

Morticians (preview)

- December 8th, 1874

Snowfall in London always symbolized different things to different people. To the wealthy children, it symbolized the upcoming arrival of Christmas and the subsequent celebrations. To the downtrodden masses, it meant having to scrounge up any remaining coal and fuel for heat. To the workers, it made little difference, as the furnaces of the factories would keep them both occupied and warm regardless. As per Ada, all that the snow meant was that her boots would get wet. Such was the nature of her occupation. No rest, no holiday leave, no vacations, no matter the season. For a Mortician's work is never in short supply. At least most of the time it was exciting. Unlike today.

As per usual, Ada arrived at their location way before Will had even showed up. And as was pretty much custom of the pair, he came with the bare minimum gear. William stepped out of his carriage, straightened his cloak, and walked right towards the massive hall.

"So..." Ada started, reaching for her case on the floor, "is Licorice in place?"

"Just dropped her off at the back exit," replied Will. "She should be able to find the security room in no time."

Ada nodded. Knowing Licorice, it would take her around ten minutes at most to trigger the emergency alarm. From there she'd quickly be able to reunite with the pair to join them.

"Well let's go in then," Will said, grabbing his cane and pushing open the iron gates.

"Now? I thought we were gonna wait for the civilians to clear out first? Besides, I'm not really much of an art exhibit person."

"In this cold?" Will replied. "Oh just humor me, Ada. I'm sure you could even find some interesting galleries to look at. Beats standing in this blizzard anyway."

Well he had a point, so Ada agreed. The pair stepped into the main hall of the building, and shook off their coats of snow. Ada didn't bring any money, so Will ended up buying their entry tickets for her. The pair entered the massive central hall, and began looking at the many marble statues.

"Excuse me miss," said a security guard at the entrance, grabbing her by the arm. "I must ask that you allow me to inspect the contents of that case. Security reasons and all."

"Oh, sure thing officer," Ada said, and unclipped the bindings of the black box.

Inside was a three legged stand, and an intricate camera device. The guard took a short look, then nodded and went back to his post. Good thing Will provided them to Ada in advance as a decoy. Ada closed her case and slung it over her shoulder.

“And let me see that arm as well. I trust there aren’t any weapons in that prosthetic?”

Ada nodded, and opened the frame of her left arm. The intricate mechanisms inside the ivory arm clicked into place as she moved her fingers. The guard took a close look, then gave her the go ahead.

The gallery was supposedly a prized import from Greece, but Ada didn’t see much worth in it. Sure, the marble statues of men wielding swords and doing athletic poses were skillfully constructed, but she didn’t see the need for such a statue. Perhaps they just weren’t in her taste. Ada wondered if Licorice might find some enjoyment in them, given her Greek background.

Speaking of Licorice, the stopwatch in Ada’s pocket began buzzing. It was ten minutes already. Any time now, Licorice will pull the emergency alarm, and the civilians will funnel out of the building within minutes. Leaving the trio free to do their work out of the public’s eye.

Another minute passed, and then another, and another, and another... Licorice was getting behind schedule. Will was beginning to be agitated too, stepping side to side and tapping his cane nervously on the floor. There was no way Will and Ada could get to work with all of these bystanders in their way. Not only for the risk of collateral damage, but also the risk of exposure. Something was defined odd. It wasn’t like Licorice would have trouble sneaking into the security room. She was the stealthiest of the trio, after all. In fact it often scared Ada just how sneaky this woman was.

She could have gotten lost, perhaps, Ada wondered. Though that’s unlikely, they made her study the map of the entire building meticulously. They even made her scribble direction in her own palm, for heaven’s sake. No, something was definitely off.

“Where could she be?” Will said after tapping Ada on the shoulder.

The pair looked up. According to the building plans, the security room would be directly above them right now. Ada shrugged in response.

“You think something went wrong?” she asked, and Will thought for a moment

“Not sure... stay here, I’ll go see if I can find her in the security room.”

Will made his way towards the staircase and disappeared. Ada looked at her watch. It’s been twelve minutes since Licorice was supposed to trigger the alarm. Then right as soon as she put it away, something crashed through the ceiling. Well rather a large chunk of the ceiling

fell downwards, crushing an exhibit underneath it. The alarms activated shortly after. Everyone nearby began panicking and shuffling out of the door.

“What in the-” Ada exclaimed, before having to narrowly avoid the crash.

Ada came up to inspect the rubble, when she noticed something writhing within. An elongated scaled creature began clawing its way from underneath pieces of the concrete. Once the cloud of dust settled, Ada was face to face with a pair of bright yellow eyes.

“Licorice! What in the world are you doing?”

