

On THE
PREMISES
A Good Place to Start
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**STORIES IN WHICH THE CONCEPT OF "COMMUNITY"
PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE...**

Table of Contents

The House of Special Purpose..... 3
by Kate Spitzmiller

Backstage with the Hypothetical Dead21
by Fraser Sherman

Princess Academy33
by Linda Shapiro

Maternal Instinct46
by K. S. Dearsley

The Harvest Christ53
by Bruce Golden

A Salt on the Rise.....67
by Benjamin Tyler Smith

FIRST PLACE

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The House of Special Purpose

by Kate Spitzmiller

My name is Olga Nikolaevna Romanova. If you are reading this, then I am dead.

Yuri has offered to take these papers if something happens to me, and for that, I am grateful. He, like his two fellow guards here inside the house, is a decent enough man, for a Bolshevik. He sneaks in candies for our Alexei, who is quite ill, and tells us of the goings on in Yekaterinburg.

Father still thinks the Whites will save us, and that he will be restored as Tsar. Mother agrees, although in her case, I think it is simply hope that sustains her and not any sort of political awareness.

But I myself can see no farther than the four stout walls that confine us. There is not even a window to look out of—the guards have covered them all with newspaper. I can see no future beyond our captivity just as I can see no tree nor blade of grass outside the blocked windows. I am afraid, and I know my sisters are, too. My brother, I think, is too ill—and too young—to fully grasp the drama around him, and therefore is perhaps not afraid. At least he does not seem so.

Dmitri is another inside guard. He is older than the others, probably Father's age, with the gnarled hands of a man who has worked the land his whole life, and a quick smile that can lighten the gloom of our dingy and grey rooms. He has sad eyes, though, as if this whole affair pains him. And I suppose perhaps it does.

The third guard who attends to us is Sergei. He is young, no older than me, and has a brilliant shock of red-blond hair. He carries his rifle with him always, slung over his shoulder as if it is another limb.

"Ideas that enter the mind under fire remain there securely and forever," he said to me one morning.

"Excuse me?" I said. I was in the room I share with Tatiana, folding laundry. Sergei was leaning against the doorjamb, watching me.

"Trotsky," he said.

"Oh."

"Have *you* learned any new ideas while here at Ipatiev House?" he said.

I ran my fingertip along the seam of one of Alexei's sailor shirts. "I've learned that a person needs sunshine and fresh air."

Sergei walked closer to me where I sat on my bed. He looked down and cocked his head. "What *ideas* have you learned, Olga?"

I looked up at him. "I suppose I've learned that the Bolsheviks hate the monarchy."

"Yes! And do you know *why*?"

I straightened my back. "No one has told me *why*," I said. "They have simply locked me and my family up in this house."

"A year ago, what did you have for dinner?" Sergei said.

"A year ago..." I shook my head.

“Yes. Think. Imagine back a year ago. What would you have had for dinner?”

“I don’t know. Venison, I suppose.”

“What else?”

“Father likes hazel-grouse. And trout. So perhaps those as well.”

Sergei grinned. “Venison. And grouse. *And* trout. All at one meal.”

“Yes.”

“And what do you have for dinner now, Olga?”

“Potato soup and a bit of bread.”

“Do you see the difference?”

“Of course, I do.” I was annoyed. The food at the house was horrible—the bread stale, the soup watery and often with evidence of bugs having been in the potatoes.

“Even now, you eat better than the average Russian.”

“So, this is the idea your Trotsky would have me learn?” I folded Alexei’s shirt neatly and placed it on the blanket beside me.

“Trotsky would have you—and me—learn many lessons. You are learning valuable lessons everyday here at the house. As is your father. And it is your father’s lessons that are *most* important.”

He began, then, to tell me all about Trotsky’s life, and I continued folding laundry, only half-listening. One could always expect a political speech from Sergei. But he was kind enough, so I always made a show of listening, while continuing on with my chores.

We are a strange community here at Ipatiev House. There are of course my parents—the Tsar and the Empress—but also my three younger sisters, my little brother, our family doctor Yevgeny Botkin, two of my father’s manservants, my

mother's maidservant Demidova, myself, and our three Bolshevik house guards. There are, of course, dozens more guards outside the house and, Yuri told me once, in the house across the street, but they are not a part of the small social circle that is established inside the house.

Fourteen people living in tight quarters in quite unnatural circumstances.

Mother continues with the charade of being the Empress of all the Russias by sending Demidova along on this task or that, and by remaining as intricately made-up and refined as she possibly can be under the circumstances. Father spends much of his time writing letters. I don't know to whom, but I assume they are to his European relatives—all monarchs and nobles—seeking assistance. In any event, the letters never leave his room; the Bolsheviks would have laughed at him had he asked for a stamp. My sister Maria spends her time teaching our youngest sister Anastasia how to do fine needlework. How the two of them can stand this pastime in rooms with blacked-out windows lit only by paraffin lamps I don't know, but somehow they manage it. Young Alexei, bless him, has taken quite ill with his blood disorder, and must remain abed, reading. Tatiana and I do the endless hours of laundry required of fourteen people in two giant tubs in the white tiled room off the downstairs kitchen. The skin is sloughing off my hands from the work. Perhaps another one of Trotsky's lessons.

We take our meals together, all fourteen of us, in the dining room beside the kitchen. Demidova cooks for us. These meals are odd, as one might imagine. The Tsar and his family dining with three Bolsheviks.

Sometimes there is talk of the weather.

"It is July the first, is it not?" Father said one night. "Perhaps we could open the windows? Let some air in?"

"Apologies, Nikolai Aleksandrovich, you know the rules," Dmitri said.

Mother, still unaccustomed to the Bolsheviks' use of our given names, shot Dmitri a wrathful look, but said nothing.

“If only in Alexei’s room,” Father said. “The boy is in a bad way, and the heat does him no good.”

“I’m sorry, no,” Dmitri said.

But the next morning, as I went into Alexei’s room with a fresh pile of folded laundry, I saw that the newspaper on his window was peeled back and that one side of the double pane had been set open a hand’s width. The sunlight streaming through the soiled glass was glorious—like liquid gold. I dropped my laundry onto a chair and went to the window, blinking at the brightness and breathing in deeply of the fresh, Siberian air. I thought I could smell pine trees, ever so faintly, and somewhere, meat cooking.

I looked over at Alexei, propped up on a pillow in his bed, his Springer Spaniel Joy lying beside him. Alexei’s chestnut bangs hung down over his sunken-in eyes as he read one of Father’s English books on birds. I would have to find some scissors and give him a haircut.

“Who did this, Alexei?”

“Did what?” he muttered.

“Your window is open. Who opened it?”

Alexei lifted his eyes from his book and shook his bangs out of his face. “Yuri, I think.”

“Yuri? Not Father?”

“No. Father hasn’t been in here yet today. Only Yuri. And you.”

“Well, don’t get too close to it. Don’t lean out. The guards don’t want the windows open.”

“*Olga*, a guard *opened* it.”

“Yes, Alexei. An *inside* guard. The outside guards are different.” I went to his side and sat down on the edge of his bed. I ran my fingers through his bangs, sweeping them off his forehead. “You know the difference. Just be safe.”

“Al-right,” he muttered.

“How’s your book?” I said.

“It’s good,” he said. “It’s about the birds of Britain.” He ran his fingers through Joy’s brown coat. “Did you know that great-grandmother was the owner of all the swans in Britain when she was Queen? It says so right here. ‘*All the swans of Britain belong to the monarch and must be left unmolested.*’ I think Father should make such a rule for Russian swans.”

“I don’t think swans should belong to anyone,” I said. “They’re far too beautiful.”

Alexei squinted up at me from behind his bangs. “But isn’t that the point? If they belong to the Queen, then they are protected and no one can kill them.” He looked back at his book, opened to a page painted with a portrait of a swan. “When I am Tsar, all Russian swans will be protected,” he proclaimed.

“You are a very thoughtful boy,” I said, smiling.

But he would not be Tsar. I knew that. The Bolsheviks would never allow it. The fact that he and Mother, and to some extent Maria and Anastasia, seemed oblivious to the reality of our situation made my insides ache. My father, at least, seemed aware of the peril, with his endless letter-writing. Tatiana and I spoke often in the laundry about our family’s fate, and we both knew things would never be as they had once been. I wondered then if I should speak to Alexei frankly; let him know the realities of our situation. Perhaps it was my duty as the eldest sibling. But Alexei was just a boy. A very sick boy. And what good would that do? At worst, the shock might kill him. So, I remained silent, sitting with my brother awhile longer as he showed me pictures of birds he would never see in a country he would probably never go to. After a time, I kissed his head again, and rose, telling him I needed to join Tatiana in the laundry.

I warned him again about the window, and then went over to it myself. The shaft of golden light had moved slightly, so now it rested on my arm as I stood facing the naked pane of glass. I could feel the heat of the sun through the linen of my blouse; a sensation taken for granted my whole life, but now, a gift. Through the opening in the newspaper, I could see a tree—a poplar—tall and majestic. There was a palisade fence beyond, and another house. But I could see nothing else of Yekaterinburg.

Reluctantly, I turned to Alexei's laundry and put everything away in his small chest of drawers. Then I went to his bedside and kissed his head again.

"Be careful of the window," I whispered.

"I know, I know," he mumbled.

I left his room and nearly collided with Mother's maidservant Demidova in the hallway. She was a short woman, mousy and shy, and she shrank away from me.

"Apologies," I said. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

She held a tray with a chipped green tea pot, a cup, and a small dish of sugar. Nodding her head to me, she scuttled off in the direction of Mother and Father's room.

I continued down the hall and walked down the stairs to the kitchen. Sergei was leaning against the double sinks, smoking a cigarette.

"Ah, Olga," he said, smiling broadly.

"Sergei."

"How goes the laundry revolution?"

"Quite well," I said. "I think we are winning."

Sergei laughed. "That's the spirit!"

He flicked his ash in the sink and then brought his cigarette to his lips again. Exhaling smoke, he said, "My bed linens need to be washed. You will do them?"

"Of course," I said. "Bring them to the laundry room, and they will get done."

"We are living the very spirit of communism in this house, Olga, can you see that?"

I thought of Demidova bringing tea to my mother as she always had and shrugged.

Sergei pointed his cigarette at me. "Each of us has a task of equal importance. Without each of us completing our tasks, the community falls apart. No one is more important or less important than any other."

"I think you are being a bit optimistic," I said.

"No, no," Sergei said. "It is quite the social experiment. You, the grand duchess, doing the laundry of me, a miner's son. Marx would consider this the ultimate socialism. We are all workers now. We are all equal."

I decided not to argue, and not to mention Demidova. "I'm glad I can help," I said. "Leave your linens in the laundry room and Tatiana and I will get to them."

I turned and headed through the kitchen to the laundry room. Tatiana was already there, her arms elbow deep in one of the huge tubs.

"There's more over there," she nodded her head toward the long oak table beneath the windows. It was piled high with garments. "Father's clothing and one of Mother's gowns. I so wish she wouldn't change her dresses *every* day. That one isn't even soiled."

Tatiana and I had taken to wearing the same dresses three or four times before washing them, because we were the ones doing the work. But no one else in the house seemed to grasp the difficulty of hand-washing the clothing of fourteen people, especially when a few of those people were accustomed to wearing more than one outfit a day, like Mother.

“Demidova still brings her morning tea,” I said, walking over to the table. “Do you suppose Mother really realizes what has happened to us?”

“Without a staff of a hundred to order about?” Tatiana said. “Yes, she realizes it. I think she simply does not accept it.”

“Alexei’s window is open,” I said.

Tatiana stopped her work and looked over at me. “Open?”

I nodded. “He says Yuri did it.”

“Won’t the guards be furious? I mean, that is their primary rule.”

I shrugged. “Maybe he had permission. Who knows? I told Alexei to stay away from it, just in case.”

“We should close it,” Tatiana said. “It is too dangerous.”

“I think as long as everyone stays away from it, things will be fine. Let guard business be guard business.”

I gathered a pile of Father’s clothes and brought them to the tub beside Tatiana, dumping them in. “You should see the sunshine,” I said. “It’s wonderful.”

“I’ve almost forgotten what sunshine is like,” she said, reaching down and pulling the stopper from the bottom of her tub. “You’d think they’d at least let us outside to hang the clothes.”

I grabbed the box of powdered soap and poured a generous measure into the tub. “I suppose then it wouldn’t be true captivity, would it?”

The water hose was connected to the sink and I walked over and turned on the taps so that the water was warm, but not too warm. My hands were raw and red and I knew they would suffer if the water was too hot. I brought the hose over to the tub and flicked the toggle to turn it on, watching as water rushed into the tub.

Tatiana busied herself squeezing the excess water from the clothing she had just rinsed, and then began pegging the clothes on the line that ran the length of the laundry room.

It was then that we heard the shot.

I shut off the hose, and Tatiana dropped one of Alexei's shirts on the floor.

We ran to the kitchen, where Sergei was furiously crushing out his cigarette in the sink. He turned and saw us, and pulled his rifle from his shoulder.

"Stay here!" he ordered, and ran out the door.

Tatiana and I ran for the stairs. My heart beat heavy in my chest as we reached the landing. I could hear crying, barking, and Mother cursing. The sounds were coming from Alexei's room in the middle of the hallway. We reached the room, and I saw Anastasia lying on the floor in tears, with Mother holding her and howling about the barbarity of the Bolsheviks. Joy the Springer stood on Alexei's bed barking madly.

I looked at the window. The part of the pane that was extended outward was shattered. Glass glittered diamond-like on the unfinished wood floor.

"*Cowards!*" Mother screamed. "*Lunatics!*"

I pushed past Tatiana and kneeled down beside Anastasia, half-expecting to see that she had been shot. She was crying uncontrollably, but as I inspected her skirt and blouse, I saw no blood. She was uninjured—merely scared.

"You're alright, Ana," I said softly, taking her hand. "You're fine."

"Olga! They *shot at me!*" she cried.

"I know. But you're not injured. You'll be just fine."

"*Barbarians!*" Mother shrieked.

Joy went into a fresh round of barking at this, and I looked up at Alexei where he lay on his side on his bed, the big Springer looming over him. Alexei's brown eyes were huge beneath his shaggy bangs, and his face was white as snow.

"Mother," I said sternly. "Alexei."

Mother's eyes were wild and full of tears. Her face was red and blotchy, and her carefully coiffured hair had come down in wisps around her face. But at the mention of her only son, she seemed to recover herself somewhat, and took a deep breath.

"Oh, what have these devils done to us?" she gasped. "My dear children."

Father appeared in the doorway with Yuri at his side. "What's this?" he said, looking down at Anastasia.

"Father!" she cried.

