

Careful what you wish for? How many times have we heard that? Well poor Oscar is about to learn the lesson first hand ...

Lily Ivory is a natural witch who was run out of her small West Texas hometown at a young age, then traveled the world until she found a safe place to land: in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury neighborhood, where she opened a vintage clothing shop. Lily's companion, Oscar, is not a typical witch's familiar – for one thing, he's an ancient creature that shape shifts into a potbellied pig when around normal human beings.

Fool's Gold

There was a Satyr on my sofa.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Maybe I was seeing things. I hadn't had coffee yet.

When I opened them, he was still there, fast asleep. Brown hairy haunches; powerful, muscular chest; scraggly beard and upside-down "V" eyebrows. Satyrs are more mischievous than devilish, and though they can be trouble indeed, I have a soft spot for their high spirits. Still, fond as I was of the woodspeople, some of the gamier ones –the centaurs and satyrs—were best encountered in their natural setting. Not to be harsh, but they tend toward the smelly.

I sniffed: my small parlor smelled like it was inhabited by a pack of inebriated, wet dogs. This was one drunken Satyr.

"Oscar!" I called. I was pretty sure my ersatz witch's familiar had a hand in this. My apartment, and the vintage clothing store downstairs, were protected by a spell. Woodfolk—or regular folk, for that matter—couldn't just wander in and fall asleep as they pleased.

Oscar tumbled out of his nest of blankets above the refrigerator. Half goblin, half gargoyle, he was covered in grey scales, and at full height reached my belly button. When he was around outsiders, Oscar shape-shifted into a miniature potbellied pig... a subterfuge only slight less difficult to explain than a half-gargoyle. Other witches have cats, dogs, or even frogs as familiars. I have Oscar.

"Mistress! You *scared* me!"

"Who's that?"

"Who?" he asked, blinking his bottle-green eyes in an attempt to convey innocence.

"On the couch, Oscar."

"Looks like a satyr, Mistress. A member of the woodfolk fam—"

“I know what satyrs are, Oscar.”

“Then why’d ya ask?”

Sometimes my familiar reminded me of an adolescent. “Don’t play games, Oscar. Who is he?”

“Silenus.”

“...And?” I waited for him to continue, but the normally garrulous fellow was silent. I tried a different tact. “Where did he come from?”

“I found him.”

Correction: sometimes my familiar reminded me of an eight-year-old. “*Where* did you find him?”

“In Golden Gate Park,” Oscar replied, his tone suggesting this should have been perfectly obvious.

“Why did you bring him *here*?”

“I didn’t know what else to do! He drank too much and fell asleep in the park, right out in the open! The tourists would have seen him, Mistress!”

My irritation, fueled in no small part by early-morning caffeine deprivation, receded as I realized Oscar had done the only thing he could think of: he brought Silenus here, to safety, where the sight of a satyr sleeping off a night of overindulgence might arouse annoyance, but not fear or violence.

Like many magical beings, Oscar was good at hiding his true self. So was I. Until recently I had worked hard at staying in the closet, metaphysically speaking. But now that I was finding a home, and a community, in San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury neighborhood, I was trying hard to be honest with the world and with myself: I’m a witch. It’s not my fault. I was born this way.

But a satyr? He couldn’t walk around without being noticed, not even in the quirky --sometimes freaky-- Haight.

“I already called Dionysus,” said Oscar as he leapt down from his perch and started scrounging in the refrigerator. “Oooh, leftover Chinese! Can I have it?”

“Of course,” I said. “What do you mean, you called Dionysus?”

“You don’t know him? Goes by Bacchus sometimes. Good guy, real life of the party. Hey! We should have him over!”

“You’re talking about the god of wine?”

“*Mmmffhsklj*” Oscar replied, his muzzle full of kung pao chicken.

“How do you know him?”

“Met him ages ago. Anyway, Silenus is his, well, sort of like his stepfather? Kind of. Point is, he’ll come get Silenus, no worries. Dionysus even grants wishes...maybe he’ll give me a reward!”

I’ve never understood the little guy’s avarice. Oscar pays no rent and doesn’t wear clothes. I supply him with food and the blankets for his nest. I provide him with pretty much anything he could want...and yet he still wants more.

“You shouldn’t have to be rewarded, Oscar. You did the right thing in bringing him to safety, and knowing that should be sufficient payment. I’m proud of you.”

He shrugged and poked at the carton of fried rice. “Anyway, prob’ly he’ll be gone by lunchtime.”

“All right,” I said with a sigh. As I poured myself a cup of coffee I glanced at the now snoring creature on my couch. Good thing my vintage clothing store, Aunt Cora’s Closet, was closed today. “Listen, I have to run over to Chinatown for supplies this morning, which means I’m leaving Silenus in your hands. Don’t let him drink anymore, understood?”

“Not even water?”

“I meant *alcohol*, as you very well know.” Is there a witchy military school somewhere that accepts smart-alecky familiars? “He can drink water.”

“He’ll be hungry when he wakes up.”

“Make him some pancakes or a bowl of cereal, then get him out of here. Just make sure no one sees you. Are we clear on that?”

Oscar nodded vigorously, spewing a few grains of rice on the tiled kitchen floor.

I left, trusting him to take care of it.

I should have stayed.

I returned several hours later to find Oscar sitting amidst a pile of golden objects: a telephone, a book, a chair. Something that looked a lot like Oscar’s favorite fleece blanket now gleamed yellow in the afternoon sun, hard and stiff.

I froze, trying to attune my witchy sensibilities to sense the aura of anyone lingering. I detected nothing.

“What’s going on, Oscar?” I demanded.

“Mistress! It’s awesome! Check this out!”

He reached out one gnarled, oversized hand and touched the base of a lamp. It turned to gold.

