

We Happy Few

by Jill Shultz

ON THE BAR, a rat sits on a magazine ad of a moonlit Maui beach, his tail a scaly rope draped over the necks of the supernaturally beautiful couple in the photograph. *Could be us.* Lilith's scrawl in her signature purple Sharpie presses into the white sand as if written with a stick.

"Might as well go to Hell," I mutter. I nudge the rat aside and meticulously tear the ad out of the magazine.

Done my time in close to two dozen cities whose nightlife had all the charm of tarted-up tweenies. Survivable? Sure. It's easier to maintain a nocturnal lifestyle in Nowheresville these days, when you can buy so much online. But see, I drank beer in Fraunces Tavern when the Sons of Liberty skulked in to brew their trouble. Even then New York was too alive to be confined by daylight. By the time I returned during the Gilded Age, the city was unstoppable. My second exile was a bitch, and that was long before I learned to take *egg foo young con arroz y frijoles* and all the city's other cultural crossbreeds for granted.

That all changed a few years ago.

I wish to God it hadn't, because now, just the thought of moving makes me go blank for a second, dead—truly dead, not technically dead.

I reach down next to the wine glasses to draw out a wire frame bin. A rat lifts her head from the blue velvet lining and yawns, flashing buck teeth the color of curry. I scowl as I place the escapee next to the others and sing them all back to

sleep. Lilith, the bar's front man, clatters a cocktail tray onto the stack. She winks, glad I answered her call for help so quickly. Her smile fades when she sees me slide the bin into place.

"No prob," I say, hoping to make her feel better. Ninety-two years of voice lessons have not helped her sing on key. Diniel usually charms the rats to sleep for her, but he's late.

"The Piper's here," Lilith warns.

I scowl, then try to hide my nervousness by crumpling the magazine ad for a three-point toss into the recycling bin.

"You're going to win, Jack."

Franchisee of the Year gets to choose his next assignment. Hence Lilith's glossy suggestions—she thinks I'll take her along to manage my new club. I would, if that were the plan.

Lilith tugs her black lace corset north and east. "You're the best rat-catcher in the city after the Piper, which means you're really number one, since he's too busy running the national chain to go out on calls."

I manage the Manhattan franchise of The Pied Pipers, and have always placed in the top three. This year, I've got to win. My thirty-year rotation is up.

And I can't leave.

There's no magical interdiction, but there might as well be. It's like this: the Piper makes his vampires move so no one notices we don't age. Break that rule and you wake up drunk on the Bowery at sunrise, ankles cuffed, nose already burning.

My workaround? I'm laying a trail of gold for the Piper, beginning at this bar. It's not as crazy as it sounds. The club was inspired by my hero, the greatest rat-catcher of all time: Jack Black, Queen Victoria's official rat destroyer. I'm not kidding. Never met him—we were already in America by the time he was born—but what a character! He once melted down all his wife's pans and poured the iron into molds formed from real rats, and wore those life-size iron rats like cabochons on a shoulder belt over his coat to advertise his business. That belt drew a crowd to

rival the Piper. Once they heard Jack's story, they either fainted or hired him. Now that's what I call an entrepreneur. Anyway, Jack Black sold the rats he collected as pets (if they could be passed off as fancies) or to the rat pits. I give mine a few days of Club Med and then the gentlest death possible, but like my namesake, I get paid twice for the same rat. What could be more appealing than double-dipping to the greedy Piper?

Unfortunately, last month's anorexic receipts have me worried about staking my future on the club's success. This plan is big, and some nights I'm not so sure the Piper is ready to let his little boy lead. I flash Lilith an anemic smile and scurry down the hall to the supply room to restock, glad I don't have to sell the idea tonight. A good month could make all the difference.

As I push open the door, the rats freeze and sniff the air. I chirp, mimicking their ultrasonic giggle; at 55 kHz, it's way beyond human hearing, even too high-pitched for dogs. They relax. I pick a male off the toy ladder and tickle the nape of his neck, their favorite spot. He playfully nips my finger as I put him on my shoulder. Over his sandalwood scent, I pick up notes of asphalt, dirt, and General Tso's chicken. Lucky guy.

