

BLAZING! ADVENTURES MAGAZINE

-Presents-

THE SPOTLIGHT ISSUE

ISSUE #6

DCP FREE



Featuring-

**TEEL
JAMES
GLENN**

THE ADVENTURES OF DOCTOR SHADOWS!!!!!!

Blazing!
Adventures
Magazine
spotlights-

TJ
GLENN

Blazing! Adventures
Magazine

Publishers
2008

New York

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Cover illustration: by Craig Shepard
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-INTRODUCTION!-

Blazing! Adventures Magazine-- Spotlights: TJ Glenn

There are no heroes.

This is a fact the world wants us to believe. Men & women who at all times try to live up to a concept of standards that are borderline impossible to achieve. Or even live by on a daily basis. The definition of a hero is:

-noun, plural -roes; for 5 also -ros.

1. a man of distinguished courage or ability, admired for his brave deeds and noble qualities.
2. a person who, in the opinion of others, has heroic qualities or has performed a heroic act and is regarded as a model or ideal:

Classical Mythology. a. a being of godlike prowess and beneficence who often came to be honored as a divinity.

b. (*in the Homeric period*) a warrior-chieftain of special strength, courage, or ability.

c. (*in later antiquity*) an immortal being; demigod.

No one could possibly live that way in the reality we are spoon fed today. The evils of this world are played across the High Def screens, shot through fiber-optic cables, across satellite dish, bouncing through the ether of space, and into the minds of adult and child alike. Wars continue, pain is a daily reality for the victims in the path of a political machine hellbent on gaining power for its masters, whose lives are just as finite as the lives lost to gain it.

There are no heroes.

.....but we can believe.

Strive for such noble intentions, such Homeric ideals, to be the people that stands in front of the moving tank, the army of steel. To fight until the last; the good fight, and in some way, regain just a little bit of that heroic ideal written about in lore, much like this.

Teel James Glenn is no hero. But he aspires, battles with pen and paper, keyboard and computer, to be more than the life he was given, more than he had to be. He writes heroes, he writes the struggles man faces when staring down the barrel of his own humanity, and strives to overcome the weakness in the corners of his mind. Shadows, trying to take him into the perpetual night.

.....but he fights to live within the light. With pen in hand, Teel weaves many tales, showing the versatility of a true Pulp fiction writer. Adventurous are some, dark are others, love can be found in many, and laughter can be had in a few.

Teel James Glenn is no hero.

.....but, he tries to be.....

-Robert S.P. Lee
Editor of *Blazing! Adventures Magazine*
New York July, 2008

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Ballard of the Wander

Author Bio-



E.J.'s DEMON



E.J. was scared and he was running for his life. He kept looking over his shoulder as he propelled himself awkwardly down the dark street, his footfalls splashing noisily in a maze of puddles.

IT had attacked him again only three hours ago, blowing his car to smithereens; barely missing him. Since then he'd seen glimpses of IT in the shadows, ITs great fangs gleaming in a perpetual and hideous smile, but he'd managed to elude IT time and again.

This time he hadn't even tried to go to the authorities, as if any human agency could have authority over that. They would only have laughed at the pathetic, obviously insane, fatman and maybe even confine him for observation like they had done before. That would only give IT a chance to zero in on him again. No, there would be no outside help against IT. He knew he was alone.

Now E.J. was tired; tired of the endless running, tired of fighting. He just wanted a moment's true peace, a moment of certainty that IT was gone forever. He stopped to catch his breath in the shadow of a doorway, his eyes scanning the deserted street for any sign of movement.

For a long minute he half stood, half leaned against the doorway panting like a cornered animal. "Maybe I've given IT the slip," he thought as his fatigue ebbed and his confidence grew, " maybe I out foxed'm!" He caught sight of himself in the glass of the door and almost laughed at the caricature he presented: prematurely bald at thirty five he was still overweight enough to be called by his grammar school alias 'butterball.' His thin tie was askew, his white shirt dirty and yet somehow he still wore the bowler hat that had been his grandfather's. Losing that would have really upset him.

To add insult to injury his nose was red and running as a result of his shirtsleeve flight in the misty night air (his jacket had gone the way of all flesh in the car explosion).

"E.J." he said to his image, "You are a mess." He straightened his tie in a little attempt to right his world. "Something has got to be done!" He said aloud to bolster his resolve.

He was suddenly aware of the softened consonants of his mild speech impediment made crisper in the evening air.

"What would you like to do?" A voice from behind E.J. almost startled the man into running again save that it added, "Would you like to find peace, my son?" The voice was deep and somehow reassuring. E.J. felt compelled to answer.

"Yes, I want peace."

"Then come in and we will talk," the voice said.

E.J. looked around at the empty street once more to be sure he was not being followed and then up at the now dark neon sign which hung above the doorway. "Madame Kooney, reader and advisor!" the sign read.

'Anything to help,' he thought as he stepped through the door. Inside the storefront was a throwback to the carny tents of old, complete with beaded curtains over the doorways, fake Persian rug wall hangings and a miasma of incense which wrapped itself around E.J. like a python. None-the-less it was warm, dry and oddly calming.

The figure who led E.J. into the room was taller than he, but all other details were obscured by a billowing maroon velvet robe. The Long grey hair which topped the figure told nothing; even the calming voice was neutral and might have belonged to a man or woman.

"Sit, have some tea," the figure said. E.J. pulled up two oversized pillows that smelled like his grandmother's living room. He sat down across a low table from his host.

"Now, tell Madame K of your troubles," she said after he had rested a moment.

"I don't know rightly were to begin," E.J. said accepting a cup of tea from her white gloved hand.

"What are you afraid of?" The old reader said. "To see a solution we must first clearly see the problem." E.J. nodded at the wisdom of that. He enjoyed the warmth of the tea a moment before he continued.

"I don't know what IT is," he said, "except that ITs big and covered in fur and IT's made my life hell for years."

"Since what time?" Madame K asked in a school-marm tone adding, "You must

be precise; I can not make bricks without straw!"

The old reader smiled broadly at her own humor and it encouraged E.J. to search his memory more exactly.

"Years ago I was on a camping trip alone out west and IT destroyed my camp." E.J. began. "For no reason. And IT nearly drove me mad with tricks and torments. And when I tried to fight IT, IT laughed that hideous high pitched cackle. I always hear that cackle now, even in my sleep."

E.J. was sobbing now, glad at least to have someone to tell his story to. "No one would listen, no one cared," he said, "they said I was crazy. They've put me away twice." He looked up at the silent mystic with the pleading eyes of a wronged child.

"I don't know what to do. It's not that I don't have resources, I'm actually quite wealthy from my camping and hunting supply business. I own homes; yachts. I've fought IT myself and hired others, men who know how to kill, but their guns and bombs were worse than useless, turned back on them until there were no witnesses." By now E.J.'s tone had become that of a prayer for deliverance. "Sometimes I wish IT would just kill me and be done but IT won't let me die."

"IT can not, E.J. " Madame K said in a hushed voice, "for IT feeds on your misery and torment like maggots on a carcass."

"You-you believe me?" E.J. almost fell across the little table when the grey haired mystic nodded a silent 'yes'. The little man's tears became tears of joy.

"You know what IT is?" He almost yelled.

"I think so," Madame K said. "I think it is a Poohka; an animal demon, a mischievous spirit whose sole purpose and pleasure is to torment the living. It is from this torment and suffering that this creature derives both joy and sustenance."

"But why me?" E.J. asked afraid for the first time in all the years that IT had pursued him that perhaps he was insane to be even listening to the old reader's words seriously....

"I think you were picked at random," the mystic continued, "perhaps your campsite so long ago disturbed some special place, some burrow or temple sacred to the demon."

"Why doesn't IT just finish with me?"

The Old reader's smile was an ironic and a cold one. "I believe the demon is fond of you--" She held up her hand to silence an outburst from E.J.. "-Not perhaps as you would like or even in a way you can understand, but fond as one might be of a dog that did tricks or a certain vintage of wine. Or else how would you explain ITs constant return to you."

"Return!"

"Yes, return," Madame K said. "Surely you do not believe your misery is unique? Such a creature as the one you describe would mischief and plague many; you I believe are ITs 'private stock."

E.J. hung his head in quiet despair and whispered, "It's hopeless."

"There is always hope," Madame K said. A whitegloved hand placed a yellowed piece of parchment on the table. On it were inscribed complex diagrams. "This is a powerful spell of banishment which has worked against such demons in the past."

E.J. took the paper with hands atremble. "How-how can I repay you--" he began.

"My payment," Madame K injected, "will be ridding the earth of such a pest. It is part of my journey along the path."

E.J. sat a while, stunned into silence by his good fortune. At last he rose, almost forgetting grandfather's bowler in his excitement and headed for the front door.

"No," Madame K stopped him with a hushed tone, "Simple caution is still called for. Leave this way." The old reader gestured to a door set in the wall at the back, all but hidden by a wall hanging.

"Here," E.J. said pressing his business card in Madame K's hand as he opened the door. "If you ever need anything at all, call."

He sniffled once, smiled and stepped through the doorway to Nothingness.

E.J. was still screaming and falling when Madame K began to change into the form IT had been most comfortable in the last two hundred years. Long grey hair became ears, leathered skin grew a downy grey fur, eyes widened into a perpetual startled expression and two front teeth grew to frightening length.

The Demon looked down at the card in it's white gloved hand which read, "E.J.

Fudd Wilderness Supplies" and cackled to no one in particular. "I do this to him all through the millennium, Ain't I a stinker!" before tossing the card into the now silent pit.

That's all folks.....

The end?

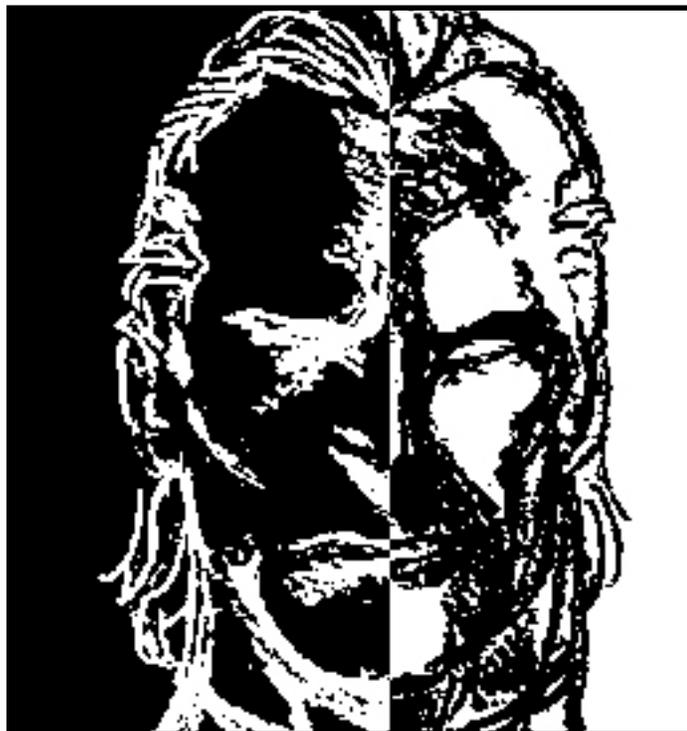
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THE SCENT of VICTORY



A Doctor Shadows Adventure



“Gettin’ into the ring with Mauler Manzetti ain’t sport or charity or exercise,” Slugger Harris said, **“Its goin’ ta war: and he don’t take no prisoners.”**

The little terrier of an ex-pug was walking in the back corridors of Madison Square Garden with a boxer who was robed and hooded. Beside the two, a petite Chinese girl with an eye-patch that had a white wolf painted on it and a serious expression on her pretty face, worked hard to keep up with the strides of her companions.

“It is a charity match Slugger, and not for any rank or title except the honorary one of Charity Champion,” the boxer said, **“or else I wouldn’t have agreed to do it.”**

“You don’t know how to turn down a dare Anton,” the Oriental woman said, **“its your best and your worst feature.”**

“You worry too much, Hank,” Anton said.

“And you worry too little,” was her terse reply.

The boxer’s two companion’s made a Mutt and Jeff trio, Harris and the girl barely coming up to their companion’s shoulders.

“Outside da ring is a charity thing, Boss,” Harris said, **“but in da ring, Manzetti ain’t ever got no charity or mercy.”** The three rounded a corner of the dim hallway to the sudden bright light and noise of the weigh in area.

Members of the Boxing Commission, a doctor, the referee and half a dozen members of the press were wall crammed into the weigh in area. It was really little more than a wide spot in the corridor with a scale and some tables and chairs set up for the event.

When Slugger and his charge entered the area, flashbulbs started to pop like a mini lightening storm.

“Easy guys,” Slugger said, **“let the new charity champ through!”**

The boxer stepped up to the ring official seated at the table.

“Name?” the mousy official asked formally, even though he and everyone else in the hall knew the fighter’s name.

“Anton Chadeaux,” the boxer said. The official checked off the name and had the boxer sign it. **“Step over to the scale for your weigh in, please,”** the man added, **“and**

remove your robe.”

Chadeaux doffed the robe and handed it to Slugger. There was an audible intake of breath from many in the room at his remarkable physique. Hank just stood to the side and watched the others in the room watch her companion and her face lit with a knowing smile.

Anton Chadeaux, PhD. was his real name, but much of the world knew him by his public name of Dr. Shadows. He was a physical marvel, well over six feet tall with a form that might have been sculpted by a renaissance master. There was not an excess ounce of fat on his muscular form, yet no muscle was over developed or ‘for show.’ His features were movie star handsome and his movements as graceful as a white wolf. What was more arresting about his appearance than his body was the color of it- his skin was an ashen grey, even to the premature grey of his hair. On anyone else the color might have denoted sickness, but somehow on him it spoke of almost preternatural power. It had caused the newshounds to dub him “the Granite Man” in the headlines.

“Two hundred and twenty eight and one half pounds,” the official called out from the scale while a fellow commissioner wrote down the numbers.

“Awful puny to go against me!” A voice like sandpaper cut through the noise of the room. All eyes turned to watch Michael “Mauler” Manzetti stride into the center of the press pack.

The Mauler was a few inches shorter than Dr. Shadows but seemed fully twice as wide. He was already sans his robe, and though massively muscled, was also layered with some insulating fat. The Mauler was hairy chested, bald headed and sweating profusely, despite wearing only his boxing trunks.

He held a huge sandwich in one cinderblock sized fist, waving it like a teachers pointer at the Granite Man. “Youse lookin’ a little pasty and underfed, Shadowboy,” Manzetti said. “Have a bite of my sandwich—a real man needs spicy food like garlic to open your skinny pores.”

The Granite Man smiled down at the other boxer with genial acceptance. “Let me guess,” Dr. Shadows said, “you’re planning to put color in my cheeks?” He could smell the powerful scent of the behemoth, a sweat ripe with spicy foods and adrenalin waiting

to be burned off.

Manzetti looked down at Hank and made as if to take a step toward her. “When I finish with your boyfriend, Slanty, I’ll show you how a real American gives a girl a good time.”

Hank bristled at the attention and Dr. Shadows stepped between them, almost nose to nose with the Mauler. “This is between us, Manzetti—and the public.”

Light bulbs popped again in anticipation of an impromptu brawl, but Manzetti just laughed, an unpleasant sound that was more a snort than a chuckle.

“Youse might say that,” The Mauler said. He took a big bite of his sandwich and spoke through a rain of food particles.

