The Day of the Somewhat Dead

"Nicolau, can you tell me why you felt the need, on the morning of the most important performance of your career, to dig up the dead?"

"Because, my dear Katerina, I'm a teller of stories. That is my art; my Extravaganzas enlighten, by relating what life compels people to think, to feel." He waved a hand at the pit that lay at their feet, an excavation at least two hundred feet wide and thirty feet deep. "We stand above an ancient city, buried a millennium ago by volcanic ash, the people trapped in their day to day lives as they ran to escape. What were they doing when the disaster struck, and why? How did they react? What were they feeling as the ash imprisoned them and the poisonous gases took their lives?"

She looked around, her long, carefully curled blonde tresses trailing over the

scarlet satin of her dress. A matching parasol kept the sun off the glowing fairness of her skin, while still allowing the light to elicit glimmering shades of red from her gown, and sparkling silver and gold from embroidery and jewelry. Not a hair or thread was misplaced; she was, as always, a masterpiece of form and fashion.

Except for her black, flat soled boots. She grimaced as she gazed into the pit, her eyes catching the clunky ends of the footwear peeking out below the hem of her dress.

"These shoes would look good on an elephant. Not on me."

"Well, as I've said about four times this morning, it's not safe to walk on such rough ground in high heeled sandals."

"Exactly. Which makes me ask why I'm here, in a place which is so entirely unsuitable for someone of my means and station?"

"Because," — he bowed, one arm sweeping low — "you're my love, my muse, my wife, my partner in life, and I need you near me whenever I'm doing something for my art."

Her eyebrows ticked up slightly. "What you should be doing for your art is preparing for tonight's performance."

"I'm ready!" He frowned, regarded the petulant moue of her lips, whose pillowy curves were often compared to rosebuds in the entertainment press; at this moment they were squeezed into accusatory pink slashes, an expression he'd seen a lot lately.

"You're ready?" The words were darts, flung at his ears. "So you've said the last three Extravaganzas. And every time you've wondered why the crowds are thin, and why those who did turn up were less than enthusiastic." She twirled her parasol, the movement cut off by a sudden clench of her hand. "You'd be better off practicing your spellbinding, trying to put some gloss on your illusions, maybe, or, I don't know, coming up with something a little brighter, a little more original!"

He sighed, turned back to the pit, hands on hips. "My spellbinding is fine, and I'm not going to change anything this close to the performance." He glanced at her. "You could be a little more supportive, you know. This has been a difficult time. Our future rests on tonight being a success, both financially and artistically."

"*I* could be supportive? You could be supportive of *me* by listening to what *I* have to say, which is what every critic in every paper is going to say. Your 'new'

show you're presenting tonight is just a rehash of what you've done many times before. Renaming the characters and title to 'Aldo and Giulia' won't fool anyone; there's nothing new, people are tired of it. But instead of thinking about that, and how to come up with something fresh, you spend a small fortune to transport the entire troupe to the hinterlands, to some stupid small town…."

"Palaria."

"Whatever. You drag us all down here to *Palaria* so you can present your unpopular entertainment in an ancient, broken amphitheater, as though that's somehow going to make everything more grand. And to top that particular cake with fish sauce, you think it's somehow inspiring to drag me out in the dust and dirt to watch you dig up antique corpses!" She glared. "I at least have the good grace and taste to show up in public dressed appropriately, as a popular Extravaganza actress and the wife of one of the most famous Spellbinders in the land, instead of…." She waved a hand at him, at his plain linen shirt, brown wool vest and trousers and sturdy brown boots. "You look like someone trying to play the part of a shepherd or ditch digger!"

He gritted his teeth. "Or maybe I look like someone who's serious about what they plan to do today, which is investigate some local history."

"Sure. Well, best get on with it, hadn't you? Then we can remove ourselves from this filth and heat, so we don't look like we're falling apart even before we arrive on stage."

