

2014 FENCON YOUNG ADULT SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNER

A Grim Adventure by Rachel Levy

I had died twice before. This third death proved to be slightly more comfortable, as if my previous familiarity with the situation garnered me such privilege. But I remembered those first two deaths, and doubted this third would end differently. Before long, I was proven correct as the warm place of death spat me, naked and shivering, into the cold of life.

My first resurrection had stranded me in a small Russian village. The second had left me in Uganda. Hopefully, this third resurrection would be more accurate.

Sticky lids peeled back from dry-grit eyes. Wiggling each individual toe and finger was a delight, the novelty of sensation a wonder. For a minute, I fought to coordinate my limbs. My muscles were jelly, and sitting up was a battle. When I finally managed it, the details of my surroundings began to register.

It seemed to be a clothing store, closed down. The lights were off, thick shutters pulled down over the storefront, soft light filtering through the slats. Around me, naked mannequins stood with hands on hips, necks thrust out in aggressive posing. The shelving was barren. Luckily, boxes of packed up merchandise remained, the flimsiness of the cardboard fortuitous. Perusing a box with the informative label “Men’s Everyday”, I came up with some boxers, jeans, a shirt, socks, shoes...

The jeans were a tad too loose, the shirt simultaneously too tight and too long in the sleeves, and the shoes a size too big. Still, if it meant I wasn’t naked anymore, I would take it. Some clever sock placement took care of the shoe issue, and the shirt had a profile grim reaper design on it. Fitting in that aspect at least.

Some more inspection of the dismal room revealed a door leading to a narrow service corridor. I decided to follow it, there was nowhere else to go, and came to another door. Edging it open, I was immediately assaulted by a barrage of smells, sounds, and *life*. People were everywhere. A closed clothing store in a mall.

With my magic, I could easily reach out, pilfer a little energy from them. It wouldn't be missed. I didn't. There was no doubt in my mind that warlocks, mages, and sages would be on the lookout for my distinct magical signature. I was in no shape for a confrontation, magical or otherwise. Instead, I fully emerged from the service corridor, and rested my body against a section of unused wall space.

I had no form of identification, no money, and no clue where I was. An ATM and a little blood magic would solve the issue of money, but nothing could currently be done about the ID. Leaving me the singular option of figuring out my location, and going from there. Pushing off of the wall, I began working my way through the throng of shoppers. Did salmon feel this way heading upstream? Seemed similar enough. My efforts were eventually rewarded by the sight of a set of heavy double doors.

Sunlight blinded me the moment I moved the double doors, and heavy, humid air engulfed me as I stepped outside. After several minutes of furious blinking, I could look around again. I was surprised to find I recognized my location. I was in the middle of my old hometown, not that "town" was applicable anymore. Over a decade had passed since I first left. The place had grown. Exploded like some sort of societal tumor. Belle Nue, Louisiana had become a bustling city.

When I was ten years old, I had fled the area. When people are constantly trying to kill you, anonymity is important. You can't be a wallflower in a town where the only hobby is knowing everyone else. Despite the growth of the area, I still felt conspicuous. The only good thing about being here was

everyone spoke English. Plus, the items to acquire a travel spell could be easily obtained. Two good things, then.

Walking away from the main mall complex, I had a specific gas station in mind. The convenience store attached to it would have everything I needed. Once I gathered the ingredients required for the spell and got home to the Otherside, I'd have time to regroup. I had a stash of fake IDs (from licenses to passports), bundles of currency, and a handy "go-bag" back at my place. It was a contingency plan I'd developed after my first death and resurrection.

I didn't yet have a clear concept of time. When you're dead, the clock stops, and readjusting is a process. I knew I'd been walking at least a few hours, because the sun had finally begun to set. I'd made good time though, already standing on the grassy median surrounding the property. I jogged over to the ATM outside of the store, and prepared myself. This magic was small enough to avoid detection. A good thing, because some things, no matter how much time passes, remain the same. Money, the desire and need for it, is simply one of those things.