“Mr. Manzetti,” the commission official said, “If you would please step on the scale.” The Mauler wiped his mouth on the back of his hairy forearm and handed his snack to his trainer. A renewed barrage of news cameras caught each moment as the scale was adjusted.

Dr. Shadows re-donned his robe and stood with a sour faced Slugger while the official called out, “Two hundred and sixty one pounds.”

“Better kiss your one eyed girl before you climb into the ring with me,” Manzetti said in a loud voice for the assembled crowd. “Cause she ain’t gonna wanta after I’m done with youse.” He smiled like a slit pumpkin and grabbed a huge bite of his sandwich in punctuation.

The May benefit at the Garden to support the Far East Relief Fund was the major event of the month, kicking off the unofficial beginning of the summer season. It had been advertised for months, and when the main card of Dr. Shadows Versus the Mauler had been announced, ticket sales soared.

The crowd was above capacity, the overflow standing around on the curbs near Seventh Avenue listening to the radio announcer’s blow-by-blow accounts of the prelim bouts. All of them were, jackets collars turned up against the unusual chill for May,

talking excitedly about the main event.

The Granite Man entered the ring accompanied by Slugger and Ki Nam Hoon, his tall Korean aide and herbal doctor who would serve as his corner man. There was a cheer that went up from the crowd inside the arena that was picked up by those outside ‘til it became a roar.

“Don’t let that all go your head, Boss,” Slugger said, “Ain’t nobody likes Mauler; he’s da only fighter I ever knew people come to see, hoping to see him put on his keester!”

“Why should a fighter of his stature and temperament agree to such a match?” Hoon asked in Korean.

“Only way to get to da boss where Doc can’t use Salsa Do techniques—no kicks, joint locks or grappling; but if he wins, he gets to claim he beat Dr. Shadows! Almost means more in some circles than a title shot.”

“Well,” Dr. Shadows said, “At least if I have the gloves on, so will he.”

“Don’t take comfort in that,” Slugger said, “Mauler hits like a freight train. I mayhave trained you, Anton, but you ain’t no pro boxer.”

“You’ve got to work on your pep talks, Slugger,” The Granite Man gave a grin. “You’re not inspiring me to victory.”

The little pug answered by sticking the Grey Goliath’s mouthpiece in and pointing to the opposite side of the ring. The Mauler swaggered into the ring to a chorus of boos that was even more deafening than the cheers for the Granite Man had been. The crude giant seemed to thrive on the crowds hate and egged them on with gestures and grimaces. When he entered the ring, he glared at Dr. Shadows and nodded his head as if in answer to some unasked question.

The ring announcer introduced the combatants to cheers and boos respectively, and then the referee brought them together for the reading of the rules. Afterward, when they touched gloves, Manzetti leaned in and said in a low voice:

“You put my cousin in da big house last year.”

“I’ve put a lot of people’s cousins in Sing Sing,” the Granite Man said, “that doesn’t narrow it down very much.”

“Tony Lazetto.” The Mauler spit, “Ten to twenty for robbery.” He poked a thick finger into Dr. Shadows’ chest, “I’m gonna cripple ya and it’s all for charity, so I’m a hero for doin’ it!”

“At least it will be for a good cause,” The Granite Man said. “He smiled at the wider man as if the threat had no meaning, but when he turned to walk back to his corner, his features were set in a dark mood.

“You were right, Slugger,” He said, “It s gonna be a war.”

When the bell sounded, the Mauler came at Dr. Shadows with no preamble, throwing trip hammer blows with his full body weight behind them. The Granite Man was forced to back pedal, absorbing the blows as best he could on his forearms that were soon marked blue with rising bruises. Any impulse to counter attack was quickly detected by Manzetti and squelched with an even more furious barrage.

‘He can’t keep this pace up with the bulk he has,’ The Grey Adventurer thought hopefully, ‘He’s already sweating like a fountain.’ Yet the corpulent boxer continued to press the attack, his iron hewed arms unstoppable pistons that gave Dr. shadows no rest.

The Grey Goliath was able to block most of the blows a few moments before the bell to end the round sounded, but the Mauler slipped in one left hook that connected. The blow sent the Granite Man lurching backwards into the ropes. Manzetti followed up like a jackal after a wounded animal, raining body blows on the pale boxer with relentless fury. Even after the bell sounded, he slammed his gloved fists into Dr. Shadows until the referee pulled him off.

“You were wrong about Manzetti, Slugger,” The Granite Man said when he fell onto his stool in the corner. “He hits like two freight trains.” He shook his head and rubbed his temple where he had been tagged. “And it burns like heck where he hit me.” There was a pink abrasion on his head that Hoon looked at with professional concern.

“You gotta stop running from him—he’s too well trained for you to tire him out that way in three rounds. You gotta take him on directly.”

Dr. Shadows looked at his friend and considered telling him about Manzetti’s statement to him but just said, “I just have to stay on my feet for two more rounds to give the crowd a show. This isn’t life or death-it’s just a charity bout.”

“Ya know every two bit thug in this burg is waitin’ to see ya go down, Boss,” Slugger said, “And a lot of dem has laid some money on the side that you won’t walk out da Garden under you own steam.”

Hoon had observed the exchange with a worried expression. “If the smelly one continues to exercise control over you, your reputation with those same hoodlums will suffer- they will no longer fear direct attack on you, and as a result, many may die.” As the bell sounded, he added, “this a life and death situation.”

Mauler Manzetti began round two as he had round one with a furious barrage of pile driver punches. The Granite Man, despite his friend’s advice, was compelled to back pedal under the assault.

Now he could see the hate clearly in Manzetti’s eyes with no mitigation. *‘He really does want to maim me legally.’* Dr. Shadows thought, *‘no pretensions of civility.’*

The pile driver hits kept coming and the Granite Man was conscious of more stings from each hit, more than a simple hit should have. Manzetti actually chuckled through his mouth guard as he launched punch after punch.

Dr Shadows increased the speed of his back pedaling so that the brawler was forced to speed up his advance. Then suddenly, the Grey Goliath ducked and slammed a hard right into Manzetti’s breadbasket, following it with an upper cut that rattled the thug’s teeth.

The audience exploded into pandemonium as The Mauler staggered back a step. Dr. Shadows moved to follow up, but the brute recovered almost immediately and got his guard back up.

Then the fight began in earnest. The rest of the second round was a punch for punch battle with neither man giving much nor gaining an advantage. When the bell sounded, both moved gratefully to their corners.

“There’s something wrong,” Dr. Shadows said when he collapsed onto his corner stool.

Whaddaya mean?” Slugger asked as he towed the boxer down. “You’re holding your own with dat palooka.”

Hoon busied himself with the styptic pencil on the abrasions where the mauler

had struck glancing blows.

“No,” the pale adventurer said, “It’s hurting more than it should when he tags me; like my skin was suddenly sensitive.” He took a sip of water and spit it into the bucket. “And he’s too confident; like he knows he has an edge.”

“These bruises and scraps are odd, Kuk Sa Nim,” Hoon said, “but I can not say how.” It visibly bothered the big Korean that he did not have an answer for his friend.

“In any case,” Dr. Shadows said, “Only one round to go.”

Then the bell called the gladiators once more to battle.

This time the Mauler was cautious, the fury in his gaze undiminished, but his training in ring science overriding the baser impulse. It was the Grey Goliath’s turn to press the fight. He attacked with a combination of punches that were so swift and accurate that Manzetti was forced to back pedal.

Once again the crowd roared its approval as Dr. Shadows took the fight to the Mauler. The bruiser, however, retaliated with his own driving combinations, striking back with a fury that Dr. Shadows barely dodged. The frenetic assault landed no major blows, but one of the Mauler’s blows glanced off the Granite Man’s forehead.

A moment later Dr. Shadows became aware of the burning sweat that dripped into his eyes. He shook his head to clear the liquid, but the burning got worse.

The Mauler took advantage of the seemingly dazed Dr. Shadows and slipped an overhand right through. The glove hit the Granite Man in his right eye socket.

The spike in the pain level from the acid feeling of the sweat was instantaneous. Manzetti gave a deep chuckle and pressed the attack even harder. All the Granite Man could do was cover up.

‘He has something on his glove,’ Dr. Shadows thought. He remembered Manzetti’s statement *‘Real man needs spicy foods’* and in a flash he knew what he was dealing with: Slugger had told him once of an old Mexican boxer’s ploy that involved painting the glove with the juice crushed from very hot peppers and letting it dry in the sun. This made sure it had no smell or tell tale signs. It was the sweat of the victim that activated it!

All these thoughts happened as the Mauler slammed five more body blows into the

helpless Dr. Shadows side. The burning in his eyes completely blinded him, so the Grey Goliath worked desperately to keep out of Manzetti's reach.

The Mauler helped for all the wrong reasons, backing off his furious assault to enjoy his opponent's discomfort. His blows, while still telling, were not delivering pile driver force anymore as if to prolong Dr. Shadows' agony. It gave the Granite Man time to think.

'I don't like a cheater,' he thought with pique. *'And I will not lose to one.'* It was as if some inner well of energy opened within Dr. Shadows, a floodgate releasing renewed determination.

The Salsa master in Korea called it Ki, the inner power that made so many of their ancient techniques so effective. A Yankee trader would call it pure stubbornness.

Dr. Shadows kept his eyes tightly shut and blocked the agony of the mucus membranes around his eyes from him with a tremendous force of will. He tried to listen for the rasped breath of the Mauler, but all he could hear was his own beating heart and the confusing yells of the crowd. Abruptly, the Grey Warrior seemed to zero in on the Mauler and advanced on him with a flurry of accurate punches that made Manzetti back pedal once more.

When the amazed Manzetti realized the fight wasn't won yet, he sidestepped the Grey Gladiator's rush and caught Dr. Shadows with a glancing blow on his left shoulder.

This stopped the Granite Man in his tracks and he almost dropped to one knee. At the last second he pivoted his body and rose from the canvas, launching an upper cut that almost literally came from the ground.

The punch slipped between the startled Mauler's gloves and connected with his chin with a sound like the report of a gunshot. Manzetti left the canvas as if catapulted backward, went over the top rope and landed on the timekeeper's table, out cold.

The crowd roared this time with force enough to shake the building like a minor earthquake.

When Hoon had flushed Dr. Shadows' eyes with clean water, the Granite Man was able to see two burly ambulance attendants struggling to put the still unconscious Manzetti on a stretcher.

“If you was blind,” Slugger asked, “how’d you know where he was; you couldn’t a heard him over the noise of this joint.”

Dr. Shadows tapped his nose. “If there’s one thing living in Korea had taught me was the smell of garlic. He positively reeked of it.”

Hank laughed and Hoon, not sure if he quite agreed, nodded at the same time.

“Just goes to prove what I always said about Manzetti,” Slugger noted, “His boxing stinks!”

The End

B



The Gift Of Song

A story of Altiva



Lunit came to an abrupt halt in the center of the crystalsmith's booth, surrounded by rainbows. After the crush of the festival crowd the silence and emptiness of the booth all but overwhelmed her. The prism sunlight, refracted through the crystal goblets, bowls, statues and tools on the shelves, cast a net of colour around her so that fly-like, she stood transfixed.

She clenched her fists to fight the eerie chill she had felt on entering the canvas booth and took a measured breath to hold down her fear. Then she turned in search of the proprietor and almost collided with him.

"May I assist you, good gentile?" the little man said in a voice that rang crisply off the faceted gems around them. His head was bald, his features sharp as carved agate. They could have belonged to a man of either thirty or sixty. "I seek a master of the crystalcraft," she said in a carefully controlled and pleasing voice, "for I seek a special gift."

The crystalsmith laughed like shattered glass. "I only make the special." He gestured with a hand that reminded Lunit of a spider. "Many enter my humble stall, but few can meet my standards." His smile revealed several crystal teeth among his real ones and did little to put the woman at ease.

'Why did I choose this booth over all the others,' Lunit asked herself. She had finished her song set at the tavern early in the day flushed with the joy of performance and come wandering to the fairgrounds pursuing an intangible whim. When she had seen the blue pavilion that was the crystal shop she knew at once what she had been looking for, what half-remembered dream she was pursuing. Yet she felt-"I was drawn here."

Lunit brushed a lock of silk-fine hair aside, tucking it under the broad brimmed straw hat she wore, while she fought back a of premonition. All the childhood tales of Crystalsmiths and Warp wizards came back to her; weavers of the fantastic whose art was as mysterious as it was frightening. She looked again at the translucent beauty around her, aware that the objects in the stall were not merely carved gems, but were living crystal grown into their present forms with meticulous care. Their harmonic

properties, shapes and functions were all calculated and planned to to serve the smithy's purpose; and the purpose of the smith's client.

"Smith," she began in as composed a tone as she could, her superb voice modulating out most of her excitement and apprehension. "There is a man I know—"

"A lover?" he interrupted.

"Yes."

"Then you need no charm to make him notice you." The Smith mated the spiders at the ends of his arms and rested his chin on his knuckles. "Heh, heh," he chimed. "Perhaps you wish one to keep him?"

"No," she stamped her foot with gentle impatience. "It is not to get him, or keep him, nor deceive him, nor entrance him with beauty I do not have." The stray lock of hair and some of its fellows escaped from her hat to punctuate her statement. "I wish you to make a special gift for this man."

"A special gift," the Smith whispered to himself, "for a special man?"

"Yes," she said quietly, "a special man. He was a Priest-Singer of the Kova once, long before I knew him-" She suddenly found the refractive qualities of the smith's eyes too much to face so she turned to gaze into an angular goblet. "But a bandit's knife ended that. He can only speak in a hoarse whisper now and is a Priest-Writer and a crystal-swordsman. It is because of his crystalsword that I know something of what you can do."

"Something, eh?" The smith chortled. "And what is that?"

"I know you can grow crystals that heal, that mind touch, that foresee tomorrow and more. That is why I think you can grow the gift I wish to give him."

She found herself confronted by her own image in the goblet, and with a performer's eye considered it. She was a broad shouldered, medium height woman who had seen almost thirty summers and despite her years as an indentured prostitute to pay off family debts, still—had the glow of a maiden. The socket of her left eye was stained sky-blue in an inverted teardrop design that marked her as Eretrian merchant class by birth and offset her cherubic features with a perpetual shadow. 'It is my freckles that make me seem so unspoiled,' she thought incongruously. 'It is a lie I shall be glad off in

a few years.'

"And what is this gift you are so certain I can grow?" the smith's voice startled Lunit from her self examination and focused her on her purpose.

"His voice." She spoke flatly to her own reflection, waiting tensely for his reply, afraid most that it would be mocking laughter. "I wish you to grow a crystal that will restore his ability to sing."

"Oh—so, Hmmm!" He murmured behind her. She turned to find the smith bending over a display shelf, studying a prismatic necklace. "There is a price, Singer," he said in a solemn tone, "a heavy price for you I should think."

"I have coinage, Master Smith," she said trying not to be seduced by the simple elegance of the string of jewels he held up. "And I will give my word-bond that I shall make sufficient more at this festival or else indenture myself to insure your fee."

"Heh-heh-" he cackled. "A high payment to be sure, but not high enough. No coinage of mint will buy back a voice, girl—it is a gift of the gods."

"Then what will buy it?" She asked, drawing herself to her full height and thrusting her chest forward in anticipation of the usual 'high payment' that men asked for.

"You must pay in equal value," the smith hissed. "Bring me sufficient of his blood to grow a fine necklace like this for you—"

"But the gift is for him."