Oscar hooted in glee, grabbed a *Newsweek* magazine, and watched it turn gold. He dropped it with a thud, reaching for the coffee table.

“Stop!” I yelled. “*Hells bells*. What have you *done*?”

“I got my wish, Mistress! Dionysus came by for Silenus. I *told* you he would offer me a wish for rescuing his friend, sort of his stepfather.”

“And you asked for...”

“For all I touch to turn to gold!”

“Oh, Oscar...”

“Look at this! Gold everywhere! We’ve got plenty of bread now, Mistress, I tell ya.” He cackled. “Speaking of bread...I only had four pancakes for breakfast. Is it lunchtime?”

As he walked into the kitchen, the floor turned to gold under his claws. He reached the refrigerator and tried to open it, but it too, immediately became gold. Wrenching open the refrigerator door, he reached for the glass bottle of milk, whose contents became liquid gold.

Oscar looked at me, crestfallen. “What the...?” He grabbed for a cookie. By the time it got to his mouth, he was biting down on metal. “Gak!”

“Oscar, how many times have I told you: be careful what you wish for?”

“Mistress!” he kept touching things: the cabinets, jars of jam, a bowl of fruit. One by one they transformed into that precious metal. “*Save me!* I’m *hungry!*”

“If everything you touch turns to gold, Oscar, how do you expect to eat?”

Clearly this had not crossed his goblin’s mind. He stared at me, big eyes imploring, verging on panic.

“All right, now, hang on to your britches. Just stand still and don’t *touch* anything else. Let’s call Dionysus.”

“Mistress, we *can*’t!”

“Why not?”

“He took Silenus to a rehab center up the coast. Don’t know where. He doesn’t have a cell phone! I’m so *hungry*!”

“Let me try.” I peeled a banana and held it to his mouth, but the moment it touched his tongue the fruit turned to solid gold.

“*I’m going to starve!*” Oscar wailed. Never had I seen him in such a state. I reached out to hug him but at the last second pulled back, mindful of not turning myself into a golden statue. “*I’m going to waste away and die!*”

“I won’t let you starve. I’ll find a way to fix this.”

“*I’m cursed!*” Oscar ricocheted around the room, screeching at the top of his lungs.

“Oscar! *Stop that this instant! I command you!*” To my surprise, my words registered. Oscar collapsed on the golden floor in a hiccupping, scaly grey lump. “I’m going to fix it,” I said with a confidence I didn’t feel. “You’ll see. Have I ever failed you?”

“No, Mistress.”

“Right, then. Why don’t you just...” My mind cast about for some way to keep my familiar amused while I figured out what to do next. “...just watch your DVD of *Gremlins*, and I’ll try to figure this out. Okay?”

“kay.” Oscar trudged into the living room. I dragged over the already gold chair, set it in front of the television, inserted the DVD, and started it playing. “Now, sit there and for the love of the goddess, *don’t touch anything.*”

Grabbing my huge *Bulfinch’s Mythology* off the bookshelf, I retreated to the kitchen and looked up the story of King Midas. According to the myth –which was actual history, of course, but most folks now assumed was metaphorical-- Midas was relieved of the curse by crying into the river Pactolus, which was famous in the ancient world as a source of gold.

Well. That was no help. Assuming the water cure would work again, Pactolus was in Turkey; how on earth would I get Oscar to Turkey?

But it did give me an idea. I never finished high school and wasn’t much good at things like math, or chemistry... but I flipped through my Book of Shadows, trying to find an arcane section I remembered stumbling across years ago. On alchemy.

“Ready?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

I had enchanted a tarp so it would remain pliable, then bundled my familiar into my purple work van, taking care that none of his skin touched anything. He moaned and grouched the entire way to Fort Point, at the base of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Now we stood on a rocky point of land where the wild Pacific Ocean met the serene San Francisco Bay, generating powerful currents. In the distance, a foghorn blew, sounding mournful above the rumble of cars high above, crossing the bridge.

“When I tell you, wade into the water,” I said. “But not until I tell you.”

I began chanting. The ancient alchemists sought to discover the unity of all matter, and thus to convert matter from one form to another, a process they called transmutation. Turning lead into gold had been the quest of the ancients, and though their attempts now seem silly, they were closer than they knew to achieving their goal.

All they lacked was sufficient power.

As I chanted the wind began to gust, waves crashing ferociously on the shore. The lights of the city winked as a wall of fog blotted out the moonlight and cocooned us in a misty embrace. I continued working my spell, invoking my ancestors; calling upon the generations of witches before me until the screaming of the elements grew so loud they drowned out the sounds of humans and their creations. I felt the pressure build, and fought against the fear that I might not be able to control the forces I was unleashing.

“Now, Oscar! Now!”

As Oscar waded into the churning water a deafening crash split the air. The sea began to glow, radiating from my familiar in concentric circles, each ring swelling and expanding farther into the dark waters until at last the glow began to dissipate and the rings disappeared. The wind and waves died down, and the fog lifted. Once more we could make out the rumble of cars overhead.

“Am I cured?” Oscar asked through chattering teeth.

“Let’s try it,” I said, and handed him a banana. He stuffed it in his mouth, peel and all, and chewed.

“Good?”

He swallowed and nodded. “Thank you for saving me, Mistress,” he said, looking somewhat chastened.

“Anytime.” I gave him a squeeze. Oscar wasn’t the easiest familiar in the world, but I don’t know what I would do without him. “Shall we pick up some Chinese food for dinner on the way home?”

“Kung pao’s my favorite!”

As we turned to leave, we both noticed the sand twinkling in the moonlight.

“Mistress? Is that *gold*? We’re rich!”

I scooped up a handful of wet sand to inspect the tiny golden speckles.

“Fool’s gold, Oscar. It’s only fool’s gold.”

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