Ridley and the Dinner Party

*By Shea Megale*

Dedicated to Rose DuPont

Every bit of your infinite love I have given to Ridley.

I’ll never know how I deserved it.

Love you.

“I really *don’t* want to be here, Molly.” Ridley squirmed in the back of the town car seat, breaking a sweat. Or rather, he would be, were he not a vampire. He played with his collar, trying to pry it from choking his neck (even though it was quite loose) and popped open a button.

 “Ridley, stop! You worked all night to get your bowtie right!” Molly, a black haired, tan skinned little girl with bright hazel eyes, took his hand, shockingly cold in hers, and laughed.

The car sped on through the silky night, passing by gentle houses with lit jack-o-lanterns on their front steps and collages of autumn leaves on their driveways and proceeded into a more centralized area, where an enormous fountain gleamed alight in a perfectly *un*threatening town circle. To Ridley Walter Voltowsky however, the circle might have been the site of a garlic convention.

 “Remind me again why I must go to this?” he said, glancing out the window and running a hand through his short, sooty-black hair. He suddenly wondered why the car seat seemed to be sinking lower and the ceiling dipping closer.

 “Because!” Molly smiled again. “You’ve gotten an invite every year you told me, and now that you’re finally a Count, you should go! At least I’m going with you…” A little tinge of hurt noted in her voice. Ridley sighed.

 “My dear, I wouldn’t be in this car without you, of course…”

 “Mrs. Weatherby? Are we there yet?” Molly asked politely. Mrs. Weatherby, driving, looked gleefully in the rear-view mirror.

 “Oh yes dear, I’m just about to pull up to find a spot! You two are *such* a cute couple – I have to get a picture for your mother!”

 Ridley moaned and buried his face in his hands.

 “She thinks I’m ten.”

 Molly stifled a giggle. “Well…you’re just really short Mr. Ridley. She thinks you just did a great job making yourself look ‘old’ for Halloween, that’s all.”

 “Mm.”

 Mrs. Weatherby found a good spot to pull over and let them out, and the cold October air struck them with a fresh shiver as they ducked out of the vehicle.

“Call me for your ride home!” Mrs. Weatherby cried, and drove off into the rotation of the town circle, all smiles.

The red bricked sidewalk they landed on showed them to a beautiful, contemporary restaurant titled “Arthur’s” in scripty writing. The glass entrance showcased a sea of mahogany tables and red carpet, a chandelier, and tiny lights along the railings. A ramp sloped up to an elevated level where the bar and stage was, and a butler waited at the front door. A small sign was nestled next to a tall potted plant that read:

RENTED

To the gentlemen of Mr. Gregory Smitt and Dr. Waliph Runner

All guests must show invites

“More like *Sir* Gregory,” Ridley commented. Molly was too dazzled to notice. She drifted forward to the beautiful restaurant with a wide smile and Ridley tapped his jacket coat once more to assure he still had his lucky gold pocket-watch in its pocket. His heart eased a bit when he felt it there once more, and he rushed forward to help her open the door.

 The butler had been treating himself to an appetizer pricked on a toothpick and nearly choked when he noticed the new guests, hurrying to greet them.

 He was a tall, heavy, middle aged man with balding hair and rough brown eyes that told them he’d rather be working on Wall Street than opening doors, but never quite got the break. A bored familiarity rested in the look he gave Ridley when he noticed the fangs in his smile and the coat obviously portraying a Count.

 “What a surprise. Let me guess. You’re with the Betty Crocker housewives meeting?”

 “They have that here?” Ridley asked, quite alarmed and looking around for cookies.

 “Lovely.” The butler rolled his eyes. Ridley, realizing it was a joke, set his brow in a hard line, placing a hand on Molly’s shoulder protectively.

 “Might you just show us -?”

 “VOLT!!!”

