

A girl is haunted by Joseph Smith's wife. A timid gay man unleashes his inner beast through a role-playing game. A plastic surgeon accidentally discovers a new life form. God's wives fight for supremacy amongst themselves. And much more.

Zombies for Jesus

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Zombies
for
Jesus

Johnny Townsend

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The Ghost of Emma Smith

I was fourteen when I had my first vision. I was walking upstairs to my bedroom with a headache, intending to lie down for a half hour, but when I entered my room, there was a woman sitting on my bed wearing old-fashioned clothing. My mouth fell open, but I remembered my manners. “Hello,” I said. I actually curtsied, having watched a movie the day before where a lady did this when meeting people.

The woman on the bed smiled, raised herself up, and faded away.

I stood there in astonishment for several moments. I was terribly sleepy, but I knew I had not imagined this. I felt alert enough now to go to my parents’ bedroom. My mother was taking a nap.

I shook her shoulder, and after several moments, she looked up groggily. “What is it, Eliza?”

“I think I just saw Emma Smith.”

My mother sighed, and I explained what had happened. At that point, she sat up in her bed, looking worried. “Ever since we moved here in November, I’ve had the feeling we weren’t alone. I wonder why the ghost appeared to you?” She looked at me sharply. “It certainly wasn’t Emma Smith. This house isn’t old enough. It was just some other woman who lived here before us. Do you suppose she’s never moved on? Can a person sneak out of the Spirit World? Only resurrected people can really act as messengers, not spirits.”

My family had always lived in Palmyra, and we loved staying where the Mormon Church was founded. Being

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Mormon in Palmyra influenced everything we did or thought. We'd lived in a 1960's-era house most of my life, then one built in the 1950's, and two months ago, we'd moved into this old home built in the 1920's. It was a move up for us, a stately old house, even if in a bit of disrepair. The furnace clanked heavily, but the plumbing seemed sound, though Dad had said we'd need to replace the hot water heater soon. We eventually wanted to find a house that had actually been around back in 1830, but those were hard to find and very expensive. My mother was the driving force behind our going backward to older and older houses. My father would sigh whenever my mother found a new prospect, but he liked antiques and seemed to want the simpler way of life an old house represented, so he went along with the moves.

"I know why she appeared to me," I said timidly.

"Now, I won't have any more of that, Eliza."

I nodded and went back to my room. I knew, though, that it was time for a new direction in the Church. I'd read the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants and parts of the Bible. Women might be the mothers of nations, the mothers of prophets, of the Messiah himself, but they were still afterthoughts. I realized, however, that it was time for a woman to become a prophet. I was fourteen now, the same age Joseph Smith had been, and in the same town he had lived in, when he had his first vision. I knew it was my destiny.

The fact that it was Emma Smith who had appeared to me, and not Adam or Moroni or Peter, told me I was right.

I knelt beside my bed and prayed. "Heavenly Father, I'm ready. Please send Emma back to me."

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I stayed on my knees half an hour and eventually grew tired and fell asleep on the floor beside my bed.

Over the next several days, I continued to feel the presence of an unseen being. I began talking to her when I was alone, in case she could hear me. It seemed to happen most often in the late evening or early morning. At school, there was no hint of prophetic inspiration. I couldn't even pass my algebra tests. And in the afternoon when I came home, I felt completely alone in my room. It was only as the evening dragged on into the late hours that I could feel Emma trying to reach me again.

One Saturday, when I was in the kitchen with Mom, my little brother Samuel came up to us. "What do you want, Mom?"

She looked at him and laughed. "What do you mean?"

"I heard you calling and calling."

Mom looked at me and then back at Samuel. "No one's been calling you, dear."

"Sure you were."

"I've been here all along," I offered. "Mom never called."

Samuel stomped his foot. "Real funny," he said and stormed off.

Mom looked at me quizzically, but I looked away, irritated. Had Emma Smith been calling to Samuel? Was I being passed over for yet another male? Had I done something wrong? Not displayed enough faith? Samuel was only eleven. It seemed very unfair for him to get to be a prophet.

My headaches seemed worse over the weekend, though I usually felt better after getting out of the house for a few hours on Sunday for church. I began hearing bells ringing in the

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middle of the night, and once I woke up with the vivid sensation that someone was strangling me. I fought off the attacker and turned on my lamp, only to find the room empty.

I felt a chill run through me. I remembered that just before Joseph Smith's first vision, he was attacked by unseen hands, too. I was happy to know I was still being considered for the position of prophetess, but a little unnerved as well.

One evening during dinner, when the whole family was around the kitchen table, there was not much talking, unusual for us. Everybody seemed to be in a bad mood or depressed or feeling nauseated. I had lost my appetite but was forcing myself to eat because I knew my mother always worked hard on dinner.

"The green beans came out really good," I said.

Mom nodded listlessly.

I looked at my brother. "Sam, what did you study in English today?"

"We read a story about ghosts," he said glumly. "I told my teacher we had ghosts in our house, and she gave me punishwork to do."

"Well, we certainly don't have ghosts," said my Dad firmly. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Doesn't the Church teach that our spirits go on after we die?" I asked. "Why can't there be ghosts?"

"Spirits go to the Spirit World or Spirit Prison after they die," said my mother. "They don't hang around here."

"But you said—"

My mother shook her head at me sharply.

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“I saw a woman in my room,” said Samuel.

“You most certainly did not,” my father replied.

“Joseph Smith saw ghosts,” I offered.

Mother put her fork down and looked at my father nervously. “He did not. He saw resurrected beings. There’s a big difference.” I looked at my father, who was rolling his eyes. It irritated me.

