

A Short Story
By
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The Apothecary

It's business as usual inside the apothecary - slow. The shop, the corner end of a line of mom and pops, stays open until ten at night. Behind the register, Imani and Nina impatiently watch the hour hand of a wall clock land on the number nine.

It's summer and the two eighteen-year-olds would rather be out enjoying their Friday night, but college isn't cheap and they aren't rich. In a month, the high school BFFs are leaving Florida headed to Cali for the start of the fall semester at USC. For now, however, they grudgingly man their post.

Imani adjusts her long box braids into a ponytail as she walks from behind the counter. She listens as Nina swears in Spanish in response to a text message she's just received. While both girls are rich in melanin, Nina's Puerto Rican roots are on display. Imani paid special attention in Spanish class to be able to keep up. Nina's least favorite aunt has just arrived in town - Tía Chismosa.

Imani doesn't ask about it, instead, she adjusts a row of loose leaf herbal teas that are already perfectly straight on a shelf. Hanging at the end of the line are a few canvas tote bags

for sale. Printed on the front of one, Disney's Princess Tiana smiles at a frog in the palm of her hand. Imani lifts the tote taking a closer look.

"Don't go getting any ideas," Nina tells her from the register. "There's a reason we aren't allowed near his exotic pets."

Imani's eyes shift towards a closed storeroom door near the back of the shop. She hadn't even thought of that. Their Boss, Mr. Wu, had been clear on the day they were hired that he wouldn't be responsible for curiosity induced mishaps resulting in personal injury. They signed liability waivers to ensure it. No other 'keep out' signage was necessary.

"I don't need a man to get ahead," Imani says letting go of the tote. "But I'm not gonna lie if kissing a frog got me there quicker... I'd do it."

"So would I," Nina admits through a crooked smile. "We're complete failures as feminist!"

Imani nods agreeing as she heads back towards the register. "Did you see that snake he brought in yesterday?"

Nina's eyes widen remembering the beast. A quiver shoots down her spine. She shakes

from her full head of tightly coiled hair down to her Nike hidden toes. “It had two heads, man. Creeped me the hell out.”

“It’s venom probably has some rare medicinal properties,” Imani reasons, looking up at their boss’ doctorate degree on the wall.

“Mr. Wu can keep it. I’m sticking to western medicine,” Nina declares. “I told my Abuela about it.”

“And what did the Brujeria have to say?” Imani asks, already amused by the answer she hasn’t heard.

“What she always says. We need to quit.”

“More bad juju?”

“I had to promise to wear this amulet today.” Nina pulls a necklace from under her shirt. A piece of black tourmaline dangles from a silver chain. “I’m sorry, but who else is gonna pay twenty bucks an hour to babysit a dead store.”

“Seriously, I don’t know how he stays in business. This place has to be a front for something else.”

“We would get jobs working for a senior citizen crime boss.”

A loud thud from inside the storeroom silences them. The girls listen intently for a moment, but nothing else comes. Their eyes do the talking as they turn back to one another. They both did indeed heard something inside of that room.

“Mr. Wu keeps that door locked so...” Imani offers, clearly not wanting to investigate.

“He left in a hurry today,” Nina reminds her. “So maybe we should just check.”

Another thud sounds and the girls get moving. Imani hurriedly grabs a broom from a utility closet. Nina snatches the fire extinguisher from the wall. She poises the hose to fire as she meets Imani at the storeroom door.

“If it’s locked we call animal control,” Nina instructs.

“Mr. Wu said to call him if anything ever got loose. We should probably just call him now,” Imani states warily eyeing the door.

“Let’s just make sure it’s locked first.”

Imani stretches out a tentative hand for the doorknob. She takes a deep breath steadying her nerves and then looks to Nina. A firm head nod gives her the go-ahead.

Imani twists the handle - it's unlocked! She lets go and the door swings open. Motion lights power on. The girls scream as they leap back anticipating a freak of nature on the loose.

There isn't one.

For the first time, they take a real look inside a room they've only speculated about. They'd seen Mr. Wu cart animals pass them before, but never imagined a sight such as this. A single step across the threshold would be like walking into a witch's menagerie.

The temptation to explore hits them hard. They know they should close the door; close the door and call their boss immediately.

"We should at least confirm something got out, right?" Nina asks, still clutching the fire extinguisher. However curious she may be, she hasn't forgotten the possible threat.