"And so it shall be, but you must wear it." The smith examined an imagined flaw in the string of crystal. "A necklace for you, a voice for him; you must give up your voice for him to sing again." He stared at her, fixing her in his gaze like a pin through a butterfly.

"My voice," she gasped, "But I—"

"That is the price." He held out his hand to silence her. "There can be no bargaining with the gods." He placed a surprisingly warm hand onto her arm, guided her out of the booth and left her with the words, "Return when you have his blood."

The sunlight of the lane was blinding and the noise and confusion of the festival deafening. She stood a moment, her mind reeling at the smith's words while around her the hocker's cried their wares and the visitors bustled past her.

She was carried along with the mass of the crowd, walking in a daze, her mind's eye frozen on the image of her face in the crystal necklace, stunned by what she had seen; the face of a child, afraid not of the darkness, but of the blinding light which would follow.

And the silence.

The terrible silence of a life without song....

Lunit had sung for as long as she could remember from the time at nine years old when she'd snuck away from temple school to sing for coins at the local tavern. It was as much a part of her life as breathing, yet she would give up her breath with less thought.

She remembered the long hours with the temple voice teacher (after the tavern incident her parents thought it advisable to have her taught song to hold her interest in temple school), the joy when she first sang the full scale and the Vindras Di song cycle.

The delirium when she mastered the intricate second and third scale and was permitted to sing the Gaddias ritual before the whole temple.

She smiled as she recalled the giggling terror when she first shattered a goblet as the finale of an aria. To even contemplate a life without song was...unthinkable.

When she became aware of her surroundings she found that the surge of the throng had carried her near the practice pits and the gaming area. Where 'He' would most likely be. She looked for him and in doing so felt her pulse quicken. She found him at the practice pits deep in the midst of a round-robin sword tournament.

The pits were wide circles cut into the ground with banked soil and a low fence all around. He was half way through the spiral of thirty pits, which meant that he had been fighting for most of the day, yet he was quiet and calm, apparently rested, awaiting the start of his next match.

Lunit stayed concealed amongst the crowd around the pit and watched him with new eyes, trying to analyze just why this man among all those she had known had so touched her that she would even contemplate the crystalsmith's hideous request.

He stood a muscular two meters tall with his black hair close cropped save for the warlock which hung down his back. His mustache and goatee were trimmed neatly and completed a frame to a sun-browned handsome face that was neither hard nor soft but capable of great degrees of either. His eyes, intense grey reflectors for his deepest thoughts, were focused into the sullen eyes of his opponent.

Then suddenly, without warning, Lunit's lover smiled. It was an inner motivated smile that revealed near perfect teeth, a myriad of laugh lines that softened his eyes from slate to twilight and the soul of a small boy who, when he enjoyed a moment, did so completely and without reserve.

"Ballox of Mephan, winner of ten bouts," the pit judge announced pointing to the opponent, "will now face Lord Eriq Shoutte of Umbria, winner of twelve bouts."

"Lord Eriq Shoutte." Lunit whispered her lover's name to herself, enjoying the sound of it. She reflected on the two years which had elapsed since they had first met. Since she had first sung for him and watched the pain in his eyes as he listened.

"There will be no strikes to face or groin," the judge announced. "Any excessive force will be dealt with harshly. All judgment are final. Is this understood?" Both men in the pit nodded their agreement and a general hubbub of betting began around the embankment.

The combatants were attired in short leather breech-clouts, tvek hide pants, and had thick leather collars to protect their necks. Ballox was wider, more massive and half a head shorter than Lord Shoutte but the priest seemed more at ease, with no hint of tension in his manner. In the center of Shoutte's chest was branded the triple inter-locked diamond symbol of the Kova, the Omphast which marked him as priest-singer, healer and warrior.

Each man held a curved two handed wooden sword in a relaxed grip by his side.

Ballox raised his silver painted sword into engarde with a ripple of muscle which spoke of raw, massive power. Shoutte raised his sword with the easy grace of a cat. His expression of one slightly distracted by a daydream, a strange half smile on his lips, his eyes seemingly unfocused.

'Eriq,' Lunit thought, 'how beautiful you are.' She remembered that strange

smile when that great cat body was poised above her at night and by the flicker of the candlelight she could see the sensual gleam in his eyes. She shuddered with both remembrance and anticipation.

'But is that reason enough to do what the crystalsmith asked?' She felt a melody of fear pass through her. 'Other men have made my belly shudder with heat and my skin tingle. Why are you so different?'

The pit judge extended his white staff horizontally between the heads of the two fighters so that they could rest their game swords on it. The dye impregnated sponge which ran the true edge of both weapons left marks on the staff just as it would mark each man an ugly purple should it touch him.

Concealed within the crowd, listening to the wagers assess her lover like a prized fighting animal, Lunit questioned the reality of the crystalsmith's words and the depths of her feeling for the Kovar priest. She searched her memory for the moment when so insane an idea as restoring Shoutte's lost voice to him had begun to grow within her. 'It was when he first told me how he had lost it,' she whispered picturing his face etched by firelight as he has spoken. 'When we had but known each other a moon cycle.'

"I was a Priest-Singer then," Shoutte said, "with the Voice and the control of a Priest-Singer. I could bid plants to bud more quickly or summon birds with a single note. I and my contract-wife Myrran and some dozen companions were camped in the forests of Belisle. As you know the words of the Kova must ever change to complete The Rythem, they are never written down; only sung so that they may change with each singing. It was my joy to sing the Truth Chants for Myrran that night," He said, his hoarse voice filled with emotion, "as I had each night for a year. But that night as I finished and leaned forward to kiss her we were set upon by forest bandits." He spoke the words, clearly in pain, but his eyes never once cried out for vengeance. Somewhere in his experience he burnt all but the ceremony of rancor from his heart.

"I fell almost immediately to this slash-" he cupped his throat in one hand as he continued," and Myrran was not far behind. All were killed save I who was left for

dead. Yet I survived to pyre those I loved, seek Myrran's father under whose care I grew Rythem-wand and then hunted each and every one of the bandits to aid in their transition to the next plane." His whisper was as calm and steady as if he had been repeating a recipe, but Lunit saw the look of utter defeat in his eyes when he ended the story with, "And I have not sung the Truth Chants since that night...nor shall I ever again."

"Begin the match!" The judge drew up the staff and as the sword points rose with it Ballox attacked. The shorter man tried to muscle his way to victory with a diagonal stroke intended to crush any parry and leave no strength in his opponent for a riposte.

Lord Shoutte, however, had anticipated the Mephan's attack and allowed his blade to be beaten aside, letting go his left hand grip. But he also stepped in so that his now trailing sword was behind him and inside the defense range of Ballox. Before the Mephan could react, Shoutte brought his own reversed sword up in a long slash across Ballox's wing muscle.

Then Shoutte reversed the direction of his stroke and caught Ballox across the right forearm with enough force to numb the arm and make him drop his weapon. It was over.

Ballox jumped away and stared up at the pit judge as if hoping the match had gone unobserved, but the judge held his staff aloft and proclaimed, "the winner of this bout is Lord Erique Shoutte of Umbria." There were applause and jeers from the crowd as a great deal of money changed hands around the circle.

Shoutte set down his game sword, steepled his hands in the diamond of the Kova prayer position and bowed to the judge and Ballox. He removed the leather collar to reveal the jagged white scar that slashed across his throat like a hideous necklace and massaged the sweat chaffed skin beneath. As he turned to take up his game sword and leave the pit he caught sight of Lunit amongst the crowd and his face came alive with joy. His eyes sparkled with an inner passion stronger than desire and he smiled. It was a smile that could melt a polar cap or change gloom and doubt to joy.

And it was a smile for her; Only for her.

It was at that moment that Lunit knew she would do almost anything to bring him

joy. A fugue of silence welled up in her and she felt her throat tighten in fear.

The losers in the crowd were jeering loudly now, commenting on Ballox lack of genitalia and obviously inferior genetic background. Shoutte ignored them, but the muscular Mephan, his pride already hurt by so quick a lose, became incensed and charged at Shoutte's back, swinging his mock sword with murderous intent.

"Erique, look out!" Lunit yelled, but her warning and Shoutte's reactive dodge aside were not fast enough. Ballox's sword grazed the priest's left shoulder with force enough to open the skin.

Shoutte continued moving to the side, but as his right leg took the weight of his body, his left shot out and broke the Mephan's knee. Ballox dropped immediately, all the fight gone out of him. The priest delivered a back kick to the fallen man's head and Ballox's screams of pain stopped abruptly.

Lunit tried to staunch the blood flow from the long scrape on Shoutte's shoulder muscle with her silk neck scarf, watching with eerie fascination as the blood turned the sky blue silk to dirty brown. She tried not to dwell on the crystalsmith's sanguine request. "Is the Mephan dead?" she asked, not daring to look into Shoutte's eyes lest her thoughts be betrayed on her face.

"He will wake up a cripple," Shoutte said in the hoarse whisper which was his full voice. "I would have bought the fool an ale for his efforts, he was good enough to force me into a wild risk to win. By the Rythem, what a waste." Lunit continued to fuss with the wound, which was deep and bled profusely. "Be at ease, my little waterbird," Shoutte continued. "We can tend to this scratch when we get home; I grow weary of these child's games."

"I am at ease, my Lord," Lunit said as she hid the blood soaked scarf in her belt pouch, her heart racing ahead of her thoughts. "But this scratch will require Ku'zn's sewing skills or it will not close properly. We had best make haste."

"A moment, please, good priest." The pit judge had come down the embankment to assess the damage. "I bear witness of your innocence in this," he said officially, "the festival wardens will however question you later. It should not mean much as long as this one-" he nudged the still form of Ballox with his staff, "-lives."

“He will,” Shoutte said with disgust; “And he will know the regret of the incomplete all his days.” Lunit also heard a tone of sadness in the priest's voice and watched his hand steal to his throat to touch the protruding scar. It made her suddenly aware of how heavy a blood-soaked scarf could be.

On the way out of the circle Shoutte stopped by the Overjudge's stall to retrieve a long narrow leather case which was sealed with the mark of the festival wardens. It contained Rythemwand, Shoutte's crystal sword. At the perimeter of the festival Shoutte had one of the wardens open the sealed case and then the priest, like a proud father, removed the sheathed blade to strap it to his back.

Normal weapons were forbidden on the faire grounds, but crystal weapons were recognized as a special class. The swords (or daggers) were grown in their owner's blood, attuned to their life force, and were in essence part of the owner. As hard, or harder

than steel the crystal blades shattered at the moment of their owner's death. Legend had it that the owner would die if the blade should shatter.

Shoutte spoke briefly to the wardens of what had occurred and then let Lunit half-shove half-carry him back to their wagon camp at a nearby inn. Mild shock from the blood loss and adrenalin fatigue made him a pliant package as Lunit and their traveling companion, Ku'zn, undressed him and put him to bed. Ku'zn, whose blue furred race were fierce warriors and sea farers, put her sail mending skills to good use on his shoulder.

“You should sleep, Erique,” Ku'zn said as she gathered up her needle kit. “If you don't you may make a mess of my fine work. I'd be very angry at that.” She smiled ferally to reveal her well developed canines.

“Upset the Z'n and dig your grave.” Shoutte quoted an old saying. “I will do as you suggest.” She bent to kiss his cheek and he playfully snapped at her.

“You are to rest.” Lunit said after shoeing Ku'zn with a grateful hug. “I have a few errands to run, still.” She carefully wrapped the bloody scarf, and all the muslin that had been used as bandages, in oil soaked paper and placed the tiny bundle in her belt pouch.

"Where did you go today," Shoutte asked as he settled his head onto a pillow. "I looked for you at the new hat seller's stall." He winced a bit as he tested his arm and pulled the covers over himself. A spring wind had come up and the tent wavered sinuously around them.

"Just stall gazing," Lunit said softly. "Even I get bored choosing hats occasionally."

Shoutte laughed his strange whispered laugh, quiet yet with all the strength of a Falstaffian bellow. "The day you are bored with hats the stars will melt." The laughter infected her and she sat on the bed next to him and hugged him.

The hug grew into a kiss and the kiss lingered. The familiar fire in her belly began again, and when his hand slipped to her breast the fire traveled downward to her groin.

'No,' she thought, 'I can't give into those feelings now, not before it is done. I must be cold so I can do this terrible thing.' She gently freed herself from his loving grasp and stood up.

"Later, Erique," she said aloud with a mock tone of indignation. "I've a million things to do before show time and you always take forever."

It was his turn for mock indignation and a laugh. "Well, we shall endeavor to change that, my good woman." She leaned over to kiss him on the cheek and danced away before he could grab her.

"We shall discuss that tonight, after you have rested." She said huskily, "In great detail!" She studied his smiling face with a calculating mind memorizing anew each line and shadow she knew so well and over each imposing the thought 'can I do this?'. Then she turned away before he noticed the effort it took for her to leave his comforting embrace. Before he saw how frightened she was.

Lunit made her way quickly through the festival to the crystalsmith's stall, looking neither right nor left for fear that

some distraction might blunt her purpose. The fear inside her was a stone that fought to slow her, but she formed an image of Shoutte's face in her mind and forced her steps forward until at last she stood in the center of the smith's stall. The stall was

empty, save for the hundred crystal ghosts that sparkled with the late afternoon light. Lunit tried to call out and found her voice caught in her throat so only a very unmusical-croak came forth. She tried again. "Ho, Smith?" she called.

"Here, Singer," A disembodied voice answered. Then she saw the smith's insect hand push through a drape at the back of the stall and motion her forward. "Come," his voice bid, "All is in readiness."

Lunit stepped through the hanging into a small tent which butted the stall and which was lit by the glow of three pure white glowgems. When the smith saw her expression of wonder at the purity of the translucent crystals he chuckled. "They are my only extravagance," he said with pride. "Three years to grow each and so many failures before the facets grew just so to hold the light and reflect it back for hours after the source is gone. My daughter would stare at them in greatest delight. I think perhaps there is not their like in all the world." He beamed brighter than his glowgems.

"They are magnificent," she murmured with awe. "Truly I can have no doubt of your ability now." The buxom read-head spoke more to convince herself than to compliment the crystal smith. "I have brought these rags with his blood on them," she continued holding up the soaked cloths "Is it enough?"

The smith took the offered package and 'ahmmed' non-committally as he examined its contents.

"Like to have more," he mumbled to himself after a time, "but we'll see." He turned away to a long table covered with crystalware in a confusing array of shapes and began to work.

Lunit watched with cold fascination while the smith soaked the cloth in first an amber liquid than a clear one. The clear liquid soon turned a ruddy brown which, once he removed the cloths, settled to the bottom.

"It will do," he said with satisfaction as he studied the beaker, "yes and nicely too. It is strong blood, as I should have remembered it to be." He drained off the clear liquid and collected the sludgy brown precipitate in a crystal goblet. Then he gathered a number of jars with various powders in them and arranged them around a shallow dish.

Lunit wrung her hands in anxious anticipation while she watched the smith work,

trying to deaden her mind's eye to images of her silent on a stage, unable to touch the audiences soul. Instead she filled her mind with a memory of Lord Shoutte beside her at night, murmuring in his sleep the words of Truth Chants he could no longer sing in the daylight. She remembered his body heat and his smile and she swallowed hard and threw her shoulders back in an effort not to cry out in fear.

Suddenly she was aware that the smith had stopped all movement and sound. The gnomish smith had turned to look at Lunit and his angular features were etched angles in the blue light as if he were one of his own creations. "The blood is all that remains," he said, so softly that she barely heard him, "but you must pour it.

