

Adult Short Story

1st Place

EJ Nickson

Malfunctioning Mascots

A flickering television screen was the only light source in the sparsely furnished and frankly depressing apartment in which Callias resided. Some banal game show, with a host who mistook wide white smiles for charisma, went to commercial break.

“Come on down to Blaze’s Used Cars and Boat Storage,” a stale voice mechanically ordered. Shaky arial drone footage panned across a parking lot of cracked asphalt, decades old cars, and a handful of boats encased in disintegrating blue plastic.

“No credit check required,” the same colorless voice noted.

The advertisement flashed to an overweight man in a too small suit with his arms awkwardly gesturing toward the business’s hand painted signage.

The heavy man’s voice increased in volume but remained robotic as he finished, “At Blaze’s Used Cars and Boat Storage, we’ve got a burning desire to get you into your next ride.”

The camera panned to a massive dragon standing next to him. On cue, the bored and morose creature sighed and puffed out a meager fire that wouldn’t have generated enough heat to cook a frozen chicken nugget.

The TV dragon blinked slowly once then flatly said, “Come get these deals while they’re hot.”

The screen changed to a black background with an address and phone number, which brought Callias’ reflection out in the dark screen. He leaned forward in his Draco Series La-Z-Boy. Disbelief pulled his facial muscles taut and exposed his fangs.

Was that Lenos?

Lenos was over five hundred years old and had been a highly respected, formidable elder since before Callias was born. Now the great dragon was peddling used cars in late night ad buys? What was the world coming to?

Callias roughly turned on the lamp nearest him and clicked off the television. Phantom tiny feet pounded his back as memories from the birthday party he'd worked that afternoon began to surface. Dozens of wailing and mucus filled human children had taken turns riding him around the yard. A frazzled mother dealt out cupcakes and a bored father snapped pictures. It was a generic scene Callias endured multiple times a week.

With the evidence of Lenos' fall riding shotgun to the reality of what his own life had become, Callias braced for the familiar weight of depression. When it hit, he rose and paced his apartment, made with stretched ceilings and extra wide hallways for those like him. His eyes alighted on the photos and paintings that filled the walls. Tangible evidence took up every inch of free space. Dragons had once been great. They used to serve a noble purpose. Callias' Grandfather, depicted in oils, flew over a marauders' camp he'd set ablaze in service to a virtuous human king. In black and white, one of his aunts posed with a clawed forelimb affectionately draped over the shoulder of an RFC pilot.

Callias turned to a large mirror and stood taller. In the reflection he conjured how he'd looked in the ballistic aviation goggles the Air Force had crafted for his kind. He grinned at the imagining and remembered the guiltless satisfaction he'd felt when the cries of pigeon-hearted Nazis reached his ears.

Over the centuries and through countless generations, Callias' family had served humanity. Providing support during the frequent times of war, when the humans were trying to learn how to share the planet - not with the dragons - but with each other. The warring hadn't ceased, but the war machines the humans created now vastly overpowered even the most fearsome dragon. Made obsolete, they were forced to find a different way to participate in the world.

As a species, dragons had a brutally rigid moral compass, one that was so insistent on pointing north they never entertained the idea of turning on the humans. Of course, every line had a black sheep or two. Callias' own cousin was living it up in South America where he tipped the scales towards the cartel over law enforcement. But he was an exception to the rule. Most dragons, like Callias, tried to make a living in any way they could in this new world.

He looked harder into the mirror, and the luster of yesteryear dissipated in a puff of smoke. Reality, dull and hopeless, was all that remained. His black scales, once as iridescent as the inside of a clam shell, now held less shimmer than the inside of a fireplace. Tears formed in the eyes of Callias' reflection. Humans weren't kind to benevolent companions they no longer needed. Dragons were merely moldy mascots, archaic and dusty, sitting unused until they could be paraded out to hawk old cars or hype a new fantasy movie premier. Incredible sources of magic and might turned ... party favors.