“But they were still dead people,” I insisted. “I think Emma Smith has been coming here. *I* saw her once, too.” I looked at my brother for confirmation. He was staring at his plate queasily.

“I won’t tolerate another word on the subject,” said my father. “I—“

“Do you hear that?” I interrupted, holding out my hand over the table to shush everyone.

“What?”

“Footsteps upstairs!”

Everyone listened. “I don’t hear a thing.”

“It’s as plain as your snoring at night. And it’s coming from my room!” I jumped up from the table and hurtled up the stairs two at a time. I threw open the door to my room and looked about.

My father and mother were right behind me. “Well?” demanded my father.

“I don’t see her,” I said in disappointment. “But I’m sure that—“

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“Oh, good grief. The Church has poisoned you with all this nonsense. There are no prophets, no visions, not even any Spirit World. It’s all superstition.”

“Oh, Mark, how can you say such a thing?”

“Dad, you’re going to get us zapped. We’ll all die in our sleep.”

“Anybody up here?” asked Samuel.

“No. We’re going back downstairs to finish our dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Get back downstairs.”

Maybe my Dad was the reason Emma was hesitant in appearing to me. Joseph Smith had had supportive parents, and even a prophet needs support if he’s only fourteen. I had to convince Emma to come see me even if my father was an apostate.

I left little notes for Emma in my room the next day, and I fasted on Friday. Saturday morning, I read more of a biography on Emma, and Saturday afternoon while I was praying for God to call upon me, I fell asleep beside my bed.

I woke up later with a splitting headache, and my vision was a little blurry. But I could distinctly feel someone else was in the room with me.

“Emma?” I asked.

I heard a rustling and stood up to look around. Right in front of my dresser was a woman. I couldn’t tell if it was the same person I’d seen before, but I started walking toward her, smiling. She began walking toward me as well.

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“What can you tell me?” I asked. “What’s the revelation? My news for the world?”

There was no response, and I stopped walking. Emma did, too. Then as my vision cleared, I saw that I was looking at my reflection in the mirror. Had it all been a mistake?

I shook my head. I was *sure* there had been someone else in the room. Perhaps when I stopped walking toward her, I demonstrated a lack of faith and made her disappear. Why hadn’t I gone up to embrace her?

Sunday, Dad said he felt too sick to go to church, but we all suspected that after his confession of faithlessness, he was just trying to avoid taking the sacrament. I couldn’t do a complete fast again so soon, but I skipped breakfast, asking for God to touch my father’s heart, and to send Emma back to me again. Maybe Emma could tell me how I could reach into my father’s soul. Saving my own family would be as important as anything I could do for the Church.

I confided in my friend Shelly after Sunday School what had been happening. I tried not to be obnoxious about my privileged status, but I still expected her to be impressed.

She was not.

“Oh, Eliza! That house is haunted. I meant to tell you when you moved in, but I didn’t want to scare you. The family that lived there before all reported seeing and hearing strange things, and then one day they were all found dead in their beds. You’ve got to get out of there.”

I was dumbfounded. Could Shelly be right? We were told that Satan could appear as an angel of light. Were these evil spirits in our house and not good ones? Was I really not about

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to be chosen as a prophet? Maybe the woman in my room was the wife of one of the early persecutors.

Still, I thought, if I was in tune enough with the Spirit World to see this much, I could ask for more. I could still see Emma if my heart was pure.

I went to my Dad's bedside after I returned home and put my hand on his head. He smiled weakly. "Hi, honey."

"Still feeling rotten?"

"I have a terrible headache."

I hesitated a moment and then blurted out, "I know I don't have the priesthood, but I can still give you a blessing."

Dad frowned.

"I've seen Emma Smith twice now. I can ask her to see that you're healed. On the other side, I bet women *do* hold the priesthood. I think—"

Dad forced himself to sit up. "Eliza, I'm going to have to forbid you to ever go back to church."

"What?"

"I thought it would be harmless to let kids have some socializing outside of school. But I can see these toxic teachings just go on seeping insidiously into your brain."

"Dad, it's all true. Emma—"

"I'm taking away your Church books. From now on, you'll read classics, or science books, or history books."

"My biography of Emma is a history book."

"That does it."

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Dad swung his legs to the floor and stood up in his underwear. He wore just boxers and a T-shirt, not the special garments Mom wore after they went through the temple. It made me sad to see him so decadently secular.

Dad headed toward my room, and I suddenly realized what he was up to. “No, Dad!” I said. “You can’t. The Church is good. The Church is true. I’m going to be a prophet. I—“

Dad pushed open my door and walked into the room, with me only a step behind. He stopped abruptly and stared at my dresser. I frowned.

“Oh, my god.”

“What?”

“There’s a woman in your room.”

Now my *Dad* was having a vision? My heart started beating faster. *He* wasn’t going to steal my revelations away from me, was he? I remembered that Paul and Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah had all been wicked and then seen miraculous visions and become great men.

It wasn’t *fair*. I was the one who was always good. I was the one the Church needed. Why were men always chosen over women? I stomped my foot.

“Emma!” I called. “I want you to appear to me right now!”

My father collapsed on the floor, and I reached down to revive him. There was no response. It was just like King Lamoni. I ran to get my mother. She called an ambulance, and soon we were all at the hospital awaiting word. Had my father been struck down like Korihor for doubting? Were we going to lose him? Perhaps his illness was just to provide a way for me to show the power of women when I healed him later.

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After a long while, the doctor came over to us, smiling grimly. “It looks like your husband is suffering carbon monoxide poisoning. I expect you all are. You’ll have to leave your home until you can get it checked out and repair whatever gas appliances are causing the problem.”

