

Tinsel in the Twilight

I get there late, as always. It's standing room only for those not lucky enough to have someone saving them a seat. I elbow my way through a sea of secondhand smoke and broad shoulders that only come up to my waist.

The missus is just where she said she'd be, but in the dark it still takes a minute to find her.

She barely acknowledges me as I sit beside her. She's pissed, and rightfully so. No one made me stay in the shop but me. But I stand by the fact the knobbies won't glue themselves. It's crunch time and someone's gotta burn the candle at both ends. Which is why, after this, I'll be getting back to work.

I'm tired and cold, but it's warm in here. I'll do well to stay awake and regret the two (ok, three) shots I had on the way over.

The mob is just getting to the castle. They have their own smoke to contend with, a low-lying mist swirling about their feet.

With pitchforks made of corn brooms and giftwrap tubes for clubs, they murmur and mumble with their pointy ears and curvy toed shoes. It is dark, and the light at the step only partially illuminates the mob. The only similarities in each member's appearance are the ears, shoes, and homemade golden belts around their waist.

Somewhere, a thunder sheet is manipulated to create thunderous booms to accentuate distant flashes of lightning. Marlowe and Shakespeare would be proud.

One of the elves, wearing a yellow winter hat, uses the door knocker.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

Another, wearing oversized glasses, complains about the nights getting cooler as he shifts from one leg to the other. A third elf with coveralls tells him to shut his yammering or head back to the village. This brings some chuckles from the crowd watching. The yammerer stares at him, before suggesting to the group maybe no one is home.

“They’re home, all right. It’s dark now. There’s nowhere to go,” the coverall elf answers.

The elf with glasses continues. “Well, I dunno, maybe-”

“What did I tell you about your yammer-“

“Silence,” the first elf puts his hand up and speaks without turning back. With this, the group falls silent.

The first elf tries the door knocker again, and mid-knock the door opens. A brief dramatic hammering of piano keys comes from the side. A man, dressed all in black with a tall collar hiding his neck, steps partway onto the step. He is very pale. “Yes?” He speaks with a heavy accent and sounds like his nostrils are being pinched.

The door knocker elf stands still. An awkward silence follows, till one of the elves gives him a bit of a nudge. “Ah, yes, Count. We want to know about that, creature, you are harboring over here. Things have been amiss the past few weeks, but I suspect you know more about things than we do.”

“Amiss? What may I ask is amiss? And what creature do you speak of?”

“Well, for starters, mice are gonna be running amok in our workshops, because our cats are vanishing. Vamoosed. Another was taken just today. Which is why we are here.”

“And of what concern is this of mine?”

There is a silence, with the Count and other elves staring at the door knocker elf. Then the Count suggests, “Perhaps you have seen something lurking about your shops and village?”

The door knocker elf remembers his line. “Yeah, something was seen walking around the shops as it was getting dark. Something big.”

“Like a giant, in a long flowing grey robe,” the stammerer adds.

“But looked female, so a giantess,” another elf from the back of the mob adds.

The door knocker elf continues. “Something big was about, as my comrades indicate, and we chased it off. But not before we think she grabbed one of our very last cats and threw it in a gunny sack over her shoulder.”

“Cats, eh?” the Count’s voice falters. He sounds a bit less confident.

“Yeah. Our cats have been going missing the past few weeks, but it wasn’t till today we found out why. The mice’ll get the upper hand if we don’t keep our feet on them. Winter is upon us, in case you haven’t noticed, and mice are desperate to get inside.”

“Grey robe? Like a full-bodied dress, full length sleeve?” The Count now has an obvious frown on his face.

The door knocker elf continued. "Exactly. A scouting group was sent out, and it being dark, they couldn't follow every track over the rocks, but they did find enough in the snow to lead us in this direction. By the time the scouting group made it to the pass by the ridge, they were set upon by the beast.

"She had been lying in wait, the cat still in the bag. Our scouts circled the beast, she stood like a mighty bear surrounded by wolves. They were lucky to make it out alive. Pretended to be dead, they did, after her mauling.

"They followed her here, in the dark they saw her scaling the back wall. We want a word with whatever it is you've got hiding out here, and we want our cats back. All of 'em. And we need you to keep that dog you just got, or whatever it is, in the castle at night. We hear it and see its tracks getting closer and closer. Somethin' ain't right about the way it sounds. It's proving hard to track, but we know it's here."

"We don't have time for this nonsense, we have deadlines to meet," the elf with the glasses added. "Production deadlines."

I hear a few chuckles from the darkness around me. I shift on my bench, inadvertently brushing my hand for just a moment of contact beside the missus's. I make no further advancement in the touch, and she makes no further retreat.

The Count waves a hand. "Impossible. There are no dogs and cats in the castle. You know I hate animals. Leave, now. There is nothing for you here. Leave before you cannot leave."

The door knocker elf stands his ground. "No. we will not. And we have all night to stand here and keep you here arguing over it if that's what it takes."

With this, the porchlight that had been illuminating the encounter fades out, leaving only silhouettes which fade into the night.

Further to the left, another light illuminates, showing two elves crouched down outside a window hugging themselves from the cold. They are dressed much the same as the elves from the mob.

