

Ghosts

By Orion Lagunas

Under ash and flame and sundered oaks, Juniper and Ash held hands within the inferno. The air here was dying, struggling to survive amidst the smoke that stole the sky. The sheer heat of the place pervaded, taking whatever fuel it could find. It would be enough to kill any who came across it unprepared and unwary. Of course, Juniper & Ash knew exactly what they were doing. It was their vocation, after all.

They were scouts of the last hearth, perhaps the only remaining human settlement, in what was left of the formerly United States. It had been roughly two centuries since the wars that ushered a bloody end to America, after the conflicts between those who loved power and those who did not. Freedom won out, though there weren't many to appreciate it. The Earth's climate was already wounded by the capitalists who poisoned and corrupted the climate for their own desires, and its effects would be felt long after. Despite, or more accurately in spite of this, the remnants of humanity came together and formed the last hearth. However, every few years, resources dwindle, and it is up to able and willing volunteers to venture into wild yonder to gather food and water so that they all may survive a little longer.

Juniper was garbed in a flame resistant suit, a loose, garish thing that made her look like walking tin foil. Still, it fulfilled its purpose, and she followed Ash's lead. Ash did not have such a suit. In fact, was there anyone else to behold them, and to the untrained eye might think they were striding through the flames with only the clothes on their back. The key to her survival laid under their skin, in the nanomachines and magnesium alloys that granted them strength. What was fire to someone who could not die?

Juniper took in oxygen through slow, steady breaths, when something shimmered in the corner of her vision. Amidst the flames, there were faces. Hazy, almost ethereal, but the features were clear. They were in anguish, stretched out, screaming, and tears like fumes left their orange eyes. Though no sound left their banshee mouths, Juniper heard their words with perfect clarity. *Gaze upon the coward! Turn your eye to the machine's wicked ward! Killer! Murderer! Doff your armor! Step into the blazing terror! Join us in hell!*

Tears welled in Juniper's eyes, though if it was from the heat or the ghosts she could not tell. Juniper felt her hand squeeze, and heard Ash's voice.

"Your heart's racing."

"I know."

"Another attack?"

"Yeah."

"You're going to be okay. Just hold on a little longer, we're nearly out."

The ghosts left their scorched perches to surround Juniper. She knew they weren't real, that they were just lingering trauma given form, waking nightmares, but their words still hurt. Juniper closed her eyes, tightened her grip around Ash's hand, and continued forward.

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"Pendragon's Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire," Juniper read out. The words were emblazoned in an atypical font, set beneath an image of a slender hand emerging from water, holding a sword to the sky like a beacon to the stars. It towered over gigantic doors, with long cobbled walls extending out and around for miles on end.

It was snowing now, though it had only been a day since they left the forest on fire. It was a comforting contrast to the embers that fell on them before.

“I have no idea what most of those words mean,” Ash said.

“Pendragon, is the surname of a Welsh King called Arthur. Pennsylvania used to refer to the land we’re standing on. At least when the colonisers claimed it as their own. Before that, I don’t know. I think Lenape people lived here, but what they called it is unknown to us.

Renaissance means rebirth, specifically in reference to a period after the Dark Ages. And faire-”

“I know what that means. Wanna peek inside?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Then stand back.” Juniper did so. Ash approached the gate. Its doors were wood, old, perhaps Hemlock by their estimation. They felt the weave of the craft, following the varnish where it was weakest. Ash exhaled, her breath pale and visible. They ran a dark hand through their stark white curls, and felt thousands of tiny sensations amassing in her left leg. Before Juniper could even blink, Ash kicked the door, shattering its frame into splinters.

“Well, come on! We don’t have all day.”

“Coming!”