My mouth fell open.

“Have you been experiencing headaches?” the doctor went on. “Hearing noises? Seeing things?”

I closed my mouth and could feel my jaw clench. This man was *not* going to take away my visions. It was a lie, a tool of the devil to shake my faith. If I proved myself strong now, I could still earn my place among the prophets.

“Do you have somewhere to stay?” asked the doctor.

“Yes,” said my mother. “We’re friendly with the neighbors next door.”

“Good. But first, let’s see if we need to admit any of the rest of you to the hospital as well.”

We submitted to the blood tests, and before long, we heard the verdict. My mother would have to stay in the hospital at least overnight while receiving pure oxygen. Samuel and I had to breathe it for a couple of hours, but we were allowed to go to the neighbors’ house as long as we came back for another dose of oxygen tomorrow.

Mom called Mrs. Thompson, who agreed to come pick us up. Samuel and I had dinner with them, and then we were ushered off to bed, Sam sharing her son Allen’s room, since Allen was in Sam’s class at school, and me getting the guest room all to myself.

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Lying in bed in the dark, I thought about what to do. Even if it were true that my visions were caused by carbon monoxide, I had to wonder if that wasn't a viable catalyst for enlightenment, like peyote or LSD or any of the other things people used. Emma hadn't been a hallucination. I had truly seen her. And I wanted to see her again.

After the Thompsons were finally asleep, I put on my shoes and slipped out the back door. It was especially cold tonight, and I wanted to make sure to get enough gas to compensate for several hours out of the house, so I turned up the furnace. It was like seeding a cloud, I decided. Joan of Arc might have been schizophrenic to receive her visions, but she was still a prophet, even if not recognized by the Church. For all I knew, Joseph Smith had been bipolar or schizophrenic himself. But that didn't keep him from being one of the greatest prophets of all time. So maybe I simply needed carbon monoxide to put me in tune with God.

But I *was* going to do it. I was going to be a prophet.

I opened the vent in my bedroom more fully, knelt beside my bed, and started praying.

I prayed longer and harder than I'd ever prayed before. I swore eternal chastity, vowed to raise eight children, promised to serve eighteen months as a missionary, said I'd finally finish reading the Bible. I explained why I felt it was so important to finally get a woman's perspective in the Church, though I insisted I would follow whatever advice was revealed to me. I committed myself to ensuring the continual growth of the gospel and the obedience of the saints.

"Nothing is more important to me than being useful to the Church," I prayed aloud. "I can make a difference. I can. Please use me."

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After three hours on my knees, though, I discovered Satan trying to sneak his way into my mind. Letting myself be poisoned was reckless. If I could only lead the righteous through brain damage, perhaps there was something wrong with the righteous as well. Maybe no one throughout history had ever seen God. Perhaps every vision ever recorded was a simple matter of brain chemistry.

I decided to get up and go back next door. But it was late and I was so very tired. I stretched out my legs and leaned against the side of the bed. Just a quick nap and I'd go downstairs and leave the house.

I'd study Joseph Smith's visions and those of others more carefully. Maybe it was all still true. And if it was, I'd manage to find a way to join their ranks. But it was too late to worry about that now. I needed to rest my heavy eyelids for just a moment.

I closed my eyes. The house felt so warm and comfortable.

"Eliza."

"Eliza."

I opened my eyes. Emma Smith was standing before me.

"You must leave this house immediately. There are important things in your future."

"Really?"

"Get up and go."

I stood beside the bed, holding onto it for a moment to catch my balance. When I looked up, Emma was gone.

But she'd spoken to me this time, which she hadn't done before.

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I walked down the stairs and back to the Thompsons' house. I fell asleep almost immediately, and I had a terrible headache when I awoke in the morning.

We had our furnace repaired, and the headaches and queasiness and footsteps and voices and visions stopped. I never saw Emma Smith again, and I never knew if that last vision of her was real or not. I gave a long talk on Emma in church one day, and a report on carbon monoxide in science class, and eventually I graduated both from high school and from Seminary class.

I did go on to serve a mission, and marry in the temple, and have two children of my own.

But I never did have another revelation. My father eventually stopped going to church, and even had his name removed from the records. Samuel also stopped his church attendance, never even going on a mission as I had. Mom died last year, still active in the Church.

I miss those early days in our last house, the joy and wonderment mixed with the headaches and nausea. But I have carbon monoxide detectors in my own home now, and neither of my two daughters has ever seen a vision. I'm not sure if I'm doing them a favor or not. I hope one of them will be a prophet one day, but only if their visions are real.

If such things actually exist to begin with.

I have a painting of Emma Smith on my bedroom wall. I look at it often and hope.

Tilly the Barbarian

“**Y**ou seem like a real geek, Andrew,” said Ryker, leaning over Andrew’s desk at lunch. “Want to join me and my friends for a game of Heroquest tomorrow night?”

“Excuse me?” said Andrew. He wasn’t used to other people at work talking to him socially. Ryker had begun working here just a month ago, though, and had already made several attempts at conversation. Since Ryker wasn’t Mormon, of course, and smoked as well, Andrew had been polite but distant.

“Come on. You must know what people are saying about you,” said Ryker, smiling pleasantly.

“Not really.” Did people actually notice him enough to include him in their gossip? It was a little flattering really.

“They say you’re a social misfit,” Ryker continued. “And I have three other misfits coming to my house tomorrow to participate in a role-playing game. We’re all just weird enough that you might like us. What do you say?”

