

THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY AND HORROR!

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 26
29TH DECEMBER 2019

SEBASTIAN AND THE OTHER KASSI

BY STE
WHITEHOUSE
*A GIRL'S GOT
TO MAKE
SOME COIN...*

TRANSMISSION

BY MASON YATES
*LOST ON
THE PLANET
ZORGEN...*

ACCIDENT & EMERGENCY LOUIS KASATKIN

SHIVERS DOWN THE SPINE KIERAN JUDGE

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

Vol. 15, Issue 26
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk. We no longer review published and self-published novels directly, although we are willing to accept reviews from other writers. Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to editor@schlock.co.uk

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Nightmare Fear Horror* by [Thomas Budach](#) from [Pixabay](#).
Graphic design © by [Gavin Chappell](#), logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

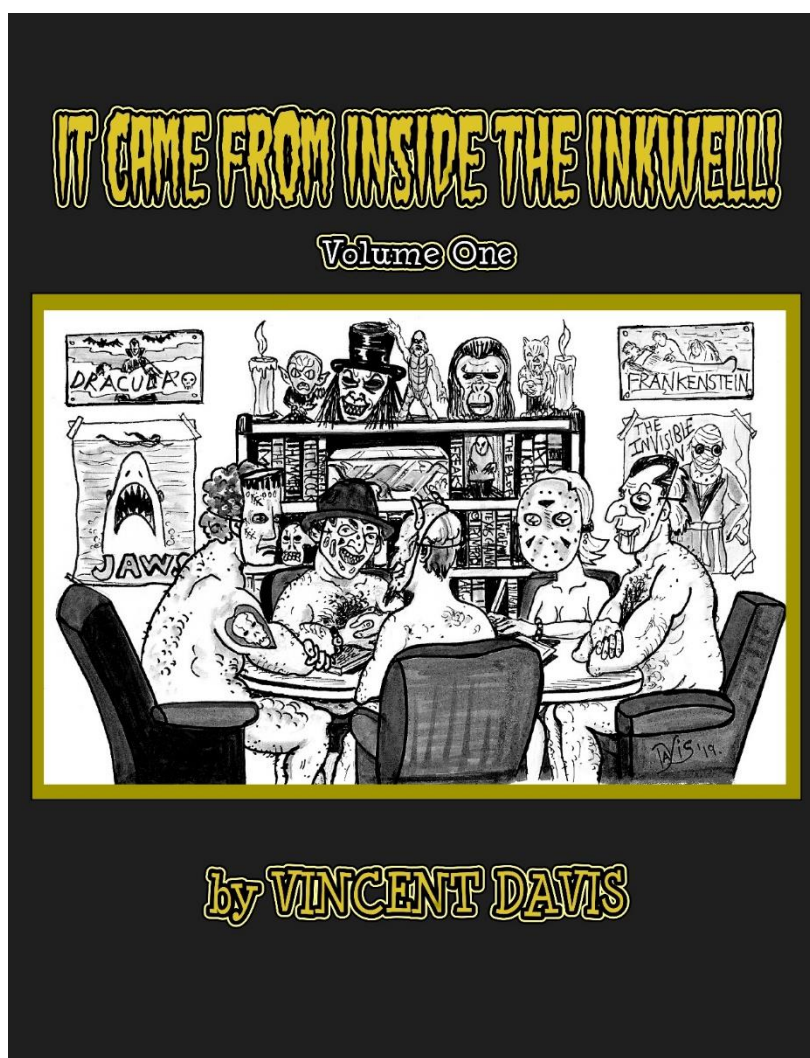
This week Sebastian encounters Kassi's imposter. A man stranded on an alien planet experiences a glimmer of hope. We learn the true motivation of the medical fraternity, and meet a hairdresser who has developed a radical new cut. A fraudulent medium has a brush with the law. And in the Dreamlands, Sunny and Eile's vacation is unpleasantly interrupted.

Dr Lowell meets the doll-maker. And amongst the mountains Polaris struggles with Minos.

—Gavin Chappell

*Still on sale: Vincent Davis' hilariously horrifying It Came From Inside the Inkwell! comic.
Available from the link below:*

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [It Came From Inside The Inkwell!](#)

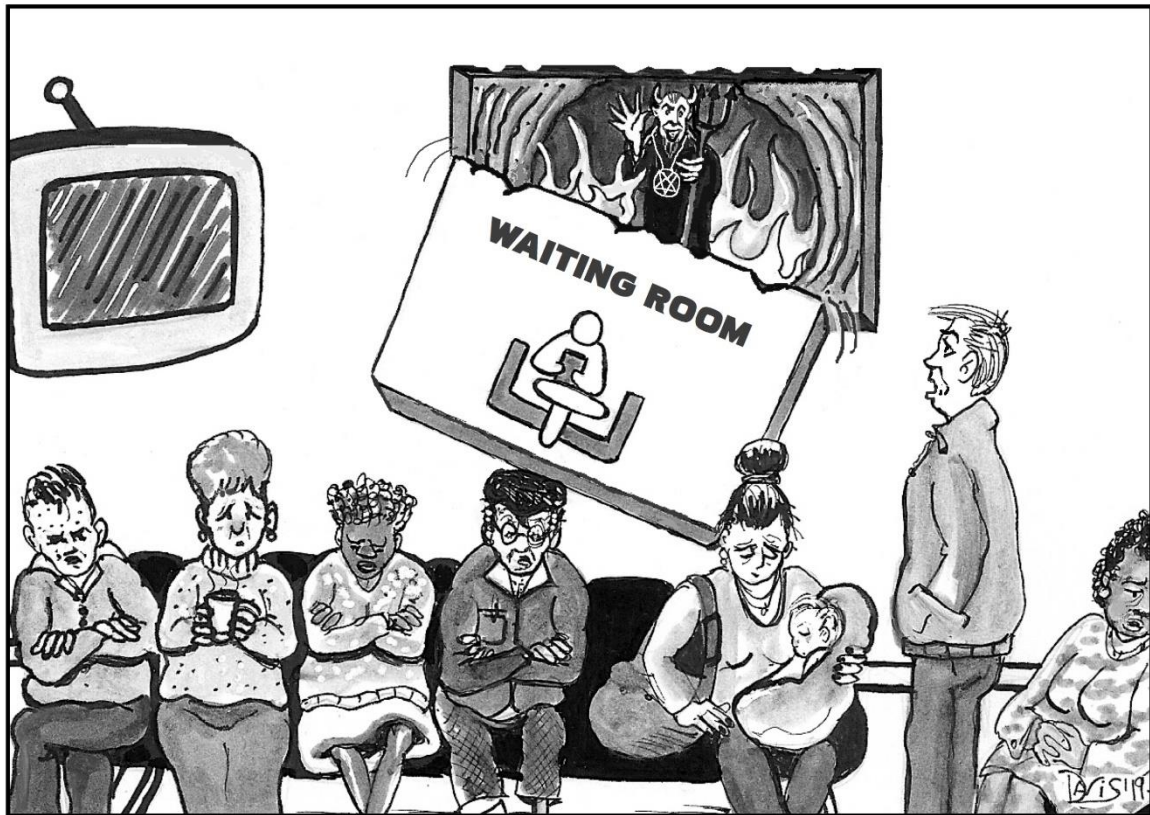


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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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SEBASTIAN AND THE OTHER KASSI by Ste Whitehouse

'The Pipe-world, Ah'kis, is five thousand miles long and just over ten miles in diameter. It was one of a dozen Arks sent out from Earth to populate distant planets; each meant to journey a mere 200 years at one third light speed. But some accident knocked Ark Six from its course and now 10000 years have passed.

Kassi seeks her brother who has been kidnapped by 'demons' and now travels north to the end of the world. She is accompanied by Sebastian, a sentient bot of dubious origins with whom she can communicate telepathically. That ability seems to set her apart from the rest of the world's population. This is an earlier tale'

Kassi marvelled at Fyonne's hand, its smoothness and elegance against the coarse roughness of her own. Each slim finger seemed complete in itself and perfect; much like the woman herself. She ran her mouth along each finger savouring her lover's taste, her tongue probing.

"Now I just have a wet hand," Fyonne exclaimed dreamily.

Kassi looked across the length of her naked lover and sighed. "Why do you taste so... exotic when all I can taste upon myself is salt?"

Fyonne rolled over, pushing Kassi down and slipping her now damp hand between the warrior's legs. She put the wetness to good use. "Oh, I don't know. Perhaps it's that I've led such a good life or maybe I don't go around slaughtering people haphazard."

"Not fair! I don't—ohhh—I don't go looking for death."

Fyonne placed her free hand upon the scarring under Kassi's left breast. That had been the first time they had met¹—but they'd had plenty of opportunities to renew their friendship over the past three years. She traced a faint scar along her lover's upper right arm. Noted the firmness of Kassi's muscles, the hardness of her skin where heavy armour had chafed and cut. The young woman's body was a visual aid to the life she led. Part of Fyonne hated the thought of her lover in danger but another part recognised the need that drove the woman onwards. She also understood how important Kassi was to the red gods who had formed The Watch a decade earlier. Their sole task was to protect the girl although Fyonne had never admitted as much to Kassi.

After another half an hour of pleasure had passed, the two women lay staring at the thick wooden boards that constituted the ceiling. After breaking her leg in a dwarven dungeon six months earlier²—Fyonne had insisted that the young warrior take some time away from adventuring and so the two of them found themselves miles 'up pipe' at a secluded pub, enjoying their days and, particularly, their nights. They had meant to stay a fortnight but almost a month had passed.

Kassi propped herself up on her elbows and said. "We really should eat breakfast. I'm famished!"

¹ See [Kassi and the Mech Merchants](#).

² See [Kassi and the Dungeon of Dwarfs](#).

Fyonne lay barely covered by the sheet just enjoying the moment. “I believe it’s closer to lunch time.”

“Then Lunfast,” the warrior said firmly.

Fyonne laughed. “I believe it’s Brunch? Breakfast and lunch.”

“But so is Lunfast. Just that it’s between lunch and breakfast.” The warrior sounded petulant but Fyonne ran a hand across Kassi’s bare back, eliciting a shudder of pleasure.

“Then Lunfast it shall be.”

Kassi stretched languidly, enjoying the moment as much as Fyonne. Just then she felt ‘nothing’. It was as though a window had been closed, and the distant background sound from outside, which she had not really heard, had ceased. The silence was thunderous. She hesitated. Glancing around the room checking where each weapon lay. Fyonne sensed her unease and asked.

“What is it?”

Kassi did not reply but instead slipped out of the bed. At any other time her nakedness would have caused the Watch Mother to moan in pleasure, but Kassi naked and warrior naked were two very different things. The young woman moved cat-like on the balls of her feet. Each foot placed just so; ready for a fight. She was almost at the dresser where her second favourite sword lay sheathed atop a mess of clothes when the shutters juddered and splintered. A small metallic sphere arched through the ragged gap, rolling along the floor before settling at the foot of the door.

‘At least it’s not an explosive of some sort’ Kassi had time to think before the two hemispheres rotated and an ear-piercing screech emanated from its depths. A strobe of light filled the large room, washing all colour from the scene and casting Fyonne in stark blacks and slabs of white. Kassi quickly closed her eyes. The strobe—a flash bang Sebastian called them—were often deployed by Sighs. The light would strobe irregularly in waves, disrupting anyone’s sense of balance. Of course, she mused, closing your eyes only made you deaf AND blind. She felt a dull sensation across the back of her head and realised that she had been hit solidly by something hard. She staggered to her knees and tried to punch at whoever was behind her but her left arm was now held and a second blow smashed her into unconsciousness.

If truth be told, Sebastian was actually enjoying his time alone. Oh, he might moan and mutter about grievances and unacceptable occurrences, but in general he was feeling... comfortable. Not a word he could generally use around Kassi as she tended to draw in trouble like a flame drew in obsessed distant moths. She and Fyonne, the Watch Mother, had been gone for almost a month now. Four weeks of bliss, although he was a little uncertain if the bliss he felt was his own or the girls. Their telepathic link worked much like speaking; each had to make an effort to contact the other, but emotions seemed to ‘leak’ through, no matter how hard they tried to stop it. Still it was good for the both of them to be happy.

The bot had raised concerns at first but really his heart had not been in it. He suspected that the Watch had as much reason as he to protect the girl, although he could not figure out why; yet. Instead he gave the girl his blessing—as if she would have stayed if he had not (although it may have surprised him to find that she would have)—and the two women had travelled north along the pipe world of Ah’kis. In the meantime he spent a little time running diagnostics and generally having fun calculating pi. It was a simple life.

Then he lost the girl. One second she was there, a distant hum of thought and emotion, and then she was not. He was too far to contact her, their telepathy appeared to work over a few miles only, but ever since that time in the caves around Kassi’s home³ they had been aware of each other’s presence. So much so that each could tell the direction of the other. But now the girl had vanished.

Within a thousandth of a second he was fully alert and moving towards the girl’s last known location. Sebastian could reach speeds up to 100 miles an hour, but this section of Ah’kis was encircled in forest and no matter how sure footed the mechanoid was he had to travel carefully. It took him thus almost an hour to travel the twenty seven miles to the inn where the women stayed.

