

A DATE
-WITH AN-
UNDERTAKER



A Short Story

by

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I hadn't seen him since the night before. And I wasn't happy about it.

But before I get into this, I'm going to tell you about how it all went down.

He, the oversized, bumbly kitten of man with the face of a determined golem, dressed in a professional suit. I, the woman half his size with all her curves arranged appealingly with the help of the tightest damn corset on the planet, and a scarlet cloud of a bustle attached to her ass like she meant business. He and I marched into that little hole-in-the-wall bar like we owned the place. And we stood out. No matter. He approached the counter without hesitation, and I gladly watched him walk away. He is taller than any man I've ever known. He is built like a laborer. His skin is gray, his hands as big as my head.

He isn't exactly human, that Morris.

Thankfully, though, I am.

I peeled my eyes off his ass and twirled around, surveying the room for my target, ready to let my bustle and corset do the sweet talking. On one end of the room, I saw a couple of old gents sitting across from one another at a tiny, square table, with their drinks half emptied. They seemed to be rather disinterestedly chatting about something. At the table two spots over, there was a woman wearing a ridiculous purple hat that was so garish I couldn't even stare at her in disbelief—she was three sheets to the wind, anyway, smiling to herself as she ran a matching purple-gloved finger around the rim of her wine glass. *The trick doesn't work with gloves on, Purple Hat.*

A man at a piano looked like he was preparing to play our evening musical selection, his fingers flitting deftly through loose sheets of paper and tongue poking out thoughtfully. Then there were the three young gentlemen all packed together, dressed to the nines, nervously scanning the room, and every pair of eyes predictably lingered on Purple Hat. They were probably barely of age, looking for some girl to pressure into talking to them about who knows what. And Purple Hat was a better choice than I—the only other woman in the place, and certainly easier to approach in her state.

I turned my attention to the man at the piano. He was the best choice. As soon as we made eye contact, he nodded at me. In the place of his sheet music, he now held a cigarette. He struck a match and puffed, never breaking eye contact. Gentle wisps of smoke floated past his stony face, joining the haze that hung above our heads. It was almost foggy in there. I pasted on my best sultry smile and moved toward him. And it seemed to work. He watched me as I strutted, one hand on my hip and the other swishing the front of my skirts back and forth, giving him just a

peek of the white skin beneath the silky flames. *Whee.* I spied a tumbler of delicious amber liquid sitting on the cabinet. It would be mine in a moment, no question about it. I tossed a quick glance to my kittenish golem.

He was pointing at several curvaceous bottles on the exceedingly-tall shelf behind the bartender. The ancient man was bent over, his spine bent like a question mark. He had white, liverspotted skin, and a bald dome with a half halo of scraggly gray and white hairs poking out like he'd been shuffling his feet on carpet for too long. Even his hooked, red-speckled nose had some hairs hanging loose. He nodded at Morris, his giant head bobbling atop a neck far too tiny and crooked to really support the weight, so he couldn't really look up. He must have had a perfect view of Morris's belt. Then he slowly shuffled around to retrieve his customer's request.

So far, so good.

I approached the piano man and leaned on the cabinet. He spoke first.

“Hello, Miss.”

Oooh. His voice was a baritone, smooth as butter, despite puffing on that stink stick. Usually they have raspy voices when they suck on those things all day.

“Good evening, sir,” I said with a curtsy. I smiled and nodded my head toward the tumbler. “What are you drinking tonight?”

“Oh, a little brandy,” he said, smiling first at the glass, then at me. “Does the lady like brandy?”

“The lady *does*,” I said, my eyes following the movement of his hands as he reached for the delicious, intoxicating prize. As he sat back on the bench again, he swirled the liquid slowly, so that it lapped against the sides of the tumbler in an almost hypnotic manner. He his gaze moved from the booze to my body, and then my eyes. His own were so dark that I couldn't see the irises—usually not a good sign in these parts. Generally it means the person's been poisoned by Soullead, which some people mine in an attempt to use as phylacteries. Soullead grows only in areas with lots of death, naturally, so this guy's been hanging around with Bogeymen regularly.

Despite his preternaturally dark eyes, he had positive features: A dapper mustache that puffed out to his cheeks before curling up into little piggy tails, and matching sideburns to boot; the tight red-and-green plaid shirt he wore was probably louder than any of the other patrons in the room, and his black cowboy hat just really made him the perfect little trade port hole-in-the-wall musician. They're a stereotype known across the realm, but they're cute, and they love to drink. Just my type, even if it was a disguise.

