

# Nell's Week

messiessie

presented by Somnova Studios

Nell stopped to read the sign on her fourth pass, the nagging temptation having convinced her to break from routine. It was bright, garishly orange, the sort of thing you can't help but notice from afar. She'd been curious the first time, but she couldn't afford to stop – she had a class to attend. And she'd been curious the second and third times, but still she had her classes to get to, still she walked resolutely ahead and pushed the intrigue to the back of her mind. But the fourth time she walked down the hall she decided, at last, that it wasn't worth putting up with the scratching curiosity. The sign begged to be read and it wouldn't let go of her until it was. So she would read it. With an uneasy glance to either side she shuffled over to the bulletin board and squinted at the poster. She blinked to shut out the noise from around her and traced the text with a finger.

ST. DYMPHNA'S  
HALLOWEEN HAUNT  
OCTOBER 31 @ GYMNASIUM  
BRING YOUR BEST COSTUME  
WINNER TAKES ALL

There was a helpful illustration of someone dressed as a ghost, and cartoon pumpkins framed the margins, bursting with the orange that had first captured her attention. It took Nell a few reads to fully absorb the information, her lips moving silently with the words. She gathered that there was to be a costume contest, apropos of Halloween, and she had a week to get ready. It was sure to be popular at a school full of mischievous teenagers. What the winner would take, she couldn't tell, but it didn't matter; this wasn't the sort of thing she'd usually do. Usually, she'd avoid people. All the more so when they're concentrated in one place and loud. So loud.

But something about this particular concentration of people caught her attention. They'd be dressed up. All the usual, she expected: ghosts and zombies and pirates and werewolves. It looked like fun, and Nell liked fun when she could find it. She could even have some fun herself. She could dress up for herself. That would be something. Her mother told her to try things out, whenever she felt like she could. The voice, soft and warm, crackling over the telephone, echoed in her memory. *Are you doing anything for Halloween, Nellie? It's a good op-*

*portunity to socialise!* Socialise. The word never felt at ease on Nell's tongue, for all she tried to grow accustomed to it. Still, she tried, if only because the exhaustion at the end the end always came with a hint of pride. She felt like she could do this.

She squinted some more at the poster and nodded to herself. The words etched themselves into her memory and she knew she could call them up as she'd need to. With one last look, she was off. She had a class to attend. Along the way, she picked up murmurs from the other students – words that popped out from the soup of noise. People were talking about their plans for the contest, and the ideas meandered into Nell's awareness. They each had their own thoughts, some more confusing than others. There were, of course, the vampires and the witches, the plague doctors and the banshees. All the usual spooky assortment one would expect from Halloween festivities. Nell had seen plenty of those whenever October rolled around. She knew what to expect.

But there were also bunnies and cheetahs, cartoon protagonists and anime characters. Nell didn't think that was very much in line with the Halloween spirit. Halloween was supposed to be spooky, and bunnies aren't very spooky. Perhaps zombie bunnies, but Nell didn't think these people were planning on that. She didn't think zombie bunnies would wear the things these students were planning on wearing. What did she know, though? This was, after all, her first rodeo. That's what

they would say.

So! She had a week, and she needed a costume of her own. What should she do? Nell stared off into the question, taking her seat in class and letting the noises bounce off her ears. What would she like to do? Ghosts were easy: five minutes of grabbing a bedsheet and cutting holes in the right place. Vampires didn't seem like a challenge either: a trip to the store to buy those silly plastic teeth and a cloak, perhaps with some fake blood to round things out. But Nell didn't want to do easy; easy doesn't win contests.

She always thought witches were cool. The way they took things from around them, herbs and rocks and animal bits, and put them all together into potions. It always appealed to her, formulaic as it was. She imagined their books full of tables with numbers and symbols down many rows and across many columns. The instructions would be so wonderfully clear and satisfyingly intricate. The pieces would come together from insignificant nothings into a stewing half-thing and boil into the final something.