"Indeed." Hands balled into fists, he strode down the dirt ramp into the pit, his stocky form upright and rigid. Ditch digger? He simply wore what the locals wore, as his Farilian ancestors would have worn. His build, his square face, the sharp chin, the tight brown curls on his head, so dark they were almost black, clearly marked where his family came from. He and what he wore blended into this country, this place, unlike the flaming, vibrant attire Katerina flaunted at the world, unlike her tall, blonde, slender Sakson elegance.

A few workers waited at the bottom of the ramp. None of them said a word or even looked at him; they were all staring at the angelic vision floating behind. He sighed; five years of marriage to Katerina had inured him to it. No matter how he dressed, he was a weed beside an orchid, and generally treated as such when they were together.

Nicolau addressed the foremost of the crew. "Excuse me, you're the foreman?"

The man shook his head, eyes coming back to Nicolau. "Um, yes." He stared

over Nicolau's shoulder at Katerina. "We expected a gentleman. Are you digging for your lady?"

"I'm the gentleman. That's my wife."

"Oh, my apologies, lord. Or, rather, congratulations." He bobbed his head. "You look like one of my workers."

"Yes, that's been pointed out. I…" Nicolau paused for a moment, frowning in disbelief. "…people actually come here to dig, dressed like peacocks?"

"Always. Why would you want to fit in with a bunch of workers?"

"An excellent question, one my wife just asked me. Well, let's go then."

The foreman nodded, headed off across the pit floor, Nicolau following. Dust kicked up from their feet, the dry, black earth swirling in small clouds behind them. The heat of the sun, even this early in the day, made the pit into an oven, and the air smelled of desiccated, lifeless minerals.

In various places, trenches pierced the pit floor. Nicolau pointed at one. "You've dug up other bodies here?"

"Yes. Lots of people got caught here in the eruption. It was maybe a plaza or market, maybe the roof top garden of a rich family." He shrugged. "We're not sure what's under any dig; when we started to find the bodies, we realized what

we had, and stopped work."

"Stopped? Why? You seem to have made a number of holes first."

"Those were dug since. Rich people like yourself."

"Oh. Tourists, you mean."

"People like digging up old bodies."

"Right." Great. Whatever remained of his hope of finding some inspiration in excavating the past, some way to acquire a little fire to ignite the performance tonight, drifted away. The argument with Katerina had already begun to poke holes in the ramparts he'd erected around those dreams. Now, to find he wasn't going to actually participate in a dig, but rather an orchestrated tourist show….

He needed this. Needed something. Because he feared the truth in what she'd said, had been fearing it for months, but he hadn't really known what else to do. His Extravaganzas were him: what he did, how he did them. Every time he considered what he could *change*, (a truly terrifying word, because change meant choices, change meant a different path, and what if the path he landed on was not…good?), he froze. Truthfully, he was stuck; he was what he was, his creations were him. What else was there to do, except to make even more of a spectacle and hope the façade of grandness would carry the show?

But here he was, about to step into a façade of archaeology. Was it a sign from the gods? Whatever gods, and there were many, who provided that spark that inspired all those who hungered to create?

They walked up to a small group of workers who stood waiting, shovels in hand. An area was marked out on the ground, a long oval, about as long and wide as a person.

"How do you know," asked Nicolau, "that there's someone there?"

"Well, you know there's no body?" said the foreman. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped the sweat from his sun-browned forehead. "The corpses are long gone. It's empty space, though probably some of the dust inside was part of them."

"Yes, I understand. But you know there's a space there?"

"Yes. Josiah, show him."

The young worker so addressed walked a few steps away, thumped his shovel on the ground. Then he walked back over, and thumped inside the marked area.

"You hear the difference?"

"I do. It does sound hollow under there."

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Whomp, whomp, whomp….

What was this infernal noise that kept pecking away at the haze of his existence? For so long, the world had been quiet, deathly quiet, and what little was left of his consciousness had faded to a dot, a bare pulse of awareness. But something had changed. Noise intruded, scrapings, footsteps, voices…he only just remembered what any of those things were anymore, but something was stirring, and it stirred something in him.

And now, whatever it was seemed to be directly above where he lay. A feeling arose… curiosity?

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"Do you want to dig, my lord?"