“Well, then,” he said, winking, “The lady will have her brandy.” And he extended his hand, and I accepted, and everything was working so well that I just couldn't help but grin stupidly.

“Thank you,” I cooed, lifting the glass to my lips. “You're ever so kind.”

I took a sip, feeling the hot nectar slide down my throat. That delicious burn. He raised an eyebrow.

“How d'you like it?”

“Wonderful,” I said, swirling the liquid around just like he had done. I put on my best pout. “Could I trouble you for another favor?”

“And that's that?”

I leaned forward, and having the advantage of standing at full height while he was sitting, I could make my point pretty... clearly.

“Would you mind playing me a song? Anything lively will do. A danceable tune.”

“Absolutely, Miss.” He laced his long, lanky fingers together and cracked the knuckles in unison. He raised a bushy eyebrow at me, as if asking for approval first. I offered my most genuine smile. Then he got to playing, and *boy* could he play, just like I'd suspected he could. I felt the vibrations move through me and they wound me up like a little ballerina in a music box. I held up a finger, letting the piano man know I'd return shortly, and went twirling over to the bar, where I rejoined Morris. Now there were two drinks in front of him.

“Well, have you seen it?” I whispered, flinging back the rest of my brandy and shuddering. I turned that awkward moment into a little bobble, a half-assed attempt at a dance.

“Yes,” he replied, looking straight ahead. There was a mirror on top of the counter that sat behind the bar. The shelves framed it, and they extended all the way to the ceiling, with bountiful bottles inhabiting every nook. “It's on the top, to the far right. Red bottle.”

My fingers did a little dance of their own as they took the next tumbler into an embrace. I brought the drink to my lips and flicked my eyes toward the location he mentioned. Sure enough, there it was: A red bottle, shaped like a skull, made of crystal. The inside contained what is tantamount to liquid gold—a rare wine grown from a plum-like fruit in the icy mountains surrounding this tiny town we're in. It's miraculous. It's delicious. And it's worth *so much money*.

We stood in silence for a moment while I weighed my options.

“Okay, give them the signal. The piano man's a Ledder. I'm keeping an eye on him.” I gave the room one more quick look. “And the three boys over there, the ones eyeballing Purple Hat?”

Morris's eyes follow the quick jerk of my head to the boys. He looks at me, eyebrows arched.

“They're *definitely* from money. Get their watches, their wallets, whatever you can.”

He didn't say anything, but I know he heard me. I pasted the smile back on my face and wiggled my way back over to the piano man. Out of the corners of my eyes, Morris's shape disappeared through the side doors. I placed my tumbler on the cabinet and pouted.

“Something the matter, Miss?” the piano man called over the music.

“I actually had a great idea. Do you think we could play a duet?”

He looked pleased.

“Sure.” It didn't take long for him to wrap up the tune. As soon as the music faded away, I heard the tittering of the few patrons. No applause. No matter.

I took a seat by him and whispered in his ear. It was at this point that I placed my hand on his back, sticking a device of my own to his plaid shirt. A neutralizer—a round, onyx-jeweled trinket with gold filigree trim. You see, Ledders are unpredictable, dark things. They're like really weak annoying minor demons best, and screeching banshees who can really suck the fun out of your night at worst. The neutralizers also tend to work on those placed under charms or who are experiencing extreme emotions—grief, anxiety, and the like. I use the thing on myself sometimes.

We played the jaunty duet of my choosing, and he seemed to increasingly struggle to keep pace. Well, I suppose I was doping him up. It was a great time... for me anyway. Just as we reached the finale, I saw the shadows by the door move.

One of the old men promptly jumped up, screaming.

“They're here! The shadow men! They're here!” he wrung his hands together, his cloudy blue eyes darting to every corner in the room, trying to eke out the intruders.

“Sit down, ya doofus, there ain't no shadow men,” his friend drawled in reply.

It took as long as this exchange for the three rich boys to have their wallets and watches swiped by the shadow man. They didn't even know it happened. The only disturbance was the geezer pointing around the room, trying to pin down the interloper, but he couldn't.

I could see now that the piano man wanted to move. He reached for his belt buckle.

Ahh, so that's where he kept it. Very clever.

