

"The Fool"

(excerpt)

by Peter Kovic

The wine the powdery man sent to my room under the stairs was always too dry. I gave most of it to the maids next door. Today he sent a gold-and-white musicbox. A dozen little figures danced and raced and fought, either by turning in place or by following set grooves in the metal. The mousers in my room woke up and shared my fascination. The figures should have collided but the mechanism was timed so that they always missed each other. Nudging any of them loose would ruin the entire dance. I would have to be careful with this gift.

Inside the box was an invitation to tour the powdery man's rooms.

His family had been in the high castle for generations. Walls had been knocked down and stairs and ladders had been added. He showed me portraits and landscapes, wooden figurines and marble statues, walls that had been turned to murals. Let me try on jewels. He poured a wine sweet enough to drink. We were low enough to see the desert out his windows.

He told me of the strange lands where he had acquired the pieces as a young diplomat. Places where fish live in trees and snow never melts. Maze gardens that go on for days. Mile-high elephants with legs the width of a finger. Countrysides that give way to repeating geometric shapes. Architects who made ceilings, floors, and walls that you could walk on.

Was any of it true?

He led me into his family's private place in the catacombs. Stone walls gave way to crumbling earth and roots. Dripping water. I would never have found my way out without him. I thought he was showing me the rusty remains of forgotten sculptures. He gave me sherry and chocolate.

A breeze. Something to do with the cold air of the catacombs meeting the warm air of the castle. He took snuff and corrected me about the rusting contraptions.

"My dear, those were for torture."

His torch was in such a way that his face was black and mad spider-shadows danced behind the apparatus in questions. Was he lying? Joking? What did he expect from me after a comment like that, and to have no face to go with it? Was he going to start hurting me?

"I have a party on 81," I said.

His voice came from the nowhere-blackness behind the torch. "Of course. You said you don't like dirt anymore. Go to your party."

That night the older fool made fireworks for us. We rolled dice and dealt cards and lit cigarettes off candles. Shouts when we won, shouts when we lost. We raced to see who could empty a wine bottle first. Puking. I teleported away the contents of our stomachs so we could keep eating.

More wine and truffles and outlandish guesses about what goes on in the palace in the sky. We broke windows in the greenhouse, woke babies in the nursery, and rattled hanging pans racing through the giant kitchen on 99. And when we came to a panting stop, hands on our

knees, everyone agreed there would be nothing better than to see the high castle obliterated.

I stumbled out of someone's bed, through a hatch only two-feet high, and entered a new part of the unmapped network of exposed stone, just behind the soft-papered walls. I was on a dust-caked mezzanine I had never seen before. A pale old couple in ragged uniforms cooked something in a rusty pan over a campfire. They said this was 84 and gave me directions back to 85. I never saw them or a way back to 84 again.

I smoked with the maids and I told them about the powdery man in the catacombs. They brushed my hair and said how the same things happened to them. They sympathized. That's all they could do.

\*

I found out you were from a trader's guild beyond the desert.

How much time passed? How many times did our eyes meet?

*How many times did you bring me a wine glass at a ball, did you slip a coin into my hand on your way out of the throneroom? How many voyages did you take while I stayed in the high castle? How many times did you risk your fortunes on the sea while my days ran together? How many desert people did I humiliate while turning sick inside?*

*How much time passed between our first meeting on the balcony and being alone together in your room?*

One of us was on the bed. The other leaned on the windowsill with the warm breeze to his back. You looked full-grown and sturdy. Maps and legal documents cluttered your desk. You had a cutlass propped in the corner, its handle catching the orange sunlight.

You asked me what I did when I wasn't at parties or in the throneroom.

"I like to read," I said. "You've only seen the main library where they keep the clean books with the new furniture. I've found the other libraries."

"What do you read?"

"Books of spells. I'm learning more magic."

"Do you like to read because no one expects you to humiliate anybody?"

Then I remembered what the older fool told me about sincerity. I asked you "How old are you?" because I thought you would be cagey. You weren't. You resolutely answered "34."

You asked how I came to be in the high castle. No use being cagey now.

"I finished my training at the guild school," I said. "It was time to apprentice."

"Why here? I hate it here."

"Why?"

"I hate what you do. I can tell you feel the same. And I hate having to get this close to T'Beria."

"I've never been to the palace in the sky."

"Neither have I," you said, and you shivered. The housecat in the corner stretched. "Can't you feel evil radiating from the sky, just being this close to it? Didn't you hear the rumors at school?"

Stories of people fainting dead when they entered the palace. Of mothers who killed themselves when their children were taken there. Of goat ears sewn into scalps. *I should have gone with you.*

"The high castle was the only place taking an apprentice fool," I said with a shrug. "If I wasn't apprenticing now I would still be at the guild school. Easier to go than to stay."

Then we were both on the bed. I had my arms around me knees. Your eyes glowed.

"Leave with me," you said. "Have you ever been to sea? No soft sheets, rich dinners, or dry wines. Just honest work. No ridicule. We could use someone like you for dealing with magicians or trading for potions or herbs. If we're ever in a bad way, it's always better to have magic at sea than not have magic."

My lips pinched.

"I'm not a mage," I muttered. "A fool's magic is a joke."

"But you've been learning new magic out of those books."

Tugging inside was the urge to go back to being cagey, to smoke with the maids, to find the powdery man and accept his chocolates and wine. "I read what I feel like. What I feel . . . changes every day. Potions. Biographies of sorcerers. One day I read about raising the dead, the next day I read about illusions. The next is levitation. I

get bored before I know how to do anything. I'm not following a plan like we did at the guild school. I'm not learning anything."

You were disappointed but you kept going.

"But you can learn. And you won't be weak anymore. Your hands will callus."

"Why do you think I ended up here? I was 20th out of 23 in my class. I never work hard."

"We could use you. You could use the dignity. Think about it."

That night traveling players performed on the little stage on 188 or 190. Noblewomen made me sit at their feet during the show. Swayed with wine, they brought me to a stuffy goldleaf parlor around 215 and had me parade naked on a tabletop. They smoked cigarettes and laughed at how repellent and alien the male form is, even this young. They threw chocolates at me. I caught about half of them out of the air with my mouth.

When I was alone with the Countess So-and-So she put a pillow over my face and rode me ferociously. No one person could have planted so much hatred in her. Later - her wig and beauty spots gone - I joined her in disparaging the other women from that evening, careful to let her make the cruelest remarks.

I thought about what the older fool had told me, early in my apprenticeship: "Prepare yourself for the thousand subtle cuts that remind you you don't belong here."