

THE HALLOWEEN CIRCUS

Happy Halloween (1) : 萬聖節馬戲團

Right next to the Dark Forest is the Halloween Circus, where magicians, demons, heroes, and nightmares all come together in a phantasmagorical coterie. When the troupe catches a walking dead man, suspected of having eaten their only chicken pot pie, a dizzying series of paranormal hijinks begin.

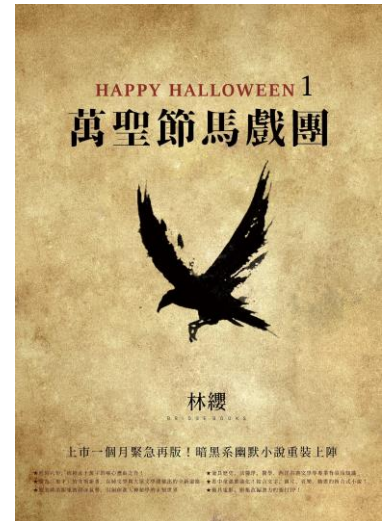
Welcome to the Halloween Circus, a dazzling nightly show of magicians and acrobats, clowns and wild beast tamers situated on the edge of the Dark Forest. If you look behind the lights, however, you find a company of mages, phantoms, and misfits who carry out much darker deeds for those who are willing to pay.

Yet, as formidable as the Halloween Circus troupe might be, they are about to find themselves in uncharted waters. They accept an assignment to locate the diamond ring of a duchess who is having an affair, but the search reveals more than just a ring. They find themselves facing an underground church of zealous, an illegal corpse trade, and dental worms that can eat a whole body. All of these horrors bear some connection to the duchess – but what?

Author L.Y. integrates the best aspect of Chinese and English-language popular fiction to bring us a gripping page-turner filled with phantasmagorical fun.

L. Y. Alloween 林纓

L. Y. Alloween is a multi-talented creator who has experience writing, songwriting, and publishing. As Editor-in-Chief of Bridge Books, L.Y. has overseen every aspect of the *Happy Halloween* series.



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1. The Blacklist

The whole Halloween Circus had gathered.

Our troupe had a commander, a cook, and nine members: a magician, a clown, a pair of twins, a wild animal tamer, a Dead Sea mermaid, an astrologer, a voodoo priest, and a fire-breathing madman.

In general, whenever three or more of our members got together, chaos was sure to follow. Someone was always setting a tent on fire, brandishing a blade at a prehistoric alligator, changing into a pillar of salt, or painting someone else's whole body black and wrapping them in bandages while telling fortunes by tossing sheep's bones.

But today, it was deathly quiet.

In the darkened tent a meeting was in progress, presided over by the commander, with four members in attendance. With so many of us gathered in the tent, there seemed certain to be some outburst. Nobody said a word. It an eerie, ominous silence.

"This is the most serious crisis in the troupe's history," the commander began. His snake-yellow pupils slowly scanned our faces. Then he said, "Whoever did it, give yourself up."

By coincidence, Crystal and I turned our heads at the same time to look at the twins, Rose and Nightingale.

"It wasn't us!" shouted Rose.

"We wouldn't dare," said Nightingale.

There was a weighty silence.

"Cat's Eye?" The commander called my name.

I froze. "Erm... Rose and Nightingale are telling the truth. I saw them near the cave just a few minutes ago."

"Look! We have proof!" shouted Rose.

"Here it is." Nightingale slapped a palm-sized, rainbow-colored dragon's scale down on the table.

"You slew a dragon?"

"No! We just asked him nicely to hand over one of his scales."

"But he wouldn't."

"So we plucked it out."

Another silence.

"Okay. Let me make myself clear." Once again, the commander's words broke the silence. "Who stole the chicken pot pie?"

Silence.

“Everyone here ought to know that when the chef is in the kitchen, he is not to be disturbed — first, because he has to put his full concentration into preparing delicious food, and second, because of the race thing — he always thinks people look down on him. Their main source of nourishment is human blood, so wherever they go people curse them. But for the sake of breaking stereotypes, he went vegetarian.”

The commander silently ran his eyes across our faces, his facial muscles rigid. “And since he stopped eating meat, he’s been a bit touchy. The last time someone stole a piece of cake, he spent two months in a deep depression. Two whole months and all we had to eat was lettuce, stale bread, and moldy cheese. And what went missing this time wasn’t just a piece of cake, but a chicken pot pie — a meat dish he made just for us in spite of being vegetarian. I’m sure everyone sitting here knows how serious this is.”

“This time...” The commander drew a deep breath, clenching his knuckles so tightly they turned white. “We have to be prepared to eat dirt.”

There was total silence. All our faces paled.

“I think you all know what that bag of edible dirt in the corner of the kitchen is for,” the commander went on.

“You mean that stuff that looks like oatmeal cookie crumbs...” said Rose in a weak voice.

“But it stinks like fish. Actually, more like worms.” Nightingale’s face was bloodless.