Andrew frowned. He’d seen Ryker’s wedding ring, and a photo of a woman on the man’s desk. He must not be gay, though from the little experience Andrew had, getting together to play games seemed a pretty gay thing to do. Maybe geeks and gays were overlapping categories. Andrew was thirty, still single because he wasn’t sure he could face an entire lifetime with a woman, but he was still a virgin as well, because he didn’t want to face an eternity with demons and devils, either.

But life did get pretty lonely at times. Some days, he felt like a caveman trying to integrate into the modern world,

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always feeling out of place, never able to adapt as well as those cavemen in the Geico commercials on TV.

“Sure,” Andrew said slowly. “It sounds like fun.”

It really didn’t. But what would it hurt to give it one simple try?

“Great. We usually start at 6:00 and go on until 10:00.” Ryker gave Andrew the address. “It’s pot luck. Can you bring some soda?”

“No problem.” Andrew was already regretting his decision. Four hours? It seemed a bit much for a work night. But he was committed now, and he always kept his commitments, as any gentleman would do. He smiled and shook Ryker’s hand, and then he got back to work. Throughout the rest of the day, he stole glances at Ryker, who was busily working at his own desk and ignoring Andrew. And he checked the internet every once in a while for the latest news. A terrorist train bombing in Russia. A bomb in a Pakistani mosque. But no soldiers killed in Afghanistan today. Thank god for that.

It was Monday, so that night after dinner, Andrew headed over to Melanie’s apartment for the Single Adult Family Home Evening at 7:00. Mormons, of course, devoted every Monday night to family activities, but since the Singles had no families, the Church grouped them together so they would both have a spiritual experience during the week and also keep in mind that the ultimate goal was marriage and family. Andrew enjoyed being with the others, though he was getting to be much older now than the core group in their early twenties. Then, too, the knowledge that he might forever be denied a family because of his condition was becoming more and more painful to bear. But like always, he smiled and pretended to have a good time.

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“Did you hear what happened to Drena?” asked Melanie once the group was all gathered and had offered an opening prayer.

“What?” asked Scott. “I wondered why she wasn’t here.”

Melanie leaned forward and whispered loudly, “She’s been disfellowshipped for petting with a guy from work.”

Everyone gasped, and half the group laughed. “Well, she was always dressing inappropriately,” said Candace.

“Why didn’t she ever make out with *me*?” asked Ron, laughing.

“Cause you didn’t go on a mission.”

“And her coworker did?”

The group continued bantering for several minutes before the lesson started, this one about the importance of reading the scriptures daily. Andrew felt vaguely uneasy about the gossip, as always. They all loved Drena, obviously, but there still seemed to be something rather brutal about the talk.

After the lesson, they all played Charades for an hour, and then the group broke up and went their separate ways. Andrew arrived back at his place just after 9:30. Tonight’s activities had lasted only two and a half hours, and he was still exhausted. He didn’t know if he could handle the following evening. Maybe he should cancel.

“Andrew,” said Ryker on Tuesday when he stopped by Andrew’s desk during lunch. “About tonight.”

Andrew smiled. Maybe he was being uninvited. Perhaps someone in Ryker’s group was calling in sick.

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“It looks like we really need a barbarian in our game. We already have a wizard and an elf and a dwarf. But if you agree to be a barbarian, you can be any race you choose.”

Andrew frowned. “You mean, I can be Filipino?”
Ryker laughed, a beautiful, hearty laugh. “I mean, you can be human or orc or a dwarf.”

“Dwarves aren’t human?”

Ryker laughed again. “You’ll catch on before long. Why don’t you start out as a human?”

Andrew nodded, and Ryker went on his way. Andrew felt like a monster most of the time because of his depravity. Maybe playing a human would help.

As long as he could avoid falling in love with Ryker. Andrew knew it was hopeless, that Ryker was straight, and that in any event, Andrew was committed to living a gospel-centered life. But he felt a tingle now as he remembered that laugh. He hoped he wasn’t making a mistake.

Andrew picked up some diet root beer on his way to Ryker’s house. It was a modest home in a working-class neighborhood. Andrew arrived at five minutes to 6:00. He hated being late. Tardiness was so crass.

“Buddy! Come on in!” said Ryker at the door, giving him a hug.

What was that all about?

“Andrew, this is my wife, Kelly. Kelly, this is my coworker, Andrew.”

“I’ve heard so much about you.”

Andrew laughed. “I seriously doubt it.”

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“Well...”

“Come on in the dining room. We’ll get set up.”

Andrew put his sodas on the kitchen counter and then joined Ryker around a large table covered with a tan tablecloth. There was a paper playing board set out, which simply contained a pattern of squares, and at the head of the table was a thin cardboard partition that said Overlord. Andrew hoped he wasn’t getting into anything Satanic. There were lots of dice, and a handful of little plastic figurines.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang, and another man walked in without waiting for permission to enter. “Hey, Maddock. This is Andrew.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” said Andrew.

“Maddock’s a wizard.”

Andrew didn’t know how to respond to that and finally managed, “How nice for you.”

Maddock laughed. “You were right about this one, Ryker.”

So they had talked about him? Andrew felt his ears burn, but the guys didn’t seem mean-spirited. If they didn’t like him, why would they have invited him?

Perhaps he was here to provide jokes later after he was gone?

A moment later, another man walked in, more handsome than the others. Andrew suddenly felt nervous.

“Hey, Gavin. This is Andrew, the guy I was telling you about.”

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Gavin gave Andrew a surprisingly brazen appraisal. “Can I sit next to him?”

“No footsie under the table,” said Maddock.

Andrew’s whole face was burning now. “Gavin’s our token queer,” explained Ryker. “And we thought he could use some company.”

“What do you mean, company?” asked Andrew, trying not to stutter.