Looking at the machine, I bit into one of my thumbs sharply, hard enough to draw blood. Pressing my thumb to the screen, I smeared my blood across it, beginning to chant. Seconds later, the machine was spitting out a stack of bills. The blood on the screen had dissipated, and I had a fresh wad of twenties. One problem down.

Folding the bills, I stuffed them down the front pocket of my borrowed jeans, and strolled inside. It was tough work, projecting an air of confidence instead of acting like a suspicious guy who had recently returned from the dead and had no ID to speak of. Making my way through the various aisles, I grabbed a bottle of water, five pack of gum, one fat brush, and three protein bars. At the register, I asked for some matches. Eyes lingering on my choices, the cashier gave me an incredulous look, but rang me

up. I shimmied, working two bills out of my pocket, and placed them on the counter. Then I bolted. He could keep the change.

Next... I needed a place to do the binding and spell. A deserted parking lot with no lighting was the best bet. I knew the perfect location as well. As a child, I'd been warned along with the other neighborhood kids about the abandoned factory. Horror stories abounded about the location. Once, as a curious eight year old, I'd looked up what actually happened to the place. It produced heavy machinery, but when the owner died at his own home, the city shut it down. There wasn't anything haunted about it. Besides that, real ghosts can only be seen by necromancers, and those the ghost chooses to appear before.

The sidewalks slowly became more cracks as I got closer and closer to the factory. Everything was gray concrete, and at least half of the structures were derelict. There was, however, an auspicious lack of lighting. Perfect for what I needed. The factory's parking lot was intact, no cracks running through, and darkness had fallen. Everything was in place.

I set down my gas station goods and began the preparations. Ripping open the plastic holding the five packs, I began unwrapping each individual piece of gum, and placing it in a small pile. Gathering up random newspaper bits that had been scattered about, I set the litter up in a little ball next to the gum pile, along with some grasses. I always hated the next part though, tried to put it off, but it was time. Using my right index finger, I made a shallow but gushing cut across my left forearm. It hurt like crazy each time I did this without my enchanted blade. Grabbing the brush, I coated it with my blood, and started meticulously painting out my summoning and binding spell. I was panting by the time it was done, but there was more still.

Sitting down with my legs crossed on the asphalt, I grabbed my water and food. After chowing down two bars and chugging half of the water, I was finally ready. Lighting a match, I tossed it on the pile of refuse, and started the chant.

“Dellepmoc er a ouy. Em ot emoc hctip.”

The shadows created by my small fire began to grow, their masses undulating. For several minutes they gyrated, shifted, swirled. My shadow itself began to change. It became shorter in height, and expanded horizontally, becoming fatter. Of course, with how skinny I am, it isn't difficult for any comparison to be deemed “fatter”. The arms moved out, though my own did not, and shadow fists rested on the figure's hips.

“Who has the gall to summon me?!” A male voice of surprisingly nasal quality came from nowhere and everywhere.

“It's me, Pitch. I brought you an offering,” I gestured to the pile of gum in front of me, ignoring the fact my shadow didn't adhere to my movements. A squeal of delight pierced the night.

“Gimme, gimme, gimme!” Hands reached for the pile, transformed into hooked claws that dug into the gooey, sugary mass. The darkness consumed it, and in less than ten seconds, the entire pile of gum was gone. “So, Kid. Back from the dead again, huh?” Pitch spoke with carefully calculated casualty. We both knew he was fishing. No one knows the secret behind my resurrections, not even me, not that the others take my word for it. Everyone asks me anyway, hoping I'll tell them how I do it. When I said nothing, Pitch sighed and moved on. “Okay. What is it you *want*, Kid?”

“Transportation to the Otherside. Preferably in the area of Rabbit, Texas.”

Pitch snorted in derision, “You don't ask for much, do you?”

“I could always go to Black Siren...”

“What?! No!” It was a well-known fact that Pitch and Black Siren had been feuding for centuries about who had the most right to black magic. While it was normally a pain for residents of the Otherside to deal with, it had its advantages. “One transport to Rabbit, Texas in the Otherside, coming right up.”

I stood, moving back from him, and left my remaining protein bar and water. Time to let him do what he did. The surrounding darkness swelled up. The fire guttered out as the darkness overtook it. From the impenetrable black now surrounding me, Pitch called out, “Hang on!”

