

Spirits in the Dark

By Stephanie White

A slim form sat huddled in the darkness, crouched in a corner as slow, steady breathing echoed in the silence. Metal flashed dimly, followed by the faint sound of tearing flesh and a sharp intake of breath. A rivulet of blood stained the once-clean surface of the dagger, snaking its way to the sharp point—like a jagged fissure cut by someone in the death-throes—slowly dripping to the filth-stained floor.

Plip... plip... plip...

“Aahh...” A soft, drawn-out sound of disappointment came from a throat slightly husky with disuse, easily mistaken for either male or female. Torn cloth rustled as the figure shifted, sat up, and leaned back against the wall, sighing through their nose. “It’s gotten darker. I used to at least be able to watch the blood fall.” The figure raised the injured arm to their mouth, a tongue darting out to lap at the thick liquid. A giggle that could only be feminine bubbled out a few moments later. It started low, gradually growing louder until it sounded almost hysterical, though it ended quickly in a fit of choked coughing.

The girl curled in on herself, her entire body spasming with the coughs, a cold sweat breaking out on her dirty skin. Dust motes flew up around her, aiding in clogging her throat and intensifying her fit of coughing. Her throat dried from gasping for breath, burning from the rapid passing of the cool, dusty air.

The creak of an ancient door drifted through the small room, and a thin beam of pale, sickly yellowish light crept across the floor, partly illuminating the shuddering girl. The clothes she wore could hardly be called such, being nothing more than old, soiled rags that could have once been elegant clothing. Her hair and skin were filthy, and it was impossible to tell whether she was pale or tan, or if her hair was once golden or red or naturally brown.

Footsteps moved quickly across the room, and moments later someone knelt next to the girl and tipped her head back. A hand pressed a cup to her lips to force some water down her throat, most of which she coughed back up. After a few attempts, she finally managed to get some down, gasping as she tried to get more than a mouthful of air.

“Better?” The speaker was a young man, hardly looking much better for wear, but seeming to be wearing the finest clothes and to be recently washed when kneeling next to the girl. Hair of the same shade of murky brown hung to his ears, greasy and split-ended from weeks of neglect. His face was slim, signs of malnourishment evident in the dark circles under his eyes and the ashen color of his skin.

A quiet giggle was the youth’s only answer. The girl shifted, collapsing back against the wall and staring across at him. “You came later than you usually do, Palan,” she said, finally catching her breath.

The young man’s face twitched faintly, the expression gone too fast to tell whether it was annoyance or sympathy, or something else entirely. “My apologies. Are you better now, Princess?”

“Do you really hope for a different answer when you ask me that?” she asked quietly. Her thin hand raised the knife to chapped lips and she slowly licked the dust-flecked blood off the blade, ignoring the grimace on Palan’s face.

“No, I suppose I don’t, Princess.”

The young woman leaned forward with a breathless laugh, stopping when their lips were nearly touching. “Call me Princess again, Palan, and I will kill you.” Her voice was soft with the promise, deadly amusement briefly lighting her eyes and curving her lips.

“Yes, Pr-...Alysa,” he replied, sighing quietly. Such behavior was common to him by now, and he’d given up long ago trying to keep up with her games. One day she demanded to be called Sister; the next, Princess or Majesty; after that, some foreign name she extracted from a dream, always moving in a never-ending cycle. To him though, she would always be Alysa, the person he cherished most in all the world. “May I bandage your arm?”

“No.” She pulled back and shifted until her arm was bathed in the pale light, holding her arm up and looking at it closely. The gash had already stopped bleeding, effectively clotted with dirt. A plethora of faint white lines glinted from beneath the layers of grime, testament to the number of times blade had met flesh.

A flash of stained silver glinted once as she raised the knife and began scraping away the filth, carelessly dragging the blade across her skin, her skill and familiarity with it evident when no new blood seeped forth.

Palan watched in silence, his faintly clouded, pale-green eyes following the flick of the blade and the movement of Alysa’s too-slender fingers. Flecks of dirt and partly dried blood filled the air in a small cloud, fluttering to the ground to join more of their kind. “How deep this time?”

“Not deep enough.” Alysa finished with her work and blew on her arm. The light glinted off her dull blue eyes, making them seem bright in a cruel reminder of how they once were. They still had an inner focus to them though, as she watched the dance of the filth drifting to the floor. The specks of dust and blood resembled dirty snowflakes, falling to an even dirtier earth to be swallowed up and lost among the millions of others. No uniqueness, nothing significant other than being on the top for the time being.

Once, she had wished she could be like one of them, in the short time the light of the sun still reached the earth below. But that time was long enough ago to be nothing more than a faded memory, discarded easily along with the more precious ones.