He looked at horror at the shattered remains of the shutters flapping outward in the wind. Even at ground level, and an hour later, he could smell the cordite used to propel a grenade and he felt a momentary panic at the thought of the two women been eviscerated by shrapnel. Ignoring the panic he was creating in the street Sebastian climbed the front of the inn. His only thought was for Kassi. He slipped into the room, which lay empty apart from a few items of clothing scattered around. At least the room was intact. He had suspected such because the window shutters were not blown out but he had needed to examine the room for himself. To see that his friend had not been blown to bits.

He drew in vast quantities of air, hoping to catch a scent on his chemical sensors, but either too much time had passed or too many people had scurried in and out. Probably both, he mused. So much was made in fiction of following a specific scent or scat for hundreds of miles, but the truth was that smells dissipated quickly and the merest breeze could shift a trail a mile within ten minutes.

Sebastian stood. For anyone observing him it would seem as though he had paused for a micro second, but for the bot a thousand hours passed. They, whoever THEY were, had used a scientist, a Sigh, to block their link. He still could not sense Kassi because of the block which, he hoped, meant that both women were still alive. Which in turn meant that THEY wanted Kassi alive. That was something at least. He ran an algorithm to see why. They had never travelled this far north, but could an old foe have? Somehow he doubted it. For a start Kassi rarely allowed anyone who attacked them the luxury of life and secondly he could not think of anyone who would be capable of revenge. Perhaps this was to do with Fyonne? Or perhaps his suspicions had born fruit.

He heard the footstep on the top step and his scans allowed him to ‘see’ through even the thick plastered walling. Form and scents matched and he sighed inwardly. Somehow he knew that SHE was involved. There was a timid knock on the door and into the room stepped a red headed woman wearing a tiny metal bikini and little else.

³ See [Kassi and the Sword](#)

“Hello, Dread Sonja,” Sebastian said without facing her.

Kassi awoke in a plain room. Brick walls. Solid door. No windows. There was something in the way sound was muted that led her to believe they were underground somewhere. Not far. She noted no difference in her weight so they were probably in a cellar. She looked around. Her head still hurt from the two strikes. Fyonne lay unconscious on a straw mattress across the narrow room; dressed, inexpertly, in trousers and shirt much like Kassi herself. A single lamp, electric, shone down on them, casting both women in washed out colours. As she suspected a Sigh was involved somewhere. First the ‘flash-bang’ and now electricity.

The door swung soundlessly open and five men stepped into the room. Four were obviously there to protect the fifth from an attack. Kassi smiled to herself. *‘Well, they’ve obviously HEARD of me’* she thought.

The shorter of the men, who paradoxically exuded the most authority, asked, “Are you Kassi Seishin, warrior who travels with a companion named Sebastian?”

“I am.”

He eyed Fyonne still unconscious. “We had heard that your companion was a machine. Another lie!” He almost hissed the last part between thin lips. His face was otherwise rotund and sallow; flecks of hair escaping at odd angles as though he shaved without the use of a mirror nor with much care.

“Come,” he said sharply and left the small cellar.

Having nothing better to do, and aware that she might likely take down these four easily but did not know how many others there were, Kassi stood and followed the man, the four stepping alongside her awkwardly. Especially when navigating the narrow doorway. Kassi accidentally tripped one poor lad up and ‘nudged’ a second into the wall then stood there in all innocence.

The four escorted her up to a larger room. One with narrow windows with thickened glass high above head height along one wall. No light seeped in, nor anything else to indicate location. With a good cart set-up, or in fact a willing Troll, a person could be a hundred miles north or south within a few hours. The man indicated a wooden chair before a trestle table. She sat as meekly as she could.

A second table lay against the far wall and on it she could see her armour, but not her swords and knives. Fuck! She had been naked. Not even the BEST thief could have concealed a weapon. The man gingerly picked at her armour as though it held some form of contagion.

“So many lies. It was said that you wore very little and your hair...” He paused. “Still, I assume you thought it clever to alter your appearance thinking it would conceal you from us. Eh?”

Kassi smiled blandly. None of what he said made sense and that was a good thing; hopefully. It meant that Sebastian had been correct and this was therefore a case of mistaken identity. Things could be cleared up pretty easily.

“We want The Raji returned to us. We care little who you stole it for. Just return it and we will not kill your companion Sebastian in her sleep.”

Or it may NOT be that easy.

First things first.

“Fyonne is my companion in... different ways. Sebastian is... around?” She became aware that she could no longer sense Sebastian’s presence. Fuck! Can this day get ANY worse? “He IS a mechanoid. But I’m afraid you must be mistaken. I have never heard of this Raji. Fyonne is a Watch Mother and we came here to... rest.”

The man snorted in derision. “And how long have you been ‘resting’ here in Sha’Haveen?”

So THAT’S the name of this place! “A month.”

“In which time Kassi Seishin has been rumoured within our borders to have repelled a government search warrant and stolen our most precious artefact. Is this how you relax?”

“NO! Well yes. Sort of. But not here. I have spent every moment with The Watch Mother.” Kassi hoped to impose on this man how important The Watch was in Ah’kis. “NOT robbing people.”

“And who can vouch for this steadfastness of yours? This ‘resting’? The woman currently residing in my cell?”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

“We heard rumours that Kassi Seishin had been recruited by the Uprising, a group of people who feel that taxation is unfair, especially when asked of them, and used to propagate their own twisted ideals. She, you, stopped the collection of lawful taxes by STEALING them away from our Revenue Officers and then broke into the Autumn Palace and stole the Raji; the very symbol of Sha’Haveen. Parliamentary begins in a week but without the Raji to anoint the Second Minister our government will collapse and those bastard revolutionaries will overthrow us all. Do you realise how close we came to total collapse the last time they ruled the land?” Spittle flicked from his lips as his anger rose. Still Kassi could not resist raising a hand and placing her forefinger and thumb a fraction apart. His face reddened and she thought he may collapse right there.

Instead he slumped into a second chair and began to sob. “Please, I beg of you. Return the Raji and we will let you and your friend go.”

Kassi weighed up her options. Without Sebastian to interrupt she could jump straight to ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK! though she suspected that this was not actually the time. As that idea passed a second thought blossomed. A stupid one, admittedly, but an idea all the same.

“You say that this Kassi Seishin was unlike me. Can I ask; did she by chance have long red hair and...” She made generous floaty gestures around her chest. “... covered in very little armour?”

A look in the man’s eyes told her all she needed to know.

“Fuck me! Sonja!”

“Why, HA-llo sugah. An’ how are you this fine morning?” Sonja smiled nervously twirling her long red hair around a daintily painted fingernail. Even without his onboard sensors Sebastian could tell the woman was worried.

“Up until a minute ago I was fine.” Despite, or perhaps because of, his voice being generated by synthesisers Sebastian sounded angry. Sonja took a step back and almost tripped over the thick carpet. He turned jerkily, adding as much menace to his movements as he could.

He saw Sonja make a silent calculation before speaking. “Ah meant no harm, sugah. Ah didn’t even KNOW that you and that little firebomb were even close by. When we parted after the dungeon⁴ ah travelled as far north as Ah could. To distance mahself.” She looked down ashamed. “Ah reckoned that all Ah needed was a little help up, an’ you and the little missy had such a fine reputation that Ah...”

“Borrowed it!?”

“Never meant any harm.” She raised her hands as though in surrender. “It’s just that each time ah tried by mahself nothing seemed to happen. All anyone wanted was the girl with the mech. An’ a girl’s got to make some coin, eh?”

Sebastian considered that he could argue all he wanted to but it would not help find Kassi so he sighed inwardly and said. “So! What did you do? Or should I say who did you piss off?”

“Huh! Such language from a machine. Well, ah nevah.”

He stared at the woman hard and she hurried on. “Ah was approached by some poor downtrodden proletariats who need help against their wicked oppressors.” She made wicked sound much more fun than it should have. “A little redistribution of wealth; y’all see that, don’t you?”

“And some of the wealth came your way?”

“Bare minimum. Ah swear.” She looked nervously around. “Ah had no ideah that you an’ the little lady were in town, so to speak. Then Ah heard rumours that the gov’nment had found the perpetrators of these heinous crimes and thought to come warn y’all. Ah was too late.”

⁴ See [Kassi and the Dungeon of Dwarves](#).

“Last I heard the Parliamentarians of Sha’Haveen were democratically elected after overthrowing a bunch of thugs,” Sebastian said flatly.

“But they are land owners and you know, sugah, that landowners are ALWAYS corrupt!” Sonja pleaded. “It comes from having all those... acres.”

“Land makes you corrupt?”

Sonja sighed and looked upwards as though the ceiling held the answer. “Ah don’t rightly know, sugah. It just seemed sooo right when they explained it to me.”

Sebastian waited but the woman appeared out of any more explanations. He asked. “So you stole some money? How much?”

The redhead looked suddenly shift. “Wellllll; it may not JUST be the money.”

This time he loudly exhaled—even if he had no need to—and folded his first pair of appendages like a mother gazing crossly at a child. “Go on.”

“There was an artefact, worthless, Ah was told, but with some deep meaning to the people hereabouts.”

“And you stole it.”

“Ah returned it to its rightful owners.”

“The people?”

“The proletariat.”

“Who surprisingly have very deep pockets, I suppose?” Sebastian asked menacingly.

Sonja kicked up a little dust from the carpet swinging her foot. “They may have. But they were prole...”

“Proletariat. Yes I understand. You are aware of what proletariat means?”

“Not landowners?” the woman replied hesitantly.

“Technically that is part of it but really it means those who actually do the work; on the land; in the factories.”

“But the ruling elite are LANDOWNERS!?”

“This whole section of Ah’kis is farm land. What else are they supposed to be? Baristas?” Sebastian felt a ping of regret. Kassi and her sarcasm had infected him more than he had realised obviously. It would take more than a few sweeps of algorithms to clean THAT out.

Sonja looked confused.

Sebastian continued. "Okay. So you stole some money and a priceless artefact that the LEGITIMATE rulers of this country need returned. We just need to find out where your 'proletariat' friends are and steal it back."

Sonja brightened. "Oh, Ah know where they are keeping it, sugah. In the Tower."

"A tower?" Kassi asked incredulously. "They have a Sigh and some sort of tower?"

She had agreed to help them in return for their withholding various torture implements from both her and Fyonne's body. The Governmental body had initially been reluctant, especially the pale man named Grov'Een, but it was clear that the two women had nothing to do with either heist, especially as many a man recalled Sonja specifically. Once seen, NEVER forgotten; especially the bra and panty thing she wore instead of good old fashioned armour.

"We can show you. Our own Sigh captured this a week or so ago," a younger Governmental said (although in this room younger was subjective; Kassi had seen trees with less yearage), and produced an image.

At first the warrior could not understand what it was she was looking at and then she did. The image was of real life. She had seen Sighs, and some Jinns, use tablets of steel upon which such images could be produced, but this was set upon a thick velvet paper. She recalled Sebastian speaking of 'fo-to-graffs' and presumed that this was one such thing. It showed an area of moorland and brush with a large square tower jutting sunline-wards at least a hundred and sixty feet or more. Behind it the curve of Ah'kis swept up and Kassi thought she recognised a series of small hillocks south of where she had left Sebastian.

The tower was old, that much was certain. Obviously a thing from the Builders, thousands of years previous, its lower walls had been removed leaving four thick steel pillars, laced together by a spider's web of steel, upon which the top two storeys rested. A chainlink fence ran around the perimeter and a sturdy set of steps ascended one of the thick metal columns. A group of figures stood close to the steps, jauntily holding a series of crossbows and at least one wand; a gun as Sebastian called them.

"So this Raji is held in this tower?" she asked.

Grov'Een, leant forward fussily and swept a beringed finger at various points on the photograph. "It is kept secure at the summit of the Tower." Kassi could actually hear the capital. "But to even reach there you would need to incapacitate a dozen men here at the Tower's feet and then climb up and gain entrance to the upper floors. We have word from the Jinn who engineered this—an architect, he called himself—and within you will find a tortuous maze with traps aplenty which alters its configuration regularly to confound any intruder, and finally at the centre a door which will only open to print of one person. THEN within the chamber itself there are rotating spheres which throw beams of light randomly."

"Beams of light?"

"No ordinary light, but a light which can burn you as though you had reached up and touched the sunline itself."

Lasers. She had learnt something from her friend.

“Above?” she asked hopefully.

“There is a skylight to illuminate the Raji, but it is sealed, and besides, once that seal is broken the beams of light do start. Such a task is impossible.” The old man almost looked happy.

Kassi was not listening. She was looking intently at the photograph and thinking. She might not have been able to call upon Sebastian but she was not stupid. There was one thing that had always infuriated her as a child, and that same sense of indignation rose in her now. To be told that something was impossible. “Can I have this area and this area enlarged, please, and this architect you spoke of... I’ll need a word with him.” She smiled. No plan. No Sebastian, and a hostage. Now THIS was a holiday.

Later back with Fyonne she spoke quietly with her, huddled together like girls on a sleepover—albeit one deep in a dank dungeon and with the promise of death. Kassi looked at the bracelets both wore. A slight hum was emitted by both and she figured that these ‘means to track you’ bracelets also kept her from communicating with Sebastian. She placed hers next to Fyonne’s and felt a soft buzz deep within her mind. She smiled...

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INK WELL!



Delightfully Dreadful
Comics
crawling out of the
pen of
Vincent Davis.



Vincent Davis ©2019.

Now [available](#) from Schlock! Publications.