My name is Grim. When I asked my mother why she named me this, she had smiled dreamily. A faraway look entered her eyes, and she said, “I saw death in you.” Now that I’ve been around the block a few times, I suspect she meant Death with a capital “D”.

I live, for the most part, in the Otherside. For normals, this place does not exist. For the few of us with even the barest hint of magic, it is a layer to the world you know. The two realities lie against one another, but cannot interact. The normals can't see the Otherside, can't see us, but we can see them. After a few months, you get used to constantly walking through other people. See, there aren't very many of us with magic. Out of seven billion people on the planet, there are *maybe* four million of us. In the grand scheme, we are a pitiful lot.

Me, I'm a necromancer. We aren't well understood, and being the rarest of magical casters doesn't help. For the most part, we can mask our gifts, but once you're outed, you tend to stay outed. Unless you're like me. Then, people assumed it of you, because you came back from the dead. Which I didn't actually personally do, so whatever.

This world of magic, of the unexplainable, it's out there and it's real. Not many get to see it. That's why I'm writing this, even if you take it as fiction, not fact. I'm writing this to give you a rare glimpse of the Otherside.

The overwhelming feeling of a lack of oxygen, suffocation, and the smothering presence of darkness was horrifying. It felt like ice fingers were dancing up and down each vertebrae of my spine, and the snuffling of large, dangerous beasts was getting louder and louder, closer and closer. I had prepared myself for this, but each sensation was still unnerving. These sick feelings were the result of Pitch's transportation. This was how he had access to the world of the norms and the Otherside. As long as these shadows of soul-sucking, empty blackness existed on both layers, he could travel. It didn't mean the traveling accommodations were comfortable.

When the darkness finally ebbed and dim lighting entered my vision, I knew we'd arrived. Pitch had followed through, even being so kind as to drop me off at a secluded location. I would have thanked him, but my shadow was fully my own once again. Pitch was gone.

The sun wasn't quite rising here, but I could see the sky hinting at lightening up soon. It wouldn't be too long now. Since I was in familiar territory, getting to my apartment was easy. Stepping into the place, I could see my norm counterpart starting his day. At first, it had been so weird. Living on a separate layer of existence, able to see the other person who lived on the layer below was disconcerting at best. Eventually, I got used to it.

My place wasn't ransacked as it had been the last two times I returned. Guess my enemies were either late, or maybe they'd given up. Yeah, right. I didn't really like the idea of my place being stormed in on while I was in residence, so I set up some protections. Seems the only "good" thing about being a

necromancer is how strong the magic born of blood is. That same reason was the only thing that allowed me to bind and summon Pitch. My protections were heavy duty, top notch. Since I was a kid, people have been trying to kill me. With so much practice at making safe wards, I've gotten enough experience to make up some of my own. Only two other people I know can do that, making it an accomplishment.

Stripping out of my borrowed clothing, I got into the shower, began calculating my next move. I feel a bit resentful at being run out of town, as Rabbit, Texas is my home now. Time to stand and fight... They've killed me three times now, what more can they really do? Sure, unending pain and torture may be a possibility, but I'm a necromancer. Spilling my blood is a downright stupid thing to do. If they dedicated their time to breaking my bones over and over, they'd have to give a period of setting. I've had worse, so it wouldn't matter.

Turning the knob behind me, the spray from the nozzle died. Drying off, I prefer to avoid seeing myself in the mirror. My first resurrection changed me quite a bit. For instance, I no longer sweat. I haven't clocked my heartbeat at over 35 beats a minute since the first resurrection. My once green eyes? Dark gray now. Skin pale as a corpse, with a waxy complexion to match. Not my idea of "normal", even by Otherside standards. At least I've got my own clothes now.

Plain black t-shirts, dark jeans, and athletic shoes make up my entire closet. Clothing for the urban caster on the go. I also have a long, black duster. It looks cheesy as all get out, totally Matrix, but it's useful. The interior is covered by sown in pockets. Since I'm able to remember where I put all of my supplies, the pouches work for me.