"Ana got too close to the window, Father," I said. "The guards shot at her."

Father kneeled down and brushed Anastasia's hair from her face. "There, there, Ana. Are you injured?"

Anastasia shook her head, and a sob escaped her throat.

Father stood and walked over to the window, inspecting the shattered glass. He turned. "Yuri," he said. "You were so kind to do this. But you should go. Make yourself scarce before the outside guards arrive."

Yuri nodded his dark head and looked down at Anastasia. "I am sorry, miss," he said softly.

"No apologies, Yuri," Father said. "You did the right thing. Don't forget that."

Yuri nodded again. "Thank you, Nikolai Aleksandrovich."

"Now go. Quickly."

As Yuri left, Sergei appeared in the doorway, his rifle hanging across his chest. His eyes were wide. “The Cheka are coming!” he said breathlessly.

Mother began wailing.

“Olga, the *Cheka!*” Anastasia’s eyes were huge.

I grabbed her in my arms and hugged her. “It will be okay, Ana.”

But I did not believe it myself. The Cheka were the Bolsheviks’ secret police. They were Lenin’s executioners. It had never occurred to me that the Cheka would be part of the outside guard at the house. And now they were coming inside.

“Come on, let’s get you off the floor.” I put my arm around Anastasia’s waist and hoisted her up. Glass tinkled off her skirt onto the floor.

“Mother,” I said, kneeling, “you must get up. The Cheka are coming.”

The sound of boots pounding on floorboards echoed in the hallway. I looked at Sergei and saw fear in his eyes before he slipped away, out of the doorway.

“Mother!” I said.

She had stopped wailing, but was still on the floor, sniffing.

The sound of boots was louder now and I stood. I wrapped my arm around Anastasia’s shoulders and faced the doorway.

A tall man, dark, with a mop of black curly hair and a black goatee and mustache entered the room. Two men entered behind him, rifles ready.

The man with the goatee brushed past me, sidestepped my mother, and went to the window to stand beside my father. His boots crunched on the shards of glass on the floor. He ran a finger across the bare pane of unbroken, closed glass, stopping at the edge where the newspaper still hung, and then he turned to look at us.

“I am Yurovsky.” His voice was deep. “This house belongs to the Ural Regional Soviet. This *window* belongs to the Ural Regional Soviet.” He walked back through the room, sidestepping Mother again, and his eyes rested on Anastasia. “The window does not belong to *you*.”

Anastasia began to sob quietly.

“The child was only curious,” Father said.

“Silence!” Yurovsky barked. “You have no authority here.” He glared at my father for a moment and then spoke again. “You will go to your rooms, all of you. And you will stay there. There will be no more flaunting of rules, and no more privileges.”

I helped Mother stand and brushed off her dress. Father came and took her arm. She leaned heavily against him. They walked to the doorway and turned right, toward their room, Mother’s shoulders hunched. Tatiana, Anastasia, and I followed, and went left, toward our rooms.

Sergei stood in the hallway, his rifle in hand and his face white. He didn’t meet my gaze. Yuri was gone.

Anastasia stopped at her doorway, and I gave her a hug.

“It will be alright, Ana,” I said.

“I only wanted to feel the sunshine,” she said softly. “Smell the grass.”

“I know. We all want that.”

She turned and went into the room she shared with Maria.

Tatiana and I went to our room and shut the door. I sat down heavily on my bed, and Tatiana paced the length of the small room.

“Do you think they’re here permanently?” she said. “I mean, they can’t keep us in our rooms forever. The laundry...”

“I don’t know,” I said.

But they were the Cheka. They could do what they liked. They answered only to Lenin. The situation was far worse than I had realized if the Cheka were here—and now in charge. We had much bigger worries than the laundry, but I didn’t say so. I didn’t want to alarm Tatiana.

Our dinner was brought to us in our rooms that night. Stale bread and broth that probably was meant to be beef but was so watery it was hard to tell. The guard who brought it was a Lett—a non-Russian. Latvian by the sound of his accent. He smelled of vodka and old cigarettes.

When the man came back to pick up our dinner dishes, he had a companion with him. He explained in accented, unapologetic Russian that they were going to search our room. We were to stand in the hallway and make no trouble.

Another guard held a rifle on us in the hallway as the two men turned our room upside down looking for God knows what. The same activity was going on throughout all the bedrooms, and I was able to see the rest of my family for the first time since the incident in Alexei’s room. Mother and Father were guarded by three men at the farthest end of the hallway. Alexei, who shouldn’t have been out of bed, leaned heavily against the wall, Joy sitting faithfully at his side. Two men guarded him, which was absurd. The boy looked like he was ready to fall over.

Sergei, Dmitri, and Yuri were nowhere to be seen.

There was a shout from inside Alexei’s room, and Yurovsky emerged from Mother and Father’s bedroom. He strode down the hallway and stopped in front of Alexei. A Cheka guard came out of Alexei’s room with his palm open and showed something to Yurovsky. They spoke briefly in a language that wasn’t Russian, and then Yurovsky turned to Alexei.

“Where did you get the candy?” he said.

Alexei shrank back.

“Speak, boy.”

“I gave it to him!” I called. If they found out Yuri had done it, he’d be shot.

Yurovsky turned and looked at me. Then he looked back at Alexei.

“Is this true, boy?”

Alexei looked at me, and I nodded.

“Y-yes, sir,” Alexei said.

Yurovsky stared down at Alexei for a moment and then turned on his heel and headed for me.

“And where,” he said, “did you get candy?”

“I brought it with me from the Alexander Palace.”

Yurovsky glared at me. His eyes were a smoky, spooky grey. His goatee and mustache were unkempt, and one of his unruly curls had found its way over his left eyebrow.

“Lukas!” he yelled.

The Cheka guard holding the candies hustled down the hallway. Yurovsky plucked a candy out of the guard’s outstretched palm and held it up in front of me.

“You brought *this* candy from the Alexander Palace?” he said.

My heart sank. The candy was in a cheap blue wrapper with faded red writing.

I straightened my back. “Yes.”

Yurovsky threw the candy to the floor. “This candy can be bought for a pittance at any corner stall in Yekaterinburg. You are *lying*, miss.”

“I am not lying. It’s Alexei’s favorite kind of candy. We buy it for him specially.”

Yurovsky narrowed his eyes and stared down at me.

“You are Olga.”

“Yes.”

“Do not cross me again, Olga. It is a very bad idea to cross the Cheka.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “Yes, sir,” I managed.

Yurovsky turned and walked away, and the tension melted out of my shoulders.

Eventually, we were allowed back into our rooms. And there we stayed. We ate all three meals there—tea and stale black bread for breakfast, a small cutlet for lunch, and bread with watery, questionable beef broth for dinner. The only reprieve we received was when we needed to use the washroom, and then it was a process of knocking on our own door to get the attention of a Cheka guard who would then escort us down the hallway to the washroom near the landing.

We never saw Yuri, Dmitri, or Sergei again.

Life went on like this for two weeks. By day, Tatiana and I read or talked quietly about what the Cheka might have planned for us. Tatiana thought they might be preparing to put Father on trial. I hoped she was right. I had darker thoughts. But I didn’t share these with Tatiana. I simply listened to her, and agreed.

At night, the Cheka not on guard duty gathered in the living room below us and played the piano, drank, and sang revolutionary songs. Usually in Russian, but sometimes in Latvian or Lithuanian. They were at it all night, sometimes until five in the morning. I could never sleep through the racket—I lay awake, listening. Sergei—and Trotsky—would probably tell me there was a lesson to be learned from listening to hour upon hour of revolutionary songs.

And then came the night with no singing.

That night is tonight. July 16th.

The paraffin lamp is running low—I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to write. The house is quiet. Every now and then I hear voices, but they are far away and indistinct.

The Cheka guards have been more reserved than usual today. They have avoided eye contact and not said a word to any of us. Something is wrong.

I thank God Tatiana is asleep. She would sense my nervousness and wonder why I am writing at one in the morning. I would have to explain my fear to her, my sense that something is terribly amiss. My stomach is like a rock. My mouth dry like dust.

Why are the Cheka not singing? More importantly, what are they doing instead? It feels like the house is inhabited by ghosts—ghosts of my family, ghosts of the Cheka. The ghost of Yurovsky. The ghost, even, of Lenin himself.

I prayed to the Virgin Mother tonight. Even though the Cheka have taken the cross I wear around my neck, they cannot take my faith. And I prayed to Her. I asked for mercy for my family. I asked for salvation for my father. And for Alexei, who would be Tsar next—which makes him such a threat to their revolutionary cause.

I hear voices now, on the staircase.

There are boots on the floorboards of the hall. And more boots. A whole army of boots, it seems.

Voices. But not Russian voices. Latvian and Lithuanian. Cheka.

They're here. In the doorway. Dear God, they're here...

*

I am Yuri Ivanovich Sedenov. I made a promise to Olga Nikolaevna Romanova and now I am keeping it.

The family is gone. They were taken three nights ago into the basement of Ipatiev House and executed. I was not there—I was barred from the house for “fraternization” when the Cheka arrived—but I know because the noise from the basement was so loud and horrifying.

I am billeted now at Popov House, across the street, and around one- thirty in the morning on July 17th, the shooting and screaming from Ipatiev House began. The

screams lasted thirty minutes. It's a sound I will never forget. I hear it when I am awake. I hear it in my sleep.

I snuck into Ipatiev House the next day, meaning to fulfil my promise to Olga to retrieve her papers. I found them, under her pillow. I also found Alexei's dog, Joy, and have brought him with me back to Popov House.

I am a revolutionary. I believe in Marx. I believe deeply in defending the rights of the world's proletariat. But this... slaughter... I cannot believe in. There can be revolution without the cold-blooded murder of women and children. There *must* be, or we are all lost.

The Cheka do not represent the revolution I stand for. They are animals. If they are in charge, then perhaps the revolution I stand for does not exist.

Olga was my friend. She was a kind soul. May her papers reach someone, anyone, who will remember her as such.

Yuri Ivanovich Sedenov

20 July, 1918

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SECOND PLACE

Fraser Sherman has been published in *New Myths, Abyss & Apex, Drabblecast* and multiple anthologies. He's the author of five published film reference books and a veteran of community theater.

Backstage with the Hypothetical Dead

by Fraser Sherman

The first time I saw the ghost was backstage during the Sunday matinee of *Chapter Two*. Assuming it really was a ghost. Even if it was, I'm not sure what happened made any sense. But I saw something or someone, and it changed me, so there you are, I guess.

It was March of my second year with Curtains Up, the community theater group I'd fallen into after my starter marriage went belly up. *Chapter Two* opened our season — Neil Simon always gets audience butts in seats — and I'd volunteered to chair props. Outside of finding a typewriter for George's apartment — we were doing it as a period piece — it wasn't a demanding gig. I had nothing to do second act, so when the ghost appeared I was just sitting by the props table, listening to the actors argue.

It's the moment when all the shit in George and Jenny's marriage comes to a head: she wants happiness, he doesn't see the point in trying for it after losing his first wife. I can totally understand that: more than a year after JJ walked out, I didn't see much point in looking for it either. Seriously, how many people find happiness and keep it? True, George finally decides he's wrong, but I'm not so sure.

Al and Harriet totally rocked the scene but I'd heard it enough times that my mind started to wander. Otherwise I wouldn't have noticed someone standing stage left, behind the wall of George's stage kitchen, a dark figure visible in the slit of light knifing between two flats.

This was not good. Nobody should be backstage left but me and Joe, the assistant stage manager, and this guy was way too skinny for Joe. I headed over fast to see who it was and why the hell he was there.

In hindsight, his staying a dark figure as I drew closer, no details visible, should have clued me in, but I was too tense to think. When I reached him, I tapped him on the shoulder... and my hand passed through.

He turned around with my arm midway into his ribs. A shadow with a head and limbs and a torso, and a blank oval where his face should be.

I still think screaming "What the fuck!" was understandable but nobody else agreed at the time.

*

"Seriously, Tony, a ghost!"

Standing on the auditorium's concrete loading dock, Janice Dahl, the stage manager, glared at me like I was a blackhead she wanted to pop. "I know you and Al don't get along—"

"We don't, but I wouldn't play games during performance. Janice, you can't think this was a joke."

"I know it wasn't a joke. Jokes are funny." She began pacing, without taking her eyes off me. "Dropping the f-bomb before the old-fart matinee audience? Denise says we got three membership cancellations already."

"They've heard the word before." I'd heard it a lot myself the past 45 minutes.

"Not at our shows. They come to us because they know they'll hear clean, wholesome, completely inoffensive entertainment, not even a god-damn." She

reached out one tattooed arm and caught me by the shoulder. “If it wasn’t a joke, cut the bullshit. Did you step on a nail or—”

“I swear to God I saw a ghost.” I knew it wasn’t the answer she wanted, but it was true, dammit. Well, sort of. “I saw something. Maybe it was... just a weird optical illusion. I mean I didn’t feel a thing when I put my hand inside, aren’t ghosts freezing cold when you touch them?”

“Al said I should kick your ass and leave you in the dumpster.” Janice had the physique to be a hell of an ass-kicker. “And he doesn’t want you back next weekend—”

“Come on, Janice! I love doing this!” Running props hadn’t been that exciting, but it beat sitting in my apartment staring at the TV.

“I told him it’s my call. Look I know you’re normally dependable but—”

“If I see the—optical illusion again, I won’t say a word. I *am* dependable you know that!”

“I do. That’s why I don’t get it.” She ran a hand through her mane of bronze hair. “I’ve been with Curtains Up since I was 15, that’s 16 years. There’s never been any ghost, no story about the place being haunted—”

“Well it has to start sometime, doesn’t it? No place has always been haunted.”

“Nobody’s died in this group since my dad and that was ten years back.” A split-second of sadness crossed her face. “And if he came back, why would he haunt you? So no excuse if you screw up again—especially as my ass is on the line for vouching for you.”

“You’re going to?” She nodded. “I won’t let you down, Janice, I promise.”

“You’re tentatively welcome. Well, wanna head over and join the others at Buffalo Belle’s?”

“I can’t face Harriet.” She was a sweetheart, and I’d ruined her big scene.

“See you at pick-up then.” Meaning the Wednesday rehearsal before the second weekend run.

The inquisition was over. We headed for our cars and I debated whether to find somewhere with decent vodka or head back to the bottle at my apartment and cogitate there.

Because that had been no trick of the light.

And whatever I’d encountered had made me look bad. The past year, this was the place I’d come the closest to happy, the place where I belonged, if I belonged anywhere. I did not appreciate some stupid spook almost fucking that up.

*

We closed *Chapter Two* without any more ghost sightings. I apologized to everyone and by the cast party they’d all forgiven me but Al. As he was directing *The Mousetrap*, our next show I decided not to volunteer for backstage and stick to set construction.