TRANSMISSION by Mason Yates

Beads of water glistened on Jeremiah's bare chest as he sat with his legs crossed on the shoreline beside the lake where he had just finished his morning bath. He gazed at the rippling water that was set alight by the sun, which was positioned across the lake, above the massive pine trees that surrounded the body of water. Closing his eyes and lifting his chin, he faced the yellow ball of light and let it kiss his skin. It felt nice sitting there with the cool air drifting by. However, before he could sink into a deep relaxation, an unpleasant memory entered his vision. Momentarily, he saw himself in a forest, walking amongst debris of a massive wreckage. In an instant, he lowered his chin and shot his eyes open. Once again, the lake was spread out before him, and the unpleasant memory of his youth vanished, carried away by the cool wind.

He wished he could sit by the lake and gaze at its beauty all day, but there was a danger in doing so. Memories often crept upon him during long periods of inactivity. Like a thief, they entered his mind and stole his happiness and hope.

He got to his feet and took one last glance at the lake before turning his back on it and walking towards the wooden structure that he called his home. He had built the makeshift house in his youth with the thought that eventually he would try to create a better version, but for some reason, he had not started that project yet. Despite the rickety, shack-like appearance, it was his home.

He entered through an open doorway and was greeted by the smell of wood. The inside of the house was dark, but the light that entered through the doorway was enough for him to see by. In one corner of the room there was a bed, and in the other there was a bundle of wires. Against the wall there were a couple of boxes, a shelf, and a record player that Jeremiah was surprised still worked. He had been given that record player as a child, and he was amazed that it had survived thirty years, especially thirty years in the wilderness. He strode to the device but took a second to pause at a box next to the machine. Inside the cardboard box were a number of records. Jeremiah flipped through them, trying to find the sound that he wanted. He read the names of Chuck Berry, The Beatles, Bonnie Tyler, Momma Cass, and Led Zeppelin, then reached bands that he had liked when he was younger: Radiohead, The Cure, and The Smiths. However, he settled on a record by his favourite band at the moment: The Mamas & the Papas. He put the record on the player and listened as "I Call Your Name" began to play softly.

He smiled. Music had always been his friend, and without the record player, he doubted he would have survived this long in the wilderness by himself. Sometimes when his loneliness grew overwhelming, he had to turn on a record and let it lull him to sleep. Ever since that fateful day of walking through the debris of the massive wreckage, he had been alone. There was nowhere he could go, and there was no one he could see. His only choice was to stay where he was and hope that someone would find him. Although that possibility was low, he persisted in thinking he would be found.

He walked away from the record player, still smiling with the music, and sat down at a table across the room. On the table, there was a black radio with a jumble of wires protruding out of it. Sitting down, he pulled the chair closer to the table and repositioned himself to get comfortable. He twisted a couple knobs on the device and pulled a microphone close to him. On the microphone, there was a switch that turned the device on and off. Jeremiah flipped the

switch so that the microphone was on and placed it closer to his mouth. He hesitated before saying anything.

Over the many years that he had been stuck in the wilderness, he had tried to call for help countless times, and he always came to the same conclusion: no one was out there. Sometimes he asked himself why he even tried. Any day, he imagined, he was going to accept his fate and stop trying, but there was still a spark of hope in his heart that told him one day he would get an answer to his calls for help. Would it be today? He doubted it. But perhaps one day.

He stared at the microphone and prayed that someone was there.

“Hello?” he said.

No response. He shook his head. The first couple times he had spoken into the microphone and had not received an answer, he had cried. Now, after thousands of calls, he was used to the silence.

“Hello?” he asked again. Despite the silence, he knew that he could not give up. “Can anyone hear me?”

There was no response. The radio’s speakers were silent and mocked him.

“Hello? This is Jeremiah Alexander, and I am lost on the planet Zorgen. I am alone. I have been alone for many, many years. I am doing fine. My spacecraft crashed here thirty years ago, and ever since, I have been surviving by myself on this planet. I am using the radio in an attempt to signal any passing spacecraft. If anyone is passing Zorgen, I beg that you please rescue me. Again, my name is Jeremiah Alexander. I am an astronaut from the planet Earth. I am alone and in desperate need of help. Please, if you are hearing this, I need help.”

He switched the microphone off and sat in his chair, waiting for a response of some sort. He didn’t necessarily want a human response. In fact, he would be happy with just a grunt. However, there was always no response. Eventually, he hoped, something would be different. To keep his hope alive, he often imagined that astronauts heard his call and were too far away to contact him. Maybe they would grow closer and the signal would be strong enough to talk to him and reassure him that someone was on their way to save him.

He sat in his chair with his arms crossed for quite some time, staring at the radio’s speakers. Although he had doubted from the beginning that he was going to hear a voice today, there had still been a little hope that he would. Everyday there was a little hope, and everyday his hope failed him. Nevertheless, he persisted.

“Tomorrow,” he said. He switched off the radio’s knobs and got up. “Tomorrow there’s going to be a voice coming from those damn speakers.”

He stared at the black radio with its jumble of wires exiting from behind it and sighed. He had always replayed a scenario in his mind of the day when someone would be talking to him. He imagined how it would go. In his mind, the person on the other end would tell him that someone was on their way to save him and that planet Earth had been trying to find him for a very long time. His imagination told him one thing, but he wondered if planet Earth was

actually looking for him. They probably had been looking for him for some time, but eventually they had given up. Jeremiah Alexander was a lost cause, and he knew that. He understood the chances of him being alive were close to none. As a young boy, he had seen the wreckage of the spacecraft he had been on. Somehow, he had survived it. It had been a miracle. Because of that wreckage, he believed in God. There was no other way to understand how he—a young, ordinary boy who had once upon a time been on his way to start a colony on the planet Revery had crashed on a foreign planet and had survived. Everyone else on the spacecraft had died in the collision, but he had made it, walking away with a few cuts and bruises. So, knowing that the spacecraft had crashed and everyone had suffered a horrible death, he doubted Earth was still looking for him. However, miracles could happen, for he knew that first-hand. He was a miracle, and if a miracle could happen once, he suspected—no, he knew—a miracle could happen again. With his eyes focused on the radio, he knew it was only a matter of time before his second miracle took place. Someone—maybe not from Earth, but possibly somewhere else—would find him.

“Tomorrow,” he whispered and nodded.

He walked away from the radio and went to the open doorway that was alight with the sun’s glow. Beside the exit was a makeshift axe. On his way out, he grabbed it. Today he was going to gather wood, but tomorrow, he told himself, he was going to be talking to his rescuer on the radio. It was only a matter of time before he heard a fellow human’s voice.

As he walked out of his home, “California Dreaming” played on the record player behind him. It was possible that he was only dreaming, but dreaming kept him alive. Hope kept him going.

He was walking amongst a field of debris again. Around him, on all sides, massive pine trees towered, watching him as he manoeuvred through the clearing. As the young Jeremiah walked through the debris, he had no doubt that the field he was walking through was once a beautiful clearing, but now, it became The Clearing of Death. Little did he know, he would be calling it that for the remainder of his time on Zorgen.

As he walked, looking at the sharp, jagged shrapnel that jutted out of the ground and the pieces of human flesh that littered the disaster site, he asked himself how he could be alive. He supposed it was a miracle, but at that moment, he did not think of the possibility of God’s intervention. In the moment, the only thing he was thinking of was how he was alive and where his parents were. He tried to cast away the images of human flesh and the thought that it was possible that the chunks of meat came from his parents, but the haunting thought intruded on his mind and wrapped itself around his subconscious.

He had been on his way to the planet Revery, a planet that humans had found a long time ago that had a hundred percent chance of being able to harbour human life. He was supposed to start a colony there. Eventually, humans were going to have to rely on him to help populate a world. That had been his destiny, not dropping onto another habitable planet alone. Looking around, he wondered if Zorgen was all a dream. It was possible that he was still on the spaceship travelling to Revery, sleeping while the spacecraft continued to explore the universe.

He closed his eyes, thinking when he opened them, he was going to wake up onboard the craft, fully intact and still in an infinite space of blackness, but when his eyes shot open, he

was still standing amongst the wreckage. He began to cry. His cries turned into sobs. He wanted to go home. He no longer wanted to be in space anymore. He wanted to go back to Earth. But that was impossible. He was alone, lost, and scared.

“Mom?” he asked aloud, voice shaking. “Dad? Where are you?”

There was no answer. He stepped forward, moving around a jagged piece of metal that had impaled the ground.

“Mom?” he asked a little louder. “Dad?”

Still, there was silence. He had never experienced silence before. As he stood in the clearing, the silence was overwhelming. He could hear his thoughts as clear as day.

“Mom?” he shouted. “Dad? Where are you? Please answer! Please!”

Tears streamed down his face. He began a clumsy run, wobbling and almost running into the jagged pieces of metal that protruded out of the ground. He came close to slicing his head open on the shrapnel a few times, but he managed to escape injury. He ran through the maze of wreckage, hoping that he would spot his mother and father alive. Maybe they were hurt and needed his help, or maybe they were trying to look for him.

“Mom?” he shouted.

He came around a corner and found what he did not want to see. His mother and father were lying dead in the grass. They were covered in dry blood and had several open wounds. A few pieces of shrapnel had found a home inside their bodies.

He didn’t mumble a word. Instead, he stared at them, and they stared back. Both of them had their eyes open in horror. For as long as he lived, he would always remember the way they looked back at him. He would always remember those bloodshot eyes and the way their lifeless pupils reflected his image.

“Hello?” a voice said.

Jeremiah kept his eyes focused on the body.

“Hello? Jeremiah?”

Was his father talking to him? No, he couldn’t be. His father’s mouth was shut.

“Hello? Jeremiah? I have received your transmission.”

“My... my transmission? Dad?” the young Jeremiah asked.

“Hello? Jeremiah, are you there?”

Suddenly, his eyes shot open. No longer was he seeing his dead parents. Instead, he was staring at a black world. He was in his makeshift house, lying in bed and staring at the dark ceiling. He had been dreaming.

“Hello? Jeremiah? If you can, would you please pick up? I have received your transmission. Your calls for help have been heard.”

Jeremiah rolled on his side and stared across the room. A voice was talking to him, but from where? Was he still dreaming?

“Hello? Jeremiah, please pick up.”

The radio.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Jeremiah cursed. He flung the covers off him and fell out of bed. No longer was he dreaming. He quickly got to his feet and raced across the room to where his radio was kept. He didn’t bother with sitting. Instead, he grabbed the microphone and held it to his mouth.

“Hello. This is Jeremiah Alexander speaking. Who is this?”

“This is Commander Oswald.” The voice on the other end of the radio spoke with a sense of surprise. “We have received your transmission, but we weren’t able to contact you until now. Now that we have a better signal, I think we are safe to talk without any interruptions.”

Jeremiah didn’t know what to say. After all these years of imagined conversations with his rescuer, it was ironic that he was lost for words.

“You still there, Jeremiah?”

“Yes,” Jeremiah breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes. Yes. I’m here. I’m sorry, it’s just been so long since I’ve heard another person.”

“How long have you been on Zorgen?”

“About thirty years, sir.”

“Were you alone from the beginning?”

“Yes. My spacecraft wrecked. I was the only survivor.”

“Hmm.”

“I know it sounds strange, but I promise you’re not speaking to a ghost. I’m not a dead man.”

“For a second I thought I was,” Commander Oswald chuckled.

“No. No. I’m alive.”

“Are you safe?”

“Yes, I’m safe. I’m healthy.”

“Good. How did you get this radio to work?”

“I’ve used solar panels for electricity. My spacecraft was on its way to Revery when it crashed, so I found some basic survival items in the wreckage. Without my findings and a little bit of hope, I wouldn’t be here today.”

“Well, keep hoping, Mr. Alexander, because we’re on our way to you.”

“When will you be here?”

“Twenty-five days at the least. At the most, it’ll be fifty.”

Jeremiah smiled and had to pull out a chair so he could sit. He couldn’t believe that someone was coming.

“Is that okay?” Commander Oswald asked.

“Yes,” Jeremiah said and chuckled. “That’s great.”

“Are you able to keep alive until then?”

“Yeah,” Jeremiah said and started to cry tears of joy. Finally, after thirty years of silence, he was going to be rescued. Thirty years had come and gone without a human connection, and now, on a random day within the thirty years he had been on Zorgen, a human voice was talking to him through the radio.

“Good. Well, Jeremiah, it was good talking to you. We’ll be in contact, okay?”

“Okay,” Jeremiah said, still smiling. It was the widest smile he could ever remember having.

“Goodbye.”

“Bye,” Jeremiah whispered into the microphone. A part of him was sad that Commander Oswald had finished the conversation, but another part of him was thrilled to be in a conversation with someone. He hadn’t been in a conversation since he was a teenager.

He set the microphone back on the table next to the radio. He about slumped back into the chair when he noticed something important. The knobs on the radio were all positioned so that the radio was off, and the microphone had been switched off as well. But that was impossible. He had just talked to someone.

His hands shot back at the radio, twisting the knobs to turn the radio on. Then, he grabbed the microphone and switched it on as well. Putting the microphone to his mouth, he spoke, hoping that Commander Oswald would answer him and explain to him he wasn’t crazy.

“Hello?”

Silence mocked him.

“Hello? Commander Oswald? You there?”

Nothing. No return.

“Commander Oswald? Pick up!”

Again, nothing.

He set the microphone down and turned it off. He couldn't believe it. He had imagined the whole thing. There was no other way to explain it. He was crazy. He had seen that the radio was off, and to further prove he was crazy, he had turned the radio on and had gotten no response. Commander Oswald and the conversation had entirely been in his head.

