

Narrator Welcome my friends, to Particularly Peculiar Parables of the Perplexing and Proposterous. Tonight, we here at the Alviren Playhouse are delighted to bring you our inaugural episode. I, Tamrius Grimm, shall be your host this evening with the help of the Rhysmarind Orchestra and the Alviren Players.

[Music Sting]

Narrator Tonight's story we call, XVIII and the Potion of Life.

Narrator To say XVIII lived a sheltered life, would be comparable to calling Rapunzel well travelled, she at least received a visitor. XVIII's earliest memories were of the stone walls of the undercroft at Dr. Dippel's home. Their most recent memories were of the same stone walls. The undercroft, dungeons and laboratory had been XVIII's home for as long as he could remember. He and several other children had grown up together under the watchful gaze of Dr. Dippel.

Narrator Dr. Dippel was strict, but not cruel in XVIII's eyes. They were provided three meals a day, comfortable beds, though these were kept in the refurbished dungeons. The doctor provided them a dense catalogue of reading material, which coincided with his lesson. Renowned for his medical talents, arcane prowess and his work during the Pale Death, he made for excellent teacher. At least in those fields, his talents for emotional development were quite lacking.

Narrator The children were always kept to rigid schedules. They would eat at 7:30AM, 12:30PM and 7:30PM. Work hours would last between 8:15AM and 7:00PM with a break for lunch, a few other opportunities to rest. After dinner they were provided a small amount of free time to before being in bed by 10:30PM. This schedule and the specifics of it varied every few months based on Dr. Dippel's current experiments, and the children's ages.

Narrator In their youth, they would spend work hours cleaning, and cooking. Their time cooking was brief however, as several instances of food poisoning proved their culinary education was lacking. This proved not to be an issue as it provided more time for Dippel's experiments.

Narrator As they grew older, those who showed specific talents, began assisting Dr. Dippel with his research directly. These talents varied, in XVIII's case, they showed a remarkable understanding for anatomy and medical examinations. Others proved more skilled at arcane matters, or alchemy. Their assistance in the laboratory started with simple cleaning and taking notes, but soon they began to assist directly. Distributing, labelling and measuring alchemical ingredients and magical reagents, the cleaning and preparation of bodies, autopsies and so forth.

Narrator Dr. Dippel's studies focused heavily on death, and resurrection theory. This meant a steady supply of cadavers were needed. The corpses had to be cleaned, their wounds, if any, stitched and dressed. Then an arcane ritual would be used to prevent rot from setting in to quickly. These tasks were often left to those assisting Dr. Dippel. Needless to say, these conditions left many of the children more than a little messed up.

Narrator Though XVIII would never have considered this situation unpleasant. They had food, shelter, an education and had become close friends with another child, an aarakocra named XV. This was everything XVIII could have wanted, though this was largely due, in part, to his ignorance of the world outside. As an involuntary shut in, this was all he knew, how could he possibly want something more, if he didn't know what to want?

Narrator Over the years, XVIII's talent for anatomy and medicine excelled, it was a talent Dr. Dippel nurtured and utilized fully. In particular XVIII had a keen eye for

assessing the nature of person's death or illness. Working in the undercroft became a sort of ritual bonding experience for XVIII. Though they wouldn't fully understand the feels for some time, Dr. Dippel was the closest thing to a father XVIII would likely ever have. As morbid as the time they spent together was, it was still a precious memory they wouldn't forget.

Narrator For several months XVIII assisted Dr. Dippel with his latest experiments, administering a new formula that the doctor had been concocting to cadavers. XVIII had not assisted with the formula's creation, as they lacked an understand of alchemy and magic. This left them ignorant but curious of the formula's purpose.

Narrator The experiments went similarly for each month. A body was brought in, XVIII would clean the body, remove the coins from it's eyes and ensure all wounds had been properly closed. Dr. Dippel would bring in a few formulas, inject the corpse and observe. XVIII would keep notes for Dr. Dippel's records, but nothing ever seemed to happen, and after a short time Dr. Dippel would tell XVIII to clean up and get ready for dinner.

Dr. Dippel "Another failure. Prepare the body to be removed." Dippel placed a hand on the cadaver's forehead. His expression unreadable to XVIII, but was either anger, pity, sadness or frustration. Perhaps a combination of all of the above.