 He recognized that voice anywhere. Pius, a handsome, kind-faced man with an unusual habit of circling twice on the spot before taking any seat, ran up to them, dressed sharply in a dark brown jacket and a yellow tie. As usual, a touch of humor shined in his eyes as he raised a hand to greet them, panting slightly from his run to the door.

 “I saw you from the bar! Thought I’d come greet you. And my goodness, is that Molly? You’ve grown four inches since I last saw you,” he gave her a warm smile, and she returned it shyly. She and Pius had been through a lot last year, on a particularly full-moonish night.

 Pius slid his eye towards the guard with a more distasteful expression however. Ridley assumed he had been given the same grumpy greeting. “Thank you for letting them in, Chives.”

 “My name is Bill, scruffball.”

 Pius mumbled on the corner of his mouth, “Looks like a Chives to me....SO let’s get you some bloodwine, huh, Rid? I catered the entire selection tonight. ‘Got Blood?’ has never been so prosperous! Our South American vendors *really* outdid themselves this season…” And Pius talked them all the way up to the lounge area, where the stage, bar, and fancy lights were. And that’s when Ridley suddenly felt a 1,000lbs heavier.

There were all his fellow Counts and elite monsters, huddled around the bar and talking smoothly, sipping drinks and looking quite prestigious in their crisp navy-blue jackets or billowing black robes.

 One was dressed in a white lab coat, heavy glasses, and topped with tufty gray hair. The greenish stains on his veiny hands were unsettling, but no so much as the fellow next to him; a shrewd looking man with black goatee and hair, and harsh blue eyes. His arm grasped a visored helmet to his side and a tall lemonade frosted in the other.

 Ridley gulped.

 “Ridley? What’s the matter?”

 “Them,” he groaned. “I went to…to…to high school with them. They all became famous…and, er, I became…well, the laughing stock.”

 “But they invited you!”

 “As a *joke*. A cruel one. They knew I had to be a count to get invited to the Counts’ Halloween party.”

 “And now you are.” She smiled. “May I go check out the band?”

 Ridley looked over to make sure “the band” didn’t have too many tattoos etched on their skin before agreeing.

 Pius had bellowed himself over to the bar and ordered two bloodwines before running into the little conference of elite monsters, proudly gesturing towards Ridley.

 Little Ridley.

 Little. Black haired. Rather shaky.

He twitched.

 The little conference fell deathly silent however, confused.

 One gnarled looking women with exquisite pearls around her neck whispered, “Did he get counted?” and then, suddenly, the man with the helmet roared into laughter.

 “It cannot be!”

 Pius looked confusedly offended.

 The man went over to inspect Ridley. “R.V.?” he said upon approaching him, cocking his head to the left slightly in wonderment. Ridley took a deep breath, gaining his courage.

 “Yes, Gregory. A pleasure to see you again.”

 “I think Sir Gregory will do just fine. When and which idiot counted you?? I thought only a relative vampire could do that.”

 “I’m afraid, unlike you who was *born* into knighthood, I earned my status.”

 “Even more amusing.” The goatee on his chin seemed to curl.

 “Smitt?” the lab-coat wearing man called with a drawlingly superior voice, looking intrigued but impatient. “Bring our guest over here like a good boy.”

 The little group laughed quietly at the jab and Smitt blushed, his brow darkening.

 “Come on, batboy.”

 And he led Ridley to the bar.

 “Happy Halloween, Ridley,” the lab-coat wearing man greeted him, with a slightly amused tone. “A nice surprise to see you here. You remember me, of course? Waliph? Dr. Runner?” he seemed to love reciting his name.

 “Yes, Wal, how’s Fiona?” (his wife). Ridley thought he was doing quite well in the social situation.

 “She’s well, thank you, she’s well…now then, I’m afraid we have a little rivalry to settle here…” he looked bemusedly at Smitt and Ridley.

 “What’s the deal here, doc?” Pius piped in, not wanting to put Ridley in a bad predicament.

 “Oh well I just thought maybe since…you know…the two of them have been none the more keen on one another since…the incident.”