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Pendragon’s Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire was remarkably well preserved. The place was brimming with fantastical buildings and machinations. A wooden ship rested by the entrance, a skull flag tumbling from its pole. Suits of armor littered cobblestone paths, rusted but intact. There was an odd skeleton or two, both of which were plastic upon examination. They stopped by and looted a kitchen called Macbeth’s Mac & Cheese, though whoever Macbeth was eluded the two scavengers. A famed chef, perhaps? Regardless, they found a good amount of frozen pasta and meats, enough to call their excursion a success. The pair didn’t have to rush, though, and decided to explore the rest of the place.

“You’re awfully happy.”

“Sorry?”

“You’ve been scribbling in that notebook of yours with a vengeance, grinning like a madwoman. I don’t think I’ve heard you muse about this place’s anthropological connections, you’re so absorbed.”

“Apologies. This place is just so fascinating. I didn’t want to bore you with the details.”

“Go ahead, bore me! I like it when you ramble.”

Juniper blushed. “Well, when you put it like that... this place is a complete anomaly compared to all the other locales we’ve traveled. There’s no concrete, no cellphones, no cars, not even any drones. It’s like we stepped into a Dragonlance novel!”

“So what do you reckon ‘Pendragon’s Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire’ was then?”

“An escape, I suppose. A chance to escape the apathetic suffering of late-stage capitalism and just pretend for a while. To live in a past, that, while it never existed, persisted as a dream in the cultural imagination. A realm where you could forget and just believe that dragons are real, and that they can be beaten... and an excuse to hit one another on horses.”

Juniper and Ash both laughed.

“Don’t look now, but I think I just found your personal heaven,” Ash said, pointing to their left. There was a small cottage overgrown with vines and spiderwebbed with frost, holding a sign that read, “Snorri Sturluson’s Book Hut.”

Juniper squealed.

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Ash didn't lie. Though there were dozens of paperbacks lost to time's cruel embrace, there were still several surviving copies of literature and inked legend. Juniper snatched the Prose Edda, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, Le Guin's *Tales of Earthsea*, and Martin's *A Clash of Kings*. Juniper considered taking a copy of a novel titled *Harry Potter*, though something about the woman photographed on the back repulsed her enough to put it down.

Darkness took its shift outside, the pair decided to make camp for the night. Though slumber swiftly took Ash, Juniper could not sleep. She usually couldn't. After some hours, Juniper was still awake, and she doubted slumber would reach her tonight. Juniper cursed quietly, and stepped outside to have a smoke. Ash would disapprove, but they weren't conscious to judge her.

Juniper lit the cigarette, and calmed as the wisps of tobacco and nicotine swirled in the night air. *JUNIPER*. There was a ghost here. This one hovered in the stone square, scintillating up and down in purple hues. Religious garments hung over the thing's unsettled frame. Two slabs of meat hung beside it, swaying in the wind.

"Godammit," Juniper said.

AAAAA. You swear to a deity you don't believe in.

"It's a figure of speech."

HMMM. So you say.

"Why are you here?"

FOOL. You know that already. In the last battle, in the last hearth... a bioweapon. A chemical bomb laced with LSD and ergot. SCREAMS. PAIN. You hid. We found you.

"Why are you here now? Why do you look like that?"

REMEMBER. A museum. A painting.

“I hate you.”

HATE. We are but figments, undead concepts brought to life by your broken psyche. You hate us. You hate yourself. DESERVED.

Juniper opened her mouth to retort when a gunshot pierced the conversation, as well as her left shoulder. Juniper cried out instead. Twelve men emerged from the shadows as the ghost dissipated. Their features were vague among the dark and the rising dread. A tall one, a rifle slung over his shoulder, pointed a pistol to Juniper’s forehead.

“Are you alone?”

Shock dragged Juniper to the ground as she fell unconscious.

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Juniper’s eyelids struggled to open under pale fluorescent light. She moved to rub her eyes, only for her hands to stay in place and discomfort to flare in her shoulder. Hemp rope bound her to a chair. Rows of costumes and outfits lined the walls to her sides. A bald man leaned against the back corner of the dressing room. His eyes were black with grease paint, and leather draped over a shirt bearing a simple yellow insignia of a bat. He was young, probably only 19.