“Oh, don’t worry. You don’t have to sleep with him unless we do a Saturday evening session that goes on all night.”

Andrew was mortified.

“So how are those baby plans coming along?” asked Maddock, thankfully allowing Andrew time to recover.

“The doctor says my vasectomy may be reversible,” said Ryker, “but if not, we may have to go in with a needle and extract some sperm.”

“Ouch.”

“How’s Carol’s pregnancy coming along?”

“The morning sickness is getting better.”

Gavin nudged Andrew. “Breeders,” he muttered, rolling his eyes.

Andrew didn’t know what shocked him the most. The casual talk of heterosexual sex, the casual talk of homosexuality, or the casual acceptance that the straight men had for the gays. Or the shock that his own orientation had been so apparent.

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Teague showed up a couple of minutes later. Everyone was in their early to mid-thirties. Andrew instantly felt a new level of comfort despite all the audacious talk. And it was nice they were all guys, even if...well, Andrew didn't know if it was the gay man or the straight men who were more challenging to accept.

Just before the game began, there was another scandalous moment almost too great to bear. "What would you like to name your character?" asked Ryker.

Andrew hadn't thought about it. How much could he allow himself to play? Could he name his character Arnold after Schwarzenegger? He looked about at his fellow players. Even the humans in the room had more interesting names than Andrew did. He was just a boring, boring person.

"Ralph?" he asked, feeling downright stupid.

"No," said Gavin. "Let's name him Tilly." The others all laughed, and Andrew's character was named for him. He was mortified at the effeminate name, and yet despite his burning ears, Andrew felt a little thrill as well. What would the Single Adults group think if they knew? The thought was funny at first but then quickly became sobering.

As the group looked for traps and treasure and fought zombies and other creatures, Andrew tried not to be shocked any further. But Maddock's male wizard was named Scarlet and spoke like a Southern belle, even though Maddock was supposedly straight. All the other players spoke in their character's voices, acting out entire scenarios at length. It struck Andrew as silly, and yet he envied the freedom these guys seemed to feel and luxuriate in.

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The evening wore on, and Andrew found himself laughing at the jokes the others were telling. Maddock had blue balls because his wife was no longer interested in sex while pregnant. He joked about beating off while fantasizing about Ryker's wife. Then there was banter about Ryker not being a real man because of his vasectomy. But there was no cattiness, no meanness associated with the joking. At the end of the game, Teague's dwarf was killed, and Maddock's wizard pulled a card which gave him an elixir of life to bring back one dead comrade. The elixir was a "pearly white liquid" to be applied to the character's face. Everyone howled, and even Andrew understood the implications.

"Straight men have all the fun," said Gavin wistfully.

"I don't know," said Teague. "You guys get to do this in real life."

The audacity, the depravity, the sinfulness, the baseness of such talk was shocking, but even these straight married men who weren't sinning at all in their sex lives were joking as if this were nothing. It was all so confusing.

Soon, too soon, the evening was over, and yet the surprises continued as all four men hugged Andrew good-bye. Mormons always shook hands, which Andrew loved, because non-members so often didn't have any physical contact at all, but these guys hugged. Were they really straight? Maybe they'd done as he was contemplating, married women they weren't attracted to. But if they were this accepting of homosexuality, why would they have bothered? Was it simply that non-members didn't understand the gravity of the situation? Perhaps he should stay away from them, after all.

Andrew went home, checked the news for the latest from Afghanistan, and read another chapter in the Book of Mormon.

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When he grew tired of that, he kneeled beside his bed to pray. “Please don’t let me be corrupted,” he begged wearily. He climbed into bed and smiled weakly, despite his worries. It had been a fun evening.

Ryker was friendly to Andrew at work, though their paths didn’t directly cross very often throughout the day. He made a point of assuring Andrew the other players liked him and wanted him to return the following Tuesday. Andrew agreed, still unsure what was best.

Saturday night was a Singles dance at the stake center. Andrew went and asked a few of the less attractive girls to dance. They didn’t look any more excited about it than he did.

Church on Sunday went as usual. It was Andrew’s turn to teach the elders quorum lesson. He wasn’t much of a teacher, going straight from the manual. The class naturally found it boring, but what was he to do? The bishop had called him to the position, and no matter how unqualified Andrew actually was, he had to do his duty. It would be uncivilized not to.

The only interesting part of the lesson came near the end, when Andrew stumbled over part of the material, and there was a long moment of silence. Tony, the second counselor in the elders quorum, took the opportunity to make an unrelated comment. “Hey, did everyone hear what’s going on in Uganda?”

“No.”

“What?”

“They’re proposing a new law that will sentence gays to death. And anyone who knows of a gay person will get three years in prison if they don’t report that person to the authorities.”

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“All right!”

“About time.”

“Doesn’t that seem too extreme?” This comment came from Edward, who was married with two kids.

“These guys are trying to destroy marriage. They’ll take us back to the Stone Age.”

“There were gays in the Stone Age?”

“You know what I mean. Gays want to destroy civilization.”

“Well, maybe if the law passes, and other countries don’t protest, the world will see that no one cares, and other places can follow suit.”

“Homosexuals just want to reduce us to animals.”

“There are gay animals?” asked Andrew, biting his lip for joining in the discussion when he still had other points the manual wanted him to make.

“All I’m saying is we ought to consider harsher penalties in this country. You saw the latest poll? Utah ranks lowest in the nation in attitudes toward gay rights.”

“You have that backward. Utah is first in the nation in support of righteousness.”

“The bottom line is that gays are trying to destroy the Church, and God will never allow it. He’ll wipe them out one way or another.”