“No,” Jeremiah muttered. “No. No. No.”

He stared at the radio. It gazed back.

“No,” he continued. “This can't be. I'm losing my fucking mind, ain't I?”

Although he had asked the question to himself, he hoped—no, part of him expected—that Commander Oswald's voice would come from the speakers and assure him he was sane. Despite his expectations, Commander Oswald, Jeremiah knew, was dead. He had died a part of his imagination, and he was never coming back, just like his parents weren't coming back from the grave that he had dug for them all those years ago.

“No,” he sobbed. “I'm losing my mind, and this radio is never going to work. Why am I even trying? It's never going to work.”

He stood up. For the first time in his life, he had lost hope. Looking around, he located the axe that he had used earlier. He went for it.

He knew the radio was never going to work. He knew that he was hopelessly trying to contact someone. He knew that Commander Oswald was a figment of his imagination. Commander Oswald had never lived.

He grabbed the axe, and as he did so, he looked up and through the doorway to the outside world. The moon was reflected in the unmoving lake water. It was beautiful. As he looked at it, he realized he was never going to get off Zorgen. Zorgen was his home, and he should come to terms with it. He couldn't change the past. Yes, he had crashed. Yes, he had lived. Yes, it may have been a miracle, but if God was alive and real, then He would not allow him to suffer. Just like Commander Oswald, God was dead.

He moved away from the open doorway with the axe in hand. He couldn't believe he had wasted thirty years on the radio. It was time to end its existence. It was a false hope, and he had come to terms with that now.

He arrived at the radio and raised the axe with two hands over his head. The radio was still on, and any second he was hoping that a voice would come through the speakers. If there was going to be one more and final miracle, now was the time.

Any second now, Jeremiah thought. Any second.

No voice. He slammed the axe into the radio, and he did so over and over again until the black box resembled the spacecraft he had come to Zorgen on.

THE END

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ACCIDENT & EMERGENCY by Louis Kasatkin

They're waiting for you,
they're waiting for you to die,
but not on their shift;
They don't fancy doing the paperwork
that you dying on their shift entails;
They have tests to run,
degrees to measure,
percentages to ascertain;
First you must be disempowered,
brought under their stewardship,
critical reasoning has to be set aside,
so that you can be
assigned, consigned, designed
to fit in with their industrial logic;
They're waiting for you,
to consent to your incarceration,
so that they can transform you
into one of their votive offerings,
on one of their altars dedicated
to their idols of weakness and incapacity;
Should you feel strongly enough
the urge to discharge yourself,
and you go ahead and do just that,
They'll still be waiting for you,
waiting for you...

THE END

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SHIVERS DOWN THE SPINE by Kieran Judge

Well, that was a good night's work.

Dean whisked away the tablecloth, unlatched the top, and surveyed the world beneath. Here were the secrets. He eyed the magnet attached to a pulley that went down to his foot. Next to it was a small drum which hummed when spun, connected to a piece of string that went out past his chair to Gregory behind the curtain. And then there was the very sophisticated piece of kit—just invented in fact—which, through an array of mirrors, would enable the picture to show through the hollow base of the crystal ball's stand. There was even a little hatch for his rigged crystal ball inside the table to be released and disposed of, should the need arise. From here he could do it all. Medium and fortune-teller; he was a one-man mystic.

And they never suspected a thing.

That's all there is to it. Just the interior workings of the table and the Dean-Carter-Machine.

That was the thing with rich women. They all wanted something a little different whilst their men were up in the newspaper business or parliament looking out through their gold monocles. Now that the time was the same all across the country to keep the steam engines in check, men were even more orderly and punctual. Everything had to be done on time; every second mattered. That was destabilising to the upper classes. They wanted something to help them make sense of a world which was moving ever faster.

Dean Carter was only too happy to oblige them.

He took the tablecloth back off the chair and spotted a beautiful silk glove. A wonder how anyone could have forgotten it. Then again, he'd had to pull out all the stops this time, and the way some of them had paled, well, was it any wonder it slipped their mind?

"Gregory?"

Dean's little slip of an assistant poked his head around the door. "Yes, Mr Carter?"

Dean held up the glove. "Do you recognise this?"

Gregory took it from him and inspected it. "I think it belonged to Mrs Eniss... no, to Mrs Finney. The woman who almost fainted when the glass moved."

Dean recalled how she'd rocked the table so much that he'd almost lost control over the magnet underneath the glass. Thankfully, with quick wits honed over many years, he'd salvaged it.

"Do you remember where she lived?"

"Yes, sir. Number One-Two-Oh-Six, Howell Street."

Dean collected his coat from the stand. "I'm going to run after her. I'd like to you clean all the parts and re-stock the blood capsule for the stigmata. If anyone knocks on the door, you know the drill."

“Cover up, dispose, and then answer.”

“You got it, my lad. I’ll be back shortly.”

The cold night air was befitting for London, and the first tendrils of the famous fog were beginning to drift off the Thames. Dean caught a cab, but decided he would have to walk the way back. He couldn’t really afford to catch a lift there, but should Mrs Finney decide to return before he got there and accidentally stumble across his secrets... well, it didn’t bear thinking about.

Ten minutes later he was outside Mrs Finney’s door. His knock was answered by a maid who tried to hide her displeasure at being summoned at such an hour. “Yes?”

“Is Mrs Finney around, by any chance?”

“And what’s that to you? Who are you?”

“Who is it, Rose?”

Mrs Finney came to the door and paled when she recognised her visitor. Dean was relieved when she regained her composure and pretended not to know him. People fortune-telling in the streets was bad enough; he would end up in jail in seconds if he was exposed. “And who might you be?”

“Just someone returning an item of yours. You dropped it in the street earlier today, and I’ve only just been able to trace its owner.”

Mrs Finney almost slipped the secret herself upon seeing the glove, but managed to keep herself in check. “However did you find me?”

“A little detective work and a large amount of instinct. I’ve got a sixth sense for that kind of thing.”

A sixth sense for that kind of thing. Oh, Dean Carter, you are one smooth son-of-a-gun.

Mrs Finney nodded. “Well, however you did it, I must thank you. Rose, fetch my purse.”

“There’s really no need.”

“Nonsense. I must give you some kind of recompense for all the effort you’ve gone to. Rose...”

Dean held up his hand. “I insist. I have a feeling we’ll meet again someday soon, so you may repay me with a kind word upon our reunion. Good evening.”

He tipped his hat and started off across the road. As Dean reached the middle of the cobbles he stopped. A shiver ran down his spine, as if someone had dropped ice down his coat. His eyes watered and his vision blurred as he shuddered, trying to shake it off.

Mrs Finney watched him from the doorway. "Is there a problem, sir?"

Dean regained himself. "Nothing to worry about, Mrs Finney. Someone just walked over my grave, that's all. The cold gets to you, no matter how wrapped up you are."

He stepped to the other side of the road. When he looked to the doorway again Mrs Finney had closed her house to the night. He gave the door a nod of farewell, checked his pocket watch for the time, and headed off home.

The fog was well and truly swirling through the streets as he wound his way through the city. Men staggered from taverns and women in bright clothing waited under lampposts. Dean smiled and gave a quick, casual nod to the occasional bobby he passed, trying to hide the instinctual spike in his pulse. Walk around like you own the place, and nobody will think twice about you. That's what he had been taught, and that was how he kept himself out of a jail cell.

His route home took him down quieter streets, where shadows danced from the rooftops. He cast a wary eye to the shingles. Anyone could be up there, looking down on him. He shivered. He liked to look down on other people, to be one step ahead of them. That someone lurking in the darkness might be one step ahead of him, following, maybe even manoeuvring him somehow... that just didn't suit someone in his trade. His job was to be ahead of everyone else, not the other way around.

Trying not to let the sound of distant footsteps and the occasional shriek rattle him, he emerged from under an arch and into his street. At the door his eyelids twitched and his vision blurred. The cold is really getting to you tonight, Dean Carter. He cast a quick glance around, took out his key, and ducked inside.

"I'm back, Gregory."

"Did you get it to her, sir?"

Dean hung up his coat. "I did indeed. I think we'll get a repeat visit at some point, or at the very least she'll recommend us to someone, which makes the trip worth it." He surveyed the table. "All greased up?"

"Yes, sir. Though we're beginning to run low on lubricant for the copper gears."

"Show me the tin."

Gregory handed it over to Dean and he looked it over with a sharp eye. The tin's base was beginning to show. It would last another month or so, but then they'd need to restock. It couldn't have come at a worse time.

Maybe I should have accepted that offer from Mrs Finney. No. By declining it she'll be obliged to return the favour somehow, and I'll have made more money from waving her away than accepting. She just needs to start talking quickly, or I'm broke before the purses get here.

"Maybe I should go into being a professional magician. You think that'd work, Gregory?"

Gregory laughed. "You'd have everyone who saw you here decrying your name throughout the land, sir."

"Maybe if I went in disguise, wearing a mask. 'The Masked Enigma! Magic Sensation!' What do you think?"

"I think you'd never be asked to play another game of cards again."

Dean chuckled. "I'm going to bed now. We're going down to the square tomorrow to scout for marks, alright?"

Gregory gave a mock salute. "Yessir."

Dean reached the bottom of the stairs before he stopped. A twitch tugged at his heart. "Gregory?"

The young man looked up. "Yes, sir?"

Dean turned to him. "Do you have any ideas of your own on how we can improve my... our, touch with the other side?"

Gregory frowned. "You're asking for my thoughts?"

"That was the question, yes."

Gregory stopped to think for a moment, looking to the table for inspiration. "I'm not really sure. I've never thought about it. I normally just follow your lead."

"Think on it. There may come a time when we're, erm, forced from this setup of ours. And some experience with the creative processes might help if you get into, erm, more dire straits, shall we say."

Gregory looked up from the table, but like smoke, Dean had already vanished to his chambers.

Dean's visit to Mrs Finney's door weighed on his mind. There was a phrase he had said which stuck in his mind. *Someone walked over my grave*. Dean hadn't given much thought to mortality since his teacher had been struck down in the street by a horse that had slipped its reins. But that phrase had put the question into his mind. What would happen if the grave suddenly came for him? What would happen to poor Gregory?

Despite having to act as if he could connect with them, Dean doubted any spirit would guide his young protégé out on the streets, a voice in the grey London fog.

Oh, Dean Carter, this can't be good. You're developing a moral compass. It'll be the death of you, one of these days.

He closed his shaking eyes and passed into the realm of sleep.

There was a wall of glass surrounding him, and try as he might, Dean couldn't smash through. He hammered until his fists were cut and blood trickled out his palms, but he couldn't even manage a crack. His prison held him tight in its clutch, funnelling up to the sky.

And then, with a rumble, the sky turned to black and sand began to stream into the glass cell.

Dean screamed. Before long the beach lapped at his ankles, feet sinking as he climbed. The sand was relentless, the tide trapping him as it came up to his waist and he was unable to move from the spot. His fingers slipped down the glass. A clock boomed in the distance, tolling the end. When the sand rose to his chest, pushing in and crushing his lungs, he took a deep breath of dusty air and closed his eyes.

Dean awoke to knocking on his chamber door. "Sir. You must come at once."

A high sun filtered under old curtains and his vision shifted from the nightmare. In his room. With Gregory at the door.

"What is it?"

"Sir, there's a policeman at the door."

If the nightmare hadn't gotten his heart pounding stronger than a military parade, the idea of a policeman at the door did the trick. Panic overcame Dean in a blinding flash of light, and then it cleared. He'd been prepared for this. He could handle it.

"Show him in, Gregory. Don't seat him at the table, just in case. I'll be down shortly."

Gregory shuffled away from the door and Dean threw on his clothes. He checked for his pocket watch and couldn't find it. He looked around blindly before spotting it on the floor. The glass was cracked, the time stopped in the middle of the night.

"Oh, Dean Carter, this doesn't bode well."

He thought about putting his timekeeper in his pocket, but instead placed it on the nightstand and pocketed a small, brush-like item. He checked himself over in the mirror, found himself to be reasonably presentable, flashed himself a charming smile, and left the room.

The policeman was sat in the theatre room by the window, Gregory presenting him with a posh biscuit on an expensive plate. As per the plan, nicely done, Gregory.

"Good morning, sir," Dean said as he held out his hand. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The policeman was dressed in the typical bobby's uniform, complete with hat clutched on his lap, but his eyes spoke of something more than your average copper. They were honed, as were Dean's, for scrutiny.

“Sir, this is Inspector Stephenson.”

“Pleasure to meet you, sir. Carter, Dean Carter.” The inspector rose and the two shook hands, suave style in an icy grip. “So what brings you to my humble home, at this late hour of the morning?”

“Mr Carter, I received a complaint early this morning regarding certain practices taking place in this household.”

“Nothing serious, I hope? I wasn’t aware they had changed the law regarding drinking water in one’s rooms.”

Dean gave his winning smile, but the inspector wasn’t won over. Slowly the conman edged towards the table.

“The practices referred to are, amongst others, fortune telling, the use of a crystal ball for divination, and an attempt to contact the dead. You are aware of the police’s official position in regards to such practices?”

Dean brought the table between himself and the inspector. Then he laughed. “You think I have that kind of ability? I’d be making a fortune as a world-famous explorer, if that was the case. I’d know exactly where the mummies were buried!”