I've finished getting dressed when my ghosts arrive. Toby Wiket and Allison Hager were my best friends before my first death. They still *are* my best friends, except they died too, and didn't come back like me. I still feel bad about it.

“Grim!” Allison squeaks, jumping up and down. She stopped the whole, squeal and hug bit when we discovered she went straight through me.

“We heard you died. Again,” Toby grins.

“And I've returned. Again.” We all laugh. I think they're both waiting for the day I won't be coming back. Not with excitement, but with a silent, secretive sort of apprehension.

“Have you told Layla yet?” Allison narrows her eyes at me. Layla is my best living friend. We bonded over the fact we're both freaks, even in the eyes of the Otherside. I keep coming back to life. For her, it's that she's supposed to be the next messiah. It was predicted by prophets, seers, and oracles alike. So far, no one thinks she's living up to the role.

“I only just got back...”

“So? She needs to know!” Allison gives me a look of complete exasperation. “If she's heard about you getting killed, she's waiting for you to return. Call her.”

“For a ghost, you're incredibly pushy.”

“Call. Her.”

Grabbing my land line, likely bugged, I dial in Layla's number. She's different from Toby and Allison. She can take care of herself. Most clerics can, it's the only way to ensure their safety. In the past, they were taken captive during war time, forced to use their magic on the injured. Wars that would have taken six months turn into battles spanning decades. The clerics were treated horribly, dying from overuse of their magic. Somewhere along the line, a cleric wised up and learned how to fight. If someone came for them, they'd be prepared to defend themselves. Now, all clerics are extensively trained in combat. No one has taken advantage of a cleric in years.

The ringing stops, replaced by a groggy, annoyed, feminine voice. “What?”

“Sorry. Did I wake you?” Feeling Allison and Toby's eyes on me causes a prickle of self-consciousness, but Layla easily erases that.

“Grim?” Her voice perks up. “Heard you died again. Was worried. Glad you're back.”

“Yeah, I'm glad to be back. Are you busy?”

“Uhh...Not really. What's up?” It really means a lot when a friend you clearly woke up lies about it.

“I think it's time to fight back.” Saying those words... My chest and shoulders feel a thousand times lighter. Allison and Toby make vague noises of distress behind me. Even Layla is quiet, the only noise the crackle of the phones.

“Awesome!” The exclamation proceeds to nearly deafen me before Layla begins chattering a mile a minute. “This is so exciting. I was hoping you'd eventually be open to the possibility, but to suggest it yourself? Wow! Oh, man, I can't wait to teach you the fine art of kicking butt and taking names. Maybe we can even get Farrah Tiger to help you make a weapon...” She pauses, thinking on her suggestion. I take the opportunity and speak.

“Think you could come on over now? We can get planning. The sooner the better. Right?”

“Sure. Give me thirty minutes,” She says, and then only the dial tone remains. Hanging up, I look over to my ghostly friends.

“She'll be over soon. I need to eat real quick.” They stay quiet, probably trying to figure out if this last resurrection has left me brain damaged. Me? Fighting? I can hardly believe it myself, and Im the

one who suggested it. Before I can descend down that dark road of introspection, I start searching for food.

Honestly, I don't eat much anymore. Another side effect of my resurrections. Poking around my pantry, all I come up with is some canned beans, beef jerky, and store brand saltines. Better than nothing. I prepped the food and got to chowing down.

Is it weird that I miss being dead? Probably. But when I've been dead... It feels safe. Like I'm home. Yet I keep getting ejected, thrown back into cold, harsh life. No one bothers to ask me how I feel about it, it just happens. Everyone around here thinks my coming back is awful, weird, or wonderful. They can't understand the security of death. The sweet solace found in its warm embrace. I imagine it's how babies feel in the womb.

Quick knocks on my door have me getting out of my chair at the table, putting my dishes in the sink. I assume it's Layla, otherwise the wards would've gone off. I still check the peephole, and sure enough, there she is.

Opening the door, I receive a toothy grin before she's shoving me out of the way. I lock the door behind her and turn around to see her inspecting the place. She's only been here once, and it was when I moved in. Now the place is completely unpacked, resembling an actual home. Watching her take everything in allows me to look at her without seeming creepy.