The colony I collected from Donald Trump's construction site last night has taken over the PVC sculpture in the center of the room. Maybe I should run a special, offer them as a premium vintage? Right now, we're the only humanitarian club, but it won't be long before the other vamp bars start offering rats to customers who don't want to feed on humans.

In the back of the supply room, a couple of young rats hang from a cherry-red parrot swing while others play soccer with a racquetball. A heavily pregnant rat runs across the tightrope to the jungle gym, tail acting like a balance pole. I sing a few notes of my ultrasonic lullaby. All around me, rats snuggle into wood shavings.

I harvest a few dozen. As soon as I shut the door behind me, I change the melody and sing the ones in my basket into a deep sleep, walking slowly past walls paneled in oak rescued from an old tavern.

At our best table, the Piper's leaning on his knee in an overstuffed Victorian club chair, gazing anxiously upon the streets of TriBeCa. An inviting pool of light falls onto the empty chair next to him. Despite the sullen heat, he's wearing a sports coat that won't button unless he sucks in his breath, and a gleaming rat lapel pin. Must be waiting for a big client. I'm proud he's meeting him at my club.

I fan the rats out on a silver tray and bring them over.

We could pass for father and son, the Pied Piper and me, both blessed with easily forgotten faces. His is craggy, ageless. Mine invites women to tousle my hair. Innocently. I was only twelve when the Piper turned me. Really sucks when you're nearly seven hundred and fifty years old and your best dating prospects are pedophiles.

"Good evening, boss," I say, setting the tray in front of him. "On the house."

"Thank you, Jack. Could I have a glass of Cabernet for Dorie?"

Damn, she's here. What's he doing dressed like this for her?

I smile and nod, checking the side rooms for Dorie as I return to the bar. Two lanky vamps are having a cat stare down in the mid-century modern suite. Laughter rolls out of the New Orleans parlor, crowded with flouncy vamps.

My fangs threaten to pop out when I return to the boss's table and see Dorie, but I swallow and mumble a greeting as I place the wine in front of her.

Dorie was turned at the right age. She has a Weimaraner's startling gray eyes and acres of strawberry blonde hair parted down the center, rippling to her midriff like Botticelli's Venus. Her beauty won't always be fashionable, of course. Styles change. For now, though, she's It.

What a waste. All that beauty and not enough spirit to make something of it. I'd probably coach her, if she wasn't playing the Piper. I mean, damn, if I wore a bandolier of gold rats and nothing else, I still wouldn't turn as many heads as she can. Of course, she walks around practically naked, dressed in a skim coat of red latex like half of the new vamps in the room. The others are in leather. Latex or leather: it's the law. No choice there for Dorie, because she's an animal rights

activist. I hope she's wearing a bikini bottom or had the decency to grab one of the towels we keep near the entrance. Talk about gross.

The Piper gestures me to join them. "Dorie, this is Jack Black." He smiles proudly at me, and I straighten. "In addition to owning this club, he's one of the best Pipers in the country."

She sips her wine. I can smell her disgust, like burnt coffee.

"He's in the running to win Franchise of the Year."

"Is that so?" she murmurs.

He prattles about his selection process, his grin stretching wider and wider, nearly patting me on the head. For once I don't feel the urge to duck because I imagine him smiling like that, leaning back in his office chair as I explain my plan. Instead of banking the prize bonus, I'll use the money to develop a sub-franchising model for humanitarian bars. He rubs his thumbnail over his lower lip, recognizing a classic case of vertical integration, with the main business providing the product marketed by the subsidiary. He smiles a little and holds out his palm, asking what I want, and I say, just a small cut. He nods. Taller now, I cross my legs casually, say we should run it out of his existing headquarters, citing the logistical benefits. I'll stay in Manhattan; it'll be easier.

Though if he insists, I'll move to Brooklyn.

Damn it, I'll even move to Queens—or if he's feeling cruel, the Island.

The Piper coughs. He turns away from both of us. Dorie tilts her chin, giving me the cool stare of a celebrity measuring my visibility.