Callias spun and burst through his front door, no longer capable of staying in the apartment with apparitions of dignity. Regrettably, in the parking lot he encountered the neighbor's perpetually high and obnoxious teenager.

The kid stepped from his car, swaggered up to Callias, and sneered. “Sup lizard man?”
There was no hint of respect, or awe, just mocking derision.

Callias narrowed his eyes and stretched to crack his sore spine through his back and down his tail. The human showed no sign of deference, even when standing under a fifteen-foot-tall specimen who was his superior in every way. A clicking noise, like that of flint meeting steel, echoed emphatically in Callias’ mind. At the sound all rational thought fled. His head swiveled toward the kid’s junker. He opened his mouth, and without any fanfare or warning roasted it with a thousand entirely unrepentant degrees.

“Are you out of your mind!?” the boy shrieked.

Callias turned to the human with his eyes still heated from a preternatural light. “Walk away, before I turn you into something your mother will have to sweep up to mourn.”

The punk’s eyes reflected dancing orange flames. A beat later he turned and ran, screaming for everyone to come and see the dragon who’d lost it. The boy’s hollering - along with the hellfire that used to be a Honda - had people streaming from their apartments in substantial numbers.

The masses who came and gathered were not afraid. They were curious, confused. They regarded Callias like a beloved Labrador who uncharacteristically growled at a toddler, or some other benign thing that was malfunctioning. The lack of apprehension stoked rage in Callias’ gut, but of course they weren’t scared. Why would they fear a mascot? A growl rumbled from his chest and escaped his clenched teeth.

With a mighty burst from his once defunct wings, Callias was airborne. He took a moment to stretch and regain his bearings up in the clouds. It had been too long since he allowed himself to soar, always too cautious of the human airspace rules for their silly planes and traffic helicopters. Even their personal toy drones had taken precedence over a dragon's right to the skies.

No more.

It was a rash, questionable decision to set fire to his own building first. Later he would likely regret the loss of historical photos and paintings within. However, watching the cramped and prosaic box go up in smoke was nothing short of therapeutic. When his intention to light up their world became clear, the humans below finally demonstrated terror. Their sounds of alarm and panic became the first dose of antidote for his poisoned soul.

Callias decided his display of vengeance need not end at the apartment complex's boundaries. He would fly and set fires and rage until their world was ash and his misery was healed. Humans needed to understand it was dangerous to get bored with something that was accustomed to being useful. If the dragons were no longer needed to help humanity, then perhaps they would destroy it instead.

The wrath of the forgotten can be lethal, but that didn't mean it wasn't righteous.

Adult Short Story

2nd Place

Jeff Burd

What to Expect

My hands reek of Calamine when I pay the cashier. She smells it, too, from the look in her eyes as I grab the tub of potato salad off the counter. It's cool in my Calamine-soaked hands.

When I get to my car, I'm thinking about my mother. She made sure I understood from an early age that a lady expects the unexpected so she can handle whatever comes at her. She said it so much that it should have been tattooed across the pale, bruised skin on her inner forearm. I can imagine black script flowing as clearly as those words ring in my head.

So it doesn't faze me that my hands reek of Calamine or that I'm heading back to Billy's with a tub of potato salad. Expect the unexpected, right?

Billy came through my checkout aisle this afternoon with a slab of ribs and the huge grin he always has on his face when he's behind the meat counter. Like he's the happiest guy on Earth despite his blood-spattered smock and working in a refrigerator.

"You ever do ribs?"

I told him I wouldn't know how.

"Come over," he said. "We'll grill and chill."

I figured why not? He seemed cool.

I showed up to a tropical garden scene in his front yard. Dozens of plants and bushes I could never name, everything green and vibrant. That was neat, but it made the scene in his backyard kinda odd. There was nothing back there but dead scrub grass, a small concrete patio, a grill, and Billy on a chaise lounge puffing a joint.

He offered me a hit. I shook my head. "S'all right," he said. "It's all about the ribs anyhow."

