THE ABSURDISTAN CHRONICLES · VOLUME 13

JESS AND THE GREAT POPCORN CATASTROPHE!

EVACUATION AT THE PICTURE HOUSE



Based on a true fictional event.

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EVACUATION AT THE PICTURE HOUSE

For every place that is supposedly just around the corner.

A story from Goldhain and the neighbouring possibilities.

Based on a true fictional event.

Prologue - The Last Serving



The evening began peacefully at the Goldhain Picture House.

Jess had dimmed the foyer lights, straightened the posters and checked the red curtain in the main auditorium. The programme featured an old adventure film with a volcano, a lost valley and a hero who opened a mysterious door despite twelve unmistakable warnings.

One hundred and forty-eight tickets had been sold.

Jess had prepared one hundred and sixty servings of popcorn.

That left a reserve of twelve servings. In an ordinary cinema, twelve servings were a safety margin. At the Goldhain Picture House, they counted as a test of character.

Just before the film began, Roxy arrived and bought two large tubs because one was for the first half and the other was "for emergencies". Mina took a small tub and explained that she ate slowly. Blitzy bought a medium one, spilled half of it and

immediately bought another.

Jess filled tub after tub.

The auditorium doors closed. The music began. On the screen, an expedition disappeared into the mist.

A late bus pulled up outside the foyer carrying seventeen members of the Goldhain Society for Historic Railings.

All of them had tickets.

All of them wanted popcorn.

Jess looked into the machine.

At the bottom lay one solitary, unpopped kernel of corn.

She lifted it between two fingers.

The evening had found its volcano.

I. The Film Is Running

In the main auditorium, the hero was riding through a jungle. In the foyer, Jess stood before seventeen expectant people and an empty popcorn machine.

"A short delay," she said.

The chairman of the railing society nodded sympathetically. "We are used to waiting. Many historic staircases are closed."

Jess checked the storage compartment. Empty. The cupboard beneath it. Empty. The reserve box in the office.

It contained napkins, two packets of salt and a single chocolate bar that had served as an emergency ration since the previous winter.

Jess went through the delivery in her head. Three sacks of corn had arrived that afternoon. Two had gone into the machine. The third was supposed to be in the storeroom.

It was not.

In its place, she found a box of three hundred little paper straws that nobody had ordered.

The society members waited in an orderly line at the counter. Nobody complained. That made matters worse. Angry people could be calmed. Patient people created responsibility.

Jess offered them nachos.

The chairman smiled sadly. "We came for the atmosphere."

Popcorn was no longer food.

It was infrastructure.

II. The First Report

Jess called the delivery company. An automated voice explained that all lines were busy. Then it played a flute arrangement of a familiar film theme.

Jess waited.

Inside the auditorium, the expedition reached a rope bridge. Muffled thunder came through the doors.

The automated voice returned and thanked her for her patience.

Jess had not offered any.

She hung up and called Ruby at the bakery.

"Do you have corn?"

"Tinned."

"Dry?"

"Only for decoration. And that has been varnished."

"Then no."

Nika checked the delivery status from home. The third sack had indeed been delivered. The digital system showed a signature. It consisted of a straight line and a circle.

"That could be anyone," Jess said.

"Or a very determined zero," Nika said.

Jess placed a small sign on the counter: Popcorn temporarily unavailable.

She deliberately kept it small. Large signs made small problems bigger. Unfortunately, she had not allowed for the human urge to bend down towards small signs and then wave other people over.

Within minutes, a second queue had formed in front of the notice. The first queue was waiting for popcorn. The second was waiting to read the notice. Each blocked the other and assumed the other group knew more.

Jess moved the sign to one side. The two queues merged into a single, longer queue of uncertain purpose.

A man came out of the auditorium, read it and went back inside.

Two minutes later, three more people appeared.

One asked, "What does temporarily mean?"

"That there will be more later."

"How much later?"

In the film, the rope bridge collapsed.

Jess said, "We are establishing that now."

III. The Empty Heart of the Machine

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Jess examined the popcorn machine with a torch. The glass chamber was empty, the metal kettle was clean and the storage hopper so hollow that every tap echoed like a call from a gorge.

At the very bottom lay the last kernel.

Jess took an empty tub and collected it. Not because a single kernel could help. It was evidence.

