

Chapter Two, “Wrappings”

1

There was a storm raging outside the inn when the coach arrived. The common room of the inn was nearly empty at this time of night. Only Jasper, Murray and Hans sat at two tables while Wilhelm, the innkeeper, tended bar for them.

In the moments before the coach's arrival, Jasper and Murray were finishing a drink together. Jasper looked about the inn, still fearing every shadow he saw, every sound that intruded upon his existence.

“They say the couple are American,” Murray said. Jasper was barely listening as Murray turned to Wilhelm, who was cleaning a glass at the bar. “Ain't that right, Wilhelm?”

Wilhelm looked up from his important work. “What's that?”

“I said, that couple that inherited old Creutzfeldt's lands is American,” Jasper said. “Aren't they?”

“Oh, aye. Rich, I'm told. Made most of the trip up by automobile!”

Murray turned back to Jasper, slapped him excitedly on the arm, making the other man jump in alarm. “You hear that, Jasper? Automobile! Can you imagine?”

“Had to change over to coach once they got into the mountains, course,” Wilhelm said.

“They must be carrying chests full o' cash with them,” Murray said, rubbing his hands together. “How long till the coach gets here, Wilhelm?”

“Any time now, I expect.”

Jasper was still lost in his own fears and he scanned the room, locking eyes with Hans, who was sitting by himself at a table nearby. Hans was a thin, weasily-looking man with eyes almost as big as Jasper's. When he saw Jasper looking at him, Hans looked away at once, suddenly becoming interested in the contents of his drink.

A loud crash of thunder bellowed from outside, scaring Jasper and making him look towards the door of the inn. When the great sound of nature subsided, he could now hear the approach of horse hooves. It was the coach.

Wilhelm pulled a watch from his vest and checked it, nodding to himself. “Right on schedule.”

They could all now hear the coach as it pulled up in front of the inn and came to a stop, the horses

whinnying being drowned out by another crash of thunder. A moment later, the door to the inn opened and the driver entered first. Jasper didn't know his name but he knew him by sight.

As the driver went to the bar to order a drink, two more people came in from the harsh rain. One was a young woman. The other was a huge brute of a man, his face obscured by a cloak with an alarmingly high collar and the large brim of a hat. Jasper estimated that the man must have been nearly seven feet tall.

The young woman was dark-haired and quite striking. Draped in stylish traveling clothes, Jasper could just see a fine gown underneath her outer layers. She took a table not far from Jasper and Murray, slipped off her gloves and sat down. Her companion remained standing, surveying the inn from behind his high collar.

Wilhelm had just finished serving the coach driver and he approached the woman's table. "Get you something?"

The woman looked up at him as if she was evaluating him. Finally, she nodded. "Something to drink, please. And some food."

Wilhelm nodded and proceeded back around the bar to fill her order. Murray finished his own drink, wiped his mouth and got up from his table. Jasper thought about stopping his friend but he was too timid and didn't dare act upon his impulse.

"Evening, ma'am," Murray said as he approached the table.

The woman shot him a look that couldn't hide her contempt. Her brow furrowed. The big brute of a man took a step towards Murray but she put out an arm to stop him. She returned Murray's nod. "Evening."

"My name's Murray. What be your name?"

"I'm Lily Allbright," she said. "Mrs."

"How do you do, Mrs. Allbright?"

"Fine, I suppose."

"Quite a night out, ain't it?"

"It is." She sighed. "I was hoping the driver would carry on so that we could get to the castle as quickly as possible but he felt it was wise to stop here until the storm died down some. I don't suppose you have any notion how long storms like this last in this part of the world?"

Murray shrugged and took a seat at her table. Lily seemed taken aback for a moment but allowed it.

"Could be ten minutes," Murray said. "Could be all night. Who's to say?"

Lily sighed again. Slumped into her chair. The big brute with her continued to hover. Murray looked up at the hulking figure. Gestured to him. "Are you going to introduce me to Mr. Allbright?"

For a moment, Lily seemed confused. When she realized who Murray was talking about, she chuckled. "This is not my husband."

"No?" Murray said.

"No," she confirmed. "This is our... servant. He takes care of my needs."

"I see." He shot a look at Jasper then turned his attention back to Lily. "Is Mr. Allbright already at the castle?"

Another sigh from Lily. "No, I'm afraid not. He's away on business."

"And will be joining you at a later date, I'm sure."

"Certainly."

Murray seemed to be getting more comfortable now and when Wilhelm returned with refreshment for Lily, Jasper's partner in crime ordered a drink for himself, as well.