“Back to the main issue.” The commander looked at us sternly. “Who stole the pie?”

“Housefly, ash, verbenal! Candle, black plague, basement — bird with no head singing in the night, singing in the night!” A strange, out-of-tune warbling began to sound, eerie shadows dancing on the walls of the tent.

“Breath of Fire, not now.” The commander wore a serious look.

“Oh. Just a minute ago, I saw someone beside the mess tent.” Breath of Fire turned and leapt from the tent, the eerie song still streaming from his lips: “Who killed the robin? It was me, it was me! Who sent the bird to heaven? It was me, it was me!”

“Wait!” As one, we pounded the table and rose to our feet.

Breath of Fire froze, and turned to look at us.

“What did you just say?” The commander’s eyes narrowed.

“Who killed the robin?” said Breath of Fire.

“Before that.”

“A minute ago, I saw someone beside the mess tent.”

“Bring them here!”

Then Breath of Fire leapt from the tent and bounded back with a black-haired man.

“So it was you.” The commander’s snake-like yellow eyes turned to slits.

We tied the black-haired man to a wooden rack. His hair was deep, deep black, like his coal-colored eyes. Gray ashes clung to his body, as if he’d been rolling around in a fireplace—no, on closer inspection, it turned out to be his normal skin color. He had pale gray skin, and his fingernails were an extremely unhealthy-looking black.

“You did it!” Rose raised her silver sickle.

“You’re the one who stole Lycopene’s chicken pot pie!” Nightingale pulled out her silver thread, narrowing her eyes with suspicion.

Facing death, the man remained surprisingly calm. He didn’t scream, struggle, or curse, just faintly knitted his brow.

“What were you doing by the mess tent?” The commander seated himself in the gilded goose down chair, and stretched out his legs. He picked up an ebony sandalwood pipe and gently knocked out the old ashes on the edge of the table.

The man with black hair fell silent for a moment, as if deep in thought. Then he said, “I don’t know.”

After emptying out the ash, the commander pinched some tobacco, packed it into the sandalwood pipe and put it in his mouth. He then tapped a flaming index finger on the bowl, dripping liquid flame inside. Multicolored smoke swirled in the air.

The commander narrowed his yellow eyes with pleasure as he blew out a strand of glistening, rainbow-colored smoke. He slowly lifted his gaze to the gray-skinned man. “Did you smell something tasty cooking when you were near the kitchen?”

The man furrowed his brow and said, after a pause, “I don’t know.”

The commander’s hand paused in midair, still gripping the pipe. “Did you see any delicious dishes on the ledge of the mess tent window?”

“Delicious dishes?” asked the man.

“That’s right.” The corners of the commander’s mouth lifted, and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. “A chicken pot pie, for instance.”

“Yes,” said the man.

Nightingale, Rose and I all gasped.

“And then what? It got up and walked away?” The commander’s gaze stayed fixed on the black-haired man.

The man considered this question, his expression unreadable, then replied, “Pies can’t walk.”

The commander was silent. A strand of smoke slithered from the bowl of the pipe.

“I’d say someone ate it, don’t you think?” The commander tried a different tack.

“Yes,” the man replied.

“It was you!” I burst out in astonishment.

The commander’s gleaming yellow eyes watched the black-haired man. No trace of a smile remained on his face.

“And how should we punish the naughty boy who gobbled up the pie?” Rose lifted her silver sickle.

“Cut him into tiny pieces, stuff them in a milk bottle, and pound in five-inch nails.” As she sang, Nightingale pulled out her silver thread.

The atmosphere was extremely tense. Seeing the man hanging in midair, just moments from being sliced to bits, Crystal, who had been bathing in a tub of saltwater the entire time, interjected, “Hold on.”

Everyone froze.

Tail swaying gently, she cast a kind gaze on the black-haired man, and said in a voice as soft as the ocean breeze, “We shouldn’t handle him so crudely.”

Rose and Nightingale lowered their weapons just a little.

“Let us be more thorough.” Leaning on the edge of the tub, Crystal said softly, “Put him a tub of fresh water. Toss some fish inside. Hoist him up, so he can’t drink the water, until he’s practically dying of thirst. Then fill his mouth with salt — lots and lots of it. Then sew his mouth shut. The salt will pickle his head by the time the fish gnaw away his body.”

I should have told you earlier: Crystal is the circus troupe’s mermaid. The difference between her and a regular mermaid is that she is from the Dead Sea.

Everyone thought she was gorgeous, with delicate features, clear blue eyes, and a body that shimmered like the color of a dream. She had a kindly, understanding air about her, enchanting and charming one and all — as long as you didn’t make her mad.

Living an extremely harsh environment with such high salinity that no living creature could survive, the Dead Sea mermaids of antiquity developed unique features, culture, and personalities. You could say they were a warlike race with extraordinary physical strength — fierce aquatic monsters feared and avoided by all.

“Minnows?” Rose knitted her brow.

