

ONE

The last thing in this world I wanted to see was another damned unicorn. They were the big deal for schoolgirls in Del Mar this year. Gaggles of them came into Paypay's shop wanting their vewwy own unicorn that would wait for them outside Miss Cowardan's school with tail swishing to walk them home. Some women wanted one in the living-room like some sort of knick knack. They could have one too, for a half a pound of coffee, a couple ounces of chocolate, a jar of decent homebrew, or whatever else Paypay was trading for this week.

It seemed pretty hollow to me. Maybe unicorns had been common as cockroaches back in the days just after the Change, but clearly they'd long since left for greener and more hospitable pastures. If we were what they had to rub elbows with, who could blame them.

Older ladies always moaned about this while I made the charm in Paypay's shop. Poor widdle unicorns, them all go byebye, how sad, could you make it shinier, please? I smiled and nodded. They were customers.

Today it was Mrs. Gloster who wanted her unicorn shinier. "I just like having them around the place," she

said. “They make things feel so warm and friendly.” She smiled at me. “Inviting.”

Mrs. Gloster was a regular, went through about a unicorn a week—pretty good deal for Paypay, considering their trade value and the fact that they only last a couple of days. I smiled and nodded and uncapped the potion thermos. I’d taken to mixing up the unicorn potions in big batches first thing in the morning and pouring doses into thermoses. It saved a lot of time. Paypay was oldschool and hadn’t thought of this. He did castings without wondering how they worked or why, or figuring out ways to make the whole messy process more efficient. I wish I’d thought of the thermos trick last year when everyone had wanted lawn gorgons. I wondered if Mrs. Gloster would be as happy to trade dear for her shiny unicorns if she knew I brewed them from readymix.

“My guests just love them,” Mrs. Gloster was singing on. “Your work is so accomplished, Fred.”

“Well, I’m glad you like them.” I lit the campstove. Propane was one of the items we traded for. More Paypay logic: trade castings for items you use to make castings that you trade for. How do you get ahead that way?

I held up a finger for her to be quiet and turned to recite the charm. Paypay liked castings to be dramatic and in full view of the customer. “Customer think magic belong on stage, you know? In movie. Make exciting. Make big.”

Whatever; I’d never seen a movie. And it was hard to act excited when I’d recited the unicorn charm so many times that I once woke myself up saying it in my sleep. But Paypay was my boss, so when he was around I did the whole bit, raised arms and flourishes and dramatic voice.

But he wasn’t around now. I cracked my knuckles and made the passes over the cauldron—really just a saucepan on a rusty old campstove—and recited the charm. Just because I said it ten times a day didn’t mean that I couldn’t still mess up, and when castings go wrong they tend to go

memorably wrong. My first unicorn charms had been these horrible lopsided skinless popeyed mutant horselike things that had gimped around the back of the shop braying and falling down a lot for two days before fading out. Well if casting were easy everybody'd do it.

The door jangled as another customer came in while I was reciting the charm. I'd asked Paypay could he please lose that damned bell—it could throw you off at a crucial moment, and it seemed to jangle only at crucial moments. Paypay'd just shrugged and said, “You get used. Concentrate is good.”

The eidolon unicorn was taking shape in front of me. Mrs. Gloster liked her unicorns small and shiny, golden-horned and glossy—more like ceramic ornaments. I'd learned to leave some things out so she could make helpful suggestions and feel she'd contributed a creative hand. Everyone's an artist if they only had the time. Well what was the harm.

This week's unicorn was “a cute little one for the upstairs.” I made it doe-sized and made the head too big for the body and the eyes too big for the head and gave it thick black lashes. Mrs. Gloster asked could I make it shinier. I added faint blue to the coat to give it more glow indoors and made the tail fluffier and backed off on the eyes and lashes. You've got to have some standards.

The charm was finished and the unicorn likeness was starting to look solid. Its tail swished and it stared up at me reproachfully. I frowned at it and turned away. “There you go, Mrs.—”

Two girls were watching me. For ten seconds all I could do was stare. The fact that they were strangers was worth a few seconds by itself. You don't see a whole lot of new faces in this big old empty world. They were gutpunch gorgeous and seemed quite tall until I realized they were wearing blades. I'd been so involved in the charm I hadn't heard them come in.

“Right with you.” I tried to sound professional but my voice broke.

“Freddie does such nice work,” Mrs. Gloster told the girls. “I hope Mr. Papadopoulos appreciates him.”

It makes you feel funny when someone with bad taste likes what you create. And calls you Freddie in the process. But she meant well. I shrugged and smiled lamely and opened the countertop for the unicorn. It could have walked right through it but it wasn't good business to spoil the illusion before the customer was even out the door.

Mrs. Gloster beckoned to it with a ring-barnacled hand and said, “Come here, baby. I can't wait to put you in the solarium.”

The unicorn looked at me. I really should have backed off more on those eyes. I spread my hands and shrugged at it. It wasn't alive or even real but I still felt sorry for it.

I added the unicorn charm to Mrs. Gloster's tab. She had some arrangement with Paypay that I wasn't privy to. But she did tip me a hunk of foil-wrapped chocolate. Where do people get this stuff.

“Thanks, Mrs. Gloster.”

“Thank you, Fred.” She hesitated at the door and eyed the two girls up and down, her customary obtuse expression replaced by one of pure appraisal. She looked like a swap meet trader considering a haggle. She seemed about to ask them something but then the look vanished and she smiled at them vacantly and held the door open for her new charm, which looked back at me again before leaving the shop and going on to meet its horrible domestic fate.

The bells jangled and the Gutpunch Girls looked at me like I'd pissed on their lunch.

“That,” said the redhead, “is so sad.”

“It's what she paid for,” I said even though I'd been thinking the same thing.