“Is it ever deep enough?” Palan questioned. Resignation laced his otherwise toneless voice.

Another giggle was the girl’s response before she looked up at him. “Palan,” she bemoaned, a childish pout curving her pale, chapped lips. “Your questions are tiring. Why don’t you just leave me alone like you always do? Like everyone else does,” she mumbled, turning her gaze upon the floor. She placed the tip of her dagger upon it and absently dragged it through the filth. The blade grated against the stone beneath, though she paid the noise no mind. Designs resembling ancient symbols of power formed in its wake.

“Alysa—”

“Sister.”

“Sister,” he amended with a sigh. He finally shifted and settled himself into a sitting position, crossing his legs and resting his hands in his lap. The wooden cup rested stilling once again. “Would you like some more water?”

“Give it to the cats.”

“You know the cats are dead.”

“Yes...The dark claimed them a while ago, didn't it?” she said softly. The blade slid to a rasping halt, fracturing the mottled light shining from the door. A stray beam caught something like bone in a corner of the room before flickering away. “The horses, too?”

“Yesterday.”

Alysa slowly lifted her head, blindly looking across the room into the darkness. Had it been light enough, a decaying, wooden bed would have been visible, the remains of a straw mattress settled atop it. Though it had once been used as a bed for humans, it now housed a few rodents and insects death had yet to claim. Bones littered the floor, a few of the cats with a few of the humans, long ago stripped of any meat by the survivors. She turned to Palan. “And you? Are you the Ghose of Palan?” she asked, giggling quietly as she crawled toward him.

“I am not a ghost,” he replied calmly, not protesting as she settled into his lap. He rested an arm around her waist, seeming unsurprised at the lack of warmth from her body.

“You are,” she accused, reaching for the wooden cup and pouring some water on the dagger. She let it set a moment before using her shirt to rub it till it shone once again. “Izan said you were. He's also the one who told me to kill you if you called me Princess again.”

“Izan died weeks ago. The dark took him, remember?”

“I remember.”

Silence fell between them, broken only by their soft breathing as they sat just on the edge of the light, not completely in the shadows, but not completely out of them. They were most comfortable in the grey; the dark frightened them, filled with sinister whispers that sent chills up their backs, and the light hurt their eyes.

The shadows shifted, roiling as if with a life of their own. Pale, wisp-like fingers groped across the floor, dispersing when they reached the pallid light. They could feel the cold touch on their backs, both of the shivering in response.

“Palan, Alysa whispered, tipping her head back to look up at him. Her eyes were wide, pupils dilated to twice their normal size, outlined with the faintest of vibrant blue. Her body trembled as if cold, though she felt as if she were burning.

“I know,” he replied softly, tightening his grip on her. “We'll make it, I promise. Only a few more days, remember?” His voice was tight and sounded not at all like him. His eyes darted wildly about the room as if seeking out an invisible enemy, which wasn't far from the truth.

“Tell me.” Alysa's voice was a quiet demand, her body shifting as she rested her head against Palan's warm shoulder.

“Go and hide. Do not reveal yourself until you turn sixteen and come into power. That is what they said. Your birthday is in two days. I promise we can make it. We have to.” The last was nothing but a whisper, the soft sound somehow carrying around the room and seeming to echo around them.

Alysa's shoulders shook slightly for a few moments, before the giggles escaped her at an audible level. “Promises mean nothing, dear Palan!” She lifted her head, kissing him soundly on the lips. “Nothing, nothing! Nothing but words, sounds from lying lips!”

The young man's eyes fluttered shut briefly, only partially hiding the flash of sorrow. Alysa's giggling was too much; too different from when it had been full of joy and lit her face up with delight. "Nevertheless, I promised you my heart. Would you so freely throw that away, Princess?" he asked quietly.

Alysa's face contorted in anger her fear forgotten for the moment. Her arm spasmed violently, her wrist flicking of its own accord to drive the glinting blade into Palan's chest. Another silence fell between them, calm and still as they stared at each other without blinking. It was only broken moments later when Palan coughed and blood trickled down his chin.

Palan's lips attempted to twitch into a smile, falling short as he collapsed back against the cold wall. "Live, Alysa. Bring the light back." There was no anger, no confusion in his voice or expression. He had known and accepted it would come to this sooner or later. Even if he had not, it was not his place to object.

"I cannot," she replied solemnly. Her body shuddered once, as if shaking off a spell that had been woven and held in place for far too long. Her eyes cleared a bit and she leaned forward, lightly brushing their lips together. Her tongue darted out to lick away the blood, her slender arms slowly lowering Palan to the floor.