She inspected the delivery route. It ran from the rear entrance through the storeroom, past the office and to the counter. Three pale kernels lay on the threshold.

A trail.

Jess followed it into the corridor. There she found two more kernels, then another outside the prop-room door. Behind it stood sabres, artificial palm trees, a cardboard moon and twelve crates from a pirate film.

No sack of corn.

Beneath the cardboard moon lay a torn delivery label. Only the number three remained legible.

Jess photographed it and sent the picture to Nika.

"The sack was inside the building," Nika said.

"And now it has vanished."

Loud applause came from the auditorium. Evidently, the film hero had survived the bridge.

Jess looked at the final kernel in the tub.

The people on the screen had no idea how lucky they were.

IV. The Supply Line Breaks

News of the shortage spread through the auditorium although Jess had made no announcement.

It travelled from row seven to row eight, then to row twelve and finally up to the balcony. Each retelling changed it slightly.

Temporarily unavailable became machine broken.

That became kitchen out of action.

In the balcony, somebody believed the electricity in the entire building was unstable.

One audience member switched on his phone as a precaution. The light bothered the person beside him. A whispered argument began. Meanwhile, the hero in the film was crawling through a volcanic tunnel and asking everyone to remain calm.

Jess noticed the unrest at the doors. More and more people came out, supposedly to buy drinks. In truth, they wanted to inspect the situation.

The queue at the counter grew.

Jess put the nachos, chocolate and jelly sweets on prominent display. Nobody touched them. The missing popcorn had reduced every other snack to

a spare part.

Mina was the last to emerge from the auditorium. She held her small tub, which still contained about twelve pieces.

The waiting crowd stared at it.

Mina pulled the tub to her chest. "That is my pension."

Jess stepped between her and the queue.

The supply line had broken. Public order now required protection.

V. The Emergency Plan

Every cinema has an emergency plan. It covers fire, power cuts, technical failures and people who talk loudly on the phone during a film. A complete popcorn outage did not appear in it.

Jess fetched the folder from the office.

Under Supply interruption, it said: Secure affected areas. Inform visitors. If necessary, evacuate in an orderly manner.

This probably referred to water pipes. But the sentence existed, and the situation had long since stopped respecting distinctions.

Jess went to the projection room and spoke to the projectionist. His name was Oskar, and in thirty years he had interrupted only two screenings: once because of smoke and once because a mayor thought he had recognised his own speech in the film.

"We need an interval," Jess said.

"Technical problem?"

"Culinary."

Oskar looked at her.

"We are out of popcorn."

He glanced through the small window into the auditorium. "How restless?"

In row five, half a tub was being traded for two chocolate bars.

"Early stages," Jess said.

Oskar stopped the film at a point where the hero stood before a locked stone door. The house lights rose slowly.

One hundred and forty-eight faces turned towards the screen.

Then towards Jess.

VI. The Announcement

Jess stepped in front of the curtain. She carried a microphone and wore her friendliest expression.

"Dear guests. We are pausing the screening for a short supply interval."

A murmur ran through the auditorium.

"The film is safe. The building is safe. Only our popcorn supply has unexpectedly run out in its entirety."

The murmur grew louder.

Someone called, "How long?"

"We are already searching for the delivery."

"Is it in the building?"

Jess thought of the trail of kernels. "Possibly."

That honest addition was a mistake.

It now sounded as though a lost sack of popcorn was hiding somewhere in the picture house and merely needed to be found. People peered under their seats. A child in row three reported a trail of crumbs. Two members of the railing society volunteered to inspect the stairwells.

Jess raised both hands. "For the moment, please remain seated."

At that instant, a door opened at the back. A visitor stepped inside and called, "The way out is clear!"

She meant that the queue in the foyer had dispersed.

The auditorium understood something else.

The first people stood up.

Oskar brought the lights all the way up.

Jess faced one hundred and forty-eight people who had simultaneously decided to behave sensibly.

Nothing is harder to stop than a crowd convinced that it is being reasonable.

VII. The Evacuation

Jess made a decision.

If everyone was standing anyway, they would actually leave the auditorium: calmly, row by row and without climbing over seats. A badly understood interval was better than a well-understood panic.

"We are clearing the auditorium for ten minutes," she said into the microphone. "Please follow the illuminated routes."



The film music continued softly. On the screen, the hero waited in front of his stone door while the audience began an adventure of its own.