She could make the costume the same way. Nell didn't have it right now; she only had an idea. But with the idea she could bring together all the pieces, worthless on their own, and make a costume that was worth something. It wouldn't be easy, and that would be the point. She would build the complexity into it, fill it with structure. She might even win it all – whatever it all

was. Nell didn't much care. She'd decided to do a witch costume, and that would be that. She was going to go to the costume contest with all the people and all the noise and she'd have fun. It would be worth it.

\*\*\*

Nell cradled her one hand in the other, whimpering. A dozen scratch marks wrapped themselves around her fingers like webs, red and raw. The dark fabric she'd been working with lay discarded on the floor, and the needle lay beside it, innocuous. The plans, too, sat on the desk in front of her, impassive. She glanced at them and whimpered again, frustrated at their indifference.

She'd been right. The witch costume was not easy. She was beginning to think that it might even be too hard. The day she'd thought it up, she spent the evening on her laptop, studying the mores of witch fashion, learning the theory of sewing and the principles behind makeup artistry. Fabric patterns and stitching methods and concealer and primer and setting spray. All explained, in theory, by the tutorials she'd found that day. This much, she never had trouble with. She could recite it verbatim right now if someone asked her to. *Theory has always been her forte. If they can put it in a book, our Nellie can sit down and figure it out!* That's what her mother always says, in that calm, collected voice of hers.

Unfortunately, Nell now thought to herself, they can't put the dexterity to handle a needle in a book. That was something she couldn't sit down and figure out from any tome. And she was finding now that she couldn't sit down and figure it out very well by practice either. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd tried to mimic the patterns she'd studied with the store-bought fabric and sewing kit, and each time she fumbled something or another. If she didn't manage to prick or scratch herself, she'd drop the ensemble entirely. If it wasn't one thing she messed up, it was something else. For more than an hour she'd struggled, and she was reaching the end of her wire.

So it was that Nell sat there, hunched over and whimpering in frustration at the fabric, at the needle, at herself. She only had three days left to the contest, and there was no way she'd be done in time at this rate. She didn't want to give up, no, but some things are just impossible. If she can't stitch together two plain pieces of fabric in an hour, how was she going to assemble a whole costume in seventy-two? There just wasn't enough time.

"...Nell?"

The apprehensive voice came over her shoulder and hovered around her ears as Nell took it in. Slowly, she turned around and saw the source standing in her open doorway, watching her with a concerned expression.

"Are you okay?"

It was the girl who lived across the hall. Layla. Nell

called up the name from one of the deeper crevasses in her memory. They'd never spoken much – she never spoke much with anybody – but they exchanged their greetings and smiles every now and again. And here she was, at Nell's door. Nell swallowed and mumbled.

“Um. . .”

Nell's discomfort seemed to register with Layla, who took a step back and brushed her dark, bushy hair out of her eyes. “I can go, if you'd like,” she said, offering a smile.

“No. . . it's alright.”

Nell could still only murmur the words, but as she got them out Layla visibly relaxed and stepped back into the room.

“So, what's up?”

Nell spoke clearly this time. “Well.” She picked up the fabric and needle from the ground and held them up for Layla to see. The girl's face opened with comprehension and she walked over to Nell's chair, bending to take a closer look.

“Oh! Is this for the costume contest?”

Nell nodded. “Yes.”

Layla scrutinized the materials in front of her. “You're going as. . . a witch?”

“Yes. Well. I wanted to.”

“You wanted to?”

“This is more difficult than I thought it would be.”

“Oh.” Layla frowned, sympathetic. “This does look pretty complicated, especially if you’ve never done it before.” Her eyes lit up and she spoke with a grin. “Maybe I could help.”

“No.”

“No?”

Nell looked ahead at her desk as she elaborated. “No, thank you. I have to do this myself. Otherwise there’s no point.”

The girl looked at her, a hint of confusion clouding her face, but the gentle smile returned before Nell could notice. She straightened up and offered a wise nod.

“I understand. It can be important to do these things yourself.”

