

Larks' Tongues in Aspice

Richard Kadrey

Like most celestial beings, Azrael, the Angel of Death, was fascinated by mortals. It wasn't that humans were especially interesting creatures: just the opposite, in fact. Among the assembly of angels, humans were regarded as small, dim, and peculiar. Uninteresting at best, horrifying at worst. Still, mortals were such veiled creatures — with secrets faces, hidden dreams and desires — that even the Angel of Death, who worked with humans more than any other angel, wanted to know and understand them.

Azrael's three ravens often gave him good advice. Babd, the oldest of the three, said, "Look to what they love. What they hold most dear will tell you who they are."

But Death shook his head. "No. Mortal love is so bound up in neuroses and childhood fears, mixed up with romantic myths, that it's much too ambiguous a way to describe the mortal soul."

Acha, the youngest of the ravens, said, "Look to what they fear. Hate is a more direct clue to their character than love. Love may move a man or woman, but fear moves nations."

Again, Azrael shook his head. "Fear isn't the answer, either. There's so much to fear in their world, yet day-to-day most mortals live as if fear was as far away from them as the stars."

Neman, the wisest of the three, said, "Look to their sex. Love and hate are bound up with the neuroses of their culture, but when they mate, it's their true selves showing through."

Azrael sighed. "That won't do, either. They hide their sex from each other most of all. Even mortals who've mated time and again often won't reveal to a lover the true nature of their desires."

It was in Armenia that Death finally discovered what he'd been looking for. There was a village at the base of a black, spiny mountain. The villagers were happy enough, but very poor. They had no coins to put on the eyes of their dead, so they buried their loved ones with honeycakes. This gave Azrael an idea.

From then on, whenever Death took a soul from Earth, before conducting them to the Afterlife, he would take them to his home. There the soul would find other souls enjoying an immense banquet. Azrael enjoyed telling the same joke whenever he saw the startled expression on the face of each new soul: "I didn't know what you'd like, so I made everything."

There was beef, fish, fowl, bush and game meat, steamed, baked, boiled and glazed vegetables, every kind of bread, cake, biscuit, cookie and confection ever made. There were a hundred different types of wine and brandy. Platters were piled high with olives, dates and cheese. Sausages draped from the candelabras like lianas from rainforest trees. For old souls, and those with exotic tastes, there was pickled eel and sturgeon garnished with quail eggs and caviar. Acres of iced oysters wound around roasted camel, goat, and iguana stuffed with pea hens. Spiced cobras with pearl onion eyes were poised to strike from a thicket of African figs, piles of pheasant, boar, antelope, hare, gazelle and flamingo drumsticks.

Food, Death guessed, was the key to understanding the mortal heart. Food was both necessity and pleasure, but humans didn't feel any need to hide this. In fact, they celebrated their culinary cleverness. Death began arriving early in the homes of his charges and before taking them away, would peruse all the

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taking them away, would peruse all the cook books he could find. While in the San Fernando Valley to carry away the soul of a small-time TV

producer, Azrael discovered the Food Network. After he spread the word, it soon became the most popular channel among all the non-corporeal beings in this plane of existence.

Cooking classes soon replaced both lyre lessons and choir as major preoccupations among the celestial orders. In Hell, Gluttony gave seminars in both meal preparation and traditional French service. This new emphasis on quality over quantity resulted in Gluttony slimming down to his college weight. Envy pointed out Gluttony's newly trim

figure to Lucifer, hoping to advance himself in the sin hierarchy. Instead, he found himself transferred to the darkest, dustiest, alcove in Hell where he was forced to research new ways to promote sin among single-cell life forms.