“Minnows have such tiny mouths, it’ll take them a long time to gnaw him away. Piranhas would be better,” said Nightingale.

“No, this way he’ll die a slow, painful death,” explained the commander.

“Ohhhhh,” Rose assented with mock seriousness.

“What do you mean?” asked Nightingale.

“Imagine the agony of eating a piece of cake as slowly as you can,” explained Rose.

“You’d suffer worse because you’d be champing at the bit to wolf it down?”

“Right.”

“Then the little fish would hurt really bad?” Nightingale shot a worried glance at the commander.

The commander fell silent for a moment, then said, “We’ll go with piranhas. He’ll end up dead anyway.”

A faint trace of a smile remained on Crystal’s face. Pale golden hair swept like ocean waves past her narrowed blue eyes, and her tail wriggled in the salty water. She didn’t object.

“Well, this stranger snuck into the troupe’s encampment and made off with a chicken pot pie. It’s his fault we have to eat dirt every day for two months. He will pay for his crime with an enormous fine, then his life,” pronounced the commander.

“I’m sorry,” said the black-haired man.

“Do you think saying sorry will save your life?” The commander snorted.

"No, that isn't it," said the man.
"Then why are you apologizing?"
"Because you can't kill me."
"Huh?" The commander sneered.
"I'm already dead."
Silence.
"Huh...?"

★

The tent was filled with the odor of disinfectant, medicine, and formaldehyde.

The metal rack was strewn with rubber gloves and surgical tools of all shapes and sizes: scalpels, needles, scrapers, curving blades, pliers, tweezers, bone saws, bone drills, and bone chisels. At the center of the tent was a dissecting table.

"He's dead. Dead as a doornail." The clown put down the scalpel and peeled off his gloves, which were covered with a pale yellow goo.

"Are you sure?" Unconvinced, I walked over to the dissecting table and stared at the body of the black-haired man.

The man swiveled his head to return the look. A Y-shaped incision ran from his chest down to his belly, the skin peeled back and held in place with metal pins to expose the ribs and the blackened organs inside.

"He has no heartbeat, no blood pressure, he isn't breathing, and his body is cold. His organs have stopped functioning, and when we cut his belly open not even a drop of blood came out. How could he be alive?" The clown pulled back the man's eyelids and shone the oil lamp in his face. "The pupils don't respond to light. The corneas are clouded over. He's dead, dead as can be."

"How can he talk if he's dead?!" I shrieked.

"I too am curious to know how his vocal cords and muscles are working." The clown narrowed his eyes and pinched the man's larynx. "Say, 'Ahhhhh.'"

The man said obediently, "Ahhhhh."

"Hmm. Fascinating. The vocal cords are vibrating. The neck muscles are contracting. No sign of rigor mortis. But he has no blood and no circulatory system. How can he be talking and walking around?" The clown furrowed his brow.

"He stole the chicken pot pie!" shouted Rose from beside the table.

"It's his fault we have to eat dirt for two months!" yelled Nightingale.

"Chicken pot pie?" The clown frowned, reached for the metal tray beside him, and looked closely at the grayish-green organs atop it. "His stomach contains 35 grams of half-rotten chewed meat."

"You cut his stomach out!" I shrieked again.

“And his left lung and his liver. Nearly all his organs have turned green. He’s been dead for at least a week.” The clown reached for the tray and squeezed the lung; a pale green foam spurting out with a sound that was something like slapping a wet sponge or a slab of pork.

“Oh my god.” I turned away, unable to bear the sight.

The clown was the troupe’s main performer and its doctor. He had frizzy yellow hair and eyes that were light green like lake water. He always wore a graceful grin that made him look suave and sophisticated. Who knew how many noblewomen and village girls his kingly air had charmed? At least half the women in ever audience had come to see him. I wished they could see him now, their knight in shining armor, squeezing green foam from a dead man’s lung.

“They say you ate a chicken pot pie, but I can’t find it,” said the clown.

“Because it wasn’t me,” said the black-haired man.

“But you just said it was!” shouted Rose.

“That’s right, I heard you!” said Nightingale.

“I saw someone eating it. It wasn’t me,” said the man.

“You saw someone eating it?” said Rose.

“Who?” demanded Nightingale.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Rose repeated.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” asked Nightingale.

“He... he looked like a dead tree. There were mushrooms growing from his neck.”

“Blackie!” Nightingale and Rose cried at once.

“The monster that eats kids?” I froze for a moment, and nearly looked behind me instinctively, but the sound of dissecting shears clanging on the metal plate brought me back to my senses.

“Blackie came back to life!” Rose screamed excitedly.

“Let’s keep him as a pet!” shouted Nightingale.

“No. The *Fomesvitae Vivere* monster is as dead as dead can be. What he saw must have been some sub-branch of the same species,” said the clown.

What? A sub-branch of the same species? Just how many child-eating monsters were there around here? I just knew there was something strange about that grove of withered trees.