



This Is Why I Hate Clothes Shopping

BY AMIR FADLAN

“AMIR, YOU look hideous.” My fiancée, Samirah al-Abbas, stared at my outfit in horrified disbelief.

“Really?” I looked down at myself. “But it’s a tux!”

“A baby-blue tux!”

“With a matching ruffled shirt and floppy bow tie,” I said defensively. “My uncle loaned it to me. I think it’ll impress your grandparents, don’t you?”

“It’s Jid and Bibi’s fiftieth wedding anniversary!” Sam sputtered. “You can’t wear—”

“Samirah.” My father emerged from the kitchen. “He is pulling your leg.”

Sam’s reddish-brown eyes blazed dangerously, and I

suddenly realized that playing a practical joke on a Valkyrie might not be the best idea I ever had.

“I’m heading over to Blitzen’s shop right now,” I hastily reassured her. “I’ll pick out something appropriate, I promise.”

“I’ll go with you, just to be sure,” Sam said.

My father cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” I said. “Blitz will be there to chaperone us.”

“Good to know,” my father replied. “But I was actually going to suggest you change before you leave.”

“Oh. Right. Give me five minutes.”

I ran up to my room and began undressing. Then I froze. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a shadow move across my window. Someone was on the fire escape. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. Heart pounding, I tiptoed over and inched open the curtain.

A pigeon swooped past my face. I leaped back, tripped, and landed on my butt.

“Stupid bird,” I muttered. I quickly swapped the tux for faded jeans and a white T-shirt, then hurried back downstairs.

Sam was on her cell phone. *Odin*, she mouthed at me. She listened for a moment, then hung up and gave me an apologetic look. “I have to go. A last-minute einherji extraction. It shouldn’t take too long. I’ll meet you at Blitzen’s. Don’t buy anything until I get there!”

I walked her to the door. Sam looked left and right, then leaped into the air and flew off.

“I will never get used to that,” I murmured.

Unlike most mortals, I can see through the glamour, the magical force that disguises reality. I can thank—or curse—Magnus Chase for making that possible. He thought it best that I know about my fiancée’s Valkyrie life. I wondered what my father would have made of Sam’s sudden disappearance. A superfast Uber pickup, maybe?

Having my mind open this way wasn’t always fun. For example, on my way to Blitzen’s Best, I passed Thor. I saw him for what he really was: a sweaty muscle-bound redheaded deity in leather shorts that left little to the imagination. Though the way other pedestrians hurriedly moved aside, it’s possible they caught a glimpse of the real Thor, too.

Blitzen’s Best, the upscale clothing store owned and operated by Sam’s dwarf friend, helped erase the image of Thor from my brain. I’m not much of a clotheshorse—*just say no to the hipster man-bun look* was my motto—but Blitz’s colorful designs spoke to me. They didn’t seem to call to anyone else, though. I was alone in the store.

“Hey, Blitz, you here?”

A thin man with close-set eyes, patchy light brown hair, and a sparse mustache emerged from the back room. He curled his hands against his chest, like a rodent squatting on its haunches. “The dwarf is not in right now,” he informed

me in a thin, reedy voice. "I am Stan. May I help you with your purchase?"

To me, shopping for clothes meant grabbing the right size of jeans from a lopsided pile. I wasn't used to having a salesman offer to help, and I'd never known Blitz to have an employee. Then again, I was on Newbury Street, home of Boston's most exclusive boutiques, where customers expected personal service. So I went along, cautiously.

"Sure, I guess." I selected a pair of dark blue trousers from a nearby rack. "I'm going to a fiftieth anniversary party, so I'm looking for something special to wear."

"Special. Yes." He took the trousers from me and returned them to the rack. "These are not special."

I was pretty sure Blitzen would disagree, but I didn't say anything.

Stan wrung his hands as his beady eyes darted over my frame. "Just as I thought. You are trim. Tall, but not too tall. Your legs are slender." He looked up at me. "I have something special that will fit you like a second skin. Wait here."

