

## The Hermit by Ghostwriter

A small town's not a smart place to hide a store. I was born and raised in Soggy Pines, but it wouldn't take more than five minutes to take stock of the local purchasing options: liquor store, bait shop, butcher/convenience store, front, prawn shack, other front. So when I saw a new business open up next to the government dock, Mephistopheles and I stopped for a look. Mephisto's a jerk, but she has to be. She's a small dog in a pit bull and coyote town.

A homemade sign above the door read "New Beginnings." Inside, the air was coated with dust and smelled like a burning scrap pile—heavy woodsmoke with an acrid undertone. I crunched into something with my boots and heard a yell from a dim corner. "Watch it—you're stepping on my hourglass!"

I bent down to retrieve Mephisto from the pile of broken glass and sand. A tiny man rushed past me, nearly upsetting a display of bedazzled skulls. He crashed around the shelves, sweeping phials of mysterious fluid aside. "Haven't seen a key around here, have you?" he barked while peering inside a porcelain ptarmigan.

"I don't think so. What's it look like?"

"It's invisible! Part of my new advanced security system."

I promised him I would keep an eye out for it and went to investigate a cabinet with a series of tiny drawers. The drawers had labels like "High school bullies are shamed by your many successes," "Spouse admits you were right about everything," and "Boss confesses to stealing your lunch and opens a Michelin-starred cafeteria in your honour." The diminutive man sidled up, holding a cup full of something that looked disgusting.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"Oh, this? Cup that never empties. Highly potent object of power."

"How does it work?"

"Whenever someone drinks it all the way down, it fills up again straight away. In theory. Don't think anyone has wanted to try drinking it yet. Anyway, what can I get for you, miss? Escape from stifling small-town existence? Triumphant return to provincial homeland covered in glory? Boyfriend upgrade? Better hair?" On my shoulder, Mephisto was looking at the cup of nausea with a little too much interest, so I edged toward a shelf of wax elbows.

"No thanks, I'm just looking around."

"Come on, there's got to be something. Intelligent girl, backwater town. I've seen it a thousand times. I've got ambition, I've got revenge, I've even got a little something in the back in case you'd like to embrace the hermit lifestyle, tame a raven or two, and get really interested in herbs."

"I'm not sure you'll have much luck with that one. There's plenty of interest in herbs here already."

Suddenly the gaslamps flickered and dimmed. A soul-numbing gust drifted up through the floorboards, as if from the depths of the ocean. The little old man was wreathed in shadow and flame. In the near-darkness, the sinister objects cluttering the room seemed to crowd in on us.

“YOUR DESTINY LIES WITHIN THESE WALLS. SIMPLY TAKE IT, AND YOUR NEW LIFE WILL BEGIN,” he thundered, his voice echoing as if in a much vaster space.

I was impressed.

I pulled a rumpled sheaf of papers from my jacket pocket. “Okay, you win. I had my doubts at first, but I can see that you’ve got some solid customer service skills. There will be some changes, of course, some of your old inventory will have to go, but I think you could really have something here.”

“What?” said the man, looking startled, although still trailed by wisps of flame.

“I own a chain of magical shoppes and emporia, and I’m interested in franchising your business. Name will have to change, of course. Too predictable. But I have to say, I’m quite pleased. I’ve been looking to open a location here for years. With a little polish, I think you and your shop will do fine.”

The old man stared at me with rounded eyes. An instant later, with a noise like an egg turning inside-out, the man, the store, and all the magical paraphernalia disappeared, leaving me and Mephisto standing next to the government dock, gazing out at a placid early-morning sea.

“Don’t worry, Mephistopheles. I’m sure he’ll turn up again,” I told her, grasping the invisible key in my pocket.