

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Thirty-First Jack

by
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Day Forty-Three / First Day in Oz
The Winkie Country, Oz
Late Evening

When Dorothy and the others came back from the galley, I was looking out the window towards the rear of the dirigible. I'd spotted movement below that didn't really look mechanical. If I didn't know better, I would've sworn it was some kind of African antelope, speeding about on the margins of the desert- at least, that's the only animal I'd seen at the zoo that had quite that look to it. Dorothy borrowed Tom's scope, though. Apparently it was the Wheelers, dressed in very different clothing than usual- drab, dusty brown. What they were doing couldn't be made out, but she said there was no way they could be anything else.

We didn't see them for very long, though. Our course took us over the Desert proper, away from their territory. After some discussion in the galley, Miss Poppins had decided that we'd make for the Winkie Country first, on the chance that the Tin Man or the Scarecrow might be found there. That meant swinging around to skirt Oz proper until we came into the western quarter. I suppose I might've appreciated the view if our circumstances were different. As it stood, the most I can really say is that desert isn't much to look at from above. Maybe if it weren't the sort of desert that kills anything that sets foot on it, the view would've been different.

Eventually, the desert gave way to forest. I say 'forest' because it was composed of trees; if I hadn't known what to expect I wouldn't have recognised the sight at all. Even knowing that everything in the Winkie Country was supposed to be yellow, I still barely realised what I was looking at. There's yellow and then there's yellow, if you know what I mean. I'd been expecting a more natural sort of colour. Willow leaves turn a perfectly acceptable shade of yellow in the autumn, and the maples that don't turn flaming red do the same thing. Wheat fields are more of a golden brown, but it's still close enough to gold to qualify as yellow, too.

At least, that's what I thought before the Winkie Country came into sight. The cluster of ugly grey buildings squatting at the border between the Winkie Country and the desert was the only thing that wasn't ... you know, I can't even describe that yellow. The best I can do is say that it was as yellow as my tunic is red. Next to that yellow forest, the Prufrock buildings stood out like the few remaining

buildings in Dawson City the day after the Fire. They had to have been Prufrock's work, there was no question of that. Even if they hadn't looked completely wrong in the landscape below, there was one inescapable fact about them. I think it occurred to all of us, but it was Tom who said it aloud:

"Those look just like the port buildings Prufrock had in Glasgow."

It didn't make much sense at first (no water, after all), but there were those sand-ships to contend with. Probably they pulled up to the port buildings and loaded and unloaded in exactly the same way as a ship in Glasgow would've done. The job defines what's needed of a building, after all, no matter where in the world you are. True, these buildings didn't seem likely to house more Mermaid Queens, but the rest of their functions were probably the same.

Needless to say, we didn't want to be noticed by whoever was working down there. Cranston circled the blimp around further and took us in over that impossibly yellow forest. I don't know if any of the countries in Oz have ever had a proper autumn or winter. I doubt it, from what the books say of the spell that keeps this place from aging like the civilized countries. All I know is that everything we saw- trees, clearings, vegetable farms, fields, houses- was the same brilliant yellow, whatever season it might've been below. The only exception was the occasional streak of grey or black, where the Prufrock people had slapped down a strip of some kind of tarmac.

Dorothy had stopped looking angry by this time- it was a long trip, after all. I didn't like her look any better now, though. With anger, you know where you stand. With as blank a face as she had, anything might happen. She hadn't said a word since spotting the Wheelers. All she'd done was pace a little and look out the windows. I was just about to ask her what she was thinking when she stopped next to one of the windows and let out a cry of, "Pumpkins!"

"Excuse me?" said Tom, who'd been about to go relieve Cranston at the helm.