The Piper takes a sip, clears his throat. Then he leans towards me and whispers, "There's an extra reward for the winner this year. A month-long, all expenses paid trip to Hameln."

He still uses the German pronunciation. I wonder if he considers himself German or American. Probably doesn't give it much thought. Give me a bank and I'm home, he says.

Never been that easy for me.

“Hamelin,” I repeat softly.

Something stirs in my belly. For a moment I’m lost in images of Hamelin’s wooden Weser Renaissance buildings, their facades subdivided with ram’s-horn scrollwork, pinnacled gables, and crazy hand-carved ornaments all picked out in different colors. Always wanted to see those buildings in person. I haven’t been back since 1284—

My palms suddenly become sweaty. I wipe them on my trousers. My parents were confident they could outwit the Piper, too. That’s why I haven’t been back since 1284, when the Piper lured us kids out of Hamelin into a cave in Köppen Hill, then through the mountain to Transylvania. Where he turned us, as revenge against our parents, who refused to pay him after he charmed all of the town’s rats into the Weser River.

As you’d imagine, Count Dracula flipped when he found 130 illegal vamps on his doorstep. The negotiation didn’t go well for the Piper. He had to give up most of the vamps and promise that none of his remaining children would ever visit the Count’s territory, which stretched all the way from Romania through Germany. Sixty-five years later, we fled Europe. Lean times, those.

The Piper grins like a little kid. “I just signed a treaty with the new Count. Two of us can go back each year. You know the town pays an official Pied Piper now?”

No, really? I smile tightly. He’s repeated this rant so often he can wrap it up in a nanosecond and still have time for a Bronx cheer.

“The guy’s not even a licensed pest control operator, he’s a *storyteller* who performs my tale weekly in front of the Rattenfängerhaus.” He grumbles.

This “rat-catcher’s house” is a fake, too, built in 1603, more than three hundred years after we left. It’s beautiful, I admit, but not as much of a show-stopper as the Weser Renaissance buildings. Their lavish style is the second major tourist attraction in Hamelin. God help me if they ever become the first.

“That town is still making money off me.”

Course, if they hadn't turned his story into a legend, he wouldn't have made his millions here, promising a service "so good, so unnoticeable, you'll think it's magic." That motto works like a charm on building supervisors at prestigious addresses. They'll do anything to keep residents from finding out they have a rat problem.

The Piper picks a sleeping rat off the tray and twists its neck. Dorie jerks back in her chair. He sinks his fangs into its heart and drinks. Her face pales.

"You want one?" he asks her, making the motion of cervical dislocation.

He meant that courteously, because Dorie is too squeamish to snap a rat's spine. She flashes me a look of pure hatred, deciding to blame the purveyor instead of her meal ticket. I'm pissed, too, because no one needs to do that to be sure my rats die humanely. Rats don't wake up after I've sung them to sleep. I am better than barbiturates. When is he going to see that? My throat burns, as if someone tossed a bucket of acid at its side and plugged the drain. Each time I try to swallow, the heat sloshes up and down.

I say I need to help Lilith at the bar and walk away.

The rest of the night scuffles past as I charm customers and rats. At 4 A.M., when we're getting ready to close, the Piper waves me back to his table.

"Dorie wants to see the operation."

I take them behind the bar and show them how to tap beer. Dorie takes out her cell and shoots a photo of the Piper with a foamy mustache. They kid around for a few minutes.

"Where do you keep the rats?" asks Dorie.

The Piper grabs her arm before I can say one word and marches toward the supply room. I follow in his wake.

"These rats are lucky to have such a good home," he says.

As soon as the Piper pushes the door open, I catch the whiff and start scanning, a smile frozen on my face. There. Behind the jungle gym. She's frozen with her rump up in the air and her tail deflected to the right. Jeezus. A big male mounts her while a dozen others crowd around them. In less than a minute, she hops forward

to dislodge him and boxes the nearest male to push the group back, but another is already on her, his spine arching as he thrusts, forepaws lifting off her back.

