Squatsie

by andlat

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The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

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"Hello, hello!" Finn heard his aunt Linda say as soon as he opened his car door. He smiled and waved to her. She was so friendly, "Oh! I didn't know you were coming, Finn!"

"Steve got beeped." Finn's mom said. "And you know how worried I get, leaving him alone when I'm out of town."

"Mom."

"I figured he can play in the garden while we paint."

"Sure." Linda smiled. "It's right around the back, but I'm sure you know that."

"It's been a few years!" Mom smiled and rubbed Finn's hair, freshly cut just that morning before they had set out for Linda's. "You were still in diapers last time we came here in the summer."

"And I really can't do things inside?"

"I don't want you underfoot. Plus, fresh air."

"I know."

"We'll call you for lunch!" Linda said cheerily as he shuffled off to the white picket gate that led to the garden that took up a large portion of Linda's backyard.

"How have you been, LInda?"

"I'll be a lot happier once this living room's all painted." She said with an eager smile. "I really do appreciate you coming out here. I hope Finn's not too bored."

"I'm sure he'll be fine. There's a lot for a boy to do back there."

"I think I have a soccer ball on the patio."

"He'll find it, I bet."

"Good. If it's still there." Linda's forehead creased slightly. "Don't you think we should have told him about the Legend of Squatsie?"

"Squatsie? He's still out there?"

"Sure is. It's his garden more than mine, you know." She laughed. "We used to come up with so many stories about him." She shrugged. "Just figured maybe Finn could've used a warning."

"About what?"

"You know! Geez, you didn't forget, did you? We always used to say Squatsie doesn't like boys!"

"Just because Willy Adler fell that one time and bit his lip."

"After he said Squatsie looked creepy."

"Wow, I forgot how imaginative we are." They both laughed and headed inside to paint Linda's cavernous living room.

Finn had seen gardens before, but this one put those to

shame. Flowers, trees, and plants he had never even seen before grew all around. Even with the house right there, he felt like he had been teleported far away from the neighborhood they had driven through.

"Guess I can explore?" It sounded like as good an idea as any, so he began to walk along the cobblestone path, his scuffed sneakers scraping along.

The garden seemed to have no shortage of paths to follow, but it was still a backyard, so he soon had the hang of navigating around them. The fork with the sunflower led to vegetables on the left path and roses on the right path. The vegetable path circled back to the gate he had come in through, the rose path led further into the garden. It was on this path that he first met a little ceramic gnome. He did not pay it much mind, busy building his mental map of the paths, but the second time past, he squatted down and investigated.

Finn had heard of garden gnomes before, but he was pretty sure this was the first time he had seen one. The gnome's bearded face smiled at him, hands folded contently over his blue jacket. He looks friendly enough, Finn thought.

"What's your name?" Surely something like this had a name, right? The gnome, naturally, remained silent. Finn stood back up and shrugged. "Let's see what other secrets this garden has. Hopefully they're a bit more exciting than a gnome." Still, he had high hopes.

A few twists and turns down the path later, Finn spied another gnome standing under a tree. Same smiling bearded face,

same blue jacked, same hands in the same pose. Why would Aunt Linda have two identical gnomes? He stopped just long enough to decide that this second gnome had a little fleck of paint missing that he was pretty sure the other one had not. Still, a gnome mystery was not the most exciting thing in the world. He frowned and pushed it out of his head. If someone had one gnome, it made sense they'd have multiple, right?

Realizing he forgot to pee when they had first arrived, he found his way up to the patio, sighing in dismay as he saw the flat, sun faded soccer ball under one of the chairs. Nearing the house, he could hear the sound of 'parent music' coming from inside. He peered through the sliding patio door and got a glimpse of Mom and Aunt Linda painting and chatting. Should I go in to pee? He wondered. He shrugged it off. He could just go outside, right? He turned around and spied a gnome standing by the path he had just come from.

"Weird..." Unnerved, he took the other path, smiling at the sensation of the house disappearing behind him as he journeyed into the garden. I'm like an explorer, he thought, imagining himself on the trail of some lost city of gold. That stone bench had to be a sign he was nearly there. He pretended he could see it through the leaves of the tall plants all around him. "Just a few more" he skidded to a halt. Had... had he just been skipping? How long had he been doing that?

Remembering his bladder, he turned to the side of the path and did what he needed to do. He heard a sudden flutter, his heart leaping as a bird suddenly took off from a nearby tree. He laughed at his own nervousness, wiping his hands on his

shorts. "Now, about that" his voice trailed off as he spied up ahead not a city of gold, but a gnome. The same gnome? A different gnome? They all had that same red hat, that same beard, that same pose. But now he had seen it in multiple places!