Dean casually put a hand under the cloth and pushed a small lever on the underside of the table. A hatchway opened and a small crystal ball dropped into his palm.

“The lady in question who made this report told me that you stated that her late husband would make sure her daughter was always safe. Upon returning home last night, she found her daughter collapsed of a heart attack.”

Ouch. You got too personal with that one, Dean Carter. Always stay vague, remember? A coincidence like that was always going to come back and bite you. It just so happened to be that Mrs Ennis is a snitch.

Dean smiled, which was more of an attempt to comfort himself than to win over his guest. “I may have said something like ‘I’m sure your late husband is watching over you,’ but surely, Inspector, there can be nothing wrong with that.”

Inspector Stephenson took out a small notepad. “Indeed not, Mr Carter. But I’ve spoken to three others who were apparently at your little gathering here last night, and they corroborate the reports given by the lady in question.”

Damn. He’s got me there.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to bring you to the station to ask a few questions about this, Mr Carter. I’ve been told to tighten up on vagrants, fortune tellers and the like, and that counts for on the streets and in the home.”

Dean looked across at Gregory, and an idea struck him. “Did these people also mention that I am in fact a practicing magician?”

The room dropped into silence.

I so hope this one works.

“If that’s the case,” Inspector Stephenson said, “I can have you for fraud. Tricking people out of hard-earned money.”

Dean put his empty hand up to stop the Inspector coming closer. This was ridiculous. “So I’m being done for predicting the future, but when I say it’s a trick, I’m being done for that as well?”

“Ignorance is no defence against the law, Mr Carter,” said the inspector. “Now please, come with me to the station, and I’m sure we can straighten this out.”

Straighten it out, my arse. I’ll be behind bars until the sun dies if he gets his hands on me.

The small crystal ball in his closed palm was like ice. Dean glanced across at Gregory and an understanding passed between them. This was the moment it ended, where life took a different turn, as they had suspected it might do for many years. Dean’s guts churned, and then they commanded action.

Dean launched the crystal ball with a flick of his wrist and it smashed into Stephenson’s head. The ball shattered, glass slicing into his flesh. Blood gushed from the wound, and the Inspector screamed as a shard pierced the jelly of his eyeball. Stephenson covered his face with his hands, howling like no man or beast London had ever heard howl before.

Dean was up and over the table in a flash, pushing the inspector back and scrambling out the door. He threw it open as he heard Stephenson roar and stumble after him, half blind, and spilled out into the street.

He didn’t look around, didn’t hear Stephenson at the door, didn’t realise the inspector had drawn his revolver until the bang split his ears and dust exploded from the wall next to him. Up ahead he watched two bobbies look up in his direction, clock the inspector in the doorway, and turn to Dean.

They’re like rabbits; they’re everywhere!

Dean ran down an alley as the policemen took up the chase with Stephenson. He leapt over a keg of ale outside a tavern’s rear entrance, throwing down the young man about to take it inside. Dean ducked inside the open door, sprinted through to the front and out into the opposite street.

A cab drew up nearby. Dean reached into his pocket and took out the little moustache he’d picked up earlier. He wet his top lip and stuck the fake moustache to it. A slight change to someone’s face makes them invisible, someone had told him. He hoped they were right.

Dean jumped onto the open cab. “Twelve-oh-six Howell Street. Now.”

Dean didn't know why he gave that particular address; it was just the first one that came to his tongue. He sat back against the seat as from the corner of his eye he saw the policemen exit the tavern and look for him. Moustache working its magic, their gaze glanced right over him. The cart was almost at the corner, the Dean-Carter-Machine breathing a sigh of relief, when they suddenly shouted after the cab.

"Drive hard, cabbie."

"The policemen, though..."

Absolutely useless. "Damn you."

Dean leapt to the street and scampered off once again.

The crowd of policemen behind him kept growing larger with every minute, never seeming to fall off his tail. Carter wound his way through street after street, side-alley after darkened corner, and still they followed. Initially he didn't know where he was going, but eventually he realised that his feet had been following his nose towards Howell Street.

As he ran, a sickness stole over his stomach past the thrill of the chase. It clutched at his heart, his lungs, his intestines turning to snakes biting their tails and coiled, ready to strike. His vision blurred and he wanted to rest but he couldn't stop now. He was between a pawn shop and a barbershop, and he knew that they would be at the mouth of the side-alley in seconds. He could hear their footsteps coming for him, closer and closer.

He cursed under his breath and took to his heels again.

Dean caught glimpses of himself in shop windows, a black fuzzy outline surrounding him like a cloak as he pushed through the oxygen-deprivation. The midday chimed from a church tower nearby. Not far now. Just another few minutes and he could hide, stop, and recover from the cramps that were gripping his belly.

When he thought he was about to collapse, he turned into Howell Street. "Mrs Finney! Mrs Finney!"

Dean Carter presented her with an incredible sight; a wave of policeman at his heels led by a bleeding, half blinded Inspector Stephenson.

From the other end of the street, a clatter of hooves and cart wheels entered the frame of the drama.

Suddenly Mrs Finney shrieked at the psychic: "He's got a gun!"

Dean looked behind him. Stephenson's revolver glinted in the sun. He took aim, foot coming down hard and jolting his finger. The bullet went wide. Bad eyesight sent it to Dean's right. Startled, he spilled off the path and into the road.

The cab's horses reared up at the gunshot and veered across the cobbles directly towards Dean.

Dean Carter felt the stomach-snakes writhe once more as a memory flashed through his mind. He had a microsecond to smile at the irony of his fate.

The Dean-Carter-Machine went under the tread of the horses. A hoof ploughed through his face, and a second destroyed his stomach. The wheel of the cab severed his splayed arm, spinning it out across the road like a wayward clock hand. It came to a rest with a single finger left attached, pointed accusingly at Mrs Finney.

Mrs Finney screamed.

The policemen, after recovering from the shock of the violence, quickly cordoned off the area and shepherded the young woman inside.

It took the rains two days later to wash away all the blood, and even then, on a day when the light was just right, you could still make out the stains left by a psychic ability that even Dean Carter couldn't have predicted he had.

THE END

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HAIRDRESSER by Christopher T Dabrowski
English translation by Monika Olasek

Andrzej found a strange ad:

‘I am a miraculous hairdresser, the specialist of specialists! Once and for all I will solve your problem of unruly hair! You think there is no hope, that you are condemned to the mess on your head? Not! I will prove you wrong. Satisfaction guaranteed!’

Andrzej touched the tangle which he’d never been able to comb.

Maybe I should give it a try, what do I have to lose?

The hairdresser told him to kneel and support his forehead on the countertop.

‘This is a new method, somewhat unusual, but effective! Just close your eyes and we are ready to go.’

Andy obediently closed his eyes and heard a swish.

He opened his eyes. The world was spinning...

His head was rolling on the floor.

‘Shortcut!’ said a delighted hairdresser. ‘Problem solved!’

THE END

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SOUL MATES by Kevin O'Brien

Part One

"Loyalty is an important commodity in the Dreamlands. Having an adventuring partner can mean the difference between life and death, but partnerships cannot work without each person being loyal to the other, because that engenders trust and dedication, which encourages a willingness to risk life and limb for the sake of one's partner."

—The Dreamlands for Dummies, by Aislinn Síle

The seventh day...

Sunny and Shadow-Stalker topped the crest of a ridge and looked towards the north. The first range of the Barrier Mountains sat across a valley from their position, and halfway up one peak was a ledge at the top of a crag. At the back of the ledge sat the mouth of a large cave.

"Thar she blows," Sunny said, but with much less than her usual enthusiasm. An adventure simply wasn't as exciting without her partner.

"It's not too late," the lean, short-haired, smoky-black cat said in her Munchkin-like voice. "We could still go back to the camp and wait for Mayv to return."

"We don't know what's happening to her. If we wait for Mayv it could be too late."

"It's been almost a week already, plus what looks like another three days before we reach the cave."

"That's better than a month trekking through the mountains."

"What I mean is—how do you know it's not already too late?"

"No. Until I know for certain, I'm not giving up." She looked down at the cat. "But you don't hafta come along. In fact, if you went back you could tell Mayv what happened."

Shadow gazed up at her with her vivid green eyes. "I said I would go with you as far as the cave; afterwards, we'll see."

Sunny smiled and crinkled her eyes behind her granny glasses. "I appreciate your loyalty; thank you."

"Don't mention it, but I'm not sure you understand just how fatally dangerous this is."

Sunny stared back at the cave. "Eile once went through hell, literally, to rescue me," she said in a grim tone. "The very least I can do is risk death for her." She took a deep breath. "Besides, it's my fault she got kidnapped. Come on, we're burning daylight." And she started down the slope of the ridge into the valley as Shadow kept pace beside her.

The first day...

Sunny sat on her rump in a hot spring's pool with her back against a pile of rocks. Eile leaned against her between her spread legs, using her ample bosom as a pillow. She rested her hands on Sunny's thighs as Sunny wrapped her arms around her chest. Eile sighed and wriggled her butt into a better position.

"Comfy?"

Eile chuckled. "Damn right, ya bimbo. Yer softer than a form mattress and warmer than a hot water bottle. I could stay like this forever."

Sunny giggled. She never took the reference to a voluptuous dumb blonde seriously, because she knew her partner meant it with affection. And sometimes as an admonishment, but never in a mean way. Besides, it was true, in a way. Eile had a strong muscular frame with a slender athletic build, the epitome of the hard-bodied tomboy, whereas Sunny was better endowed in bust and hip, as a centrefold for a men's magazine. Although, she was stronger than she looked, especially in the arms and torso after taking up archery. She was also blonde, though gamboge would have been a better description, a kind of honey-hued mustard. But she wasn't dumb; even Eile acknowledged that. She was as scatter-brained as a kitten, with a carefree attitude that bordered on clueless innocence, but she was still quite intelligent. Eile had practical common sense smarts, but she was the puzzle master, even if her logic followed its own rules.

Sunny ran her hands down her partner's tummy to her hips as Eile moaned. Sunny was so deeply in lust with her that she couldn't imagine being with anyone else, and while Eile had lost her virginity to a boy-lover in college, she had told Sunny that the feeling was mutual. In the Waking World they had known each other for all of eighteen months, though the time differential in the Dreamlands had expanded that by almost another year. At the current state of their relationship, they tended to express their affection with sex, going at each other as if they were actresses in a porno movie, but lately they spent most of their time together cuddling.

Such as now. Medb hErenn, their mentor and surrogate mother in the Dreamlands, had taken them to the onyx city of Inganok in the land of Kaar in the southern region of the Northlands when she accepted a commission to mediate a dispute between labour and management of an onyx quarrying company. Afterwards, she then took them on a walking tour of Kaar, following the caravan road that ran from the market town of Karkakorum on the edge of the Plateau of Leng in the east to the land of Lomar far to the west. However, when they reached the city of Laudopha with its walls of peacock granite, they made a semi-permanent camp on the Verdant Plain south of the municipality and Medb announced that she would be leaving them for a time. She didn't explain where she was going or how long she would be gone, only that she wanted them to remain in camp until she returned, and the next morning she was gone. Having little with which to entertain themselves, they turned to each other, and at Sunny's suggestion they decided to have a lover's retreat.

Sunny slipped a hand between Eile's thighs, making her gasp. "Geezus, ya spaz, you horny already?"

“What can I say?” she said in a gay sing-song tone. “You’re just so sexy I can’t keep my hands off you!”

Eile chuckled and turned over, stretching out on Sunny’s abdomen. She normally wore her long straight seal-brown hair in a ponytail that dropped to her knees, but for the moment they had piled it up on top of her head into a ridiculously immense pouf to keep it dry. Sunny preferred to wear her hair in a massive feathered mane that billowed around her head. Eile in turn dyed the four big locks that framed her face a vivid fuchsia, and sported a number of silver hoops in her ears along with a tiny diamond stud that pierced the left nostril of her nose.

“So, whaddya have in mind? More of the same, or somethin’ different?”

Sunny raised her hands and draped them over her head. “How about, *Nasty Sorority Sisters II: Nasty to the Eleven*.”

Eile grinned, but managed to blush slightly. “Never heard of that one. How’s it go?”

Sunny embraced her partner’s neck. “Imagine the most hard-core girl-on-girl action you can think of, then take it up a couple of notches.” She tightened her arms, pulling Eile in close, and kissed her. When she let her go, she said, “In other words, use your imagination.”

“Heh, put a sock in it, ya ditz.” And she leaned forward to kiss her again.

Before their lips could touch, Sunny suddenly pulled back. “Did you hear that?” It sounded to her like heavy garments flapping in a wind.

Eile glanced up and around, but then she focused on Sunny with a lopsided grin. “What, is this some kinda variation on the parked car tease?”

It took a lot to irritate Sunny, especially where Eile was concerned, but one way was to question her competence as if the bimbo stereotype was true. “I’m telling you, I heard something!”

“Okay, okay; sorry.” Eile retreated backwards to the centre of the pool so she could scan the entire sky. Sunny joined her, and almost right away she spotted small black shapes silhouetted against the phosphorescent underside of the perpetual overcast that blotted out the sky.

“There!” she pointed behind Eile, who pivoted on her heels to look. The shapes were humanoid; their black rubbery whale-like skin, batwings, head horns, barbed tails, and featureless faces were unmistakable.

“Geezus! Nightgaunts!”

The flock circled high above them, as if studying them, then it dove straight towards them. Sunny and Eile ducked under the water, and Sunny saw the ‘gaunts rake the surface with their hands.