I'm not going to lie. When Stan disappeared into the back room, I almost bolted. The guy gave off a seriously weird vibe. But the party was that night. If I didn't get something in this store, I'd end up wearing the blue tux. Better to risk Stan's weirdness over Sam's wrath.

Stan returned with a pair of light tan leather pants. He caressed the material, which was unlike any leather I'd

ever seen. “Try these.” He extended his arms, giving me no choice but to take the pants. “Put them on, and you will never take them off.”

“Uh, I hope you mean I’ll never *want* to take them off,” I corrected.

“You will wear them *forever!*”

Stan’s voice had taken on a feverish edge that made me regret not bolting. I decided to appease him by trying on the pants. I’d claim they didn’t fit or were too expensive or something, and get out of there quick.

I held up the pants to examine them in the bright lights of the dressing room. They looked formfitting, like skinny jeans, tapered at the ankle and snug through the hips and thighs. The peculiar leather was lightweight and papery in feel. They were slip-on, with no zipper, just a single ivory button at the waist. Poking out of the single deep front pocket was a scrap of wrinkled yellow paper with a symbol scrawled in red-brown ink.

“You have not put them on yet.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Stan was just outside the curtain. I hadn’t heard him approach.

“Uh, one sec.” I shoved the paper back into the pocket, kicked off my sneakers, and slipped out of my jeans. My cell phone fell to the floor. I debated texting Samirah to tell her to hurry up, then remembered she was doing her Valkyrie thing. I put my phone back in my jeans and laid

them on the dressing room bench. Then I stepped into the tan pants, pulled them up, and fastened the button.

Vvvvtttt! With a sound like a vacuum nozzle sucking against a piece of paper, the pants suddenly constricted around my body.

“Hey! What the heck?”

The curtain flew open. Stan stood there, circling his hands over and under. “You have put them on. Willingly. With your own hands.”

“Yeah, and now I’m taking them off. Immediately. With force!” My fingers scrabbled at the button, but it wouldn’t unfasten. I shoved my thumbs into the waistline and tried to wriggle free. The leather stuck to me as if it had been painted on. I yanked at the ankles, clawed at the sides. The pants didn’t budge or tear.

“The pocket. Check the pocket!” Stan stared at the pants, which did nothing to ease my growing alarm.

“There’s nothing in it but an old piece of paper.”

Stan stepped closer. “Check. Again.” He enunciated each word in a voice no longer thin and reedy, but deranged and dangerous. “*Now!*”

“Okay, okay, chill out! I’m checking.” I slipped my hand inside and blinked. My fingers touched a coin. A half dollar, judging by the size. I withdrew it and gulped. “Is this . . . *gold?*”

Stan thrust out his cupped hands. “Give it to me.”

Dazed, I dropped it into his palms.

“The pocket,” Stan whispered. “Again.”

I pulled out a second gold coin. Then a third and a fourth. As soon as I removed one, another took its place. Within seconds, gold coins were spilling from Stan’s hands onto the floor. He crouched and started running his fingers through the glittering pile.

I edged toward the front of the store. “Okay, well, this has been fun, and you’re obviously busy, so if you could tell me how to take off the pants, I’ll be on my way.”

“You cannot go,” Stan said, still playing Mr. Moneybags with the coins. “Not as long as you wear the *nábrók*.”

“*Nábrók*? What does that mean?”

Stan glanced at me and smiled slowly. “Necropants.”

I blanched. I’d seen enough crime dramas to know that the prefix *necro* meant *death*. “Just to be clear, *nábrók* means *death pants*?” I swallowed hard. “Are they going to kill me?”

“No. You misunderstand.”

Relief flooded me. “For a moment there, I thought—”

“*Nábrók* are pants made from the skin of a dead person.”

I clapped my hands over my mouth to keep from vomiting.

“These necropants have been in my family for generations,” Stan went on. “They were created by my ancestor, a mighty sorcerer skilled in dark magic. The symbol on the paper is a powerful spell written in the blood of the deceased. The spell . . . it makes gold coins. Forever.”

“Then take the paper!” I cried. “I don’t want it.”

