

Family Dinner Night

By Louis Peacock



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These days, family dinner night actually felt like time spent with family.

Many startling changes had come to the Lungbarrovians' lives since Kinkeeper Innocet had put an end to the years they'd spent wandering the foothills of Mount Lung and yearning for the Promised House; yet, even now, that simple fact was perhaps still the most shocking. *Family*. Children crowded the meal cavern, chasing each other around, under, and sometimes onto the vast central table; only Jobiska complained, while the others simply laughed.

Cousin Rynde now had a hundred mouths to feed, and he'd risen to the task with gusto; his ingredients were as humble as ever, mushrooms and grains and questionable meats, but rather fresher and more abundant than in their years of sequestration—and Rynde gave them freely. At mealtimes, his hissing, bubbling symphony of freshly-opened pans, of newly-ladled soups and stews would echo through the low-lit neon den, mixing with the layered chorus of shouts and murmur, the idle conversation of the Cousins and Second Cousins. There had been enemies among them, and bitter rivals, but all that had faded now, with freedom and the need for survival. They'd lost their House, but found a home with one another.

Or so it was, at any rate, with most of them.

"I *still* think we should take this outrage up with the High President! ...Again! We are *Lungbarrow*—the Children of Plutarch—old of blood, ancient in tradition—"

And senescent of form, someone thought so loudly it was audible. Cousin Xephresa, once a respected stellar astrophysician, was still clinging to a body he'd been wearing since before the House's burial, and it fit his calcified attitudes.

"Why should we be reduced to squabbling squatters!?" he thundered on. "Little better than Outsiders are we here! We have emerged. We are free! We should be Home, in a Chapterhouse befitting our status—not scrabbling in dirt and living off *mushrooms* as if nothing ever changed!"

In the midst of such much new life, the old relic's posturing was a sharp reminder of the past. Yet even he, even bitter old Xephresa, the great traditionalist, loved the children. All through his tantrum, one of Owis' children had been playing with fistfuls of his long white hair.

"What was it like," she asked him, cocking her head to one side — "the *old* House?"

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“Oh, well I—” the old man stammered. “I—well—”

“Oh! Oh!” the girl’s brother piped up. “Second Cousin Vesperell, *he* could tell us! He has the *best* stories!”

A few seats down, Kinkeeper Innocet stiffened. “Now Uphon, Cousin Vesperell is very tired. I’m sure he’d be happy to tell you in the morning—”

A decrepit man with a shaggy brown beard raised his head from his food. “No, no, Kinkeeper. Let him ask. I understand his desire to know... Dash it, he *ought* to know, they all should. They should *know* why we can never go back.”

Instantly, a pair of advisors closed in on Vesperell from either side. The first was tall, a woman, with long, wildly curled black hair. She’d been sitting close to the chronicler already, for Incandeline was like a younger sister to the old man, but now she leaned in closer, hissing words of warning directly into his mind — for Incandeline, in all her lives, had but rarely spoken with her mouth, letting her thoughts do the work. More demonstrative was the second cautioner, Cousin DeRoosifa, who adjusted his thick, bottle-bottom spectacles and then spoke up in his booming, sonorous voice.

“My dear Vesperell, surely you cannot think of taxing yourself so! Why, any story of our joint youths is bound to invoke... well... well, you know...”

He trailed off, letting his gaze fall on one of the empty seats around the table. It’s Arkhew’s chair, installed at Innocet’s request along with one for every other departed Cousin — even Glospin had been given one. A rare concession to the grief which she had once borne so manifestly upon her back, now turned inward as her other responsibilities called.

It was well known that Arkhew, DeRoosifa, Vesperell, and Incandeline had been something of a tight-knit group in the old days, exchanging favours and secrets in forgotten corners of the ancient Chapterhouse even after the burial of House Lungbarrow; that was, until they had all trailed off into the calling dark of the House, leaving only Arkhew behind at the mercy of Owis and Glospin. The death of the shy little man had hit the other three hard; harder than most deaths would have in such a bickering, distrustful family.

Nonetheless, Vesperell shook off the pair and their objections.