He had the ribs on a platter. He handed me a shaker full of red powder and said to sprinkle it. I did, and then I watched him massage it into the pork. I liked how he was confident with his hands but also gentle, like he was rubbing a cat's belly. I kept sprinkling, and he kept rubbing until the ribs were rust colored.

He laid the ribs on the grill and said it was gonna be a couple of hours. He got a lawn chair for me. Then he sat in his chaise lounge and rolled another joint with weed he pulled out of his pocket.

Flies and mosquitoes buzzed around him. He couldn't swat them very well. "They usually don't like smoke," he said. "But look at the bastards." I wasn't sure if he meant smoke from the grill or his joint. Neither was helping him.

He went inside and came back with a bottle of Calamine. "You mind?" he asked.

I didn't. He was nice enough to make dinner. Besides, his calves and ankles looked like a bas-relief map. Just looking at them made me itch.

"You don't smoke?" he asked as I shook the bottle. "It's mellow. I got plenty if you change your mind."

He fully reclined the chaise. I squirted his calves and ankles and rubbed for a few minutes. He made some *mmm* sounds like I imagined he'd make when we ate the ribs.

This was supposed to be about the ribs, but I wanted to see where it would go. I squirted more Calamine and rubbed until I felt friction. He had to feel that, but all he said was to go as high up his legs as I wanted.

Maybe later.

Who am I to let weed bother me? I've never done drugs. I was thinking how self-soothing escalates to self-medicating and how that escalates to something else and then something else until whatever you're doing pretty much has the opposite effect of what you started doing. That's a lot to think about with ribs on the grill. But there I was. My mother kept coke in the sugar canister. Harder stuff in the flour canister. I could never have my friends over to bake cookies. I'd go to their houses and hope for a sleepover.

I rubbed until there was so much friction that I worried about chafing and making the Calamine pointless. Billy didn't say anything. Then I realized he was asleep.

I sat there as the sun set and wondered if he had any snacks or drinks. When I got up to look in his kitchen, he stirred. He looked confused, like he couldn't remember why I was there.

It must have come to him because he said he forgot potato salad. "Would you mind?" he said. "I got money." He pulled the weed out of his pocket and seemed surprised to be looking at it. Finally, he told me, "I'll pay you back."

*

I return to Billy's house in the absolute dark. My headlights are the only source of illumination, so I leave them on.

A sprinkler clicks and hisses as I walk around back. The backyard is empty except for the smell of pork cooking over hot coals. The screen door leading into the kitchen is hanging open. The whole house is dark except for a light on the second floor that goes out as soon as I see it.

I could go in the house and get plates and grill tools, but I don't like the idea of fumbling in the dark in a strange kitchen.

The meat sizzles on the coals. Smoke seeps out of the air vents on the grill lid and drifts through the dimly lit night air. Otherwise, it's nothing but crickets back here, like a punchline that fell flat. Which I guess makes this whole scene a joke.

I head back to my apartment. I scoop potato salad out of the tub and lick it off my fingers as I drive. I'm thinking about my mother again and wondering how well I'm handling all this.

Adult Short Story

3rd Place

Lori Beckham

The Cab Ride Back

I sit slumped in the back of the taxi, staring out the window of people walking along the streets, some with shiny cheap cardboard hats and glow-in-the-dark rings around their necks. It has been one year since I entered this neighborhood, on my way to Lisa's New Year's party. I only went for Lisa, and to see a few familiar faces of my past colleagues, but honestly, I just didn't want to spend New Year's alone.

A new restaurant has opened just a few blocks from the party. It puts a slight smile on my face, seeing a cartoonish Italian man in the window, with a slogan that says, "Mama Mia, It's A Good Pizza." Not a great pizza, not the best, just "good." Ethan would have laughed at that. My smile drops and I try to shake it off. A new year is beginning, and I must forget him.

