

Epilogue III

Marooned

By

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Necromortius, beard now grown past his collarbone, sat in his corner of the prison shuttle, scribbling song lyrics on a roll of toilet paper. Given how forgetful Otto was when it came to biological necessities, he was surprised there were any rolls at all. If the others knew he'd taken one for himself, they'd probably demand some kind of recompense, but luckily, they didn't pay him much mind these days. Five months into the journey, they hadn't even reached Mars yet, and the boredom grew maddening.

The first few weeks were spent plotting escape, not to mention revenge. Sagittarius in particular had worked out several new, inventive methods he was going to use to torture Esmerelda and Otto, including the Bloody Meathook Tango, the Involuntary Crab Buffet, and the Listen to Lord Ironmask's Poetry Hour. Ironmask himself insisted he could have turned the shuttle around (circumventing the self-destruct failsafe Otto built in case of any tampering) if only it had been made of iron ("Traacherous alloys," he had said. "They interfere with Lord Ironmask's mastery over all things ferrous!"). Rrrgh used his magic gate to sneak back to the realms infernal, but upon returning with beer, smokes, and out of magic, no one was particularly grateful. After that, the others turned to Necromortius, assuming his magic would be able to teleport them home. And indeed it might have, had they not been moving farther and farther away from the Earth. Teleportation, he explained, was an imprecise technique at best, much like throwing a dart at the ocean and hoping to hit a particular manatee. Many were the tales of powerful wizards who, attempting to show off their mastery over distance and co-location, found

themselves partially lodged in a wall, a thousand feet in the air, or worse yet-- partially lodged in a wall a thousand feet in the air. Amplifying the distance between themselves and the very planet made the possibility of reaching home more and more remote as time went on, and he could not, even in bad conscience, risk their lives on such a suicidal venture.

At least, that's what he'd told them.

In truth, Necromortius gave himself better than even odds of teleporting them home in those first weeks. So why hadn't he? It wasn't, as the others assumed, because he was a coward, though to be sure, he was, as he'd proven time and again. When they asked him to turn on Otto, hadn't he initially refused, only to let them pressure him into it? And for what? Because his friend was actually happier than he was? No, his refusal to try was equal parts penance for his crime and a sly obscene gesture to his compatriots. He'd rather be back in his crypt, most likely watching the ghouls play Twister while trying not to fall apart, but it gave the necromancer some small sliver of satisfaction that the others were equally miserable. Indeed, he considered weathering their insults, veiled threats, and occasional sucker punches one of the braver things he'd done in quite some time. Let them think he was weak, afraid, useless. That suited him just fine. Eventually, they left him to his own devices, with only Rrrgh, who didn't grasp that anything was wrong and seemed to think he was on an extended field trip with his best friends, still acknowledging his presence.

When he wasn't writing songs (most of which weren't very good, he thought, but at least it was practice), Necromortius spent his time carving a chess set from the various animal bones on his robes. They'd never served much practical purpose, and he only wore them because his mother nagged on and on about how "they'll make you look scarier, like your father," until he finally took her advice. Not that he had anyone to play chess against anyway. Lupine and

Sagittarius considered it a game for nerds, Ironmask became insanely angry when anything other than himself was labeled a king, and he didn't even bother asking Rrrgh, dreading to imagine what orifices the demon would (mistakenly?) stick the pieces in. And Desert Fox? Well, she'd found her niche. Needing a break from his hobbies, Tim decided to see what the others were doing, though he had a rather good idea.

And indeed, it seemed they were at it again. Apparently, Dru Lupine kept a spare deck of cards up his sleeve (not for cheating, he insisted), and thus the others spent their time continuing to hone their poker skills, playing for various food rations, such as ketchup packets, slices of cheese, and jerky strips. Even if he'd still been welcome at the table, Tim wouldn't have wanted to play. Certainly he'd lost his taste for it, but leaving that aside, it was hard to imagine not growing bored with playing the same game, day in and day out, especially when there were no actual days to speak of. Still, it kept them from killing each other, and more importantly, from killing him. Pretending to make himself a sandwich as slowly as he could, the necromancer observed the latest game as it began.