Jess stood in the centre aisle. She used her little torch to show the way. Row by row, the guests filed out. Some carried drinks, some coats, some carefully rescued scraps of popcorn.

Roxy had eaten both large tubs and offered to help with the count. Lena stood by the side door and kept a tally. Tessa held open the double doors as if

defending a mountain pass.

Mina remained seated.

Jess went over to her. "Everything all right?"

Mina lifted her tub. "I still have seven."

"You still have to leave."

Mina rose as though abandoning a sinking ship and took every single piece of popcorn with her.

After four minutes, the auditorium was empty.

A pale trail of spilled popcorn ran across the carpet towards the exit.

Jess counted the rows from front to back. A scarf lay in row four. A half-full drink stood in row nine. Beneath seat sixty-two, she found a single shoe whose owner had apparently evacuated so methodically that he would not notice its absence until he was outside.

She took the shoe with her. Then she checked the side aisles, the balcony and the small room behind the curtain. Oskar reported from the booth that the projector was safe. The screen still showed the waiting hero, frozen in a pose that looked more impatient with every passing minute.

Jess shone her torch briefly over every seat. Not because she expected to find a person, but because an empty row was only truly empty once somebody had looked.

Jess walked alone through the rows and checked every corner.

In the film, dramatic music would have started now.

At the picture house, the only sound was a vacuum cleaner in the foyer.

VIII. Outside the Picture House

One hundred and forty-eight cinema-goers stood in the square outside the building. They were joined by seventeen members of the railing society, three curious passers-by and a reporter who happened to be nearby.

The scene looked more significant than it was.

Someone asked whether there was a fire. Someone else replied that the popcorn had failed. The reporter heard only the word catastrophe and began recording.

Jess stepped onto the entrance stair.

"There is no danger."

"Then why were we evacuated?" a man called.

"To keep the supply interval orderly."

The man considered this and nodded. In Absurdistan, it was an adequately official explanation.

Lena reported that all guests were outside. Roxy reported that no tubs had been left behind. Mina reported nothing. She stood in the shelter of a pillar and ate her sixth piece.

Nika called. She had checked the delivery route. The driver had entered through the rear door that afternoon. A security camera showed him placing

the sack on a trolley.

Afterwards, a person in historical costume had pushed the trolley towards the stage.

Jess looked back at the building.

That afternoon, a rehearsal for the town festival had taken place in the smaller auditorium.

The missing sack had not been stolen.

It had become a prop.

IX. The Expedition to the Stage

Jess, Tessa and two members of the railing society went back inside. Lena stayed outside to guard the guest list. Roxy guarded Mina's remaining supply, although Mina had not requested assistance.

The route to the stage led through a dark side corridor. Scenery flats, artificial trees and a painted mountain pass leaned against the walls. Jess lit the way with her torch.

Several trolleys stood behind the curtain. One held costumes. A second carried a cardboard dragon. The third held three sacks labelled as sandbags for a harbour scene.

The false labels had been added by the town festival's assistant director. He appeared from behind a piece of scenery, still wearing a harbourmaster's coat, and explained that they had needed heavy sacks to stop the artificial quay from shifting during rehearsal. The delivery driver had only said, "These are for the cinema." Nobody in the theatre had understood that as a clue to their contents.

"The sack was for popcorn," Jess said.

The harbourmaster looked at the sacks. "That explains why the quay was so light."

He apologised and offered to help return it. Tessa handed him the evidence label. The expedition now had a witness and a man in a gold-braided

cap.

Jess opened the first sack. Fabric scraps.

The second really did contain sand.

The third rustled dryly.

She loosened the string. Golden kernels shone in the torchlight.

The expedition had reached its lost valley.

Tessa lifted the sack onto her shoulder. Meanwhile, the members of the railing society inspected the stage rail and declared it "historically unconvincing but stable".

Jess called Lena. "Found it."

A cheer swept across the square outside, carrying through the walls all the way to the stage.

Jess looked at the sack.

"Now we only have to serve one hundred and sixty-five people."

Tessa grinned. "Then move."

X. The Great Eruption

The popcorn machine was heated. Oil, corn and salt went into the kettle. Jess closed the lid.

The first kernel popped.

Then the second.

Then an entire storm erupted.

