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Opening extract from

Schwartzgarten Tales: Tales from Schwartzgarten 1: Osbert the Avenger

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Chapter One

OSBERT BRINKHOFF was born on a Tuesday to a respectable family in an obscure corner of the city of Schwartzgarten. Mr and Mrs Brinkhoff, who had dreamed of rearing a genius, welcomed little Osbert's considerable breadth of skull and elevated forehead with undisguised glee.

'He has the head of an intellectual colossus,' observed Mr Brinkhoff.

'Indeed,' replied Doctor Zimmermann, eyeing the child with some suspicion as he packed away his forceps and stethoscope. 'I shouldn't be surprised if your little boy grows up to be the most intelligent citizen in the whole of this great city.'

And so it was that Osbert Brinkhoff's story began.

The Brinkhoff family lived in a comfortable apartment on Marshal Podovsky Street, close to the library and overlooking the greasy brown river that coiled like a serpent through the heart of Schwartzgarten.

Mr Brinkhoff worked as a middle-ranking clerk at the Bank of Muller, Baum and Spink and had far more ambition for his son than he had ever had for himself. Even so, his own prospects were excellent, and it had been decided that when the ancient Mr Spink finally expired, the bank's name would be changed to Muller, Baum and Brinkhoff.

Mrs Brinkhoff was very proud of her husband, whom she adored. She would lie in bed at night and pray that Mr Muller and Mr Baum would die in a terrible accident, so that when Osbert was old enough he and Mr Brinkhoff could run the bank all by themselves.

But as the years passed and Osbert grew into a little boy, he showed no inclination towards banking. He was always small for his age, with pale skin and intense blue eyes. He had inherited his father's poor eyesight, and wore spectacles from his earliest years. He did not want to play with other children, but would instead sit for hours in his bedroom, reading books on physics and algebra that he had taken from his father's study, pushing a chair under the doorknob so that he would not be disturbed.

This was not quite the boy the Brinkhoffs had dreamt of. Finally, in desperation, they decided they had no choice but to engage the services of a nanny to look after Osbert, in the hope that she could prevent the boy from becoming irredeemably peculiar. Turning to the 'Home Help' section of *The Schwartzgarten Daily Examiner* on the eve of Osbert's sixth birthday, they found a small advertisement that seemed to answer their prayers: *Boys taken care of, no questions asked. Over thirty years' experience.*

On the day Nanny arrived, the sky turned a curious shade of mauve. The weather was warm and suffocating, and as Nanny hauled herself up the steps to the Brinkhoff apartment, Osbert watched her suspiciously from his bedroom window. Nanny was a large woman, almost spherical. She was dressed in black from head to toe: black boots, black skirt, black coat and black feathers sticking upright from her large black hat.

'Like an overfed raven,' thought Osbert, grimly.

Mr and Mrs Brinkhoff met with Nanny in the study and Osbert listened at the keyhole.

'You will find that Osbert is a very clever boy,' observed Mr Brinkhoff, the pride in his voice tinged with anxiety. 'But as with all clever boys, he must be watched very closely.'

The armchair in which Nanny sat groaned under her great weight as she leant forward, eyeing the Brinkhoffs with a steely gaze. 'The thing about boys,' she whispered mysteriously, 'even the oddest of them can become quite normal again. It's like gorillas in the zoo,' she rasped, and Mrs Brinkhoff coughed nervously. 'Little boys must be *tamed*.'

The following day, Nanny awoke early in her apartment in the Old Town. She packed two suitcases, switched off the gas and electricity and covered the furniture with large white dust cloths. Securely locking the door of the apartment, she made her way downstairs and out onto Donmerplatz, where she caught the tram across the city to take

up her new position in the home of the Brinkhoff family.

Mrs Brinkhoff thought it best that Nanny should settle into her new home before being introduced to little Osbert. But little Osbert had other ideas. As Nanny unpacked her suitcases, she became aware of the fact that she was no longer alone. There, in the doorway, stood Osbert, observing her every move.

'So you are little Osbert Brinkhoff?' said Nanny.

Gravely, Osbert nodded his head.

'Do you have a kiss for Nanny?'