“Yes. This was supposed to be a new experience for me. So if I’m not the one doing it, there’s no point. It would be someone else’s experience.” Nell nodded to herself to punctuate the sentence.

“Right.”

“But I still want to go to the contest. I want to socialise”

“I’m sure you can! Maybe not as the witch you were planning, but you could figure out something else. Or just go to see what people do. You don’t have to bring a costume of your own.”

“Yes, but. . . I would like to.”

“I know, Nell. And you still have a few days. I can help brainstorm if you want, or leave you to it, but you

have time.”

“I have time. I should figure it out on my own. It should be my idea.”

“I’m sure you’ll come up with something good.”

“I hope so.”

“You’re a smart girl, Nell.”

“Maybe. But not smart like this.”

Layla smiled again and brushed a gentle hand over Nell’s shoulder. “If you say you aren’t, then you won’t be. Don’t condemn yourself before you’ve even started. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good! Are you going to be okay?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Perfect. I’ll see you around?”

“Yes. Goodbye.”

With a wave, Layla turned around and left Nell to her thoughts, humming as she went. For her part, Nell stared at the abandoned materials with a tired expression. A minute passed, and then she set about gathering them up.

\*\*\*

The grass fluttered beneath the cool breeze and gave way as Nell pulled at it in tufts. She sat in the school grounds, cross-legged, grabbing at the yellowing blades and uprooting them absentmindedly. They made no sounds

of protest, and soon she'd collected a pile of destroyed grass at her side. Every minute or two a gust would sweep away some of the heap, but it still grew slowly, without purpose. Nell didn't even look at it. She stared off, her mind as distant as the trees at the edge of the grounds.

"Someone looks busy."

Nell blinked, then blinked again. Her head swiveled and tilted up, and she spotted an imposing figure on the pathway nearby, arms crossed.

"What?"

"You seem distracted."

The voice was thick, husky, and playful. She knew that voice. Everybody knew that voice.

"Hello, Fran."

Fran strutted over and sat beside Nell, stretching their legs with a satisfied yawn. "What's up, Nells?"

"I'm okay."

"Really? You could've fooled me."

"What?"

"I mean," Fran said with a sympathetic smirk, "that you don't look okay."

"Oh," Nell mumbled, looking at the grass in her hands. "I'm sorry."

Fran chuckled. "Don't be sorry. You're not doing anything wrong." They pulled a stray lock out of their face, frowning, and looked back at Nell. "I asked because

I hate to see someone so obviously distressed without knowing what their issue is.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. You can call it my natural curiosity.”

“Yes.”

Rolling their eyes a little, Fran pressed further. “Really, Nells: what’s wrong?”

“Well. There’s the contest.”

Fran’s eyebrows rose just a bit. “The costume contest? The one tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“What about it?”

“I was going to enter.”

“Oh holy shit, really?”

Nell lifted her eyes from the grass and met Fran’s gaze for the first time. “Yes. Is that bad?”

“No, no,” Fran answered, waving away the concern with their hands. “It’s not bad at all. It’s just a surprise.”

“You’re right. It isn’t something I do usually. But that’s why I wanted to do it.”

“Totally, I get you. But why is that a problem?”

“I wanted to be a witch. I planned the costume. But I couldn’t put it together, I didn’t have enough time, and I got stuck. I’ve spent the past two days trying to think of something else I would like to do, but I can’t. And now it’s tomorrow, and I have nothing to enter with.”

“Jeez, Nells.” Fran scratched their head and offered a pained grimace. “That’s rough. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“So what are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I came here. To think.”

“Ah. . .”

Fran let the acknowledgment drift away awkwardly and spent a minute watching Nell, who had returned to her grass-picking. Eyes narrowed, they chewed their lip, deep in thought. A moment passed, and their face lit up.

“You know what, Nells?” they started, leaning forward.

“Hm?”

“I think I might have just the thing for you,” they continued with a grin.

“What?”