I jumped up, sending sheet music flying through the air like leaves in an autumn wind, and shoved him against the wall so hard his head bounced. I wrapped one hand around his throat tightly enough that I could feel the pulse of his vein against my palm. He reached out to grab me, but I drew the dagger from its holster on my leg and held it to his chest. Purple Hat screamed and tried to run, but she just fell out of her chair with a loud *thud*.

“The Soullead,” I hissed. “I know what you are. Give it to me or I'll stab you, right here in front of everyone. And they can watch you bleed out 'cuz of some dumb, drunk woman. Would you

like that, *Ledder?*” I emphasized the word. I wanted him to know I was serious.

“You bitch,” he wheezed from beneath the weight of my fist. His fingers traveled downward and fumbled with his belt, slipping on the shiny stone as he tried to get a grip on the belt's hook. I rolled my eyes.

“I don't have all night--”

But just then he managed to get it undone with a hard jerk of his shoulder. He raised his eyebrows at me, as if to say, *hah, showed you*, and slowly, deliberately, drew the length of the belt through the loops.

I removed my fist from his throat and snatched the belt away from him, not caring a whit about his stupid show he was trying to put on, and inspected the Soullead. It had been made into a perfect buckle ornament. Suited the cowboy look he had going on.

I opened my mouth to say something witty when I felt the arm wrap around my neck. Piano man grabbed the dagger from me and snatched the belt back, almost too fast to fathom.

“The HELL--” I tried to scream, but it wasn't working. My body was being dragged back, back across the room toward the door. I dug my heels into the floor and they made a hideous scraping, screeching sound as I went. I had to do something. I looked around: The two old men were staring at me now, mouths open in giant, gawping *O* shapes, and Purple Hat had sat up on the floor, wobbling, holding herself steady with her hands. But the ancient bartender was gone.

And just as suddenly as I'd been captured, I was let go. I fell to the ground, landing on my ass with a great *oomph*. Immediately, I looked up to see who had gotten a hold of me, rubbing my sore neck, expecting to see some bouncer that had been hidden in the back somewhere.

It was one of the rich boys. He had the same dark eyes as the piano man. But if he was here, where were the other two? I scanned the room again, and I saw them: Crouching down, heads covered, hiding between the end of the bar and the wall. Cowards. But at least they were out of the way. Then the other *Ledder*, the piano man, walked toward us, I wracked my brain trying to figure out something to save myself.

A loud crack of thunder broke through the silence, and the piano man's head wrenched back, a spray of red coating the wall behind him. He fell, and my dagger and the belt clattered to the ground. The *Ledder* next to me whipped around to the source of the noise, but he too got a prompt bullet through the head. Blood sprayed across the floor next to me. I rolled to the side, and there, behind me, was our *Verna*, our weaponsmaster, with her two giant pistols. Next, *Morris* barreled back through the door, overtook the room in about three strides, and leaped onto the counter. He grabbed the skull bottle from the top shelf with ease.

“Let's go!” he yelled, swinging back down from counter like a damn monkey, and I scrambled to my feet to retrieve my belongings. I nearly slipped in the boy *Ledder*'s blood as I

hurried over to the dead piano man. I lifted his heavy, leaden body to pluck my useless neutralizer from his back. It hadn't failed me before, but perhaps there were just too many of them feeding off one another—too many in one small space. I grabbed the belt and my dagger, and was almost ready to go when I saw the little bald head poking above the counter, checking to see if the coast was clear. He was trembling, his beady eyes darting around. Well, we trashed his bar. And he certainly wasn't one of the bad 'uns.

I looked to the door, where everyone had left now—all but Morris. He watched me expectantly. I looked back to the little man, then shook my head.

Sorry, I mouthed to Morris.

I went over to the geezer and held out my hand.

“I didn't mean to hurt you,” I said. He raised his eyes as far as he could, still hunched down and unable to lift his head all the way. He held his hands up defensively, not accepting my offer for assistance.

“You are stealing my things and killing my patrons! Of course it hurts me! It hurts *business!* And what am I going to do about these *bodies?*”

I bit my lip and withdrew my hand. Yes, he was right. Dammit. I'm too soft-hearted for this sometimes. I know what it's like to have nothing, and somehow, someone or something finds a way to take even *that* away from you. So I reached into my purse, which I kept tied to my waist—just a tiny little pouch—and withdrew a few coins. I placed them on the counter.

