

2024 ADULT SHORT STORY CONTEST – 3RD PLACE

Ebony Hair

By J. Millard Simpson

It was deep winter the night the child came. If Grandpere hadn't answered a call of nature, surely she'd have frozen to death.

“What is that? Is someone there?”

Was that a piece of dropped firewood? He squinted, and the black blur resolved not into bark but hair. *It was a small girl.*

Swiftly, he scooped her up and ran to the dining hut. The cook was abed, but the fire yet blazed for Sleipnir, down with fever in the sickroom behind. Kicking the cook's assistant from his pallet before the fire, he placed the child as near the hearth as he dared. “Boil water,” he ordered, and went to fetch Axelrod, our carpenter and what passed among us for a surgeon.

I bunked near Axel, and when he went, I followed. The whole camp woke and crowded into the dining hut, craning to see the new arrival. Our din woke Au Jus, the cook, from his fetid nest in the storeroom.

“What's all the racket, Hap?” he demanded, rubbing his eyes. I hate *Happy*, which mocks my scarred smile, but *Hap* I can live with. I told him what little I knew, and he grimaced, pushing forward toward his kitchen.

By now Axel had had enough. “Shoo! Back to bed with you! You'll all hear in the morning. Go!”

So fierce was his aspect that we all left uncomplaining. Even Au Jus fled before his scowl, latching his door behind him.

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Axel addressed us over breakfast. “We bathed her in hot water until she warmed. I think she's safe from frostbite, and her breathing is regular again. Children often survive many things that would fell a grown man, but she's so young, perhaps only five winters. She'll need more care. I'll stay with her.”

He was true to his word, nursing her while the rest of us went to work at the mine.

All day, we spoke together of the tiny guest fate had sent us. There were no villages up here in the high valley, and she was so small! She must somehow have made it through the pass despite the heavy snow.

“Perhaps she's light enough to have come over the crust,” suggested Bosch, a stuttering, oft-silent German. Such was her effect even before she awakened that the most taciturn spoke freely. Only mute DuBois kept silent, though near enough to follow the discussion.

We marveled at her survival in the harsh weather and wondered what extreme could have forced her to venture here, deep in the Carpathians. We knew well what had driven us, though we didn't speak of it: war at home, and the lure of easy wealth in this place the locals all feared.

We hoped she might be a sign of changing fortunes, a good omen long overdue. Six of our number had died this year, by accident or disease. Yes, there were fortunes to be made, but the price—! Yet now, perhaps....

After dinner, Axel told the assembled company he thought her out of danger. “Her cheeks are pale as snow, but there's red in her lips now. I'll sit with her in case she should stir.”

Eustace, the cook's boy, was evicted for the night, and Axel set up a chair in his spot, feet outstretched near the hearth. Though exhausted, he would brook no other in his place. He was dozing when the last of us left the table.

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Eustace found him the next morning when he went to start breakfast. He ran and got Au Jus, who sent him for the rest of us. White-haired Douglass and I arrived next.

Eustace brought the girl out into the main room and played with her while we tended to poor Axel in the back. He'd been found lying on the floor, a grotesque look on his face. A bitten apple lay nearby; perhaps he'd choked.

The child immediately took to the cook's assistant, who talked softly with her and kept her by him as he prepared our breakfast. She stayed silent.

Ah, but Axel! I could not close his eyes, however hard I tried, and that grimace—

In the end, we covered his face with a cloth. To this day I think of him in the dark of his grave, eyes forever staring....

The winter had been brutal, and death had taken a third of our company. Axel, though, had been hale and healthy, and it came as a shock. We buried him in our small cemetery, breaking open the frozen earth with picks. Douglass, who's older even than Grandpere, read a few words. Then we went off to work the mine. Sleipnir, though weak, was well enough to help, and Eustace now tended to our foundling. It was he who started calling her Bianca.

It was days before the wee girl recovered enough to be fully aware of her surroundings. She remained pale, with no roses in her cheeks. The only color in her face was the red of her lips, striking against the deep black of her hair. Yet she seemed sturdy enough.

I spent several days hiding my scarred face from the child, for fear I'd frighten her. Then, one evening at dinner, I looked up to see her standing by my table, staring. She reached her small hands toward my face, and I bent down to let her touch where my cheek had been cut through. When she was done, she nodded to herself, then climbed in my lap for the rest of the meal.

Bianca never did speak, though she had no difficulty hearing. I believed her voice had been frightened out of her. We learned through gestures that her father was dead and her mother had driven her away, young though she was. The least mention of her mother visibly terrified her, poor thing.

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We were shorthanded, and every man was needed to work the mine. We'd assembled the Baron's share of the ore, but now we needed as much again to cover our stake. Fortunately, Sleipnir was better, and the cook and his boy did double duty. Poor Eustace was unused to hard labor but did his best. Often, we sent him back at midday, worn out.

As the land was wild and untamed, we warned little Bianca to stay close to camp while we worked. Ever obedient, she did as she was bidden, and made herself useful by cleaning, carrying water from the stream, and performing such small chores as she was capable of.

It's a strange thing, but sometimes the roughest souls can be the gentlest. Before long, her sweet nature had won over even the most antisocial among us—and our occupation does not draw the genial. Stuttering Bosch sang lullabies, and DuBois the silent capered about and pulled comic faces to make her smile. Even scowling Grandpere, foul-tempered as they come, would have walked over hot coals for her. We found ourselves competing in small ways to please her, some offering a tasty treat, others carving small toys. In return, she bestowed on us her complete trust and the unconditional love of which only a child is capable.