Fran hopped back up and brushed off their pants. “Stay here,” they said, stepping off toward the front gate. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

Nell watched Fran’s receding back, confused and uncertain, until they disappeared out the gates to some unknown destination. Once again, she turned her attention to the grass – what was left of it, at least. By now she’d collected almost all the grass around her, and she scanned the remains with surprise. Realising the damage she’d done, she opted instead to focus on the beetle climbing one of the destroyed blades. It turned and fum-

bled, helpless, so she took it in her hand and set it in a nearby patch of soil. There, it burrowed as Nell watched, entranced. She lost track of the seconds and minutes in its miniscule motions, didn't notice the Sun descending slowly, and didn't hear the approaching footsteps.

"Nells."

"Oh. Hello, Fran."

"Yeah, hey." They held up a bundle of something. "I thought you could use this."

"What is it?"

"Let's just say," they responded, unfolding the bundle, "it's an idea for tomorrow I think you might like."

Nell stared at the unravelled object, comprehension dawning on her face. She took it with a growing smile and stood up to examine it more closely.

"Wow."

"Pretty good, huh?" Fran puffed out their chest and struck a pose.

"It's wonderful."

"So, what do you say? You'll give it a shot at the contest?"

"I can't."

Fran deflated, frowning. "What do you mean, you can't?" They gave the fabric a shake. "It's perfect! It's so *you*."

"It is. But it wasn't my idea. It has to be my idea."

"That would be fine," Fran said, "if you had two weeks to work on this. But you've got a day. You're

running out of options.”

“I am.”

“Then take it!”

“I can’t.”

Sighing, Fran rolled the bundle back up and tucked it beneath their shoulder. They rubbed their temples, eyes closed, and shook their head. “Listen, Nells. You’re doing this because it’s something you don’t normally do, right?”

“Yes.”

“Even if you use somebody else’s idea, you don’t normally go to costume contests, right?”

“Yes.”

“So,” they continued, holding out the bundle, “even if you use this, you’ll still be doing something new. But if you don’t take it, you won’t have anything to compete with, and you won’t enter the contest at all.”

“That’s true.”

“And something is better than nothing, isn’t it, Nells?”

“I suppose it is.”

“Then I think you should take this, because it’s better than nothing.” They grinned. “Much better, in my opinion. I think you’d enjoy it.”

“Okay.”

Nell took the bundle from Fran, who gave a satisfied nod and salute.

“See you tomorrow, Nells. *In that.*”

“Yes, Fran.”

\*\*\*

It was very loud. Nell expected it to be, but that didn't lessen the intensity of the noise. Most of the school was there, in the gymnasium, chattering away as she tried to weave her way through to the front. They hardly gave her a passing glance, with perhaps five or six actually noticing what she was wearing. That was all the better for Nell – she wasn't sure how she felt being seen in her costume yet.

She looked at the little things people had donned for Halloween as she passed by them. Pointy hats in droves, naturally. Quite a few students had stuck false canines in their mouths, too lazy to commit any further to their vampire aesthetic. And, of course, a lot of dark makeup, strong eyeshadow, thick eyeliner, things Nell had studied in her planning but could not execute. It was fascinating to her now to see them properly done.

There was a stage at one end of the gymnasium, and as Nell approached it she saw a few official-looking students with clipboards standing at either side. She walked to the one that seemed the most friendly, a small girl who had just waved a particularly put-together werewolf through.

“Hello,” Nell said, staring at her feet. She hoped the girl would hear.

“Oh, hi!” she answered, and Nell sighed in relief. “Are you looking for something?”

“Yes. . . I want to enter.”

“Oh!” The girl seemed surprised, looking Nell up and down. “You’re Nell, right?”

“Yes.”

“Hm.” She let the thoughtful noise trail off, then smiled. “Perfect. Just head over to the back room behind me. We’re having the contestants wait there, and we’ll be calling you out in the order you’ve signed up.” She peered back to her clipboard. “That means you’re coming out after. . . Fritz the Werewolf.”

“Okay.”