XVIII "May XVIII speak, asks XVIII hesitantly?" XVIII said in their mechanical, almost monotone way, but the hesitance in their voice still rang true. As stated, Dr. Dippel was very strict, though not outwardly cruel, he was quick to reprimand anyone who fell out of line. Though he never appeared to take pleasure in this, it had left deep scars in XVIII. XVIII did not wish to upset the doctor, and often repressed their curious nature in an effort to not cause trouble. However, like Rapunzel in her

tower, XVIII's curiosity could only be contained for so long.

Dr. Dippel "Of course XVIII, who would I be if I withheld knowledge and wisdom from those who seek it." The doctor was somewhat taken aback by XVIII taking any initiative.

XVIII "What is the purpose of this formula? Asks XVIII curiously."

Dr. Dippel "I once told you corpses are sad things, and they should be treated with respect and a delicate hand, correct?"

XVIII "Correct, confirms XVIII." XVIII nodded.

Dr. Dippel "People are frail, pitiful things, XVIII. We live sad short lives and die in an instant, many long before our time. *Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish is dear to me, and I will defend it.* This formula is my great work. It will someday grant a person a new life, and as many lives as a person may wish to live." The doctor sighs, disheartened by the continual failures. "If that's all XVIII, ready the body for removal and clean yourself. Dinner will be in less than an hour."

XVIII "Thank you Dr. Dippel, says XVIII expressing their gratitude. XVIII is honoured to assist with such a project." XVIII says with a stiff but earnest bow.

Dr. Dippel "Thank you for your assistance XVIII." Dippel then turns to leave, but pauses in the doorway for a moment. "You're all my greatest treasures." He whispered to himself, though the words and feelings still reached XVIII. They then began to clean the laboratory and wrap the body in a burial shroud for removal and burial.

Narrator The months continued to go by, XVIII continued to assist Dr. Dippel with his experiments. During one morning, purely by coincidence XVIII was helping massage XV's wings. This happened frequently, being confined to the dungeons left little opportunity for

XV to stretch his wings. This would result in stiff muscles and a risk of atrophy if they weren't exercised. XVIII, thanks to their growing knowledge of anatomy was a natural masseur.

XV "XV is very grateful XVIII."

XVIII "You're welcome, expresses XVIII politely." In truth XVIII was happy just being helpful. However, on this particular day, the threads of fate began to beckon, pulling that curious mind. Begging them to ask the question that had been buried so long ago.

XVIII "What is... outside? XVIII asks cautiously. XV has wings and should not be confined to the ground, XVIII states confidently."

XV "Outside is dangerous for us, XV was warned many times. Asking such a thing is dangerous, XV warns. Is XVIII feeling ill?"

XVIII "XVIII is unsure, XVIII has no symptoms, but feels unwell. XVIII says expressing their confusion."

Narrator XVIII fell silent, kneading the tender muscles around XV's shoulder blades. The world was a dangerous place, XVIII had been told many times. It was safe here, they had food, friends, a place to sleep and they could learn about anything they wanted if they asked. It's unclear if the feelings rising inside them were the result of a sheltered and bizarre upbringing, a late rebellious phase, or fate itself pulling on their stifled heart. Whatever the reason, they desperately needed to know, they wanted to see outside.

Narrator That night XVIII was to assist with another experiment. With a heavy sense of apprehension that they had not felt before, they began preparations. This particular corpse had been stabbed numerous times, which meant XVIII had a long time to think as they stitched wounds closed. Why couldn't they go outside? Why was it so dangerous? Why were cadavers brought here? Why were they allowed outside?

Narrator The question why, is a terrible thing. It can bring knowledge and learning, but so often it becomes all consuming. A parasite that feeds constantly and breeds anxiety. XVIII was torn between an innate desire to be useful, to not cause trouble and the maddening question why?

Narrator The doctor arrived shortly after preparations were complete. The experiment began the same as every other day. The cadaver lay still, Dr. Dippel would produce a formula and administer it, while XVIII would obediently write down all of the doctor's observations. The fifth digit of the left hand twitched slightly. This was the most progress that had been observed in all the long months of testing, and though it produced no further effects, the doctor was delighted.

Narrator XVIII saw this as the perfect opportunity to ask Dr. Dippel about the outside world. Unfortunately the result was not as XVIII had hoped. The doctor grew angry, unleashing a furious rant I shall not repeat here and ended the conversation before it had even properly begun. He stormed out of the lab, leaving XVIII alone to clean.