“Fool!” Stan shot to his feet. “The spell must remain in the pocket. It is activated only when a male descendant of the dead man willingly and by his own hand fits the pants onto his body.”

“A male descendant?” Horror flooded my veins. “You mean these are—?”

“Made from the skin of your ancestor, yes.”

“*Ahh!*” I desperately clawed at the pants. I didn’t want to wear my great-grandfather or anyone else. But they were invulnerable.

Stan’s eyes gleamed. “I’ve been watching you, Amir Fadlan, waiting for my chance to give them to you.”

I remembered the shadow crossing my window and once again almost vomited. “Where’s Blitzen? What have you—?”

Ding-a-ling!

The bell over the store’s front door jangled. “Amir? Blitzen? Anybody?” a voice asked. “Jeez, I could rob this place blind and no one would know it.”

I sucked in my breath. *Alex.*

Alex Fierro was a gender-fluid einherji from Hotel Valhalla and Samirah’s half sibling. He sounded male at the moment—and a little annoyed.

“You know this person.” Stan said it to me like a statement, not a question. “If you value their life, you will remain quiet. I too know how to wield dark magic.” He gave me a warning look, rearranged his expression to pleasant, and hurried out front. “Good afternoon. May I be of assistance?”

I had a partial view of Alex through the curtain. In his eye-catching pink-and-green outfit and dyed-green hair, he looked more at home in Blitzen's Best than I ever would. But he didn't see me, and I didn't dare draw his attention. Stan obviously had more nasty surprises up his sleeve.

"Who are you?" Alex asked. "Where's Blitz?"

"I am Stan. The dwarf has gone to his apartment to retrieve necessary fashion supplies."

Alex leaned an elbow on the counter. "Stan, huh? Well, Stan, I'm looking for a guy who came here to buy an outfit for a fiftieth wedding anniversary. Tall, fit, and attractive, with a faint scent of falafel. Has he been in?"

"I have seen no such person."

"Well, maybe I could pick out something for him. Heck, I might get a few things for myself, too."

"No. We are closing now. Good day." Stan moved to the door and opened it for Alex.

"Sheesh, hold your horses, pal! I gotta call his fiancée first." Alex pulled out his cell phone and thumbed a number.

A muffled ringtone sounded from my jeans on the dressing room bench—Alex's ringtone. He was calling my phone. But if I answered it, Stan might put a spell on—

"Whoops, wrong number." Alex hung up and dialed again. "Samirah? Yeah, I'm at Blitz's. This guy Stan says the dwarf isn't here and that Amir hasn't been in. He won't sell me anything, because they're closing, like, right now."

Alex listened for a moment, then laughed. "Oh, *definitely*

bring that, so when you see him, you can let him have it.”

What did Alex mean by “that”? I wondered.

Alex hung up. “She is *so* not happy.”

“You will leave now.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Alex pushed off the counter and sauntered out. Stan locked the store door and returned to the dressing room. Without warning, he grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back. Pain exploded in my shoulder.

“It is time to go.”

“Go where?”

“No need to worry about that, my pet,” said Stan, “as that is exactly what you are now—my pet.”

Going anyplace with him seemed like a very, very bad idea. Stalling, on the other hand, seemed like a terrific plan. “Wait! What about the gold? Shouldn’t we—you—bring it?”

Stan laughed. “The nábrók will give an abundant supply. Endless.”

“Can’t I at least put my jeans back on? They’ll fit over the—the necropants.” I almost lost my lunch saying the word. “And hide them from prying eyes.”

“Who would notice?” Stan scoffed.

“Heimdall.” The guardian’s name just popped into my head. With his far-seeing gaze, he could spot trouble in the Nine Worlds—when he wasn’t gazing at his phablet. “He and I have a special connection. He even took a selfie with me.”

Stan paused, considering. “Very well.” He released my arm. “But don’t try anything foolish.”

Naturally, I tried something foolish. Instead of putting on my jeans, I snatched up the nearest weapon—my left sneaker—and whipped it at his head.