"Ok, I'm settling this." He fished in his pocket and pulled out a marker. "Here." Stomping over, he knelt down and drew a little black X on the side of the gnome's hat. "There!" Feeling thoroughly pleased with his own cleverness, Finn began to skip along, swinging his arms by his sides.

He remained pleased for a few moments before he suddenly felt uneasy again. He looked around for the gnome and laughed. He was being paranoid! He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. That was it. He hated feeling his hair on his neck! Why didn't I remember a hair tie? He thought. He froze. Something felt off about that. But what? He tapped his foot as he thought, but got distracted for a moment admiring the way his white sandals stood out against the cobblestones. What was it?

"Oh!" He exclaimed. He had just gotten his haircut this morning! "And I should've asked Mom for a pack of hair ties." That was it! He frowned. "But that doesn't sound right either..."

"Finn! Time for lunch!" Finn's confusion vanished as he skipped up to the patio.

"I'm famished!" He exclaimed.

"Well, uh... wash up first." Finn hurried past so quickly, he did not notice his mom and Aunt Linda staring at him.

"What the?" Finn whispered, his hand washing interrupted by the mystery in the mirror. His hair, his outfit, nothing looked right! His hair had gone from two inches long, if that, to cascading down his shoulders! His Fortnite t-shirt had been replaced by a bright orange t-shirt with little white bows on the puffy sleeves. His basketball shorts were now jean shorts with appliqued daisies and less than half the length. When had this happened? How had it happened? He dug into his pockets, or tried to as he realized his fingers didn't even get all the way in before he reached the bottom.

"Ooh, hair tie!" He pulled it out and expertly put his hair into a ponytail. There! Hair off his neck, cute summer outfit. Time for lunch!

"Are you having fun in the garden?" Mom asked over tuna fish sandwiches.

"Sure. There's a lot of paths to follow out there."

"Anything fun you've discovered?" Aunt Linda asked.

"I scared a bird." Finn said. He would rather not tell them about the gnome he had drawn on. Why had they not mentioned his outfit, his hair, anything? He studied their faces, but adults were like aliens. There was no way to tell what they were thinking. "Mom, you've got paint on your nose."

"I bet I do!" Mom laughed, but mellowed. "We'll probably

still be here for dinner, kay, kiddo?"

"Sure." Finn shrugged.

"And maybe even spend the night."

"If it comes to that." Aunt Linda said. "It's a big room."

"Want me to help?"

"With your history with ladders, young man? I'd rather not risk it." Mom stuck her tongue out at him and laughed. "Go play outside as soon as your plate's in the sink."

Finn did just that, though he was a little worried about just what might happen next. Figuring he should play it safe, especially once he realized that the most steps he could take was three before he broke into a skip, he found his way back to the stone bench. No gnome, he thought in relief as he sat down, though he groaned as he tugged at the hems of his jean shorts, willing them to go lower than his upper thigh. Giving up, he looked up above at the leaves and a few puffy white clouds floating by overhead. They look like cotton balls, he thought as he returned his gaze back to the earth. His brow furrowed. A gnome! He jumped up and marched over, relieved it was a different gnome. He squatted down and defiantly stared into the gnome's eyes before noticing the little black X.

"Shit." It was the same gnome! He got to his feet and ran, wincing as even in his panic, he felt an almost overwhelming urge to skip.

The rest of the afternoon followed a pattern. He would skip along, see the gnome, turn around, and find the gnome again in just a few twists and turns. He tried talking to the gnome, asking and then ordering it to stop following him, but it never seemed to change its expression. What worried him more was that he kept hoping it would. Finally, Finn had had enough. Spying the gnome for what had to be the hundredth time, he lashed out and kicked it. Just before his foot made contact, he thought better of it. He tapped it with his sandal, it wobbled, and fell over gently.

Finn was in a dress. Not a plain dress like some of the girls in his summer fun group wore. This was a Dress with a capital D. Bows, ruffles, the works. Between the gentle blue of the dress and the fluffy white of the petticoats peeking out, he felt like he was wearing the sky. There were so many petticoats, Finn had to push them down to flatten them enough to see that his girly white sandals had been replaced by shiny black shoes over white socks with lacy ankles.

"Shit, shit, shit." He said.

"Finn! Come in for dinner!"