 Oh boy. The incident. Ridley gulped again. He tried to remember which incident it could be. There were so many incidents in his life. Especially in the S.S.S. days (Students of Scary Studies).

 A malicious smile curled on Smitt’s face.

 “You don’t mean the E.E. results?” (Eerie Exams).

 “Precisely.”

 Now this of course, was a sore subject for Ridley. He had done terribly on his E.E.s. But the personal jab here? After a long series of bullying Ridley, Smitt had ironically been assigned as his performance partner. Ridley had cost Smitt his double masters. His parents had to pay for him to take the exam again with another partner, and Ridley, who was already forty-eight at the time of his school years, didn’t have enough saved to pay for his own.

 Smitt had hated him even more ever since.

 “But that was pumpkin carving and potion making! Just silly school stuff!”

 “Exactly, and that is why I’ll assign you two different tasks. I’m so thrilled you made it here, Voltowsky, it would have been a boring night without you…”

Ridley looked over to the band to see that Molly was okay. The band was just three men in their early thirties it seemed, and they loved their new fan. The signer, holding a beautiful electric guitar, even invited her on stage to thump the tambourine.

The bloodwines arrived on the bar by a light-hearted looking ghost but Ridley ignored them completely. The others were getting quite excited at the idea of a few party games.

 “Alright,” said Ridley. “I’m in.”

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 Molly was so excited. Too excited. In fact, she was a little ridiculous.

 They were about to walk into Build-a-Bear.

 The whole party had told the manager of the store they’d be back for more appetizers and cocktails in a bit and in the meanwhile stepped out into the brisk, cool air, the fountain spray chilling the hairs on their arms.

 Ridley and Sir Gregory followed Dr. Runner purposefully, and a trail of anticipating onlookers followed eagerly behind them, having already placed their bets.

 Dr. Runner spun around before they took another step towards the bright yellow shop.

 “Gentlemen. Your first test. As you know, we’re all adults now. This task is much more gruesome then the silly school ones…

 “You will go into Build-a-Bear. You will make a bear. And you will come out.”

 The crowd fell severely silent, like they were about to witness an execution.

 Ridley was stunned. That was the task?

 “Wal, surely you could’ve thought of a more…*humane* task?” Sir Gregory growled. The old doctor just smiled. “Good luck, gentlemen. You may take the little girl, Ridley, I won’t be watching her. On the count of three…one…two…three!”

 Ridley didn’t quite move at first. A bear. Make a bear. Extraordinary.

With one whimsical look towards Molly, they made their way to the door, she skipping with excitement. Smitt wasn’t far behind, but he moved more stiffly.

 The little bell tinkled above the door as Ridley held it open for Molly and entered. The crowd gasped.

 “Welcome to Build-a-Bear! I hope you’re having a pawsome Halloween!” a sweet, disgustingly happy teenage girl greeted them at the door holding a bear dressed as a witch.

 “Uh, hello…” Ridley said awkwardly. “We’re just going to…” but Molly jumped off to the bear buckets to pick out her favorite.

 Smitt came in from behind.

 “Hello! Welcome to –“

 “AAaaaaaAAAAAAAAHhhhhhhhh!”

 He bolted back for the door, shoving on his helmet. But rather than being shocked by the knight’s retreat, the crowd watched through the glass, dumbstruck, as Ridley stood quite comfortably amidst the cuddly, fuzzy bears, frilly pink bows, bright yellow surroundings and repulsively cute music. In any normal occasion, it was a monster’s worst nightmare.

 “I don’t believe it…” Runner mumbled, shaking his head.

 Molly picked a blaringly green frog and the teenage girl, after recovering from the random and quite startling scream from the knight, went over to stuff it for her. Ridley looked out the window and lifted a hand to the other monsters, who flinched at his movement.