"We'll just do a quick walkthrough," Imani agrees, raising the broom into a batter's stance.

They cautiously enter into the forbidden area. Their eyes roam a unique collection of distinct animals. They carefully inch pass a glass encasement housing a massive wolf spider. Beside the eight-legged menace, an electric eel

swims alone in a fish tank. A few more steps and the infamous two-headed snake sleeps in a terrarium. Its green skin is almost fluorescent. The reptile isn't the only creature in a deep slumber. A two-tailed fox and albino wolf have clearly been sedated inside neighboring cages.

Movement inside a glass refrigeration unit catches their attention. Mystery liquids inside varying sized jars boil, clump, and swirl on their own. Before the girls can examine them further, the lights flicker startling them both. Instinctively, they huddle together.

"Maybe it was nothing," Nina quickly offers, ready to bolt.

A shadow suddenly leaps across a wall. The girls scream as a bullfrog lands at their feet. Nina loses her balance and stumbles into a shelf. On its top, a mason jar full of fire ants teeters threatening to fall. Imani pushes it back before it can make good.

Her relief is cut short as the bullfrog loudly croaks. Its bulging eyes stare directly up at her. Imani states the obvious, "We have to catch it."

"What if it's poisonous?" Nina suggests. "I don't trust anything back here. We need gloves."

The frog makes an aggressive leap towards them. The girls jump back once more.

“What the hell!” Nina shouts, threateningly pointing the hose of the fire extinguisher.

Imani studies the four-legged hopper. She finds its gaze strangely endearing. Putting her broom aside she bends, slowly, creeping up on the creature to catch him.

“Pará! Pará! Pará! Gloves!” Nina whispers trying not to spook the frog, but she’s too late.

Imani pounces, needlessly she soon finds out, as the frog makes itself comfortable in the palm of her hand. She smiles back at Nina, “It’s kind of cute, right?”

“It’s kind of suspect. Look around,” Nina redirects Imani’s attention to the animal freak show surrounding them. “We need to find its cage and get out of here. We’re not even supposed to be back here. You shouldn’t have touched that thing without gloves.”

“Calm down, Nina,” Imani responds, knowing perfectly well that she’s right. Too proud to admit it she says instead, “Soap and

alcohol exist. I'll be fine. Let's just find the cage."

As the girl's search, they notice even more disturbing pieces in Mr. Wu's collection. A single monkey paw floats inside a jar. Animal organs and skins have been collected and labeled.

"Are you getting black market vibes?" Nina asks. "Cause I am."

Imani looks down at the frog in her hands. The state of things has her rethinking returning him. The frog looks normal enough but everything they've seen so far has some sort of abnormality. *There must be a reason it was captured.*

Nina interrupts Imani's thoughts with a swat on the arm. She's spotted an empty cage laying on the floor. Its metal casing looks thick and quite heavy. A dust formed square marks the spot on the countertop where it last sat.

"What the hell? Is Kermit a bionic frog? How did he knock this over?" Nina wonders aloud.

"How do you know it's a boy?" Imani tosses back playfully.

"Kiss it and let's find out." Nina jokes, but there's a twinkle in Imani's eye that says

she's game. Nina throws out a challenge, "I dare you."

Imani laughs it off at first but then seriously considers it. "If it's just a dare I don't get anything if I do it, but a bet... how much you wanna bet?"

"Lunch two days this week."

"Make it three, this thing could be diseased."

"Imani!"

"Okay, two. Two." Imani grins as she stares down at the frog. Her lips pucker thinking of the free Pad Thai she's having for lunch tomorrow. With the slightest of grazes, her lips touch the top of the frog's head.

"Gross!" Nina fake vomits all over the floor.

The frog leaps from Imani's hand. She quickly reaches to grab it but skids to a halt seeing a boil rise up directly in the spot where she just kissed it. The girls recoil as more boils rapidly appear all over its body. The frog begins to grow in size. It's morphing, changing... but into what they wonder in horror.

Nina readies the fire extinguisher to shoot but stops. Their confusion is short-lived as a recognizable shape takes form in front of

their eyes. It's a man, a handsome one, who looks to be not much older than them.

Imani grabs Nina's arm, "Oh my God!"

Nina lowers the extinguisher, "He's--"

"Naked," the young man finishes her sentence. His arms cross in front of him protecting his modesty.

"And you have nothing, and I mean nothing, to be ashamed of," Nina assures him as her eyes wander over his body. Long straight black hair hangs over his brown sculpted shoulders. He stands tall on a rock hard Indigenous frame.