Nell made her way to the back room, which turned out to be a glorified walk-in closet full of gym supplies. She turned heads on her way in, and more than one contestant smiled at her. Nodding to them imperceptibly, she found a spot between a box of volleyballs and a hockey net, and sat against the wall. Nobody approached her. That was for the better. It was all she could do to come here to begin with. A conversation would be too much. Nell closed her eyes and let the minutes tick by, tuning out the chattering around her into a low hum.

It wasn’t long before a booming voice echoed through the room, reverberating around her head.

“Welcome one, welcome all, to St. Dymphna’s grand hall!”

She knew that voice, with its thick smoke and deep notes. Yesterday made a lot more sense now.

“We’ve gathered you all here today for a most auspicious event!” Fran continued.

A chorus of cheering followed this.

“A costume contest for the ages! Or, at least, until next year.” A round of laughter.

“Here’s how this works: we’ll be calling out each of the contestants in turn, and they’ll present themselves to you, shamelessly, on the stage. You vote with how loud you are. The higher the volume, the more you like what you see! You got that?” More cheering, louder than before.

“Good. We’ve got twenty-two creepy costumes for you today, carefully culled from the masses. Only the best of the best will be up here for your eyes, so pay attention! Are all you witches and vampires and ambiguous skeletons ready?” Applause.

“Alright, here we go! First up: Eli as Frankenstein’s monster!”

Nell watched a very green, haggard boy prop himself up, grab a can of Monster energy drink, and hobble out toward the stage. The subsequent cheering was loud, as was the laughter. Nell couldn’t tell if it was impressive. She just knew it was very, very loud.

“Hey, hey, you seemed to like that one! Let’s see how you feel about. . . Layla the banshee!”

The girl sitting opposite Nell, clad in ragged black cloth and obscured by waist-length dark curls, gave Nell a smile through her hair as she got up.

“I’m glad you figured something so cute out, Nell!” she said, skipping through the door. There was oohing and aahing and a great deal of cheering. Nell thought it may have been louder than the last round. She hoped it was. She liked Layla.

Next was Natalie as a bunny. That’s what Fran said, at least: Nell watched Natalie strut away out the room in a very short, tight dress with a small, round tail and long ears. She was neither furry nor cuddly, but she was definitely... something. Nell supposed that was enough to make someone a bunny. The audience seemed to like it, though she caught a few jeers as well.

Nell closed her eyes and let the rest of the contestants pass unseen. There was another zombie, two witches, someone dressed as Sailor Neptune (she remembered the days she would watch that show religiously, every morning), and so on. The cheering was louder here, quieter there, and Nell couldn’t keep track of who was winning. She wasn’t sure the judges could, either. She was beginning to suspect the whole thing wasn’t as serious as she thought it would be. That is how these things usually went.

Nell was called back to the present with a familiar phrase.

“You’ve been doing great so far, my creatures of the dark!” Fran said, voice booming around the room. “Let’s keep it going for Fritz the werewolf!”

Nell opened her eyes just in time to catch a tufty

brown tail exit the room into the gymnasium, and heard the respectable cheering in response. Now it would be her turn. She stood up, pulling at the net beside her for support, and inspected herself. As far as she could tell, she looked fine. Unfortunately she tended to be near-sighted in these matters. She would have to trust Fran that this was indeed a good idea. She did trust them. She took a deep, steadying breath.

“We’re getting to the last few now, folks! And I’m pleased to call up, for your sore eyes, Nell!”

That was interesting. They didn’t give her a title. She was just Nell. But then again, Nell thought to herself as she walked, that’s who she’s always been. Just Nell. She was fine with that.

As she emerged back into the gymnasium, she was met with a moment of silence. She felt the innumerable eyes on her and tried to ignore them on her way up to the stage. Fran was there, in an offensively red get-up, motioning for her to stand at their side. She made a beeline toward them, and let out a shaky sigh as she took her place.

“You’re Him,” she whispered. “From the Powerpuff Girls.”