It must be your hand which creates the gift, else the gods might be offended."

"I am ready to do what must be done." Her voice said, but her mind screamed 'Stop.' Her hand made no move.

The crystalmith held out the bloody goblet to her and with the greatest effort of will she raised her hand to grasp it, almost losing her grip when she felt the heat through the cool crystal, warm with life.

For a moment the only sound in her world was the splashing of the blood-mix into the powders and liquids already in the dish. To Lunit it sounded like a waterfall. Then the liquid in the dish began to foam and bubble, hissing like a thing alive.

Slowly, like thought solidifying, a crystal began to grow in the center of the dish. Its growth was astonishingly rapid and in minutes the shape of the jewel, which the smith said would be the center piece for a necklace, became clear; it was three four pointed shapes conjoined in a trinity. "An Omphast!" she exclaimed. It was the symbol of the Kova that Shoutte had branded on his chest. "Fitting is it not?" the smith said, "the symbol of change is the form this 'craft must take."

Lunit watched with the eyes of a frightened child as the gem grew to the size of a hen's egg before the smith raised it carefully from the dish with crystal tongs. He set it on a small pedestal, washed it down with pure water and then patted it dry.

"Just a little longer," the smith said in a distracted voice as he attached clamps to the triplicate jewel. "You will wear the necklace to bed this night and when you awaken it will be done. Your lover's voice will be his again

At last he set the tools aside and threaded a woven silk cord through the eyelets in the clamp. A string of carved crystal beads completed the necklace and the spell was begun.

“Done,” he said at last.

“Done,” she whispered in a voice filled with horror.

The trigem was warm in her hand, as warm as life.

“As long as you and this crystal are,” the smith said ushering her through the stall, “the priest's voice shall be; for you three are joined even as the gem.”

“But your payment?” She managed as he pushed her into the twilight of the lane. “I know this bargain is not real until you are paid.” All her years of trading in her own flesh had taught her more about the realities of business than any trader would like to know. She knew nothing was given without price.

The smith put a bony finger to his lips and shook his head.

“The debt was paid long before you became part of this transaction, Child of Song. I owe much to the lad who blooded Rythemwand.” She stared at him, confused and confounded by his statements. She tried to speak again, but he disappeared into the stall and was gone.

She collapsed against the side of the stall and sank to her knees. All her strength seemed to leave her and she cried with relief and fear until there were no more tears left. Until all that remained was the terrible weight of the tiny gem in her hand.

Then she rose, wiped the tears from her face, adjusted her absurd hat and walked back across the silent festival grounds to do her last show as a singer.

It was fully dark when Lunit arrived at the wagon camp and almost time for the song set she performed each night for the patrons of a nearby inn. Lord Shoutte, as always, was waiting to help her into her performance gown. She hid the necklace in her costume trunk by the bed, donning her performer's smile with her gown and reveled as she always did in the anticipatory excitement of pre-show insanity. And this time with a special excitement that bordered on horror.

“So many mysterious errands today,” Shoutte whispered in his cheerfully hoarse

voice. He favored his left arm as he helped her into the gown of violet and green and she could feel his fingers lingering on her naked back between moments when they were occupied with the fastenings. "It makes a man wonder," he added.

"That is good," she quipped, "it is a woman's joy and duty to fill men with wonder." He laughed and patted her on the rump to send her on stage. She made her ritual reply of tugging gently on his beard.

"Luck," he whispered as usual.

"Luck." she replied as usual, then stepped into the open space between some tables that served as stage, for what she knew would be her last time. Nothing would ever be as usual again.

That night she sang as she had never sung before, completely consumed by her need to sing. Each note was perfect, each chord vibrated with a clarity of pitch and tone that touched the soul of every hearing being in the house. Her love songs brought tears, her rousing ballads and drinking songs had a special urgency that sparked idiot laughter in even the gruff. And with each new song she peeled away a layer of her self, distilled from all her inner conflicts to its purest form, to lay at her audience's feet in monument to herself. And though her pain was supreme, so was her joy.

As she sang her last ballad, the love song of a dying warrior to a homeland he would never see again, she looked into the wings and watched Lord Shoutte watch her. His expression was the same she had seen on his face on so many nights, an indefinable sadness, a self absorbed distraction that could only be a mask for incredible pain. She imagined the pain and the silence, imagined what it would be like to hear him sing and to know she never could again and the void was more that she could fathom.

'How will I stand it?' she thought. 'How does he?' Then she heard the final thunderous applause that her singing would ever earn.

Lord Shoutte helped her off the stage, his strong arm wrapped around her shoulders as he whispered in awe, "Your voice soared like thought itself tonight; it was equal to your finest work."

Then he added, "Would that I could gift you with such beauty."

It was more than Lunit could bare. The red-haired woman collapsed in his arms

and it was minutes before she could manage to speak though her sobs, and then it was to say, "Please take me to bed and love me."

Her passion was part of the same symphony as her pain that night and he could only wonder and be grateful as they soared together. But at last passion and the need to be enraptured gave way to exhaustion and fatigue.

He lay asleep beside her, covered only with the fine film of perspiration that their love making had begotten, but she could not rest. Her fingers danced blindly along his skin in the darkness, assuring herself that he was real; that the unshadowed delight he gave her was real. "Goddess grant me strength," she murmured and reached for the latch to the trunk.

When his breathing was deep and even she fastened the necklace around her throat and waited for the silence of sleep to claim her for its own.

That sleep was filled with nightmares for Lunit. Dreams of crystal hangman's nooses, snakes of gems and screams for help in a world of the deaf. The oblivion of dreamless slumber was a long time coming.....

The first sound Lunit heard on awakening was laughter unlike any she had ever heard before. It had all the qualities of a child's unrestrained giggle, but its tone was deep and full and masculine. She knew without opening her eyes that it was Lord Shoutte.

She glowered in the sound of it, picturing in her mind's eye his smile. Then she remembered the price and her fingers touched the warm stone which hung at the pit of her throat, feeling it rise and fall with the cadence of her breathing like a thing alive.

'I will not let my shadows fall across the joy of this moment,' she decided and fluttered her eyes open. She was greeted by a sight so comical that she found herself suspended between tears and laughter. Lord Eriquet Shoutte, clad only in one of Lunit's old robes (which, aside from the absurdity of a feathered collar, was obscenely too short) was dancing up and down hysterically, tears of joy streaming down his face.

When he saw she was awake he struggled to suppress his laughter and speak. "Lunit, my little waterbird, my voice has returned. My very own voice!" His words rang

like crystal chimes, sharp, resonant and full voiced.

He raced across the tent and pulled her to her feet. "Hear it?" he asked. "My own voice, as it was before the attack. It is as if the wound had never been!" He swept her up into his arms and together they danced around the tent, he in his ludicrous robe and she wearing her necklace and a smile of delight. All the while he kept up a running monologue, delirious at the sound of his own voice.

I call out to Ku'zn to say hello and my voice was there, all of it!" Shoutte said, "She kept on walking by because she did not recognize my voice. My very own voice!"

Lunit settled down on the sleeping pallet out of breath as much from his crushing-ly strong arms as from laughing and was secretly pleased that he had not realized her laughter was the same whispered laughter that had once been his. She threw on an old shirt and prepared herself for the reaction which she knew would come.

Shoutte settled into a sustained giggle, his face locked into an idiot grin. "Have you no comment on this wonder?" he asked her.

"Or have you been struck mute as I have been struck giddy?"

"It is," she began haltingly in the hoarse whisper which would be her voice henceforth, "the most beautiful moment of my life to see and hear you so."

The joy on Shoutte's face froze as, with terrific and crystal clarity he realized her whispered voice was no jest. "Lunit, my love, your voice?" He stared into her unblinking eyes and then down at the necklace resting at the pit of her throat. When he looked again into her eyes there was a challenge there.

"My voice is as it is," She said in her still strange whisper.

"Not even Rythemwand can damage this stone, and though you bury it, or fling it into a fiery pit the necklace shall remain as it is also. And so shall your voice." She struck a defiant pose, hands on naked hips. "So enjoy it!" She hoped that her outward bravado was successful in masking her quaking heart. But she did think, '*What is done is done.*'

Shoutte could not help but smile at the image she presented, though there was pride as well as mirth in his look. "Oh so fierce and so loving, little bird," he said in his new/old deep voice which seemed to her so strange. He reached out a hand to touch her

cheek and she softened her posture to clutch the hand in hers.

"The price," he said with sadness, "is too high."

Lunit shook her head like a wicked schoolgirl. "It is paid in full." She said, "there is no forfeit to the payment."

He looked into her eyes for a full minute searching for falsehood till at last he knew she spoke the truth. But he smiled his own wicked smile, his mind made up to some decision and shook his head. He stood and removed the robe, placing it lovingly on her trunk. Then he went to his own collection of belongings and from them removed a sapphire blue ceremonial robe, which he donned.

"Sit, my love," he said, his voice musical already in its tone, "and I will sing a song of power for you; I will sing you a Truth Chant." And she did sit, reveling in the beauty and control of even his spoken word, of the absolute mastery it foretold.

And then his voice was all around her.

It seemed like she had waited for that song her whole life, as if each tone and note she had ever heard were gathered into one moment to pierce her and enter every nerve and fiber of her being. Warm arms embraced her soul and the power of his voice was within her.

'Would that I could sing with him,' she thought. And just before the music swallowed all conscious thought she realized that indeed, in her mind's ear she could accompany him. At that instant she realized what his expression had been as he watched her sing all those nights. "He was singing with me. If only I had known." Then she and the song and Lord Shoutte were one and the words filled her with power.

*What forest, my love, is
greener than the green
of your eyes?*

What ocean foam whiter

than the whiteness of your skin?

*What flame burns
brighter than my passion for
you, my Love?*

*No mountain soars that
my want cannot ascend,
No river flows whose water
my need cannot ford;*

*No desert so wide nor
hot that your cool breath
cannot reach me.*

*For in darkness
you are my light.*

*In daylight you are
My shade.*

*And when the silence
of my isolation presses in
around me, you are the song of
love which fills my heart with wonder.*

As the final note in his song of love sounded and with the absolute vocal control of a Priest-Singer, Lord Shoutte cast his voice into the tri-gem so that it gently shattered.

It rained a hundred tiny Omphasts onto Lunit's lap."I have sung my song for you," he said in his whispered voice, toned with joy, "so that now without guilt you may sing me a thousand more." Lunit of Eretria cried tears of joy and sorrow in her lover's arms while fragments of their love lay shimmering around them like a carpet of stars.

"Each song I sing, my loving lord," she said in her clear rich voice. "We shall sing together!"

The End





Intermission:
Ale Brothers



*The greater dark is almost here
The sound of battle dim
It matters not if't was us or them
Who in the end did win*

*For we who bleed our life away
Who gave all for our cause
Are waiting here for the beating wings
And grasping raven's claws*

*And moments gone
Those enemies who
Cursed and fought in earnest
Are now tangled limbs askew
Awaiting Hulda's furnace*

*For come this night in drinking halls
Above the storm wracked sky
We share a foaming horn of ale
We warriors that die.*



BUY WAR BONDS

Brought to
by-

B!



Agreement at Destiny Wells

A Josiah Silence, the Ghost Maker Adventure



“Come in, amigo, sit down, smile and talk of pleasant things,” The Rio Grande Kid said, a wide grin on his pock marked face, **“Or I will shoot you through the head.”**

The man standing in the door of the stage station was back-lit, his features a question mark except for his tall stature. The dry wind that whistled down from the valley walls washed around the broad shoulders of the stranger, sending wisps of dirt from the road into the rustic building.

The Rio Grande Kid made a broad welcoming motion with his pistol and the stranger stepped in through the door at the silent command. **“The gun, Senor—on the floor if you please.”**

The Stranger gingerly removed a Navy Colt from where it was tucked in his wide sash and placed it at his feet, nudging it across the rough planked floor toward the bandit. The Rio Grande Kid stooped with more grace than his form should have had and scooped up the weapon without ever taking his eyes off the stranger.

Once inside, the candlelight in the station revealed the stranger’s features to be rawboned and handsome, but with a darkness reflected in his downcast eyes. Those eyes were like chips of flint that cut sharply with each gaze. He wore an old confederate overcoat and with his wide brimmed gray hat, his impression was one of a statue of some long dead hero.

“And of what pleasant things should I speak, Rio Grande Kid?” The Grey stranger spoke in flawless Spanish, but his demeanor and clothes marked him as American. He seemed unperturbed by the pistol pointed at him.

“This ruffian wants to talk mostly about himself,” one of the four others who occupied the New Mexico country station said in Boston accented English. She was a woman past middle age dressed in a colorless dress and quilted jacket and clutched a worn leather bible to her as if it were a sick child. She had the earmarks of an old frontier hand. Her features were as drab as her mousy brown hair and with some untold sadness in the depths of her brown eyes. **“And most of it is horrid exaggeration.”**

The Rio Grande Kid laughed a deep roar of mirth that filled the main room of the tiny station like thunder. He had not been a ‘kid’ for quite some time and his skin

was the color of old ivory. His brows were thick and bushy and his fleshy mouth had a wide smile that exposed crooked teeth. "Is not a man to be proud of his life's work and all he has done?" The Mexican asked.

He wore indeterminate layers of clothes beneath criss-crossed bandoliers of bullets. A brown leather vest over a quilted jacket and at least two shirts made his true size hard to judge, but he had obviously not missed many meals in his life. He and the gray clothed arrival studied each other with the deliberation of stalking predators. The new arrival pulled a cigarillo from a coat pocket and lit it with a strike all match on the rough edge of a table nearby. He took a few puffs and smiled to show strong white teeth and a scar along his jaw line that went along his neck and disappeared beneath his coat collar. His smile and his smooth manner of movement reminded those watching of a great puma ready to pounce.

"The Rio Grande Kid has little need to sing his own song," the visitor said, "he has others to do that for him."

The bandit bristled like a wild boar.

"So I am known," he said with suspicion, "Perhaps you will tell me what the songs say?"

He gripped his pistol a little more tightly and used it to motion the gray man to take a seat. The tall man sat at a table where a Mexican peasant couple was huddled together fearfully. They were young, but what was visible of their drawn features spoke of a hard life. The wife kept her face turned away; her long hair all but hiding it.

"The Rio Grande Kid is famous," the gray man said, "or perhaps infamous is more correct, throughout all of Mexico and the southern states."

"So?" the bandit said, "tell this unworthy one more of this song."

"He is known to have been the dog of the Emperor in the Mountains near the border," the visitor continued, "Killing and stealing with his followers at the beck and call of the foreign leader on Mexico's throne."

"More a jackal than a dog," the last occupant of the room spat. He was an older man whose dignified bearing and soft vowels marked him as an old warrior and a gentleman from back 'east' in the antebellum south. His bearing was upright bordering on

rigid. He wore a pince-nez and a weather worn civilian coat in a manner that echoed a life in uniform.

“This esteemed one is not hearing happy things,” The Rio Grande Kid said. He maintained a jovial expression on his features, but his voice took on an edge.

“Jackal, dog, wolf,” the grey man said, “what does a single name matter? This brigand of legend burned and looted on the southern edges of the United States and the northern mountains of Mexico and became known for his savagery, for never retreating and, oddly for a bandit, never breaking his word.”

“Aha!” the bandit roared, “you see the truth is all in the tone of the telling!” He took a swig from a bottle of Tequila without taking his eyes from the group cowering before him.