"Thanks, but could you get me something to cover myself and fast. Your boss will be here any minute." His eyes shift upwards towards a small surveillance camera in the ceiling. "I need to get out of here."

"Right," Nina drops the extinguisher as she turns to leave but stops hearing Imani.

"What the hell are you?" she asks, still stuck on the fact this guy was a frog a few seconds ago.

"Call me Chogan," he tells Imani before looking past her. "Nina. Clothes. Now."

“How do you know my name?” she asks through squinted eyes, her brows now furrowed.

“Frogs have ears.”

“So you are acknowledging that you were a frog two seconds ago!” Imani shouts, still stunned. “How?”

“Nothing here is what it seems, except for me being naked. Nina!” Chogan yells, all out of patience.

She runs out as Imani begins an interrogation. “Are all of these animals people?”

“Some.”

“We gotta get them out.” She starts for a cage with a sleeping fox.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Not everything here is as harmless as I am.”

Alarm bells start ringing in Imani’s mind. *Is he harmless?*

Chogan answers as if he’s heard the unspoken question. “There are rumors, legends, whatever you want to call them about my tribe. Specifically, about our blood having mystical properties. It’s all a lie, but we still get hunted for it. I’ve been stuck in that cage a week, soon to be sold.”

“Mr. Wu did this?” Her eyes widen with disbelief. “He turned you into a frog?”

“He had help. Your boss is a procurer, not a practitioner.”

“Witchcraft?” Imani’s mind reels over the possibility. In the month she’d been working there she never suspected a thing; at least, not this type of thing.

Nina rushes back into the room carrying a bright orange windbreaker and yellow swim trunks. She tosses them to Chogan, “This is all I could find in his office.”

The girls give Chogan their backs as he hurriedly dresses. Nina uses the moment to game plan between the two of them. “If Mr. Wu already saw us there’s no point running. We should call the police.”

“No cops,” Chogan says pushing passed them headed out of the storeroom.

The girls quickly follow. They arrive at the front door within seconds. Chogan reaches for the handle but his escape is cut short.

The metal security gate outside slides closed locking them in. All the lights go out. Moonlight streaming in from the windows keeps them from plunging into total darkness.

Imani pulls her cell phone from her back pocket and turns on the flashlight. Nina rushes to the cash register. She fishes her cell phone from her purse that is tucked behind the counter. She turns on her flashlight as well. “What the hell is going on?” she demands to know.

“He’s not the only person locked in a cage back there,” Imani explains.

“There’s another way out,” Chogan informs them. “You don’t want to be here when he arrives. Trust me.”

Chogan sprints passed them headed back the way they came. He disappears into the storeroom.

“Imani...” Nina begins but doesn’t know how to finish.

“Don’t ask me to explain what you saw for yourself. I’m not about to be a caged animal. Let’s go!”

The girls rush to join Chogan. The windowless storeroom is pitch black. Beams from their flashlights pierce the darkness. They see Chogan lifting a rug off the floor. A rollaway counter that was on top of it has been moved aside.

“You can see in the dark?” Imani asks, suddenly suspicious.

“No, I felt my way. I’ve been back here a week, remember? I know the layout.” He flings the rug aside revealing a hatch on the floor. “I saw your boss go down here.”

As he lifts the hatch they hear the front door open.

Mr. Wu has arrived.

No one needs to be told. They rush down the stairwell inside the hatch opening. Nina grabs the fire extinguisher from the floor as she goes. She tucks it under one arm like a football as she high knees it.

Chogan snatches Imani’s cell phone as they run. Using the flashlight, he guides them through a cavernous tunnel. Narrow, the dark and dank passage is clearly an escape route.

“Girls!” they hear a shout from behind. “Stop!” Mr. Wu frantically calls out to them. Their chubby boss sprints to catch up, his face a blanket of fear. For a sixty-year-old, he moves well. His weight isn’t slowing him down. “You don’t know what you’re doing!” he warns.

The girls swap troubled glances. Mr. Wu is right. They have no idea what they’ve gotten

themselves into. The blind faith they've put in Chogan may be a huge mistake.

They slow as they trail behind their leader. He notices the sound of their footsteps fading. Chogan turns to face them. "Believe me," he asks with eager eyes, his tone sincere.

The girls look from him to Mr. Wu who is fast approaching. They make a decision.