I didn’t see Janice again until move-in. I showed up pretty early—I was still trying to redeem my reputation—but she and Carol Wu, the set chair, were at the rehearsal hall already, moving flats into the truck for the first trip from the rehearsal hall to the auditorium. Even on a one-room set like *Mousetrap*, there’s lots of flats, support braces, doors and later stage lights and furniture to move.

At the auditorium, Janice and I were lowering a stage-center flat to the floor when I saw a doodle on the back. A very graphic representation of “Mouth Pacific,” signed by—“Shit, Janice, you must have been—”

“Sixteen. I made a joke, Helen double-dared me to draw it.” We let the flat drop the last half-inch to the floor. “Everyone has too much fun teasing me to paint it over.”

“Anything to liven up Rodgers and Hammerstein,” I said as we returned to the dock. “Oklahoma’s what, ninety years old now?”

“Not that old,” Carol—short, stacked and green-haired—said as she pointed us at a wooden door. “And like, everyone loves them. Put the door stage left of that last flat... the college can get away with, like, *Rent*, but not us.”

I’d seen Carol try to speak without using “like” as punctuation. She’d made it easily to 45 seconds.

“Used to be—” Janice grunted as we picked up the door. It was smaller than most of the flats, but a good deal heavier than canvas stretched over a frame. “—we’d do at least one show now and again with some ambition.”

“We’re so close to finally buying our own theater,” Carol said. “The board’s cautious about, like, reducing our cash flow.”

“Harriet says it’s probably *Sound of Music* for next year’s musical,” I said to Janice as we lugged the door across the stage. “I’ll bet you I know the cast already: Harriet as the Baroness, Sean as Colonel Von Trapp, Molly as—” My chin hit the door. Janice had stopped moving.

“Tony, do you see it? Over by the fusebox?”

“What?” I turned my head to peer into the wings, but I couldn’t see anything. I craned my neck more to the left—and I saw the ghost again, standing by the fuse box.

“A trick of the light, Tony.” She didn’t sound certain. “It has to be.”

“What light? It’s standing in a shadow.” Somehow, it was dark enough to stand out. It made an incomprehensible gesture with its shadowy arm, then started walking toward us.

I felt the sudden weight of the door as Janice let go and it almost landed on my left foot, then she caught it and as we tried to balance it, the ghost stepped into the light. Its face looked a little more human, like a manikin’s half-formed features, and then the door almost overbalanced again. By the time we had it securely on the stage floor, the ghost was gone.

“What are you guys doing?” Carol yelled, striding over. “Janice, you almost—”

“Sorry, sorry!” Then Janice hissed silently to me, “Tony, I take back everything I didn’t tell you I was thinking about you.”

*

“...so by the time I’d finished ASM-ing *Dracula*, I had the bug.” Janice stuffed the last part of a Moe’s burrito into her mouth, paused just long enough to chew, then went on. “My dad was pleased, except he always wanted me to do more acting. Couldn’t get that I’m happier behind the scenes.”

“I think I was just looking for something to do after work when I volunteered for *The Odd Couple*,” I said. “JJ got all our friends in the divorce—of course, they were her friends first—but suddenly I was part of something again.” I used a napkin to remove a smear of hot sauce from my T-shirt. “I’ve thought about auditioning. Chorus, maybe, to start with.”

“Go for it if you think you’d like it. Look how many parts Nick gets just by showing up and you’re a lot more dependable.” Dependable. I was back on the dependable list. Cool. “Speaking of which, the ghost—”

“You seriously think we should tell people? Look how Carol reacted.” I’d sworn her to secrecy before anyone else showed up—I wasn’t sure it would take, though—then Janice and I had split as soon as lunch rolled around. “Nobody’s going to believe us, so why bother? It’s not like the ghost’s doing anything.”

“I was thinking about that. What if it’s like the chairs in *Poltergeist*?”

“Huh?”

“You know, it starts with chairs moving and everyone thinks it’s funny, then the shit gets nasty.”

“I never saw it.”

“Not even the remake?” She rolled her eyes. “You kids today, with your death-metal and your found-footage films.” She clapped me on the shoulder. “After we finish up with the set, you’re getting educated.”

That night, after move-in was done, we watched *Poltergeist* on DVD at her apartment, over pizza. I wondered if it might be some kind of foreplay, but then she put in *Poltergeist II*.

It was still a fun night. Unfortunately, the movies didn't give us any idea what to do about the ghost.

*

Theater's a gossip factory. By the time of the *Mousetrap* cast party, everyone knew Janice had seen the ghost too. Nobody thought she was bullshitting—was I wrong to be a little peeved?—which was not to say any of them believed we'd seen a real ghost.

"I'm saying I believe that you believe it." Nick, a bony Curtains Up veteran who'd played one of the murder victims, splashed beer as he gestured. He was always gesturing; he said it was an Italian thing. "But you didn't see what you think you saw, Tony. Something moved, maybe, or a trick of the light."

"I'm so sorry for some of the things I called you," Harriet said apologetically, patting my arm. "Nick, how can you be sure it's not real?"

"I'm telling you, I know psychology," Nick said. "My point is, Tony didn't see anything that strange, but now he's convinced himself he did to explain the great big f-bomb."

"And me?" Janice said. "I saw it this time, both of us did."

"Mass hypnosis," Nick said confidently. "Happens all the time."

"Like, the real issue is what we do if the ghost *is* real," Carol said. "I talked to Father Bingham after move-in, and when he didn't know I asked the bishop. There's like, ghosts who come here on a mission from God. And ghosts who are like, out on a day pass from purgatory or something, and bad ones who come up from Hell."

"How do you tell them apart?" I asked. She just shrugged.

“Well I tell you one thing,” Janice said, “when we start work on *Oklahoma*, everyone’s got to be on the alert. Too many people backstage, too much movement, we can’t have anyone losing their shit. That ghost screwed up one show I stage-managed, he’s not doing it again.”

*

Janice encouraged me to try out for *Oklahoma*, and I wound up as a cowboy in the chorus. I’d way underestimated the work involved—the dancing and singing rehearsals are intense. But I’d have worked on the set most nights, so what difference did it make? And the occasional “Hey, I always knew you saw something” apologies were nice, even when I could tell they weren’t sincere. I was beginning to feel less like they were just people working on the show with me and more like... friends. Maybe they’d been friends for a while and I hadn’t noticed.

There was no sign of the ghost until opening night. I was sitting on the back dock with Carol, wigged to conceal her green hair, while “Oh What a Beautiful Morning” played on stage. And then we saw it standing between us. It didn’t walk or appear in a puff of smoke, it was just there, no preamble.

I gasped. Carol shrieked. For the first time it was in bright light, which made it look darker and more solid than ever. Maybe that’s why I could make out the shadowy outline of jeans and a sweatshirt over its body, and the face—it was close enough to distinctive features I could almost recognize it.

Then Carol thrust her parasol into it, jabbing me in the navel. “Carol, ow—”

The ghost slapped its forehead melodramatically and disappeared. Only then did I realize several people had squeezed into the backstage doorway, jaws dropping.

I was pretty sure everyone believed me now.

*

Despite the ghost, the show went smoothly. The opening number kept the audience from hearing Carol’s shriek, and I think the extra adrenalin, the nervous watching in case it showed up again, juiced us up. Afterwards, the ghost was the

talk of the opening night reception at Orlando's, though by unspoken agreement we kept it from the audience members who attended.

"...no exorcism," Carol said, tossing off her third screwdriver. A bunch of us had commandeered tables over in a corner and squeezed them together. "Not without like, demonic possession. The bishop was definite."

"So why isn't there something?" I said, nursing a Diet Coke (I was Carol's designated driver). "Someone dying or a message like Hamlet's father—" I watch Shakespeare DVDs sometimes on the weekends. It seems like the right thing to do when you're in theater. "—or the power goes out or... I don't know."

"It *is* giving us a message," Janice said, rapping one knuckle on her lips. "The message is, it's haunting you, Tony. You're there. Every time. Every fucking time."

A small, uneasy silence settled on the discussion as they all looked at me.

"Everyone, keep an eye on him when you're not onstage," Janice went on. "We're not letting him get sucked into a hellmouth—especially as I can count on him to show up for set strike."

Everyone laughed at that, then assured me they had my back. I didn't point out they couldn't do much against a living shadow because that would have been rude. And I'm sure they already knew.

*

Having made its one-visit-per-play, the ghost didn't show again. But once *Oklahoma* wrapped up, we began work on the year's last show, *No Sex Please, We're British*, so I figured we'd see it again. Not cool: it's one thing to work in a haunted theater, it felt like a whole different thing to have a ghost haunting me personally.

Curtains Up had done *No Sex* about 12 years ago, Janice said, and it was a surefire money maker, just dirty enough that the old farts laugh without being so dirty they walk out. It's another period piece—the jokes about porn don't make much sense otherwise—and the seventies nostalgia goes over well too.

I volunteered for ASM—Al protested I'd bring down a curse on the show, but he was overruled—and I was pumped. This kind of farce has people coming and going in and out constantly, so it would be a lot livelier backstage than *Chapter Two*.

Janice started out doing the lighting design, but the girl we'd originally cast as one of the third-act hookers broke her leg rock-climbing—or technically, I suppose, rock-falling. After multiple calls to find a replacement, the director, Pete, begged Janice to step in, and as it was a non-speaking part, she reluctantly agreed.

We made it through the first weekend without the ghost showing up. Then the matinee, then most of the last weekend, so everyone knew it would be closing night.

From the moment I signed in backstage that evening, I was on guard, but I couldn't keep that up once the show started. Like I said, *No Sex* is a fast-paced farce with lots of cues to give and problems to watch for, so when the ghost did show up, it took me by surprise. It was at the frantic climax of the show; Janice had just exited stage left and I was over to the right, hissing at Al to keep his voice down. Then over his shoulder, I saw the ghost, pointing right at me.

I froze. The shadow was completely detailed now, and honest to God, it had my face. Or something close to it, older, a little heavier—then I registered that the ghost was pointing past me, not at me, so I spun around and saw Janice in, the far side of the narrow space back of the center stage flats.

I had no idea what the deal was, so I ran as fast as I could, squeezed past someone, stumbled over a sandbag, reached Janice, pointed behind me, glanced back, saw the ghost hadn't changed its stance and wondered what the hell it meant. If I hadn't been so wired, I don't think I'd have noticed the change in the light overhead. But I noticed, looked up, and saw a spotlight coming down right on top of us.

I shoved Janice hard and we hit the floor of the stage together. The light crashed in a shower of glass and everything on stage stopped. Then started up, because the show really must go on, and we take that seriously. Janice scrambled up, hugged me and ran onstage because she was late for her entrance.

I glanced back. The ghost was gone, of course.

*

Six months later, we still haven't figured out the ghost.

Part of that's because we can't even agree on what happened. I remember Janice standing right where the light came down, which means the ghost saved her life. She says when I reached her I was the one standing right under it, which would mean the ghost tried to get me killed. We checked out the light, and maybe it hadn't been fastened properly, but Carol believes the ghost ripped off *Phantom of the Opera* as a joke.

Whatever its mission was, I guess it succeeded because we haven't seen it since. Unless that means it failed and gave up.

And then there's that face. Why the hell would it have my face? Harriet says it's the ghost of my future self, coming back to save Janice. Janice says it must have been a doppelganger—I think that's the word—sent to take my life and collect my soul. Harriet thinks it was an out-of-body experience but after Googling them I'm pretty sure I'd have to pass out before I could have one. Nick has a theory involving ley lines and psychic projection but I've never been able to listen to it all the way through.

My take? Well the men in my family look a lot alike; maybe if I had photos further back than my great-grandfather, I'd find an ancestor who looked exactly like me. And maybe he made those earlier appearances because if he'd appeared for the first time during *No, Sex*, I wouldn't have reacted so fast.

That still doesn't explain what he wanted, whether he was from hell, heaven or purgatory, but I'm voting for heaven. After the adrenalin wore off, I realized how big a hole Janice's death would have left in my life. Somewhere along the way, she'd become my first friend since the divorce. Whether the ghost intended to or not, he saved her life; if he ever returns, I'll shake his hand for that.

And thinking about what happened made me realize I didn't want to give up on happiness after all. I asked Carol out, my first date in almost two years; even if it doesn't go anywhere, I'm gonna stay in the game.

Janice, Carol and I all got on the play-reading committee for next year, looking for scripts that were actually written in this century. I figure we can stretch a little because someone spilled the beans about the ghost after *No Sex* closed. Memberships surged, and some paranormal investigators show up for two or three performances of every show. Now and then we let them go backstage with an ectoplasm detector or whatever it is, but they haven't found anything.

I worked the first two shows this year—*Ten Little Indians* and an oldie called *Send Me No Flowers*—and I'll be ASMing *Sound of Music* next. Yeah, it's Rodgers and Hammerstein and corny as hell, but even when the shows suck, this is my home now.

But after that, I'm taking *The Haunting* off. I know I'm being silly—I don't believe the ghost will come back, ever—but I've *been* haunted. I'm entitled to be a little cautious.

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THIRD PLACE

Linda Shapiro has been working as a freelance writer since 1995. She has published articles, reviews, and essays on dance and the performing arts, architecture, design, and other subjects in numerous Twin Cities' publications and *Dance Magazine* and *The Gay City News* in New York. She was formerly a choreographer and the co-founder and co-artistic director of *New Dance Ensemble*. This story represents her first fiction sale.

Princess Academy

by Linda Shapiro

The girls come to rehearsals with their hair tightly wound in French braids. They wear no make-up, but look ready to be filled in. They are in fact all outline, bones outcropping at various joints as they stand carelessly erect beside the sloping parents who deposit them here daily.

In the first of several informational meetings for parents, the Director points out that contemporary young women are animated flow charts, processing as they go. *We are all aggregates of experience* he explains, focusing his gaze strategically on the parents who seem most at sea. *But in our present unstable world it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile the assemblage of self, the job these young women face, with the monstrous tide of events that today threatens to engulf us.*

Not the best way, perhaps, to reassure mid-western parents who have just paid through the nose to enroll their daughters in this summer theater workshop, though the Director appears to be offering so much more.

He has brought Playmodalities™, his award-winning methodology, to Huntington, this peaceful enclave on the margins of a deeply troubled city. Here he will be able

to create the proper conditions for a range of social experiments that will be incorporated into rehearsals and the performance of an original play.

The girls have already been through a weekend of rigorous auditions and divided into what the Director terms *cohorts*. Once he separates the parents out according to the cohorts their daughters will occupy, what some have described as his oily charm gains a little more traction.