Licorice didn't reply. Instead she pushed on her right arm, popping her shoulder back into place. She coughed up some dust, then began brushing off the debris from her tail. There were several scratches along her body, possibly from the crash. They began healing right away, leaving behind only inky smears of blood.

“Where were you?” Ada continued at the serpent girl. “You were supposed to set off the alarm over ten minutes ago!”

“Well,” Licorice replied, “there were some complications, but this snake managed to get the alarm. No need for Ada to get angry.”

“How in the world did you break open the ceiling?” Ada yelled in frustration.

Instead of an answer, Licorice simply pulled out several arrows from her quiver. The tips were snapped off, and Ada recognized the red feathers as Licorice's bomb ammunition.

“You blew up the ceiling? What were you thinking?”

“This snake could not get to the security, so needed a different alarm. Explosives are loud, so people folk below should scatter, right?”

Ada shook her head in disbelief. Granted, Licorice wasn't the smartest creature at the Parlor's disposal, but Ada thought she'd be at least a little less reckless.

“And... why couldn't you get to the security like we planned then?”

“Hmm, well... the Muse stood in the way, and this snake could get around the ghost thing. So this snake improvised a different alarm instead,” Licorice replied with a smile.

Ada sighed, but paused immediately

“Wait... you found the Muse?” she asked, and Licorice nodded with a proud smile. “And instead of dispatching it yourself... you blew up the ceiling?”

“Will and Ada said to set off an alarm, so this snake set off the alarm.”

“Well yes, ok but...” Ada was at a loss for words at the moment. “Licorice... the whole point of the alarm was so that we could comb the building in peace for the Muse. If you found it by yourself, why didn't you just dispatch it with an arrow? Or crush it with your tail, or something?”

Licorice thought for a moment. Then looked down in embarrassment, squeezing the tip of her tail. Ada almost felt bad at the display.

“Alright, well what’s done is done then,” she said, and Licorice perked her head back up. “Well... at least we found the monster. So where is it now?”

Licorice raised a finger and pointed up. Ada thought it was meant to be a joke. But as soon as she looked at the ceiling, she could see the Specter crawling over the edge of the open hole. The creature gently floated down to the ground level, and brandished its large rusty blade.

To give Licorice some benefit of the doubt, the Muse was a whole lot bigger than they anticipated. By herself the serpent girl could not have been able to defeat it. No matter, Ada thought.

A Muse, or Moûsai in original Greek, has an incorporeal body like every other Specter, and it’s healing reserve wouldn’t be depleted through damaging it. And since Will wasn’t here to provide his arcane Night Watcher to punch it to death with, the two girls would have to beat it the old fashioned way: good old steel to the face. Or rather to the mask. Muses weren’t class 4 creatures for no reason, having the intelligence to cover their one weakness with a protective mask. Usually a theater mask, as it happened to be. This one in particular wore a female mask with a leaf crown.

Ada unclipped her case, and opened the false bottom. With a single motion she readied her sword in its resting form. No need for the scythe just yet, first they’d get a feel for the Muse’s skills. Licorice in turn readied her large bow, and knocked a lancer arrow onto the string.

“Alright let’s get this over with quickly. Licorice, shoot it in the face.”

“This snake can’t do that!” protested Licorice. “The mask of ghost thing is a priceless art. We must not break it!”

“Seriously?” Ada sighed in frustration, but Licorice didn’t relent. “Fine, we’ll just yank it off then.”

There wasn’t much point in arguing with Licorice over anything. Besides, she did have a point. If they broke anything expensive the Director would cut it right from their paychecks.

Ada squeezed the lever on the guard of her sword, and the mechanical blade extended into seven curved notches. The saw blade was usually reserved for tearing off flesh, but a mask wouldn’t be such a stretch. The two girls looked at each other, grinning.

“Ready?”

“This snake is ready!”

Licorice lunged to the side, firing a disruption round at the Muse. The Muse deflected, but the sparking mist that shot from the arrowhead disoriented it enough to stand still.

Meanwhile Ada fired her twin grappling hooks into a pillar, and began swinging at high speeds around the room. Her plan was to ram the Muse from the back, and rip off its mask in the process.

Ada attached herself to the adjacent wall, facing the Muse right below her. Licorice fired another disruption arrow at the Muse, then gave Ada a thumbs up to go ahead. She fired each hook on its sides, and made a speeding lunge for the back of its head. But as soon as Ada got within reach, the Muse instinctively ducked out of the way. Ada swung right over its head then landed on the floor, her boots sparking as the metal hooks scraped against the ground.

“Alright,” Ada hissed, “so you want to play rough then. Let’s play rough.”