Dorothy pointed out the window. Sure enough, we were passing over a field of rows upon rows of pumpkins. The otherwise yellow field (thankfully, a more natural shade of yellow than those trees) stretched out behind a yellow pumpkin-shaped house that looked like it could've done with a few solid weeks of work to put things right. We were flying low enough that I could make out another, smaller field nearby, peppered with upright stones. I knew what those were, all right. According to the books, there was only one place in Oz that had any need for them. "Gravestones," I murmured.

Hugo, who had Tom's scope and was frowning at the two fields, looked over at me. "Sorry?"

I pointed. "Am I right? Are those things gravestones?"

"It looks like it. That's strange- I thought nobody died in Oz?"

"They don't," said Dorothy, standing on tiptoe and cupping her hands around her eyes to get a better look. "That's just for the heads."

"Heads," repeated Hugo, a peculiar look crossing his face.

"Heads, Mr. Danner," said Miss Poppins. She cast a glance of her own out the window. "I believe that this calls for a stop."

Dorothy picked up the rolled-up carpet as Cranston brought the dirigible's engines to a halt. As she started towards the hatch, I looked out the window one more time. It might've been Jack Pumpkinhead's home once, but Heaven only knew what it might be hiding now...

I knew the Belt would keep her from being harmed. And the thing was this: I didn't care. It might still be dangerous. Somehow I doubted the Belt could do much if she were knocked off the carpet. Or worse- what if she landed successfully, but Jack's house were full of Prufrock soldiers? Soldiers with orders to capture, instead of trying to kill? No; no, I wasn't going to let her go out there alone. Not if I had anything to say about it. And I did.

"Dorothy," I said, "I'm coming with you."

I don't think anyone expected that. There was a moment of silence, and then the arguments broke out, but- well. I let them argue. Miss Poppins could sort it out. I helped Dorothy roll out the carpet and waited for Hugo to open the hatch. Fortunately, the carpet was big enough that I didn't have to look down for long. Dorothy got aboard the carpet first. I sat down behind her- it might've been strong enough to hold me up, but I didn't trust the winds beneath the blimp- and waited.

Miss Poppins finally nodded. Dorothy took a deep breath and looked over her shoulder at me. "Ready, Mr. Preston?"

"I think so, Dorothy."

And we were off.

The winds really were fierce, and I've been out in some of the worst storms the Yukon can throw at a man. I suppose it makes a difference, being hundreds of feet above the ground. Whatever wizard or witch had made the carpet did a splendid job- it hardly seemed to notice the winds whipping around us. I don't think its fringe was even flapping much. Silly thing to think about, I know, but it was better than thinking of just how high up we were.

Dorothy leaned sideways a little, and the carpet started to circle downwards. As we turned over the roof of Jack's house, something caught my eye: a gangly figure

of brown wood, a single blob of orange at its top. "Dorothy?" I yelled (had to- even at this height, the winds were too much for anything quieter). "Is that Jack there?"

"I b'lieve so, Mr. Preston! Jack! Jack!"

The gangly wooden figure below us shaded his eyes with one hand for a moment, then staggered back a few paces. Gripping his pitchfork as if it were a spear, he called back: "Who's there?"

"It's me!" she cried. "It's Dorothy!"

"Dorothy?"

"Yes!"

"But you're dead!"

"I'm not!"

"But-" If a face carved into a pumpkin can look crestfallen, this one did. "But you've been dead for years," Jack said.

"I haven't been," Dorothy answered, "not even a little bit." She sighed, looking at me. Below us, Jack just shook his head mournfully. "It's me!" she tried again. "Jack, it's me, Dorothy!"

He hefted the pitchfork again. "You're dead," he insisted.

"No, I'm not! Jack-"

"If you're not dead," Jack said, "then where've you been?"

Drawing herself up straight, Dorothy answered, "I've been in stasis!"

It's funny, how such a little thing can strike you. I'd been the one to explain that word to her. She'd understood. And she'd taken that understanding to heart, even gone past what I'd told her- well, I don't quite know what to say, except that just then I don't think I could have been more proud of her for that understanding if she'd been my own daughter.

