

A Light in the Tower

Von abgemeldet

Kapitel 2:

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Chapter Two

Sally's heart raced as she sneaked up the ramp that led to the library. She wasn't allowed anywhere near that place since that fateful day, two months ago. Sally still could hear his voice yelling that she was too stupid to learn anything beyond domestic stuff and that he'd no longer waste his time teaching her. It still hurt, too. The ragdoll never could understand what she had done wrong. She had been such a dedicated pupil, always hungry to learn more and make him proud, but that just seemed to make him angry, instead.

Luckily, the door wasn't closed shut. Very carefully, she pushed it just enough to open a crack and peep in. A scent of mold and humidity assaulted her nose, despite her lack of nostrils, and she pinched it to stop a fatal sneeze. She peered in again. The place was just as she remembered it: the same dry, giant bat hanging from the ceiling with its wings open wide; the same yellow skull and the same old stuffed animals resting randomly over the shelves; the same

dusty, tottering piles of books resting on the floor here and there, too. And, a few meters away, the same table and chairs, where she used to sit with her master for her lessons of arithmetic, geography and many other subjects. It was precisely there that the two men were now. Her eyes widened.

There, standing beside her creator, was what looked like a huge, long, ten foot tall black whip with a white ball at the top. Sally never had seen anything or anyone so tall, even considering that the only people she saw closely were Igor and the master. The Pumpkin King reached out to point at something, and she gaped, noticing how long and thin his arms were, almost as long as his legs. Looking more carefully, she saw that he actually didn't look like a whip, but more like a sort of strange spider with four legs. Six, if she counted as legs the two ragged things hanging from his backside, probably his tails, and that fanned out at the slightest movement of air.

That was the Pumpkin King? Sally pouted in disappointment. He looked weird, alright, but nothing like the horrible apparitions she had imagined. No black cloak, no hook, nothing scary at all. Thinking hard, she remembered now having once or twice

glimpsed a sort of tall black scarecrow running through the crowd. Well, maybe it didn't look that scary from that distance. Perhaps if she moved closer...

The thought made Sally bit her lip nervously in frustration. She had no way aside from entering the library, and that gave her the creeps. Maybe it was better to give up and run back to her room before she was caught. She was taking risk enough standing out here...

Just that moment Jack asked the doctor something. At the sound of his voice, a rush of courage invaded her body: she took a deep breath, opened the crack a little wider and squeezed through it.

That was probably her lucky day, because at that precise moment the doctor opened a big tome on the table and the two men bent over it. That's why neither of them noticed the ragdoll tip-toeing and sneaking from shelf to shelf until she slipped behind the closest one at their backs. Sally leaned her back on the shelf for a moment as she waited for her heart to slow down. Carefully, she stretched her neck out of her refuge and peered.

Hmm. Muuuch better.

The Pumpkin King kept his back turned to her, so she couldn't see his face, only the back of his skull, round and very white like a full moon. She noticed that his outfit wasn't entirely black. Instead, it had thin white stripes all over, realcing his slim figure. She also noticed that the tails, which she had thought were part of him, were actually a part of his coat.

He looked nice, which somehow fit his voice. However, according to what she had been told, the Pumpkin King wasn't supposed to look nice. Why had the master said the King was horrible? Well, maybe he had a horrible face, she thought with a weak smile; still, that sounded forced. Or maybe... maybe the master was ashamed of telling her the truth. That would explain why he didn't want her to see him. He had built her the image of a splendid King, and now he was afraid that she become upset with him if she discovered the truth. Maybe it was that.

However, she couldn't help feeling a little upset at the thought that he had lied to her. Since Sally had learned to talk she had been told over and over never to lie, so she naturally expected that he never lied, either.

"This is my best tome about herbs, Jack," said the Dr. Finkelstein "If you don't find what you need in it, you won't find it anywhere else. But of course, you're free to browse around if you like."

"Thanks, Doctor."

"You're welcome. Now, if you don't mind, I must go back to my lab now and check on Igor. I don't like leaving him alone for too long. He ate my spare livers last time."

Jack nodded absently and the old man turned to go. Sally quickly ducked behind the

books as the wheelchair passed by.

"Speak of Igor," Jack said "I forgot to ask you how your most recent creation is doing. "

Sally felt her heart jump. Jack had asked about her!

"Still refusing to leave?" he added.

Sally's eyes widened in shock. What?

The wheelchair silenced, like if the Dr. had stopped dead in his tracks. There was a heavy, tense silence. Sally could almost feel her master hesitating, choosing his words carefully.

"I wish I could say no, Jack," he finally said, "but I have to be honest. Sally is a very peculiar girl. From the moment she opened her eyes, she has been terribly scared of everything. Even of me, the man who built her!" he continued in a very depressed tone. "You should have seen her a few months ago -- even to convince her to leave her room was a battle. She's doing a little better now, but she won't listen to a word about the things out there. She wouldn't have any use for Halloween anyway. I tried in vain, but Sally has shown herself completely incapable of learning anything."

"I'm sorry about that." Jack said.

"We've got to be patient, that's all. It's very tough. I don't know if I can stand it much longer."

Jack said a few more polite words of comfort and the doctor finally left, but Sally no longer paid attention. She squeezed out of her small hiding place and sat with her back against the shelf. She felt as though a huge rock had crashed down on her.

Not only he had lied to her, but to Jack, too. To the important, the respectable Pumpkin King. He had made him think that she was afraid of the world out there and that she was unable to do anything. Well, it was okay that he had called her good for nothing in private, but to tell someone that... he made her look even stupider than Igor!