 When they rung up the cost, Ridley happily paid the $32.50 to the even sweeter and even more disgustingly happy, brown-skinned young man behind the counter, and tousled Molly’s hair as she hugged her new stuffed frog. Smitt was still shaking by the door outside, attempting to grasp the handle several times but recoiling quickly as if it were white-hot.

 The door tinkled again as Ridley exited the shop. At first there was a solid wall of silence. And then erupted the cheers.

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 Many groans accompanied their walk down the street as monsters exchanged wads of cash, sour faced. Many had lost the bet… In fact, only two had been making a profit – Pius, happily pocketing the money in a, salesman-like fashion, and the silly looking ghost who was behind the bar named Rufus, his bowtie askew with bills being thrown at him (or through him, more like it).

“Don’t think you’re getting away with this, Ridley. I know you drank some potion Pius slipped you in the bar or something,” Smitt accused greasily.

 “What?? I’d never!” Pius overheard him, snapping up from counting his twenties. Ridley just grunted, annoyed.

 “That was impressive, Ridley, very impressive,” Dr. Runner chipped, cutting by them to lead them somewhere else.

 “But this next task is even more horrifying,” and he swung around at a crosslight, an anticipatory, evil glint in his eye. “Behind me. Twenty yards. Don’t speak – you might alarm her.”

 The two of them craned their heads over his shoulder to see, Ridley actually having to step around to get a view.

 There was an old lady of about eighty-two, with horn-rimmed red glasses and a walker by her side. Cars were honking at her to go as the sign read “WALK” but once she took a step on the street, she retreated back on the curb and the drivers didn’t know whether to go or not.

 “You must offer to walk her across the street. NO EXCEPTIONS.”

 The onlookers exchanged horrified glances, but not nearly as many bets were placed this time. Some in the favor of Ridley even.

 “Sir Gregory…you will go first.” Sir Gregory gave a grim nod and a hard look was in his blue eyes. Ridley could’ve sworn he saw sweat along his forehead, however.

 He crossed when the sign allowed him to, and the old lady stood her ground, intrigued by the oncomer. Smitt was actually keeping himself rather composed. But he made a fatal flaw.

 Rather than asking the lady, he simply took her arm.

 The lady went ballistic. She swung her purse to hit him square in the nose, but something even worse than that happed.

 His head popped right off his shoulders.

 “Not again!!”

 It flew in the air and landed with a splash in the fountain. The lady, instead of being terrified, seemed impressed with her strength and watched it as it plopped into the water, yelling curses and moaning. His body tried in vain to go find him. Molly shrieked.

 “He’s *headless*??”

 “Well of course he is!” said Pius, half delighted half perplexed at the series of events. “Or else how would he be considered a Halloween monster?”

 Waliph clicked his tongue. “Shame. I believe that disqualifies him?” And then they all flinched as his body tried to cross the street to the fountain, causing several cars to swerve. “Rufus, you’ll have to, er, clear their memory, will you?”

 “Yes sir, right away sir!” and the ghost floated off joyfully to snap his fingers over the cars, causing the driver to glaze his eyes over happily, and think of their favorite baseball team winning the World Series or marrying their dream celebrity.

 “Ah, humans! I love them. They’re so simple sometimes!” said Rufus as he returned. Smitt was finally able to reattach his head, although most wished he didn’t, as he was fuming and wearing a deathly expression as water dripped down his goatee.

 “See if you can do better!” he barked at Ridley, and Dr. Runner gave them both a baleful eye.

 “Yes, we shall have to see… Go ahead, Ridley, go ahead…”

 And Ridley took a deep breath before crossing the street.

 “What do you want??” The lady seemed on edge after her first incident.

 “Er, well, I want to help you cross the street perhaps.” He put on his best friendly approach.

 Her eyes narrowed. “Does your head come off too?”

 “No, I don’t believe it does.” He gave a shy smile, but this too was a mistake, as she jumped when she saw his fangs.

 “You’re his friend! No! I’m not going anywhere with you.”