When the 'gaunts had passed and were climbing back up, they popped to the surface to catch their breaths. Sunny pointed at the flock and shouted, "Zapareeno!" A sphere of ball lightning formed in its midst. Though it threw off bolts that struck some of the 'gaunts, none of them seemed harmed, but they grabbed their heads as if shielding their non-existent ears from a deafening noise and spasmed in convulsions as they peeled off.

Almost immediately another flock appeared and dove at them. Again they ducked beneath the pool, and again Sunny zapped them, chasing them off, but a third flock appeared, diving out of the sky.

"We're sittin' ducks like this!" Eile said, and she scrambled out of the pool and ran for the camp to retrieve their weapons.

"Eile! No!" The third flock split in two, with half chasing after Eile. "Look out!" She raised her arm to zap them, but the other half came at her and she had to shift her aim. The lightning ball appeared directly in front of them and threw them aside violently; one even dropped into the pool, seemingly unconscious.

"Gaaah! Leggo a me, you assholes!"

Sunny levitated herself out of the pool and turned towards camp. She panicked when she spotted Eile being carried aloft by three 'gaunts while the rest of that portion of the flock surrounded them. She pointed at them to zap them, but hesitated. The ball lightning spell was not as offensive as her other magical electrical spells, but it was still powerful enough to incinerate a target if it touched or engulfed it. Besides, she realized that once the 'gaunts became disoriented they might drop Eile, which would be fatal from their current height.

She willed herself to speed after them, but they were too fast; she could never hope to catch them, or even keep up.

"Sunny! Help!"

"Eile! Eile! I'll come find you! Wherever they take you, I'll rescue you! Even from Kadath itself!" The flock was already way far ahead and she wasn't sure if her partner heard her, but that didn't matter. She stopped and turned to face north, glaring in the direction of Mt. Kadath, just visible over the horizon. "You hear me?" She addressed Nyarlathotep in a grim tone barely above a whisper. "I will never rest until I have her back, and not the Great Ones, or the Other Gods, or even you can stop me." There was no reply, but she didn't expect any, except maybe an evil laugh.

She settled to the ground and walked back to the camp. Shadow came bounding over the field towards her. "I saw the nightgaunts; what happened?" She looked around. "Where's Eile?"

"They took her."

Shadow meowed in consternation. "Where?!"

"That's what I intend to find out."

They went back to the pool. The ‘gaunt that had fallen into it had recovered and crawled out, but it still felt the effects of the electrical attack as it wobbled and stumbled as if it was drunk. It turned its head to “look” at them and tried to fly away.

Sunny pointed at it. “Zap!” It became encased in an actinic cloud of sparks, stiffened, and collapsed, but was otherwise unharmed. Sunny approached it to examine it, and spotted a medallion on a chain around its neck. She knelt and lifted it off, then stepped back and waited. Presently the ‘gaunt revived, shook its head, glanced at her and Shadow, then spread its wings and flew off, heading due west after the flock that had taken Eile.

Sunny watched it disappear into the distance then examined the medallion. It bore an intricately carved low relief design on its obverse side, with a sentence in an Arabic-like script on the reverse.

“I think this is the insignia of whoever commands those ‘gaunts,” she told Shadow. “If we can find out who, we can find Eile, but for that, we’ll need a soothsayer.”

Shadow glanced at the city, visible in the distance. “I think I know someone who can help us.”

The tenth day...

Sunny reached the ledge after an exhausting climb up a narrow, steep, rock-strewn trail eroded into the side of the crag. She stood bent over for several minutes, clutching her knees as she tried to catch her breath. Shadow had preceded her and sat close to the edge.

When Sunny recovered, she straightened up and approached the mouth of the cave. It was as big as the opening to a railway tunnel, but natural looking, and from deep inside she heard the steady and ponderous, if laboured, breathing of a massive animal.

Sunny stared into the pitch-black passage for a few moments, then opened a scrip on her belt and pulled out a small bone whistle. She gripped it in her fist and looked down at Shadow.

“Now we find out if Bǎo Mei was telling the truth.” She put it in her mouth and gripped it with her lips.

The second day...

The nightgaunts had flown due west all night, and Eile became dangerously chilled. She didn’t think she would survive another hour, but as they passed over a grey peak, she saw ahead a black tower. The ‘gaunts dived and winged around it as they circled back then hurtled up its side, arched over the top, and dove for the floor of a plaza. In the centre was an opening to a round shaft that penetrated deep into the tower. At the last minute they levelled out above it and let her go. She dropped into the opening and plunged into darkness. She was too numb from cold to feel afraid and she shivered too violently to scream, but the shock was too great for her mind to cope, and she mercifully blacked out before she hit bottom.

When she awoke, she felt warm, but strangely uncomfortable. She opened her eyes and found herself in a windowless chamber carved from living rock. However, it looked less as a dungeon than a laboratory from an old Frankenstein movie. The equipment mystified her, but she recognized power crystals, rectifier crystals, capacitor crystals, and battery crystals, suggesting that, whatever their purpose, the equipment operated off of the Dreamlands equivalent of electrical power.

She glanced around the chamber and discovered that she was suspended, spread-eagled, above the ground between two rose-coloured crystalline pillars. She then focused on a woman standing in front of her.

“Who are you?” she demanded. “What do you want with me?”

The woman flashed a grim smile. “My dear Braveheart, you are my guest.”

Her response sounded so bizarre that it left Eile befuddled. “What the freakin’ hell are you talkin’ about!?”

The smile widened into a grin. “All will be revealed in good time.”

She felt her anger flair in response to her trepidation. “Listen, asshole. If you don’t release me, my partner White-Lion will come looking for me.”

The woman replied in a cold tone, “I am counting on it.”

The pillars flared to life, illuminating her with a blinding rose-coloured light, and fireworks exploded in her head as weird, incomprehensible glyphs streaked past her mind’s eye as fast as oncoming traffic.

Sunny did little more than get dressed and collect her weapons and survival gear, before she and Shadow took off for the city. She didn’t concern herself with the camp or the stuff she left behind. If she returned, she and Eile could replace whatever might be stolen; if not, it would benefit whoever found it, especially the supplies.

They didn’t reach Laudopha until after sunset, and they found the main gates shut and bolted, with no other way for pedestrians to enter. Fortunately, a corporal of the guard was on duty, and while it took some persuasion on their part, he finally permitted them to enter through the postern. However, instead of being allowed into the city they were detained in the guard room overnight as they were questioned about their business. Sunny wanted to be less than forthcoming, which made the guards suspicious, but the cats of the city vouched for them, so they gave Sunny some supper while Shadow hunted rats in the cellar, then they gave her a bed for the night that Shadow shared.

In the morning they were released after second breakfast, and Shadow took Sunny to a grizzled old cat who paid for his retirement by working as a sage. He could not identify the insignia, even with the help of his girl apprentice, but he gave them the names of four colleagues to consult, and the girl took them to each in turn. Unfortunately, none of them

knew either, and once first dusk descended the girl had to return to her master. Sunny felt despondent and helpless, feeling abandoned, when before she and Shadow left him, the fourth sage suggested one last person they could try, but warned them he was dangerous. Desperate, Sunny accepted his suggestion as well as the risk.

They arrive at Bǎo Mei's emporium just after third dusk, when full-on night descended. Though the shop was dark, a blood-red paper lantern hung above a door in an alley that separated the store from its neighbour. The door was unlocked, and opened onto a flight of stairs that ascended to the floor above the retail space. At the top of the stairs sat a doorway with a beaded curtain through which poured bright light.

Sunny shuddered; she didn't know why, but she suddenly got a feeling as of someone walking over her grave.

"Anything wrong?" Shadow said.

Ignoring the cat, she headed upstairs. When she reached the curtain she saw it had tiny bells woven into the beaded strings. While she wasn't trying to be sneaky, she realized it would be impossible to pass the curtain without making noise.

She pushed her way through to the sound of delicate silver tinkling into a small room that reminded her of a studio apartment. There was almost no furniture to speak of, just straw mats with cushions lying around a small round table that resembled a Japanese *chabudai*. Lighting was provided by more paper lanterns, coloured white, and many candles scattered around the room.

Which was not unoccupied. To one side of the table stood the personage she assumed to be Bǎo Mei. He wore an embroidered *changshan* displaying a mix of blacks, dark blues, reds, purples, and greens interwoven with brilliant gold thread.

Sunny instantly recognized him to be a Tcho-Tcho, though not a full-blooded one. His complexion was sallow rather than urine, and while bald he wasn't hairless: he had bushy eyebrows, a Fu Manchu moustache, and a narrow goatee, all snow-white. The goatee and moustache hung down to his upper chest. His eyes were blue instead of amber and rounder than normal, and he was taller than his racial brethren, though he still didn't come up to her chin.

He bowed to her and she bowed back. Though she and Eile tried to be charitable with all the people of the Dreamlands, they didn't like the Tcho-Tchos. It was a prejudice they had learned from Medb, but one which had been confirmed by their personal experience several times. The Tcho-Tchos had an evil reputation for worshiping dark gods with foul rites involving the blood sacrifice of other sentients; for engaging in sadistic ritualistic torture; and for cannibalism; and on one occasion they had discovered that the reputation was not exaggerated: just the opposite in fact, particularly in the way they would treat human women.

"Please, sit," and he gestured at one of the cushions around the table. She smoothed her pleated tie-dyed skirt over her legs and knelt; she placed her composite bow, quiver, singlestick, and quarterstaff on the floor beside her within reach, to make herself more comfortable, but left her stiletto dagger on her belt. Shadow crawled onto another cushion beside her and sat down.

“Refreshment?” he asked.

“Thank you.”

He retreated to a small kitchen area in a back corner of the room and returned with a teapot, two cups, and a plate of small cakes.

When he settled himself he poured tea into both cups and handed her one. She set it on the table and accepted one of the cakes, which she placed beside the cup. Shadow stood and stretched over the table, and sniffed at cup and cake.

“Green tea with ginseng, honey, and an infusion of citrus; it’s harmless. The cake, however, is made from opium poppy and black lotus. I wouldn’t trust it.”

Sunny glanced at Bǎo Mei, expecting him to be angry, but he smiled, stroked his beard, and nodded. He then lifted his cup; Sunny did the same and they both took a sip.

When they set the cups back down, Bǎo Mei said, “And how may this unworthy one assist the Great Lady White-Lion?”

She smirked at his fake oriental accent and courtesy as she removed the medallion from a pouch. She tossed it across the table.

“I need to know who owns that insignia.”

Bǎo Mei picked it up and examined it carefully, which she assumed was for show. Then he frowned with his whole face, which she took to be genuine.

He laid the medallion back down and stared at her. “The one you seek is a highly dangerous sorceress, and most evil.” He had dropped his fake accent.

“I don’t care if she’s the Wicked Witch of the West; she took Eile, and I intend to get her back, even if I hafta melt her to do it. Who is she and where can I find her?”

He flashed a puzzled look, not getting the references, but then his face settled into a serene expression and he nodded over his hands held as if in prayer, with the palms pressed together. “She calls herself Salamah Bargash, and she dwells in a fortress tower excavated from a volcanic plug of black porphyry far to the west, in the very last range of the Barrier Mountains, north of the town of Vornai.”

She felt her eyes widen and bulge as her eyebrows crawled up her forehead. “It would take me a month to get there!”

“Longer, as there are no roads or trails that lead to it, and no passes through the mountains even if there were. It can only be reached from the air.”

“By air, hmmm? That sounds like a job for a nightgaunt.”

“Can you command one?”

“I know how; I’ve...just never tried it before.”

“Whether you succeed or fail, it will be to no avail—”

Sunny giggled. “Hey, that rhymes!”

Bảo Mei scowled at the interruption. “—because she is the Mistress of Nightgaunts. All who approach her tower fall under her command, and your steed would seize you and carry you off to some deadly place where it will abandon you to your doom.”

“Okay, then, smart guy, what do you suggest?”

He scowled again, at the disrespect. “There is only one alternative available: a shantak.”

“I thought shantaks feared ‘gaunts.”

“I know one that does not.”

“Where is it?”

“It lairs in a cave to the north, along the southern edge of the mountains. But it cannot be controlled, or coerced; it can only be persuaded.”

“And how do I do that?”

He shrugged. “I cannot say, but I know a way to give you an edge.”

“Okay, tell me.”

He stared at her as a mongoose would stare at a cobra it was preparing to kill. “What will you give me in return?”

Alarm bells went off in her mind. She realized she was now treading on thin ice. “What do you want?”

His eyes shined and he licked his lips. “You; for tonight. In the morning I will give you the help I promised.” She understood he meant, if you are still alive.

“No.” She didn’t even think about it. Aside from the fact that she couldn’t help Eile if she was dead, the thought of sleeping with him nauseated her.

“You would leave your partner to Bargash’s mercy?”

“No, but I will not betray her dedication to me.”

“So, you would not sacrifice for her?”

“We are bonded to each other through mutual affection. That’s from where we derive our strength. If I betray that, it will destroy us. I can’t sacrifice that, and Eile would never ask me to.”

“What kind of devotion is it that acknowledges an obligation great enough to willingly sacrifice the one for whom that devotion exists?”

“The kind that understands there are things greater than itself. You asked what I would sacrifice for her. I would sacrifice my happiness, my honour, and my self-respect. If I let Eile die rather than betray her love, I would never forgive myself. I would mourn her for the rest of my life, and I would beg her to forgive me each and every day I had left.”