One looks around and they appear to be talking, but I can't hear anything. Soon someone runs out and adjusts a microphone before whispering to them. They start over.

One looks around. "You sure you're good to do this?"

The other one nods. "I've already committed. But, that said, we won't have long. In and out, get the cats, and avoid the grey beast at all costs."

"At all costs," the first one agrees. "The Count should be tied up with the others out front. Let's do it," and they shake on it. They climb through the window and as one climbs over the ledge, we can see his shoelace is untied. They are now in the castle.

The light follows them as they step as quietly as they can, and they soon find themselves in a den. Mounted heads of various wild game, such as zebra, lion and buffalo look down in judgement over all that enter.

"This room gives me the creeps," the first elf says, and the other adds, "This whole place gives me the creeps. The cats must be somewhere in here. Keep your wits about

you.” As they walk out of the room, the animal heads all turn in their direction, and there are gasps from the crowd.

The elves continue walking, and they walk out of the light. Not long after they have walked away, a creature in grey, from the earlier discussions, passes by the light, arms outstretched like a zombie. She is two heads taller than the elves. Likely a high school student.

At length, the two elves find themselves in a laboratory. Flasks and tubes line the shelves, and a large table is in front of them complete with shackles to hold hands and feet. At the head of the table is a collar hooked up to wires and tubes.

“This must be the Count’s workshop. One can only imagine what sorcery takes place in here,” the first elf asks no one in particular.

“Just keep looking,” answers the second.

Both drop to their knees, in slightly different directions, and peer under the shelving. “Aha!” one cries, lifting two sacks. “There are four bags here.” He unties each bag, confirming the cats are inside. “Let’s get out of here with the cats we’ve got and get message to the others,” he says as he hands the other elf two of the bags.

They don’t realize it, but during their discussion, the giantess walked into the room and is now standing behind them. She is pale, not unlike the Count, and her long grey dress is torn. She has long dark hair that hides much of her face. There are whispers of anticipation from the audience.

The two elves turn and walk into her. They size her up, scream, then look at each other, and scream again. They run repeated loops in a small circle, with the grey monster in pursuit, to the sound of fast paced piano music. The lighting and music fade out as the porchlight between the Count and the mob of elves lights up again.

The argument between the Count and mob continues. Is a great grey beast, giantess even, and a wild dog taking shelter in the castle, and are the elves' cats there? All of a sudden, the two elves that had been prowling in the castle sprint out the door past the Count, arms in the air holding their bags of cats and screaming. Hot on their tail is the giantess in grey.

Before much else can be said, the elf with the loose shoelace trips and crashes to the ground. His bags fly out of his hand and before either bag lands on the ground, cats are out and sprinting for home.

The audience is silent, not knowing if this is real or scripted. Nobody moves except the giantess, who stops and kneels beside the fallen elf.

"The great grey beast!" one of the mob yells, and steps in with an impromptu swing of his club.

"Ow," the giantess says. "What's wrong with you? Your friend is hurt and I'm trying to help him."

The Count puts his hand up. "That is my niece you are assaulting. I command you stop at once."

"Neice?" the door knocking elf asks.

“Yes, she is home on holiday from veterinary school,” the count answers. “With her fiancé.”

“Why are you taking our cats?” the elf with glasses asks.

“Because, as I understand it, you little monsters have been asked time and time again to have your cats fixed, and you refuse.”

“I have asked, but no one listens,” the Count affirms.

The giantess nods and continues. “So, I’m fixing them for you. I literally had them in bags to take some of them back tonight or tomorrow. I wanted to make sure they were healing well without infection.”

The Count starts to speak but at the same time a deep howling comes from the distance. “Lon is coming,” the Count shares a concerned look with his niece. “The cats.”

“It’s not just the cats I’m worried about,” his niece answers, as she looks at the elves.

My mind tunes away from the play. I shift. and slowly, with the dexterity of a surgeon, touch my hand against that of Mrs. Claus, this time keeping slight contact. She waits a moment, and without looking at me, she interlocks her fingers in mine on the bench, making all right in the world again.

I’m the first to admit this play, solely written and performed by the elves at their refusal for any outside help, will never win a spot in a Broadway musical. As far as plays go, it’s just not very good. Though rewritten every year, the plot remains virtually the same. Lines are repeatedly forgotten and misread, sometimes even said by the wrong person,

and the lighting and props leave something to be desired. I do like the thunderous metal sheet, though.

There is a rawness to the play. A truth of sorts. It speaks of courage and teamwork, innovation, and pride. Both on and off the stage.

The elves insist on the performance. They say it helps them blow off some steam partway through ramp up production and is free for anyone that will watch.

At times I wonder if they rather Halloween over Christmas. I don't know what it is with elves' obsessions of giantess beasts, werewolves, and Counts. And every play they'll ever perform is replete with their beloved cats.

I wake up, realizing I have succumbed to the heat and missed the last part of the play. My neck is now sore and I'm thinking I may take the rest of the night off from the shop.

Our hands only separate to clap to the standing ovation the characters receive as they return to the stage to take their deep bows.