“Been a while since I’ve seen that,” the Piper says softly, as the fifth male mates with her in so many minutes. He grabs Dorie’s cell and takes a picture. “They’ll keep at it for two or three hours,” he tells her. He smiles.

A very masculine smile.

Dorie stares at him, open-mouthed. I echo the Piper’s smirk. Before she can figure out which complaint to lodge first, the female escapes into the nest box. The males mill around the entrance, whiskers sweeping across the rough wooden side.

“Outta luck, guys,” says Dorie with obvious relief.

“Typical bunny-hugger,” I say under my breath.

Dorie stiffens. My fangs pop out in response. I smell the musk of rising testosterone in the rats and inhale deeply. The Piper turns his shoulder to shield her. I ignore him. Behind me, a rat gnashes his teeth. Dorie’s eyes widen. A laugh that tastes sweet and sour like trouble gurgles in my throat. I ignore that, too.

“Try to imagine them with nice furry tails,” I say, leaning close to her. “Isn’t that better?”

“Don’t you know when to shut up?” the Piper says. “Sweetheart, don’t worry about him.”

I stumble backwards in surprise. Before he started dating her, the Piper liked to grouse with his rat-catcher buddies about how animal rights activists are only interested in protecting cute critters and ones that communicate like humans. They’d trot out the latest horror stories. Halfway through the conversation the Piper would say, “You can bet your franchise that 80% of them have never sat silently for an hour observing actual animals at work. But they’re sure quick to tell us how to do our jobs right.” If I wasn’t lucky enough to escape at that point, he’d elbow me and say, “Jack here is an animal welfare activist, but he’s okay. Well informed and realistic.”

Well-informed, realistic, and stupid beyond belief. He must actually care about her. Acid washes up my throat again. I mumble an apology and start counting the punch marks in the Piper's shoes to keep quiet, which ain't easy.

Like I said, stupid.

Dorie turns to the shelf unit. Her muffled exclamation makes me look up. A rat slurps coffee out of a mug. Dorie's holding her hand over her mouth and nose. The Piper chuckles and takes another picture.

The female in heat reappears and is instantly rushed.

"I always tell the recruits, if they're not eating, they're having sex." The Piper chuckles again. "Not a bad life." He snaps a shot of a rat running across his shiny black wing tips.

"Stop them," Dorie squeaks, squeezing his arm.

The Piper starts explaining how female rats benefit from gang rape, because males who have copulated with them are less likely to commit infanticide.

Dorie thumps him on the chest. "That's not natural. It's a perversion caused by human interference."

Her screeching upsets the rats. One male starts chasing another across the room, trying to bite his rump. I hustle the vamps back into the hallway.

Now she's babbling about how the whole set-up of my club is unethical. Vamps should feed off humans, not kill rats.

Pink splotches appear on the Piper's cheeks. He yanks her toward the club's exit. In thirteen hours, I will remember that I left the door to the supply room open.



The sign from the New York State Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is written in English and Spanish. Closed. Live rats were found throughout the premises, and rat droppings were found on the bar and in the supply room.

My vision blurs. An older vamp stands with me in the alley outside my club, his hand on my shoulder. His words whoosh past like the sound of distant highway

traffic. Eventually I realize that he's asking if my insurance is paid up. No vamps will return to the club for fear of exposure, he says. He slips a business card between my hand and the glass door.

Long after he's left, I look at the sweat-stained card and wonder who designed the arsonist's logo.

My head aches dully. If I'm lucky, I'll sell at a loss. My mind keeps skittering away from the alternative: that I won't be able to sell quickly enough, and I'll lose the Piper franchise, too. I keen, and inside the rats shriek.

I keep standing there like an idiot, staring at the sign on my back door. It suggests I visit www.pestfreeNYC.com for a list of recommended pest management professionals.

The only thing I can figure is that Dorie registered a complaint, sent some of the Piper's photos to the Health Department. But why?

Does she think the Piper lets his rats loose in Central Park?

I text Lilith, my go-to girl, for Dorie's address.

