

## Open Call

Inspired by "Dance of the Historian" by [Eriyal](#)



Fairyal looked about the bustling crowd, the energy of their strides and the volume of their voices all combining to make for one large headache. Swinging her small feet beneath her as she dangled her legs between the balustrades of the bridge overlooking the square below her, Fairyal imagined what would happen if she hocked a snotwad down on the crowd. Probably mass fury--or, more likely, *massive* fury, as most people wouldn't pay attention if it happened to them. If nothing else, it might take an edge off her boredom.

Fairyal stood and smoothed the pastel blue overskirt. Shaking her brown hair off her forehead, she began to load up a solid projectile. The sound was a mixture of a kettle's whine and a rooting pig. Fairyal placed her hands on the bannister of the bridge and stood on tippy toes. Aiming would require careful lead time, of course, and she didn't want to hit someone who was wearing a hat or some other such nonsense. Bare sconce, that's what she sought.

And...

...there. She saw the man: Portly, shining with sweat despite the cloud cover and general coolness of the day, his brown skin rumpled as it raced from his bald crown to the folds of his neck.

Perfect.

Adding an extra *hork* of phlegm to the saliva in her mouth, she reared back--  
--a hand dropped on her shoulder. "Fairyal."

Startled, she swallowed the entire concoction. She could feel it clinging to her

throat as it slid toward her body where she imagined it landed with a disgruntled *plop*. She looked up, following the graceful line of the armored arm until it disappeared beneath the jagged angles of the gold-highlighted overcoat. In the front of the conch-like helmet was Jabb's softly smiling, lined face. Orwl the Owl, who perched on his right shoulder, was looking at something behind them, his head pivoted away. Fairyal was grateful for this mercy: She hated it when Orwl chimed in with something sarcastic.

"You weren't going to do anything...untoward, were you, Fairyal?"

She swallowed again--taking whatever residue was still in her mouth with it--and shook her head. "I'm just lookin' at the people, y'know."

"Certainly, I do."

In his left hand, he held a satchel overflowing with what looked like scrolls. With his right, he guided her toward the building that attached to the footbridge.

"What's with the wiping paper, Jabb?"

Jabb sighed. Fairyal knew he hated being called that, but she wasn't about to start calling him *Jabby'n' Ten-Rothschar* all of the time. What a waste of syllables. And since everyone else called him "Rothschar" or "the Historian", Fairyal felt like it made more sense for her to have her *own* pet name to use on her tall, reticent friend. "It isn't wiping paper. It's a script."

"It ripped?" She wrinkled her nose. The papers weren't what she'd call pristine, but they didn't look in too bad of shape.

"No, *script*. For the play."

"Playing what?"

"*The play*, Fairyal."

She stared at him as they winded down a stone staircase to get to the square below. "I don't get it."

"It's what I was getting while you stood on the bridge. It's a written-down story. Not like your tumbling, but a carefully constructed pageant. We need actors to fulfill their roles. We must get them ready for a performance tonight."

Fairyal smiled, her eyes lighting up. "Tonight! That will be a most excellent fantasy, then!" She clapped her hands. Had she not already had dots of red paint on her cheeks, they surely would have brightened with the thought. "We will gambol and gamble, gaff and guffaw!" Despite the fact there wasn't enough space, she decided that the only way to demonstrate her excitement was to do a cartwheel. It knocked over a couple of people who made the mistake of walking too close to her, but that wasn't really her fault, was it?

"Yes, I'm sure we will."

She clapped her hands again. "Goosie!"

Jabb scratched at one of his long, pointed ears. "We shall see."

"Yes we shall!"

He pointed toward the center of the square. A long-dead garden had been planted in the center of the space. It only took them a moment to ascend and get situated. He handed Fairyal an armful of the musty scrolls. She had to tip and bend a bit to keep them all in place. Once she was ready, she looked out over the milling crowd of

uninterested people.

"You know what to do." Jabb set his satchel down, then rummaged through it before extracting a piece of parchment and a large quill pen. "Best get started."

Fairyal sucked in a deep breath. Tightening her diaphragm and rounding her mouth to better project, she began to shout. "*Hey! Stupids! Look over here!*"

Jabb made a sound that Fairyal had always thought sounded like a moan of disbelief, discontent, and discomfort of the bowels. He made that sound often, it seemed. "Maybe try something a bit less abrasive?"

"I hain't cleanin' nothin'." Jabb had a weird way with words. Fairyal would've preferred that he spoke more plainly, but she knew she couldn't pick who summoned her. If she did her part well enough, she'd be paid for and wouldn't have to hang around the Historian anymore. That thought was sad, so she mentally kicked it in the sweets and shoved it away.

"No...never mind. Try again, but be *nice* about it."

Fairyal looked at him, the small buns of hair on the sides of her head tipping. "Nice?"

"Yes."

"Like..."

"Like, don't insult them."

"Ah." She paused. "Lie, then?"

That weird moaning-sigh again. "Try 'Ladies and gentlemen' and see how that works instead."

Fairyal quirked her lips. She didn't think that would work very well. But Jabb said to do it, so...

"*Hey! Stupid ladies and gentlemen! Look over here! We've got some scrubs to get you all to do! Hey! Fat-one! Don't ignore me! Look! Look!*" Dropping the scrolls, she sucked in a breath and promptly pulled off her head. She set it on the ground. With a hop--a tricky move because she wasn't used to thinking about having her feet over her head like this--she stood on the crown of her own skull. It was heavy, and of course, without her head attached to her neck, she couldn't do this for long--she couldn't breathe this way--but it absolutely did the trick.

People looked.

Fairyal held her hands out, awaiting their applause.

