

JACK O' LANTERN

Continuing the adventures of Faustus the Great and friends, last seen in the Divisions Only Contest story, Rainbow Girls.

"Are we all ready?" he pulls down his cowl, a scalloped cape draped over his shoulders.

"Yes, Batman. We're ready." Jackie sighs, licking the back of her hand with a slight purr, her striped tail swaying slowly.

"Aye, the wench'n I're ready." Marcel agrees, holding up his plastic cutlass, a black patch over one eye, a red bandanna tied off around his face.

"Watch who you're calling a wench, buster." Sam puts a flintlock under his chin, a patch over the opposite eye, a ruffled skirt and low cut blouse over her body.

"Yeppies." Zilvy giggles, licking the long fangs in her draconic purple muzzle, a slight hiccup of flame curling out. Petra nods, holding her huge sword in both hands, a tight leather Xena suit wrapped tightly around her to show off the rippling Amazonian muscles.

"Oh, yes." Anne purrs, stroking her crimson trident, tiny horns poking out of her forehead, a pointed tail swishing through her tight red hot pants.

"You bet." Dell finishes for the group, clad in the bright orange prom dress she'd acquired.

"Dell, I told you, you can't come."

"You're letting Anne come! She's supposed to be being punished!"

"Not today. Samhain is a truce. No punishment. And you're too young. No minors at this show."

"Why not?"

"Well, uhm..."

Jackie rolls his eyes, "Because the shows 're adults only an' the guests 're adults only an' ye're not an adult. Ye're not allowed t' drink, ye're not allowed t' gamble, ye're not allowed t' see the shows, an' ye're certainly not allowed t' take part."

"Anne's not old enough either."

"Turned 18 in August." Anne smirks. "You'll have to wait a couple of years to have fun."

"So, you sure you don't want dropping at your dad's for the night?"

Dell pulls a face, "Yeah, I'm sure. Go have fun without me. I don't care." she closes her hands into fists and flounces off.

"Don't play with anything on your own!" Paul calls out after her, but gets only the finger in response. "Ok, just one thing to do then." He lifts up the lid of the carved pumpkin, touching his finger to the candle wick, setting a flickering flame inside.

"D'ye always gotta do tha'?"

"It's traditional. Got to keep the ghosts and ghoulies frightened away."

"If'n they're frightened o' a pumpkin wi' a candle in it, they're not exactly scary t' begin with."

"Yes, dear."

They close the door, leaving the room illuminated by the candle's glow.

Dell leaps onto the bed, punching mattress, "This is so unfair. Treating me like a kid. Well, I won't need this then." She pulls the dress off, tossing it onto the floor, changing into a pair of faded jeans and an old t-shirt. "Happy Halloween." she sighs, "They've left me all alone in here." she slowly smiles, "They've left me. All alone. In here." she sinks slowly down, the floor rippling as she slips into the body of the van. "Time to explore." She slides into the van, leaving it quiet. The darkness around her pulses with syrupy lines of magic. "Now, where to first?"

Meanwhile, in the living room, the pumpkinhead turns this way and that, slowly rotating all the way around. It rises off the table, gnarled and blacked wood stretching out beneath it. It pushes itself up with long thin arms, fingers stretching out like pointed twigs. The gangly legs wobble as it rights itself. The jagged grin carved into its face widens ever so slightly. The long fingers flex, and it lopes unsteadily off, the candlelight bouncing along the corridor with it, haunting laughter rolling along in

its wake.

Elsewhere in the endless corridors that pretend to be the van's interior, a flash of lightning arcs out, "Ow!" Dell jerks her hand back from the doorknob, rubbing her fingers, "Someone takes their secrecy far too seriously! It's not as if I was going to steal much!" The door doesn't reply. "Stupid boss and his stupid rules not letting me get into people's rooms. Guess I'll have to find somewhere else." again the floor swallows her up, the van reclaiming her.