He empathizes with the parents of those he has cast as the princesses, obviously bewildered by the long legs and unsettling *sang-froid* that seem to have sprung from nowhere in their immediate families. How could these physically faultless creatures be sensitized to, learn to cope with, the “muggle world” the rest of us inhabit? Several parents had smiled at that.

At the same time, of course, they must learn to liberate the power that is locked within them, to dig beneath the shiny surfaces of their streamlined bodies, their candy flavored lip-gloss.

To the guardians of those cast as rebellious peasants, he paints a picture of highly intelligent girls with restless spirits, already looking beyond themselves to issues of social relevance. The Playmodalities™ experience, he assures them, will give their exceptional daughters the opportunity to enter a larger arena than their lives have thus far permitted.

Finally he takes on the parents of the mermaids, the eccentrics whose unsettling behavior may lead (or perhaps already has) to piercings, tattoos, and other forms of what some refer to as body modification.

Permitted to incubate in a carefully controlled environment, these daughters will experience the virtues of transformation from within.

*

Marni’s mother knows (though Marni’s father does not) about the tattoo of a small seahorse that has recently appeared on Marni’s sacrum. Her father nearly exploded when Marni came home with her ears and nose pierced, so her mother queasily anticipates the conversation she needs to have with Marni before she

progresses to more tattoos and who knows what else? Her mother had found a website on “body modification,” but could not get past the part on “advanced scarification.”

For now anyway Marni is thinking about other things, like how she will look in her mermaid costume, pants with sequin scales and inserts that flare out into fins. She is kind of critical of the Director, who strikes her as not giving *some who have studied dance for years* more complicated routines. She has suggested a solo for her character, who could do the splits, for instance, to stand for a mermaid’s options—land or sea—and at the same time the *way* intense pain the Little Mermaid felt when she swapped her tail for legs so she could dance with the prince. The Director had to gently remind her that she was getting off track and imposing a character from another story onto her own.

Well, she had replied, her solo *could* make the misery of prisoners in the dungeons below, which is now just represented by a bunch of fake-sounding taped howls and groans, really stick out for people. Some types of suffering could actually be expressed through dance, at least by a mermaid who can do a chest stand with her tail draped over her head. Plus it would give this show some pizzazz.

Eleanor is delighted that her two adopted daughters, Meg and Riana, have been cast, though in different cohorts—Riana as a princess, Meg as a peasant. As a single mother she has struggled to understand these flawlessly aligned creatures that speak to her only in monosyllables. With their American friends they string out monologues (“so, *I’m* like... and *she’s* like... and *we’re* so like...”) in voices that rise and fall in the singsong dialects of unknown ancestors. Eleanor is hopeful that the Playmodalities™ experience will help her daughters develop their natural talents while fostering more varied interactions with the other girls, and perhaps with herself.

Meg has no memory of China. Their mom is always showing Meg and Riana photos of the cities where they were born, which look smoky and crowded with high rises, like a science fiction movie. She often goes outside on her breaks. (only the peasants get to go outside—it’s strictly forbidden for princesses to leave the theater). She sits beneath one of the black walnut trees and gazes up and down the

street that runs through the town's center. She loves this old theater, built in the 1920's, mostly abandoned now except for their play.

She's especially interested in early twentieth century American history and imagines how the street must have looked back then—the picket fences, the busy sidewalks, people sipping lemonade on their porches. The beauty shop still has a few of those dryers that women sit under, mostly older ladies who go there for permanents. And there's a café that advertises lattes, but mainly sells coffee and pie to the retired men who gather there each morning.

Meg lives on the outskirts of Huntington where there are no sidewalks and no houses older than twenty years.

From her house she can see a grey horizon of flat-topped roofs in the distance, a constantly expanding mall where the Director took the girls for a field trip the first week of rehearsal. There he asked them to observe how people moved: which of them had a sense of purpose? Who just seemed to be wandering aimlessly or hanging around? Meg hadn't been to the mall since her mother said it was attracting too many people who, while sadly less fortunate than themselves, might make the girls feel uncomfortable. But going there with the Director had been interesting because he'd given them specific things to look for.

Meg sort of envied the aimless ones, even followed some girls about her age as they tried out round brushes in Sally's Beauty Supply and made each other up with the cosmetic samples, screeching and sort of clogging up the aisles. What she admired about these girls was the way they were simply there, so easily *in the moment* as the Director would put it. Not worrying about everything locked down in the past or held back, snarling, somewhere in the future.

*

Today in rehearsal the Director says that the princesses need to access their inner resources, to develop more authority. Yes it was their father the king who decreed that certain people disappear from their royal sight, which in turn incited the populace to revolt. But now that their father is no longer really in the picture, it is the princesses who must restore order.

At the same time they must also develop humility and take responsibility for their actions. He tells them stories of medieval noble women who, out of guilt for their sins, starved themselves, crawled on their knees over rough stone, cleansed the sores of lepers. It was only by touching bottom, literally and figuratively, that they could achieve transcendence.

Riana opens the door to the Green Room carefully. This is a very old theater, one that hasn't been used in some time, at least for plays, and all the doors stick. The theater smells a bit moldy, which has some of the girls' allergies acting up. Parents are not allowed into rehearsals at any time, as the Director explains he is trying to create an optimal situation in which all can flourish while each is encouraged to develop her own character. For instance, the Green Room is off limits to peasants, only princesses can go there. And of course there are separate dressing rooms.

Actually Riana is surprised to have been cast as a princess. She is no beauty, though the Director told her that she was chosen for her natural dignity and her work ethic, as demonstrated in the audition process. Also, she suspects, because he needed someone to keep the other princesses in line.

Inside the Green Room princesses are sprawled about on the floor, or on the several abused couches donated long ago by theater supporters. Riana is worried about their morale; they seem worn out and nibble on bits of food—sweet or salty, each according to her taste—without pleasure or commitment. Perhaps she will need to talk to the Director about the increasingly intense rehearsal process that does not allow for much fun or enough fresh air. The Director seems to favor the peasants, who get to run around outside during their breaks.

Riana reminds the princesses that they have assigned homework—looking through the packs of laminated pictures that the Director has supplied of the martyrdom of various female saints. The girls like the way that the saints are depicted as medieval ladies with high headdresses and plucked eyebrows, wearing elaborate gowns, while the symbols of their martyrdom are made into wallpaper or floor tiles. In one St. Catherine stands calmly reading a book while a miniature tormentor with a tiny wheel hovers behind her. It reminds them a little of *Game of Thrones*, forbidden to most of them at home, but viewed in the family rooms of friends with less vigilant parents.

Meg and the other peasants are actually glad they have been banned from the Green Room. They think of themselves as having more at stake. They are the play's social conscience, the liberators of the kingdom, if you read the script in a certain way. This is what they've adopted as their motivation, so that they at least have some clear direction. Sometimes the Director seems to be uncertain of what the play is *about*, or maybe he's just hung up on the princesses and mermaids, who get a lot more attention. Not in an icky way though... the girls have discussed this and decided he is definitely not a perv.

In several years Meg will become a civil rights lawyer. Riana will change her name to Zian and return to the province where she was born to work with an international adoption agency. On the few occasions they get together, they will remember this phase of their lives differently: Riana as a revelation of her agency in the world, Meg as a mish-mash of third-rate sociology run amok that made her eventually opt for law school.

*

Kelsey has the lead princess role, and she has hardly had a moment off for a month. She carries her script with her at all times, trying out various voices. During the breaks, when the other girls trade snacks and whisper together, Kelsey is certain they are making fun of her.

Kelsey does not have time for breaks. She has too many lines to memorize, for she is the king's eldest daughter, the one who commands the army in his absence and controls the other princesses. Her personal regime must be a strict one, to set an example. She keeps her makeup, all the little containers and brushes she has purchased for the actual performance, neatly organized. Every day she wipes underneath the things she has already wiped and thinks about how *she* is the one who holds the fate of the entire production in her hands.

*

At the daily discussion groups that the Director has instituted, the girls are encouraged to talk about the play and any problems they may be experiencing.

Today Kelsey insists that the mermaids, who mostly lie around swishing their tails, will detract from the seriousness of the play's themes.

The Director explains that it is necessary to have mermaids, who are protean beings (he tells them what that means and asks the girls to add it to their vocabulary lists). At times they can symbolize the suffering of the disenfranchised (another vocabulary word), as Marni so aptly suggested. They certainly serve as a representation of the sea, which stands for the idea of freedom from tyranny.

Kelsey says nothing, but notes that "freedom from tyranny" does not take into account all the hard work the princesses, especially herself, have been doing to manage the unacceptable behavior of the peasants. The play's theme so clearly reveals what happens when people lose respect for authority. And she deeply resents the fact that no one, not even *she*, has received the script for the second act. The Director explains that this will add a sense of anticipation and, ultimately, revelation to the rehearsal process.

But Kelsey feels better now that the set is being installed, piece-by-piece. So each day the imaginary stairs they have been climbing, bridges they have been crossing, corpses and ruins they have been pretending to step over become a little more real. Not that there is fighting or violence of any kind onstage, of course, but the Director has explained that dummy corpses and debris of various sorts will give the audience markers for the progress of the civil war.

*

One day out of the blue the Director asks each girl to tell a back or future story about her character. Just say what comes to your mind, he urges, right here on the spot! He will record the stories and transcribe them, so that each girl can incorporate hers as subtext.

Meg points out that since the play takes place mostly in closed or cramped spaces—peasant huts, royal chambers, crowded squares—maybe each story should have something from the natural world in it: a forest, an ocean, a garden. Of course, the Director replies, commending Meg's out-of-the-box thinking.

She leads off with a description of what happens when the rebellion is over and the kingdom becomes a democracy, or maybe even a socialist state, and they have to decide what to do with the former princesses. She explains that after a fair trial, they will be exiled to a remote forest. Each will have her own hut, but will need to forage for food. Before being exiled, the princesses will attend a special academy set up by the new government where the peasants will teach them to cook and sew, hunt with a bow and arrow, and perhaps how to fish.

Riana takes off from Meg's story, which appeals to her for the way it gives the princesses some sense of power. She imagines walking through the forest, having acquired various survival skills. While the other ex-princesses creep around on the lookout for something moving that they can shoot, she will go totally vegan surviving on the nuts and fruits that grow abundantly there, as well as the produce from her garden. She would definitely plant a small garden, surrounded by a sturdy fence. She would hum to herself while working, so that any person or animal that happened to wander by could see how productive and fearless she was.

Marni rattles off a story about an ancient tribe of women who, pissed off because everyone just wants them to look pretty and get married, sort of gave everyone the finger by getting lots of tattoos and piercings. Consequently, they were kicked out of the village and allowed to live only on the shore of an ancient sea. One day one of the women tries to save a swimmer from drowning and almost drowns herself hauling him in. But some Sea Goddess or other takes pity on her and rewards her courage by transforming her thrashing legs into a tail. The women right away realize that glitter scales and see-through fins are the best makeover they could possibly get—better even than surgical augmentation. So the other women from the tribe start hunting down swimmers who need saving in order to get tails. Even better than the way they look is the way they can move around anywhere in the water, and knowing that they are finally in control and actually *in charge*, instead of just putting out for some guy.

Kelsey tells about a time when she had accompanied her father on a royal visit to a neighboring kingdom. She had gotten separated from her father's entourage and found herself lost in the woods. (At first she had said "abandoned" in the woods, but then corrected herself.) She decided that she *would not* give into her fear. So she strode boldly with a loud crunch that felt both regal and brave. Not like

sneaking around. She stuck to the paths, not feeling the need to wander into the deeper parts where hunters' huts or animals' lairs might be hidden, places where she might be in danger of being martyred. The Director had nodded approval at Kelsey's rather poetic rendering of the things that, clearly, scared her and asked her to go on. But she simply insisted that eventually, of course, her father and his retinue had returned to rescue her, and fortunately, one of the servants had an extra gown so that she did not have to return home in tatters.

*

Finally the Director says that rehearsals for Act II will begin on Monday. When the girls arrive, however, eager for the script that will tie things together, each is handed a copy of her own back or future story.

But what really gets Marni is that they are asked to sit in a dumb kindergarten circle while the Director explains all whispery that *Act II will consist entirely of their stories*. They will wear regular clothes and deliver their own narratives of *what was and will be*. Segments of their individual stories will be layered choral style to evoke a universal experience, while honoring each girl's unique artistry.

Now, as the Director knows, the real work begins, the task of melding the fractious groups he has so carefully cultivated into a unit while maintaining an uneasy, one might almost say queasy, balance between the individual stories and the collective unconscious of the group.

He's often illustrated what he is aiming for in journal articles with the image of a mermaid displayed in a child's inflatable pool over a deep chasm: an enchanted, divided creature, one half splashing innocently around while the other gestates in subterranean waters.

If the innocent splashing is Act I with all its fairy tale clichés, then Act II is the deep dive where each girl finds her own cave while connected by guidelines to the others.

He has devised a series of theater games for this process.

He begins by having each girl shadow another while she moves blindfolded through the group. The shadower can't touch her partner, can only whisper directives that will keep her safe.

But Marni moves so fast that Riana barely stops her from slamming into a wall.

Then he asks each girl to apologize for some wrong she has done to another girl during the rehearsal process. Rather than say the apology directly to the one she's offended, she must chant it to the group. Then she needs to create a laminated card with her apology drawn as an abstract symbol.

Kelsey breathlessly announces that she's not sure why the others are offended by her playing the role of the lead princess, but she's sorry if she's been snooty about anything.

Her card displays a carefully drawn unicorn with a gaping wound where the horn had been.

Finally, the Director initiates a sort of air guitar contest where one girl sings a part of her narrative, while another has to practice mouthing the words in perfect synchrony.

Riana and Meg win that one hands down.

*

The play opens to a full house. At intermission the audience buzzes about Act I in the lobby. Some (especially fathers and uncles) view the play as a melodrama with interludes (or olios as one father, a drama teacher, points out) of gyrating mermaids. Others latch onto its gothic spirit, which especially ignites the girls' younger brothers who yelp and holler at any hint of violence or carnage. Still others (mainly mothers) choose to view it as an emotional journey in which each character must make her own choices and then deal with the consequences of her actions.

Act I ends in a sort of détente between the princesses and the peasants. Marni represents the possible easing of hostilities as peasants lift her by one leg, princesses by the other, and she opens out into a total air splits.

But Act II throws almost everyone for a loop. The curtain opens on darkness. There is a rustling sound, as of tiny rodents (actually the girls rubbing their hands together). Individual voices can be heard as stories unfurl in fragments, some lines delivered as plaintive group chants. A spotlight pins a girl's face, seemingly floating in mid air, as she silently mouths the words of another, who remains invisible. Some audience members become disoriented as the voices of girls they cannot see coil around the silent ones they can.