Around midnight, I find myself waiting for the train at Chambers Street. The last six hours are a blank. That should probably worry me, but I'm too busy thinking about Dorie. I mutter to myself. Used to be, New Yorkers would give you a wide berth when you did that, but wireless headsets make it hard to spot the crazies these days. You can talk to yourself all you like now, even talk to God, just as long as you don't smell like piss or push a shopping cart.

Maybe I'm starting to feel a little crazy.

But what does she gain from ruining me?

The train rattles as it passes under the financial district, and then roars quietly through the tunnel under the East River. I'm so upset that I miss my stop and have to walk through Prospect Park. It's muggy. I keep plucking my shirt off my back. I slap a mosquito dead on my cheek, smearing blood. Each step falls clumsier as I enter the Piper's hallowed neighborhood of Park Slope, an enclave of brownstones on tree-lined streets—real trees, big ones, not those pencil-thin jokes shivering with fright behind iron skirts.

Huge pots of trailing geraniums flank both sides of the Piper's stoop. His front garden isn't big enough for a zucchini plant, but the fancy wrought iron fence lets you know this is the home of someone who could afford a loaded Mercedes, if he was dumb enough to own a car in the city. I ring the bell, looking up at the window boxes with more of those flowers flowing over their sides. There's one at every window on all four stories.

"Jack." He waves me in with an uneasy glance.

My apartment would fit in his office with room to spare. In the corner, a display case features the latest bait stations and other paraphernalia used by human rat-catchers, to reassure potential customers.

"I heard," says the Piper, rubbing his eye. "I'm so sorry, Jack."

I shrug as I drop into the chair opposite his desk. "You talk to Dorie about it?"

He sits back and scowls. "Why should I?"

I don't even dignify that with a response. The silence stretches. I stare at an envy head, a wooden bust that rich Hamelin merchants attached to their homes in the 1600s to fend off jealousy. This one's a monster with horns curling over his cheeks.

The Piper shifts his legs to the side. His eyes, heavy with sadness a moment before, are hot now. "She's not like that anymore." He takes a quick swig of Coke. "It's business, Jack. You gotta deal with the ups and downs." He's getting louder.

"Believe me, I've been screwed. Your parents called me a sorcerer. Hah! Like I'm some dirty little wizard. A voice like mine comes along once in a generation. Did they appreciate what I did for them? I nearly froze my *tuchus* off waiting for those rats to drown. You know they can hold their breath for—"

"Fifteen minutes." When I was young, I enjoyed playing rat trivia with him.

He twists in his seat again. "But did I take that out on you? Naah, I—"

You kidnapped me and turned me into a vampire.

"I gave you the franchise and—"

"She's yours. So how are you gonna make this right?"

The Piper sits back with a thump. Then he stands, scraping his chair along the oak floor. He flings his arm out, knocking over the soda can. His cheeks flush purplish-red as he mops up the spill, like he's about to stroke out or something.

My heart actually thumps as I realize I've made a terrible mistake. I can feel all the blood pooling in my body, and blink back dizziness. The envy head leers at me. What was I thinking, asking for his help? Money is his immortal love. I mean, come on, a thousand florins is what, about fifty bucks? Who complains about fifty bucks for 736 years?

"Get out," he growls. "Before I ship you off to Milwaukee to protect my business from your bad PR."

Milwaukee has the best pest control of any city in the country; that's where he sends trainees and slackers, not master rat-catchers. I stumble out, wishing I could think faster on my feet, but no parting line comes to me.

Back on the train hurtling towards Manhattan, I realize that the Piper never claimed Dorie, so I'm free to deal with her on my own. And dammit, she owes me! Not just for the club. I've never fought with the Piper like that.

At 86th, I get out. Instead of walking back to the Mariner's Gate, I hop over the tall wall surrounding Central Park and head towards Belvedere Castle.

The castle's stone scrapes my palms as I climb to the lookout. The sky is now the mid-gray of the castle's Manhattan schist, not quite as light as its granite. This is madness. Sunrise doesn't creep, it rushes up from behind and chomps on your heels. How much time do I have, an hour? Maybe?