With one lightning quick move, Stan caught my sneaker in one hand and recaptured my arm with the other. “A shoe?” he growled. “Who throws a shoe? Honestly!” He shoved me through the curtain and then stopped short.

Sam stood in the middle of the store. With a spear of brilliant light in hand and wearing a suit of chain mail with a helmet over her green hijab, she looked drop-dead dangerous. If our religion didn’t forbid it, I would have kissed her.

“Let him go.” Sam’s voice radiated Valkyrie power. “Amir belongs to me.”

My heart swelled with pride. I felt like we could take on the whole world together, and—

“Not anymore,” Stan snarled. “As long as he wears the nábrók, he is bound to *me*.”

Oh.

Sam looked confused for a second. I pointed helplessly at my pants. She nodded and said, “Well, then we’ll just have to unbind him!”

I heard a zinging sound behind me. Stan stiffened and dropped my arm like a hot potato. I spun to find Alex holding one end of his golden garrote like a leash. The other

end was wrapped tightly around Stan, pinning his arms to his sides. Stan spit out a string of curse words.

“Oh, put a sock in it.” Sam grabbed a pair of argyles and stuffed it into Stan’s mouth.

Alex, meanwhile, eyed my legs. “Nice pants.”

“Yeah, not really.” I told them the disgusting truth about my attire.

“Gross,” Alex said.

“There’s more.” I showed them the paper with the spell on it.

Sam grimaced. “Dark magic. I hate dark magic. *Light* magic, though . . .” She touched the tip of her spear to the paper and it vanished in a puff of bloodred smoke. “Light magic comes in handy.”

Stan let out a muffled howl of fury.

“Hey, Amir.” Alex pointed at the necropants. “Let’s shuck ’em.”

“Alex!” Sam cried, blushing.

Alex rolled his eyes. “I meant get them off—in the back room, obviously,” he added when Sam blushed an even deeper shade of red. “Here, you hold Stan’s leash.”

He gave Sam his end of the garrote, took her spear, and followed me into the dressing room. He raised his eyebrows at the pile of gold coins, then turned to me. “Hold still.”

“What are you— *Hey!*”

With three quick and too-close-for-comfort flicks of the

spear tip, Alex slashed the pants from my legs. I guess the light magic overpowered the dark once again. The pieces crumbled into drifts of dead skin, which slowly disintegrated into dust.

“Huh. That’s not something you see every day,” Alex said. Then he glanced at my boxers and made a face. “Or those.” He tossed me my jeans and turned his back so I could dress in semiprivate.

“What tipped you off—about Stan, I mean?” I asked.

“Couple of things,” Alex replied. “He referred to Blitzen as *the dwarf* and claimed you hadn’t been in. Knowing how terrified you are of Sam—”

“I am not!”

“—I thought it was unlikely you’d skipped the shopping spree. So, I tested his story and called your phone. When I heard my ringtone, I knew he was lying about you being here. But the biggest clue? He refused to sell me anything. I mean, come on.” He gestured to his pink cashmere sweater vest and tight lime green pants. “A real clothing salesman would have seen dollar signs the minute I walked into the store.” He nudged the gold coins with his rose-colored boot. “But I guess he had all the money he needed.”

“And more where that came from.” I shuddered. “He was going to use me as his own private ATM. Forever.”

“Dude.” Alex laid a comforting hand on my shoulder. “That would have sucked.”

“If you boys are ready,” Sam called, “I’d like to call Blitzen, make sure he’s okay. I want to check in with Odin, too. He’ll know what to do with this creep.”

“Hang on.” I scooped up the coins from the floor. “I’m taking these for the Chase Space,” I told Alex, referring to our friend Magnus’s shelter for homeless children. “Anonymous donation for the kiddos. Except for this one.” I put a coin on the counter by the register, then grabbed the dark blue trousers, a pink silk shirt, and a matching paisley vest. Samirah chose my tie.

“I still think I rocked that blue tux,” I told her as we bagged my purchases.

“Oh, Amir.” She smiled sweetly and leaned in close, making my heart thump. “If you ever wear that again,” she whispered, “I’ll skin you alive.”