“So why is it that the fury of the border now roams the wastes between Las Cruces and the mountains?”

The bandit shrugged his shoulders. “Life is ever changing,” he said philosophically, “I had a disagreement over a village I destroyed within sight of an American observer with the Emperor Maximilian’s agent—a very contrary Frenchman.”

“Aren’t most of them these days?” The grey man said. He gestured to a water pitcher on the bar and the ‘Kid’ nodded assent. The American stepped to the bar and took a cup to fill it. While he poured the liquid into the cup, he noticed the body of the stationmaster lying face down behind the bar. There was a bullet hole in the back of his head.

When the bandit saw the direction of the grey man’s gaze he shrugged again, “The station keeper was a stubborn man and would not listen to reason.” He said, “I am sure he was not part of my agreement.”

“Agreement?” the stranger asked. He sat down at a new table, alone, a little away from the other four.

“Yes,” The Rio Grande Kid said, “it is the reason I am here in this hovel of a pig sty; I have made an agreement to hold all here who come this day by sundown. I was told the one who hired me would then say who is to die.”

“Aha,” the grey man said in a gentle jibe at the bandit “and who hired you?”

“Aha,” the bandit said with no acknowledgment of the jibe. He took another swig from the bottle. “This I do not know.” He pulled a piece of paper from within the folds of his clothes. He waved it vaguely at the tall American. “This unworthy one received this letter (yes this bandit can read—he was in mission school when young) that says to come to this place and hold, without hurting the people who come here, and wait; then the one who sent this will tell me who is to die.” He pulled a second piece of paper out with more reverence. It was half a bank note of a high denomination torn carefully down the middle. “The letter says I will receive the other half when the death is done.”

The bandit rose and paced just out of reach of the prisoners. He watched them with cold eyes for any sign of resistance, delighting in their expressions of horror at his proximity.

“Don’t you think shooting the stationmaster might be construed as ‘hurting?’” The grey man said. His tone was calm but mildly scolding as one would talk to a child.

“But he did not come here,” The Rio Grande Kid said, “The station keeper was here already so the bargain has not been broken.” The certainty of his jailhouse logic was evident on his face when he stopped before the stranger. The Kid stayed a little further away from the American than he had from the others.

“And The Rio Grande Kid is known to always keep his bargains.” The grey man finished.

“Aha!” the brigand said, “So.” He stared at the angular features of the taller man, searching his memory. “This one knows you, Gringo.” He said, “How are you called?”

“My momma named me Josiah and my daddy’s name was Justin Silence.

“The one they call the Ghost Maker!” The Kid said with a breathless gasp. “The gunfighter who was tamed like a little kitten by The Rio Grande Kid! Aha!” He stepped further back from the tall man though his smile broadened. “This one’s fame will grow even more if you fall by my hand: the Rangers in Texas have a bounty on your head.” He raised his pistol to point the barrel between the American’s eyes.

“Was not your bargain to harm none until told who?” Silence spoke with no indication in his tone that having a gun pointed at him was unusual.

“So!” the brigand said, “yet the sun sleeps soon so perhaps you also.” The Rio Grande Kid brightened with the thought.

He took in the rest of the occupants with an expansive gesture. “These are all sheep to be fleeced as one wills,” he said, “but you are a fine wolf pelt for The Rio Grande Kid to hang from his ample belt.” He patted his broad waist and smiled jovially. “If you are not the one I am hired to kill, then when that thing is done I will take your head as well and it will be a happy day for my wallet.”

“I’ve had considerable success in keeping my head attached despite many attempts by the Yankees, the Mexicans and the Texicans.” Silence said with a hint of smile on his lips, “So you are welcome to try.”

“Aha!” The Rio Grande Kid said, “We will see.”

The shadows lengthened in the valley outside the rustic station as The Rio Grande Kid lectured the hostages at length about his ‘heroic’ and numerous exploits.

“The business of kidnapping along the border is alright with the Federales and Rangers arguing over who gets to arrest me,” he said, “as long as there is money to be had; then the ‘guest’ is freed.” His pockmarked features lit up at this sagely wisdom. “If not, it is a tiresome thing to have to leave the body in a public place as an example.”

“You cur! The Old Southerner stood bolt upright. “You talk about it as if killing a human being were just throwing away a cigar.”

“Sit down, old man,” The Rio Grande Kid said, “or I will stub you out like a cigar.”

“Now, now,” Silence said, rising to take a step forward. “Remember the terms of your agreement.”

The brigand swung the gun back to menace the Grey man. “I will do as I do,” he said, “and I will take your head in trade for this contract if I have to.” He called over his shoulder, “Sit down, old man.”

The gentleman stood where he was and even defiantly took his own step forward.

“The Rio Grande Kid has given you an order and does not care if he has to hurt you just a little bit!” The Mexican criminal said as he turned, “You will obey!” He aimed deliberately at the legs of the old man and began to squeeze the trigger.

Suddenly Josiah Silence moved. His motion was like quicksilver, almost faster than the eye could follow. By the time the Bandit perceived the movement, the Ghost Maker had launched a knife from his coat sleeve that struck the bandit in the wrist of his gun hand. The pistol flew from his grasp and clattered across the floor.

The Rio Grande Kid reached for his own belt knife, but again the grey man's speed foiled him, snatching the blade from the sheath and tossing it across the room in one smooth movement.

"What now, Ghost Maker," the bandit said in challenge, "Will you face The Rio Grande Kid as legend to legend then?"

"No," Silence said, "not me. My pain is deep—but not as deep as theirs."

The Bandit turned now to see that the other four had risen. The drab woman opened her bible to remove a pistol from it. The Southerner removed a sabre, broken five inches from the hilt from under his coat and the peasant couple each produced cheap homemade blades.

"What, these sheep?" said. "I am The Rio Grande Kid! I have killed hundreds, robbed thousands. I am unstoppable. Should I be afraid of a few sheep?"

"You should be afraid of the sheep you have turned into wolves," Silence said, "The General whose son you kidnapped and killed; the missionary whose school you burned in your youth after you assaulted her and killed her husband." The occupants of the station began to move slowly toward the brigand like nightmares alive.

The peasant wife's face was fully visible now, a hideous scar bisecting her left eye and dripping down her cheek the color of molten lead.

"Or me," Josiah Silence said, "whose wife was on a coach coming west to meet me after the war who, when the driver tried to run the horses from a bandit ambush, died when the coach went over a cliff. She lived, they say, for two days in the wreckage. A man might have climbed down that ravine to see if she could be helped. You—did not."

The Bandit stared at the approaching figures, uncomprehending that any could challenge his legend. He turned to look at the Grey American. "You are a devil to have challenged the legend that is The Rio Grande Kid and live!"

The scarred wife was the first to strike. She used the same dagger that The Rio Grande Kid had used to disfigure her and gut her baby, months ago when he destroyed her village in the south. Then the General plunged his son's broken sword into the man's back. Then the woman who had taught him to read the letter that had trapped him fired her husband's pistol once through the black heart of the bandit.

"I've been called worse than a devil," Silence said, "by much better than you."

After they finished with their empty revenge and justice was done, they dumped the carcass that had been The Rio Grande Kid in a shallow grave out back of the station. Before the earth was shoveled onto the memory of the beast, Josiah. Silence dropped in the other half of the bank note he had used as a lure for the bandit. After all, a gentleman always keeps to the terms of his agreements.

The End





ONE ESCAPE at a TIME



***"In life there are two things a man
cannot escape; himself and death. And death is by far the least
oppressive jailer. --Timothy Quentin Locke***

Joanna traced her fingers through *his* hair as he nibbled on her. She tried to focus on the lit candle beyond him but his tongue--*Oh his tongue*--kept her from concentrating. She kept squeezing her eyes shut because the colors seemed so bright despite the single candle's flame being the only illumination in the room. His hands cupped her apple-sized breasts, his supple hands, callused yet delicate, radiated heat.

His smell filled her nostrils: a man smell of soap, sweat and passion. And the sound of his breathing was the rhythm of an ocean surf rolling in upon her. It filled her senses like a summer rainstorm: wet heat that she feared she would drown in.

He seemed to know every secret part of her, every private spot that connected her body to her soul. He tasted her, tickled her. She scratched his back. She whimpered. He hummed and murmured arcane lovers words older than the earth itself. Words her soul knew when her mind refused to understand.

He caressed her body and her soul with the total of all he was, no part held back, no reservation nor distraction. His soul: her soul: Their soul.

She fought to stay above the maelstrom they had become; a sudden fear in her that she would be swallowed whole by the collision of her hopes and their desire. She pulled at his night black-hair, she growled at him and he growled back.

His arms suspended him above her like tree trunks that she clung to. She tried to stare into his grey eyes but the light of passion within them was almost too much for her. Then he lowered himself into her, touched her inner core 'til she was driven to distraction by the primal rhythm of his lust; until she was barely able to breath.....until she screamed!

Locke woke up screaming.

It was the rat nibbling at the rope again. It always was.

For a moment his breathing raced ahead of his reason and he was in the tunnels again. Then he was aware of a rustling next to him and he heard the girl's voice.

"Hey, Tim, are you alright?" He turned toward her. "You're sweating." She ran a hand along his forehead and the contact brought everything into sharp focus.

He was in his own bed, beneath his own sheets: not the tunnels. The rats were only—

"Memory" he whispered.

"What did you say? She asked. He looked at her, trying to remember her name. Joan? Joanne? He thought hard. He had picked her up in a bar on Irving. They had a late supper at Anthony's near Eighteenth then walked a block north to Locke's town house and his bed. She was an art student with wild red hair, pale freckled skin and classically shaped breasts that were just the right size. Joanna, was her name.

"I--I uh, I had a nightmare, Joanna," he said. His voice shook even after his body had stopped. "I'm sorry I woke you." He threw off the sheet and sat up reaching for his cigarettes on the nightstand.

"My ceremonial pack," he thought. He lit one, then offered one to the girl who was watching him intently.

"No thanks, she said. "Didn't I read-" She stopped herself when he shot a glance at her. "I just meant-" She stopped again and drew the covers tight about her.

"I usually don't," he said. He drew on the cigarette and stood. "The fan magazines were right. It's just that before a major escape that I—break training." He stood, staring at the moonlight that streamed in from the French windows, oblivious to the girl.

Standing naked, bathed by moonlight, Timothy Locke was almost beautiful. Joanna stared at him and realized for the first time how he could have risen from obscurity to national fame in less than six months. His presence was almost preternatural.

He stood a well proportioned tautly muscled two meters, his features chiseled and handsome framed by blue-black hair combed back from his forehead in a dramatic sweep. A single streak of white flared through the mane like the foam crest of a wave.

In his left ear lobe was a silver post earring. Physically he was striking but it was his cool grey eyes and the something deeper that they reflected that commanded notice. They were like the calm surface of a deep pool of water. There was vast turbulence just below, but the glassy surface only cast back altered reflections of the viewer.

Locke moved. He reached for a silk dressing gown flung near the foot of the canopied bed, the muscles beneath his alabaster skin rippling. The action startled Joanna who had become lost in his presence. He donned the robe and walked to the louvered doors, opening them to admit more moonlight.

'How could I have not known it was him,' she thought. She let her eyes linger on his back, drift down passed his narrow waist to how the robe hung teasingly over the muscular buttocks she remembered gripping with explosive passion. Joanna had let him pick her up because she thought he was intriguing. And he had been a good lover; considerate, passionate and inventive. She shuddered when her body remembered him poised above her, eyes aflame breath gasped, nostrils flaring like some wild animal she had momentarily captured with some magic spell.

But had she known that he was Timothy Locke, the spiritual descendant of Houdini, and the man who on next Monday was to risk his life suspended a quarter mile above the earth in a strait jacket—she would have stayed away. Maybe there was *too* much depth behind those eyes.

Locke reached his left hand above him and grasped the lintel of the door frame leaning forward onto the balcony and into the moonlight. The light glinted off the bracelet around his wrist. It was silver and fashioned into the form of a handcuff bracelet. He had said there was no key.

"Tim'?" Her voice was barely a whisper, "Can I ask you a question?" He turned his head to look at her and there was a warmth in his smile. It was almost apologetic.

"Sure. Joanna." He waited a moment, then turned back to stare out at Gramercy Park and watch the late Friday street—all but lifeless.

"Well, "she sat up straighter in the bed, "I don't want to pry, but why do you wear that handcuff?" She tried to avoid staring at him.

"Why?" His voice was distant. Joanna stared down at the bearskin rugs stretched

across the flagstone floor. An epee, fencers padded vest and wire mask reflected the moonlight.

She felt her chest tighten.

"Is it important for you to know?" He lit a match and the yellow flare gave him a carved-in-wood look. He flipped the used match out to the balcony, following it with his gaze.

There was movement in the park. An English setter, big for a city dog, was jumping and capering with its master at the edge of the park. Its brown coat glowed golden. From its neck to its master's wrist a silver chain scintillated in the lamplight. Locke felt her silence behind him.

"Is it important?" he asked again quietly. He looked at her. Joanna nodded. He turned back to the window.

"Alright," he said, "I'll tell you. But answer a question for me first."

She slid from beneath the sheets near the nightstand, picking up her glasses and watch as she did.

"If I can." The watch said two thirty.

"Why did you come back here with me?" He lit his third cigarette. Joanna stood and looked at herself in the inside window beyond the antique four poster. Her back was to Locke. It was like looking at a naked ghost. On the other side of the glass she could faintly glimpse the spiral staircase going down to Locke's second floor living room, and up to his work area. Behind her phantom-white temptress form she could see the fireplace, the crossed swords, the rose wood panels and Locke superimposed. She felt sandwiched between the two realities of his existence. It scared her.

"I don't really know," she said watching the false him in the glass. "Fascination? Or maybe I could see some of the hurt in your eyes, Tim, the kind of hurt that wouldn't let you hurt back." In the glass Locke nodded.

"Fair enough. But I'll have to start a long time ago to tell you about the cuff. Go back to Chu Lai before—when everything was hospital white or further back to the tunnels—all black pajamas and brown dirt."

He bit into his cigarette, spit it out and lit another. "I was drafted from my fathers

locksmith shop and somehow, despite my height ended up in that green and red mess, in a heavy combat zone. But we just tried to stay alive, and if one of the guys did 'buy the farm' we'd sit around in the bunkers and smoke ourselves back home. Funny thing; even then I knew somehow I would end up here, doing what I'm doing. It was as if it was all set out and I just had to make it happen."

Joanna moved away from the bed and crossed the room to the dresser. She picked up her bracelet and snapped it on. "Go ahead, Tim, you still haven't said why." She slipped her rings on her fingers.

Locke fixed his gaze out the window and his grip on the lintel tightened. "It was the tunnels," he said. His voice had a chilling quality to it, one that at once frightened Joanna and made her want to hold him close and tell him it was alright.

It was the voice of someone recalling a nightmare.

"A week before the U.S. pulled out, The Viet Cong overran our reconnaissance patrol and killed everyone, but me. Seven guys. My helmet saved me; it deflected the bullet. When I came around I was tied up and lying face down on the dirt." She could see his left arm shaking and she knew his knuckles were white. "I was never more scared in my life." Locke looked down at his cigarette pack and realized he had crushed it. He swallowed hard fighting down dark emotions. His cool, neutral voice frightened even him. It was as if he were at the bottom of a well and someone was whispering to him from the cruel sunlight.