I sing to the rats. The first emerge from my left, trudging out of the Delacorte Theater, gluttoned from the refuse left behind by the crowd gathered for the free Shakespeare in the Park play. Straight ahead, the rats on Turtle Island paddle across the pond, answering my call. They pour toward me, from the Great Lawn, from the lake, from behind the Metropolitan Museum, where the mummies sleep. Some run all the way from the Sheep Meadow. For many minutes I sing to them and they keep coming.

Hundreds.

Thousands.

Those in the front line press their paws against the castle walls, chittering with excitement. The sound burns inside me: no longer is this castle the respite of my evenings off. It's a true battlement and I am its lord.

I lead the rats out of the park to Dorie's basement apartment. Behind its metal bars, her window is cracked open on the top and bottom. I slice through the screen and beckon the first troop under the rhododendrons, instructing them to wait for my signal. Next, I scout until I find the spot where the utilities enter her building. The mortar's broken around the pipes and cables. Measured against the knuckle of my thumb, the gap's easily more than a half-inch wide.

"Fools," I mutter, shaking my head. My rats will have no trouble squeezing through.

Stay, I command.

I leave a troop there.

The strongest rats trail behind me as I search for a manhole cover. I lift it quietly, not wanting to rouse any of the city's upper crust. We enter the sewer, and walk back to her building.

Go, I urge them, giving them a mental picture of the route and an apartment so rich with food and shelter it suppresses their fear of new things.

The rats drop into the filthy water and swim toward her apartment. I jog back to her street.

From a shadowed doorway I watch as rats stream through her window. In my mind's eye, I see them flicking their whiskers around the pipes to decide if they'll fit through the gap, and then sliding through, one after another. It'll be a few minutes before the first rats paddle through the sewer pipes and push past the trap into her toilet bowl.

Her scream pierces the air: three bursts in the soprano range, and then an inhalation with the wet sound of a cry before the first curses emerge. I sing

counterpoint, driving one troop forward. The rest remain, shadowing the sill. A man slides open a window and yells at her to stop screaming.

I love New York!

My cell vibrates in my pocket.

“Help me!” Dorie screams.

What?—oh, she must have grabbed the Piper’s phone instead of her own and hit last-number-redial, thinking she was calling him. I laugh to myself.

“You’ve got to come here now! Ohmigod, help me!” The phone clatters to the floor.

Well, okaay, I think, sauntering toward her apartment, humming. The doorknob breaks off in my hand. If she’s like every other New Yorker, she has that silly little chain and a dead bolt that’s not as good as she thinks, so I just put my shoulder against her door and shove hard.

Her back’s against the sliver of open wall next to the bookcase in her one-room studio, a fox terrier squirming against her chest, yipping in his highest register. Rats cover her Murphy bed so thoroughly I can’t see the color of the blanket. The lid of her garbage can drums against a cabinet. Her eyes are glazed and unfocused.

There’s a long squeak from under the bed followed by three squeak-churrs and a shriek that makes me wince. An open-mouthed hiss. A rat spurts out, its fur erect. The pursuer cuts off its escape. Both rats’ tails writhe on the floor. The attacker boxes and misses as his opponent kicks out. Another short chase and then they wrap around each other in a tight ball, rolling and shrieking as the attacker tries to stretch across his opponent’s back to bite his flank.

“God oh god,” Dorie moans.

Her terrier’s hind paw rakes her bare thigh, leaving three red streaks. She yelps and drops him. He dives into the throng, grabs a rat by its throat, and shakes it wildly. Blood arcs through the air.

“Ohmigod!” She flings her arms out to snatch her dog but she can’t make herself move closer to the rats. “Babykins!”

I call off the rats and scoop up the dog, prying his victim out of his mouth. He growls, his claws and tail thumping against me as he struggles to return to the fray.

Figures she'd have to have a ratter.

His heart's beating so fast my mouth waters. I sing softly to him, staring into his black eyes. Then I set him on the floor, and command him to stay. He scoots his butt forward, his eyes trained on the rats.

"Stay."

I grab a chair from the kitchen and thrust it next to Dorie. "Sit."

She scrabbles onto the chair and pulls her legs up. "Get rid of them. Please. I'll pay double."