The jack o' lantern turns to either side, staring down the corridor, the glow swinging across the doors like a searchlight. The scent of the candle mingles with the wisps of smoke curling into the mouth. It looks down, and crouches, tracing circles in the floor with its spindly fingers. It cocks its head quizzically and taps on the floor, its finger sinking into the floor.

Dell wanders around the labyrinthine prop room, the light pale but adequate, the corridors between the props stretching off into the darkness. She sighs. "All these cool toys and no one to use them on. How come Miss 'I turned 18 in August' gets to go out when she's supposed to be being punished?" she sighs again. A light flickers across the corridor, deep into the shadows. Dell blinks but sees nothing but darkness.

The jack o' lantern prowls through the darkness, skirting through the corridors. It pauses for a moment, a pale glow breaking the darkness in the distance, muffled echoes sweeping past it. The leering mouth twitches and it scampers off on its long, gangly legs.

"Well, I can't play on my own. I've no idea what half this stuff even is, never mind what it does, or how to undo it." She pats a stainless steel frame, the metal riddled with holes through it, "I can't get into their rooms for even a little peek around. And it's Halloween so the only thing on will be those lame non-scary horror movies. Wonderful." The floor swallows her up, the light winking off behind her.

The jack o' lantern leaps into the light, just as it winks out. It peers around in the glow from its slanted triangle eyes. It presses its face up against the floor, drawing air through the triangle representing a nose. The floor swallows it up, plunging the room into darkness.

Dell flops onto the sofa, the TV flickering across channels. "No. No. No. No. Oh, look a rubber suit. Scary. Still, better than nothing." she throws a handful of popcorn into her mouth, "And better than some stupid party that I'm not old enough to go to. Definitely better."

The jack o' lantern rises up from the floor. The TV's music creeps along, an eerie piano to accompany the on-screen killer's silent footfalls. It takes a long step forward, its foot silent on the carpet as it reaches out its long gnarled fingers.

"Why do they always run up the stairs?" Dell asks the room, "It's a dead end. All he has to do is follow them up and go through each room and bam, dead cheerleader! Stupid bimbos deserve to be knifed."

The jack o' lantern straightens its hunched figure, looming over the sofa. It spreads its arms, long fingers ending in points like sharpened stakes. It's jagged grin pulls a little wider.

On the screen, the victim trembles inside cupboard, peering through the slats. The killer waits outside, calling softly to her, the camera flitting between his gleaming knife and the shadowy cupboard, focusing on the victim's wide eyes, shadows forming bars across her face as she breathes heavily. A shadow falls across the door and she holds her breath. Dell stops eating the popcorn,

unconsciously holding her breath.

The jack o' lantern pauses, and brings its hands down.

The cupboard door shatters inwards, the knife seeking the victim. She screams, as the blade comes away red.

Gnarled woody fingers touch Dell's shoulders. She screams as she leaps from the sofa, popcorn flying over the floor as she vanishes into the walls.

The girl's warm flesh jumps out of the jack o' lantern's fingers. It screams, ducking behind the sofa as its wail echoes out of the room.

The jack o' lantern cautiously raises its head, glowing eyes peering around the room. "Is, is it gone?" it asks in a high, quavering voice. "H-hello?" the jack shivers. "A-are you there? Anybody?"

Dell slides out of the wall behind it, a baseball bat held high over her head. "Hey!"

The jack o' lantern leaps high into the air with another scream, crashing down onto the sofa.

"Owwwwwww..." it moans, weakly raising its head. "What did you scare me like that for?"

"What did **I** scare **you** like that for?"

"Yes. What did I ever do to you?"

"You sneaked up and grabbed me and you're a monster and..."

"A monster? Me???" it sits up, facing her with glowing eyes across the sofa, "I have never been so insulted. A monster indeed." it folds its long gangly arms across its thin chest, turning its nose, if it had one, up. "To think that I, Jack O' Lantern, Spirit of All Hallows Eve, should be considered a monster. The very idea!"