“Ante up, boys,” Desert Fox said. “Or should I say, panty up, y’pack of bloomers! Ha!”

“Yeah, that joke never gets old,” grumbled Sagittarius, throwing in the now traditional ante of a sugar packet.

In a way, it was rather enlightening of them. Desert Fox was the first woman to play in Supervillain Poker Night since it began. Of course, that may initially have had something to do with her promising to fill them with “more holes than Swiss cheese with a rat inside,” but after a few hands, she'd become an actual part of the gang, and kept up rather well with Lupine and Sagittarius.

“Lord Ironmask only wears undergarments of the heaviest and least delicate iron! And despite what his now-deceased underlings say, he never has to apply any powders afterward!”

“Bro, for the last time, no one wants to hear about what goes on in your pants,” Lupine said, tossing in a packet.

Ironmask looked almost hurt. “But Lord Ironmask’s banter is so clever! Lord Ironmask is always saying he and his friends’ lives would make a great situation comedy.”

“Ain’t them friends just the servants you’re always executin’?” Fox asked, dealing the cards with deadly accuracy fitting for someone who once killed a dozen Pinkertons in a sandstorm with only two bullets (it would have been one, but for the “dern fool laws of physics gettin’ in m’ way”).

Ironmask paused. “It would be a rotating cast. Hmmm, ‘cast...’ Like cast iron—get it?!!” No one even pretended to crack a smile.

“Pathetic mortals,” Rrrgh said to himself, reading from a book called *Phineas Q. McCracken’s Guide to Cheating at Poker*. “Little do they know it was my plan from the beginning to lose every single match! Now that I’ve lured them into a false sense of security, I shall win their very souls!”

“You know we can hear you, right?” Sagittarius asked, rubbing his temples.

“Because you see, Lord Ironmask used the word cast to mean more than one thing! It was a play on words! That is the joke!” Ironmask laughed raucously, pounding his iron fist on the table.

“Pathetic mortals,” Rrrgh cackled. “Little do they know it was my plan for them to overhear my plans!”

And so it went. Usually they'd play until a fight broke out, though these days they had to be much more careful, seeing as it would be entirely too easy to tear a hole in the hull. If it wasn't a fight, it was some rules debate that sent everyone off to their various corners of the ship, followed by an evening of taking turns at the makeshift still Lupine had built (Tim didn't care much for it himself; one sniff and he was tipsy), and finally an evening of the horrifying symphony of Rrrgh, Lupine, and Ironmask snoring. And this, Necromortius lamented, was his life, for close to seven more months.

Then he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, and he knew there was another presence on the ship.

"You...you killed me!" A luminescent form materialized above the poker table. Coming into focus, the figure had a giant pumpkin head, wore a high-collared vampire cloak, a long white sheet, clawed, hairy gloves, and, oddly enough, a set of gills. It pointed at Desert Fox with rage and fury. "It's your fault I'm like this. Now, I shall make you suffer for all eternity!"

"Sorry, who're you again?" Fox asked, scratching her chin.

The unnatural light around the figure receded somewhat. "Seriously? You don't remember me? Halloween Girl? We met at the Women in Villainy Conference? You sent me to talk to Kali and she tore me to pieces? Ring any bells??" Fox shrugged.

Lupine sputtered out a laugh at this. "Damn, that's harsh, Fox! Points for style, though."

"Silence!" Halloween Girl shouted, her ghostly voice echoing throughout the shuttle. "It's taken me months to gather my power and track you across the depths of space. Now I shall drain your life away, along with your jerkface friends! Die!" The cards, along with the food rations, rose off the table and swirled around her. The villains rose to defend themselves, except Rrrgh, who was engrossed in Chapter Nine: Point and Say "Look Over There!" Halloween Girl

flung the swirling objects in every direction, then, her eyes burning red with hatred, dove into Desert Fox's chest. For just a moment, the seasoned gunslinger betrayed a look of terror, after which Halloween Girl fell out of her back and through the floor of the ship.