 “Ma’am I really don’t mean to –”

 *WHACK!*

She sent him flying into the fountain as well. A deep, plunging splash engulfed him and he huffed out a mad line of bubbles, feeling the rush of the fountain’s current propelling against him. He resurfaced with a suck of air (although unnecessary for the little vampire) and patted away his hair, soaked with it dribbling into his eyes.

 He climbed over the rim, water drizzling down to his shoes and puddled at his feet as he shook his hair. Looking over to the crowd, he gave a shrug, and swallowed a wallow of anger at the more than pleased look on Sir Gregory’s face.

 When he returned to the group, they regarded him interestedly as he approached right up to the enemy knight. Smitt looked at him apprehensively, a cruel smile curling his lips.

 “I wasn’t planning a tie-breaker, boys…” Dr. Runner warned.

 “That won’t be necessary,” said Ridley, and to everyone’s surprise, he offered a hand to shake Sir Gregory’s. The knight looked at it, alarmed, and glanced around at the others, who were watching in silence. Sir Gregory pursed his lips and gave the little vampire an edgy look.

 And then, taking a deep breath, he shook his hand.

 “Alright, R.V. Truce.”

 Dr. Runner was the first to ignite a round of applause.

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Back in the dinner room, bloodwine, bleer (blood-beer), ectoplasm for Rufus, and a Shirley Temple (100% blood free, believe it or not) was served at supper, which consisted of delicious garlic mashed potatoes (which Ridley politely refused), turkey, green beans, pumpkin pie, apple cider, and thick chocolate bars. Dr. Runner, the primary host of the party next to Smitt, rose for a toast.

“Dear friends…another Halloween has come and past. The wonderful night where each of us feels at home, where the humans believe in magic again, and the full moon casts a silver glow on the world. The leaves will soon fall completely and crunch red, orange, yellow, and purple as we step over them.

“But tonight is even more special. It is the reuniting of friends…and the allowing of water to run under the bridge. Forgive my mention of water, boys,” he added and the table laughed merrily.

“To friends, family, love, and a little extra magic when we need it!”

And as tradition, they lifted their glasses and said “Boo!”

When everyone was stuffed silly, all the jokes told, and all the stories boasted and bragged by the wealthy, successful counts, the lights dimmed and the band started playing again. Some monsters went up to dance and others returned to play a game of pumpkin-toss or apple diving. The crystal chandelier above them twinkled lovingly down upon the gathering of friends as the cold wind sighed through the little town square outside.

“My dear? May I have this dance?” Ridley rose and offered his hand to Molly. Molly laughed and hugged him before she took it, and he led her to the dance floor. She stepped over his shiny shoes to follow their pattern as he slow-danced side to side with her, smiling.

“Did you have a fun night?”

He glanced at the green stuffed frog, still seated in the chair next to her seat at the dinner table.

“You’re my best friend, Ridley. I always have fun with you!”

And he almost blushed, smiling again.

 “Hey! Molly! Want to give it a go?” the band’s drummer called over with his British accent, holding up the tambourine again. “Let’s pick up this tempo, eh?”

 She led an excited Ridley over to the stage, and he helped her climb up before she took the tambourine dutifully. The drummer laughed at her determination and then spurred off the band with a pounding thrum on the snare drum. The band went wild, smiling happily and the dancers responded in turn. Ridley danced next to the stage, worries far from his mind. He was surprised to be tapped on his shoulder by Pius, who offered him an instrument. One he was actually marvelous at playing – the saxophone. His eyes lit up and he grabbed it, nodding his thanks, and listening to the rhythm, picking it up on third beat. The guitarist smiled as the little vampire complimented him, reverberating the room with the rich, jazzy brass.

 And Pius jumped up excitedly, remembering that he had brought his own instrument, one that he had bragged all day about being masterful at playing. In fact, he had taken lessons for three years and was proud as a peacock.

 He pulled out the triangle and began playing.