The talk threatened to go on, but Andrew forced himself to clear his throat loudly. “*Anyway*,” he said, trying to regain control of his class, “the next point of the lesson, if you’ll turn the page...” The elders had clearly been more interested in this

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topical argument than in Andrew's lesson, but Andrew couldn't bear to hear the hatred in their voices. They would cut him out of their lives in a heartbeat if they knew his secret. How could he ever feel the brotherhood of the Church, knowing these people despised him?

Andrew's mind wandered more than usual during Sunday School and Sacrament meeting. In some ways, the Church had grown more understanding toward homosexuality over the years, he reflected. But as last year's Proposition 8 in California had proven, the Church and its members still hated gays, despite whatever "gentle" phrases they might try to use. Maybe he was contaminating himself by playing with Ryker and his friends on Tuesday. The battle was hard enough when he was pure. He'd never manage it with an evil spell cast over him.

Andrew spent the rest of the day reading a book by Boyd K. Packer and then watching *The Other Side of Heaven*. He felt better by the time he went to bed.

Andrew determined the next day to tell Ryker he couldn't make the Tuesday night meeting, yet somehow, they never seemed to run into each other all day, and Andrew was left with the commitment to say something first thing the following morning.

Monday night was Family Home Evening again at Melanie's apartment. Drena was there this time, and everyone acted happy to see her. She was frank about her recent troubles, admitting to spending the night with her boyfriend. "But we broke up," she said. "I guess I kind of provoked it, in order to save my character."

"What did you do?" asked Candace.

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“Well, he had this horrible monkey. It was always masturbating.”

Everyone laughed nervously.

“And it threw feces all the time.”

“Ugh.”

“He had it in the back yard in its cage during the daytime last Saturday. But he forgot to bring it in at night because he was distracted by my sleeping over. I remembered the monkey, but I hated it, so I left it outside. And of course, you remember how cold it got last weekend.” She shrugged. “The monkey was dead by morning.”

There were a couple of gasps, followed by laughter. Andrew, though, was appalled. Drena had killed a living creature just to break up with her boyfriend? Even if she'd done it simply out of hatred for the animal itself, nothing seemed an adequate justification. How could everyone be laughing about it like it was merely a naughty prank?

The group settled down shortly and they had a lesson on the importance of prayer. Then they played Pictionary, and everyone went home.

Andrew lay in bed a long while, thinking.

The next morning when his alarm went off, Andrew thought about calling in sick to work. But that wouldn't be right, so he got dressed and ate a quick breakfast. He avoided Ryker for most of the morning, but during lunch, Ryker stopped by Andrew's desk.

“How's Tilly doing?”

“Oh, uh, um, just fine.”

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“So we’re still on for tonight?”

“Sure.”

“Great. Gavin will be pleased.”

With that, Ryker left, and Andrew had to figure out what he meant by his comment. Was Gavin interested in him? Should Andrew change his mind and cancel in order to protect himself from temptation? Perhaps Gavin simply liked not being the lone gay man in attendance. Andrew knew what it was like to be all alone. He always felt like a loathsome bug at church. But maybe Gavin just liked him as a friend. It would be nice to have a real friend, wouldn’t it?

There wasn’t time to worry about it too much, though. There was plenty of work to do, and Andrew barely had time to check Yahoo for news just once around 4:00. There was a shooting in Michigan, and a reference to the fact that Utah was the only state that allowed guns on school campuses. Two soldiers were killed in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan. Andrew’s heart skipped a beat, as it did every time he heard bad news from the region. He hoped that Steven was okay.

Andrew barely even knew Steven. The man was seven years younger than he was. Andrew had sent him a couple of encouraging letters when Steven was a missionary in Sweden. It wasn’t till he came home, looking like a real man for the first time, that Andrew had really sat up straight to take a good look. He tried to befriend the young man in the Single Adults program but not two months after he returned to the States, Steven had joined the Army, and now he was stationed in Afghanistan, fighting the evil Taliban.

Part of Andrew admired Steven for it. But part of him hated that the man was forced to live in the desert in a Third World

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country where the literacy rate was only 10%. Part of him felt that unchecked, terrorists could precipitate World War III. But part of him also felt that aggression on our part was only exacerbating the problem. Why did people like to fight so much anyway? Why did grown men like Ryker and Gavin think *pretending* to fight every Tuesday was a fun pastime? It almost seemed insulting to be playing a game of pretend heroism while Steven was facing bullets and roadside bombs every day. Maybe tonight should be Andrew's last time.

Andrew brought cans of diet crème soda tonight, and shortly after 6:00, the gang was all seated, ready to play. "The doctor *is* going to have to use a needle to get my sperm," Ryker announced.

"Barbaric," muttered Teague.

"What's barbaric is living with a pregnant wife," said Maddock, putting his hand to his forehead. "I wish some of these spells in my bag were real."

"That's advanced gaming," said Ryker. "We're not ready for that yet."

Everyone laughed except Andrew, who was afraid again he was getting in over his head in some kind of witchcraft. "Look, guys, I'm Mormon," he said abruptly, his heart beating hard. "I don't know if I feel comfortable playing."

"You're Mormon?" asked Gavin. "Hey, did I ever tell you guys about when I took a tour of the Mormon temple here before they opened it? Apparently, heathens are only allowed to see the place before it's 'dedicated,' and then only card-carrying Mormons can go in after that. Is that right, Andrew?"

Andrew nodded uncertainly.

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“Anyway, I went in with all these stickers that said, ‘Gay Christians have met here,’ and I put them everywhere. I put them underneath vases, under chairs and sofas, insider drawers, underneath toilet lids, absolutely every place I could think of.”

