

The Witch's Key

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One

I read how the train slowed as it neared the yard, its headlamps lapping the wooded bluff in a broad sweep ahead of the bend, blinding, momentarily, the squatter punks and angellinas waiting to hop aboard. Further along the tracks, a young man sat Indian style, hands clasped, resting on a cloth bundle.

I turned to Lilith, pointing to the article in the newspaper where the engineer admitted he had been drinking, but claimed he wouldn't have been able to stop the train in any case. "Can you believe this guy?" I asked. "How can he say alcohol wasn't a factor?"

Lilith brushed the question aside as though I had never asked it. "Look," she said. "I made this." She handed me a little white box.

My first impression was that the box contained jewelry of some sort. It was about the right size. But then, our relationship had not made that leap since our still-recent return to prime. The rite of passage ceremony we participated in had given me the body of a twenty-something year-old, an easy forty years younger than the man I was. And although I had made no secret of my romantic inclinations for Lilith, she had yet to express anything remotely mutual towards me. For that reason, I dismissed the idea of the gift representing any significant intimate value. Still, the giggle in her voice made me wonder. I took the offering and shook it to my ear. It sounded empty.

"What is it?"

She smiled, teasingly, and then she sat down on the couch, opposite my end. She leaned back on a stack of pillows, propping her feet up on my lap. "Go on, open it."

The coo in her voice intrigued me. My heart fluttered, I think. I mean, admittedly, it had not done that in decades, but I'm reasonably sure that's what it was. I pulled on the ribbon that made up a bow and untied the neatly wrapped package. My eyes darted back and forth between Lilith and the box, hoping to catch a glimpse of what she was up to. With most women, you can take a moment like that at face value, embrace it, delight in its spontaneity and treasure its tenderness. But with Lilith, you can't do that. It is not to say that she isn't spontaneous; she is, most certainly, or that she is not tender, because she can be. I've seen it. But Lilith, witchcraft and magic notwithstanding, is definitely not like

most women. When Lilith presents you with a gift, you must take it gratefully, but with quiet reservations.

“It’s not going to bite me,” I said jokingly, as I prepared to lift the cover. “Is it?”

She kicked her shoes off and cupped her hands behind her head. “Course not, silly.”

Great, I thought. She called me silly. I knew I was in trouble then. Silly is something a girlfriend says to her boyfriend, or maybe a wife to her husband when she’s feeling frisky. I didn’t want to accept her gift with my guard up, but I didn’t want my hopes unnecessarily dashed either. I lifted the cover on the box and looked inside. A faint whisk of air shot out, making me blink, but otherwise provoking no unpleasant surprises. I looked back at her. She seemed satisfied, but curious.

“Is that it?” I asked.

She nodded.

“But it’s empty.”

“Yes. Now it is.” She wiggled her toes, and at once, I began rubbing and massaging her bare foot.

“You know, you’re going to think this is crazy, but…”

“Yes?”

“Well, I thought maybe you were going to give me something special.”

“Oh?” Her smile remained suspiciously stuck. “Like what?”

I stopped working the ball of her right foot and began thump presses on her left. “Yeah, I thought for a moment you were presenting me with… I don’t know, a ring maybe.”

“A ring?”

“Yes.”

“Like a friendship ring?”

“Yeah, maybe, something like that.”

She pulled her foot away and inserted the other back into the rotation. “And you’re disappointed now?”

I shrugged. “A little, I guess.”

“Oh, Tony.”

“Tony, nothing,” I said, sounding discouraged, I’m sure. “You know how I feel about you, Lilith. You don’t need to tease me with empty boxes.”

“That wasn’t an empty box.” Curiously, her smile broadened.

“Wasn’t it?”

“No. That was a whisper box.”

“What’s that?”

Now the laugh came out, spilling like a secret she could no longer keep. “A whisper box is a vessel containing a spell, which is cast upon the recipient who opens it.”

“You cast a spell on me?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of spell?”

“Oh, it’s harmless. There is only one kind of spell that you can hold in a whisper box.”

I must say I was getting a bit perturbed at that point, but for some reason, I couldn’t stop smiling. “Lilith?” I had worked my way up to the top of her foot and was about to wring her big toe. “Tell me, now.”