"Of course I do? What, do some people just watch you do it?"

The foreman shrugged. "It's hot like this for most of the year, and some folks would rather watch work than do it."

"I know I would," mumbled Josiah.

"I came here," replied Nicolau, "to at least *pretend* I was doing some archaeology." He held out his hand, and Josiah passed his shovel. "Where should I start?"

"In the middle of the outline," replied the foreman. "Go slowly. Remember, you're just trying to open a small hole."

Nicolau nodded. He planted his shovel, put his foot on the top edge, and leaned into it. The shovel barely made a scratch in the tough surface of the compacted volcanic ash. He lifted the shovel up, stepped down hard, and the sharp edge cut in a little further. Pulling up a small section of black and grey pumice, he threw it behind him, placed the blade back into the small hole, and took another scoop.

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The noise continued, louder now, as though approaching, though how something could be approaching through his tightly packed prison, he couldn't fathom. It was disturbing. His dust had sat unmoving for what felt like an eon, but now it bounced slightly with each blow that resonated from above.

What was he feeling? Because, yes, to his amazement, he was actually feeling something. Curiosity indeed, and…agitated? Right, an energy, just a little, enough to move the sad pile of crumbs that was all that was left of his physical form. A tiny swirl ran through the chamber, raising up his remains into a minute funnel cloud, separated from the dirt and the fragments of the young lady he'd been lingering with when the

volcanic ash and fumes had overcome and buried them.

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Several more shovel loads, and Nicolau felt the blade break through into space. He tried to catch as much of the falling dirt as he could, before placing the shovel behind him.

He regarded the small, dark hole he'd opened; despite the way the morning had gone, despite feeling like a mark and a fool for thinking this would be something more — a wave of excitement ran through him. "Incredible." He fell to his knees, bent over the opening. "What does it look like in there?"

A small cloud of dust swirled into his face. He breathed in a gritty, obnoxious miasma, filled with the scent of dirt, mold, of death and age, and…wine?

A heady incoherence slithered through his mind, a hazy confusion, lit with something that felt strangely like elation, which despite his sudden befuddlement he realized was rather odd.

He sagged, his arms collapsing, driving his entire face firmly into the hole, forcing him to breathe in more swirling dust. The workers leapt forward, grabbed his arms, rolled him over and pulled him to a sitting position.

"My lord!" The foreman crouched in front of him. "My lord, are you alright?"

He swayed dizzily for a moment, trying to collect himself. Focus, focus; if there was one thing being a Spellbinder taught, it was to concentrate on the present no matter how crazy things grew around him. It took a few seconds, but he pushed the odd feelings down, controlled the vertigo, at least enough to talk. "Probably a bad idea to inhale the remains of a thousand year old corpse."

"We should've been more careful, but I've never seen anyone dive into a grave before."

Nicolau chuckled weakly. "I wouldn't worry about it. I came here for historical inspiration, and I might have just ingested some."

Katerina, who'd been wandering about, escorted by various admiring workers, came trotting across the pit floor, heavy boots shuffling awkwardly through the black sand.

"Nicolau! Are you alright?"

The foreman looked up at her. "He is, madam."

"He'd better be. He needs to be for tonight!"

Nicolau shook his head — his vision was still a little foggy. "Just for tonight?"

"At least that long."

"Thank you, my dear, for your concern." He waved weakly at the hole. The

swirl of dust had settled. “Does that need to be bigger?”

“No,” replied the foreman, “it’s perfect. You sit and relax, my lord, and we’ll do the rest.”

“I…alright.” He stood, slowly, tottered to the pit wall, where a small wood bench rested blessedly in the shade, and sat heavily. Katerina came over beside him.

“Nicolau,” she hissed, “this grows more idiotic with each moment.”

“I’m fine!”

“You’re not fine, you almost passed out!”

“I. Am. FINE. And I’ll be a lot more fine if you’ll let it go.”

Her mouth worked for a moment, her moue writhing like a couple of scarlet inchworms passing each other on a branch. But she thought better of what she was going to say, and, arms crossed, spun to face the workers.