The place is booming, just like last year. Lisa and her husband are handing out cheap metallic beads to everyone who enters the doorway. Her face lights up when she sees me.

"Jenny!" She gives a quick hug and puts the white metallic beads around my neck. "I'm so glad you made it. Last time we talked, it sounded like--"

"I know, I know," I say in smile. "But better late than never. Where are the drinks?"

She laughs and points. I walk through the sea of people and pour myself some wine into a red plastic cup. I had yet to see anyone I recognized, not that I looked hard. I see a man wearing those dumb 2020 glasses, but at least it makes sense this time. Last year the 2019 ones looked so awkward, with the "9" being so big to accommodate the eye.

I say hi to a few people, but mostly I listen, overhearing bits of conversations.

"What do you think the market is going to look like this year?"

"Have you seen the new Star Wars movie?"

"I don't know if we're ready for kids just yet."

The Cab Ride Back

2020 couldn't arrive fast enough. It was a smart choice to take a cab. I can drink as much as I want. I feel the effects – I'm swimming in wine.

The big moment is here. Everyone counts down. "Five, four, three, two, one!"

I take a big gulp just as the little kazoos ring out and everyone cheers.

I feel good, but not as buzzed as I should be. I need to drink more, and in thirty minutes I will call a cab and be so drunk, I'll sleep well into noon. I go to take another drink from my cup, but the smooth plastic is now rough, with a papery texture. I look down. The cup is white, and my red wine is light in color, bubbly. Champaign. I look up, thinking someone had switched my drinks, and I see a person, the same one as before, wearing those dumb 2019 glasses. I forget my confusion and burst out laughing among the loud, celebrating crowd. I turn to my right and gasp when I see Ethan smiling at me.

I say to him in a low voice, "What are you doing here? I told you not to come."

His smile fades and his brows furrow. "What?" he says, putting a hand to his ear.

Now I want to leave. I shake my head and walk away to find Lisa with her arm wrapped around her guy, talking with someone. I don't mind interrupting.

"Lisa, why is Ethan here?"

Her smile drops. "What do you mean?"

"I told you not to invite him."

"You did?" she gasped, looking at him as he stood next to me. I jump a little.

"Hey," he said, peering at me, "Is something wrong?"

I scoff and pull Lisa away. Lisa whispers, "What's going on?"

"Ethan and I aren't together anymore," I say, and Lisa looks at him, now at a distance.

Her mouth drops open. "Oh my god. When did this happen?"

The Cab Ride Back

"Three months ago. How could you forget?"

She looks at her own drink for a moment, then looks at me. "If you two broke up, and you didn't want him here, you shouldn't have walked in with him."

"I didn't."

"I put the beads on you myself, Jen. And him."

I look down at the beads around my neck. They had been white, round metallic, but now the beads are red and larger than before, flat with rough patterns. Indeed, Ethan wears the same red-beaded necklace. And only now do I realize that my grey sweater is a burnt orange. My fitbit is missing. Lisa's sweater, I swear it was white before, not black. How am I sober?

Lisa says, "Maybe you've had too much to drink. I'll be right back." She walks over to Ethan and her husband. They are talking and looking at me. I try to find more differences. There are people here I don't remember seeing when I had entered the place. But when I walked in, I hardly spoke to anyone. I'm not sure.

Ethan walks up to me. "We need to go, ok?"

I crinkle my nose at him, turning away. "I'm not going with you. I'll call a cab."

"Why would you call a cab?"

"It's how I got here," I reply, and he looks back to Lisa, who overhears. They exchange glances.

Ethan says, "Jenny, are you ok? Are you feeling well?"

I want to say yes, I'm fine, but I got scared then. "I don't know. Something is wrong."

"Ok, let's just go. Come on." He puts his hand on my shoulder and guides me to the exit. He grabs a coat and hands me my red raincoat, but I didn't bring it. It's pouring outside. He continues to guide me out the door and we walk to his car. We sit as the rain pounds on the glass.