“It’s a will-chill.” She said, and before I could ask, she explained, “It slaps a momentary freeze on your freewill and allows a predetermined command to motivate your actions. It’s pretty cool, really. It’s the only spell I know that keeps in a box until you’re ready to use it.”

My smile was gone now. The thought of anyone screwing with my freewill just didn’t sit right with me. “So, you used it on me?”

She drew a tight bead with her lips and perked her brows. “Ah-huh.” No apologies insinuated.

“Nice. And what is it you’re going to have me do?”

She gestured toward her feet with a nod. “You’re doing it already.”

I looked down at my lap and saw that my hands were full of Lilith’s feet. “Lilith!” I pushed them off my lap. “Not funny!” I barked. “Not funny at all!”

Apparently, she disagreed. She rolled up on the sofa, laughing and squeaking and snorting in a manor most unbecoming a witch. I gave her a moment to enjoy herself before condemning her righteously.

“Are you done?” I asked, after wiping my hands dry on a kitchen towel. “Are you finished toying with me now?”

She sat up and pulled the wrinkles from her blouse. “Relax. It was a harmless prank. Why are you getting so uptight about it?”

I looked at her from across the room, and for a moment, wondered the same thing. Pranks like that are what make Lilith, Lilith. I had come to expect that from her. It’s that vitality for excitement that drew me to her in the first place. I walked back to the sofa and sat down beside her.

“I don’t know. I’m uptight about everything,” I said. “I guess I’m having trouble adjusting to the new me. Things are so different now. I have all this pent-up energy and I don’t know what to do with it. Is that normal after going through the rite of passage? I mean, I feel like we’ve been on this incredible journey together. I should be exhausted from it, but I’m not. Instead, I’m agitated.”

She laughed a little and brushed my cheek with the back of her hand. “It’s not so much the journey, Tony, but the destination. You returned to the physical prime of your life, but metaphysically, you are still an old guy.”

“Hey!”

“You know what I mean. Listen, your brain thinks it knows how your body should feel, but your body is young and alive. It won’t listen. Give it some time. You’ll adjust.”

“You think?”

“I know. Trust me.”

As I looked into her eyes, I began to believe that she could tell me the world was flat and I would trust her on that. I wanted so much to let those eyes just draw me in until our noses touched, our lips met and our kiss solidified a love she secretly harbored but staunchly denied. I leaned into her slowly, pulled by the gravity of her aura. But as I neared her face, she pulled back.

“Tony. No.” She pressed her fingertips to my lips. “Look, what you need is a diversion. What do you say we go out for a while to break the monotony? I know this nice little place around the corner. It’s called the Cyber Café.”

“You mean, Cyber Crapā?”

“Come on. You’ll like it. It’s open twenty four seven. I go there all the time.”

“Is that where you head to when you sneak out of here in the middle of the night?”

“I don’t sneak out. I go there to use my computer when I don’t want to wake you.”

“Oh, it’s that computer place.”

“You’ve heard of it, then?”

I wrinkled my nose some. “Yeah, it’s a geek’s nest, isn’t it?”

“Please,” she said, making that tsk sound after it. “You’ll love it. You can get some coffee and muffins while I go online and cruise the Web.”

“Cruise for what?”

“For cool sites like Witchit. That’s where I learned to make your whisper box.”

“You’re kidding!” I said, sensing another prank in the making. “You can learn witchcraft online?”

“Witchcraft? Hell, you can learn how to make nukes online if that’s what you’re into. Now, what do you say?”

I winced again and gave a little shrug. “I thought you wanted to keep a low profile for a while.”

She stood and made her way to the closet where she grabbed a denim vest for her and a windbreaker for me. “Don’t worry `bout it.” She tossed me my jacket. “I go there all the time. No one knows me. Like you said, only geeks go there.”

“Maybe someone will know me.”

That made her laugh. “Tony, you’re forty years younger. Who’s going to recognize you?”

I thought about it. She had a point. Even if I didn’t look forty years younger, nobody I knew would be seen dead in a coffee shop that catered to computer geeks. I grabbed the jacket and followed her out the door.