"Shit!" He turned toward his mom's voice, but found his feet glued to the cobblestones. "Come on, walk. Walk!" In his stress, he ran a hand over his head, almost yelping as he felt a bow. He felt around desperately with both hands. The ponytail from lunch was gone and, near as he could tell, there was now a ribbon tied around his hair in a big bow, like Alice from the Disney movie. "Shit." He said again. "Ok, I just

need to breathe. Mom and Aunt Linda will totally notice this." He took a few shaking breaths and felt instinct -- or something -- kick in. His hands found a place on either side of his voluminous skirt, resting there daintily as he began to flounce along the garden path, shoes clicking against the cobblestones.

"Your aunt made a reservation for us. We're going out to eat." Mom explained, trying and failing to hide her amusement at how her son had emerged from the garden.

"What? I can't!"

"You're certainly dressed for it." Aunt Linda said, at least holding a hand over her mouth in an attempt to hide her laughter.

"No, I... I can't."

"It's not that bad, sweetie. We'll explain everything."

The two women refused to explain a thing in the car and clearly adored seeing him flounce from the car to the restaurant. When they finally had been seated, Aunt Linda explained all about Squatsie.

"Near as we can tell," she said. "Squatsie's always preferred girls. Any boys we played with tended to trip or suddenly have to leave whenever Squatsie was around."

"But-" Mom could see where he was going.

"With you, it seems like he's got a new trick. Make you into a girl."

"I'm not a girl though."

"True." Aunt Linda said. "We clearly know you're a boy but" she held up her phone so Finn could see himself. "Squatsie didn't really cut any corners."

"So, how do I get him to turn me back?"

"You'll have to ask him. Nicely." Mom said.

"Nicely?" Finn did not like the way Mom had said that.

"We'll have to come up with something." Aunt Linda said. "A curtsy for sure, maybe a song."

"What?"

"Didn't we used to do daisy crowns for him?" Linda thought out loud.

"Whatever it is, it'll have to be in the morning." Mom said, the voice of reason. "I don't want you wandering around the garden at night."

"You said he kept moving around?"

"I think so." Finn shrugged, wincing as his dress rustled.

"And here I thought you were the one moving him around all those times." Linda said to her sister.

"And I thought you were doing it to get me in trouble."

"Hey, remember me?" The two women looked at him.

"We'll handle it in the morning. Once we get back to Linda's,

it'll be bed for you."

The return back was uneventful, though Finn had needed both of them to help him with his seatbelt thanks to his ample petticoats.

"We'll take it off as soon as we're there." And that was how Finn had ended up standing in one of the bedrooms at Aunt Linda's house, staring in utter disgust at his frilly bottom in the mirror.

"Squatsie gave you the most darling little panties." Mom said.

"You're enjoying this."

"Not in the way you think. You see, your grandma used to make Linda and me wear dresses just like this for her garden parties. I think Squatsie got the idea from those."

"I'm a boy though!"

"I know, but you're going to be a boy in panties and a nightgown tonight. We want Squatsie to think you're happy as a good little girl."

"But-"

"Sweetie, if he tries to do anything more, who knows what'll happen? Do you really want to risk it?"

"No."

"Good. Nightie on and into bed."

Finn tried his best not to look at the pink flannel nightgown

he wore, only opening his eyes once Mom had pulled the covers up to his chin. She turned out the lights and left him to try and sleep. Finn lay there, staring up at the ceiling. How could he sleep with his very masculinity in jeopardy? He rolled onto his side, blinking back tears. What if they couldn't fix it? What if he woke up as a girl? What if…

The next morning, Finn could hardly even remember what had kept her up so late last night. She got out of bed, twirling in delight at her beautiful nightie. She giddily skipped out to the dining room to a breakfast of chocolate chip pancakes.

"We should be finished this afternoon." Mommy told Finn.

"Any plans, princess?"

"Well, I thought I might do a garden party with those dolls I saw upstairs." Finn said. "And I also want to go see Squatsie." She paused, her lips turning down into a frown. "Wasn't there something I was supposed to do with him?" Finn, Linda, and Finn's Mommy all paused, suddenly all struck with the strangest feeling they had forgotten something.

"Weren't you talking about singing him a song at dinner last night?" Linda said.

"Oh! That's right!" Finn beamed. How had she forgotten. "I'm going to make him and me daisy crowns like you and Mommy used to make!" Finn leaped up from her seat, kissing both Mommy and Aunt Linda on the cheek.

"Get dressed first, munchkin." Mommy called.

"Oh!" Finn dashed past in her pink flannel nightgown and the two women sighed contently. Girls could be such handfuls.