“This should cover the damages,” I said. “And it should be more than enough to replace that bottle we took.”

I felt a strong hand slide across my back and clasp me around my waist. I looked up, and there was Morris, looking back down at me, holding the bottle in his other hand. My skin stippled in excitement. He never touched me. I knew I was blushing, so I looked away.

“Come on, Red.” He tugged at me, and I went, leaving the coins behind.

We made our way back to the door, and he held me the whole time. I smiled. No bother about the dead bodies. That came with the territory. But he rarely touched, rarely smiled, and I wasn't about to waste this moment.

My eyes stung. I knew they were puffy from crying, but I didn't care. I was so angry. I'd sent them all away, told them to have the night off.

Squelch and Verna went to go do... whatever it is those two do, they're very odd and withdrawn, but I suppose that's why one steals things for us—Squelch, aka “the shadow man”, as it were—and the other, his twin sister Verna, makes the craziest of weapons with the happiest of expressions on her face.

Annelise was sleeping in the opposite end of the ship, thankfully, because even though she was technically our hostage, she really wasn't smart enough to go try to escape. She was a worthless hostage, actually. No one would pay to take her back because she was so bland. But we all knew that she had the key we'd been looking for all along—why would such a boring, schlumpy girl have the key to one of the most notorious prisons in the territory? I didn't know. She's got secrets, I suppose. We all do.

The Baron was the hardest to get rid of. God, he's a hell of a pilot, but he's surly and drunk all the time. I don't know how he flies when he's that intoxicated, but he's so good at it that I'm afraid of him flying sober. I figured that he was probably off buying attention, which was fine by me, because as long as he got his giggles regularly he did his job and let me be.

Sledgehammer was just a giddy little kid at heart, despite actually being a dork in his thirties, and the second I told him he could have the night off, he went to go stick his face in some food. And I knew that when he returned the next morning, he would proceed to tell us how great the food was and how he would make it for us. Bless his heart, the man can't cook worth a burned, crispy little turd. But was the best engineer I'd ever known, and he had saved our asses from exploding or otherwise crashing about fifty times now. I've lost track.

And so there I was, the captain, alone in my quarters on my giant, beautiful airship *Bacchante*. I had everything set: Weapons had been hidden away to create a romantic atmosphere to replace the intimidating space I usually kept; all of the empty bottles and the trinkets and dirty underwear had been sufficiently camouflaged for the occasion. I was at my table, which was set for two—and it was a glorious table, one that was free of Sledgehammer's cooking. I had really, really good local bird on our plates—never tried it, but it was supposed to be an aphrodisiac. Romantic, you know. It had little green sprigs around it. It was prepared with oils *I'd never even heard of*, dammit.

I had our wine, the stuff we worked so hard to get. I thought he'd appreciate the skull bottle. Not just for its value, but for its symbolism. His own little *memento mori* in the absence of a proper autopsy table, which I knew he missed, despite never saying that he actually longed for his old job.

And he wasn't here.

He was supposed to be here. I had told him last night that I would like to see him tonight at twenty one. In my office. What else is that supposed to mean? Not many ways you can misunderstand that. And the way he put his arm around me? Could I have been the one who was

mistaken?

So there I sat, and it had already been an hour. The candles were running low. The bird had gotten cold. The wine looked good though—red and ruby-like, glimmering like a jewel in the candlelight, beckoning to me with each flicker of the flame.

So I took my glass and threw back a couple of gulps, killing off about half the juice in one go.

Why did do this to me? And this wasn't even the first time he'd done it.

He wasn't exactly normal, Undertaker. Morris. My kitten-golem. He was an escapee from Syfaxis, where his people had been enslaved, murdered, sold on auctions for the last hundred years. I couldn't imagine being born into that. Living that awful life, then dying. Not ever knowing what this great world has to offer.

We were pirates, we traveled by air, we did not always treat others kindly. Especially not those who tried to stop us, as pirates are wont to do. But on my ship, when we took hostages, even if they were boring and schlumpy, we didn't enslave them or treat them like animals.

But *his* people weren't really human—and so it was easy for the new settlers to consider them subhuman. His people are tall, strong, muscular—even the women—and they have gray skin, pointed ears, fangs, claws. Not animal claws. Just huge hands with nails that are harder than a human's, so if they're not trimmed and filed, they're actually pretty effective weapons. That's why so many of them have had their last knuckles removed, like people do to cats. Their teeth are filed, like removing the vicious bite of a fighting dog.