Behind me, the dog whines but holds. The place is a confusing carnival of scents: the dog's excitement, a raw chicken bone on the edge of rot, peppermint candies, and Dorie's sour fright. Whiskers sway as the rats take it all in. They've massed, almost in ranks. Several rats climb up my legs. I stroke the back of a young female and croon to them, ignoring Dorie. The rat perched on the harp of her table lamp yawns.

"I'll pay triple."

"Why'd you do it?"

Her lower lip trembles. "I've been trying to convince him to sell the chain. He says his franchise owners don't use glue traps but the industry's so abusive I can't believe—"

"What's that got to do with my club?"

"I thought they'd connect the incident to your pest control business and turn it into a laughingstock, make the whole franchise look bad. So he'd get frightened and sell sooner. He hates to lose money, you know." She finally looks at me, with jealous eyes.

Dorie, jealous of me?

"I love him," she whispers.

Like I care. I set the rats down gently, and turn away.

“Wait! You can’t go!”

I snort and head for the door. She blocks me.

“Jack, you know the Piper will take care of you.”

No, he won’t. A second passes. My throat clogs as I realize the truth of it.

Dorie shakes my arm. Her eyes are still shiny with fear, but there’s a hint of sympathy, too, as if she thinks I want to be kept but am afraid the Piper would refuse. I stare at her, huddled into herself. She honestly wants nothing more than that. Poor little girl.

The rats stir and stumble forward. Dorie flattens herself against the door. She’s as close to tears as a vamp can get. I am, too.

“What do you want from me?”

Damned if I know, I almost admit. Then, just like that, everything goes still and cool inside me. The last bit of temper fizzles out. I’m burned about how much I’ll probably lose, but I’ll have centuries, maybe eons to make it back. That’s not what this is about.

I smile, revealing my fangs. “You know the Piper rotates his girlfriends every three years.”

Her eye twitches once. Someone must have called her the new lease model.

“You help me,” I say, “and I’ll help you. Trash-talk the wannabes, make you look good.” I flick my eyebrows, letting her contemplate the alternative.

This time, the jealousy is all over her face. I open the door behind her, and send about fifty rats out of her apartment. She mewls as they brush past.

“That was a gesture of good faith.” I pull out my wallet and offer her my business card. “Give that to your super. I’ll give him a good deal on rat-proofing the building.”

She nods dumbly and squeezes the card in her palm. “What do you want?”

“You’re going to persuade the Piper to sign a contract saying I can stay here as long as I like. No more rotations. No way am I going to fucking Milwaukee. I stay in New York.”

“What if I can’t get him to sign?”

INTRUDER, I scream at the rats, whipping them into a frenzy. The dominant males rush to attack, only they can’t find the source, so they turn on each other.

“Get them,” I tell Babykins.

The dog bounds into the rat pile, barking and growling. We can’t see his legs through the thick gray bodies, but the first yelp says it all.

“Stop them!” Her fingernails dig into my arm.

I rescue the dog. This time it takes longer to calm the rats. A big old rat near the bookcase is crying bloody tears. Shit. Porphyrin secretion like that is a sign of acute stress. I waver for a moment. If I don’t free them now, I’ll have nightmares about that crying rat. Then I imagine a suburban house in Milwaukee and shudder. My mouth dries out.

Suddenly, I want Dorie to understand. Dorie! Not Lilith, my best friend, the only vamp I trust to run my business when I’m out of town. Crazy. Yet if not for Dorie, I might’ve backed down.

“How old were you on 9/11, five or six?” I finally ask. “What do you remember?”

She scowls the way kids do when asked about ancient history. I want to smack her. Instead, I stare deeply into her eyes.

“The ash was ankle-deep in the streets. Only we knew it wasn’t just ash. It was lottery tickets. Pictures of kids. The ugly sweater everyone keeps in the bottom drawer. And flesh.”

Dorie bites her lip. She has small fangs, really pretty.

“Eight-forty-six A.M., on the most beautiful day imaginable.” I draw in a breath and try to control myself. “Crisp. Not a cloud in the sky. Kind of day I still dream about.”

