



# Bad Clown

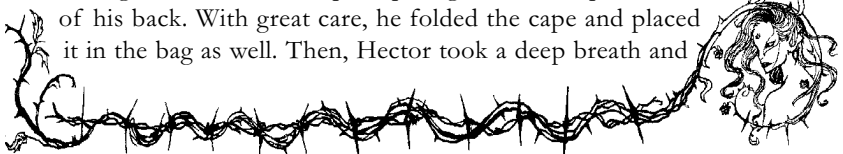
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**H**ECTOR LOVED THE CLASSICS. SOME OF HIS COLLEAGUES WOULD groan whenever he threw a cream pie in the face of a mark or tumbled around the sawdust-strewn floor, giggling as the children laughed at his pratfalls. He didn't care, so long as he had the children's attention. Classic gags could be miraculously new for them. His taste in dress reflected his love of the old days: black and white checkered vest and black three-belled jester's cap with white hose. The cap fitted over his eyes, doubling as a mask with an obscenely long nose. For a splash of color, he wore red gloves and slippers and a red cape with a gold lining that hung over his shoulders, smoothing over his outline in just the perfect manner. A little white face completed the costume. The only props he carried were his cane and a multitude of colored handkerchiefs tucked inside his vest.

"What is black and white and red all over?" Hector asked the other clowns in the Oberon-Titania Circus who would groan, fully aware he would exclaim the answer before anyone would try to respond. "Me!"

As a small regional circus, Oberon-Titania did not have many individual acts, which suited Hector fine. His double-jointed frame and wiry physique enabled him to not only serve as one of the clowns, but also aerialist, contortionist, escape artist, and, on occasion, human cannonball. Hector also mastered knife throwing, but he rarely showed that skill off in the rings. He preferred to reserve that for his avocation.

The sun was just dipping below the Appalachian Mountains as Hector the Harlequin tucked several sharpened implements into his shoulder bag. He removed his cape, exposing a small hump in the center of his back. With great care, he folded the cape and placed it in the bag as well. Then, Hector took a deep breath and



unfolded his wings. Taking a quick glance around the park to make sure none of his fellow carnies were watching, he leapt into the air and flew north.



Leif opened his bottle of beer as he watched the sun go down and felt a twinge of nostalgia. The rolling mountains of Pennsylvania always reminded him of home, so he made sure the circus passed through here every year. He took a swig of the dark ale, so unlike the colored rice water that the big American breweries passed off. Since it was brewed locally, stocking up on the ale was another perk of visiting Pennsylvania. Tetsu had tried to show him how to order a case through the microbrewery's website, but Leif didn't trust all the technology in this new world.

A raven settled on the roof of Leif's trailer. "The Harlequin's about," the bird squawked.

Leif took another swig. "You know the rules, Tetsu. If you want to talk to me, you have to have lips."

The raven let out a noise of protest, "No time, little person!"

Leif finished his ale with a final gulp and pitched the bottle at Tetsu. The raven just barely hopped out of the way and fluttered to the ground. "Shift, now," Leif said. "And I warned you about calling me a 'little person', tengu!"

With a sigh, the raven twitched as he grew, shaking off feathers and sprouting fingers. His face transformed from that of a bird to what appeared to be a handsome young Japanese man, though his long beak of a nose made him look like he was preparing for a high school production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Tetsu straightened himself and smoothed his black silk shirt and pants, tracing the gold embroidery along the collar and lapels with his fingers. "Sorry, Leif," he said. "I was just trying to keep up with the modern parlance."

Leif slipped off of his tiny deck chair and folded it up as he let out a snort of disgust. "I hate that bloody politically correct term. I'm a dwarf. It's what I've been for eight hundred years. It's what I'll always be."

"Eight hundred and six," Tetsu corrected.

"Who's counting?" Leif reached up to open the door to his trailer. "Let's go inside."

Leif kept only a few personal items in his trailer. It served not only as his sleeping quarters while on the road, but the business office for the Oberon-Titania Circus. A small desk and filing cabinet fill most of the front section. A PC sat on the desk, though Leif rarely used it. A few of the circus's framed promotional posters hung on the walls, including one that proclaimed, "Leif Erikson, the World's Smallest Ringmaster!" Leif sighed at its yellowing edges. The date on it was 1936.

Leif settled behind his desk and waited for Tetsu to take a seat. "Now then, what is so important about the Harlequin?" he said, starting to open another beer.

Tetsu cleared his throat. "He's unseeleie."

The bottle slipped from Leif's fingers and struck the edge of the desk, spilling foam on his white shirt and red jacket. "What? Are you're sure?"