And he escaped all of that, thankfully. He still had all his teeth and knuckles, and he was *free*, but he was still “branded” for life, closed off and distrustful of others because he didn't know anything other than deception and violence. It was frustrating, especially when you meant well and just wanted to show kindness.

I threw back the rest of the glass and stared at the tiny ring of red left in the bottom. And I wanted more. I wanted to drown every last little feeling from my body, because if I blew up at him in the morning, they'd all know.

And they couldn't know.

He didn't know. He was as dumb as a doornail when it came to this.

But I'd hoped... I'd hoped tonight would be the night I could finally tell him. Show him how much I appreciate him, his help, his presence. I like him, I really do. And I'm not the kind of lady to crush. There's just something about him...

I could feel my cheeks flushing. But that didn't stop me from getting that glass I wanted. I briefly chided myself for not taking the time to taste this expensive indulgence, but I didn't care. It

did taste good going down—sweet, fruity, just a little bit woody and tangy. What am I saying? I'm no connoisseur.

It tasted like wine.

I swallowed the rest and felt a warm wave spread across my skin. I laughed.

I'm a fool.

I always told myself I didn't want to be one of those women who tried to change a man. He would be however he was meant to be; I'd be the same. If we meshed, that was great, and if not, no sweat.

But this one was different. I had found him first; I had had the upper hand. And then somewhere, somehow, something changed. I began to feel shy, klutzy, like a little girl. He rose up taller, his shadow grew longer, his presence swallowed mine. No one ever makes me feel that way. No one but him, and I frequently face murderers, thieves, and rapists in my line of work.

Three knocks jarred me from my thoughts. The noise startled me so badly that I sent my glass rolling across the table. I managed to catch it and set it upright again before quickly smoothing down my hair, adjusting the boobs, and making sure everything was in its rightful place.

“Come in!” I called, trying not to let my excitement be too obvious. My heart was trying to escape from my chest, I think.

The door opened a crack, and I smiled, sitting up straight and squaring my shoulders. *Ready.*

The long, black curls of hair appeared first, followed by a half-undone button-up shirt and an untied red cravat, and then his whole torso.

The Baron.

My shoulders sank and I let out a sigh. He stepped halfway in before noticing the setup, then shrank back a bit.

“What's going on?” he asked, knitting his bushy black brows in a disapproving manner and sticking his lip out in a pout. “Expecting someone?”

“No. Want some cold bird?” I said as I meekly gestured at the meal. He waited, but I offered no further explanation.

Finally, he grinned. And it was a drunk grin. Well, what did I expect?

“You're a cold bird.”

Ha, ha. I rolled my eyes and poured myself another glass as he eagerly took a seat across

from me. He dug right in, his eyes practically bulging out of his big, round head at the sight of all the delicacies.

I didn't offer up any conversation. I just lifted the glass to my lips and swallowed. *Mmm.*

“That the stuff we got the other night?” he asked, putting down his knife suddenly and reaching for the bottle. My hands flew out to stop him, but I'm shorter than he is and he got it first. Not that it would do me any good to stop him—anyone would remember a red crystal skull bottle. He raised an eyebrow and looked at me. “I didn't know we did all that so you could drink it.”

I pointed at the full glass across from me.

“That's all yours. I'm *sharing.*”

“But I *meant* that--”

“You guys got your cut of the rest of the stuff. Just let me have this one thing.” The words were coming out a bit slurred and aggressive despite my best efforts.

The Baron was not a man who possessed much tact. He says what he thinks, all else be damned. But for once, he shut up, pressing his lips into a line and casting his eyes downward, and I was both relieved and nervous. Relieved because I didn't want to elaborate.

Nervous because he *knew.*

But we weren't going to say anything. Instead, he brightened and smiled at me. Then he lifted the glass to propose a toast.

“To the best captain I've ever known,” he said, and waited expectantly. I picked up my glass, and a small smile found its way to my lips. I nodded at him. We drank together. I plucked up my fork and picked at the bird, and wasn't too bad despite the coldness.

The Baron and I didn't talk any more after that. He'd said all he needed to—and wanted to—and we were okay in the silence. We'd known one another long enough. Tonight, he was good company. Welcome company.

It's all right. Everything was lovely just the way it was.

Some other time I'd get Morris to sit with me. Maybe.