The air stirred and she glanced around. Slivers of pale white slowly became visible around her, writing and growing as they convoluted together and advanced.

They had come. They would always come to claim their own.

Alysa watched silently as Palan's body trembled briefly and then stilled, his clouded eyes finally going completely blank. Slowly, she reached out and closed them; they would no longer need to strain to make out objects more than a few feet away. Her hand slid down, grasping the knife and tugging it free from the body before scrambling back.

Dust clouds rose around her in her haste, her eyes wide, her breathing quickening as the finger-like wisps descended on Palan. Her heart beat quickly, sharp against her ribcage, her blood pounding in her ears. Her fingers twitched around the dagger, clutching it close to her chest, though it would be of no use for defense.

The pale wisps covered Palan's body in a hazy blanket that moved and pulsed rhythmically with a life of its own. There seemed to be no rush, for time hardly mattered except to those who noticed its passing. Every shift in the white, thickening mass seemed to draw out for an eternity, and Alysa felt her heart-rate slowing to match the pace. The cloud-blanket could have settled there for just minutes, or could have truly stayed for the hours it seemed, but eventually it pulled away in the same slow, unhurried manner in which it had descended. The whiteness huddled around Palan's corpse, seeming to be waiting expectantly. Alysa waited as well.

Slowly, a wisp of the same substance began creeping from Palan's mouth, wiggling like a worm emerging from a hole in the ground. It grew until it was as large as a human, as large as Palan, hovering above the corpse and looking at Alysa with Palan's face. Neither of them spoke, would not even if they could have, communicating silently with only their eyes, though there was nothing to be said.

The sallow light seeping in through the door flickered and, when it had returned, the spirits were gone.

The silence seemed suddenly oppressive, choking the air out of Alysa's lungs. "I knew you were a ghost." She lifted the cup and splashed the remaining water over the

dagger, watching the blood slowly diffuse and drip onto the dirt. She stood unsteadily, wiping the blade clean on what was left of her shirt as she stumbled out of the room. The shattered glass from a vase sliced into her bare feet, but she ignored the dull, biting pain.

The only way out was through the glass, the last defense they'd had to keep others away, though they had nothing left to worry about anymore. Many weeks, months perhaps, had passed since there had been need to fear stragglers finding the cottage. Even so, none of them had ever thought to sweep it up.

Reaching the large, splintered wood door, she reached for the rusted handle and tugged. It groaned and creaked in protest, but finally it gave and swung open. Biting cold wind rushed in, circling around her and pulling her outside. She fell to her knees on the barren ground, not a blade of grass anywhere to be seen. Only bones and rocks served as landscape, barely visible with the lack of light.

What had once been a magnificent front yard with thick, dark green, sweet-smelling grass was now little more than a graveyard. The almost-sweet stench of freshly rotting corpses mixed with the fouler smell of older ones and she gagged, choking on her own breath as her vision swam. Even now she vaguely remembered racing their horses from one end of this yard to the other, before the end of the war, before the sun turned cold and dark. Her family sent her here for safety, to hide away until she could inherit the full of her power. Bitterness stung her throat though she swallowed it, long since accustomed to the taste. The power was in her, clawing at her insides, yearning to be free even now, before she had come of the age when it would be her ancestral rite of inheritance.

Her eyes moved upwards, searching the sky that was blacker than onyx. The stars had winked out long ago, the moon nothing more than an ominous, obsidian eye impassively watching over a dying planet.

Everything must come to an end, she thought, shivering as she felt the cold fingers upon her back. Already she could see the contorting white clouds, far off in the distance, but approaching rapidly. So her time had come. There was no one else left.

A strange hissing built up in her throat, pushing its way out through her clenched teeth. There was nothing left for her; she had killed Palan. Tears slid from the corners of her eyes, unbidden and unwanted. Her slender, grime-covered fingers tightened on her dagger. What was the point in bringing back the light when she would be the only one to see it? She closed her eyes, throwing her head back as a loud, utterly inhuman howl boiled up from somewhere inside her. It went on and on, only increasing in intensity and volume without her drawing breath, dying out with a choked, blood-laden gurgle as she slit her own throat.

The mass of spirits reached her and time seemed to slow. Palan stood to the side, a cat winding its lithe body around his legs, arching up against him in a way that begged for attention. She could almost hear the loud purring that would have accompanied it in the flesh. Then her vision went dark.

The dagger fell to the ground with a dull clatter as the white cloud-blanket surrounded her falling body. The emblem of the royal family glinted faintly on the handle—a royal family that had failed for the last time.