When the lights go full up, the audience sees a stage cleared of corpses and debris, the girls in jeans and t-shirts standing at various levels on the bridge and staircases. Linked in a chain that undulates back and forth across the stage, they sing a repetitive chorus in eerie ostinatos: *Triumphant in spirit, united in kind, our power unleashed by the mysteries that bind.*

During a discussion among parents after the performance, Kelsey's mother, an amateur psychologist, suggests that a rare instance of collective disassociation during Act II might be the cause of the physical discomfort experienced by several observers (one five-year-old even wet her pants).

But there's also a sense, she continues admitting that she is "a card-carrying Jungian," in which the girls did seem transformed onstage. No longer the Disneyesque appendages of familiar fairy tales, no longer somewhat awkward amateur performers, they briefly cohered into a pulsating organism that embodied the female archetype as subject, object, historical site, and evolutionary work-in-progress.

*

The jury is still out on the Playmodalities™ experience when the Director leaves town and the old theater is finally boarded up for good, condemned by the local authorities. A few weeks later, most of the girls have moved on to the excitement and drama of the new school year. Their parents are caught up in trying to get the

town council to do something about the possibility of increased crime in their neighborhoods as more and more homeless people fan out from the city, sometimes taking up residence in the public library all day.

Still, some have noticed decided changes in their daughters. They seem somehow more vigilant, as if their narrow focus had widened and softened to include more of... well, the world, perhaps, or at least things they have spectacularly failed to notice before.

For instance, several girls have taken an interest in the down-and-out people holding up signs for help. Not necessarily giving them money, but sort of hanging out with them for brief periods, talking and laughing, completely at ease.

Marni even brought a scruffy looking man back to sit on the screened in porch where, as far as Marni's mother could tell, she seemed to be asking him questions. When her mother brought out a couple of glasses of lemonade, Marni had quickly stopped talking and introduced the man as "a former software programmer who kicked it all to be, like, a free spirit."

Other girls seemed to fold into their own private worlds, reading historical novels or the lives of the saints, which the protestant and Jewish parents find mystifying.

There have been more serious repercussions. Kelsey dropped out and is being home schooled for the semester. Some of the girls try texting her, but she doesn't answer. There are rumors of some kind of breakdown, but no one really knows because that December her family moves out West somewhere.

The following summer Kelsey and her parents travel in their Winnebago to all the national parks in America. Kelsey quickly learns to recognize the flora and fauna indigenous to each, the habits and habitats of every animal. Her parents tutor her, of course, but mostly they let nature be her teacher. Kelsey wears a t-shirt that reads, *There's No Crying in Hiking*. They make sure that she eats at least something at every meal and is properly hydrated.

The theater has been boarded up for a few months now, but the homeless people who have been arriving from the city often break in for the night. They feel safe among the scattered set pieces: cardboard and plywood in the shapes of bridges, a

castle, and trees, stuffed dummies lying around that the people use as mattresses and bolsters. They sleep peacefully tucked into this little village, camouflaged by the surrounding debris.

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HONORABLE MENTION

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Maternal Instinct

by K. S. Dearsley

Behind the counter, Gilbert smiled nervously. “What would you like today, Mrs. Brown?”

Sonia almost felt sorry for him. The other women had given him a hard enough time with their picky demands before the war had started, but now that most of the men were off fighting Hitler, his life was one long apology. She was one of the few who did not look at him with accusing eyes.

There was a snort from behind her. “Why bother asking? You know you won’t have it. Just tell the girl what you’ve got.” Tilly Jones had the look of a sweet old lady, as soft as fudge, but had a will like rock and a tongue acid as pear drops.

Becoming pregnant was the best idea Sonia had ever had. A queue of solicitous women in headscarves and curlers or last year’s hats had ushered her through to the grocer’s counter. In this heat there were minor discomforts, but the benefits far outweighed them.

“I’d love some humbugs or that really hard toffee that makes your jaws ache.”

A sigh wistful as Sonia's words rippled through the queue.

Tilly patted her hand. "Still getting the cravings, ducks?"

Sonia nodded.

"Don't talk to me about cravings." Vera, Gilbert's wife, appeared from their living room with their nine-year-old daughter, Mary, trailing behind. "When I was expecting this one, I had to have pineapple. Thank goodness there wasn't a war on then!"

There were more murmurs. Women who would never normally have done more than nod "hello" now found a camaraderie in making do and mending. Not Sonia. She hitched awkwardly at her belly; the sooner she got home and got rid of it the better. Immediately, there were frowns of concern.

"It's all right. It just kicked, that's all," Sonia reassured them quickly.

"Gilbert—fetch a chair. Fancy keeping Mrs. Brown standing!"

Gilbert scurried to obey. The daughter, Mary, tugged at Vera's skirt and whispered into Vera's ear as she bent down.

"I don't know," Vera said. "You'll have to ask her."

Mary looked at Sonia shyly and shook her head.

"She'd like to feel the baby move. Is it all right?"

Sonia hesitated. The waiting women wore indulgent smiles. Annoying child! Sonia would have to agree.

"I don't know if it'll do it again," she said. She took hold of Mary's hand and placed it carefully on her bulge. "There—feel it?"

Mary nodded uncertainly and withdrew her hand.

"Say 'thank you', Mary," Vera said. "In fact, I think you ought to thank Mrs. Brown properly. Go and fetch that jar of barley sugar—well, go on." Vera shooed the

reluctant child out. “We’d been saving it for her birthday next week, as a treat, but she won’t miss it.”

Gilbert returned with a chair and helped Sonia into it. She supported her stomach as she eased herself down, the way she had watched other heavily pregnant women do.

“We put a few bits by to make up for not being able to get her the doll she wanted,” Gilbert explained as he relieved Sonia of her shopping list. There were murmurs and shaken heads.

“This war!” Tilly spat out in a way that suggested she wished Hitler was in front of her so she could give him a good talking to.

Mary reappeared with the jar.

“Go on, dear. Mary doesn’t mind, do you Mary?” Vera said, giving the child a shove forward. The look on Mary’s face said otherwise.

“All right then. Just a couple.” Sonia filled her pocket. Mary peered into the jar.

Gilbert put her purchases in her basket. Sonia knew when she unpacked it, there would be a little something extra—maybe an additional sausage or some cheese—because Sonia was “eating for two”. Maybe it was depriving someone else, but, Sonia shrugged mentally, it was not as if she asked for it. She rose and clutched at her belly. Something had slipped.

“Another kick, ducks?” asked Tilly.

“That baby’s going to come early. Look how low she’s carrying,” Vera said. Sonia blushed under their appraising stares. “When did you say it was due?”

“Not for another month yet. I’ll be moving to the country soon. I promised my husband I’d have the baby well away from the bombing.”

There were sympathetic murmurs.

“At least let Gilbert deliver the shopping for you.” Vera nudged him.

“Yes, it’s no trouble.”

“No, I can manage. The exercise will be good for me.” Sonia took her basket from him, holding it against her belly as she maneuvered her bulk out of the door. She struggled back to her bleak bedsit as fast as she could, past the rubble of bombed streets and the blank windows of the houses waiting to be next. Turning a corner, she steadied herself against a lamp-post and with a quick look over her shoulder, gave her stomach a hoist. As she walked on, Sonia looked increasingly as if she was giving birth and had to wrap one arm around herself. Shutting the door of her bedsit behind her, she spread her arms and allowed the pillow to drop out.

“Sonia, my girl, that was too close!” She sank into a chair at the table, too relieved for the moment to get up and put the kettle on. This was the third town in which she had been pregnant. She had never come so close to “miscarrying” before, but then, she had never gone to eight months before. It was time to move on.

“Bloody Hitler,” she muttered and pulled the local newspaper towards her. There must be another bedsit somewhere in one of the other districts. It had to be far enough away not to bump into her old neighbors and big enough for newcomers not to create a stir. The trouble was, she had allowed herself to get settled, enjoying the attention. Now, with so many people homeless, thanks to the Luftwaffe, accommodation was in as short supply as nylon stockings. The thought made her pick up the shopping basket.

What little surprises had Gilbert put in for her this time? She unwrapped everything slowly, savoring the smells. There was a piece of bacon that had not been on her list or in her ration book. Sonia began preparing a feast: a slice of the bacon and one of the real eggs that Tilly had slipped to her the last time they met.

“Go on, you’re eating for two, remember?” they all said as they pressed their treasures on her. Sonia had cravings all right, and being pregnant was the ideal way to satisfy them.

After her feast, Sonia strapped the pillow to her once more and set out across the city with the newspaper in her carryall, determined to find a new home. The first part of the journey was not so bad. People were only too happy to give up their

seat on the bus to someone in her condition. When she was sure she was far enough away to be safe, she found a rest-room and exchanged her pillow for a smaller cushion from her carryall. She surveyed the results. Instead of looking as if the birth was imminent, she could now pass for five or six months.

She walked past the address in the newspaper without realizing it. What the bombs had not destroyed, fire had finished off. Everything was a dripping, sooty mess of broken glass and lives. Sonia peeked at rooms whose prized possessions were now exposed to public view; tawdry, sad and ignored by passers-by who had seen it all too many times before or were too superstitious to pause. As she looked, Sonia's heart jumped and she felt her scalp prickle. An arm was poking through the rubble. She picked her way closer, wanting to run in the opposite direction, wanting someone else to deal with it. Then she saw the head and breathed again. It was a doll with bandy legs and scorched hair. Sonia pulled it free. Why not?

*

The baby would have been well overdue when Sonia headed for the grocer's once more. She was pushing a pram. Scouring the abandoned streets for blankets and toys had been far more fruitful than her search for a new place to live. It had become necessary for her to "give birth" until she could "evacuate to the country". Few of the local housewives were around; shopping was a morning activity. Sonia parked the pram outside the grocer's and went in. The bell as she entered snatched Gilbert from his doze behind the counter.

"Mrs. Brown! We thought you—the bombs—oh!" He noticed the pram outside. "Congratulations! Can I take a peek? Vera'll be so sorry to have missed you." He started around the counter.

"No!" Sonia was the image of an anxious new mother. "Sorry. I had such trouble getting her to sleep." Sonia's "baby" would pass at a distance, but if anyone pulled back the comforter she was sunk.

They turned back to the business of shopping. Gilbert weighed out her purchases, giving even better measures than before. The bell made Sonia's palms go clammy with fear. It was Mary. The child clutched her school satchel in front of her.

“Say ‘hello’ to Mrs. Brown, Mary,” Gilbert said.

“Had a good day at school?” Sonia asked. The muttered answer was inaudible as Mary disappeared into their living room.

Gilbert rolled his eyes. “Still sulking about her birthday present.”

Sonia nodded, not really interested, allowing her eyes to roam over the shelves to the window display. Her hand fluttered to her throat. Tilly Jones was bending over the pram. Sonia rushed out.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

Tilly’s face was as white as hers. “I’m sorry, ducks. I thought—I wanted to—I’m sorry...”

Sonia looked in the pram. The blanket was pulled back. Gilbert looked over her shoulder.

“The baby. Where’s the baby?”

Sonia could have sat on the pavement and laughed. The doll was gone—she was safe. The expressions on Gilbert and Tilly’s faces stopped her.

“But she was only in the shop a minute...” Gilbert said.

Tilly took command. “Fetch her a chair.”

Caught between relief and irritation, Sonia kept a shocked silence.

*

Over the following weeks theories abounded, but gradually Tilly’s gained credence.

“Poor ducks went into labor early, didn’t she, and lost it. Grief’s sent her funny. We shall have to keep our eye on her—make sure she takes care of herself.”

“Bloody Hitler!” Sonia thought, as she was ushered to the front of the queue once more, the better for the other women to ask impertinent questions and give intrusive instructions under the guise of sympathy. She could already feel their gossip burning into her back. To think that she had craved attention—it was a trap.

Mary walked through the shop singing to a doll, cradled in her arms. Sonia made out a bandy leg and scorched hair. Mary turned at the doorway to the living rooms and looked at Sonia with a smile. Sonia shuddered.

“It’s just a doll, dear,” Vera explained. “Found it on a bomb site. We’ve told her it’s not safe, but...” she shrugged. “She did so want a doll.”

“Sweets,” Sonia said, seeing again the expression on Mary’s face when she had half-emptied the jar.

“There aren’t any, ducks. Rationing, remember?” Tilly spoke as if to a three-year-old. “Fetch her a chair, Gilbert.”

Sonia sank onto the seat. “She’s a wonderful dolly,” she told Mary. “You take care of her.”

Mary nodded.

“She will, dear,” Vera said. “Our Mary’ll make a really good mother one day.”

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HONORABLE MENTION

Bruce Golden's short stories have been published in more than 30 anthologies and across a score of countries. His novel, *Monster Town*, is a satirical take on the world of the hard-boiled detective, one populated by the monsters of old black and white horror movies. <http://goldentales.tripod.com>

The Harvest Christ

by Bruce Golden

If I was gonna do it, I knew I needed to get dusting. I had been thinking about it for days, and now it was already Holiday Eve. But flies and fleas! I didn't know how I was gonna keep my promise to Gramps, and still do what was right.

The right thing seemed like the wrong thing, and the other way round. It was way too much for a scrawny sprout of only eleven harvests to figure out, so I put my hand in my pocket and grabbed hold of my lucky goldstone. I hoped it would help me think better.

Gramps had given me his goldstone just before he was chosen to become one with the south field. He said it had come from Faraway. I used to love to fold up on the porch and listen to him talk about Faraway, and the things he called cities. Cities, he said, were giant-sized communities with more people than you could count—and I could count all the way to a hundred and beyond. Of course, Gramps had never actually lived in a city, but he believed what he'd heard about them. He said once upon a time there were thousands of cities, that is until the rainfire destroyed them. I knew all about the rainfire, the swarms of hoppers, ol' demon Drought—those things were landstory. They were part of the soil, they were in every seed, every drop of water. But cities? I wasn't sure if I believed in them.

Some day, though, I wanted to have a looksee for myself. After one or two more harvests, I was gonna dust a trail to Faraway and see what I could see.

Right now, I had a promise to keep.

It was a cool day, but warm enough in the sunshine. The wind was playing with the chaff in the south field. I'd been out there saying *Hey* to Gramps. That's what reminded me I couldn't put off my promise to him any longer.

So I made a trail back to the hub. On the way I saw a bunch of girls carving up their Holiday jack-o'-hearts. My sister, Heather, was there, and so was my mom, who was showing them how it was done right. They were all giggling and smiling and carrying-on strange-like. Heather herself had been acting funny of late. I didn't know if it was cause she was older than me or cause she was a girl. But she wasn't the same Heather I used to have mud fights with. All I knew was she had her eyes on Billy Wagoner, and that lately she always seemed to smell of honeysuckle.