Unfortunately, Jack didn't feel the same way. A crestfallen pumpkin is one thing, but a bewildered one is quite another. Jack was staring at us blankly, so I leaned over and waved. "Hello there, Jack."

Jack Pumpkinhead hasn't got eyelids, just a carved face, so I suppose he's always staring. Still, the way he looked at me was a lot more like a human way of staring than anything I'd seen so far. "You're the biggest Quadling I've ever seen," he said, sounding a little shocked.

It took a minute to realize what he meant. The Winkies wear yellow, the Munchkins blue, the Quadlings red- and I was in uniform. I almost laughed as I answered him. "That's because I'm not from Oz. I'm from a country called Canada."

"Where's that?"

Dorothy's eyes went wide and she shook her head, but I'd already started speaking. "It's one of the civilized countries-"

"Civilized?" Jack snarled, jabbing the pitchfork upwards.

Too late, I realized my mistake: the Prufrocks came from the civilized countries too. "It's Canada!" I said quickly. "It's not that kind of civilization!"

Fortunately for both of us, Dorothy picked that moment to speak again. "It's all right, Jack! He's a friend!"

Jack tilted his head just as if he hadn't seen her at all. "Dorothy?"

"That's right!"

"But you're dead!"

I don't think I've ever seen her look that frustrated. She closed her eyes for a moment, then looked down at Jack again. "Jack, when was the last time you changed your head?"

"... You're you," the figure below us finally said, and trudged off into the house.

Dorothy glanced at me, looking a little relieved. "He'll be all right in a bit."

"I don't remember him being like that in any of the books."

"Oh, it's just his head. He's worn it too long to be healthy. He'll be all right once he changes it," she assured me.

A few moments later we touched down. As I stepped onto solid ground again, Jack emerged from his house, his pumpkin head looking a good deal fresher and newer. "Dorothy?" he asked. "Is it really you?"

"Yes, Jack," she said, "it really is."

For a moment he looked like he was going to touch the ground- but no. No, Jack Pumpkinhead was seven feet tall, which meant he had to bend down low if he was going to hold out his arms to a gleeful Dorothy. She hugged him, smiling, and beckoned me over. "Mr. Preston, this is Jack Pumpkinhead. Jack, this is Mr. Frank Preston; he's a policeman in his country, and my friend."

I stuck out my hand. "Pleased to meet you, Jack," I said.

He looked down at the hand for a second before shaking it. I'm not sure he knew what he was supposed to do. I imagine there's not much call for handshakes in the Winkie Country. Regardless, Dorothy looked happy. "He's here to help, and so are the rest of my friends." She pointed at the blimp as Jack obediently looked up. "Only we don't know all that's happened yet."

Jack nodded. "A lot of things've happened, Dorothy," he said mournfully.

"Could you tell us about them? Once you've buried your head, I mean?"

He nodded again as he started towards the field of tombstones. There were an awful lot of them, and the space was very small, but you don't really need much room to bury a pumpkin. The head Jack had been wearing when we saw him from the carpet sat to one side. Next to it was one of his tombstones, which was already carved with the words 'Here Lies The Mortal Part of JACK PUMPKINHEAD, Which Spoiled'. As he started to etch the date into the stone, he asked, "Are you going to land your flying house on the people who burned down the Emerald City, Dorothy?"

She gave a little start at Jack's words, and a look of shock went over her face. It vanished almost immediately, turning into a thoughtful frown. Eventually, she said, "Yes... I rather believe I will."

"That's good," said Jack, who had finished carving the date.

We buried the old head without much ceremony, and Dorothy demonstrated the flying carpet for Jack. There was more than enough room for the three of us, although Jack seemed to find the whole thing very awkward. I didn't blame him, of course. Dorothy had a good hand with the carpet and the ride up to the dirigible went smoothly, but we were still sitting on nothing but a piece of flying cloth, and that's not an easy thing for anyone to bear.