Narrator XVIII was devastated by this. They admired Dr. Dippel, the weight of having angered him was overwhelming. Shamefully and solemnly, XVIII began to clean the room, their face felt wet though they did not know why. No matter how much they cleaned, the doctor did not return. Utterly distraught, they had failed in their only purpose, to serve and assist Dr. Dippel. XVIII wished for nothing more than to start over again, to never again ask why.

Narrator If only they could have another life, XVIII thought. As those terrible creeping thought pulled at their mind, and fate itself turned their head. They then noticed a vial of the formula that the doctor, in his anger, had not removed from the chamber. Without hesitation XVIII drank the concoction desperately. Though they had not

expected the formula to have any effect on the living, they still clung to a foolish hope that it would give them a second chance.

Narrator The room began to spin instantly, as the formula rapidly spread through XVIII's body. Their pulse slowed, vision clouded and they fell to their knees. A calm filled them as their breathing slowed, and then they collapsed.

Narrator When XVIII woke up, they were delirious, their memories hazy. The sun beat down upon them mercilessly. The light blinding, and heat unbearable. The smell of rot and putrid decay filled their nose. Vultures screeched overhead and XVIII could taste iron in their mouth. All of their senses were assaulted by vial sensations.

Narrator XVIII tried to roll over, tried to escape from any of the feelings, but their body couldn't move. A dense canvas like material was wrapped around them, leaving them contorted, as if they'd been put into some kind of straitjacket.

Narrator Eventually, XVIII's eyes began to adjust to the vicious rays of the sun. Not enough to open them completely, but they could at least squint and take in their surroundings. They were indeed wrapped in some kind of straitjacket, one very similar to the death shroud they would wrap failed cadavers in. A mound of corpses, all wrapped in a similar fashion lay beneath them.

Fortunately, XVIII had long since grown accustomed to the presence of cadavers and wasn't nearly as distressed by this situation as most individuals would be.

Narrator However, for XVIII being outside for the first time, in an unknown location, alone, was extremely distressing. They cried for assistance, but could barely manage a whisper. Their mouth was bone dry, lips chapped painfully and a desperate hunger gnawed at their insides. Knowing they could do nothing in this straitjacket they began to struggle, twisting their arms as

best they could. Freeing their arms was by far the hardest part, it took a great deal of struggling, but desperation can be a powerful motivator. Eventually, one of the buckles bent, allowing enough slack for XVIII to free their arms.

Narrator With their arms free, the straps along their legs were easily removed. Using a strength they didn't know they had, the canvas tore away. XVIII wasn't sure how long they had been here, or how much time had passed since drinking the potion, but their nails had grown extremely sharp and strong. This would prove invaluable for surviving the desert.

Narrator During this time, their eyes had fully adjusted to the sun, though they still desperately wanted to get indoors. A primal instinct fuelling them. They needed shade and blood. No, not blood. Food. Food and water was what they needed. The only thing that would be remotely edible here were the circling vultures, who were screeching in distress and annoyance that their meal had suddenly begun moving. Crouching low, XVIII crept towards one such bird who was busy rending rotten flesh from its canvas lunch bag.

Narrator XVIII leapt at the vulture, claws extended... and unsurprisingly, he caught nothing but air. The vulture's claws lashed in retaliation as it took flight, forcing XVIII to stumble backwards. None of the vultures were interested in a meal that would fight back, and quickly took flight, observing from a safe distance.

Narrator Hunger and thirst were XVIII's sole motivations, they knew more than enough about the frailty of a person's body. Without food or water they would surely die out here. Crawling out of the large pit proved to be unexpectedly easy. Even as their stomach twisted and the burning sand shifted beneath their feet, they moved uninhibited. Before them was a barren wasteland, dry shrubs, a sporadic cactus, rocks and sand where all they could see for miles.

Narrator The following days were horrendous. XVIII knew very little about survival, least of all, survival in a desert. There were no landmarks, no water, and no signs of habitation. Though starvation lingered, XVIII was able to survive off of several desert insects, and a few small rodents. Eating them raw was unwise, even at the worst of times, but with no source of fire they had no other choice. They ate ravenously, all sense of etiquette and decorum replaced by pure survival instinct. This was fortunately enough to keep XVIII moving, and after nearly a week of wandering, XVIII saw another person. People, more accurately, all wearing armour and riding horses. With starvation looming, these people were a miracle. The soldiers noticed XVIII quickly, turned their horses and rode rapidly towards them. Weapons at the ready, though stowed, they circled XVIII.