"Konner!"

My mom waved me over, but I didn't want to get too close to them silly girls, so I shuffled my feet as I walked, and let the dirt run up over my toes. I was going so slow, she came over to get me.

"Konner, where are your brothers?"

"Don't know."

"Well, I want you to make sure they're not getting into any trouble. You know how your brothers are."

"Ah, flies and fleas, Mom. I've got better things to do than looking after those sprouts."

"Go on now," she said, and I heard the sternness in her voice. "You find out what kind of mischief they're up to, and put a stop to it."

"All right."

Her expression softened then, and so did her voice. “Are you excited about Holiday?”

“Yeah,” I said, bundling in my real excitement.

“Well, you be sure to have fun now, okay?”

“Sure, Mom.” I noticed she was wearing the walnut shell pendant Dad had given her a long time ago. She was particular about when she wore it. I liked how when it caught the sunlight, the tiny piece of crystal inside the shell would sparkle all different colors. I think it made her feel special.

“It won’t be long, Konner, before you’re all grown up, so you have fun while you can.”

“Don’t you and Dad have fun on Holiday?” I asked, not caring to think about the day when I wouldn’t have any fun.

“Sure we do. It’s just a different kind of fun. Have you thought about your Holiday wish yet?”

“Yes.” I’d known for a long time what I was gonna wish for.

“Well good. I hope you get your wish. Now you make a trail and find out what Kobey and Kory are up to.”

“Okay.”

I headed off, meaning to do what she said, but the Trouble Brothers would have to wait. I had something else I had to get done first.

Closer to the hub I saw most of the trees and bushes were already wearing their Holiday clothes, though some of the final decorating was still going on. Some women were going here and there, putting on hats and belts and scarves and anything else they could make fit. I knew those clothes would scare Pestilence away for another harvest, but I couldn’t figure how. They didn’t scare me. Some looked so downright odd, I had to laugh. Maybe that’s how they worked. Maybe ol’ Pestilence didn’t care for laughter.

As I approached the elders' lodge, Henry Olmstead walked out and cornered me.

"Konner Grainwell, what are you up to?"

"Nothing, Mr. Olmstead," I said, hoping I didn't look as nervous I felt.

"Shouldn't you be out practicing your cupid bow?"

"I'm not old enough for the shoot, Mr. Olmstead."

"Rainfire, boy! I wasn't any bigger than you when I took my first shoot. Well, anyway, you go have some fun." He reached into a bowl he was carrying and held out his hand.

"Here's a sweetstick for you. Take it now," he urged, "and don't tell Ms. Olmstead I gave you one before the party." He winked and walked off towards the hub where lots of folks were busy getting ready for Holiday.

"Thanks, Mr. Olmstead."

He just waved the back of his hand and kept trailing.

I was right there then—right outside the elders' lodge. All I had to do was sneak in, grab Gram's marker, and sneak back out. It was all I had to do to keep my promise to Gramps. I put my hand in my pocket and grabbed my goldstone. I told myself it was okay, that nobody would be hurt by it. If Grams was chosen *next* year, Grampa would be happy and I'd keep my promise. But I stood there way too long, trying to make myself believe it, and picking at my courage.

"Konner?"

It was Grams with little Hazel in tow.

"Konner, I need you to take Hazel home. She's tired and I still have lots to do."

Flies and fleas! I'd been so close.

It wasn't that I didn't like my little sister. In fact, she was my favorite—not much trouble usually, not like Kobey and Kory. She was only five, and not mooning after

boys like Heather. I thought Hazel was just the cutest little thing, with her big, wide-open blue eyes and corn silk hair. Right now though, I had something more important to do.

“Do you hear me, Konner?”

“Yes, Grams.” I knew there was no way round taking Hazel home. I’d just have to sneak back later.

“That’s a good boy, Konner. Your Gramps used to say, ‘We can always count on Konner.’”

That made me feel good, and it also reminded me of my promise. Grams didn’t know anything about the promise. That was just between Gramps and me.

I liked Grams well enough. She was a nice old lady, but she spent most of her time smoking weed and talking with the other elders. Whenever I saw her, it made me think of Gramps. Before he became one with the south field, Gramps would spend a lot of time with me, telling me stories and singing old songs. I missed him. I wouldn’t forget my promise to him. After he was chosen, he asked me to be sure and take care of Grams when he was gone. He made me promise when her time came, I’d make sure she was with him. I promised I would, and I always try to keep my promises.

*

The sun had fallen to that point where the sky takes on a more serious attitude—you know, beautiful and grim at the same time. I could never figure out how it changed itself. One moment it’s this soft, friendly blue, then the next time you look up it’s got these angry streaks of red and orange. I figured it was like a warning. *Here comes the black night—beware!* I didn’t waste much time looking at it though, cause Holiday Eve was in full bloom.

I heard the music long before I dusted off for the hub. Anyone with any kind of instrument would be playing tonight. When I got there the dancing had already started. I thought dancing was for girls, though I saw some older boys trying to

step with the music. Of course I'd seen older boys do crazier things where girls were concerned.

My eyes went right to the tables, where all manner of good stuff was laid out. I saw sweet breads and pies, jams and tater crisps, and enough spiced cider to drown ol' demon Drought himself. I couldn't wait to stuff my belly, but I had to make a careful trail. Those darn jack-o'-hearts were strung up all over the place, candles burning inside them so they were aglow. I saw some girls lingering under their carvings, hoping for a kiss. They reminded me of trapdoor spiders, just waiting to pounce.

I wasn't planning on kissing anyone, except maybe my mom or little Hazel, so I avoided those orange gourds like they were Pestilence himself. I told myself I'd have a little snackdo first, then I'd sneak back to the elders' lodge when it was dark. I had just grabbed myself a taste of sweet bread, when I spied Kobey and Kory under another table. They had their peashooters and were popping girls in the head when they weren't looking.

It might have been funny if I wasn't sure I'd be the one who'd suffer for their mischief. So I dusted over, grabbed the two of them, and relieved them of their shooters. Both were filthy-looking. Kory stood there scratching his butt as usual. Kobey tried to look defiant.

"You two cause any trouble and you're gonna be at one with your sister, Henna, in the east field." I didn't like to think about my dead baby sister, Henna, who was born still and never had a chance to even see the sun, but I knew it would scare the seed right out of those two sprouts. "Now both of you go wash up, or I'm gonna find Dad and tell him what you've been up to, and that'll be the end of your Holiday."

I let go of them and they dusted off like a couple of field mice. I figured chances were about even they'd actually get clean. I thought I'd better take care of what I had to take care of then. Afterwards I could—

Darned if I wasn't standing there thinking when all of a sudden this girl swoops in like a red-tailed hawk and kisses me! Her lips were pressing against mine before I could even see who she was.

Now, the truth is, except for the shock of it all, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I mean, it was the first time any girl not family had kissed me. When she pulled away I saw it was Dandy. I should have known. Even though she had seen one more harvest than me, Dandy had been making eyes in my direction for some time. Now she just stood there grinning.

I looked up and there it was. A big ol' jack-o'-hearts, smiling down at me just like Dandy was doing—like I was a rooster, all plucked and stuffed and ready for mealtime. Darn those sprouts! Trying to keep them out of trouble had landed me square in Dandy's trap.

Dandy looked like she was about to say something when my mom walked up with Hazel.

"Hello, Dandelion, happy Holiday," said my mom, then looked at me and smiled that smile moms get that make you think they know everything.

"Happy Holiday, Ms. Grainwell," replied Dandy all sweet-like.

"Konner, it's time for the sing and I want you to take Hazel with you."

I took little Hazel's hand, figuring it was a good excuse to get away from Dandy. But she followed us to where the others were getting in line for the sing. I tried to ignore her.

I didn't care much for the sing, but if you weren't joined you were still considered a sprout as far as the sing was concerned. It was the only time I wished I had a wife like my big brother Kyle. I didn't mind singing the songs, cause they were kind of scary and fun. I just didn't like having to parade round the hub so all the grownups could *coo* and *ah* about how cute we all were.

I don't know who started it, but we trailed off real slow as soon as the first song began. I noticed Dandy was right behind me, but I didn't pay any attention to her.

I held onto Hazel as I sang, and watched her trying her best to remember the words.

*Tell me, tell me landstory.
Back when fire burned the sea,
Rivers wept and mountains roared,
Hot winds sang a frightful chord.
Tell me, tell me landstory,
About when people had to flee.
When hoppers rose up in swarm,
Laying bare where once was corn.*

Ahead of me Heather walking real close to Billy Wagoner. I figured if he wasn't careful, they'd be joined before another harvest. I looked round and saw the Trouble Brothers. They seemed to be behaving themselves, acting more serious than usual. But I knew why. The songs still scared them a little.

*Tell me, tell me, tell me please,
That someday there'll be more trees.
Say ol' demon Drought is dead,
Then I'll lie down on my bed.*

Round and round we trailed and sang. I knew it would have been a real good time to sneak into the elders' lodge, cause they were all watching the sing. But I couldn't very well get away with Hazel in tow and everyone watching, especially Mom and Dad. They were holding each other, touching and kissing, and looking so happy when us sprouts trailed by. Dad was usually all leather and salt, except when he was around Mom. It was a sight to see how she could soften him up no matter what his mood.

*Tell me, tell me, I do pray,
What I'll eat this Holiday.
Say the poppers will fly right,
And grant the wish I wish tonight.
Tell me, tell me landstory.
How I wonder what I'll be.*

When the sing ended, I noticed some of the elders headed back to their lodge. I knew then I'd have to wait until morning to do what I had to do. It was like a weight bearing down on me had been lifted. Since I wasn't worrying about it anymore, I stuffed as much of that good food into me as I could while doing my best to avoid Dandy.

When once I spotted her heading my way, I dusted off in the other direction. Keeping to where it was dark, I made a trail round the hub to the other side. As I did, I spotted two older kids all twisted up together like Gram's special mustard pretzels. I recognized it was Burt Ploughhorse and Lily Landesgard. They were half naked and kissing, and I could tell by the way they were moving and the sounds they were making that they were planting seed.

I knew what they were doing was for the good of the community, but it still seemed silly to me. I stayed out of sight and made my way back to the party.

It wasn't long after that when Mom and Dad began rounding up everyone for bed. The Trouble Brothers tried to sneak off, but Dad snatched them up by their shirts and lifted them off the ground till they stopped squirming.

"You sprouts need to get to sleep soon, so the Santa will come," said Grams as we trailed off towards our lodge. Kobey and Kory started whispering real excited to each other, and Hazel looked up at Grams, her big blue eyes filled with wonder. Last harvest I'd snuck out early and saw it was the elders who actually hid the candy. So I figured the Santa must have been at one with the earth for many harvests, and that, so all of us sprouts weren't disappointed, the elders kept doing his good work for him.

When we got to the lodge, everyone else went inside. I stayed out so I could look at the moon. It was full and kind of orange. It made me think of Dandy's jack-o'-hearts, and that got me to remembering the kiss. That made me think about the pair I'd seen planting seed. I'd heard talk from the older boys that it was a fun thing. But it sure sounded painful, and I couldn't see the sense in it—except for making babies. Of course I knew the more sprouts, the better for the community. So when a boy and girl got together and started planting seed, the elders always acted all happy.

I put my hand in my pocket, took hold of my goldstone, and stared at the moon. I didn't want to think about girls, I wanted to think about Faraway, and what I might find when I got there. I sure hoped I'd catch a popper and get my Holiday wish. I was worried if I didn't—

“You need to get to sleep, Son,” said my dad, stepping outside and looking up at the moon himself.

“Dad...?” I said, then hesitated.

“What is it, Son?”

“How important is a promise?”

He looked at me as if he were sizing up a new calf. “A man's only as good as his word, Konner.”

I already knew the truth of that. I guess I just wanted to hear it said.

“Don't forget you got your chores to do tomorrow.”

“But, Dad, tomorrow's Holiday,” I protested, even though I knew it would do no good. When did I ever *not* have to do chores? Never, that's when.

“It may be Holiday, but the pigs still have to eat, and the tools still have to be cleaned.”

“I know, Dad,” I said, getting up to go in. But as I did, I gave one last thought to Faraway. I thought about how when I dusted off to Faraway there wouldn't be any more chores to do. I couldn't wait for that day to come.

*

It was Holiday, and just cause I didn't believe in the Santa anymore, didn't mean I wasn't gonna get up early and find as much candy as I could stuff in my pockets. Mom helped Hazel and the Trouble Brothers were on their own, so I did pretty well. Afterwards I hid it all in my secret place, so Kobey and Kory couldn't get their dirty hands on it.

Then I did all my chores, and by the time I was finished I knew the Holiday shoot had started. So I made a trail to the gully where the older boys, with their cupid bows, were trying their best to hit whichever jack-o'-hearts was carved by the girl they were sweet on. Some weren't even coming close. Others were so bad they were splitting open the wrong pumpkins, much to the frustration of some girls. I saw Heather get all excited when Billie Wagoner shot one right through the heart-shaped mouth she'd carved. That was about all I could take.

Most all of the elders, including Grams, had pulled up chairs to smoke their weed and watch the shoot. So I knew it was now or never. I dusted a trail, squeezing my goldstone the whole way.

As I neared the elder's lodge, the sky grew dark. The wind passed over me and I shivered. A mean-looking dusky cloud was blowing in from the east. I could see a big old bull in its shape. I kept watch for a minute, then snuck inside as slow as an earthworm. It didn't seem like anyone was there.

I'd never been in the elders' lodge before, cause sprouts weren't allowed. It looked like any other lodge, only bigger. As I searched for where they kept the markers I spied this picture hanging on the wall. It scared the fertilizer right out me. Either that or the candy I'd eaten that morning was disagreeing with my insides. It was a creepy-looking thing, painted in more shades of brown and red than I knew there was. It was some kind of monster, all fangs and claws but almost like it wasn't really there—like a goblin made of wind. I guessed it must have been somebody's idea of ol' demon Drought.

Even though it was just a picture, I backed away from it real easy-like. That bumped me right into what I was looking for. All the elders' markers were in this big bowl sitting there on the table. Quick as I could, I found Gram's marker and put it in my pocket. I started to go but got this queer itch to take a last look at ol' demon Drought. His eyes gave me the shiver-tingles. I was sure he knew what I was up to. So I dusted it out of there before I gathered any other strange thoughts.

Once outside, I made a trail back to our lodge, going real slow like everything was okay. But everything wasn't okay—at least not with me. And it was more than ol' demon Drought looking over my shoulder. I knew what I'd done wasn't right. It

wasn't fair. But I didn't know any other way to make sure I kept my promise to Gramps. I just hoped some day I wouldn't feel as bad as I did right then.