The Cab Ride Back

I say dazedly, "I didn't know it was going to rain tonight."

Ethan stares at me. "You reminded me to bring my coat, remember?"

I continue to stare at the water hitting the windshield.

"Jenny, you're freaking me out. Did you take something? Are you on anything?"

I shake my head no.

"You're telling Lisa we're breaking up?"

And then I see it. Beyond the squiggly movements of the water, a LED sign, high up in the distance, displays the numbers "2019."

I shudder. Everything adds up. The clothes, the 2019 glasses, the drink. Ethan.

"I'm going insane," I say. "I'm reliving last year. This was last year."

"What was? We weren't here last year."

"Ethan, it's supposed to be 2020."

He doesn't mean to, but he let's out small laugh. "No, dumbass. It's 2019."

"Is this a prank? Is this some attempt to get back together? Is Lisa in on it? Is this-"

He grabs my shoulders then, stopping my words. "Hey," he says calmly, but his eyes are wide and scared. "I don't know what you are on, but I can assure you, it was 2018, it is now 2019. If you think otherwise, I am taking you to the ER."

He pats me on the shoulder now and starts the engine. He looks freighted as he drives, periodically glancing at me. He says, "Tell me, what year is it?"

We slowly pass the pizza shop that had made me smile earlier, except it's black and abandoned. "It's 2019," I say in amazement. Inside I want to scream, but on the outside, I give a reassuring smile. "I guess it was a dream," I say. "I dreamt it was next year."

"And when did you supposedly dream this?" Ethan asked.

The Cab Ride Back

"Or maybe I'm just drunk and thought up a bunch of things," I quickly say, trying to sound rational to him.

"Pfft, sounds more like drugs to me. You're sure you don't want to go to the hospital?"

"No, I'm fine."

A short time passes when he says in smile, "So, what can we expect in the future?"

I speak without thinking, "I get a new job. At Deltek."

He crinkles his nose and scoffs. "You just got this job. You're already thinking of getting another?"

"It got miserable after six months."

He jerks his head to me, no longer smiling.

"You know, in my dream," I add, but he doesn't resume his smile.

"And we broke up, is that right?" he says, dejected now. "You were acting pretty mean to me back at the party. So, spill it. What happens?"

I say quietly. "I, uh, asked if you wanted to get married."

He flinches, just like before. The pain strikes me. "Why would you say that?" He sounds angry now, no different from when I had asked him three months prior, and now nine months early.

I feel woozy, as if I am drunk. I look out the window as we are nearing our old place in Arlington Heights. How long had it stopped raining?

The car pulls up in front of our house. It's black inside, with a "For Rent" sign on the lawn. I stare at what was once our home, feeling the effect of the wine and noticing the dry, overgrown grass sticking out from the sidewalk.

Slumped in my seat, and I tell the driver, "Because I thought you would say 'yes.'"

Adult Short Story

Honorable
Mention

H.M. Lawson

Elsina and the Vine Goddess

In a small house at the edge of the world, there lived a girl named Elsina and her brother, Parlen. They worked in the royal vineyard, harvesting sweet, white Anderkin berries for the Queen. It was strictly forbidden for anyone except the Queen to eat the royal berries. Each day, Elsina and Parlen were required to pick the vines clean. The Queen warned the harvesters that if any berries remained on the vines, the nightly rains would wash them into the soil, angering the sacred Vine Goddess, and the plants would not produce berries the next day. Leaving even a single Anderkin berry was punishable by death.

Every evening, as roiling storm clouds gathered in the east, the Queen would stroll down to the vineyard. She would collect the baskets of berries and inspect the vines. In exchange for their work, the Queen provided a plate of kitchen scraps and stale bread to the workers.

One afternoon, the warm sun left Elsina parched, and she walked to the river to fetch water. She came across an old woman, dressed in filthy rags, sitting on a flat rock near the water. As Elsina stooped to fill her vessel, the woman saw that the girl's fingertips were stained white from the juice of the Anderkin berries. She asked Elsina if she would share some berries with her.

