

The Autumn of My Godhood

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“Rats.”

“Pardon me?” I was carrying a grocery bag of canned goods into the kitchen, from the car. Angela was on her knees in front of a kitchen cabinet.

She held up a box of couscous to illustrate her comment. Dried grain poured out onto the kitchen floor. “We have rats.”

“I see that.” I stood still in the kitchen, staring at the pile of couscous forming on the floor. The bag was getting heavy, but it didn’t particularly occur to me to put it down.

“Well, what should we do about it?”

“I’m thinking,” I said, because I was.

“Where did they come from?”

I shrugged. “It’s getting cold. This is our first winter here, maybe they’re moving indoors.” It made sense to me. There was a field on the other side of our fence; it was overgrown. I wasn’t even sure who owned it, whether it was the city or an absentee landlord. Didn’t mice live in fields?

“Maybe it’s a mouse,” I offered.

Angela looked at the hole in the side of the box, then stuck her thumb into it. “Possibly, but it’s a big mouse.”

“Hm. How much did they destroy?”

She crawled back into the pantry, and pulled out a few more boxes. Unidentified grains spilled onto the floor.

Angela sighed and stared at the brownish mound. “What are we going to do?”

I set down the bag. It wasn’t because I suddenly remembered to do so; I barely remember doing so. My arms had merely decided they’d had enough of my inactivity and acted on their own. “Let me think about it.”

“We can’t afford an exterminator,” Angela pointed out morosely.

I thought about little rats choking and writhing in response to an application of some toxin or other, the odor of which would permeate our house and our clothing, and silently agreed with her. “Cats,” I said distantly.

“What?”

“Cats eat rats. You’ve wanted a cat. We’ll get a cat and it will track down all of the rats.”

“And leave little rat bodies for us to find?”

I shook my head. “We had a cat when I was young. They don’t eat the rats, they just frighten them. The rats go live somewhere else.”

Angela stared at the grain some more. “The landlord won’t let us have a cat. You know that.”

“The landlord would rather we sued him over the rats?”

She looked at me thoughtfully. “Can we do that?”

I shrugged again. I was momentarily self-conscious of how much shrugging I did. “I don’t know. But I don’t think the landlord knows either. Besides, he doesn’t need to know about it.”

“A cat. It’s worth a try.”

According to the pet shop, Maine Coons make the best mousers. Enrique was one of their best specimens, and although I choked at the price and briefly considered paying for the exterminator instead, I remembered my imagined stench of rat poison gas on my clothing.

Besides, this was as much an excuse to bring a cat into the household as it was a solution to the rat problem, and Angela didn't need to know how much he cost.

Enrique preened at me and puffed out his fur. I reached out to him, but he jumped back. "Seems a little skittish," I pointed out.

"They're like that with humans," the clerk said. She made a clicking noise in the back of her throat, then moved a parakeet cage within the sightline of the cat.

Enrique chirped and squatted, entranced by the bird and visibly trying to calculate his odds of jumping through the bars.

"I'll take him," I said. The clerk smiled.

Enrique settled into the household well. Angela loved him, of course. And, of course, traitor that he was, he took to her instantly and remained aloof to me. There seemed to be something about me that he didn't like.

That was just as well. He was here to do a job. If he got rid of the rats and kept Angela happy, he could be as aloof as he wanted to me.

For a while, it seemed to be working. Evidence of the rats disappeared from the pantry. There was one little gift of a dead rat that Enrique left for us at the top of the basement stairs, and Angela had gotten me out of bed too early on a Saturday morning to dispose of it.

All in all, Enrique was a good cat, despite his indifference to me. Having apparently dispatched the rats, he busied himself with trying to protect us from dustbunnies and stray socks, neither of which posed a particular threat.

September bled into October.

"Honey," Angela was talking as she pulled out the fancy china. "Could you go down and get a bottle of wine?"

"In a few minutes." I was playing a video game. It seemed very important that I defeat the gemini boss to get to level six.

"Ted and Cindy are supposed to be here in a few minutes."