He looked up and smiled a shit-eating grin. “Ah, good morning! Sorry about the bullet, but you can only be too careful nowadays. My men did their best to bandage the wound. It didn’t strike anything vital, so you should be fine.”

“Thanks, I feel just peachy knowing you care about my well-being.”

“Oh, don’t be like that! It wasn’t personal, merely a matter of, let’s say, preemptive self defense.”

“I was unarmed.”

“Well, the past’s in the past. Nothing you can do to change it, unlike your present circumstances.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Right, where are my manners? I am Franklin Jedediah Miller of the ultimate holy crusade. You may call me Frank.”

“Hmph. What do you want?”

“Order.”

“Of course. Let me guess: You’re dissatisfied with the current state of society and would like to see a return to a great and glorious past. You seek to bring on that reality by calling yourself a government or church and seizing a monopoly on violence. You intend to conquer and absorb whoever you come across, excising anyone you deem lesser or weak, which, be honest, usually tends to be anyone who isn’t a cis white man.”

“Finished?”

“Yeah, just about.”

Silence held for a moment.

“You’re not entirely wrong. Well, actually, you’re spot on. How in God’s name do you know all that?”

“I’m a historian. You’d be surprised how predictable you types are.”

“So what, you think chaos, anarchy are a better alternative!?”

“Those aren’t synonyms.”

“What?”

“Anarchy draws from ‘An-Archos’. Without rulers. That doesn’t equal chaos. It just means forming a community around mutual aid rather than hierarchy and domination.”

“The hell are you talking about?”

“Why am I lecturing to a fascist child?”

Frank removed a pistol and took it to Juniper’s head.

“Why am I listening to a retarded girl who talks to herself?”

“Because I’m stalling for my partner.”

“Ha! Don’t play coy with me. My men searched your camp. There was no one there.

You’re alone. You’ll be alone when I kill you. And I will personally lead the charge against the last hearth and ensure that God’s kingdom reigns-”

Frank had a hard time finishing his sentence with a novelty sword plunged through his lungs. He fell to the floor, and Ash stood tall. They were covered in blood.”

“Are you okay?” Ash said as she untied Juniper’s restraints.

“I don’t know. Are you?” Juniper said.

“Oh, this isn’t my blood.”

“That’s not what I meant. Are you *okay*?”

A book had fallen from Frank’s jacket. It was a comic. The Dark Knight Returns, by Frank Miller. It was stained red.

Ash struggled to speak, “I- no. No, I’m not. They were teenagers. I killed-”

Juniper hugged Ash.

“It’s okay. You’ll be okay.”

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It had been a week since the couple’s encounter with the crusade. Ice and snow caked the land as far as the eye could see. The two were on their way home. Shades of Frank followed Juniper, uttering voiceless words that echoed in Juniper's head.

Children, Juniper. Ash killed. Walk with a killer. Monster machine.

“Why do we do this?” Ash said.

Why, why. Time passed. End it. No humans.

“I read the comic,” Juniper said.

“Why?”

“I was curious. It was fine. But there’s this moment. An old man named Gordon, he shoots a teenager. He doesn’t even bat an eye. He feels nothing. What I’m saying is, you care. It hurts, but you don’t relish it. It…”

Murderer kills, coward walks.

“It haunts you. It haunts me, but it means you’re human.”

Ash stopped walking for a moment.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

They continued walking.

Worthless wander. Anarchists kill.

“I love you, you know that?” Juniper said.

“I love you, too,” Ash said.

“Tell me about the Evil Dead.”

“What about your nightmares? I don’t want to tell you anything that might-”

“Fuck my nightmares. If it’s good enough to be your namesake, I want to hear about it.”

And so Ash told Juniper a horror story, trailed by ghosts that weren’t there.