Andrew’s mouth fell open in horror.

“Then when I got home, I called the temple and told them what I’d done. I said I’d placed one hundred stickers, but I really only placed ninety-one. I figured they’d tear the place up looking for those last nine.”

Everyone howled, and as horrifying as the story was, Andrew found himself slightly impressed.

“Speaking of barbaric, they said what I’d done was a vicious vandalism, and they threatened to prosecute me. But the temple was dedicated on schedule, and the world didn’t seem to come to an end.”

“It was a lot like after Prop 8,” said Ryker. “The Mormons went on and on about all the ‘violence’ they suffered, which amounted to a couple of cans of spray paint.”

“But...but...” Andrew spluttered.

“I understand,” said Gavin softly. “I read Patty Hearst’s autobiography. I know how brain washing can turn even a respectable person into a criminal.”

Andrew’s mouth fell open again. Had Gavin really said such an outrageous thing? He completely disapproved of what Gavin had done, and yet as a brutal act, it hardly compared to what was going on in Uganda. Andrew had been reading the Church website and following the news. No major religious or political leaders in America were condemning the proposed law. Why wasn’t the prophet denouncing it? The gospel was

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supposed to bring a civilizing influence upon the world. Was it just “not their problem”? The Church avoided speaking on “political” issues, but if gay marriage was a “moral” issue here in the U.S., then why wasn’t the murder of gays a moral issue as well? But tonight, instead of feeling like a worm, thinking about his position in the universe just made Andrew angry.

He behaved recklessly throughout the game, opening doors without checking for traps, being the first to engage monsters in battle, letting the others gather all the treasure. He felt he’d given up before even starting, and that made the game not as fun as it had been last week. And yet part of him enjoyed the recklessness, too.

“Andrew’s really getting into this,” said Maddock.

“If he gets hurt much more in battle,” said Gavin, “he may need some special comforting later.”

Teague laughed. “But you don’t have any healing spells.”

“I’ve got some pearly white liquid left over.”

“Left over from what?” asked Ryker, smiling.

“I beat off in your bathroom every Tuesday night, listening to your sexy voice through the door.”

“Well, *I* beat off in your bathroom every Tuesday night, too,” said Maddock, “listening to *Kelly’s* voice through the door.”

Andrew put his dice down and stood up.

“You okay?” asked Ryker.

Andrew was trembling. He knew this was a pivotal moment in his life, and he had to be strong. What he wanted was

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everyone's leftover sperm. But he was going to be good. He was going to be civilized. He was going to be a light set on a hill.

“I can't come here anymore.”

There was only a brief moment of surprised silence before Gavin said, “We're compromising his virtue. I've seen it before.”

“Is there a cure?” asked Maddock.

“Anyone got a spell?”

Ryker, who was sitting just to the right of Andrew, at the head of the table, stood up. “I don't know if I have any potions specifically designed to eradicate this problem, but I do have a magic wand.” Without another word, he unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis.

There was immediate laughter around the table.

“Finally!” said Gavin. “I've been coming over here for ages waiting to see that.”

“Well, I could live without the images I'll have to deal with when I go to sleep tonight,” said Teague, “but...” He stood up and unzipped as well, pulling out his member.

Then Maddock and Gavin followed suit. Andrew watched in horror-struck fascination. The straight guys all had flaccid penises, but Gavin's was half-erect. What kind of friends would stand around doing such a thing? What kind of animals were they? The men were all pointing at each other and laughing, as if this were nothing, all except Gavin, who was just looking and smiling pleasantly.

“Come on, Andrew, your turn.”

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Andrew would *never* be so vulgar as to show his penis in public, and yet part of him sensed the camaraderie the others were feeling, and he longed to experience that. And part of him just wanted to be wild and dangerously lawless. And part of him wanted Gavin to see him and like what he saw.

He slowly unzipped and pulled out his fully erect penis.

“Not bad,” said Gavin.

“Are you kidding?” said Maddock. “How can I possibly seduce Kelly now, seeing what I’m up against with *all* you guys?”

“Whose turn is it?” said Ryker. “Maddock, I think you’re up.” With that, everyone zipped their pants and got back to the game. Andrew sat down again as well, confused. He didn’t want to leave anymore. They continued playing till about 9:45, and then everyone hugged, and Andrew drove home in silence.

It took him a long while to fall asleep.

Ryker stopped by during lunch the next day to say hi. Andrew brought his Book of Mormon to work for the rest of the week and read it during his breaks each day.

Saturday night was movie night with the Singles. They met at Melanie’s for 8:00 to pop some popcorn and watch *The Rock*. “Nobody tell the bishop we’re watching an R-rated movie,” said Ron.

“Speaking of R ratings,” said Drena, “did you hear about Steven?”

Andrew sat up straight and stared at Drena. “What?” Had he been hurt? Or—

“He got kicked out of the Army for being gay.”

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“No!”

“Really?”

The others laughed. “I always thought he was too prissy to carry a gun.”

“Wasn’t he nominated for Soldier of the Year? What a joke.”

“He only joined so he could take showers with other guys.”

“I wonder how many soldiers he’s tried to rape? He’s probably raping Afghani civilians, ruining our international relations.”

Andrew stared at his friends in shock. They had been praising Steven’s patriotism just two weeks before. What kind of loyalty dissolved in mere seconds? He nodded slowly. He’d always understood that Church members would abandon him without a thought, but to see that callousness in action was sobering. He felt as if he were watching some hulking man throw a tiny dog out the window of a speeding car onto a busy freeway.

“Steven is a good man,” said Andrew softly but firmly.