Elsina replied, sweetly, "I am sorry. The berries belong to the Queen. They are not mine to share."

Elsina bid the woman good day, and returned to the vineyard to finish her work. The following day, Elsina was surprised to find the woman at the river again. As before,

the old woman asked Elsinä if she would share some berries with her. Elsinä repeated that she could not.

The old woman ran a crooked finger along Elsinä's smooth cheek and sneered, "I can see from your beauty that you are stealing berries for yourself. Unless you share some berries with me, I will tell the Queen you are stealing from her."

Horrified, Elsinä ran back to Parlen and told him about the woman. The siblings decided that it would be better to be wrongly accused than to be guilty of stealing from the Queen.

On the third day, Elsinä marched down to the river. Before the old woman could ask, Elsinä said, "I know you are hungry, but I can only share what I have earned as my own." She offered the woman a crust of bread.

The old woman stood up straight. Her rags dissolved into a beautiful, green gown and her eyes glowed white. Her hair transformed into lush, flowing vines, covered in delicate leaves.

"I am the Vine Goddess. It is I who produces the Anderkin berries. I have sensed a foulness growing in my vineyard, but it is not from you. You have passed my test."

In exchange for Elsinä's kindness, the old woman presented her with a pristine, white silk scarf and promised it would bring good fortune.

That evening, as the rain began to fall, Elsinä realized that she had forgotten the berry basket in the vineyard. Elsinä raced to the vineyard to retrieve it. When she turned to leave, she noticed the Queen lingering amongst the vines. Soaked with rain, the Queen gobbled a handful of berries, then raised her arms above her head as she spoke.

"Vines of old, green and plain,

Grow a little in this rain.

Midnight blossoms turn to fruit,

Washing deep to feed the root."

As she finished speaking, the Queen reached into the basket and tossed the meticulously gathered berries on the ground. Elsina gasped in confused disbelief. Torrents of rainwater washed the specks of white into the soil. She watched the gnarled vines twist around each other, sprouting tight, convulsing helices until they formed a woman. The figure grew vines for hair and two glowing white berries became her eyes. It was the Vine Goddess.

She towered over the Queen and said, "You have nourished my roots. In return, I shall grant you one wish."

The Queen's eyes glittered in the rain, and she told the vine figure that she wished for the beauty of youth. A flash of white light washed over the Queen, and she radiated exquisite beauty.

Elsina clutched her empty basket and ran back to tell Parlen what she had seen. She burst through the door and startled Parlen so badly, he dropped his bread. It fell to the ground, scattering crumbs across the dirt floor. He reached to retrieve it.

"Wait!" Elsina exclaimed. "Don't eat the bread."

The following evening, as usual, Elsina and Parlen exchanged their baskets for a plate of food. However, instead of returning home for dinner, they hid among the vines. When the clouds released their rain, the Queen spoke the incantation. As before, she scattered the contents of the basket onto the ground, and the specks of white washed

into the soil. However, this time, no figure grew from the vines. The Queen tossed a second handful and a third, but the vine was still and silent. Perplexed, the Queen inspected the basket and saw that she had not been given white Anderkin berries, but tiny crumbs of stale bread.

The Queen screamed and wailed. Dark circles formed under her eyes. Her skin began to sag and wrinkle until she was nothing more than a pile of brittle bones on the ground. Elsina and Parlen each tossed a handful of berries from their pockets onto the soil. Elsina looked up at the sky and spoke in a loud voice.

"Vines of old, green and plain,

Grow a little in this rain.

Midnight blossoms turn to fruit,

Washing deep to feed the root."

The Vine Goddess appeared. "You have nourished my roots. In return, I shall grant you one wish."

Elsina and Parlen asked to become the rulers of the kingdom, which they governed fairly and justly. The Anderkin vineyard became open to everyone in the land. On days when no wishes were needed from the Vine Goddess, the berries fell to the ground. Even more berries would appear on the vines the next day. As for the white scarf, it became a symbol of honesty and integrity and flew like a flag from the top of the castle.