Soldier “Who are you, and where do you hail from?” One of the soldiers questioned aggressively.

Narrator This was certainly a crude line of questioning, and the guard should have asked if XVIII was okay first. However, at this moment, XVIII was wearing the remains of a straitjacket, was dirty, and covered in crusted blood splatter from his most recent meal. For all the soldiers knew, this was a maniac escaped from an asylum, or a murderer who’d just finished dismembering and burying their latest victims. Unfortunately for XVIII the truth was far less believable.

XVIII “This one is known as XVIII, of unknown origin, explains XVIII earnestly.”

Soldier “What are you doing out here?” Another soldier questioned.

XVIII “XVIII looking for food and their home, explains XVIII attempting to hide their discomfort.”

Soldier “Why are you uncomfortable?”

XVIII “XVIII is hungry, tired, hot and thirsty, says XVIII”

Soldier “We’ll escort you to Karaad for further questions.” One of the soldier stated firmly as he got off his horse and produced a set of manacles. “Hold out your hands.”

Narrator XVIII without hesitation held out his hands, allowing himself to be manacled. The soldiers then provided XVIII a drink from their water skins, which helped them mentally more than physically. Though they knew they needed water to live, their body seemed to care very little for the life giving liquid. Then, with some assistance, XVIII was placed on a horse and escorted to Karaad. The journey was strange and uncomfortable. Though XVIII didn’t express their emotion the same way as most, they felt them just the same, in that moment they felt very vulnerable.

Narrator The soldiers questioned XVIII relentlessly. Baffled by his state, story and manner of speech, they all attempted to catch them in a lie. However, XVIII having no reason to lie, maintained their story the entire time. The soldiers, regrettably, remained unconvinced by the strange story.

Narrator When they arrived in Karaad, XVIII was immediately taken to a cell, then provided rations and a minuscule amount of water. They were then isolated for several hours while the soldiers discussed the situation with their superiors. The food and isolation were relieving, restoring XVIII’s spirits. This restoration was painfully short lived, as soon new faces and more soldiers began to crowd and repeat the same lines of questioning. The repetition didn’t bother XVIII, however XVIII saw these people were their superiors, and the repeated questions indicated they were unsatisfied with XVIII’s answers. The questioning continued for several exhausting days.

Narrator It was then, after days of torturous questioning that the threads of fate began to intertwine once again. While XVIII was being questioned in a particularly

aggressive manner, a peculiar pair of foreigners happened to overhear the conversation. By this point, even XVIII, with their mechanical mannerisms, looked devastated. Exhausted, confused and scared from days of relentless questioning.

Frog “What are they in for?”

Soldier “That’s none of your concern.”

Buttonworth “I dare say, you are speaking with the crown prince of the proud nation of Mycorhiza, if he asks you a question you will answer it.” Buttonworth blustered, horrified by the audacity of this peasant soldier.

Soldier “My apologies, your highness. This one was found wandering the desert, their identity is still in question. We’re trying to confirm their story.”

Frog “Oh, that’s important information. I wasn’t aware wandering the desert was illegal in this country.”

Soldier “Wandering the desert isn’t illegal, but they were found under suspicious circumstances.”

Frog “Suspicious?”

Soldier “I wasn’t there myself, but the report said they were covered in blood, and claimed to have no idea how they arrived in the desert.”

Frog “Yes, I can see that, you couldn’t even spare a change of clothes?”

Soldier “Yes, well, they have no home or family that could be contacted, so...”

Frog “So you decided to bully an orphan for a few days? You, why don’t you tell me what happened?” Frog pushed passed the guard and spoke to XVIII directly.

Narrator XVIII then proceeded to recount the same tale they’d told in as much detail as they could muster. As someone who was extremely strange himself, Frog felt a lot of sympathy for XVIII and their current situation. It would be a simple matter to have them released, but little did Frog know, that this act of kindness would have long reaching repercussions.

Frog “It seems to me you have no reason to keep them prisoner any longer.”

Buttonworth “Your highness, I’m certain that if we speak with the Baron we can have this whole situation cleared up. Boy what is the fine for wrongful imprisonment?”