Ada raised her sword and swung at the Muse. The specter parried with ease, but was distracted as Licorice fired an arrow into its back. Having to juggle two targets proved a challenge for the creature. It soon began backing up under Ada’s advances, until it accidentally stepped within Licorice’s lunging distance. The serpent girl pounced on the Muse, stabbing a lancer arrow through its torso and reaching for its mask. The Muse moved its head in time, but Ada took the opportunity to viciously slash the creature on the back.

The Muse stumbled forwards, crashing into a display exhibit and toppling a large vase. Licorice had an open shot at grabbing the mask. But instead, she quickly rushed over to catch the falling antique.

“Oh come on,” Ada yelled, crossing swords with the Specter. “Could you focus here please?”

Licorice quickly put the vase back on the pedestal.

“Sorry,” she said, “this snake just wanted to save this pretty pot.”

“Well whatever, just get over here.”

The duo wailed onto the Muse relentlessly with attacks. It was clear the creature was a skilled swordsman, but vastly outmatched against the pair. The Muse began to frantically swing its blade around in a panic. Ada and Licorice had to back up to avoid its swings, but the Muse used this to its advantage. The creature ripped open its cloak, and revealed a slim withered body with a set of strings going from its neck to its crotch. Using its rusty blade it began running the back edge across the strings, creating a deafening screech.

Muses were the specters of artists and musicians, too stubborn to move on. It wasn’t uncommon for them to retain some sort of semblance of their talent inlaid into their body once awakened. This one appeared to be a violinist in its previous life. The noise was so loud Ada was pushed back, and she felt blood pour out of her ears. Licorice seemed unaffected by the noise, and fired another shot at the muse. Rather than a block the Muse caught it in its claw,

and hurled it straight back into Licorice's chest. The lancer arrow went right through her vest and embedded itself straight through her ribcage. Which Licorice simply pulled out immediately, and wielding it like a spear lunged at the Muse with an angered scream.

The Muse tried to block with its blade while strumming its strings with the left hand, aiming for Licorice's head. Ada quickly pulled the index finger on her prosthetic, and blew the high frequency whistle. The Muse stuttered for a split second, which gave Licorice ample time to catch the incoming blade in her teeth, grab the Muse by its throat, and stab the lancer arrow into its violin body. The arrowhead's ridges cut right through the wires as she ran it through with an awful scratching sound. The Muse was dazed by the attack, which gave Ada ample time to run across Licorice's back, flip over her head, and unleash a full blast of gas from her arm's hidden mechanism underneath the mask's ridge. Ada landed gracefully on her feet, and with a snap of her fingers activated the blast. She made sure to spray just enough to cause the ceramic mask to bounce off of its face without breaking. Licorice quickly backed up to catch it.

The Muse let out an annoyed screech. Streams of red began filling its cloak as its skull-like face was in the open. The blast from Ada's hidden mechanism did a good amount of damage, not enough to completely take out its healing but enough to stun it completely. No matter. With the face in the open, all it would take is one bullet. Or one arrow, since Ada didn't take her pistol with her. Licorice knocked a lancer arrow onto the string of her bow, pulled the shot up to her mouth, aimed... and then the sound of gunfire rang across the room. The Muse's face burst into pieces, shooting inky black blood everywhere. Both girls looked back to see the source of the gunfire.

Behind them on the staircase stood Will, smoke coming from the barrel of his pistol sword.

"Kill stealer," mumbled Licorice.

"That takes care of that," Will said, sheathing the sword back into his cane. "So... which one of you two went off script? We were supposed to look for the Muse together guys. Was it you, Ada?"

"Me?" Ada replied, shocked. "Why do you think I'm the one who messed up the plan? I'm the most punctual out of all of us, after all."

"Oh, like that time you got us trapped inside a sewer, brought us both into a Mahamba nest, and blew up a factory?"

Ada paused, looking for a good response.

"That was ONE TIME! Are you ever not gonna bring that up?"

“Nope,” Will said with a smug smile. “Well come on you two, let's get out of here. Lawrence should be on his way to clean up, and you know how he gets when we interfere with his Undertakers.”

“No need to remind this snake,” Licorice chimed in. “The withered man is scary.”

“Yeah,” Ada nodded along. “Meet us at the same spot we left you at, alright? Wouldn't want you going back to the Parlor on your own in this freezing weather.”

Licorice nodded, shaking at the thought of the cold. She split off to climb into the air ducts, while Ada and Will made their way out the front door.

“So where were you, anyway?”

“Me?” Will paused.

“Yeah,” Ada said, crossing her arms. “Why didn't you help us with the Muse once the alarm went off?”

“Oh... that. It's kind of embarrassing actually,” Will replied. “I forgot to take a map, and got lost on the second floor.”

Ada sighed in disappointment. But oh well, at least their hunt is over with. Another mission completed for the Seventh Parlor.