Osbert shook his head.

'Suit yourself,' said Nanny and continued unpacking her bags.

Osbert watched from the door with growing curiosity as Nanny opened a case and took out a dozen silver picture frames, wrapped carefully in tissue paper. She unwrapped the pictures and placed them on the chest of drawers. The largest of the frames she positioned on the table beside her bed.

Tentatively, Osbert entered the room. He stared hard at the photograph on the bedside table.

'Marshal Potemkin,' explained Nanny. 'My first love. Poisoned to death.'

Osbert moved to survey the photographs on the chest of drawers.

'General Metzger,' continued Nanny, 'killed by a bomb the day before our wedding…and beside him, Marshal Beckmann, who had his head chopped off by a cutlass… Ah, how I loved Marshal Beckmann.' Nanny sighed, wistfully. 'Dead. All dead.'

Twelve photographs of twelve celebrated military leaders, all beloved by Nanny until they had met their grisly ends.

'So I never married,' said Nanny. 'None of them lived long enough.' She smiled. 'And that's why I turned to nannying.'

Nanny was used to little boys. In her thirty-year career she had seen most types of child imaginable: the sort that shouted and spat, the sort that fidgeted and moped, even the sort that bullied and lied. But Osbert was something different. He was watchful and intelligent.

This unsettled Nanny. The key, she decided, to taming the boy, was to remain eternally vigilant.

But Osbert had no intention of being tamed, no matter how hard Nanny tried. She would tie him to a chair and refuse to release him until he'd eaten all his supper, but Osbert would always wriggle free. She would threaten him with monsters under the bed, but it would only disappoint him when the monsters failed to materialise. She would dose the boy with cod liver oil, only to find that Osbert had returned the favour by adding the oil to Nanny's cup of cocoa.

As the weeks passed, Osbert became sick of Nanny's attempts to tame him. One day, while his keeper was out, he tiptoed into her bedroom. He was in search of clues; clues to prove that Nanny was not to be trusted with the care of a young and impressionable genius. As he began opening the chest of drawers he was certain he would find evidence of wrongdoing. At first he could find nothing but raven-feather hats in various stages of decrepitude and half-eaten packets of salted caramels.

But then, as his fingers felt around the corners of the final drawer, he discovered a false bottom had been

added. Carefully lifting the wooden panel, he found wires and putty, an alarm clock timer, a rusted cutlass and a green glass bottle decorated with a skull and crossbones.

'Do unto others before they can do unto you,' said a voice.

Osbert turned and there stood Nanny. She took the wooden panel from Osbert and carefully replaced it at the bottom of the drawer, covering over the treasure trove of Nanny's 'hidden things'.

Osbert smiled. Life had suddenly become interesting.

'Our little secret,' said Nanny, and Osbert crossed his heart.

Something had changed. It seemed that Nanny had a grudging respect for Osbert, and in turn Osbert had a new-found respect for Nanny.

'I'm loyal to the families I work for, Osbert,' said Nanny. 'People that treat me good get goodness back. I'd maim or kill for my families if I had to.'

'And have you had to?' asked Osbert, burning with curiosity.

'That's for me to know,' said Nanny, tapping the side of her nose with a stubby finger. 'But let's just say there's them in their graves that got there earlier than nature intended.'

As time passed, Nanny grew fond of Osbert. He could be a kind and thoughtful boy, and would sometimes read her mathematical calculations that he thought she might find amusing from his book of algebra.

Osbert and Nanny would go on long walks together: along Marshal Podovsky Street, past the Governor's Palace with its green copper dome and on into Edvardplatz, where they would stand and watch the great clock striking the hour. Sometimes they would walk out onto the Grand Duke Augustus Bridge, gazing down as the foaming water surged beneath them. As Osbert grew older their walks would take them further – across the Princess Euphenia Bridge and into the Old Town beyond. Osbert was fascinated by the Old Town. The buildings seemed darker, the

streets were narrower and everywhere hung the noxious fumes from the glue factory.

'You see up there?' said Nanny, pointing to a window on the seventh floor of a decrepit apartment block. 'That's where I used to live.'

'I don't like it,' said Osbert.