The others stopped and looked at him.

“I never heard *him* gossiping maliciously,” Andrew continued.

Candace turned up her nose. “Well, *he* can’t throw stones because *he* lives in a glass house.”

For some reason, the comment really irritated Andrew. “And you live in a cave,” he said coldly.

“Why are you defending Steven?” asked Ron. “Are you queer, too?”

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Andrew stood up, walked to the bedroom to pick up his coat, and left without another word. Sitting in his car, he held onto the steering wheel tightly for several moments, thinking of defenseless Chihuahuas, which slowly morphed in his thoughts into mastiffs with spiked collars. Then he pulled out his cell phone and called Ryker.

“What’s up, Buddy?”

“I was wondering if you had Gavin’s phone number.”

“Sure thing.” There was no smugness or smirking tone to Ryker’s voice, even though Andrew knew he must be able to connect the dots. Andrew thanked him and then took a deep breath, looking at the number in his hands.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Gavin. It’s Andrew.”

“Oh, hey, how are you?”

“Well, I’m thinking about next Tuesday.”

“Yeah?”

“I decided my character needs a sword in addition to his axe. I’m in a fighting mood.”

“What brought that on?”

“A surge of testosterone.” Andrew wondered if it really did all come down to hormones. Was it his spirit or his body that was in control? “Is there a sledgehammer in the arsenal?”

Gavin laughed. “I love my men butch.”

“Can I come over to your place?”

Gavin laughed again. “Sure. I just showered to get ready for the bars later, but I’d rather see you.”

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Andrew smiled.

“And just FYI, I douched as well.”

It took Andrew a moment to figure out what Gavin meant, and then he laughed despite himself. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Andrew drove a few miles over to Gavin’s place, following the directions Gavin had given him over the phone. It wasn’t hard to recognize the house when he arrived. There was a large two-story covered in Christmas lights, with lighted reindeer on the roof, and a large, lighted snowman in the yard. That wasn’t Gavin’s house, though. His was the one-story beside it, dark except for the few strings of lights on the roof spelling out the word “DITTO” and an arrow pointing to the house next door.

Andrew smiled and walked up the front path. He paused a moment, thinking of Steven and if he’d need a place to stay. Steven was certainly welcome to share Andrew’s house if he wanted. It would be better, of course, if Steven’s family still accepted him, but there was obviously no guarantee of that. Andrew wondered how Steven’s situation would affect his own future. Would he start dating Gavin tonight only to switch to Steven a few days later? It was so confusing not to have strict guidelines confining your every move. Even Heroquest had rules. But now Andrew had to make up his own as he went along.

He knocked, and a moment later, Gavin opened the door. He was wearing high leather boots, a tunic, and a flowing, hunter green cape. “Are you a weary traveler seeking lodging for the night?” asked Gavin in an officious tone.

“Uh, yes,” said Andrew.

“Well, we extend every civility to wanderers. Do come in.” Gavin motioned for Andrew to enter, and he did so cautiously.

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They stood looking at each other seriously for a moment, and then Gavin winked. “I thought we’d do some *real* role-playing tonight.”

Andrew smiled, and Gavin grew serious again. “Our barmaid will serve you shortly, good sir, but first, let me show you to your quarters. Perhaps, for a small token of appreciation, I could arrange for you to be served in your room.”

Andrew followed Gavin uncertainly, yet still smiling a little in anticipation. Gavin really was a misfit, it seemed, but he supposed he was one, too. Andrew realized with complete clarity now that he’d never fit into mainstream society. He wondered if he was starting an adventure tonight that would bring on battles against ogres and giants, and if he was even starting out on level one, but he was willing to see where the story led.

Once in the bedroom, Gavin pretended to kneel down as the host of the inn for the purpose of removing Andrew’s shoes. But that game ended pretty quickly as they moved on to a new one. It turned out that the douching did come in handy, after all. Afterward, Andrew and Gavin lay on the bed cuddling. Andrew put his head on Gavin’s chest, and Gavin caressed Andrew’s arm lightly.

“This isn’t a game, you know,” said Gavin softly. “You of all people must know we have real enemies out there.”

“Yes,” said Andrew slowly. “But we have the Overlord on our side, don’t we?”

“Even with friendly overlords, elves get shot with arrows, and dwarves get their arms hacked off. Being gay isn’t only about love. It’s about violence, too.”

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Andrew was silent a moment. “You have any more of those stickers you brought to the temple?” he finally asked.

“Yes,” Gavin replied in a confused tone. “Why?”

“I still have my temple recommend. I can get back in with them again next week.”

Gavin laughed. “Barbarians aren’t the best undercover agents, you know.”

“The Mormons are the real infiltrators, though, aren’t they?”

“You sure you’re up to taking them on? Prophets are like wizards. They can cast spells over people.”

Andrew reflected on the statement for a moment. “I may get killed in the first round,” he said slowly, “but I won’t go down without a fight.”

“Well, I’m up for any kiss-ins you want to participate in.” Gavin squeezed Andrew’s shoulder and then touched it with his lips. “Sheesh, kiss-ins,” he said. “You know, the real problem here is that our attacks are a lot less brutal than theirs. When you’re heartless, you can fight pretty savagely.”

“Then maybe a little more barbarity on our part is in order.”

Just then, Andrew felt a bite on his nipple and jumped. A moment later, Gavin bit his other nipple, too.

“Animal,” said Andrew, laughing.

“You have no idea, Tilly,” Gavin replied.

But Andrew was pretty sure he wanted to find out, and to unleash the animal in himself, too.

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“Call me Attila,” he said and smiled. Then he bared his teeth as well.

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