“Yes!” they answered. “I’m glad someone gets it! And you’re a cat! Wave to the masses, cat!”

So she did, standing in the black-and-white cat onesie Fran had lent her. It was loose and baggy on her, just the way she liked it, fluffy with a pair of short ears and

a cat face on the hood. It also came with two extremely comfortable paw-gloves. As she waved with the right one, the audience broke into their cheering. It was very loud. That was all Nell could tell, and she closed her eyes and smiled at the same time. She was overwhelmed, but the softness of the fabric around her eased the discomfort. It was warm and so very pleasant. The noises could lose themselves in there, loud as they were.

In a few seconds, Fran's voice materialized by their ear. "Okay, Nells, let's get you out of here." She opened her eyes. "Just head over to that other room there. We'll be calling up the winner soon." They winked.

"Okay. Thank you."

The applause died down as she walked away, but she could see everyone smiling at her. It was a nice feeling. They seemed to like her costume. It wasn't her idea, and it wasn't hard, but they liked it. So she did something right. She was looking forward to telling her mom about this.

In the other room, she found all the contestants who had gone before her, along with yet more gym equipment. Layla smiled as she came in.

"They really cheered for you, Nell."

"Yes. They did. It was very loud."

"That's good! It means they liked you." She giggled. "How could they not, with an outfit like that?"

This was a compliment. Nell understood. "Thank you."

“Of course. I think they’re almost done,” Layla said, motioning to a box beside her, “if you want to sit here until it’s over.”

“Yes.”

Nell took the seat and closed her eyes again. She was already tired, but she wouldn’t have to deal with the noise for much longer. She took some solace in that.

The remaining three contestants passed quickly, and Nell didn’t bother to note their costumes. As the last round of cheering faded away, Fran’s voice echoed around her once again.

“And that’s all, folks! That’s everyone we’ve got for you today! We’ll be announcing the results in a minute, and in the meantime, we’d like for the contestants to come out and line up by the stage.”

There was more. Nell sighed and opened her eyes to see Layla giving her a sympathetic smile.

“You’re almost done, Nell.”

“I know.”

She got up and followed Layla and the rest through the door. They lined up as instructed, and this time Nell looked at the audience, most of whom were looking back in their direction. On the stage, Fran and a few of the clipboard-people had convened and were exchanging low murmurs. Fran seemed to be making a point, gesturing at the contestants, and the others nodded in turn. Fran looked relieved and faced the stage again.

“This is it, kids! The moment you’ve all been waiting for! Who won? Who will be showered with infinite honour until their inevitable dethroning next year? All will be revealed soon!

“But before we get to that, a different announcement! The judges have, in their infinite wisdom, decided to award a few contestants with their own honorary titles! They may not win it all, but we want to recognize their talents all the same!

“First: the misshapen golden star, because *you tried*, goes to Natalie!”

Natalie, on Nell’s left, looked shocked at this, but quickly broke into a fit of giggles.

“Listen, Nat, we all loved your ‘bunny’ outfit, but I think everyone knows the reason had nothing to do with spookiness.”

She nodded through the giggles.

“I just thought we should put that out there. Second, because we all know what these contests are really about: the golden condom, for the most ‘accidentally’ horny costume, is awarded to Fritz for his *interesting* interpretation of a werewolf!”

Fritz offered a sheepish wave, and Nell noticed for the first time that the front of his costume was quite open. The crowd jeered.

“Alright, horndogs, put your sausages away! You can all get his number later!

“The final honorary award will, I think, be agreed on by all. Sometimes a touch of wholesome is just what we all need. Out of the twenty-two contestants you’ve seen today, we’ve decided to confer the title of ‘Most Adorable’ on our resident cat: Nell!”

Nell blinked. That was her name. And now the crowd was cheering. They were cheering for her. She blinked again. This was not what she expected. She did not expect to win anything, and yet she did. They thought she was the most adorable. She liked that. She wanted people to like her. She blinked a third time. Her mother is going to be very happy when she told her. Very, very happy.

Nell beamed.