Layla is fair-skinned with bright green eyes, and flame red hair kept in two braids. The story is her family came from Scotland, mixed with some Irish, then mixed with some English. I really don't know, and I really don't care. She's beautiful, plain and simple.

Turning sharp eyes on me, her mouth quirks up, "The place looks like a home. I'm impressed."

“You're the one who said I needed to stop living like a war criminal on the run and settle down.”

She shrugs, “Didn't mean you were going to listen and do it.” She turns, fully facing me, resting her fists on her hips. “You got any weapons?”

“Uh, I have a sharp and pointy object. Not sure it counts though.”

“I'll be the judge of that. Bring it here,” Layla orders, and I nod. Heading into my bedroom, I beeline for my closet. In the very back corner, I have a small box made of Rowan wood, with hardcore warding done by I don't know who. My mother gave it to me, the item inside a gift from her as well.

I pull it out, and lightly blow across the top. Not because of dust, no, but because this is how the warding of the box works. It's keyed into me specifically, and this is the method of disarm. Opening it up, I pull out the wickedly curved knife. It functions as both a dagger and knife, a crescent shape. Setting the box back, I head back over to Layla. Her eyes go wide, white magic sparking along her fingertips.

“Where did you get that?” I have never before heard this tone of whispered awe from Layla. What was so special about it?

“My mother gave it to me.”

“Wow.”

Since she seemed frozen, I went ahead and offered her the weapon. “Take it.”

She held up her upturned palms, flat. Placing it in her hands, an odd reverence is apparent in her eyes. “You have no idea how amazing this is, do you?”

“It's something my mother gave me, that's all.”

“Well, it's definitely a weapon. What were you using it for before?”

“Uhm...”

She huffs, “Spit it out, Grim!”

“For blood magic stuff.” Whenever I use this blade, the cuts don't hurt, and almost instantly heal. I didn't know any other magic users, not even my mentor, who have something like that.

“I guess that explains why it looks well fed,” Layla mused, now turning it over in her hands.

“Well fed?”

“The best of the enchanted weapons require feeding and care. My ax, for example.” I had seen her ax before, and it was scary. A giant monster of a weapon. “I have to sink it in a giant tank of oatmeal each week. Takes about two hours once a week for all of the oatmeal to get consumed.” I don't know why I was surprised. It *was* the Otherside, after all.

“So, what? I've been feeding this thing my blood without knowing it?”

“Basically, yeah. Looks like that's all it can eat, too.” Her hands were glowing. She was utilizing implemental magic to assess the properties of the weapon. The glow faded and she handed it back to me with a nod. “This is definitely a high-caliber weapon. Designed specifically for you.”

“That doesn't make sense. Why would my mother give me some sort of ultra-weapon but not tell me it's an ultra-weapon?”

“I don't know. She's *your* mother.” My eyes roll at her retort. Sometimes, I think Layla is purposefully unhelpful.

A sudden thought struck me, coming out of nowhere. My subconscious, I guess. Layla and I had been talking, sure, but Allison and Toby didn't normally stay quiet. I looked around, surprised to see no sign of my ghostly pals. Layla must have noticed my concern because she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Something's not right. Toby and Allison are gone." As soon as I finished my sentence, the wards went off. I turned to the door, saw Layla pulling out smaller, throwing style axes. The wards flashed brightly, a soft grumble emanating from them. Filtering through the walls, muffled curses and swears came from the outside, even a few screams. My offensive wards had gone off as well, which meant a maximum level threat. I gripped the hilt of my knife with white knuckles. Based on the commotion outside, there were quite a lot of people coming from me.

There was a fast, sharp blast that blew the door off of its hinges, sudden and violent, unexpected. Layla and I were both knocked back, bodies hitting the ground painfully. Dust filled the room, a mixture of sawdust and plaster. Coughing, my ears rang angrily. I could barely push myself up, but when I could, my eyes focused on a vague figure in the door frame. Layla was still down, next to me, and I didn't know if I could stay awake and fight them off.

I stayed conscious long enough to hear, "Hello, Grim."