White popcorn filled the chamber, bounced against the glass and poured into the tray. Jess scooped, Roxy filled tubs, Ruby had arrived from the bakery with bags, and Mr Kamm from the public order office distributed numbered tickets although nobody had called him.

The guests were admitted in groups. Rows one to five first, then six to ten. The members of the railing society received their servings last because they expressly insisted that historic patience deserved recognition.

Jess introduced a simple system: each guest showed a ticket, received a tub and went straight into the auditorium. The system worked for thirty-eight seconds. Then it emerged that several tickets had been left beneath seats in the dark.

Lena replaced the tickets with her tally. Roxy recognised most guests because she remembered their original popcorn orders. Mr Kamm stamped two napkins out of habit before Jess confiscated the stamp.

The man with the single shoe came forward. Jess returned it. He thanked her, put it on and accepted his tub with the dignity of a traveller who had lost and recovered his luggage during a long passage.

Mina placed her final piece of popcorn in Jess's empty tub. "For the reserve."

Jess stared at her. "You are giving it away?"

"The crisis is over."

It was probably the most solemn act of the evening.

After twelve minutes, one hundred and sixty-five filled tubs stood on the counter. The floor crunched. The foyer smelled of butter and triumph.

Jess took the single unpopped kernel from her evidence tub and dropped it into the fresh corn.

Even final witnesses deserved a second chance.

XI. The Return

The auditorium opened once more.

Jess stood at the entrance and counted every person. One hundred and forty-eight guests returned. They were joined by the seventeen late society members, for whom seats in the front rows had remained free.

Everyone carried popcorn.

The mood was not angry. It was ceremonial. People who have evacuated a cinema and recovered a sack of corn together regard one another as travelling companions afterwards.

Oskar waited in the projection room. "Where were we?"

Jess looked at the screen. The hero was still standing before the stone door.

"Before the bad decision."

The lights faded. Conversations stopped. Jess took a seat at the back so she could keep an eye on the auditorium.

Oskar started the film.

The hero opened the door.

The volcano erupted behind it.

One hundred and sixty-five people reached into their tubs at once.

The rustling sounded like rain on a tent roof.

Jess smiled.

The screening had been saved. At last, the disaster film could take place on the screen, where it belonged.

XII. After the Credits

When the credits rolled, the audience remained seated.

Then somebody began to applaud. First for the film, then for Oskar and finally for Jess. The members of the railing society stood and pronounced the evacuation exemplary, particularly the handrails in the west stairwell.

The reporter asked Jess for an interview.

"How did you remain calm during the crisis?"

Jess looked at the floor covered in popcorn and the empty tubs among the seats. "I did not have time to become agitated."

"Was the evacuation necessary?"

Jess thought about it. "It was orderly."

The next day's town paper reported an exemplary supply operation at the picture house. The lost sack was not mentioned. In the photograph, Jess stood in the centre aisle holding a torch and looked as though she had personally supervised a volcanic eruption.

The guests passed the story on. In one version, the machine had thrown sparks. In another, the popcorn had vanished beneath the stage. The railing society published a detailed report in which the crisis occupied two pages and the handrails

nine.

Jess corrected nobody. Those who had been there knew that the truth was both smaller and larger: one missing sack, a crowded square outside the cinema and an auditorium that returned together.

In the foyer, she hung the delivery label beside the emergency plan. Underneath, she wrote: Popcorn deliveries are not props.

She left the single chocolate bar in the reserve cupboard.

Some emergency rations grow stronger when they are never needed.

Finale - A Small Serving

Late that night, the picture house was empty again.

Jess swept the centre aisle, locked the doors and checked the new sack of corn. It stood in the storeroom, clearly labelled and tied to the shelving with a ribbon.

Then she sat down in the back row.

Oskar played the loveliest scene from the film once more: the view over the lost valley, before anyone opened a door. Jess held a small serving of fresh popcorn in both hands.

The cinema was silent. The projector hummed. Dust danced in the beam of light.

Jess took one piece of popcorn.

It tasted of butter, salt and a very long interval.

A message from Nika appeared on her phone: Tomorrow's delivery has been confirmed. Four sacks.



Jess smiled with relief.

Then a second message arrived.

Correction: four boxes of paper straws.

Jess looked towards the storeroom.

On the screen, the volcano began to smoke again.

She put away her phone, took another piece of popcorn and remained seated.

Tomorrow was another film.