*

By evening, everyone had gathered at the hub for Last Supper. I couldn't help but notice something was in the air—something you could almost feel, like a thick morning dew. Nothing I could see, but I could sense it. It was more in the way folks were talking—or not talking. They were a bit bridled, not as free and easy, as if they were waiting to be set loose. I knew what they were waiting for.

Before anyone could eat, the Harvest Christ had to be chosen. My dad and Mr. Landesgard made a trail to the elders' lodge and brought back the big bowl with all the markers. I tried not to show it, but I was feeling real bad about then. I didn't want to be there, but I knew I had to be. Young or old, sick or cripple, everyone took part in the choosing of the Harvest Christ. I knew it was a great honor to be chosen, and that only doubled my guilt.

Since the bowl was filled with all the elders' markers, or was supposed to be, none of them could pick. So, after everyone quieted down, Mr. Landesgard reached in, stirred his hand round, and pulled out a marker. My hands were in my pockets—the right one clenched round my goldstone, the left Gram's marker.

“Henry Olmstead,” he announced, holding up the marker for all to see.

Everyone started clapping and shouting and I looked to over to old Mr. Olmstead to see how he was taking it.

He was all smiles, shaking hands with everyone. He seemed happy, but... there was something about his smile I couldn't quite figure. Something different—like he was trying too hard.

Anyway, someone had put the harvest wreath on his head and a big knife in his hand, and everyone was coaxing him to get Last Supper going. Mr. Olmstead waved the knife above his head and there was more clapping. Then he brought it down and began carving the Eater Bunny.

I swear it was the biggest rabbit I'd ever seen. Even skinned and barbecued up nice and juicy like, it was as big as a ki-yote. It was such a grand scene, full of laughter and fine-smelling food, that it made me wonder for a moment whether or not I'd get the honor of carving the Eater Bunny some day. Right then, I didn't feel bad at all. Flies and fleas, I even let Dandy sit by me for Last Supper.

*

It was long after dark when I climbed aboard the wagon with the rest of my family. I was about to burst from all the good stuff I'd eaten, and more than ready to get some sleep. But Holiday wasn't over yet. The whole community was loading up the wagons and making a trail out to the fallow north field where the Holiday fire was already blazing.

When Henry Olmstead's body was being laid aboard one of the wagons, I started feeling guilty again. Earlier, when he'd drunk from the harvest gourd, I'd turned away so I wouldn't see. I squeezed my goldstone and tried not to think about what was in that drink.

Not that there was anything so terrible to see. I'd watched when Gramps was chosen. It was like he'd gone to sleep. But this time I couldn't help feeling bad about what I'd done, even though I'd kept my word to Gramps. I knew the Harvest Christ would be made at one with the north field this Holiday, and Gramps wanted Grams to be with him in the south. That's what I'd promised. So I couldn't let her be chosen—not *this* Holiday—even if it meant maybe depriving her of the honor. I was sure she'd be chosen next year when it was time for the south field again.

When everyone had gathered near the fire, Henry Olmstead was carried carefully from the wagon. They took off his clothes and gently laid him into the place that had been prepared. As they covered him up, Ms. Olmstead stepped forward, looking real proud-like, and delivered the Holiday thanksgiving.

“The earth is the land, and we are the earth. Bless this land and the bounty of its harvest. We who take from the land, now give back to the land. May all of our harvests be so bountiful.”

Then everyone joined in for the last part.

“The earth is the land, and we are the earth.”

After that, everyone trailed off to stand round the fire. No one said a word, cause we weren't supposed to. The littlest sprouts were shushed if they tried to speak, and even the Trouble Brothers knew better than to make any noise.

I already knew what my Holiday wish was, so I tossed my popping corn into the fire like everyone else. As I stood there, waiting, hoping to catch one of the poppers so I'd get my wish, I thought about Faraway and Gramps and Grams and old Henry Olmstead. I wondered if they celebrated Holiday in Faraway. I sure hoped so, cause I'd miss all the food and the fun. Who knows, I might even miss getting kissed under a jack-o'-hearts.

The poppers had started flying all round me. I waited, ready to grab one if it came my way, cause you had to catch them on the fly to really get your wish. I saw Heather catch one and get all excited, then *pop!* One shot off to my right, but I was quick. I caught it, wished my wish again, and tossed it into my mouth.

I was feeling real good when everyone began loading back into the wagons. Just knowing I'd get my Holiday wish made everything I'd worried about seem okay. Maybe I wouldn't get it right away, but some day...

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A Salt on the Rise

by *Benjamin Tyler Smith*

“You want to do *what* with maggots?”

“Just hear me out, will ya, Addy?” Ferryman tugged at the sleeve of my black robe. “You necromancers need money, too, right?”

I shook off his hand. “Not badly enough to poison people with spoiled cheese.”

“Not spoiled! Enhanced!”

“Maggots aren’t an enhancement!”

Frosty breath escaped Ferryman’s deep hood. “Pah, you’re no fun.”

We walked along one of Necrolopolis’s cobbled streets, bound for our favorite tavern. To our right rose multi-storied mausoleums and cairns that glowed with ethereal torchlight. To the left, the River Styx wended its way westward, cutting the city into two sections. Across its iridescent waters, the towering structures of the city’s south side brushed the twilight sky.

Beneath the river's surface, colorful balls of light flitted this way and that. Souls from around the world, bound for Lake Veil and the great—or not-so-great—beyond. Such was the fate of all who lived and died.

Well, except for the four million undead in this city, made so through some lingering attachment to the mortal coil: an ambition unfulfilled, a thirst for revenge unquenched, or a powerful love for another. Whatever the reason, they were trapped here until Mortus, the God of Death, could meet with them one-by-one and resolve their issues. At present, the wait time for a new entrant was upwards of seven decades. You get used to the smell.

Ferryman followed my gaze. His expression soured. “Ugly blighters, sneaking off to the Isle of Passage like that.”

“Sneaking? It's the natural way.”

“Natural doesn't feed my eighty-seven kids,” Ferryman spat. “I only get a pittance for transporting souls. Why do you think I run a gift shop on the side?”

More like a grift shop, but I didn't correct him.

“No, the real money's in the body,” Ferryman continued. “Round trip fare to the Isle, then to the Catacombs. And the smaller, the better! Ashlings are great, since all you're taking is an urn. But you can cram the ferry full of skeletons if you stack 'em right and don't mind the complaints. Even those mummy newcomers wouldn't be bad once stripped. Look at that burning one coming at us. He's a stick!”

A smoldering mummy ran past us, almost as naked as a newborn, except newborns weren't quite so wrinkly. He—I think it was a he, but with how shriveled everything was, who knew—beat at the charred remains of his linen wrappings. “Damn those Cremaider brutes! They'll pay for this!”

Cremaider? Oh, Mortus, what was Ashwarden's gang up to now? I opened my mouth to call out, but thought better of it. The ashlings and mummies had been at each other's throats for weeks, ever since King Farralus and his Court of the Embalmed arrived. I couldn't deal with a problem this big right now, not after

three all-nighters in a row. Keeping the dead pacified was grueling enough without throwing a faction war into the mix.

“Shouldn’t you deal with that?” Ferryman asked as I continued forward.

“Deal with what? I’m off the clock. It’s pint time.”

Ferryman wheezed a laugh. “Don’t let Mina hear that.”

“Hear what?” a feminine voice asked.

We jumped. Mina stood between us, a tight smile on her pretty face. She may look human, with her white skin and blonde ringlets, but her red irises give her away her otherworldly status. She’s the daughter of Mortus, God of Death. More importantly, she’s the director of Necropolis. That makes her my boss. She crossed her arms. “Care to explain why you ignored that stricken mummy?”

I looked to Ferryman for help, but he was already running away. “I’ll save you a place at the bar, Addy!”

“Oh, don’t bother!” Mina slipped an arm through mine. “He’s about to have a busy night.”

My stomach fluttered. “What do you have in mind?”

“Just follow me.” She grinned. “It’s going to be a riot.”

*

I landed flat on my back, the wind knocked from me. A mummy stepped up, his club raised to deliver another blow. Before he could, a burning piece of timber smacked his shoulder and ignited his wrappings.

All around the wide square, two mobs of undead assaulted one another with wild abandon. Linen-wrapped mummies comprised one side, wielding weapons they’d brought from the desert kingdom of Farras. They were led by a pair of gorgons moving through the crowd, exhaling a gray mist that turned anyone and anything to stone. The gorgons were the pets of King Farralus, leader of the mummy

faction. On the other side were the ashlings, the risen remains of cremated men and women. Each was colored some shade of gray or white, from skin to clothing, and each had an urn strapped to the hip. Most wore orange armbands, designating them as members of the Creremainder, Ashwarden's gang.

Mina hadn't been joking about a riot, nor about my "busy night." She'd shoved me into the crowd and told me to go find the ringleaders. It had been my intent to ascend the wide marble steps at the far end of the square to get a better view, but I'd only made it halfway before the clubby-mummy got me. The stairs ascended to the pillared entrance of the Courthouse at the top of the hill. Even from here, I could see a squad of Death Knights watching the riot but making no move to stop it. Thanks for the help, guys. Really appreciate it.

There wasn't a lot I could do to stop the riot on my own, short of using my magic to compel the undead. The problem with that was two-fold: first, I'd have to contact each undead with my blood, and I didn't have enough of that to go around; second, Mina would kill me if I used such strong magic on her citizens. That left finding the ringleaders.

I hopped to my feet and grimaced at the pain in my stomach. That stupid club was going to leave a bruise. "King Farralus!" I shouted. "Ashwarden! Show yourselves!"

A gorgon charged me, a stream of gray mist flying before it. I jumped out of the way, and a trio of ashlings was hit instead. Their petrified forms struck the cobbles with dull thuds. The gorgon turned and stamped its feet.

A wave of concentrated heat sailed over my shoulder and struck the gorgon full in the face. It bellowed and backed away.

Next to me stood an ashling unlike all the others: where they were monochrome, he looked as he had in life: red hair, pale skin, bright green eyes. A black jacket and trousers completed the look, all done via powdered dyes added to his ash, along with an innate magical power strong enough to properly distribute the color. This was Ashwarden, self-styled leader of the ashlings, and all-around jackass. He

lowered his red-hot hand and glared at me. “Adelvell? What’s Grimina’s lapdog doing here?”

“You make that sound like a bad thing!” Mina called. She walked toward us, her mere presence quelling the riot almost instantly. Even if she was normally cheerful, she was still Grimina de la Mortus. One didn’t cross Lady Death lightly.

Ashwarden dipped his head. “Lady Grimina.”

I rubbed my aching stomach. “Couldn’t you have done this to begin with?”

“I would have.” Mina’s gaze hardened, though her smile never faltered. “Had *someone* not chosen to ignore the issue in the first place.”

Ouch. Point taken.

“As punishment,” she continued, “I leave this to you to resolve.” She scanned the crowd. “And where is King Farralus? Both parties need to be present.”

Mummies parted to allow King Farralus through. He was bedecked in linens much like his followers, in addition to a crown and an ornamental beard braided with gold. His uncovered eye shone with malevolent light. “Lady Grimina, good evening.”

“What’s good about it?” Mina spread her arms. “Oh, you mean the riot? And in front of the Courthouse, no less! You know Father’s work is not to be disturbed.”

This is where I *don’t* mention that Mortus sometimes sneaks out to the tavern with Ferryman and me.

“But,” Farralus said, “I merely wished to speak with him, one king to another—”

“Father doesn’t deal with city issues. If you’re having a problem with another faction that you can’t resolve, come to me. Or to my assistant.” She patted me on the head like a child. “It’s all yours, Addy.”

Great. I tucked my hands into the sleeves of my robe. “What is the problem, King Farralus?”

Farralus gave me a withering look. “Very well. It all started—”

“Woah, woah, woah,” Ashwarden interrupted. “Never mind him. We’re the victims here! They horn in on our territory, and then they blame us when their jerky gets smoked!”

Farralus stepped toward Ashwarden. “You lie!”

I put myself between the two. “That’s enough! Let’s start at the beginning. Ashwarden, you first.”

Ashwarden pointed at Farralus. “Three times this week alone his kind has been found in the natron beds. Beds *we* control!”

“Beds my people need!” Farralus gestured at the Styx. “It’s too humid in this city! We need to periodically lay in the natron so that our bodies don’t grow too moist.”

Oh, yum. From smoked jerky to wet jerky. You could always depend on the dead for delectable conversation. “Natron?” I whispered to Mina.

“A mix of salt and soda ash.”

“I don’t care if all of you get waterlogged and rot,” Ashwarden said. “I don’t want your bandaged butts anywhere near my beds.”

“Why do ashlings need natron?” I asked.

“Commerce, my man.” Ashwarden tugged his jacket lapels. “We sell it to the soap makers and butchers in the Mortal Quarter.” He grinned. “I suppose we could sell it to the mummies. At a discount, of course.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I said. “Deceased citizens can only be charged for luxuries. Their interment fee covers all necessities.”

“Is that so?” Farralus stroked his ornamental beard. “Then, you will give the natron beds to me—I mean, to my people?”

“That wouldn’t be fair to the ashlings.”

Ashwarden beamed. “I knew I could count on you, kid.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I need to think on this. King Farralus, do any of your people desperately need the natron right now?”

“Some, yes.”

“They are allowed into a small section of the beds. All other activities are suspended for a fortnight.”

Before Ashwarden could object, Mina clapped her hands. “You heard Addy! He’ll come up with an equitable solution soon. Until then, off you go!”

The crowd dispersed: ashlings bound for Columbarium Tower, mummies for Pyramid Hill. Mina winked at me and hurried up the Courthouse steps. Farralus and Ashwarden stayed behind with their respective entourages, glaring at one another. “Equitable solution,” Ashwarden said, a sour expression on his face. “The only equitable solution is total control for the ashlings, as it’s *always* been.”

“Oh, no!” Farralus stepped close. “Adelvell, you heard Lady Grimina! She knows my kind need the natron, and she wants you to decide in my favor.”

“I will decide in the way that benefits everyone,” I said. Seemed fair enough, right?

Wrong.

Ashwarden’s temperature suddenly spiked. Farralus and I jumped back. “I may be a legitimate businessman, but that doesn’t mean I bow to unreasonable demands. I’ll protect my investment.”

A blast of petrifying breath sent Ashwarden and me scrambling. “A businessman you may be,” Farralus said, “but I am a King. I will defend my people.”

Both leveled fingers my way. “Don’t cross me, necromancer!” they shouted in unison.

I sighed. It was going to be one of those weeks.

*

I'd never been to the natron beds before, but it was about what I expected: a bowl-shaped depression filled with white pellets that tasted of salt and ash. The dried lake seemed out of place in this relatively lush section of Necrolopolis, but I'd noticed that the city had varied terrains and even climates within its vast walls. "Father set it up that way," Mina had said, "so that any who came here could have their needs met."