Adult Short Story

Honorable
Mention

Edie Reese

PRINCESS FOR A NIGHT

The scene opens on an idyllic view of a pastoral forest and zooms in to a view of a stone cottage.

An enormous, animated pumpkin is sitting in front of the cottage, speaking. "Good Evening, fans in the Land of Make Believe. My name is Pumpkin Pete, and we're here for another instalment of 'Princess for a Day,' where some lucky peasant girl gets plucked out of nowhere to have a fabulous date with a prince--then goes on to live happily ever after. Today's adventure is about Cindy Tremaine, also known as Cinderella. I'm at the window of the Tremaine residence now. And flying in on her firefly-powered jetpack is my co-host, Merry Fairy Godmother! Good to see you, Merry! What's up? I haven't seen you for a week."

"You'll be glad to know that we just got renewed by the network for another season."

"Glad to hear that we've been renewed. However, I've been exploring other options, including a Halloween-themed show."

"Sounds smashing!"

"Thanks a lot, Merry. Let's get back on track with our show."

"Good idea, Pete. Tell us about today's contestant."

"This gal is the real thing. Cute as a button, industrious and modest. She's got two stepsisters whose faces would stop a clock and a stepmother who won't let the poor kid wear anything but rags. She does all of the household chores aaand sleeps on the fireplace hearth, hence her name. Merry is going inside to tell Cindy about the wonderful prizes she's won. Our contestant is receiving a complimentary ballroom fashion wardrobe, a fabulous night of exotic food, dancing and entertainment at the palace, as well as a romantic date with Prince Robbie. Oh, it looks like

Cindy's stepmom, Maddie, is entering the room... and she looks MAD! Let's eavesdrop on the conversation.

The scene changes to the interior of the Tremaine stone cottage. Merry is engaged in an argument with Maddie Tremaine, Cindy's stepmother:

"Pete, I'm here with Maddie, Cindy's stepmom, and we're having a 'polite discussion.'"

"This is Maddie Tremaine, and you can tell your studio audience that my stepdaughter isn't signing any contract without my review. I see that there's no place in here for me and my two daughters."

"This show isn't about you and your two other daughters."

"For your information, Cindy is under legal age. If I don't give permission, she isn't in the show. My daughters and I need to have featured roles. Otherwise I won't let her sign. Got it?"

"I've got it, alright. OK. I can give your daughters magical assistance with their ballgowns. You are responsible for providing your own dress and transportation to the event. That's as far as the network will let me go. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, but just barely. Remember, I have my eyes on you."

"Mercy, that was a tough one! Its days like this when I wish I were dealing with straightforward folks like Captain Hook. Back to you. Pete!"

The scene changes to the exterior of the Tremaine home. "Pumpkin Pete here again with a word from our sponsor, Magic Mirror—It only reflects what you want to see about yourself (most of the time). Also, stay tuned for next week's show, where we'll interview former contestant Princess Ariel, now living on land with Prince Eric and raising two-year-old Melody. Now let's

meet Jack Field, of Mouse Union #214. He's standing here with some of his buddies. Jack, can you tell our TV audience about your role in this production?" *The camera zooms in on a field mouse wearing a safety vest and a hard hat.*

"Certainly! Me and my buddies here are proud to help our pal Cindy in what we're calling "Operation Prince." Miss Merry is going to turn us into horses, and we'll pull her coach to the ball. From what I understand, you, Mr. Pete, are going to be turned into the coach. And unless the network agrees to pay overtime, we're all going to turn back into mice and a pumpkin by midnight."

"Whoa! I wasn't aware that I had any active role in this operation... Why doesn't Merry tell me these things?" *The camera moves to a wide angle view of the cottage entrance.* It's now time for the Ballgown Reveal. As stated in their contracts, Drizella and Prunella, Cindy's stepsisters, got magical assistance in designing whatever ballgowns their hearts desired. Maddie is wearing her own gown. Let's look at what everyone's wearing."