'It's not so bad,' said Nanny, 'if you don't mind the stench from the glue factory, and you're happy to chance a desperate cutthroat creeping in and slicing you from ear to ear while you're tucked up in sleepy-land.' She gave a gurgling laugh, like water escaping down the plughole.

Osbert disliked the place intensely and Nanny could feel his shiver as she tightly held his hand.

'There's somewhere I think you *would* like to see,' said Nanny, as she walked with Osbert to the end of the street. Crossing over long abandoned tramlines they encountered a high, grey wall, which seemed to extend forever in both directions.

'They call this Bone-Orchard Street,' said Nanny, with a dark twinkle in her eye. 'We go left here.'

After walking for over ten minutes, the wall parted at a monumental gateway.

'The Gate of Skulls,' whispered Nanny in awe.

Looking up, Osbert saw that the gateway was topped by a pyramid of iron skulls. Sitting atop this grisly mound was an ornamental skeleton in black robes and a golden crown, his bony finger outstretched and pointing to the path below.

'Look,' said Nanny, her breath hot and sticky with excitement. 'He's pointing at us. You and me. They could be our skulls he's sitting on.'

Beyond the gates lay the Schwartzgarten Municipal Cemetery. Although Osbert had never visited the cemetery before, he knew its reputation well. The city of Schwartzgarten had been blighted by over two hundred years of civil unrest, bloody sieges, battles and political assassinations. This, of course, had resulted in a vast quantity of bodies, all in need of burial. The cemetery was a quarter of the size of Schwartzgarten itself, and was known by many as 'the Dark City'.

Nanny bought twelve white roses from the cemetery flower seller and led Osbert in through the Gate of Skulls. They left the central avenue, which led through the heart of the cemetery, and continued along a

narrower, darker path, in the shade of a row of yew trees. When it seemed the path could get no darker, Nanny and Osbert rounded a corner and stepped out into a bright, paved courtyard. The sun was low in the sky, but the rays of light were reflected off the grand tombs of white marble that lined the square. It was like moonlight in the middle of the day. Nanny turned slowly, staring hard at the carved and gleaming busts that topped each and every one of the twelve tombs in the courtyard. The faces looked familiar to Osbert; they were military men with neatly trimmed beards and elaborately twirled moustaches.

'My darlings,' Nanny whispered. 'My dear, dead darlings.'

Inside the twelve tombs were interred the mortal remains of Nanny's lost loves: General Metzger, Marshal Beckmann and the rest.

'Do unto others before they can do unto you,' said Osbert gravely.

Nanny flashed him a wicked smile and placed a white rose at the foot of each tomb, finally laying a bloom at the carved feet of Marshal Potemkin.

'My first and greatest love of all,' whispered Nanny, kissing the Marshal's cold stone face. 'Such a brave soldier. Drank down a whole bottle of cyanide in his beetroot schnapps, and not a word of complaint.'

Although Nanny was happy to educate Osbert in the ways of the world, relating dark tales of intrigue and murder, she left the boy's formal education to his parents. And so, throughout his early childhood, Mr and Mrs Brinkhoff tutored Osbert at home; Mrs Brinkhoff during the day and Mr Brinkhoff when he returned from the bank each evening. But as he reached his eleventh birthday it became clear that they were no longer equal to the challenge of educating their son – he was simply too clever for them. He could carry out long division in moments, memorise extensive tracts of poetry after just one reading and would discuss the history of Schwartzgarten as if he himself had borne witness to its long and exceptionally bloody past.

'There is only one thing for it,' whispered Mr

Brinkhoff to his wife, as he prised a book of algebra from the arms of his sleeping son. 'He must sit the entrance exam for The Institute.'

'He can't,' said Mrs Brinkhoff, shaking her head. 'He mustn't.'

'I don't like it any more than you do,' said Mr Brinkhoff sadly, 'but the boy is too clever for us. Too clever by far. If he's accepted into The Institute, who knows what he might achieve?'

Mrs Brinkhoff shuddered and tucked Osbert into bed, kissing him gently on his great forehead. She feared the worst: The Institute would take her son from her, and who knew what would happen next?