No, Jabb hadn't necessarily said that she should get their attention this way, but she figured that a trick would get people eager to sign up. Why seeing her auto-decapitation might do that, Fairyal didn't know. People did weird things.

Like now.

Now, they screamed. Mothers covered their children's eyes, a couple of people--it was hard to tell since her view was a bit lower than she was used to--turned about to retch. Many started to run away.

Weird.

"Put that back on!" hissed Jabb. She couldn't see his face, but she could tell from the tone of his voice that he was less than pleased.

"Okay, okay," she said with what little air she had left in her throat. Stepping off from her own skull, Fairyal stooped, picked up her head, and reattached it at the neck. It took a moment to get the senses back aligned. When she did, she saw Jabb's expression was less than pleased.

In fact, she would probably say that he was closer to "pissed off" than "disquieted" or some such. "What?" she asked when her breathing seemed to be working right again.

"Sending them into a panic isn't going to get us recruits!"

"Why not?"

Jabb sighed and pinched his fingers to the bridge of his nose. He did that often, usually mumbling something under his breath. Fairyal assumed that this was a prayer, so she mimicked him. A kind of solidarity, she figured, something to show that she may not believe in his god (or gods or goddesses or...whatever it was that he was praying to. Ancestors? Daemons? Memories of passed gas? She really didn't know.), she stood by his right to worship whatever imaginations he had.

"Why me?" he said, as he always did when he was done with his prayer.

"Why me," she repeated, as she always did when he was done with his prayer.

Jabb dropped to a knee to look her squarely in the eyes. "Fairyal, we have a job to do."

"Right."

"So I need you to help me."

"Okay."

"And that involves doing what I say."

"Gotcha."

"Without doing anything else."

She stared at him.

"Do you understand?"

Furrowing her brow, she said, "Not even breathing?"

He sighed--maybe her mentioning of breathing was enough to make him remember that he was doing that automatically, which meant that now he had to be aware of his own breathing.

Orwl hooted.

Fairyal gave him a dirty look. "That was rude."

"He's right, Fairyal." Jabb put a hand on her shoulder, which was what he'd done when stopping her loogie-launch. That made for two times he'd touched her today. That was unusual. "You need to *help* me. Say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we have a special opportunity for you today. The Emperor would like to see a play and we have parts to share. Participants will be rewarded by the Emperor.' And then you hand out any of the script parts that a person may want." He squeezed her shoulder--*quite* unfamiliar, that--and bobbed his head up and down as if to encourage her. "Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir!" She saluted in the way she'd seen some of the guards salute certain people--standing up straight and clapping a fist against her chest. It hurt.

"Good." He stood and gestured. "Try again."

Screwing up her face and closing her eyes as she tried to remember everything she'd just been told, Fairyal drew in a breath, tightened her diaphragm, and shouted, "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a special opportunity for you today. The Emperor would like to see a play and we have parts to share. Participants will be rewarded by the Emperor!"

She opened one eye, then another.

The square was empty.

No one gossiped by the small well. No children chased chickens through the roads. No horses clopped their way from north to south nor east to west. She looked up at Jabb. "I didn't do that, I think."

"You sort of did."

"Not on purpose."

"Doesn't change the result."

Fairyal twitched her nose. "Okay, so what do we do next?"

Jabb sighed and stepped down to the cobblestones. He reached up a hand to help her down. Three times he'd touched her today. How odd. "We find another square and try again."

"But no removing my head?"

He shook his own.

Fairyal growled. "That doesn't seem to make a lot of sense. We need their attention, don't we?"

"A minkix is not something that people see very often, Fairyal." Jabb began walking down one of the streets. His long legs let him move much faster than she; the next time she became corporeal, she would ask for long legs, too--she doubted they'd be as much trouble as these stubs that she was currently forced to work with. "Drelves like me aren't particularly common, either."

"So why aren't they curious about us?"

"Humans don't tend to expect a head to be optional on a body."

Fairyal rolled her eyes. "Again, all the more reason to show them what it's like!"

"It frightens them."

"Why? We're not the Emperor."

"Don't fret about it."

Fairyal tried to obey this order, but it was difficult. Nothing he'd said made a bit of sense, and that made Fairyal fidgety. Before it got out of hand, however, they'd found another square, ascended another rise, and addressed the people. She even said (almost) all her words right. Some of the crowd looked interested, so she started to hand out the scribbles--which, to her surprise, seemed to mean something to many of the humans who took the scrolls--and soon enough, a troupe of a dozen or so humans were giving their names to Jabb, who scrawled the sounds on his own parchment. Orwl hooted. Fairyal stuck her tongue out.

Once finished with the recruits, Jabb motioned for them to all proceed toward the Emperor's Palace where they would begin rehearsal. As they walked, Fairyal skipped closer to him. "We did it, right? Did the thing?"

"Yes, we did." He hesitated. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wanted to know if you were going to touch me one more time."

"Dismiss you?" He raised an eyebrow. "Why would I do that?"

She shrugged. "I just thought it was weird that you'd put me this close to a dismissal--three touches while the sun is out--if you weren't thinking of sending me back."

He grunted. "The thought has traveled through the villages of my mind."

"Your what now?"

He shook his head. "No, Fairyal, I think I'll keep you around a bit longer. Not only did it take more time for you to show up when I requested you than I expected, as far as minkix go, you're not too bad." He looked her out of the corner of his eye. "Why? Did you want to leave?"

"Not really. I mean, there's still the show, right?"

He nodded.

"So, I'm okay sticking around a bit longer." She paused. "But...can I ask one favor?"

Jabb responded slowly, "You may *ask*."

"Can we have a balcony seat?"

"Do I even want to know why?"

"I was in the middle of doing something earlier and I want to pick up where I left off."

He started to pray again.

Fairyal took it as a good sign.