"Rumor is that you've inherited the castle," Murray said.

"That's right," Lily said.

"Who's side of the family was old Creutzfeldt on if I might ask?"

"Mine, I'm told. A distant great uncle, if I have it correctly."

"Ain't that nice?" He turned to Jasper. "Ain't that nice, Jasper? A great uncle!" He turned back to Lily. "You sure you never met the man? Or maybe you were told stories about him, hey? Old family legends, perhaps?"

"Nothing of the sort," Lily said. To Jasper, she looked bored of the conversation now, more interested in her drink than the man sitting across from her. Wilhelm delivered food to the table. The conversation continued for a while but Lily's responses cooled as the storm began to calm down outside.

After some time, the driver wandered back to the door and opened it. Poking his head out for a moment before heading out, he left the door standing open. Through it, Jasper could see that the storm appeared to have broken.

The driver confirmed this when he came back in. Lily finished her food and stood up, slipping her gloves back on. Murray didn't bother standing up but he nodded to the woman and she nodded back.

"Pleasure to meet you," she said.

Jasper did stand up, holding his hat in his hands, and approached the table. As Lily turned to leave, she spoke to her servant. "Pay the innkeeper, would you?"

The servant nodded and approached the bar. As he reached into his coat for coin, he turned in the right direction and the light above allowed Jasper to catch a glimpse of the man's face.

He managed to refrain from screaming but that one small look shook him to his very core. The brute

man's face was massive, his features all exaggerated, bigger than they should be. His gaze met Jasper's and one eye narrowed. It was a threat and Jasper knew it.

A moment later, coin was on the bar and the big man was heading outside with his mistress. As he heard the coach pull away and continue its voyage up the mountain to the castle, Jasper looked around, taking in the three others in the inn. It was clear none of them had seen what he had seen.

They hadn't seen the face of the big man. The face that had sent chills creeping up the back of his neck.

2

In another part of the country, on a different, much clearer evening, the Bride watched from her caravan window as Christina danced for the people. It wasn't yet night but she knew that the moon would be full when it finally fell. And the full moon in autumn sometimes brought bad tidings.

The camp had arranged the wagons for display and the evening had brought a number of interested folk. The Bride could see twenty or more visitors milling about. Some of them played games of chance, a small group waited on Kezia the fortune teller, but at the moment most of them were watching Christina dance.

The Bride understood their obsession. She, too, was transfixed by the young woman's sensual dance. Christina's movements were wild but fluid. Her eyes were piercing and the Bride thought that Christina bestowed her gaze upon the window more than once during the dance. The young woman knew that the Bride was there, watching from the safety of the dark.

But her gaze, if it was directed towards the Bride, was brief and soon the dancer was wooing the crowd once again. She seemed focused on a small group of young women among them. There were three of them and they appeared to be sisters. The Bride frowned at the small group of women. She wished that Christina would look at her once again, though she did not know why.

There was a knock on the door of her wagon and the Bride let the curtains of the window fall back in place. As she headed to answer it, the door opened as the Impresario let himself in. The man was tall and thin – almost gaunt – with white hair. He was dressed in a smart suit and top hat, ready for the show. Their show.

In the time she had been with Eva and her extended family, the Bride had been slowly learning to speak and even read and write a little. She had found it exhilarating. It was like discovering a new world.

She wanted to thank her new family for the gifts they had given her, for the house – always moving

– they had provided her with. And so it had been suggested by the Impresario that she pay her way on nights like these.

“Are you ready, my dear?” he asked her now.

She nodded.

“Raise your arms,” he ordered.

She did as she was told and raised her arms. Turned about in place when he ordered her to do so. Her wrappings were brand new and a fresh shroud was draped over her lithe form. The women had worked on her hair and make-up, making her both frightful and beautiful at the same time.

“Good,” the Impresario said, “you're ready. Now let's go. The people will be coming soon.”

She followed him out of the wagon and they circled around the carts, out of sight of the paying customers. At the back of the circle of wagons, the caravan had put together two caravans to form the House of Horrors, their most popular exhibit.

The Impresario left the Bride as she went into the exhibit to ready herself. Passing by jars of medical oddities and horrific displays, she paused for a moment to observe the sarcophagus leaning against a wall in the darkness. Cocked her head at the figure inside.

The sarcophagus was Egyptian and the figure inside was a mummy. The man had been dead for thousands of years but if the Impresario's story was true he sometimes still walked the night, looking for victims.