They were filling a barrow with white powder from some large bags. Others were hauling buckets of water down the ramp, dumping them in with the powder while the foreman stirred the mix with a wood paddle. A large tin funnel was placed in the hole Nicolau had dug. Once the barrow was full and at the correct consistency, the workers began shoveling the mixture into the funnel,

from which it slid into the cavity. When the barrow was empty the funnel was pulled out and the foreman peered inside. “No, another full barrow.” He turned to Nicolau. “Big chamber, might be more than one person.”

Nicolau nodded. The barrow was refilled and emptied, then refilled and emptied again. At this point the foreman raised a hand. “That’s good.”

“How long does it take to set?” asked Nicolau.

“Not long. We use magic. We have a Corebinder on staff.”

“Of course.”

“If they use magic,” asked Katerina as the foreman walked away, “why do they need to pour in the plaster? Couldn’t they just, you know, solidify the air?”

“The magical physical arts,” replied Nicolau, “are different from the magical creative arts, but still in some ways the same. You can’t create something from nothing. The air wouldn’t provide enough substance to fill the space.”

The Corebinder, an older man, was walking down the ramp into the pit. He was much better dressed than the workers, in a fine blue suit. His hair and beard were long and silver, neatly trimmed, his mustache waxed and bent at a precise angle. A tall top hat, circled by a sky blue band holding a scarlet feather, was perched at a slight angle on his head.

He walked over to the foreman. “You’re ready for me?”

The foreman indicated the hole, filled to the top with white muck. “We are.”

The Corebinder strolled to the ancient grave. He was quiet for a moment, head bowed, concentrating; his arms came up, his head came back, and he sang, a long, low hum, interspersed with chanted words. His hands worked, pulled, kneading the air.

All totally unnecessary, as magic came from the mind, but he was putting on a show; mages were all artistes, at least for the most part. Some used physical motions and singing to focus themselves as well, but it was mostly just dramatization.

The muck in the hole began to bubble. Steam formed, drifted upwards, a few wisps at first, then a stream, then a nearly solid column.

“You could cook dinner in that,” said Katerina.

“Sure,” replied Nicolau, “and end up with a dish delicately flavored with well aged, dead Farilian.”

It only took a couple of minutes before the extraction finished, and the steam died away. The Corebinder nodded to the foreman, and walked away. The workers picked up their shovels. Josiah hopefully offered his to Nicolau, who

waved him off. He was still feeling odd and light-headed, and digging in the hot sun no longer seemed like a good idea. So he sat back, leaning against the earthen pit wall behind him, and watched as the workers dug up the plaster cast of the chamber's interior.

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So many sensations — he was remembering them, now. This one was light. This was scent. This was feeling, touching. He was still barely aware, and he had no command, no control of what he sensed. But he did have memories, memories that were creeping back, of what the world had been; the blue of the sky, the dark earth, the voices, the movement. A slight, warm breeze touched his skin…wait, his skin?

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Nicolau, Katerina, the foreman and workers stood in a circle regarding the freshly made statue. The workers had hauled it from the hole, brushed off the surface dirt and ash. It didn't exactly shine in the sun, and was a little rough, but nonetheless, what the interred couple had been doing was quite clear.

"You'd think," said Katerina, "that any sensible person would be running as a volcano erupted over their heads." She peered at the intertwined plaster figures. "They weren't running."

"No, apparently not," replied Nicolau with a chuckle, "I guess some people become very engrossed in certain events, even when the world is exploding around them."

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He certainly had been engrossed. He had a vague memory of her, the young woman, screaming at him to hurry. But it was not his nature to hurry certain things, even if his nature was also that of chaos. So the ash had fallen around them, a little at first, and then in a sudden, massive, suffocating layer, so thick and heavy even he could not escape, then, or later. He'd tried, and tried, but they were sealed inside a form fitting tomb tighter than any sarcophagus. The poisonous air that accompanied the fall took her almost immediately, and the touch of humanity he possessed, that gave him his physical body, had succumbed not long after. But the rest of him had lingered, and lingered….