"I thought I was blind and paralyzed at first and there was a damp closed-in smell all around me. I thought I was buried alive. I started to scream! Somebody kicked me in the ass so hard I saw red." He laughed until tears stained his cheeks.

Behind him the girl pulled on her t-shirt and reached for her jeans.

"I was never so glad for pain," he said. "Even pain is feeling. Then I realized I was blindfolded too. And I knew from the coffin smell that I was in one of Victor Charlie's tunnels. Did you ever see a picture of one of V.C.'s tunnels?" He paused only long enough to let a distant shiver through his form. "They're not dark like you imagine, because they have a system of periscope holes with mirrors that reflect in light. And they try to hide all the packed in human smells with incense; they burn punks along the

wall every twenty feet or so. The V. C. 's had been digging them for thirty years and we'd dropped four million tons of bombs on them. Some of those tunnels are miles long—whole cities."

She stood and donned her light jacket. She watched his back again studying the jumps and spasms of the corded muscle beneath the robe.

"That is where the cuff comes from," he said, "and the rats. That's what the nightmare was." The words tumbled out of him while he lay helpless at the bottom of the well listening. The dam had sprung a leak and it grew with pressure from within. "They moved us around a lot for the first two years, kept us disoriented, kept changing our groups up so we felt isolated. Finally we ended up in this one complex for along time."

"There was one guard who used to turn a big profit on rat races; real rat races. He would take one of us P.O.W and put the rat's food, a piece of meat or a bowl of rice, on our chests. We'd always be tied with our hands behind our back and we'd always be bare-chested. That's how I finally escaped. One of the rats got out its cage when no one was around and went for my ropes; the meat juice was still on them." Locke clutched at his chest and tightly shut his eyes. He could feel the irritation of the ropes again. *The warmth of the small body; the wetness of the snout.*

His stomach convulsed, "I wear the cuff because I have to know I can get out of it. That I can pick it and free myself from it any time. It eats at you like a hungry rat. Every elevator could be sealed. Every car is locked to keep you in. It's not exactly claustrophobia. It's the need to know I can get out--" Something circled his chest and held him. His eyes flew open and his body jerked. It was Joanna. whose arms were around him.

"Tim," she said, feeling his sudden start. "Cindy, my roommate, is expecting me, we're going to her sister's in Auburn but I can call her—" She fixed her eyes on his and tried to read an answer—

"-If you want me to stay? "

Locke's eyes refused to admit her to their depths, reflecting only her image.

"Thank you, Joanna," he said. "But I only have two days to do a lot before I have

to perform at the Trade Center." His voice stayed neutral and he stepped away from her, breaking her hold on him. "I have to test and check the equipment." He stood looking at her while she tried to read him.

"I left my number on the night table." She made a motion to leave.

"I remembered from before." He recited her number, letting his mouth soften into a smile. She smiled back.

"Use it, Timothy, " she said. He made no move for a farewell embrace. "I'll find my way out." She walked for the corridor, passed the bed and her thoughts went to the fact that there were, no doors or locks anywhere in the two floors she had seen. Half-way down the hall she turned to look back to where he still stood—framed by moonlight.

"Take care Monday, Tim. " She saw him nod and noted the half step his shadowed form took toward her. Then he halted almost as if a rope had jerked him back.

Locke turned to the window, lit up one of his crushed cigarettes and watched the English setter frolic at the end of its silver chain, enjoying its illusion of freedom. Joanna heard Locke sob quietly.

"One escape at a time,' she whispered to herself," one at a time, Tim." She waved goodbye to his back and hurried down the stairs.

The End



...PLAYING GAMES...



"Hurry, Thom, you'll miss the opening remarks!" Ezter yelled. "Ten minutes to show time!"

She was a short woman, with old style red hair hanging to her shoulders. She tended to be plump, but in a very pleasing way. She entered the living room holding a tray laden with benzi-sugar tabs and Oxifix. She carried the tray to the low table before the game console and set it down. Ezter settled herself down on one of the pillows to the left of the console and decided to get a head start on the Oxifix, breaking one of the capsules and inhaling the pure oxygen. The moment of headiness passed and she sat bolt upright with the sudden lucidity it induced. "Hurry!" she yelled again.

On Ezter's second yell Thom entered the room. He was a tall man of a twenty-year appearance (though by bio-clock nearly thirty three). His hair and features were dark and worn. He moved in short nervous jerks, plopping himself down on the opposite side of the game link-up from his con-sort. He began tapping his fingers against his leg.

"I thought you meditated?" She said to him.

"I did, Ez, but who can sit still tonight." She nodded, wrinkling her nose with freckled concentration. "Its show night!"

Ezter and Thom had prepared for the show for a whole month. They had tried to stump each other with the play at home ver-sion, mutating simple household flora and fauna. They had searched all the genetic variance charts and chromosome com-bination projections until the information was muttered in fitful dreams.

All too suddenly it was the third Tuesday of the month and the time was approaching seven thirty. The tri-vision was warmed up and running and the room lights had been adjusted to give the best details of the contestants.

Show time! The Tri-V cube faded out the abstract light pattern and the familiar bright green and white logo of the program jumped into the living room of their home.

The letters were a meter high and free-floating. They yelled "Genetic Mutation." Slowly the letters metamorphed until they said "Staring Jm Raz." Then they faded away, re-placed by the life size figure of the host. Jm Raz was dressed in a sporty tunic

of silver and black with his haircut in the latest block style. He held the couple mesmerized with his electric smile.

"Hi out there all you hermes and neuters, this is Jm Raz here with this month's addition of that great play at home game—Genetic Mutation, the game of Darwinian progression gone mad! Now before we get on with the show, we have to be sure that all good people out there who are playing tonight's edition for rating are properly tabulated and all lines are hooked up."

The game show host smiled and seemed to look directly at the couple seated on their pillow chairs. "We'll give you folks a test question on a simple yes or no basis. This will test your computer hook-up. Ready? Okay, here it is. Is Jm Raz the host of Genetic Mutation?" He made a comic mime and leaned back with his hands on his hips. A voice from somewhere in the tri-vision studio said: "You have thirty seconds to make a decision."

Thom turned to Ezter and frowned. She stared back at him with defiance in her blue eyes. She reached across and punched the yes button on her half of the console.

"Push the no to test it, Thom." She said. He pressed the button with reluctance, completing both their moves by flipping the lock switch that sent their answers to the Tri-V station. The answers flashed in the upper left of the Tri-cube where Jm Raz stood and Thom's answer was immediately X'd out in red.

"Maybe we should double tonight, Ez, maybe we're not ready to single-cast." Thom faced his consort of three years and ignored the smiling game show host who had begun to speak.

"You all know if your hook-ups are working properly, so now is the time to remove yourself from the circuit if there is any problems. None? Good. So here's how the game is played."

"Thom, stop it," she said, breaking another Oxifix capsule, "we need the rating single cast will give us if we're gonna get that bigger apartment."

"But hon-"

"As you know folks, we normally have one contestant seized at random from our studio audience and subjected to the genetic engineering of our staff. It's your job then

to pick out that contestant, having been shown a before picture."

"Don't 'oh hon' me! I'm sick of a fourth level apartment. I want to move up to Sky-top level. And we could do it too if you took gaming more seriously." She popped a benzi-sugar cube into her mouth and smiled at the sweet taste. "But all you ever do is worry about the error factor at that lousy air mask plant. To think I could have consorted with Dez-Tarat."

"But tonight folks we have a big surprise for you! A switch on the show that switched network genes first! We have obtained two native Orill'iods and instead of a member of our studio audience, one of the descendants of our first colony on Orillia, before we realized the genetic variance was so great from planetary forces. Your job folks will be to pick out just who was the human! Great fun, huh?'"

"Did you hear that Ez? You see, we shouldn't play this month, we're not ready. Let's just practice, with no link-up, like usual."

"Oh no you don't. Not this time," she decided, "I've had it with the class of people at this level. All they do all day is talk Tri-V or dream scan. Not one person I know here has been to Mars. They're degenerates! I'm getting to Sky-top level!" She lunged at the console before he could stop her and pressed the linkage button, twisting it to lock them in the game matrix.

Thom collapsed to his pillow in defeat. There was noth-ing more to be done. He had to play.

"Now remember folks, you have only this sixty second com-mercial to decide finally whether or not you're going to play with us tonight. A failure to play after matrix lock is an automatic loss. Be right back!" A commercial for one of the period shows, "Terrorist" flashed onto the screen, but Thom was still lost in thought and paid it no mind.

"How could you, Ezter? I do my best for you. I played a rated game last quarter for you." He tapped his fingers with growing savagery on his knee, and snatched one of the Oxifix, crushing it with one hand and inhaling.

"And that got us to fifth level. But that was double cast and you know that's not worth as much. And I still can't see the sky from this level."

He looked away from her, at the tri-cast and sighed. In the view cube a building in a mid-twentieth century style was exploding; concrete and human bodies flying everywhere. "The story of one man's fight against everybody else." The announcer was saying.

"We'll get a high enough rating to move all the way to Sky-top if we score right on this one." Ezter mumbled, sucking on a benzi-sugar and inhaling an Oxifix.

Thom pushed a button on the household computer with ex-aspiration. "Exobiology," he said, "Orillia information." The words 'not available' flashed across the information play-back. "Of course," he thought, "they would have blocked that back at the central terminal to increase the odds. If only I had spent more time on non-terrestrial forms instead of gene charts for earth species."

Jm Raz's now half sized form solidified in the Tri-V. Next to him was a crystal cage containing a pea green, vege-table looking being. It was as tall as the announcer and twice as wide. Only by careful observation could it be seen to have two legs and what vaguely resembled two arms. Thom and Ezter realized after a while that the growth they assumed at first to be leaves was actually bushy green hair.

"Careful," Thom thought, "don't assume." He fidgeted on his pillow. He thought about a cube or another Oxifix, but decided it would only make him over-aware, nervous. Heaven only knew he was jittery enough. The game show host's bust filled the transition cube. He smiled broadly and began his usual spiel. "Now then, folks, here is contestant number one. The statistics are being flashed now on your input monitors and you have five minutes of direct linkage to our studio monitors to perform all your analysis. Go!" The cube filled with the image of the vegetable thing and the monitor panels in front of Thom and Ezter came alive with two-D X-ray, N-ray and infrared images.

The couples worked in silence for most of the time, occasionally conferring to question an ambiguity or reveal a discovery. Ezter used only one Oxifix during the whole work period. Thom, sweating profusely, suppressed an urge to use the toilet.

Finally, the five minutes were up and Raz's smiling head filled the room floor to ceiling again. "Now wasn't that a hard one, eh? Well, we'll get on to the next one after

a rest period--what you folks call an advertisement, hah, hah! So we'll be right back after this commercial." His image faded and the words "Two minute commercial" appeared. They too faded--replaced by a commercial for one of the new cerebral stimulators that Ezter was always raving about. Thom found them a boor. "Who needs extra fantasies" he always said.

Thom raced out of the room to relieve himself, Ezter consumed the last of the benzi-sugar cubes and watched some of the commercial. It was a particularly erotic one she always loved to watch, but when they got to the Venusians colonist's fantasy involving the native fauna, she left for the apartment's service area to stock up on more Oxifix. This time she added a memory tablet and some meat pills. Thom liked meat pills, especially the pepper steak with onions. She sipped some water from the household allotment and scurried back into the living room.

Thom was already seated. "Here, hon," she said, "some steak." He took the pills from her and chewed them with considerable relish.

"Thank you. You know it always calms me down." She smiled at him, but the smile was cut short by the end of the commercial. The cube showed the image of the studio audience, seated in plush chairs, their wrist restraints having been unfastened. They were lucky, this month no contestant had been chosen from their ranks. But next month things would be different.

The audience faded and Jm Raz appeared in full figure. "Welcome back, folks. Rested? Good. Now it's time for contestant number two. You have five full minutes..." The image changed into a hunched over, vaguely reptilian creature, vivid in mottled purple. It also was humanoid, more or less. "Starting from now!"

Ezter and Thom launched into frantic activity. Density slicing, microscopic retina checks, heat distribution analysis and all the rest. When the time was up Thom slumped forward near the panel, breathing heavy. Ezter popped the last of her Oxifix and mopped her brow.

"I can't finish," Thom said, "I just can't take it." He pushed himself into a sitting position facing Ezter. "Why did you do it?"

"Oh stop complaining. You'll thank me, you'll see. You know how good I am at

this. Now get a drink of water before this commercial is over." He shook his head wearily, but rose to get the drink anyway. He needed it. He added scotch to the water just to buck him up a bit. He was just sipping the last of it with protracted joy when Ezter yelled, "It's on!" Which sent him racing back.

The third contestant was no more pleasant looking than the others had been. It was hairy and tall and very stupid looking but by all evidence it was the best prospect to have once been human. The scotch had not helped Thom's nerves much, and he made several errors in focus and calibration that lost valuable time.

When the five minutes were up Raz appeared in the cube. "That's it folks. All three of tonight's weirdoes!" The audience cheered and laughed with religious fervor. The host smiled even more broadly. "So here's where the big decision is made. Where we separate the men from--" (he chuckled) "the mutants." The audience laughter increased briefly. Raz sud-denly became very serious.

"You now have a free period of five minutes at the end of which a buzzer will sound. Thirty seconds after the buzzer all bets had better be in or you're counted as an automatic loser. Here's where you study those results and compare. Talk it over with your consort. Single casters remember you are independently scored so that if you both vote and win you each get a full unit of credit! Good luck!" He dissolved into a composite image showing all three specimens.

"Come on, Thom, stop sitting there sniveling. We have work to do." She glared at him for a second then turned to her console to use the time allotted. Thom shook his head, as if to clear it of cobwebs, and rose.

"It doesn't matter," he said, "it doesn't matter." He ambled to the service area and gulped down some of the scotch; straight. It did no good. His hands still shook.

"I've never been good at games, you know that, Ezter." He dropped heavily to his pillow.

"The retinal patterns on the lizard look good," Ezter was saying, "but that vegetable thing has a nice heat dis-tribution." She punched a new read out for the house comp. "But this! Honey, I've got it! Look at the projected bone structure on this monkey thing. That's our colonist." She turned to see him just staring at her. "Thom, snap

out of it, you look terrible. I have the answer." She pointed to the console and he followed her movement.

"You-you might be right." He said. He ran a quick N-ray scan and turned back to her smiling. "That hip joint is the only variation that could be trouble. It looks perfect." His smile faded. "But, it's so much to gamble."

"I'm voting for it." She said with finality and leaned over to punch the number three button on her panel. Once punched, the button turned yellow to signify it was not too late to change.

Suddenly the button turned orange as the thirty-second buzzer sounded.

"No," he yelled. "More time!" Thom frantically scanned the findings. "Alright, Ezter, we do it together." He leaned across to punch his number three button, but the pillow beneath him slipped and his hand over shot. By mis-take the number two button was pressed.

"No!" He screamed. He righted himself and bent to press the correct button, but both his and Ezter's choice turned a bright red. The game had ended.

Thom sat back and began to cry. "The wrong choice! I made the wrong choice! Ezter, what have you done to me?" His words were smeared by his anguish and the scotch.

"What have I done to you?" She put her hands on her hips indignantly. "Look at what you've done. We could have had two credit units, but you botched it."

On the tri-cube Jm Raz appeared in full figure. "High tension out there, huh, folks? Well, we're not gonna keep you waiting any longer." Ezter put out a hand to hush Thom and riveted her eyes to the set. He continued sobbing.