Was he like her? Dead but somehow still alive?

She had never seen the Mummy move but sometimes sensed him, sometimes felt as if he were moving around when she wasn't looking. The Bride could hear the Impresario giving his spiel outside the wagons and knew that she had to get in position. Rushing to the back of the exhibit, she took her place among the horrors.

A moment later, the Impresario ushered the paying customers into the exhibit and began showing them around the various horrors inside. Every jar seemed to have a story attached to it. Each evening they set up for a show outside of a little village, the Impresario would tell these stories. Not every single one: just the ones he was interested in telling on that particular night.

But it was when he reached the Mummy that he truly became inspired. The Bride listened to him espouse the horrors of the wrapped monster.

“Ah,” he said, “now we come to a true horror. Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce you to Kharis the Mummy. Kharis's story is a most tragic one. He dared to love the wrong woman and was buried alive for his crime. Forced to do his master's bidding long after his own death.”

There were shocked gasps from the crowd. The Impresario seemed to eat it up. Retrieving an old

scroll case from beside the sarcophagus, he presented it to the crowd, opening it. Inside, the Bride knew, was a small collection of ancient leaves.

“Yes, ladies and gentlemen,” he continued. “With the power contained in these inconspicuous flora, he can be revived to do terrible things. One need only possess the knowledge to properly brew them.”

He smiled at the paying customers. It was a sinister smile. When he shut the case, the Bride could hear several members of the crowd jump, startled out of their minds.

The Impresario laughed, put the case aside and gestured the crowd to follow him into the back of the exhibit. The Bride was waiting for them in the dark. None of them could see her.

“I know what you're thinking, my friends,” the Impresario said. “You can't see anything in the darkness. Positively anything at all could be lurking here among the shadows. Well, let me illuminate the situation.”

Dramatically, he pulled a large switch on the ground near the wall. All the exotic electrical devices in the room came to life at once. Sparks and electricity crackled through the air, illuminating the Bride, who was sitting in an elaborate chair at the back of the exhibit room.

There were several screams and the Bride was pleased to hear that not all of them came from women. She could also hear pleasure in the Impresario's voice when he spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “this is the Electrified Woman! A most curious case. This lovely specimen was constructed out of the bodies of the dead. Her mind was created by black magic. She cannot die. See how the electricity flows through her body.”

On cue, the Bride reached out with both hands and grasped hold of two metal knobs on the arms of her chair. Bright currents of electricity coursed through her. The voltage was far lower than a bolt of lightning, though, and she felt no pain.

More gasps and screams from the audience. The Bride saw the small group of young women she had spied from her window among the audience now and she focused on one of them in particular: a rather attractive girl, obviously from the nearby village.

The Bride hissed at the young woman, scaring her. The girl covered her mouth with both hands and she practically disappeared between her two companions. The Bride was pleased and smirked to herself.

With the supreme moment of horror over, the show ended. The Impresario switched the machine off, gave his closing spiel and ushered the paying customers out of the exhibit.

The Bride stayed in her chair, in the dark. There would be a second show soon enough. Sighing, she leaned back in the chair and began to practice her words, one at a time.

“Tree,” she said. “Rock. Frog. Fox. Rabbit. Boy. Girl...”

She trailed off, a confused look on her face. This was a strange world and she didn't understand it.

All at once, the Bride felt that she wasn't alone in the darkened room. Something moved in the shadows with her. Squinting, she tried to see what it was, focusing her attention on the connecting room, where the Mummy was.

She was convinced that she could hear something moving in there. It sounded like cloth-wrapped feet walking across the room.

But how could that be? Surely, the Mummy couldn't really be alive, could he?

Was it so far-fetched, though? She was dead but alive and walking around so why not Kharis? There was a strange smell in the air of the wagon, one that she hadn't noticed before. Could it be the strange leaves that the Impresario had mentioned?

If so, had he been brewing them before he came to collect her? She might have missed them until now, being focused on her impending performance as she had been.

She was afraid. Something that was rare for her. She was afraid that the Mummy was up and walking and that he would come into the room with her and strangle her.

Would she die? She believed that she was indestructible, like the Monster before her, but what if she were wrong? What if the undying could only be destroyed by another undying creature?

Just as her fear was at its peak, the Impresario came back into the exhibit, leading another small group of paying customers. It broke the spell and the Bride convinced herself that she had just imagined the whole encounter.

And if she still smelled the strange stench of brewed leaves, she ignored them. Told herself that they weren't real.

To Be Continued...

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