I sighed and set down the gamepad, letting the boss shoot my defenseless body. The virtual me fell over in a pool of blood, and the screen went red.

I padded down to the basement, scabbled through the useless but valuable junk we'd piled against the back wall, and opened the door to the wine cellar. One of the nicer amenities to this particular rental, even if we did only drink a bottle every few months.

I turned on the light, and was greeted by a flurry of fur. Two dozen rats pushed against the wall, trying to hide in the dark corners.

I jumped back, startled, then leaned forward again. They were curious creatures, even if they were frightened and the small room stank of their droppings. They'd taken up refuge in the one place in the house Enrique couldn't get to them.

I picked out a bottle while deciding what to do. A nice Merlot. The bottles were dusty, reminding me of how underused our wine collection was.

The most obvious thing to do was to leave the door propped open. Enrique would find them and take care of them. That was his job, after all.

I turned to go, nodding. That's what I would do.

I heard a clicking noise behind me, so I turned back to the cellar. One of the rats had moved out into the middle of the floor, and was waving his whiskers at me.

My impulse was to step on him, as barbaric as that was. How impudent, to challenge me like that! As I watched, though, his movements began to make sense. He scurried around, and waved his paws, and I could swear I understood what he was saying.

"No hurt," he kinesthed. "Hungry. Please, no demon. Hide from demon."

"Demon?" I asked aloud, then laughed at myself. I had no idea what he was saying. It was just random movement.

More movements, though, and I knew it wasn't my imagination. He described the demon, and I realized he was talking about Enrique. He was afraid of Enrique. Naturally.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Food," he kinesthed. "Please. No demon. Food."

"Honey, Ted and Cindy are here." That was Angela, from upstairs.

"I need to go," I said quietly.

"Food?" Samael asked. It was then that I realized I'd named him, and if I'd named him, I'd have to take care of him.

"Later," I said.

I made sure to close the wine cellar door.

I fed them. They didn't eat as much as I thought they would. I cleaned out their wine cellar, and was surprised when they learned how to use a small litter box I made for them.

Samael was the only one who made any sense, and he seemed to be the only one to understand me. He understood English. When I asked him why, he kinesthed something incoherent about Another and not wanting my wrath for speaking of it.

Enrique grew increasingly impatient with me. He seemed to know what I was doing, especially since I'd shoo him upstairs before opening the cellar. He didn't like that.

Halloween snuck up on me.

"I brought you a treat," I told Samael, sitting a candy down in front of him.

He sniffed it from end to end. "Thank you."

As I closed the door, I saw the others descend upon the candy, and regretted not having brought another.

The next day, I set the usual mound of couscous down on the floor of the cellar when Samael came up to it, sniffed it, and looked sad.

The next day, the couscous was still there, untouched.

The next day, Samael rushed to greet me. "More candy," he kinesthed excitedly.

I looked at the couscous, still untouched. "Eat your couscous."

"More candy," he kinesthed again.

"No."

The next day, the couscous had been formed into three smaller piles. In front of these, there was a bundle of Q-tips which had a mild putrid odor, as if they'd been urinated on. "What's this?" I asked.

Samael poked it towards me. "Gift. Please. More candy. Eat couscous if you bring candy."

I looked at the gift, picking it up daintily. It *had* been urinated on. “What kind of gift is this?”

Samael wriggled uneasily, and the other rats chattered impatiently.

“Ok, Samael,” I said. “If your couscous is gone tomorrow, I’ll bring you a candy. And you can keep your gift.”

He thanked me profusely and chattered at his comrades.

And so it went, through November. Every few days, I would bring them a candy, and their gifts would get more intricate and inexplicable. Staples and droppings fashioned into a sculpture; weeds brought in from a dangerous foray into the wilds beyond the wall; a bottle cap with scratchmarks that I imagined were supposed to be a picture of some sort.

After I picked each up, Samael would bow to me and thank me for everything that I’d given them.

It was creepy, and getting weird.

I decided to stop giving them candy.

For one thing, Angela was starting to get suspicious enough about my trips into the basement. I’d tried to slip away while she was distracted. But the candy and the obsequience took time, an increasing amount of time.