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“I appreciate your concern, Cousins. But I have a story which must be told... a small story, so as to not spoil our appetites. I call it — ‘A Feast at House Lungbarrow’.”

* * *

Thousands of years ago and many miles away, the feast hall of Lungbarrow was all but dead. Oh, to be sure, there were people in it—but the silence that hung over it was like that of the grave. Instead of Cousin Rynde, the great wooden Drudges served the food, their ancient limbs snapping with each bend towards the high table top. No lively conversation was to be had here, just the deadened glares and muttered accusations of a spiteful family ill-accustomed to gathering in one place. Few came to the Chapterhouse with any regularity anymore, but it was a special occasion—the Feast of Thremix the Liberator, and the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Cousin Vesperell’s publication of the wildly successful three hundred volume biography of the self-same figure—one of Lungbarrow’s few success stories in recent memory.

It was this notion of a ‘success story’ for the modern House being the biography that suddenly caused Kithriarch Quences, after hours of silence beside the ever-watchful Sathralope, to stand up upon his oversized seat, glaring accusatorily at the young chronicler.

“So, we have our feast here today in honour of *you*? In honour of this... mediocrity?”

Vesperell blinked in surprise, a smile falling from his face. He had been rather handsome then; a short brown beard and wavy, well-sculpted hair complimenting his persona of the dashing young storyteller, master of the ancient lore of their world. Beside him, Incandeline—then a shockingly tall and gaunt man with a long, thin face broken in its pale monotony only by a dimple under one eye—laid his hand on his Cousin’s shoulder, cautioning against rising to the old man’s spleen.

Vesperell did not heed him. “Why, Ordinal-General, is it not *good* to have a success story of any sort to our name? My biography of Thremix is celebrated in the halls of even the very hoariest Chapterhouses, it—”

“Success?! You call *that* success?!” spat Quences. “Why, I suppose you’d call all of your little scheming quartet of Cousins here successes too then, hm? Success indeed—a biography of *Thremix*, of all things! Not one of the Architect, nor even the Engineer—no, for, recall, your efforts there came to *nothing*. So you cling to a biography of a half-wit scientist,

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least of our Founders, gathering us all here to celebrate your boastful nothingness!”

DeRoosifa raised a hand, almost as a scared child might to a teacher scolding their friend, his bald head beaded with sweat that trickled down to stain his omnipresent spectacles.

Quences rounded on him, his palms flat on the table, blue eyes hard as diamonds in his gaunt face. “Ah, and you, dear Cousin DeRoosifa, always with the speeches, quick to the defence! When you told me, my boy, that you wished to go into politics, I thought—at last, here is one who can fulfill our potential! But where did you end up? A *lawyer*. Politician indeed! And *you*, Incandeline, what of you? A Junior Chronogeneticist in the Bureau of De-Extinction, spending all your time poking around with that idiotic little yellow-liveried taxonomist! Not even a hint of ambition, as your fellow conspirators possess.”

All three of the previous victims of his rant flinched as Quences at last came to Arkhew—poor, quiet, unassuming Arkhew.

“Ah, and finally, Arkhew... you wish to be a cloud-sculptor. I have nothing else to say. What *could* I say to such disappointment?”

The small, brunette-bobbed woman—as Arkhew had been then—bowed her head, no resistance in sight.

Quences sat back in his chair, huffing and daubing his forehead with a handkerchief. He looked almost apologetic for a moment, his eyes softening to pools of clear water.

“Ah, but I should not berate you... there are two of your kin who will give us our hopes now! They have enough ambition for all of you; why, they did not even come here tonight, so great are their callings elsewhere! One is growing closer to the organs of power all the time, the other stays studying... such unusual things, but so *brilliantly*! Fear not, all of you... your promise may be wasted, but you shall live to see it fulfilled in others... I promise you, my dears... yes...”

Muttering, Quences withdrew once again into his ancient senescence.

The four he had accosted remained in silence. What could be said? Quences did not care for them—he never would. Only whichever great hope he clung to for a few centuries was ever on his mind; they were not a family here, merely obligations he put up with.

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