"Go!" Imani shouts, and the trio is back in motion.

The sound of whistling swirls around them as wind blows through the gated entry of the tunnel. They see the moon shining above a wooded area through the gate's thick black iron bars.

Chogan's muscles fail him as he tries to force the gate open. It won't budge.

"There's only one key, and I've got it," Mr. Wu announces stepping out of the darkness and into the moonlight. Though slightly winded, he looks ready for a fight.

Chogan protectively guides the girls behind him.

Wu laughs at his show of chivalry. "You mustn't be fooled, girls. You're dealing with forces beyond your understanding." Wu extends a hand towards them. "I've never hurt you

before and I have no intention of doing it now. I can explain everything, but first..." His hand flexes beckoning them to his side.

Nina slips from behind Chogan. She'd rather the devil she knows. She comes to a stop beside her boss and sits the extinguisher on the ground. Her eyes plead for Imani to join her, but it doesn't seem to be working.

Imani isn't one hundred percent sure herself why she's hesitating at this moment. They always joked about Mr. Wu being shady but this is next level. Even if Chogan is bad, that doesn't make Mr. Wu good. It's impossible to tell which is the lesser evil.

"Don't be simple, Imani," Mr. Wu chides her. "Step away from him before you get hurt."

As Nina watches her best friend, the amulet around her neck starts to lightly sway. She looks down unsure of what's happening. She grabs it to still its movement, believing it to be her own heavy breathing causing the motion.

Mr. Wu takes a step closer to Nina as he continues coaxing Imani. "I don't know what lies he's told you, but we don't have much time."

Nina releases the amulet with Mr. Wu mere inches from her. To her amazement, the amulet starts to glow. “Oh my God!”

Wu turns and she quickly snuffs the light out with her hand. “I thought I heard something,” she lies, backing away from him.

Mr. Wu returns his attention to the others. “Imani, I--”

Wu’s voice gets caught in his throat. His eyes roll to the back of his head. He drops to his knees in agonizing pain.

Nina stands over him holding the fire extinguisher in the air. She’s just whacked him on the back of the head. She yells to Chogan, “Get the keys! Get the keys!”

Chogan lays him out with a kick to the chest. He searches Wu’s pockets until he finds what he’s looking for. He pulls out a carabiner carrying multiple options. Chogan hurries to the gate and starts trying his luck.

On the floor, Mr. Wu loudly groans. He isn’t knocked out, just dazed and stirring.

Imani eyes him, head shaking with regret, “We are so going to jail.”

“It had to be done,” Nina assures her.

“Got it!” Chogan excitedly announces. He throws open the gate and motions the girls

through. Nina's first, with Imani just behind her.

Chogan looks back as Mr. Wu starts to rise. The old man is tough. Chogan gives him a smug wink before turning to leave, only... he can't clear the threshold.

Imani and Nina stare in disbelief as Chogan runs directly into the empty gateway but can't get through. Behind him, they see Mr. Wu back on his feet. Chogan's freedom is seconds from being snatched away.

He yells to Imani, "Help me!" Chogan thrusts a desperate hand out for her to hold.

Wu's expression darkens seeing Imani running back towards the gate. He charges Chogan with every ounce of strength he's got left.

Imani reaches through the gateway and grabs Chogan's hand. She yanks him clear of the entrance, just out of reach of Mr. Wu.

"No!" Wu shouts devastated. "You don't know what you've done!"

"It's too late now, old man," Chogan brags.

The girls' expressions drop. They've been had.

Nina's hand goes for her amulet. She was sure its reaction was a warning. *Mr. Wu was the dangerous one, wasn't he?* She turns to Chogan but he's already slipped away. Soundlessly and in the blink of an eye, he's disappeared.

"Where did he go?" Imani asks. Her head whips in every direction.

"I don't see him anywhere," Nina responds as her eyes search the nearby woods.

The slam of the tunnel gate closing draws their attention. They watch Mr. Wu lock it and then hurry back towards the apothecary.

"What do we do?" Imani asks, panicking. "There are more animal people locked in there. I don't know if they're good or bad. I don't know if we work for Voldemort. I don't know if he's going to come after us."

"First, we get the hell out of these woods," Nina instructs. "Then, I'll go see my Abuela."

"But Wu--"

"Whatever we just let out is obviously more important than locking us in."

The girls don't wait for their boss to have a change of heart. They run for their lives

out of the woods. Once they make it to a main street they devise a plan.