An awkward moment passed, after which the ghost dragged herself up through the floor. "Yes, I'm back!" she said, stammering just a bit. "Now, where were we?" The villains stared at her askance before going back to their poker hands. Halloween Girl slumped her shoulders.

"Damn it, I lost you, didn't I?"

"Totally," Lupine said.

"You never HAD us," Sagittarius groaned.

"Lord Ironmask was intimidated up until you failed to attack with iron chains. Or anything iron for that matter—like an iron for instance!"

Desert Fox took a slug of bootleg hooch. "Sorry, kid. You just ain't on my level. Come back in a century or two. Then maybe we can dance proper. In the meantime, I got some peppermints to win."

The villains sat down once more as Halloween Girl hung in the air like an unidentified stench or an uncomfortable silence. Sagittarius turned to Tim, who was no longer trying to conceal his observation of the scene. "Hey, Little Wizard that Couldn't. Why don't you make yourself slightly less useless and perform an exorcism on Casper the Friendless Ghost here?"

"Sick, bro!" Lupine said, offering up a high five. "Two for one, just like me with the ladies!"

Sagittarius scowled. "I'm purposely not getting that."

Unfazed, Lupine leaned in closer. "Damn, don't leave me hanging."

"I reckon that's like you with the ladies too," Fox said, smiling behind her cards.

“Lord Ironmask finds double entendre to be the lowest form of humor. Puns, on the other hand...”

Tim cast a quick spell, gently took Halloween Girl’s hand, and escorted her out of the main galley back to his corner, during which he thought he heard Lupine challenge Desert Fox to see who could “score the most babes” once they were back on Earth. Halloween Girl sighed. “So you’re going to banish me, huh? Well, get it over with. I’m a lousy ghost anyway.”

Tim shook his head. “Not unless you want me to.”

“So what am I doing here? Do I have to be part of your, like, undead army now?”

“Maybe, but...I just thought you might like someone to talk to first.”

Halloween Girl paused and shook her head. “I feel like anything I say would be way too melodramatic. You don’t want to hear it.”

Tim reached for his roll of toilet paper. “Yeah, I get you. When I feel that way, I usually put it in a song. Somehow, feelings seem a lot less silly when they rhyme.”

Halloween Girl leaned in closer. “You write songs? Cool! What about?”

“Oh, they’re mostly dumb, but I’ve been working on this one for a while. It’s about a guy who’s lost in space, not sure when he’s going to be home, and the loneliness is driving him crazy. Then he meets this girl, and all of a sudden, things start to get better.”

“A girl, huh? Is she, um, a ghost?”

Tim scratched his head in embarrassment. “Actually, she’s a sexy alien dancer.”

“Lame. You should make her a ghost.”

“Yeah, but then what am I going to rhyme with ‘interplanetary romancer’?”

“We’ll think of something,” Halloween Girl said. Then, to Tim’s surprise, she took off her mask and put her hand in his. “I’m Emily. Emily Choi.” She had long black hair with red

dyed streaks in it, a sweet, round face, and lots of eyeliner done up in intricate spirals. She smiled, and Tim found himself involuntarily smiling back.

“Necr—Tim,” he said. “Tim Hammond.”

They held each other’s hands in silence for just a moment, until hearing Rrrgh bellow from in the next room, “Hey guys! Look over there, and definitely not at your cards!” As the sounds of yet another card game scuffle began, Tim and Emily let go of one another and burst into laughter.

“Is it always like this?” Emily asked.

“Yeah, but sometimes Lupine forgets we’re not outside when he needs to use the bathroom, so count yourself lucky.” Tim took out his animal bone carvings. “Do you play chess?”

“Yeah, my parents taught me when I was little. Gotta warn you though, I’m not half bad.”

Tim smiled. All of a sudden, seven more months didn’t seem half bad either.