Dell slowly lowers the bat, but doesn't quite let go of it, "You've got a pumpkin for a head."

"And you've got a bit of bone for yours, what's your point? Still, if it bothers you..." the long fingers grasp the sides of the pumpkin, twisting it back and forth until it pops off. Jack places it in front of him, "Is that better?" the head asks.

"No, not really."

"Honestly, you mortals are never happy!" he jams the head back on, folding his arms in a sulk,

"What are you doing here anyway?"

"What am I doing here?"

"Yes. Are you really going to repeat everything I say with a shriek of incredulity?"

"I live here!!"

"Here?" he looks hard at her, "Now see what you've done, you've got me doing it." he pouts. "This is a magical sub-dimensional tesseract construct only slightly tethered to the so-called real world. How can you live here?"

"It's a what?"

"Sub-dimensional tesseract construct. How can you live in something when you don't even know what it is?"

"It's the Tardis. It's a van that's way bigger on the inside than the outside, that's all."

"Oh, that's all, is it? It's bigger on the inside than the outside and 'that's all'? It's breaking two dozen laws of physics and you're not even slightly impressed?!"

Dell shrugs, "You get used to the weirdness around here."

"Except for monsters like me, apparently."

"Look, would it help if I said I was sorry for calling you a monster?"

"Well..." he draws it out, putting his fingers on his chin, "maybe."

"Fine. I'm sorry that I called you a monster."

"And for scaring me."

"No way! You scared me first!"

"Well, what if I apologise for scaring you, then you apologise for scaring me in turn?"

"Ok, I guess."

"Splendid. I am very sorry, little girl..."

"Little girl?! Little girl?!" she lifts the bat up. Jack scrambles back, holding his hands up.

"What have I done now?!"

"I'm 16! I'm not a little girl. Why does everyone treat me like I am one?"

"Well, what should I call you then?"

"Everyone calls me Dell."

"Dell? Fine, fine. Well, Dell, I am deeply and sincerely sorry if I frightened you at all. Please accept my humblest apologies." he bows.

"Uhm, likewise, I guess."

The thin shoulders slump in what is probably a sigh, "I suppose that will do. Now..."

"Hold it, what are you doing here?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, I live here, but what are you doing here?"

"Oh, well, you see, it's kind of, well, that is to say, uhm..." he laces and unlaces his fingers together, tapping the tips to each other, "I kind of misspoke earlier."

"Misspoke?"

"Alright,, alright so I exaggerated just a little bit. I'm not **the** spirit of Halloween, I'm just **a** spirit of Halloween."

"And what are you doing here?"

"Well, I sort of, the others are holding this big celebration, and they said I was too small to go. And then I saw this place out in the ether and I was curious and..." he sniffs, wiping the hole where a nose should be with the back of his hand.

"Don't cry, you're not the only one who's not allowed to a party."

"I'm not? Who else is....oh." he points a long finger at her, the tip almost reaching her t-shirt. "You, too?"

"Yup. Still, who needs their stupid parties? We don't, do we?"

"We don't?"

"Of course not. We can have fun on our own."

"We can. Oh, I'm so stupid, I'm sorry. I didn't do it right."

"Do what right?"

"Well, I'm supposed to say it first off."

"Say what?"

"Uhm, trick or treat, of course."

"What?"

"Sorry, sorry, I'll do it properly." he draws himself up, his back arching his head almost level with hers, only slightly higher, the black bark arching high behind him, his long fingers stretching out.

"Trick? Or treat?"

Dell smiles a crooked grin, "Oh, trick, definitely."

"Really? Really truly? No one chooses 'trick' anymore."

The smile grows, "Really tru..."