Narrator I shan’t bore you with the details or the legalese that proceeded, but know that it was a marvel of social engineering. Within fifteen minutes they had the soldiers scrambling to release their prisoner. For XVIII, who had lived a life of order and structure above all else, they had little concept for acts of cruelty or kindness. Though the relief and happiness they felt in this moment, would be the first step on a long road, of opening their heart to the emotions they had stifled for so long.

Narrator Frog and Buttonworth spent a very short time with XVIII. Though Buttonworth tried to question XVIII further, Frog stopped him, simply allowing XVIII to breathe away from guards. Frog then provided XVIII fresh clothes and a small sum of gold. Just as quickly as they had arrived, it was time for them to go. Bidding farewell, they would travel for some time before returning.

Narrator XVIII was left alone in Karaad, with enough gold to earn a few nights at the local inn. I regret to inform you that this glimmer of hope was short lived, and the following events are the results of twisted exploitation, cruelty and ignorance. I shall spare many of the details of this part of our story, as they are too horrible even for myself to recount.

Narrator The money didn’t last, and XVIII having no marketable skills, or rather no ability to market their skills, was unable to find work. They were then forced to sleep on the streets for several days. During this time, thanks to the noble sacrifices of several rats, XVIII found they could subsist off blood. Not just subsist but thrive. Killing anything never sat well with XVIII, even in their

desperation. They soon came to the conclusion that rats could not provide a sustainable source of blood without causing them harm or death. The only other option was a larger target. The time spent studying with Dr. Dippel was priceless, and XVIII was certain a human could be bled enough to subsist on, without causing them serious harm.

Narrator So XVIII simply asked someone if they could part with a small amount of their blood. This didn't go over well, at least not the first time. However when XVIII tried again, on another person, something inside them stirred. They weren't aware of it at the time, but they had managed to cast a small bit of innate magic that was beginning to boil out from inside of them. This subtle charm was just enough to convince some people to forfeit a small amount of blood, just enough for XVIII to survive.

Narrator Though this satisfied XVIII's ever growing hunger, it didn't satisfy their need for shelter. The days were miserable, hot and humid. The nights freezing and damp, and these conditions create vulnerabilities.

Vulnerabilities that can be exploited and prayed upon.

Narrator Baron Millan Watts is an odious devil who controls several of Karaad's major establishments. To compare him to the most disgusting thing you can think of, would be an insult to that thing. He was a predator who exploited the defenseless and weak for his own benefits. XVIII homeless, alone and naive was a prime target.

Narrator One night, when XVIII had grown especially hungry and desperate, Baron Watts approached them. He feigned concerns for XVIII's conditions, offering them food and work, should they be willing. The Baron assured them the work would be easy. XVIII agreed quickly, knowing nothing else, they were swiftly taken in by the Baron's offer. The Baron simply needed to be sure of XVIII's talents before hiring them properly.

Narrator I shall spare the gruesome details of that night. The next morning the Baron confidently hired XVIII to work at the local brothel. For the next several months, XVIII would work under Lane Corinado, and would quickly become a favourite of the Baron. XVIII was obedient, never complained, never questioned an order, all while being severely under paid.

Narrator The small silver lining to this situation is that although XVIII's ignorance allowed it to occur, it was their ignorance that allowed them to not suffer from the experience. The clientele and intimacy provided XVIII ample opportunity to feed and regain their strength. This is hardly a cause for celebration, but the rest of the brothel staff were accepting and helpful to XVIII. Though these months were strange, and filled with abuses XVIII could not understand in their ignorance, the month did still pass.

Narrator Many months passed, when Frog returned. By pure coincidence he had decided to attend the brothel in secret. There he encounter XVIII, without hesitation he purchased a night of XVIII's services, and the two retired to a private chamber for the evening.

Narrator The night was extremely unusual by the standards which XVIII had been living. Frog was a gentleman the entire time, making no advances, and simply spoke with XVIII the entire evening. To call their dialogue a conversation would be dishonest, Frog should be praised for maintaining most of the conversation on his own. It took them some time, but Frog did manage to teach XVIII several card games, which they played late into the night.

Narrator When dawn arrived, Frog hired XVIII and assisted them in quitting at the brothel. Baron Watts would be deeply upset by this news, but his petty anger is another story entirely. This would be the start of XVIII's new life.