“Go home, check on your family,” Nina decides. “I’ll talk to my Abuela and then meet you at your place.”

Nina uses her cell to arrange a ride for them. There’s no way they’re going back for their cars tonight. Imani realizes Chogan still has her phone. She swears, pissed at having trusted him.

It’s not long before they’re picked up and headed on their way. The entire ride home the worst-case scenario runs a maddening loop in Imani’s mind. If Chogan has hurt her family she vows to hunt him down and kill him herself.

Her mother is understandably confused when she has to knock to be let in. Imani tightly hugs her, relieved.

The sound of a football game fills the living room. Her father smiles warmly seeing her enter. He tips his beer before taking a bite of a chicken wing. All is calm on the home front, but Imani’s mind is racing. She takes to her room.

Imani locks the door behind her, not wanting any interruptions. Hunkering down to

wait for Nina is all that's left... or so she thought. Sitting on the edge of her bed is Chogan. His wardrobe has been updated to a white tee, jeans, and sneakers. His hair is tied neatly back in a low ponytail. He's even more handsome than before which throws Imani further off her guard.

Before fear can set in, Chogan stands up. He lifts both hands in submission to show he's not a threat. "I came to thank you, and say goodbye."

Imani cautiously approaches, his unassuming smile luring her in. Imani spots her cell phone on the bed. *He isn't a thief at least.* She asks the question that's been needling her, "Are you evil?"

Chogan's smile widens over her innocence, "What do you think?"

She takes her time and does just that - think. Long and hard about the person standing before her. "I hope you're not," is where she lands. "Where did you go?"

"I needed some proper clothes." He does a fashion model spin. Imani's unamused, so he moves on. "And to get this." Chogan pulls a small ceramic bullfrog adorned with a silver crown atop its head from his pocket. "Take this

and keep it carefully. I'm not a prince but you did break my curse with that kiss. I owe you a debt."

He places the ceramic frog in the palm of her hand where he once sat. "If the day ever comes that you're in trouble and you need me..." He lifts her hand holding the ceramic, "Close your eyes, think of me, and give it a little..." Chogan leans in. His lips lightly graze hers.

Imani's eyes drift close against her will. Her head drifts back as she falls into a deep sleep. Chogan gently guides her head down onto a pillow.

Pounding on the bedroom door wakes Imani from her slumber. She opens her eyes to sunshine flooding through the windows. It's morning and she's surprisingly well-rested. She hops out of bed and rushes to answer the door.

Nina invites herself in. She raises a brow over Imani's clothes. She's still in yesterday's get up. She notices sleep in Imani's eyes.

"I don't know how you slept, but check this out." Nina shoves her cell phone in Imani's face. News coverage of a fire raging at the apothecary is being live-streamed.

“Was Mr. Wu inside?” Imani asks, concerned.

“I don’t think so. No casualties have been reported.” Nina plops down on the bed. “I talked to my Abuela. She gave me an amulet for you as well.” Nina pulls it out of her pocket and holds it out to Imani. “Last night mine lit up when Mr. Wu came close. That’s why I clocked him.”

Imani takes the amulet. She readily slips it around her neck.

“What do you think Chogan’s gonna do?” Nina wonders aloud. “I’m like terrified that we just started the apocalypse or something.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I kept checking my window all night. I didn’t want him to get the drop on me.”

“I dreamt about him,” Imani confesses. She can’t help but laugh at Nina’s raised brow. “Get your mind out of the gutter. He came to say goodbye... but it was just a dream.”

Nina notices something on Imani’s dresser. She picks it up and holds it out. The sun glints off the silver crown atop a ceramic frog’s head.

Imani's jaw drops dumbstruck by the sight of it.

"When did you get this?" Nina asks.

"It was a gift," Imani answers, reaching out to take it. Her hand closes around the frog and she suddenly feels reassured. "Everything's gonna be okay, Nina. Chogan... he isn't a prince, but he owes me one." Imani places the ceramic back on the dresser and spots her USC welcome packet. Chogan's future plans may be a mystery but hers isn't. "We're gonna need new jobs."

"And cars to get there," Nina holds up the video feed of firefighters dousing their fire-ravaged cars.

Imani watches the flames dance across the screen for a moment before returning her attention to the frog prince on her dresser. She may not know the truth of who Chogan really is, but somehow she's certain he'll be there if she ever needs him.

THE END



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