She stops as the long fingers rear back, plunging through her t-shirt and deep into her chest. She feels them probing around, spearing and gripping her ribs. And then Jack pulls, and keeps pulling, tearing at her as her skeleton rips its way free of her body. She gives a scream that cuts off into a long gurgle as her skull pulls free, blood and gore dripping from her bones as her body slumps to the floor. Blood spreads around her empty body as her skeleton stands there, it's bony feet still inside her body, feeling her organs pushing up against her bony heels. "There, what do you think?" She looks down, her skeleton shuddering, arms hugging herself under the ribs as she looks into her own lifeless brown eyes, her hair matted with blood. "What do I think?! I think you've killed me!" she reaches for the baseball bat.

"You said trick! What did you expect?!"

"Something where I wasn't dead." she steps out of the gore, her feet painted red, "Can you, can you put me back? Please?"

"Sure? It won't be much of a trick if you're only like this a few seconds."

"You can turn me back, right?"

"Oh, indubitably."

"You'd better, or your head and this," she holds up the bat, waving it menacingly, "are going to have a very close chat. Capice?"

Jack's eyes switch between the bat, and the bloody skull looking at him. "Oh, yes, I capice very, very well indeed."

"Good." she looks down at the pool of sticky blood, "It won't stain the carpet, will it? Boss will kill me if I do that."

"It will all be back in it's rightful place, I assure you."

"Great." she looks around at the popcorn covering the floor. "You sweep up, I'll get some more."

Jack looks down at the floor as the skeleton sinks away. "Sweep up, indeed. Who does she think I am?" he reaches out, his shadow peeling away from his dark body, gliding over the popcorn, each piece sinking into the darkness as the shadow passes over it.

A few minutes later, Dell returns, stepping gingerly over her corpse, a bowl full of popcorn balanced between her hands. "Wow. That's fast work."

"I aim to please."

"Well, you did. Sit down, if you're going to." she flops down, her bones rattling alarmingly, the bowl clinking against her ribs. A long wooden hand dips into the bowl, "Hey!"

"Oh weren't you going to share? Naughty, naughty." he wags his finger at her, slightly spoiling the admonishment by having a bit of popcorn speared on the fingertip. "He pops it into his mouth, the candle flame inside flickering as the popcorn bursts into flame, "Mmmmm. Nice and salty."

"How do you know what makes good popcorn?"

"Please, just because I'm a Halloween spirit doesn't mean I have no taste at all."

"Riiight." She digs a hand in, and drops them into her mouth, only to have the pieces tumble through her jaw. "Hey! No fair!"

Jack turns to regard her solemnly, his eyes glowing brightly, "This is Halloween. What's fair got to do with it? And that bowl is hardly appropriate for the evening, now, is it?"

"What should I use?"

"Well, I doe have something in ivory that might be better themed..."

"Cool, what?"

A long fingered hand closes around her skull, pulling it off her neck with a pop, "This." he turns her over, dipping her into the bowl of popcorn.

"Hey!!" Dell protests, as Jack carefully eats the popcorn out of her skull a piece at a time, running his fingertips right around her skull to make sure he hasn't missed any. "That wasn't nice."

"Didn't you enjoy it? A unique experience, I'd imagine."

"It tickled!"

"Oh, my deepest apologies." He lifts his head off with his other hand.

"What are you doing?"

"A little trick, nothing more."

"Riiight."

"So suspicious." he places his head onto Dell's neck.

"Hey! I can't feel my body anymore."

"Because it's not your body anymore."

"What?"

"Possession is nine tenths of the law, still, I believe." his long hands lower Dell onto his neck. The hands wave wildly.

"Great. Thanks. How do you control this body?" she stands up, wobbling on her feet, her bloody skull staring from atop the hunched shoulders. "So, this is my body now?"

"For now."

"And that's yours?"

"Quite so."

"Ooookay, then I think it's time for a trick myself."

"A trick? On me? Oh, dear."

Dell reaches the spindly fingers down, tugging off his feet. "Oh, the foot bone's connected to the shin bone..."

She continues to sing, pulling her old skeleton apart until all that's left is Jack's head sitting on a pile of bones.

"You missed a line."

"I did what?"