That meant ol' Mortus had known Farralus and his motley crew of bandaged buddies would show up some day. He could've at least warned me. Way to let down a drinking buddy.

The mummies were out in full force this morning. Dozens lay in the natron, buried up to the neck. Nearby, a vast carpet had been spread out. A handful of mummies in wrappings nearly as fine as Farralus's sat at the edges. They were waited on by shabti, burial dolls made with magic similar to what animates golems, only on a smaller scale. Now that I looked closer, it seemed even the buried mummies had servant dolls tending to them with drinks and banana leaves for fanning. No one occupied the center of the carpet. Maybe it was reserved for King Farralus? He always liked being in the middle of everything, it seemed.

Numerous sets of footprints traced a path from the far edge of the natron beds all the way to the carpet, including a set of abnormally large tracks. I frowned. None of the mummies present looked that big, though maybe one of them was buried more deeply than the mounded pellets let on.

Aside from that mystery, everything else looked normal, and had for the last few days. I still couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

I was sweating by the time I left the arid natron beds behind. I followed a wooded path back towards the more civilized sections of Necrolopolis, stopping every now and then to drink from a bottle. It was during one such stop I heard a scraping sound, like claws against tree bark. I crouched low, my heart pounding. I didn't think there were bears or mountain lions inside Necrolopolis, but I wasn't about to make assumptions.

“Come along, you stone-faced lout!” a voice called.

“Clem, keep it down!” another said. “D’ya want the bandages to hear?”

“Oh, come off it, Jes. This blockhead’s making more noise than either of us, and you know it.”

A pair of ashlings stood about thirty feet into the woods, on a goat trail that ran parallel to the dirt path I was on. The one called Clem crossed his arms and glared at the squat stone golem lumbering along in their wake. Every few feet it either crushed a shrub or shredded bark from a tree with its broad, rocky shoulders.

“Ashwarden’s going to toss us out of the Tower if we dawdle any longer.”

“We’ll get there when we get there,” Jes said with exaggerated slowness. She smiled. “I know: how’s about you run ahead and let him know his tunneling golem’s on the way?”

My eyebrows rose. Tunneling golem? Its arms were certainly wide enough for the job. What did Ashwarden need that for?

“Good idea,” Clem said. “I’ll be back!”

I followed Clem through the woods to a tunnel in the side of a hill. Two Cremaider thugs guarded the entrance. They discarded their deck of metal playing cards at Clem’s approach. “Got to see the Boss,” he said. “The golem’s been repaired.”

They let him through just as a group of ashlings laden with large sacks filed out of the tunnel. Clem bumped into one of them, sending the man to the ground in an explosion of ash. The man’s sack likewise burst open, spilling white pellets everywhere. Oh, ho. It seemed Ashwarden had a natron mine, in spite of the moratorium. Mina would be interested in that, but I’d need to confirm Ashwarden’s involvement if I really wanted to nail him.

Clem murmured an apology and ran on as the fallen ashling reconstituted himself. The guards left their post to help gather up the cargo. I used this chance to slip into the shadowy tunnel.

The tunnel mouth led into a level corridor wide enough for three grown men to walk abreast, tall enough that I only had to stoop to avoid the support timbers. Glass globes filled with dim, ethereal light hung from sconces at odd intervals. Actual lanterns would have provided better light, but ashlings have a thing about fire. It was kind of funny, considering how good they were at starting blazes with just their body heat. Don't ever point that out to one. They're quite touchy about the subject.

I darted from shadow to shadow, passing the occasional side-passage or storage alcove. I ducked into these whenever I spied movement further down the corridor, which happened often. Ashlings moved up the corridor from time to time, either carrying sacks or pushing carts heavy with natron. It was quite an elaborate operation Ashwarden had here. I didn't know there was so much money to be made in salt production, but when labor and transportation is free you can undercut the competition by quite a bit and still come out ahead. No wonder Ashwarden could afford those dyes of his.

The corridor opened up into a wide, circular chamber filled with carts, crates, and piles of burlap sacks. Ashwarden supervised about a dozen ashlings with pick-axes. Clem stood nearby. "I'm going to go back and make sure Jes doesn't get into any trouble."

"She'll be fine. Take a break," Ashwarden said with a friendly slap on the shoulder. Raising his voice, he added, "Hear that, boys and girls? Your relief's on the way! Take five."

The ashling miners let out a ragged cheer and set down their tools. Undead don't tire physically, but a monotonous task will bore just about anyone, given enough time.

I crouched behind a crate as the miners spread through the chamber in select groups. A pair of ashlings sat on my crate. I pressed myself against the floor and tried to slow my breathing. I hated this kind of spy work.

Ashwarden walked over and joined the conversation with the ashlings near me. Now that they were distracted, it was time to get out of here. I crept forward.

The ground lurched. I staggered against the wall as cracks formed along the floor. A deep rumble resounded from below. That didn't sound good.

One of the ashlings shouted "Cave-in!" just as the floor collapsed. We tumbled down into the dark, riding a wave of earth and natron. My scream was lost in the roar, and then I struck bottom as ashlings exploded all around me.

When the dust settled, I was half-buried in a much larger chamber than we'd been in before. Ashwarden stood over me, his eyes narrowed. "Adellvell? Was this your doing?"

I spat out a salty mouthful of natron. At least, I hoped it was just natron. "Why would I demolish a tunnel I'm standing in?"

"Cause you're an idiot?" Ashwarden shrugged. "I've never really thought too highly of you, kid."

"I never would have noticed." I stretched out an arm. "Mind giving me a hand?"

Before Ashwarden could bend over, a hand thrust out of the natron next to me. A bandaged hand. The mummy pushed itself the rest of the way out as Ashwarden danced back. He barked a command, and clouds of dust rose up from the ground. These clouds coalesced into ashlings who scooped up their urns and once more strapped them to their hips.

More mummies pulled themselves from the natron. When they saw the ashlings regrouping they picked up discarded pick-axes and shovels and prepared to attack.

"What is this?" a voice bellowed from a hole in the chamber's wall. King Farralus stood there, his burning eye a beacon in the dim light. Next to him, a golem the same size and shape as Ashwarden's waited. Its wide bladed hands dug at the air for a moment before stopping.

"Farralus!" Ashwarden stomped toward the opening, his Cremainder thugs surrounding him. "What's going on here?"

"I should ask you the same thing, Burning One!" Farralus pointed at Ashwarden's crew. "Digging for natron, are you?"

“So are you! And why is that? The surface is yours, thanks to this nitwit.” He hiked a thumb my way.

“Hey!” I tried to push myself free, but only managed to sink deeper into the natron. “It’s not my fault the two of you can’t share resources!”

“Share?” Ashwarden shrugged. “Where’s the profit in that?”

“Isn’t good will among neighbors its own kind of profit?”

“With this neighbor?” Ashwarden indicated Farralus.

“A fair point,” I admitted.

Farralus struck the side the golem with his fist. “Such impudence from individuals of low-birth!”

Ashwarden pushed up his jacket sleeves. “Come down here and I’ll show you just how low-birth I am.”

“A king should never sully his hands on those lesser than him.” Farralus clapped his hands, the noise muffled because of the bandages.

The mummies surrounded Ashwarden and his men, but they didn’t close in. Even in the dim light the ashlings shimmered with heat. As dry as the mummies had to be after dealing with so much natron, they’d go up in a flash if they weren’t careful.

Things would only escalate if that happened. I tried to wiggle free again, but slid even deeper. Damn, this stuff was like quicksand! “Stop fighting, both of you!” I shouted.

They looked at me, clearly unimpressed with a necromancer buried up to his chest. “Or you’ll do what?” Ashwarden asked.

I ignored him. “King Farralus, you don’t want me to report this to Mina, do you?”

Farralus shrugged. “Report what? Your good Lady Death already knows about our disagreements.” He looked sidelong at Ashwarden. “Though, I suppose she would love to hear that you’re violating her orders by being here.”

“So are you,” I said.

“I am not sure what you mean.” Farralus’s eye narrowed. “What are you implying?”

“Oh, come on, Farralus,” I said, not even bothering with his title this time. “It’s obvious what you and your nobles are doing. You’re making a show of using the natron beds, but really you want to harvest it and sell it to your own people at a premium. Those of ‘low-birth,’ I assume.”

“That’s a lie!”

“Is it? Then why are you here? With a tunneling golem, no less?” I shook my head. “That’s disgusting. Not even Ashwarden would treat his own that way.”

“Watch your mouth!” Ashwarden snapped, then added, “Kid’s got a point, though. This is low, even for you.”

“Of all the—”

“We can still resolve this peacefully!” I said, talking over them both. “Get me out of this, and we’ll sort it all out.”

“Sort what out?” Ashwarden said. “Let’s turn this crook in.”

“He will report you, too!” Farralus exclaimed. “We’re both in violation of Lady Grimina’s orders, remember?”

Ashwarden hesitated. “What do you propose we do about that?”

“There is a saying amongst my people: dead men tell no tales.”

“We have a similar saying,” Ashwarden said with a grin.

I pushed against the natron, my guts churning. “Don’t you idiots realize this is the city of the dead? Dead men tell lots of tales here!”

“Oh, we have ways of dealing with that.” Ashwarden patted the urn at his side.

“More than just ash can be sealed in here, you know.”

“Then we are in agreement,” Farralus said. He raised an arm. “Kill the necromancer!”

Ashling and mummy alike turned my way. Damn, they really were going to kill me! I pushed against the ground, but my arms slipped deeper into the loose natron. Something sharp cut my hand. I winced at the pain, but started digging. Hey, a weapon’s a weapon, right? My hand closed around something hard and smooth, and I yanked it free. A broken femur? “Any of you lose a leg?” I asked with a nervous chuckle.

No one smiled. Well, maybe one of the mummies did. Hard to tell beneath those bandages.

I dropped the femur and examined my hand. Blood ran from a neat slice along the palm. Perfect. If I could just touch one of them—

“Stand back!” Farralus shouted. “He bleeds!”

Everyone froze. Damn. Well, at least they couldn’t kill me now.

“Now what?” Ashwarden asked.

“Finish collapsing the ceiling. Let all this rock and sand take care of him.”

“You know, for a guy with his brain in a jar, you’re pretty smart.”

“Could not the same be said of your brain, urn-dweller?”

All right, maybe they could kill me. I cast about for something, anything, to help. If only I could touch one of them! My eyes fell on the blood-soaked femur. Well, it was better than nothing. I snatched it up and hurled it at the closest ashling, Clem.

It struck his face in an explosion of white powder that quickly turned pink as the dry, thirsty ash absorbed my blood.

I closed my eyes and reached for my magic. In the darkness of my mind I could detect all the unlife surrounding me, from the mummies and ashlings to the animal souls powering the now idle golem. They appeared as bright lights against my eyelids. One in particular shone brighter than the others, the one who now had my blood in him. *Clem*, I whispered through my blood. *Clem, you're mine.*

Under my command, Clem reached for his face and tore out pieces of his chalky flesh. He threw these at the ashlings closest to him, who in turn did the same to their companions. All it takes is a drop, and virtually any undead can be compelled like this. Mina wouldn't be happy, but I'd be damned if I let these jerks kill me just to cover up their illegal activities.

"Guard yourselves!" Farralus shouted as my ashlings rounded on the mummies. One struck a mummy with a bloody fist while Clem snatched up the still-wet femur and stabbed a second mummy. This mummy was right next to Farralus. I compelled it to rip out the femur and put it against the king's bejeweled neck. Clem ripped another bloody clump from his face and held it to Ashwarden's head while the other ashlings under my control boxed their leader in.

I had a mummy pull me free of the natron and dust off my robes. I held up my bloody hand and approached. "Ash, Farr, let's chat."

The two glared at me. "A King does not beg," Farralus said.

"Nor will I." Ashwarden spat what appeared to be actual saliva at my feet; impressive, for someone made of dust. "Always knew you'd do me in like this, so just get it over with."

I patted Ashwarden on the shoulder with my unwounded hand. "Oh, it's nothing like that at all! Mina's instructions were clear: find an equitable solution to this problem. I can't very well do that in good faith if I've enthralled you, now can I?" I held my bloody hand to each of their faces and smiled as they shied away. "Just don't tempt me."

“Anyway, I think I fully understand the situation now. Both of you are in this purely for profit. One of you wants to sell the natron to his own people—a gross violation of Necrolopolis’s code of conduct, I might add—while the other wants to sell it to craftsmen within the city. That’s a legitimate enterprise, except that it’s denying a necessity to a faction of the undead. Also a violation of the city’s code. Similar goals, similar violations.”

Ashwarden stared at me balefully. “Get to the point.”

“While we are still young,” Farralus added.

That was rich, coming from a two-thousand year old mummy. I cleared my throat. “If money is all either of you care about, then I have the perfect solution. One that would allow the mummies use of the natron beds *and* turn a nice profit in a certain market.”

The two looked at one another, and then back at me. The skepticism was evident on their faces. I raised my hands and said in my best Ferryman voice, “Just hear me out, will ya?”

*

“Addy, I can’t thank you enough for this.” Ferryman set the crate into his boat, next to several others. The clinking of crockery echoed from inside the box. “This mummy salt’s selling like crazy. Tourists can’t get enough of it.”

“Glad to be of help,” I said, reaching for the last crate.

I still couldn’t believe Farralus and Ashwarden went for the idea: Farralus and his mummies would use the natron beds, then Ashwarden would harvest it to sell at specialty stores like Ferryman’s, stores that catered to visitors and eccentrics. Ashwarden couldn’t sell to his usual customers anymore, but salt that a desert king was mummified in sold at quite the premium. That was enough to get them both enthusiastic about the joint venture. That, and the alternative was confessing their crimes directly to Mina. Under my not-so-gentle compulsion, of course.

I untied the berthing rope and tossed it into the ferry. “This certainly beats maggot cheese.”

“Oh, that’s still on the table, my friend!” Ferryman slapped one of the crates. “We can pair it with the salt. A value pack, if you will.”

I rolled my eyes. “Right. And while we’re at it, we can roast and salt the maggots that get loose.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea.”

“It’s a horrible idea!”

“Pah, you’re no fun!” Ferryman took up his pole. “Anyway, I’m off. See you at the tavern!”

Before I could respond, an arm slipped through mine. “Not tonight!” Mina sang, her red eyes gleaming in the light of the quay lamps. “The city needs its *expert* negotiator.”

Oh, Mortus. “Who is it now?”

“The banshees and skeletons.” Mina grinned. “Just follow me. It’s going to be a riot!”

I let her pull me along. Why is good work always punished with more work?

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