"Contestant number one," Raz said, "was--a native Orilliod! I hear all those groans out there." The set showed the studio audience. They all gave a collective 'ahhh' at the host's words.

"I told you, I told you." Ezter shouted. She jumped up and down beating her pillow. Thom just sobbed.

"Contestant number..." Raz held his pause while the Tri-V scanned over the remaining two. "...three is also a native Orilliod!" There were more groans from the

audience.

Ezter froze in mid jump.

"That means contestant number two is the descendant of the earth colonists folks! Number two is the correct answer!"

Ezter screamed. Thom lifted his head to look at her, bewildered.

"Two?" He said haltingly. "Two?"

"No, no NO!" She screamed. "It's not fair!!!"

She was still screaming and crying five minutes later when the studio audience collection team pushed in the front door and grabbed her.

"Thom, stop them. Help me!" The two androids had her clamped between them. Unable to struggle, they walked her slowly toward the door.

Thom was seated on one of the pillow chairs. In one hand he held an Oxifix capsule which, with deliberate care he broke and inhaled. "Sorry darling," he said, "If you game, you have to plan on loosing sometime." He looked at her and smiled. "See you next month on the Tri-V."

The End



Intermission:
Serial Killers



*The Scorpion, the Mask,
Doctor Satan, Fu Manchu,
So many villains,
Flash hardly knew what he had to do*

*Dale and Zarkov
Followed in line-
The spikes descending-
Is he in time?*

*Vile and wicked
Evil and cruel
Villains all learned it
At the very same school*

*But by chapter fifteen
The bad was all done
Gordon had saved them
Goodness had won-*

*If only full color
Could be black and white
We could smile in the
Daylight and
Sleep safe at nite.*



NAPE of the NECK



Vito Inazzi had always been sure death would come to him from behind. It was just as simple as that and because of that dread, Vito could not stand to have a door or window at his back. At first it was just doors proper, but then the annoyance grew into a dread of any opening that could be used as a door.

He could not tell when the slight annoyance first appeared, but it certainly was part of his world view as early as a child of six. He often woke up screaming and huddled against the secure comfort of a blank, door-less wall.

As he grew older, stories of Wild Bill Hickok's demise with his famous hand of aces and eights fueled Vito's phobia, because Hickok had carelessly set his chair up with his back to a door. It allowed him to excuse himself at restaurants.

"You never know when a gunslinger will come lookin' for me." He would joke as he slid into the booth to put the reassuring solidity of the wall behind him. It was a good laugh the first time anyone heard it, but he would fly into rages if his joking attempt to gain a wall at his back failed.

It became a course of habit to check doors and windows when he entered a room. Eventually, he made a point of choosing rooms without a view when he traveled, to keep uncomfortable moments to a minimum.

Somehow Vito lived a normal life despite his phobia. Some might say he became a cop right out of college because of it.. and, he was good at it.

"You've got nerves of steel, Vito Inazzi" Holly said as she adjusted his bow tie. "If I was going in front of all that police brass in the Top view Club I'd be shaking like a leaf." She was a delicate honey blond.

“I’d be pretty poor cop.” He said. He was almost movie star handsome, with the scar on his chin only adding to his mystique.

“You are certainly not that,” she said, “Policeman of the Year.

He had to smile because it was something. He was only eight years on the force, the last five street crime and undercover. He had never figured on anything other than putting his twenty in and retiring to a little one door windowless cabin upstate somewhere.

Then the mayor’s son had been kidnapped. Vito had been following up a routine lead and had stumbled across the hiding place of the dirt-bag who had the boy. In one of those rare and frightening split seconds of explosive action that can occur in an otherwise plodding and methodical police career, he had been forced to shoot it out the kidnapers. He had taken two bullets, but had saved the boy.

‘You know,’ she said, “after this you’ll be too famous to work undercover.”

Vito laughed. ‘I’m still not taking a desk job,’ he said, “but I’m kind of glad myself; now I can shave my head and be Kojak.”

She made a playful punch at him, then he caught her swing and pulled her into a long hard kiss.

“I better get upstairs for your big entrance,” she said when she recovered her breath.

He watched her go out the only door to the green room with a satisfied smile. To his right the elevator door that would carry him to the stage above was never out of his sight. The loudspeaker next to it droned on with the speeches above. Then he heard,

“And now ladies and gentlemen, the Officer of the Year, Vito Inazzi-”

He stepped into the elevator, one of those with a door at each end and shuddered. He rested his back against the wall, eyes darting to each side and took a deep breath. 'Relax,' he told himself, 'they just want to give you an award!'

After a moment the door to Vito's left slid open. He squared his shoulders and stepped out to the stage with a smile on his face.

Behind him the doors closed and the elevator slid back into the floor of the platform with a hum.

That's when the full impact of where he was struck Vito like a kick in the gut: there were windows on a three hundred and sixty degree sweep all around him. He was standing on a raised podium in the dead center of the room as the elevator disappeared into a hidden trap door behind him.

He had known it was a restaurant famed for its views of the city, but it never occurred to him what that would really mean.

He felt the room begin to spin and wasn't sure if the roaring in his ears was from the applause across the room or inside his head.

He barely heard the mayor say his name or felt the tug on his sleeve guiding him to the microphone.

All he was aware of was the tingling at the base of his skull, like a million ants crawling into his head and the windows all around him.

No comforting wall to put his back to.

Out of any of the windows were dozens of rooftops that a sniper might use, or

hundreds of windows whose dark maws might hide a gunman.

Vito felt himself sway. He grabbed the microphone for support.

'Control it,' Vito told himself, 'its okay. You can do this.'

He caught sight of Holly's smiling face. He tried to focus on her sweet eyes.

“Ladies and gentlemen, “ he began, “Mr. Mayor I don't—”

Then a sound behind him. It might have been a stifled cough or the scrape of a chair, but it was loud and sharp.

It was enough.

Vito yelled like the tormented in hell and spun, his hide away gun in his hand.

He squeezed off six quick shots amid the screams and pandemonium before a dozen shots from half as many guns slammed into his back.

And Death did indeed come to Vito Inazzi from behind.

The End



TEAM SNIPER



It would be a day for records to be set. In the bottom of the ninth, the score was four to three, two outs, one man on second base and five fatalities.

Joey Kokich was Team sniper for the New Brooklyn Patriots who were up at bat. The Toronto Marlins had finished their turn at bat with two more home runs and two patrons gunned down as they tried to storm the dugout.

This had been the most hotly contested world series since the Hiroshima Carps had defeated the Detroit general Motors back in 2046; there had been over twenty deaths then, with both team snipers using all six shots to down unruly fans by the eighth inning. It had left both teams undefended when at the top of the ninth the riot had broken out in the ‘no-med’ seats—the under bleachers where the poxers and terminals who were still mobile could fight their way.

The riot actually brought the bleachers crashing down at Hillary Clinton Field, delaying the game by hours while the dead and wounded were taken outside the stadium and burned. The flames from the massive bonfire had provided an eerie illumination as the final inning was played out much like a traditional ‘four bag’ match from ‘back in the day.’”

Joey had only been in second school then, but had watched the game on tri-v. He had been fascinated by the deft care with which “Whitey” Okura, the Hiroshima Carps’ Team Sniper had taken out two successive waves of field rushers in the second and fifth innings with only one bullet each time.

He had deduced, Joey learned with later study, who the ringleaders of each assault were and killed them with dum-dum head shots at exactly the right time psychologically to stop the ‘mob mentality’ in its tracks.

Each of the snipers’ six bullets unused were worth half a point. It was initially a rule to guard against excessive zeal on the marksman’s part but with the furor of the recent crowds the league was considering dropping the rule.

Even in Okura’s day no game sniper ever left a match with a bullet unfired.

It was Whitey Okura, in a way, who was responsible for Joey becoming a team sniper. After the ’46 series Joey had followed Whitey’s career and then the careers of

other team snipers, eventually shifting his interest from the playing team to the snipers altogether.

Joey's dissertation in university had been on, "The mass psychology and instability of sports obsessed individuals in group interactions." It had gotten some notice in circles he couldn't even have hoped for and resulted in an offer to join the Patriots farm team as a sniper. That was two years ago.

Joey had trained hard to become a master marksman and had become first sniper for the club by years end.

Now Joey, moving up to the Patriots as an alternate at the beginning of the season, had been put in as first sniper after the sixth game of the series when First Sniper Hammish McCloud had suffered a fatal heart attack.

Thus Joey became the youngest team sniper to shoot for a world league team in history and the only one without prior military experience.

"This is the big one, son, " Phil Owens , the general manager of the team , said to Joey when he informed him of his new position just before the game." We're three even with those northern-sons-of-snowbirds, Kokich, and this games gonna be hard. The Police are overwhelmed at the gates."

"Well maybe," Joey stammered," you'd better call up Earp or Dalton from the farm te-"

"No time," Owens said with a tone that made it clear to Joey that it had been discussed, "you were with Hammish every moment," Owens continued, "You know this mob; you know Hammish' game plan to manage the crowd; you're the man on the spot, Kokich. Are you up to it?"

That had stunned Joey. *Hadn't they thought him up to it when they hired him?*

Of course they had. It was not their confidence in him and his ability that was in doubt. It was his own inner voice, his own inner doubts that would determine if he could 'step up to the plate and swing' when the time came.

"Yes sir," Joey had said," I won't let Hammish or the team down."

The crowd was rowdy but controlled for the first few innings, and both Joey and Bolenko, the Team Sniper for the Marlins had only had to fire once apiece.

The sniper boxes on top of the scoreboard at Maple-leaf Stadium gave both riflemen an unobstructed view of the field and the stands.

The emotions ran high in the stands as both teams—historic rivals since the Marlins moved from Florida and beat the Patriots in the '50 series—fought hard.

The Federal Park Police, whose jurisdiction ended once the fans entered the stands, had a hard time keeping order in the corridors of the stadium. There was a shoot out at the beer and drug concession that left four dead at least six stabbings; so much for metal detectors.

The stands were not much better. The falling snow meant lots of heavy coats, blankets and heaters, which meant lots of places to hide weapons. Each sniper remained glued to their scopes in an attempt to anticipate trouble and be able to warn their team.

The seventh inning stretch arrived with a bang when a group of Brooklyn fans, upset that the Patriots were three runs behind stormed the laser barriers using reflective blankets and actually made it onto the field.

Bolenko had used two shots, one to take out the leader, running back in the pack to try and hide, and, in a masterstroke of strategy, one shot to wound the blanket holder.

When the holder fell the coherent light of the fence sliced through several of the hooligans and trapped half a dozen on the field where the park dogs made quick work of them.

Even Joey had to admit it was brilliantly played and he gave a quick grin to Bolenko when he caught the old pro's glance in a scope-free moment. Bolenko nodded an acceptance of the compliment and then both of them went back to work.

Going into the ninth inning Bolenko used his last shot on what turned out to be a harmless commercial runner—one of those deluded fools who make a pile of credits (paid provisionally in advance) to draw attention to themselves for a bit of Tri-v time.

This one, a pretty girl with an ample figure, ripped off her top to show her figure and the product logo painted on it.

Bolenko must have thought the girl had a bomb in the jacket she was throwing at the fence to spark a fire and draw focus; he put his bullet through the jacket into the

girl's head. She had been hawking toothpaste.

The Marlins made two homers in the ninth, putting them ahead four to three before they gave up the field to the Patriots.

Now, in the bottom of the ninth Joey was feeling the pressure.

And the crowd was feeling the excitement in excess; the Brooklyn fans, unrestrained and knowing they had no more to fear from the Marlin's sniper had begun the almost ritual destruction of the stadium seats. A number of fights had broken out as exaltation gave way to anarchy because they knew they had made the Marlins use up his ammo and negated any advantage the rifleman could have given his team. They felt proud.

All that remained was for their team to score two runs and victory was theirs.

The Marlin fans were another story.

There were four or five potential hot spots in the crowd; Joey could see the trigger moments getting ready to happen: in the north stands a group of naked college students, their bodies painted in the teams colors were huddled around a smuggled propane heater chanting "Murder for the Marlins!" with ever increasing fury. A group of Veterans from the U.S./Mexico war, their prosthetic limbs painted the Marlin's colors were proclaiming their "we survived" attitudes and down in the no-med bleachers the terminals, as ever, were ready to go, hoping for a quick death to help their team.

"What would you do, Hammish?" Joey whispered to the spectre of his former boss- "Which hot spot do I stop in hopes the third will be cowed log enough for us to win?"

Down on the field it was batter up again, a swing and a hit.

The crowd was getting noisy enough to be heard without amplification by Joey , the chant of "Murder for the Marlins" rising and falling like a storm surf.

The ball sailed log into the outfield as the runners raced around the bases. The Chant increased.

The no-meds were beginning to break up seats to use as weapons, always a bad sign.

"What to do?" Joey thought.

The outfielder made the catch and rocketed the ball toward home base as the runner on third headed in.

The no-meds started to surge at the fence, but Joey could see no clear leader.

The runner was tagged out and the catcher threw to second to stop the second runner.

It was a forgone conclusion now if the runner didn't make it in the game was over and the Marlins had won. If he did make it they would be going into overtime and it was anyone's guess.

The ball was caught but the runner dodged and headed for third.

The Vets were starting to rise in their seats and move.

"Come on, Joey," he yelled at himself, "make the call, fire the two bullets."

The vets. The no-meds. The college chanters. Which two to shoot?

The runner made it to third when the second base man over threw. The runner headed for home.

All at once Joey knew what to do, how he could change the whole complexion of the game. He aimed and fired at the propane heater the chanters were huddled around and the resultant explosion almost vaporized a portion of the stands.

Suddenly the no-meds and the vets stopped dead, frozen by a sudden unreasoning fear that the Patriots sniper had an explosive round left. In the stunned silence that followed the end to the chanting the runner making across the home plate untagged was almost an afterthought.

The Game was over and the new Brooklyn Patriots had won: 4 1/2 to three!

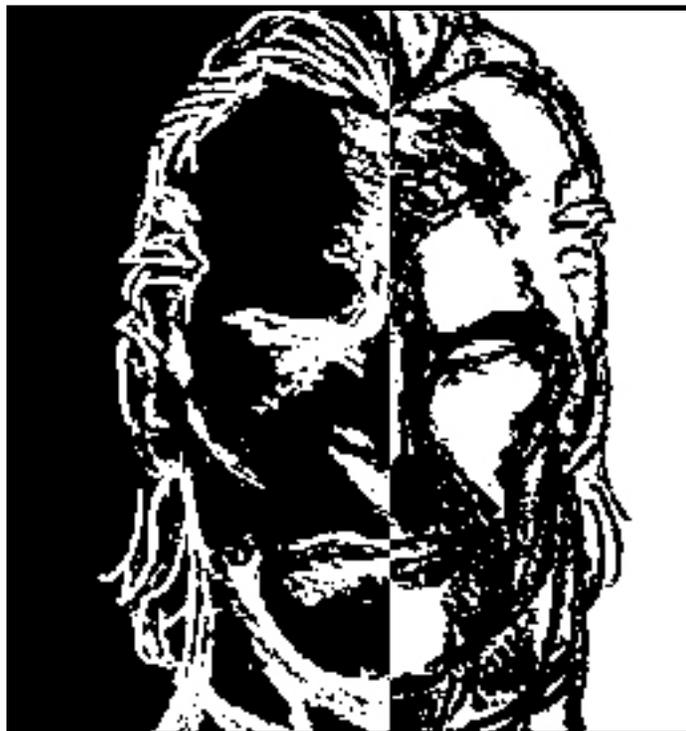
The very first time an unfired bullet from a team sniper 's gun gave his team the world series win. That indeed was a day for the record books!