He displayed a smirking grin, and pulled a small bone whistle out of a pocket. “You claim that love is a source of strength; it is not, it is weakness. You will rush headlong to your death, all for a maudlin feeling and an animal passion, neither of which represent true devotion, which you cannot understand. And yet...” He paused and gazed at the whistle. “While I cannot understand this love of yours, I can understand desire, especially a desire that one is willing to risk death to fulfil.”

He tossed her the whistle and she caught it with one hand. “I will teach you how to use that to bring forth the shantak. Once it appears, speak to it from your heart. That is all I can do for you, but in return, one day I will ask a favour of you and your partner.”

She understood he meant, if you are both still alive.

“Agreed,” she said. She spat into her right hand. He did the same and they clasped hands to seal their bargain.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

XIII.—Madame Mandilip

I stood at the window of the doll-maker's shop, mastering a stubborn revulsion against entering. I knew McCann was on guard. I knew that Ricori's men were watching from the houses opposite, that others moved among the passers-by. Despite the roaring clatter of the elevated trains, the bustle of traffic along the Battery, the outwardly normal life of the street, the doll-maker's shop was a beleaguered fortress. I stood, shivering on its threshold, as though at the door of an unknown world.

There were only a few dolls displayed in the window, but they were unusual enough to catch the eyes of a child or a grown-up. Not so beautiful as that which had been given Walters, nor those two I had seen at the Gilmores', but admirable lures, nevertheless. The light inside the shop was subdued. I could see a slender girl moving at a counter. The niece of Madame Mandilip, no doubt. Certainly the size of the shop did not promise any such noble chamber behind it as Walters had painted in her diary. Still, the houses were old, and the back might extend beyond the limits of the shop itself.

Abruptly and impatiently I ceased to temporize.

I opened the door and walked in.

The girl turned as I entered. She watched me as I came toward the counter. She did not speak. I studied her, swiftly. An hysterical type, obviously; one of the most perfect I had ever seen. I took note of the prominent pale blue eyes with their vague gaze and distended pupils; the long and slender neck and slightly rounded features; the pallor and the long thin fingers. Her hands were clasped, and I could see that these were unusually flexible—thus carrying out to the last jot the Laignel-Lavastine syndrome of the hysteric. In another time and other circumstances she would have been a priestess, voicing oracles, or a saint.

Fear was her handmaiden. There could be no doubt of that. And yet I was sure it was not of me she was frightened. Rather was it some deep and alien fear which lay coiled at the roots of her being, sapping her vitality—a spiritual fear. I looked at her hair. It was a silvery ash... the colour... the colour of the hair that formed the knotted cords!

As she saw me staring at her hair, the vagueness in her pale eyes diminished, was replaced by alertness. For the first time she seemed to be aware of me. I said, with the utmost casualness:

"I was attracted by the dolls in your window. I have a little granddaughter who would like one I think."

"The dolls are for sale. If there is one you fancy, you may buy it. At its price."

Her voice was low-pitched, almost whispering, indifferent. But I thought the intentness in her eyes sharpened.

"I suppose," I answered, feigning something of irritation, "that is what any chance customer may do. But it happens that this child is a favourite of mine and for her I want the best."

Would it be too much trouble to show me what other, and perhaps better, dolls you may have?"

Her eyes wavered for a moment. I had the thought that she was listening to some sound I could not hear. Abruptly her manner lost its indifference, became gracious. And at that exact moment I felt other eyes upon me, studying me, searching me. So strong was the impression that, involuntarily, I turned and peered about the shop. There was no one except the girl and me. A door was at the counter's end, but it was lightly closed. I shot a glance at the window to see whether McCann was staring in. No one was there.

Then, like the clicking of a camera shutter, the unseen gaze was gone. I turned back to the girl. She had spread a half-dozen boxes on the counter and was opening them. She looked up at me, candidly, almost sweetly. She said:

"Why, of course you may see all that we have. I am sorry if you thought me indifferent to your desires. My aunt, who makes the dolls, loves children. She would not willingly allow one who also loves them to go from here disappointed."

It was a curious little speech, oddly stilted, enunciated half as though she were reciting from dictation. Yet it was not that which aroused my interest so much as the subtle change that had taken place in the girl herself. Her voice was no longer languid. It held a vital vibrancy. Nor was she the lifeless, listless person she had been. She was animated, even a touch of vivaciousness about her; colour had crept into her face and all vagueness gone from her eyes; in them was a sparkle, faintly mocking, more than faintly malicious.

I examined the dolls.

"They are lovely," I said at last. "But are these the best you have? Frankly, this is rather an especial occasion—my granddaughter's seventh birthday. The price doesn't really matter as long, of course, as it is in reason—"

I heard her sigh. I looked at her. The pale eyes held their olden fear-touched stare, all sparkling mockery gone. The colour had fled her face. And again, abruptly, I felt the unseen gaze upon me, more powerfully than before. And again I felt it shuttered off.

The door beside the counter opened.

Prepared though I had been for the extraordinary by Walters' description of the doll-maker, her appearance gave me a distinct shock. Her height, her massiveness, were amplified by the proximity of the dolls and the slender figure of the girl. It was a giantess who regarded me from the doorway—a giantess whose heavy face with its broad, high cheek bones, moustached upper lip and thick mouth produced a suggestion of masculinity grotesquely in contrast with the immense bosom.

I looked into her eyes and forgot all grotesqueness of face and figure. The eyes were enormous, a luminous black, clear, disconcertingly alive. As though they were twin spirits of life, and independent of the body. And from them poured a flood of vitality that sent along my nerves a warm tingle in which there was nothing sinister—or was not then.

With difficulty I forced my own eyes from hers. I looked for her hands. She was swathed all in black, and her hands were hidden in the folds of her ample dress. My gaze went back to her eyes, and within them was a sparkle of the mocking contempt I had seen in those of the girl. She spoke, and I knew that the vital vibrancy I had heard in the girl's voice had been an echo of those sonorously sweet, deep tones.

"What my niece has shown does not please you?"

I gathered my wits. I said: "They are all beautiful, Madame—Madame—"

"Mandilip," she said, serenely. "Madame Mandilip. You do not know the name, eh?"

"It is my ill fortune," I answered, ambiguously. "I have a grandchild—a little girl. I want something peculiarly fine for her seventh birthday. All that I have been shown are beautiful—but I was wondering whether there was not something—"

"Something—peculiarly—" her voice lingered on the word—"more beautiful. Well, perhaps there is. But when I favour customers peculiarly—" I now was sure she emphasized the word—"I must know with whom I am dealing. You think me a strange shopkeeper, do you not?"

She laughed, and I marvelled at the freshness, the youthfulness, the curious tingling sweetness of that laughter.

It was by a distinct effort that I brought myself back to reality, put myself again on guard. I drew a card from my case. I did not wish her to recognize me, as she would have had I given her my own card. Nor did I desire to direct her attention to anyone she could harm. I had, therefore, prepared myself by carrying the card of a doctor friend long dead. She glanced at it.

"Ah," she said. "You are a professional—a physician. Well, now that we know each other, come with me and I will show you of my best."

She led me through the door and into a wide, dim corridor. She touched my arm and again I felt that strange, vital tingling. She paused at another door, and faced me.

"It is here," she said, "that I keep my best. My—peculiarly best!"

Once more she laughed, then flung the door open.

I crossed the threshold and paused, looking about the room with swift disquietude. For here was no spacious chamber of enchantment such as Walters had described. True enough, it was somewhat larger than one would have expected. But where were the exquisite old panellings, the ancient tapestries, that magic mirror which was like a great "half-globe of purest water," and all those other things that had made it seem to her a Paradise?

The light came through the half-drawn curtains of a window opening upon a small, enclosed and barren yard. The walls and ceiling were of plain, stained wood. One end was entirely taken up by small, built-in cabinets with wooden doors. There was a mirror on the wall, and it was round—but there any similarity to Walters' description ended.

There was a fireplace, the kind one can find in any ordinary old New York house. On the walls were a few prints. The great table, the “baronial board,” was an entirely commonplace one, littered with dolls’ clothing in various stages of completion.

My disquietude grew. If Walters had been romancing about this room, then what else in her diary was invention—or, at least, as I had surmised when I had read it, the product of a too active imagination?

Yet—she had not been romancing about the doll-maker’s eyes, nor her voice; and she had not exaggerated the doll-maker’s appearance nor the peculiarities of the niece. The woman spoke, recalling me to myself, breaking my thoughts.

“My room interests you?”

She spoke softly, and with, I thought, a certain secret amusement.

I said: “Any room where any true artist creates is of interest. And you are a true artist, Madame Mandilip.”

“Now, how do you know that?” she mused.

It had been a slip. I said, quickly:

“I am a lover of art. I have seen a few of your dolls. It does not take a gallery of his pictures to make one realize that Raphael, for example, was a master. One picture is enough.”

She smiled, in the friendliest fashion. She closed the door behind me, and pointed to a chair beside the table.

“You will not mind waiting a few minutes before I show you my dolls? There is a dress I must finish. It is promised, and soon the little one to whom I have promised it will come. It will not take me long.”

“Why, no,” I answered, and dropped into the chair.

She said, softly: “It is quiet here. And you seem weary. You have been working hard, eh? And you are weary.”

I sank back into the chair. Suddenly I realized how weary I really was. For a moment my guard relaxed and I closed my eyes. I opened them to find that the doll-maker had taken her seat at the table.

And now I saw her hands. They were long and delicate and white and I knew that they were the most beautiful I had ever beheld. Just as her eyes seemed to have life of their own, so did those hands seem living things, having a being independent of the body to which they belonged. She rested them on the table. She spoke again, caressingly.

“It is well to come now and then to a quiet place. To a place where peace is. One grows so weary—so weary. So tired—so very tired.”

She picked a little dress from the table and began to sew. Long white fingers plied the needle while the other hand turned and moved the small garment. How wonderful was the motion of those long white hands... like a rhythm... like a song... restful!

She said, in low sweet tones:

“Ah, yes—here nothing of the outer world comes. All is peace—and rest—rest—”

I drew my eyes reluctantly from the slow dance of those hands, the weaving of those long and delicate fingers which moved so rhythmically. So restfully. The doll-maker's eyes were on me, soft and gentle... full of that peace of which she had been telling.

It would do no harm to relax a little, gain strength for the struggle which must come. And I was tired. I had not realized how tired! My gaze went back to her hands. Strange hands—no more belonging to that huge body than did the eyes and voice.

Perhaps they did not! Perhaps that gross body was but a cloak, a covering, of the real body to which eyes and hands and voice belonged. I thought over that, watching the slow rhythms of the hands. What could the body be like to which they belonged? As beautiful as hands and eyes and voice?

She was humming some strange air. It was a slumberous, lulling melody. It crept along my tired nerves, into my weary mind—distilling sleep... sleep. As the hands were weaving sleep. As the eyes were pouring sleep upon me—

Sleep!

Something within me was raging, furiously. Bidding me rouse myself! Shake off this lethargy! By the tearing effort that brought me gasping to the surface of consciousness, I knew that I must have passed far along the path of that strange sleep. And for an instant, on the threshold of complete awakening, I saw the room as Walters had seen it.

Vast, filled with mellow light, the ancient tapestries, the panellings, the carved screens behind which hidden shapes lurked laughing—laughing at me. Upon the wall the mirror—and it was like a great half-globe of purest water within which the images of the carvings round its frame swayed like the reflections of verdure round a clear woodland pool!

The immense chamber seemed to waver—and it was gone.

I stood beside an overturned chair in that room to which the doll-maker had led me. And the doll-maker was beside me, close. She was regarding me with a curious puzzlement and, I thought, a shadow of chagrin. It flashed upon me that she was like one who had been unexpectedly interrupted—

Interrupted! When had she left her chair? How long had I slept? What had she done to me while I had been sleeping? What had that terrific effort of will by which I had broken from her web prevented her from completing?

I tried to speak—and could not. I stood tongue-tied, furious, humiliated. I realized that I had been trapped like the veriest tyro—I who should have been all alert, suspicious of every move. Trapped by voice and eyes and weaving hands by the reiterated suggestion that I was weary so weary... that here was peace... and sleep... sleep... What had she done to me while I slept? Why could I not move? It was as though all my energy had been dissipated in that one tremendous thrust out of her web of sleep! I stood motionless, silent, spent. Not a muscle moved at command of my will. The enfeebled hands of my will reached out to them—and fell.

The doll-maker laughed. She walked to the cabinets on the far wall. My eyes followed her, helplessly. There was no slightest loosening of the paralysis that gripped me. She pressed a spring, and the door of a cabinet slipped down.

Within the cabinet was a child-doll. A little girl, sweet—faced and smiling. I looked at it and felt a numbness at my heart. In its small, clasped hands was one of the dagger-pins, and I knew that this was the doll which had stirred in the arms of the Gilmore baby... had climbed from the baby's crib... had danced to the bed and thrust...

“This is one of my peculiarly best!” The doll-maker's eyes were on me and filled with cruel mockery. “A good doll! A bit careless at times, perhaps. Forgetting to bring back her school—books when she goes visiting. But so obedient! Would you like her for your granddaughter?”

Again she laughed—youthful, tingling, evil laughter. And suddenly I knew Ricori had been right and that this woman must be killed. I summoned all my will to leap upon her. I could not move a finger.