But now, he was free, sort of, in that at least he was out of the ground. Just trapped inside something…or someone…else.

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The foreman scratched his bearded chin. "Will you be wanting to take it home with you, my lord, my lady?"

"I think…," began Nicolau.

"No," said Katerina flatly. "I can't imagine anything less appealing. We're certainly not going to put that in the foyer of our house, which I believe is what you'd planned."

"I guess not." Nicolau looked at the foreman. "What'll you do with it?"

"We'll put it in our museum. It'll be a conversation piece."

"I'm sure it will." He rose carefully to his feet. The vertigo was gone; he still felt a little odd, had a touch of double vision. But he was functional. "Come on, Katerina. We should go back and check on the preparations."

"Finally, some common sense. Did you get anything out of today that might help tonight's performance?"

"I'm not sure." He took a deep breath; odd, there was that taste of wine again. "I got something, certainly."

A faint whisper, sounding almost like a touch of laughter, drifted by. He glanced around for the source. It wasn't Katerina, not with the mood she was currently entertaining. Neither was it any of the workers or the foreman, who were busy figuring out how they were going to move this particularly large statue out of the pit.

The sound must have been a trick of the hot wind swirling over the rock

walls. He shook his head and followed Katerina towards the ramp.

Just a Sip

The carriage ride to the amphitheater was mercifully short. The road was rough, a rutted track, as dusty and hot as the pit. They passed other excavations, old buildings, streets and neighborhoods, mostly constructed from amber sandstone. Some larger marble structures had been uncovered, the homes of the wealthy, temples to various gods. The surrounding landscape was all ancient, rounded hills, the slopes covered by scrubby forests of pine and oak with parched yellow grass growing between. In the distance sat the blue haze of the sea, the edge of the water blending into the sky, a cerulean wall. Here and there,

in dales between the hills and on some of the slopes, verdant fields of grain and vegetables brightened the earth.

Above it stretched the broken cone of Alicudi. No smoke or steam leaked from it today; its brooding presence was threatening enough as it was.

"This would have been a lovely little city," observed Katerina. "Finer houses perched on the hills. A nice view out to the ocean. But why live so close to a volcano?"

"The ash makes for excellent farmland," replied Nicolau. "People run from an eruption, but they always come back. Though, at least in this case, they didn't rebuild the city."

"Sensible, but not sensible." She smiled slightly, pleased to be away from the pit, headed for the amphitheater. "Like you. Despite your foolishness, you'll be ready for tonight."

"Of course I will, and you will. We all will, the cast and crew. This will be our greatest triumph."

"You keep saying that." She leaned back, closed her eyes. "You've risked everything on this. Your reputation. *Our* reputation. Our money."

"I know." His hands smacked down on his thighs, and he leaned towards her.

"This is my way, it's all I know!"

She was silent for a moment, then, "Whatever you think, I've always believed in you." She looked him in the eye; there was something in her face, a touch of sadness. "What I'm not sure of is whether you believe in yourself."

"Of course I do." He sat back, glared. "I'm Nicolau Campos, the greatest Spellbinder of this century!"

"Yes. But one whose time is passing, if the reviewers and the crowds are to be believed." She leaned forward, put a hand on his arm. "Nicolau, if you truly believed in yourself, you'd try something different."

"Like what? One of those silly little productions, an Extravaganza Buffa, to run in some cheap, minuscule theater?"

"Maybe. Those silly little productions in those cheap theaters sell out night after night, and the reviewers are taking note."

"Spectacle is everything, and you can't do that on such a small stage with so few cast members."

"So your art is nothing without spectacle?"

"I didn't say that!"

"No? I'm confused, because I thought that was exactly what you said."

"Twisting my words again."

She laughed a little. "Perhaps. But there's truth behind it."

They were silent for a while, gazing out of the carriage windows. The subject of the conversation was an old one that they'd chewed on more and more frequently, a wedge between them, driven a little deeper every time it came up.