But why? Why he was doing that?

The answer came immediately, in the form of that old thought nagging in the corner of her mind: the master didn't want to let her go. He had said all those things to keep her indoors with him. Sally shook her head feverishly. No, it couldn't be. He couldn't be so cruel... He did that because he was concerned with her safety... because the world out there was dangerous...but the thoughts no longer convinced her. What if that was a lie, too? That the world wasn't dangerous, nor people cruel?

But that meant that everything she had learned wasn't true!

How could he have done such an awful thing to her?

If she couldn't trust in her own creator, who could she trust?

Confused and devastated, she embraced her legs tight and lowered her head in a fetal position, wishing to disappear.

As soon as Jack had found himself all alone (at least he thought it so), he let out a relieved sigh, then stretched his long limbs with a long, booming yawn. Actually, the doctor was right: all the information he needed he could have found in his own library. But this research gave Jack a pretext to spend a few free hours in a place where he couldn't be disturbed. His subjects simply didn't understand that even the Pumpkin King needed to relax occasionally. Wherever he went, there was always someone asking him for help, flattering him or (if it was a female) hitting on him. The Mayor was the worst. Every day the rotund politician came to Jack's house and pulled his doorbell over and over: if the reluctant King wouldn't come running at his call the Mayor immediately started to get anxious, because even the simple idea of thinking by himself caused the little conical man to panic. He had made a point of coming after Jack even in his favorite refuge, the spiral hill of the graveyard. Complaining only caused hurt looks and teary eyes that immediately made Jack feel bad and apologize; then the circle started again. The laboratory wasn't a pleasant place and the doctor was far from a congenial host, but at least in there no one would come after him: excepting Jack himself, all Halloweeners avoided the disagreeable scientist's lab, fearing the possibility of being used for spare parts in an experiment. Even the Mayor had been there only once or twice in his long career, out of obligation, and Jack didn't believe that he would come by now. He sighed again. Moments like this he felt like a prisoner in his own kingdom... he flipped absently through the yellowing old pages as he yawned again, his eyelids suddenly starting to weigh down.

Sally brushed one eye and sniffed, not caring if she had been heard or not. She no longer wanted to remain there or to see the Pumpkin King. All she wanted was to leave immediately and go away from that place forever, jump down from the tower, no matter what, so she'd never see the master again. She took the chance and peered out. Jack was still there, his back turned to her, but his head was leaning backwards in a strange position. Sally startled a little and pulled herself back: maybe he had heard her! Then she heard a sound that gave no doubt.

It was a snort.

She knew the sound well because the master snored a lot whenever he ended up sleeping on his table from working too much. Although the soft buzzing produced by the tall, slender man in black was far from the rasping sound the master produced, it gave her no doubts that he was sleeping.

A little surprised at this, Sally took the chance to sneak out of the shelf right to the door.

Then, almost half-way there, she froze. Her head tilted back and towards the sleeping skeleton-man. Just one look at his face... No, no, she had done enough. She wasn't even supposed to be there. Clenching her teeth, she forced herself to turn and sneak

to the door...but as though they had a will of their own, her feet took her toward the Pumpkin King.

Guiltily and shyly, Sally leaned over him, her heart racing, and per her hound over her mouth so as not to make a sound. She peered at his face, and couldn't suppress a gasp of astonishment. He was beautiful. Sally couldn't tell what exactly made him so attractive, but he was beautiful, indeed, beyond words. And he didn't look like a skeleton at all. Sally had seen lots of skulls and skeletons, in books or into the master's lab, but never something like him. Maybe the master had lied again and he wasn't a skeleton, despite his name. Then her eye fell over one of his hands, hanging loosely beside the chair. She took it in her hand and examined it. Yes, it was really a skeletal hand, but how huge it was! Her two small hands could fit loosely into his... the thought made her blush and she carefully put the hand down, taking care to not wake him up. She turned her attention to his clothes. He had a strange thing strapped to his neck, like a sort of bat. Sally reached out to touch the wings.

But what fascinated her most was the mouth. Although there were no mirrors in the whole house, Sally knew how she looked, by seeing herself in the polished surfaces of the devices of the master's lab when he fixed her up. Many times he had said she was so plain that nobody would bother himself looking at her, and Sally somehow agreed. Her eyes were too big, her nose and chin too little, and the stitched lash running through her mouth and cutting her face through one side to another didn't help anything. But now, she could see that Jack's face wasn't much different from hers. He also had a small nose (well, almost) and chin. Okay, she couldn't be sure if his eyes were as big as hers, but they probably were. And the mouth... Sally looked fascinated at the long line of teeth that almost cut the man's skull in two. She touched the lash in her face and reached out to take his...

Jack's eyes opened.

"Whoaah!" he yelled as he sat up straight like a spring! Sally let out a yelp and turned to run away. However, in her panic she didn't see where she was going and ran into a tall, tottering pile of books.

The sound as she stumbled and crashed down helped Jack to wake up. At first, in his confused mind, he thought that the vision of a red-haired woman yelling at him and disappearing was part of his nightmare. But, those sounds were real. He stood up and looked around.

The woman lay sprawled on the books and didn't make any efforts to stand up and run. Instead, she was crying. Carefully, Jack came towards and bent over her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, worried. "I'm sorry, didn't want to scare you. "

"Please, don't hurt me." she whimpered "I know I shouldn't be here, I just wanted to know how you were..."

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