“How could you let her leave with that creature,” said the blonde.

“It’s not real,” I said—then realized the creature she meant was Mrs. Gloster. “It’s just a charm. It’ll only last a few days.”

“Poor thing.” The blonde shook her head at the door.

“Well maybe I can brew up something you won’t find so—”

“Cheesy?” said the redhead.

“I was going to say obvious.”

“Actually,” said the blonde, “we wanted to know if we could put a flyer in your window.” She gave me one.

It had a crude line drawing of a man and a woman facing each other with hands joined and a radiating ball floating between them. Despite the bad art it was nicely printed.

safe circle presentz

shelter

del mar racetrack

dusk to dawn

solstice

I looked up from the flyer. “I don’t think my boss will let this stay up till June. But leave one with me and I’ll put it up on the community board at the racetrack. No one’s seen a printed notice on that board in like thirty years; it’ll get looked at. Where’d you get it done?”

“There’s a woman living at this old bookstore in Carlsbad,” the redhead said. “On Woodley.”

“Bizarre,” said the blonde. “Wacko strange-o.”

“I think she’s just a witch,” the redhead said. “Anyway she has this oldtime press with a big—” She mimed turning a big screw. “She said it was in the store when she squatted it. Like a decoration. She taught herself how to use it.”

“Wow. Good for her.” I indicated the flyer. “It sounds like fun. Are you guys gonna be at the, um ... Shelter?”

“Vibe. It’s a vibe.” The redhead’s smile was somewhere between appreciation and Nice Try. “And I will most definitely be there.”

“I’ll look for you. I haven’t been to a vibe in a long time.”

“It’ll be epic.”

“We should get going,” the blonde said.

The redhead took a flyer from her and gave it to me and said Thanks a lot.

“Glad to help. I’m Fred.”

She smiled. “Freddie does such nice work.”

I laughed. “Ouch.”

This time the smile was real. “See you next summer.”

I started to say Count on it but decided it would be just the other side of pathetic, a border I had probably breezed across as it was, so I just said See you. Which would turn out to be more true than I could have expected or wanted.

They went out into the warm October day and the bells were still jangling as I heard them start to laugh. “I haven’t been to a vibe in a long time!” I heard the blonde say as the door shut slowly. “What, when you were twelve.”

Parts of Paypay’s lunch still clung to his patchy gray beard. He put on his apron and wiped his hands on it. His nostrils widened and he sniffed and looked around. “You make unicorn?”

“Mrs. Gloster.”

He nodded.

“Can we work on binding spells today. We were supposed to a couple weeks ago but—”

“Is late today. Learn tomorrow.”

“It’s just after lunch.”

“Fred.”

I took a deep breath and tried to let it go. I was turning into more of a store clerk than an apprentice. My education seemed to have slowed down a lot lately. I tried to be

patient but there was more to casting than I could learn in ten lifetimes. How Paypay had done it, sloppy and slipshod as he was, without turning himself inside out, or embedding himself half in rock, or sending himself some horrible where, or leaving a big hole in the ground where he used to be, or any of ten thousand other things that can go mortally wrong when you start speaking dead languages inside a pentagram, was a total mystery to me.

My father told me that after the Change suddenly everyone and his brother was a caster. Talismans, charms, Summonings, you name it. Even he had tried it, though he wouldn't say much about it. People quickly figured out you could get killed playing with this stuff and I guess that took all the fun out of it. The guys who kept at it got really good. You know they were good because they were still around to do it. And let's face it, you've got to be pretty decent to be even a shitty caster.

Paypay was the only full-on caster in Del Mar unless you count the coven down at the old youth hostel. He was well-regarded and a local fixture and he didn't seem to need much but he seemed to just get by. People used his services but I think they found it hard to take him seriously. Casters are supposed to be haughty otherworldly guys who inspire fear because they can kill you with a word, not shuffling overweight guys with tobacco-stained fingers and food in their beards.

But then he'd unpack his kit and get down to it and suddenly he was focused and economical and meticulous, even graceful. He knew his shit even though he wasn't always able to say what it was he knew. Before I could learn casting from Paypay I'd had to learn how to learn from Paypay. It was a separate education.

The bells jangled intermittently through the rest of the afternoon. Mrs. Abney wanted a vase uncracked, which epic casting was of course handed to yours truly. There was no shortage of dusty vases lying around for the taking but

apparently this thing was some fabulous family heirloom, blahdee blah, could you just uncrack it and stop making helpful suggestions that will send business away from the shop, Fred. Mr. Akbash wanted his dog's leg fixed. I taped it and sent him off to Dr. Ramchandani down the highway.

Then school let out and we got one more unicorn charm (no thermos; Paypay watched me like a hawk); a request from Joey Binauer for something to keep him awake for three days to study for a test, which was a bad bargain for Joey because he couldn't pass so much as a meal if he worked on it for three months; a glamour from Lucinda Welter, who had a crush on Dylan Rondonaki (I warned her that glammers aren't target-specific and everyone would pay attention to her, which for Lucinda would be like putting a hex on herself, she was so painfully shy). You learned more about your town than was good for you in this job.

The day slogged on. I said no more to Paypay about binding spells.

Just before dark I hung my apron on a nail in the door-frame leading to the back room and stuck my head in Paypay's office to tell him I was heading home. He wore his reading glasses as he leafed through an old book by the light of a lone candle. He grunted in my direction and turned a page.

I watched him a moment and wondered if he'd put my education on the back burner because I wasn't measuring up, or if I had done something wrong.

I left without asking him. He'd tell me or he wouldn't. Nothing was going to rush him.

Halfway out the door I remembered the flyer and went back in and grabbed it from behind the counter. **shelter. solstice.** On the way to Yan's I realized that one thing the redhead hadn't left was her name.