How his world, and their relationship, had changed. She was younger than him, had been a bright light rising through the lesser Spellbinders' shows. He'd been absolutely captivated by her, asked her to join his troupe. She'd been just as captivated by the possibilities of working with such a famous Spellbinder. They'd complemented each other, her spectacular stage presence, her ability to bring a role to vibrant life, entwined with his stories, his compositions, his magic that blended it all together, lifting his Extravaganzas to ever greater acclaim. Nicolau and Katerina Campos were scintillating stars in the Spellbinder universe.

But that was threatened now, both their place in the world, and their relationship. Everything was in doubt. As the audiences thinned, the arguments grew ever more bitter, her anger so sharp, he'd begun to wonder if she still felt anything for him; indeed, if she'd ever truly felt anything at all. She'd said all the

right things during their courtship, but it's a truism of being rich and famous that it's always difficult to tell whether people want you, or what you can provide. Certainly, the edge that now ran through her words and manner hadn't been present in those first years together. The respect, the devotion, were slipping away.

His thoughts drifted back to the couple who'd been trapped by the volcano. "I wonder who those two were, down in that hole. I wonder what they meant to each other. Were they man and wife, were they a new couple, were they lovers cheating on their spouses?"

"Maybe," she replied, "they saw death coming and decided to meet it with one last fling."

That brought a chuckle from him. "Perhaps."

"Perhaps you could make an Extravaganza out of that scenario."

"It would be a very short show."

"That would depend on him now, wouldn't it?"

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He was starting to understand a little about his new predicament; he was stuck in a body that wasn't his. He'd entered a human before, taken over for a while, but it wasn't

something he liked to do. One became the host eventually, an odd blending of the original personality and himself. It was a wrench to leave after that.

But here he was, too weak to go anywhere. At least this man in which he was stuck was some kind of an entertainer, a creative. He'd be able to indulge himself in that as he grew stronger.

If *he grew stronger. He could only hope he would. So far, he'd been able to bring himself enough to the forefront to at least see and feel what the man, this Nicolau, was seeing and feeling. If he could just start to influence all that now….*

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The ancient amphitheater had been one of the first parts of the old city to be excavated. It ran down a hillside, rings of stone seats, not the most comfortable of perches, but spectators were expected to bring their own cushions. At the base of the hill sat the stage, a wide stone platform raised a few feet above the ground. It was no longer a perfectly level space, rough and cracked in places. A semicircle of broken columns rose behind it, graceful and fluted, at least, what remained of them.

Nicolau spent the afternoon going over his script, testing his magic, trying different things. The disorientation he'd acquired in the pit that morning was

gone, replaced with an odd clarity. He often felt this way on the eve of a performance, a lifting of his mood, a sharp focus on his art. This was the time he felt most alive, before and during the shows. Creating something beautiful and mesmerizing was all he'd ever wanted to do, from the first time he'd watched an Extravaganza as a youth. The sight, the sounds, the cast of players and musicians wrapped in the magic of the Spellbinder, pulling the audience into an alternative world and holding them there until the story was done. The experience electrified him, and that sensation never went away.

His parents had been appalled at his desires; they were Corebinders, mages who made material goods. "Useful things, Nicolau. Don't waste your talent on fluff. This is what our family does, not cheap entertainment." Well, he'd shown them. Not that they'd said much about his successes, but they had at least no longer acted as though he'd stained their reputation; they'd even deigned to come to a couple of his performances before they passed away.

And there wasn't anything anyone could have done to change it, anyway. The type of magic a person could wield wasn't open to influence. It grew out of what the person was, even if at first they themselves thought they'd be on a different path, either through natural inclination or some form of talent. Whether what

finally came was a surprise or not, in the end it was always apparent through ability and contentment that what emerged was right and true.

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This Nicolau knew what he was doing. Actors, musicians, Corebinders and Lightbinders coming and going on the stage, and the Spellbinder working with and manipulating them, trying small changes and polishes, ensuring that everyone knew their parts perfectly. The size and scope of the production became apparent, and he was fascinated; nothing like this existed when he *last walked the world.*

But the lady was right — it definitely needed a little more, a little extra. If only he was stronger, so he could provide influence. Well, he could try….