



One Night
by
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He took the nose off first and with it, Jingles was no more. What stared back at him in the mirror was a half-done, barely-there clown, a remnant of who he had once been. He picked up a box of make-up wipes and popped the lid. With each soft cloth, he erased himself, returning his face to the blank canvas of being nobody.

He felt neither sad or happy; he felt very little, truth be told. The clown's persona is their only persona. He'd been a clown too long to be anything else. With Jingles gone, his face looked hollow, empty. His eyes didn't sparkle, and his cheeks didn't jiggle with laughter. It hurt to watch himself in the mirror, knowing it wasn't himself that looked back.

He knew, somewhere in the blankness of his thoughts, that he wasn't the only one going through this trauma. Every room in the hotel housed a clown who would die tonight. A small gathering chose to perform the ritual in groups--they were braver than he.

For one night, he'd die. He'd set himself aside, in honour of those who came before, not because he liked it, but because he hoped that someone in the future would do it for him. It was selfish. It may even have been petty and sacrilegious, but it gave him the strength to participate.

His fingers touched the old pine box and ran the length of the lid, worn smooth from years of use. The stained top still reflected the secrets of what lay within. White, black, red, and blue, worn to faint pastels, marred the lid. His fingertips graced each smudge with respect and a little trepidation. Inside, Minstrel awaited.

The last time Minstrel had seen the light of day, Pope Paul the Third ruled the Vatican and Henry the Eighth, England. Rulers had come and gone, civilizations risen and fallen, but throughout all that time, the society of clowns, the brotherhood of jesters, had remained.

He opened the lid, careful of the hinges that were fastened by hand-forged nails. A waft of autumn took flight in the motes of dust sent airborne by the air-conditioned breeze.

He said a short prayer, seeking strength and resolve, and took the first of the face-paints from the velvet-lined box. Minstrel never fancied himself a perfectionist, so broad strokes of make-up made the foundation for the rest. With each colour, his hands became more sure. Excitement replaced fear as his eyes regained a glint of personality. His breathing eased into a satisfied, life-affirming, rhythm.

Minstrel studied his face in the mirror, flexing his mouth and rolling his eyes. The cheeks were too hollow, the eyes too close together, but he settled into the different landscape with relative ease as his eyes travelled to his true face, painted atop the foreign soil.

He glanced around the room, recognizing the two matching beds and the wondrously lush drapery panels. He marvelled at the quality of light, that neither flickered or smoked. His eyes passed over those things he didn't understand in favour of those he did. Small comforts, reassuring touchstones.

Laid out on the bed furthest from him, a harlequin cape rested beside an oak sceptre and a sheet of white parchment.

He wrapped the cloak about his shoulders, canting his cheek so it caressed the silken fabric, far richer than any he had worn before. His fingers touched the sceptre but fear prevented him from grasping it. Tears clouded his vision; it had been so long since he had held aloft the sceptre of his court. He settled on resting his hand against the grain of the wood while he distracted himself with the words written on the parchment.

He read the words quickly at first, then again more slowly as he worked his way through the stilted English.

Minstrel,

*In the manner of our brethren
and out of respect for our ancestors,
you are given one night of freedom.
Use it as you will, for it is yours.*

The unshed tears in his eyes flooded forth as he realized the gift he had been offered. As he had once done, what seemed as not-too-many years ago, had now been done for him.

His hand embraced the simple oak sceptre, little more than a fancy stick, by truth, and he held it aloft and kissed it.

As his lips met the grain of the wood, an image entered his mind and his heart leapt, skipping a beat or two. She wore a different body, too tall, and far too slender, but her face was unmistakable.

He rushed to the door and, after a moment fumbling with the lock, fled the room. He didn't spare a glance at the strangeness of the hallway, nor did he stop when he brushed past a pair of drunkards, painted in a mockery of his own image. Instead, he held tight to the vision in his mind, following its call as surely as a homing pigeon bound with an urgent message.

His heart beat in anticipation, and fear, for he dared not hope that the vision held true until he saw her, not just in his mind, but with his eyes.

The siren's call brought him, breathless, to an unassuming door, marked only with three numbers. He tapped it lightly with the crown of his sceptre, straightened his harlequin cloak, and waited for the lady to answer.

The door opened, timidly unsure of itself, to reveal the shining beauty of his Lunette. Her pale face blossomed in a smile as she met his gaze. Her hair fell awkwardly over her shoulders and her dress glittered in a most disturbing manner, but her face, the way the painted

lines danced from her cheeks to her eyes and the tear that marked her temple, those were just as he remembered them.

She rushed into his arms and he tentatively wrapped his own around her. At the feel of her solidly pressed against him, he relaxed. She was real. His Lunette, gone these many years, had returned to him. If only for a night.



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