"Drizella chose green as her signature color. The gown is a bright chartreuse with white ruffled accents. I would say that she looks like a frog dipped in whipped cream. Here comes Prunella in deep violet studded with sequins in an "S" pattern. She's wearing a lot of snake-themed jewelry as well. This outfit just slithers along. Finally, we have Maddie in solid black with a black cape and an ebony walking stick with a gold wolf's head on the handle. The effect is that of an elegant assassin."

"We're anxiously awaiting the main event, Cindy's gown reveal, but there appears to be some hold up. I'm going to roll over closer to the house so we can eavesdrop again and find out what's going on. Merry, I'm switching things over to you."

The camera focuses on the interior of the Tremaine home. “Thanks, Pete. Merry here with Cindy. I’m explaining to her that she must wear the blue ball gown that I’ve co-designed for her.

“And this is Cindy here, and I’m explaining that I’m not wearing that. I’ve designed my own gown.”

“But you have to wear this, it’s in your contract!”

“Contract, shmontract! I designed and sewed my own gown and I’m wearing it, and that’s final! Wait until you see it. Now go outside and wait for me!”

“All right, Cindy. But you still have to wear these glass slippers with your outfit. This gal has some spunk, Pete. I have to concede. I’m coming out.”

The camera pans to the exterior of the Tremaine residence. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Pete again. Merry, I can’t wait to see this gown ...here she comes...Oh, I love it! It’s ORANGE! It’s beautiful!”

“I’ll admit, this sleek number with the sequined spaghetti straps is just phenomenal. And the glass slippers set it off perfectly. Now, we’re gonna have to hustle a little. Jack! Come here with your buddies. Stand HERE. And Pete, you roll over THERE. Stand very still. Cindy, stand back. I’m waving my magic wand and...there you have it, ladies and gents, a coach and four! Now you may get in, Cindy. And remember, you must return by midnight, otherwise your ride will transform back into a pumpkin and four mice. For our audience, I’ll take over commentary at the ball. I do love a good party! I’m flying over to the palace so that I can catch Cindy’s arrival. *The scene changes to the Royal Palace.* Here she is... making a great impression with the crowd as she enters. The spread here is fantastic—I’m going to sneak a little shrimp appetizer here... delicious! Here are Cindy’s stepsisters and their mom. Not much crowd reaction for the girls’

dresses, although there's a smattering of applause for Maddie's outfit. Now Prince Robbie is asking Cindy to dance. As they're dancing, he's talking, and talking, and Cindy can't get a word in edgewise. Uh oh, Cindy is leaving Prince Robbie stranded on the dance floor and is heading out of the palace! Pete, she's headed your way! Take over from here!"

The camera pans to the palace exterior. Pumpkin Pete here again. Through the magic of make believe I can still talk, even though I'm a coach. I've got it, Merry. Cindy, what went on between you and Prince Robbie that caused you to leave?"

"That dweeb went on and on about his taxidermy hobby and wasn't interested in what I had to say. I figured that he could just as well listen to himself talk. And my feet are killing me. These glass slippers are awful. Let's go home."

"But it's only ten o'clock. Don't you want to live happily ever after with the Prince?"

"I want to own my own dress shop and keep on designing my own clothes."

"Merry, did you hear that? No go on the match with the Prince! She's going off script! I'm not prepared for this! What do we do?"

The camera pans over to a close-up of Merry. "We have no choice but to grant the young lady her wish. Meanwhile, Maddie has been conversing with Prince Robbie—Apparently she has extensive experience in Fairytale Espionage. Prince Robbie is appointing her as his Spy Minister. It appears that things are turning out Happily Ever After after all."

"Apparently so. Ladies and gentlemen, tune in next week when we visit Snow White and discuss her roommate problem on 'Princess for a Day.'"