I was spending too much time on my rats.

It was getting creepy. Plus, this was probably all my own imagination. I couldn’t really speak to Samael. That was absurd.

No more candy.

Besides, as November crept slowly towards December and Thanksgiving approached, I’d worked through the leftover Halloween candy, and wasn’t about to buy more just for some rats.

Of course, they went on their hunger strike again. Samael stopped asking for candy and started demanding it. “What do I need to do, great one?” he kinesthed.

“No more candy,” I insisted. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

Samael made a motion to the other rats that I didn’t understand. I don’t think I was supposed to. Even though he’d been friendly to me, they’d still usually hide in the shadows. Slowly, though, they came out and formed a semicircle around him.

They began clicking slowly, rhythmically. It made a strange harmony.

Samael repeated his demand for candy.

“What the...?” I was mildly scared now. “Do I have to go get the cat?”

The rats stopped dead in their tracks, and Samael bowed down to me. “No, please, we’re sorry, we just thought... please. No demon.”

“Eat your couscous or I’ll get Enrique.”

“Yes, we will.” Samael shivered. The other rats scowled at me, but if they said something, I didn’t know what it was.

For the next week, in the days bookending Thanksgiving, I brought them couscous and they left me gifts. I ignored the gifts, even though some of them were clever, because they were useless to me, and because I was angry with them.

Had I not given them food? Warmth? A clean place to live? And their gratitude was to just ask for more. How dare they? What were they, meaningless little beasts that did nothing but leech off of me?

And why was I still bothering, anyway? Was I that soft-hearted, that I'd let my own delusions about a communicating rat get the better of me?

December woke up on a cold snowy morning, and told me to go back to sleep. The rats would be fed tomorrow.

Damn the rats. I was tired of being their patsy. If they didn't like what I gave them, they could go somewhere else. I knew they could get out, many of their gifts have leaves and twigs in them. Bastards. Ingrates.

It had been a week since I'd gone to the wine cellar, and then two. I knew I couldn't avoid it forever, but I was done with the rats.

Still, I missed Samael's cute way about him, the way that he wiggled his whiskers when he shimmied around.

I missed the way they all looked up to me, even if they were demanding at times.

I was annoyed with myself, for feeling guilty about a bunch of rodents.

Just as I'd decided to go down and check on the rats, Enrique hopped up onto my lap and curled up for a nap. He was good at knowing the exact wrong time to get on my lap.

I settled back in and let him doze.

Damn the rats.

"Honey, could you get a bottle of wine?"

It was a week before Christmas, and I'd all but forgotten about the rats.

"In a few minutes," I said. The hydra boss was going to lose this time, and then I'd be on the final level. It was my eighth attempt to get past, but I knew I was going to make it this time.

"Your 'few minutes' or a real world 'few minutes'?"

I sighed, and while I was pondering a response, the boss grabbed my virtual self and broke it against the rocks. The screen turned red.

"Ok, I'll do it now."

I trudged down to the basement, and scabbled through the basement, working my way past the odds and ends stacked up against the back wall and into the wine cellar.

The cellar stank of rotting fish. I gagged, and thought about turning away. I realized, though, that whatever it was, I'd have to deal with it soon enough.

I looked into the cellar. The usual array of gifts had been set down for me, from feces sculptures to odd melanges of weeds. An army man whose legs had been artistically gnawed. A styrofoam cup crushed and mashed into the shape of a waterfowl, more or less.

Beyond those, the rats were arrayed on their backs, their chests gaping open. They were in various states of decay.

Samael limped out from the shadows and greeted me tiredly but happily. "I knew you'd come back," he kinesthed. "I prayed and prayed, and you came back."

I looked at the rat corpses, carefully lined up from one edge of the cellar to the other. "How did you pray?"

"Gifts," he kinesthed. "These are my gifts to you."

I stepped back, still looking back from one end of the rats to the other. "No."

"Candy," he kinesthed.

"No," I said again, but he wouldn't stop. He moved from rat to rat, kinesthing over and over the single motion: "Candy. Candy. Candy. Candy. Candy."