We debated over Bianca's future, worrying it between us like dogs with salt beef. Eventually, we decided to send her to the Baron with the first ore train. Our valley would be cut off by deep snow for weeks yet, though, so we gave her one of our barracks huts and crowded into the other two. The hardship was to us as nothing. She brought us such joy. She delighted in her own space, though she often left to be with her friend, the cook's boy.

When Eustace died, she was inconsolable.

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As with Axel, he was found on the kitchen floor in the morning, his face twisted with strong emotion. In his hand were the splintered remains of a hair comb he'd been carving, perhaps broken in a convulsion. Another grave was dug in the frozen earth as Douglass and I tended to his body.

“So young,” Douglass said to me. “Axel at least lived a full life, but Eustace... I don't know, Hap, I really don't.”

I was deeply grieved myself, but even so, I was amazed to see tears running down the seamed face of my old friend. We had become inured to loss these past months as our numbers steadily dwindled. Then I realized part of it was fear Bianca might be next—and of the unknown. Death without cause was a new terror.

We all talked after the burial and decided to post a watch for the next few nights. We had much to do and little time, but if something out there was killing our fellows, we had little choice. We would stand guard in pairs. Every man among us resolved to do with less sleep.

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Open cliff-face mining is fundamentally unsafe, and we were pushing ourselves to make up for lost numbers. In hindsight, we should have expected it. One of our shorings, built without Axel's expertise, collapsed, and Bart died outright in the rockfall. George and Corny were both badly injured. We did what we could, tending them in our sick room, but both soon succumbed.

All three were buried as soon as weather permitted. Again, Douglass said the words; again; we went straight back to our labors. Slowly, the ore piles grew, as did our profits, if such they could still be said to be. We'd paid a blood price for every rock.

In the beginning, we'd rested on the Sabbath, but now there was no time. The Baron's man would come with the thaw to tally our haul, and without our pay, we'd never survive the summer. Instead, we took turns resting in camp to guard Bianca, preparing dinner while the rest worked the mine; for Au Jus was especially strong, and we could not spare him.

As the weeks progressed, first Dexter and then Ferdinand fell sick with a wasting ailment. When they could no longer work, they took to the sick room.

"It is some *strega* cursing us, sending poisons," muttered Grandpere. "The child's mother is out there, watching."

We decided to search the valley, but that night the spring rains came. The cliff face that was our dig site flooded, and for better or worse our work was done. For three days the storm raged, and we stayed indoors, resting at long last. The morning of the fourth we went out in the mud to bury our fellows, both dead the night before.

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Douglass stood once more at the stone that served as an altar, and read once more from our Bible. Bianca clung to the bier and cried freely, and so too did those few of us who survived. We had been 20 in the autumn; today we numbered but eight including the girl. The invisible specters of our absent fellows loomed large in our midst.

We had no warning at all. The child's demented mother appeared as if from nowhere. She was soaked to the skin, frostbit, and dressed in rags. In her hand she carried a broad-bladed hewing axe.

Before any of us could react, she rushed into our midst, seized the girl, and slew her with one stroke.

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Two of us bound the woman and locked her in the hut. She didn't resist, a small mercy. She only wept piteously, her eyes wild and unfocused. So did we, grown men though we were.

Perhaps we should have hanged her as punishment, according to custom. Instead, we resolved to leave it to our betters, either Church or Baron. I think we'd all seen enough death.

Surely, this mother was mad. Looking at her, it was hard to imagine so slight a woman could have carried out such a brutal attack. Only that unnatural strength the insane possess could have driven the axe clear through her victim, burying it so deeply into the wooden bier that we'd broken the haft trying to remove it.

But was she the cause of the mysterious deaths of Eustace and Axel? Could the madwoman have somehow poisoned Ferdinand or Dexter? And if so, why had we seen no sign of her before now? We could make no sense of it.

"At least now we can stop standing watch of nights," said Au Jus. I looked at him quizzically; he shrugged. "We've nothing left to lose."

I could not argue with him.

Grandpere, weeping silently, did his best to make Bianca's pitiful little corpse look presentable for her burial. Tenderly, he hid her wounds beneath cloth scavenged from coat linings and spare linens, tying a wide bow of scarlet ribbon to conceal the gaping wound that once had been her throat. The innocent beauty of her still form was a clawing agony, unbearable; yet bear it we did, somehow.

That evening we laid her out on a white bedsheet. On her chest, we placed the wooden cross from the storeroom door. Then we took turns standing vigil throughout the icy night.

The Baron's man arrived with the dawn. Young, strong, and well-favored, he stood head and shoulders above the rest of us. By comparison, we looked soiled and uncouth; yet he treated us with respect. He listened closely as Douglass recounted the tale of Bianca, the child that had found us, the joy she'd brought to our miserable lives, and then her sudden awful death. He agreed to take charge of the madwoman and to see she faced justice for her crime before the Baron himself.

Then the lordling knelt with us in the mud by the small grave and sent up his prayers. He helped plant the wooden cross from her breast that would be her only marker. When the time came to lay her to rest, he bent over the small body to kiss her forehead.

At that moment a loud crash came from the shed where her mother had been imprisoned. While her guard was at the burial, she had burst free, and even now she ran toward the gathering shrieking. We stood still, watching as if transfixed.

Suddenly, the madwoman fell to her knees. Her eyes widened in horror, and she pointed. We all turned back and saw behind us what the mother had seen: tiny white hands reaching up to embrace the young nobleman as if his kiss had somehow miraculously returned her to life.

Then his body fell aside, life's blood pooling on the muddy ground. The scarlet ribbon streamed away and up she sat, restored, her lips red with fresh blood and skin gleaming snow white against the ebon blackness of her hair.