

Ligonier Valley Writers Flash Fiction Contest

Second Prize Rise of the Turnips

By Cricket Jean Baunoch of Indiana, PA

Cricket Jean Baunoch has been writing creatively for years. She is featured in the Appelley Publishing 2020 Rising Stars Collection and won second place in the Ligonier Valley Writers Student Poetry Awards (traditional verse). Cricket loves creating art and is featured in public displays (murals, tapestries) throughout Indiana County. She is in 10th grade at Indiana High School.

“Too long,” The grocery store was dark, perhaps darker than normal, but no one could really say. After all, they hadn’t been around very long. This would be their last night alive.

“We have been overlooked.” Even the potatoes, with their many eyes, couldn’t make sense of their surroundings. Though the potatoes, of course, were not alive and never would be. Poor souls.

“Jack of the lantern, the spirit of the lantern, grants us life once a year, in honor of when he put the first burning coal in the first jack o’lantern. We know what it was, don’t we?”

Several in the crowd whooped in agreement.

The king smiled. “How often have we sat on this empty shelf, alone and forgotten? Confused for radishes! When was the last time one of us was bought for a soup, a mash, a pasty-pie? What do people care about us Turnips?”

The Turnip King growled, leaves rustling with anger. “The first jack-o-lantern was carved from a Turnip, by Jack himself, and they were made to keep spirits away. But now . . . Pumpkins!” He spat. “Those vile orange pomposities! Look around!”

The Turnips peered toward the rest of the aisles. Pumpkin aprons, pies and pastries, balloons floating above the tills, orange circles with little black triangles on their faces.

“Blasphemy!” The Turnip King declared. “Justice for us! Justice for the Turnips!”

The Turnips erupted in cheers. “To battle, my friends! May this Halloween be the deadliest of all!”

The Turnips jumped from their basket in rows, marching across the tiles.

“Can’t you imagine, Irvin?” the king whispered, “Once upon an October, guts spilled on concrete floors?”

“Aye, sir,” Irvin replied, “Permission to gather weapons?”

“Granted, granted!” The king called to his subjects, “Gather weapons, some of you! Purge the baking aisle!” He switched to a mutter. “Can you imagine if pumpkins were not so popular? Perhaps we would have our own seasonal drink!”

“Aye, sir. I will take my leave.”

The King grinned. “Bring me back a blade, Irvin, I will make my mark.”

“Is that what this is about?”

The group jolted.

Out of the shadows marched a Pumpkin. She was fierce, not in the way of weapons or size, but in that her eyes burned with the weight of her army.

An army, the king thought, who were surely lurking in the dark.

“Get the weapons!” the king hissed.

Irvin and a few others bolted.

“Making your mark, King?” The pumpkin went on, “If that is your goal, then stab your sword into the ground and leave it there.”

“You know why I am here!” the king snarled.

“Just as your kind finds us every year: to maim in hopes it will quench your envy.”

“You Pumpkins—”

“Have done nothing wrong!” Her voice finally rose. “Violence toward the innocent is the most cowardly act of all!”

“How dare you!”

“How dare you, Turnip King!” She glared. “My name is Queen Ottavia, and I will not let my people die as they do every year. We fight *alone*, you and I.”

“Your Highness!” Irvin cried. He looked between the two, breathless.

“Bring me a blade, Irvin,” the king commanded.

The turnip hesitated.

“Irvin!” he snapped.

“Aye, sir.”

“Do not bother sending your troops to my kingdom.” Ottavia spoke coldly. “It has been long evacuated.”

Irvin handed the king a chef’s knife.

The king muttered orders to him.

“Aye, sir.” Irvin replied, trembling, but the King hardly noticed as he raised his weapon. Queen Ottavia held two pocket knives.

“Dual wielding, I see,” the king called.

“I fight only because I must. I do not want this.”

The king’s smile was sickening.

“Then this will be easier than I thought.” He charged.

The battle raged. Ottavia was strong, with brunt force and sharp, whirling blades that cut slivers in his leaves. Still, the King had speed. Her sides were nicked and scratched.

“Violence is the practice of fools,” she panted.

“We’re both fools then.”

Ottavia nodded. “Aye, only because I cannot think of another way.” She swung, **almost taking off a chunk of flesh**. “You want violence, I do not.” She swung again. “That makes me better than you.”

He growled, “Your pride shows, you rat-ridden harpy!” He slashed his blade, “You are not better than I! Never!” The king faked left, then slid and landed a stab in Ottavia’s side.

She gasped.

“Turnips came first,” he whispered.

“Fool.” The Queen pulled out the blade. “You should know it takes more than that to kill us. Cut holes in our heads and scoop our insides out. We live. We watch as they roast our seeds, as they mutilate eyes and mouths into our faces, light us up so the world can see their gruesome sin. Look around! Aprons and cookies and balloons, disfigured faces carved into our flesh. We live until we rot, and that is a relief. How my people long to die, Turnip King!”

She cried, “What cruel existence is this? What’s to be envied? Take my place!” She held the knife over him. “Let me take out your insides and hang them on a wall!”

“Do it!” The king screamed, “Do it, and let future generations see my corpse, me, who killed every last Pumpkin!”

Her face went slack.

“You—”

“My army left during our duel. They will have found your people by now.” He grinned.

Ottavia kicked him against the wall and put her blades on either side, burning with rage.

“I thought violence was for fools,” the king said softly.

Ottavia held her blades tight. “You,” Her tone dripped with malice, “do not deserve my wisdom.”

He was dead in a single motion.

Ottavia fell to her knees and wept.

Little did she know, as the sun rose and her mind fell away, that hiding between aisles of candy, Turnips and Pumpkins sat in a circle, **praying that the next year there would be peace, until** Jack of the lantern let their spirits die.