And then clouds of toxic dust rolled down the streets, shrouding lower Manhattan in darkness before the morning coffee break. The really old vamps had flashbacks of Pompeii when they watched the evening news.

Four hundred million tons of steel turned into scrap. The debris punched a hole straight through the Customs House, leaving a crater in its basement, and obliterated a small Greek Orthodox church perched in front of the towers. It sandblasted the surrounding buildings, blew out windows and doors. The rubble was like a dragon, belching fire and smoke. Some of those I-beams were hot enough to set your shoes on fire.

“By the time I woke up, the rescue workers were gray from head to foot. This one guy—the ash made his hair stick out straight. But you didn’t want to wash it off, you know? Because that seemed sacrilegious. I swear that was the last thing I thought about every morning before I went to sleep, for nine fucking months.” I take her hands off my arms.

“Look around you. Now picture a thousand times as many rats.”

She looks confused. I wait, but even with rats all around her, she still doesn’t make the connection. To be fair, few people did even at the time, and we didn’t talk about it much because the situation was already unbearable.

“When the towers came down, Dorie, all the food in the restaurants and supermarkets, all the garbage, it just sat there. And the rubble provided perfect shelter. Dorie, the rats were eating the bodies.”

She whimpers.

“Every night at sundown I went into the sewers. I sang until I was hoarse, luring the rats uptown, into the river, wherever. As long as they were away from Ground Zero.

“On September 18th, the Health Department let four human pest control operators into the area. They worked from dawn to dusk, and I worked the night shift. Those guys worked hard. They set over a thousand bait stations in the ruins and in the sewers.”

I pause, remembering how good it felt every time they expanded the ring of bait stations, gaining more ground, until we covered most of the southern tip of Manhattan.

“I tried to direct rats into their traps. They needed it.” My voice cracks.

I can't tell her we protected all of the dead because I saw bodies whose fingertips had been gnawed off. But we saved many of them. We protected the firefighters and ironworkers from rat bites.

And most important of all, we kept the rat population from exploding. If we hadn't, three thousand dead would have been just the beginning.

I know how bad it can get.

I lived through the Black Death. It started when I was seventy-six—just a kid, in vamp terms—too young to do any good, the Piper said, as he took me away.

I wasn't going to let plague take my city.

Not now.

Not ever.

The New Yorkers who rushed in their high heels and Armani suits to form the bucket brigades, they understand. On September 10th they might've been bitching about the Mayor's latest fascist policy and the trash that hadn't been picked up for three fucking weeks, but on September 11th, it was just our city. People who'd been wishing they could move to Connecticut for years didn't want to evacuate downtown.

We forgot to be cynical and hip.

The cops became good guys again.

Shit, even Giuliani became likeable, and who could've seen that coming?

I'd loved the city before, the way an honorable man loves his best friend's girlfriend: quietly, and within bounds. Afterwards, I saw the lie of it in the eyes of the other volunteers. There was no more holding back.

“You make him understand,” I tell Dorie softly. “This is *my* city. You get him to sign that contract, sister, because I'm not leaving.” I step back, so she can see all of the rats. “You get him to sign and I'll protect you.”

She nods. And with that, I take the rats home.

About the Author

Jill Shultz earned her B.S. in Biology from Cornell University and M.S.T. in Environmental Sciences from Antioch University. For most of her career, she zigzagged between environmental and arts organizations. It seemed she'd bag every independent Audubon Society in New England, but she missed by half. She's been a land steward, zookeeper, lab assistant, naturalist-teacher, science writer, and the program director of Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, her second-favorite job (#1 is being a novelist). Born in Brooklyn before it was cool, Shultz now lives in upstate New York with her love, Bill Altman, where she dreams of a well-kept garden and enjoys slurping books, visiting museums, hanging out with friends, and watching wildlife.

Please visit the author's website at: <http://www.JillShultz.com>



If you enjoyed this sample and would like to read more of the author's work, you can find a free sample of her science fiction novel, *Angel on the Ropes* here:

<http://www.JillShultz.com/Angel-on-the-Ropes-Ch1-Sample.html>