The long white hands groped over the next cabinet and touched its hidden spring. The numbness at my heart became the pressure of a hand of ice. Staring out at me from that cabinet was Walters! And she was crucified!

So perfect, so—alive was the doll that it was like seeing the girl herself through a diminishing glass. I could not think of it as a doll, but as the girl. She was dressed in her nurse's uniform. She had no cap, and her black hair hung dishevelled about her face. Her arms were outstretched, and through each palm a small nail had been thrust, pinning the hands to the back of the cabinet. The feet were bare, resting one on the other, and through the insteps had been thrust another nail. Completing the dreadful, the blasphemous, suggestion, above her head was a small placard. I read it:

“The Burnt Martyr.”

The doll-maker murmured in a voice like honey garnered from flowers in hell:

“This doll has not behaved well. She has been disobedient. I punish my dolls when they do not behave well. But I see that you are distressed. Well, she has been punished enough—for the moment.”

The long white hands crept into the cabinet, drew out the nails from hands and feet. She set the doll upright, leaning against the back. She turned to me.

“You would like her for your granddaughter, perhaps? Alas! She is not for sale. She has lessons to learn before she goes again from me.”

Her voice changed, lost its diabolic sweetness, became charged with menace.

“Now listen to me—Dr. Lowell! What—you did not think I knew you? I knew you from the first. You too need a lesson!” Her eyes blazed upon me. “You shall have your lesson—you fool! You who pretend to heal the mind—and know nothing, nothing I say, of what the mind is. You, who conceive the mind as but a part of a machine of flesh and blood, nerve and bone and know nothing of what it houses. You—who admit existence of nothing unless you can measure it in your test-tubes or see it under your microscope. You—who define life as a chemical ferment, and consciousness as the product of cells. You fool! Yet you and this savage, Ricori, have dared to try to hamper me, to interfere with me, to hem me round with spies! Dared to threaten me—me—possessor of the ancient wisdom beside which your science is as crackling of thorns under an empty pot! You fools! I know who are the dwellers in the mind—and the powers that manifest themselves through it—and those who dwell beyond it! They come at my call. And you think to pit your paltry knowledge against mine? You fool! Have you understood me? Speak!”

She pointed a finger at me. I felt my throat relax, knew I could speak once more.

“You hell hag!” I croaked. “You damned murderess! You’ll go to the electric chair before I’m through with you!”

She came toward me, laughing.

“You would give me to the law? But who would believe you? None! The ignorance that your science has fostered is my shield. The darkness of your unbelief is my impregnable fortress. Go play with your machines, fool! Play with your machines! But meddle with me no more!”

Her voice grew quiet, deadly.

“Now this I tell you. If you would live, if you would have live those who are dear to you—take your spies away. Ricori you cannot save. He is mine. But you—think never of me again. Pry no more into my affairs. I do not fear your spies—but they offend me. Take them away. At once. If by nightfall they are still on watch—”

She caught me by the shoulder with a grip that bruised. She pushed me toward the door.

“Go!”

I fought to muster my will, to raise my arms. Could I have done so I would have struck her down as I would a ravaging beast. I could not move them. Like an automaton I walked across the room to the door. The doll-maker opened it.

There was an odd rustling noise from the cabinets. Stiffly, I turned my head.

The doll of Walters had fallen forward. It lay half over the edge. Its arms swung, as though imploring me to take it away. I could see in its palms the marks of the crucifying nails. Its eyes were fixed on mine—

“Go!” said the doll-maker. “And remember!”

With the same stiff motion I walked through the corridor and into the shop. The girl watched me, with vague, fear-filled eyes. As though a hand were behind me, pressing me inexorably on, I passed through the shop and out of its door into the street.

I seemed to hear, did hear, the mocking evil-sweet laughter of the doll-maker!

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POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

18: The Humbling Of Minos

IT WAS no part of Polaris's program to take part in a hand-to-hand fight with the pursuers. There were seven of them remaining, and with nothing but his own safety a stake, he might have been confident of the issue; but he did not dare, under the circumstances to take the risk of the encounter.

When he saw that a charge might be delayed no longer, he turned and ran swiftly along the curve of the ledge, the dogs racing with him. He, the fleetest of runners, now went at top speed. When he stopped, some hundred and fifty feet away, Garlanes and his men had barely rounded the bulge of rock to the wider part of the path.

They charged the neck of the way, and, finding the way widen, where there was nothing to take cover behind, they quite naturally hesitated for the—next move of their foe.

That move came quickly. Garlanes, in the lead, heard something sing past his ear like an angry bee. The man next behind him felt something strike him over the heart, and he threw up his hands and crumpled to the floor. The walls of the mighty tunnel flung back a crashing echo to the sharp report of the rifle. Kneeling close to the wall, peering through the fitful light, Polaris watched the effect of his shot.

Vainly he hoped that superstition would come to his aid and hold the Sardanians back from the carnage. They were dismayed. By the intermittent flares of garish light from the throat of the volcano, Polaris could see their consternation in their faces and gestures; but he had not stopped them. After a momentary examination of the body of their comrade, they came on, but slowly.

With loud cries of encouragement. Prince Minos and his men, summoned by the messenger from Garlanes, poured around the corner of the rock, and the entire body came, on apace.

Again Polaris took up the retreat, running swiftly, and keeping well out of the range of the spear casting. Presently, when he deemed that he must be nearly half-way around the rim of the crater, he came to another narrower part of the pathway where a large rock lay. behind which he could crouch There he decided to make his stand, and to retreat no farther until the summons of Kalin should tell him that the sledge was clear of the tunnel.

He refilled the magazine of the rifle, and waiting calmly for the flickering light to make his aim sure, he began methodically to pick off the foremost pursuers, making every bullet count. Under the pitiless accuracy of his fire, the Sardanians lagged uncertainly but always they crept nearer.

Six times had the brown rifle sent its death unseen, almost unfelt, across the arc of the crater rim, when there was a stir among the dogs behind the marksman, a touch on his shoulder, a voice in his ear.

“Come, brother, all is ready. Haste thee before they close in!” called Kalin.

Not a score of yards, farther they came to a passage, in the wall, or, rather, a fissure through it, which seemed to have been floored by the hand of man at some distant time. It led at right angles from the crater shelf. As Polaris looked into it he could see that it was lighted dimly by the light of day. It was barely wide enough for the passage of the sledge, and it so twisted in the rock that it had been a slow and difficult task for the priest to drive the ponies through.

Circumstance willed that they were not to pass the tunnel without further mishap and bloodshed.

Slowly the enemy had crept up. When Kalin and Polaris broke cover and dashed for the mouth of the tunnel, the foremost of the Sardanians was only a short spear throw behind. In the momentary pause at the mouth of the tunnel, men and dogs were bunched, and offered a fair target to the Sardanians leaping along the ledge.

With a scream of pain and rage, the dog Pallas leaped thrice her height from the floor and fell, writhing in her death agonies. A spear had penetrated behind the poor brute's shoulder, nearly piercing the body through.

Her death wail was drowned in the terrible challenge that came from the throats of the pack, and the cry of anger that rose from the lips of her master. Kalin stood alone at the mouth of the narrow way, holding the rifle that had been thrust into his hands. In the midst of his leaping, snarling dogs, Polaris, raging like a demon at the slaughter of his old playmate and servant, threw himself back into the teeth of the charge of Minos's men.

Clutching a heavy spear in his right hand, and whirling it like a toy, and with a revolver in his left, he swept down the ledge, thrusting and firing. Around him the six dogs of the pack fought after their own fashion, rending and snapping like devils. In the face of that attack the Sardanians shrank aghast.

Thirty feet or more back along the pathway Polaris fought blindly for vengeance before his reason returned to him. In front of him the Sardanians were huddled in the path, backing away and obstructed in their flight by those behind who were pushing forward, under the threats and commands of Minos, the Prince.

Polaris's brain cleared. He heard the voice of Kalin calling to him to return. He turned and raced swiftly to the tunnel, over the bodies of the dead. Behind him the rush of pursuit gathered and came on again.

Through the tunnel they raced, dogs and men, and came out into the sunlight, which, shone on crags and boulders and bare earth.

"Quickly, now; the rocking stone—tip it over!" gasped the priest.

Where the tunnel ended was its narrowest point. A man might reach out and touch both walls. On the rock above the entrance beetled what Kalin called the "rocking stone." It was an enormous boulder, the fang of some glacial jaw in the primeval. Or a fragment spat from the maw of the volcano. Where it had come to rest, at the very verge of the tunnel entrance, it was balanced. So nice was its adjustment on its natural pedestal that the breath of a strong breeze caused it to sway, or rock gently; the hand of a strong man might increase the oscillation greatly.

“Tip it over!” gasped Kalin, pointing with his hand.

A glance told Polaris his purpose. In the passage swelled the clamour of pursuit. He sprang up the rocks, set his powerful shoulder under the belly of the immense stone, and shoved with all his strength.

Over swayed the stone—farther than it had ever swayed before in all the centuries that it had stood there. The solid rock of its foundation grated and crumbled. Over it swung but not far enough to fall. To the straining man, whole minutes seemed to be passing as the stone hung; then, despite his utmost effort, it shuddered—and swung back!

Polaris turned and set his broad back to the surface of the stone as it oscillated. He waited until its recoil swing was completed, and, as it again inclined toward the fissure, he straightened his doubled legs and put forth all the power in his magnificent muscles. He heard the roaring of the leaping blood in his ears. He heard the uneasy crumbling of the rock at his feet. He shut his eyes and strained grimly—triumphantly! The resistance ceased, and he threw himself on his side to avoid falling. The huge boulder pitched into the tunnel, grinding and crashing and settled its weight of tons squarely across the passage.

As it went down, there was a flash of white beneath it, and the body of a tall man shot through the portals that were closing forever, and fell on his face on the slope. It was Minos the Prince! Outdistancing all his men, he had dashed through the passage, and hurled himself at the daylight not one second too soon to escape being crushed under the fall of the rocking stone. Behind his flying heels it closed down, grimly and solidly, splintering the walls at either side to make way for itself. When it rested on the floor of the crevice it completely filled the entrance. Not a squirrel could have clambered through.

DULLY, through the wall of rock penetrated the dismayed clamour of the Sardanians in the passage, and the muted sound of their spears smiting on the stone: No efforts of theirs could so much as shake the boulder. Nothing short of giant powder would dislodge it.

Desperate at his plight, made mad with fury, or surpassingly daring was Minos the Prince, for he picked himself up with a shout and charged headlong at the men and dogs who confronted him.

“This task to me, brother,” shouted Polaris to Kalin, who lifted spear to defend himself. Polaris had sprung down from the pedestal of the rocking stone, and he leaped unhesitatingly into the path of Minos. With lightning swiftness he caught a grip on the haft of the spear which the prince whirled up to pierce him. For a moment the two men stood tense, with upstretched arms, battling fiercely, but without motion, for the mastery of the weapon. Then Polaris widened his grip on the shaft and twisted it sharply from his antagonist’s grasp.

They stood breathing deeply, and Polaris, cast the spear away, at the same time sternly ordering off the dogs which would have rushed on Minos.

“A trick,” said Minos with a smile, glancing at his empty hands. “Another trick, O clever stranger! Now try a fall with Minos, where tricks will not avail.” He flung his arms around Polaris.

His grip was of steel. In all Sardanes the “smiling prince” was known as the strongest man. Once, for a wager, he had trussed the legs of a full grown pony, and had carried it on his shoulders unaided, from the river to the Judgement House.

Round about Polaris his long legs tightened, and he tugged upward mightily, in an effort to tear his antagonist from his foothold and hurl him down. He would have plucked an ordinary man from the earth like a toy, but he was not pitted against an ordinary man. He was the strongest man in Sardanes, but Sardanes was small, and her strong men few. Polaris was perhaps the strongest man in the world.

He stood firm. Not only that, but he thrust his hands upwards, gripping the prince in the armpits, and slowly straightened his arms, despite the utmost effort of the struggling prince to pinion them to his sides. Strain as Minos might, he could not break that grip beneath his shoulders. Slowly, very slowly, Polaris straightened his arms. As he did so, he bent his hands in from the wrists, exerting an ever increasing pressure at each side of Minos’s broad chest. To his own intense astonishment, the prince, whom no man ever had mastered, felt his foothold growing insecure, felt his ribs slowly curving in and his breathing growing short and painful, felt his mighty arms slipping.

In vain he straightened up to his towering height and shook his sweep of shoulders. His terrible grip was broken.

Polaris suddenly loosed his hold, passed his arms up within those of the prince, and brought them down with elbows bended, freeing himself entirely. He caught Minos by the wrists, and exerting a strength that almost crushed the bones, he pressed downward swiftly and relentlessly.

The Prince of Sardanes knelt on the bare rock at the feet of the son of the snows. No word had been spoken. Polaris let fall his enemy’s wrists, and pointed along the mountainside toward the pass that led into the valley.

“Yonder lieth thy way, back to Sardanes, prince,” he said gently. “Go back to thy people and rule them wisely, O Minos. Seek not to follow us. We go hence on a far journey, and will not be denied or turned. As to the strife that hath arisen, no man can regret it more than I. Farewell.”

Minos answered not, and Polaris turned to the girl and the priest. He saw that all was in readiness for their going. Tethered to a tree below them in the mountain’s belt of green were the snorting ponies. He threw out his arm in a sweeping gesture. “The way to the north is open,” he said. “Let us be going.”

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