"Missed a line."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. The head bone's connected to the neck bone." The long black fingers close around Dell's skull, plucking it off and placing it on the pile as the other hand replaces Jack's head. "Now hear the word of the Lord."

"Unfair!"

"You keep saying that. I wonder what on Earth you have to compare to. You didn't really think I'd let you have control of my beautiful body, did you?"

"Kinda."

"Poor baby." he sits down, putting his arm around the bloody pile of bones, casually tossing pieces of popcorn into his mouth.

"Are you going to turn me back now?"

"Not riiiiight this instant, no." he tosses another piece of popcorn into his mouth.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm enjoying your company. Most people would have been screaming by now."

"But you'll turn me back eventually?"

"Oh, probably." another piece of popcorn.

"P-probably?"

The ends of the jagged mouth curl up into a smile, "Well, that's the thing with monsters, you never know what we'll do."

"I said I was sorry I called you a monster!"

"Oh, I know, but it still hurt my feelings. And you don't want to hurt a Halloween spirit's feelings, even if he's only a Jack O' Lantern."

Dell regards him with empty eyesockets, "When I get my body back, I'm going to hurt a lot more than your feelings." she mutters.

"Oh, alright, if you're going to give me that look. Anyone would think you had no sense of humour." he pushes himself off the couch, pulling her body over.

"No, this is really funny. Really."

"No, no, don't try to butter me up now. It's clear that you don't appreciate my genius." he reaches over, plucking her bones from the pile, dropping them into the jagged tear ripped through her chest. Dell tries to squirm, not easy given her current state, as her bones move through her cooling body, returning to their rightful place.

"That tickles."

"How truly, truly sad." he picks up her skull, sliding it into her chest.

For a moment, nothing happens. Then Dell's eyes blink, once, twice, and she takes a breath, hands going to her chest, feeling the smooth, unblemished skin through the rent in her t-shirt. "I liked that t-shirt."

"A thousand apologies. Next time I'll give your apparel full and appropriate care."

"Next time?"

"Of course. There's always next year, after all."

"Next year?"

"Halloween does happen every year, my dear Dell. And you enjoyed this year, I wager."

"Well, yeah. But next time, I'm choosing the treat."

"Oh, why wait? I may have taken a few liberties with your tricks. Have a treat." he pushes the popcorn bowl towards her.

"Great. You're giving me my own food as a treat." she reaches in, her hand closing on something icy gold. She pulls out a small black stone, polished smooth. "What's this?"

"That? Oh, that's the treat."

"What is it?"

"A token. Of my esteem and affection. May I?" He holds out his hand. Dell slowly hands the gem over.

"This isn't another trick, right?"

"Not as far as you know." the long fingers close around her wrist. "Open your hand." she does and Jack places the gem into the centre of her palm, and pushes. Dell shudders as the cold sinks into her palm and looks down as Jack releases her wrist so find a dark oval reflecting her face back.

"Well, it's pretty, but a bit offputting. Does it do anything?"

"Yes."

She sighs, "Ok, I'll ask, what does it do?"

"It marks you as a friend of mystery and shadow. Which means, before you ask," he continues, holding up a finger, "that you can see through shadows."

"See through shadows? I'll just use a flashlight."

"And a flashlight would let you see through any shadow as if you were the shadow, would it?"

"Huh?"

"When I say see through shadows, child, I mean see through shadows as if they were a scrying pool."

"Oh. Ohhhhhh."

"Exactly. I shall see you next year, Ardelle Christian." He sinks to the floor, his body folding up until only the pumpkin is left, the candle flickering out inside it.

"Hey, how did you know my name?" One eye closes, and opens as the candle gutters out. Dell looks down at her hand. "You're going to be fun."

The morning of All Souls Day, as the door to the van opens up, Dell yawns, stretching out on the couch, "Enjoy yourselves?" she yawns.

"Aye, ye didn't get up to any trouble, did ye?"

Dell looks up in perfect innocence, "Nope, no trouble at all."



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