The End



THE ACCOUNTING

A Doctor Shadows Adventure



The world trembled on the brink:

The Empire of Japan was on the rise when it invaded and annexed Manchuria in 1932 in a thinly veiled conquest. They proclaimed it the independent nation of Manchoukuo that had conveniently ‘asked’ for help from Japan. Every official of the new nation had a Japanese ‘advisor.’

In the frozen north of the new ‘country’, near the Siberian border, the Russian founded city of Harbin was a hotbed of insurgent anti-Japanese activity. An impotent League of Nations did nothing but appoint committees, while across the sea. America did its best to ignore the gathering storm clouds of war.....It was the fall.....the year, 1937...

A Salsa warrior is loyal to his country and his fellow warriors. Fearless in battle, never takes a life unnecessarily, and always—acts for justice!!

I. An Obligation Assumed

Anton Chadeaux PhD. who the press had dubbed Dr. Shadows, drove his grey roadster at dangerous speeds on the icy evening streets of Harbin City. He did not have time for caution. The woman’s voice on the phone had made that clear: ”Come now to room twenty-one at the Hotel Moderne or I will be killed.” She had said, and then the line went dead. Her English had been accented, possibly Japanese, and the fear in her voice was unmistakable.

That had been ten minutes ago.

Dr. Shadows pulled up to the elegant Hotel Moderne and leapt from the car almost before it rolled to the curb. He drew many curious stares as he strode across the lobby of the hotel toward the open cage elevator, but he was used to that. He stood six and a half feet tall and was handsome, with chiseled movie star features. This alone would have been enough to draw attention almost anywhere in the world, but it was his ashen grey skin and silver hair that drew most stares. They were a legacy of the herbal baths that had restored him to health after a terrible tragedy and combined to give him the aspect of having been carved from stone. That had given rise to his other nickname, The Granite Man.

The tall grey man knocked once on number twenty-one's door and was welcomed by a coarse male voice that said in Cantonese "Enter quietly, Ghost Healer, or the woman dies."

Inside the room, a burly Chinese sat in an overstuffed chair across the opulent sitting room of the suite. There was a beautiful middle-aged Japanese woman in full kimono with her arms bound behind her, seated on a footstool in front of him. The silvered steel of a knife blade was pressed against the pale flesh of her neck. Her skin was almost translucent, the 'alabaster' of the poets and the obscenely cold looking blade left a pink trail as the corpulent Chinese bandit dragged the tip across her throat. Dr. Shadows found it hard to keep his eyes off the blade and attempted to concentrate on the face of the desperate man wielding it. It was a battle-hardened face, with sadness in the cunning eyes that seemed out of place. "You will hear my words, Ghost Healer," the man said with the Cantonese transliteration of Dr. Shadows' name. "Tonight the Kuomintang supported irregulars will board the train after it leaves the station. They will kill Baron Yashita and all those with him during the attack on the train."

The November sunset slanted through the ornate windows of the suite to outline the bandit and his prisoner in liquid gold. The woman's eyes pleaded with the Granite Man, who eased the door closed behind himself. "Threatening this woman will have no effect on that attack," the American said. "It can have no-"

"This is Madame Yashita, wife of the Baron," the Chinese said, "and she will die

if I cannot end the life of that monster myself. Her blood is his blood and I will have the debt of blood paid in full.” His voice was steady, with a calmness that was chilling; it was the voice of a man already resigned to death. “You will bring Yashita to me, to me alone to kill with my own hands by dawn or this woman dies.”

“Yashita is a Japanese Secret Police official,” Dr. Shadows said, “How am I to bring him to you or stop a train full of irregular fighters from killing him? I am one man.”

“Ling Fu is a humble bandit,” the knife wielder said tapping his own broad chest, “but even this one knows of the Grey American who has reason to hate the Japanese.”

“Many people have reason to hate the Japanese.” Dr. Shadows observed.

“But you are trained by the Salsa monks of Korea,” the bandit said, “and can do many things others cannot; or so the stories tell.”

“You should not believe the stories you hear, Ling Fu,” Dr. Shadows said, “I am just a man like you.”

“Then as a man you will not want to see me kill this woman,” Ling Fu said, “I will spill the blood of a Yashita by dawn-hers or his; it is your choice. If you can not persuade him to come, she will die.”

“Ghost Healer,” the woman said, voice atremble yet with a firm resolve in her tone. “It is known you have no love for the Japanese people; I wish to incur no obligation from you; there is no shame in ignoring this bandit’s request.”

The Granite Man looked into the dark eyes of the woman and saw that she meant it, that there was a resignation in her to an inevitable death. It was that resignation more than anything said in the room that brought resolve in the American. “I have no problem with the people of Japan, Madame Yashita,” Dr. Shadows said, “It is General Tojo and his military ilk that gets my attention. And yes, I know your husband has done more than his share to further the occupation of Manchuria-”

“It was Baron Yashita who ordered my village of Wo Fu to be destroyed,” Ling Fu said, “and for that I will kill him myself.”

“If you hate him so,” Dr. Shadows said, “Why not let the irregulars kill him when they attack the train?”

“No I must see him die, I must hear his last breath. I knew I could not be sure of being first in the train. It is I who must collect this blood debt.” The bandit’s eyes glowed with the fire of an inner hate that his dead calm voice did not betray. “Yashita blood must wash my blade.”

“Then I will do my best to bring the baron to this room by dawn,” The Granite Man said. He looked like the statue of a war god come to life, his flinted eyes focused pinpoints of power. “But, Ling Fu, if you know anything about me you know that my promise is a thing of stone. You know what I can do; I promise you that if you hurt this woman, regardless of what happens, there is nowhere you can hide from me.”

“This unworthy one would expect no less,” the bandit smiled grimly, “but Ling Fu the bandit died when his family died in Wo Fu. Yashita will die either in the flesh or in his heart when this woman breathes her last breath.”

Dr. Shadows looked into the eyes of the hostage and saw something there beyond resignation, but he could not say what it was.

The bandit took the knife from the bound woman’s throat and waved it “When the sun rises there will be death in this room Ghost Healer, of this there is certainty.”

“There is only one certainty in your life from this point on,” Dr. Shadows said, “and that is me.” To the woman he said, “Take heart, Madame Yashita, I will be back, no harm will come to you.”

Once he was in the hall, the image of the woman’s eyes hovered before him and quickened his steps; it would be a race to make the train.

II.

Engine of Destruction

The Granite Man pulled the car up to the stone edifice of the Harbin Railway

Station which was the hub of the Manchurian, Chinese, Russian and Korean railway lines. He was conscious this time of the looks from the Japanese soldiers on guard outside the building. The dozen or so troops wore the uniform of the Provisional Manchoukou Regime like all the Gendarmerie and city police who were also Sons of the Rising Sun. It was a masquerade for the rest of the world; the citizens of Harbin and the rest of Manchuria had spent five years crushed beneath the Nipponese boot. A soldier stepped up to bar Dr. Shadows entrance with a gruff grunt and a gesture of his long rifle. The oriental came barely to the grey giant's chest, but his manner was as if he loomed over him. He obviously did not recognize the American adventurer and assumed he was one of the White Russian population that had settled the city originally.

“No enter without a pass!” The Japanese said in Russian. He made a second menacing gesture with his long rifle to back the tall American up.

Dr. Shadows resisted the urge to just push the smaller man aside and instead answered in Japanese. “I have a pass signed by the military governor.” He produced an excellent forgery made by his friend and associate Ki Nam Hoon that he carried whenever he went abroad in the city. It gave him free rein to conduct his private investigations.

The soldier saw his superior's signature and quickly stepped aside to let the tall occidental enter the station. If he was curious as to why a round-eye had a pass from a Japanese authority, he was well trained enough to not show it or dwell on it. Once inside the European style railway station, the Granite Man made his way to the ticket window and purchased a coach class open car seat on the train. He raced to the steps of the coach barely in time, leaping up as the bellow of steam spewed from the great engine and the conductor yelled “All Aboard!” in several languages.

“Well,” the tall American thought as the train picked up speed moving out of the city, “I am seated on a train headed for an ambush purposed for a kidnapping with no plan; just the thing for a Saturday night in Harbin.” He settled into a seat beside a White Russian officer who was reading the Rutor daily Russian paper. The rest of the open seating railway car was full of a mixed group of mostly single men-few families risked train travel with the many irregular attacks. There were White and Red Russians

studiously ignoring each other, going south for business, a few Chinese merchants who could still afford coach fare and two Koreans who had a thuggish appearance to them at the back of the car.

He did his best to draw no attention to himself, keeping his fedora pulled down low and slumping in his chair like a weary traveler. He kept an eye on the Koreans and considered what he knew of the train from his brief chance to survey it as he ran onboard.

The night train was a short one with an engine and coal car followed by a flat bed car with a mounted gun and troop contingent. Two public cars in turn followed this, the first of which Dr. Shadows sat in. A first class/sleeping coach followed with a dining car, and then two cargo and passenger baggage carriages. The train finished with a troop car, the private coach of the Baron and a caboose with more troops.

The train was away from the lights of the city now and picking up speed. He knew it would continue along the Sungari River plain, gaining speed before it came to foothills and went up a grade that meant it had to slow. He had to make his move now, because that would be the most likely place for an irregular attack.

The Granite Man rose and made his way back through the carriage as casually as possible. He made his way through the second public car and they followed as well. 'I don't have time for subtlety,' he thought, 'so I'll do it the hard and fast way.' Dr. Shadows exited the public car and donned his leather gloves for action.

III.

Cargo of Death

Dr. Shadows went through the sleeper coach without drawing any undue attention or encountering any opposition. When he made his way into the dining car, several of the train crew took notice of him and began to talk amongst themselves.

The baggage car proved to be locked though it was a weak one, and the grey giant was able to pick it quickly. The lock to the second boxcar proved as weak as the first and he was soon inside. This time the boxes were neatly stacked in shoulder high rows the length of the car. All the wooden crates were labeled as “Military Supplies for the Japanese Army.” He knew in fact they were drugs destined for the Japanese franchised opium dens of China.

Off to the right the Sungari River shone in the dappled starlight as the train rumbled along. Ahead were the foothills. He knew that once it slowed for the upgrade of the hills, the danger of the attack would be greatest.

Dr. Shadows hopped up on the safety rail of the next car that held the guard contingent of Japanese troops. The only way to get beyond the troop car to the private car of **Baron Yashita** was to go over the roof. He pulled himself to the roof of the coach and lay flat along the edge.

The top of the train was windswept and soot covered, and had he not been wearing gloves, the cold rails that ran along its length would have frozen his hands in moments. He pulled himself along the rails with any effort to be quiet forgotten in the need to move swiftly. Fortunately, the racket of the train itself covered any noise he might have made.

It took him a full fifteen agonizing minutes to make the other end of the troop coach. The two Japanese soldiers standing guard on the platform outside of **Baron Yashita's** coach were more concerned with staying warm than protecting the man inside the car. They were huddled together, heads down and backs to the troop coach. It was a simple matter for the **Granite Man** to launch himself down on them and send them into oblivion with two deadly blows. He acted with no regrets; he never considered occupying soldiers to be innocents.

Dr. Shadows tossed the bodies off the train and grabbed the handle on the private

coach door. 'Into the frying pan,' he thought, then turned the handle and entered.

IV. An Urgent Appeal

There were two occupants of the private coach, the Baron, and a bodyguard who stood beyond him. Dr. Shadows slipped quickly in and closed the door behind him. Baron Yashita gave lie to the fact that stereotypes did not exist, for he was the perfect cartoon image of a yellow menace. Short, bow legged and with two front teeth that extended past his thick lips at twisted angles. He was dressed in formal pinstriped pants and shirtsleeves with a 'happy coat' short kimono over the top. His hair was thinning with tints of grey at the temples and was combed over in a pathetic attempt to disguise his onset of baldness.

The diminutive size of the Baron was made more apparent by the huge Japanese who stood beside him, massive arms crossed in a western style greatcoat that barely contained him. His hair was worn long in the chonmage style that made it clear the giant was a Rikishi, a professional sumo. "Who are you?" the Baron asked in perfect unaccented English. "Not one of the ragged Russian irregulars, for certain; English or American perhaps?" His eyes were the break in the cartoon image, for they showed quick intelligence and a sharp mind inside the caricature.

"I am Anton Chadeaux, Baron Yashita-san," The Granite Man said. "And I must speak to you on a matter of great importance."

The little Asian stared at him for along moment, then smiled. "The one who spends so much time with the dog eater Koreans and the simple-minded Chinese call "The Ghost Healer?" How very quaint. I assume the guards are—"

Dr. Shadows made a dismissive gesture but kept his eyes locked with the Baron's. The Baron stepped aside slightly so the large bodyguard had a clear field of play, but at

the same time gave a hand gesture that that held the huge sumo at bay.

“You have been a thorn in the side of the of Japan for some time,” the Baron said, “What important matter could an American have to discuss with me ?”

“Your wife, Baron,” Dr. Shadows said, “has been taken prisoner by a Chinese partisan who wants you in exchange for her.”

“Mariko is a dutiful wife,” the Baron said, “she will die for me without complaint. I have value to the Emperor-she is a mere woman.”

The Baron gestured and the sumo stepped forward.

“Taro here is a Yokozuna of Sumo,” Yashita said, “ a champion. He will show you how a superior race disposes of mongrel annoyances.”

Dr. Shadows assessed his options as the massive wrestler shed his greatcoat for ease of movement. The man was only five foot ten, but easily three hundred and fifty pounds of compact muscle. He almost filled the space of the railway car. The Granite Man was taller than his opponent with a longer arm reach but outweighed by a hundred pounds.

“Okay, Big Boy,” the Granite Man said in as insulting a gutter Japanese as he could manage, “let’s play your patty cake games.”

The Japanese giant registered the insult making him more determined to win. The Sumo moved with astounding speed, coming out of his squat and charging at the Grey Goliath like a bulldozer. Dr. Shadows attempted to avoid the charge but the quicksilver wrestler was faster. The sumo collided chest to chest with the Granite Man and knocked him over.

Dimly, the Granite Man could see Baron Yahsita, torn between watching the spectacle of the fight and wanting to make it past the opponents to summon soldiers from the troop car. Dr. Shadows struggled to his feet. The Sumo made a grunt of dissatisfaction that ‘his toy’ could even stand and charged in again. This time the Granite Man met the charge head on, smashing his shoulder into the meat of the broader man’s chest. In a flash, the Sumo had his arms around the Granite Man’s middle and was squeezing him like a python. Dr. Shadows, his arms out flung above his head, grunted in agony as the wrestler compressed him in the massive arms.

“Crush him slowly, Taro,” the Baron said with great delight, “Let him contemplate the futility of opposing the will of the Emperor before he dies.”

V.

Hide and go Flee

Taro took great delight in tightening his grip slowly. He stared at the pale grey face of his victim with the narrow squinting eyes of a man who likes to hurt people. He increased the pressure with slow deliberate pressure waiting for the satisfying crack of the ribs he knew would come. He had executed prisoners before that way for the Baron and it thrilled him like nothing other in life.

The Baron Yashita stood fascinated by the scenario before him, sipping from a Saki cup in an apparently casual attitude. He made no move to summon help from the troop car. Instead, he stood enjoying the sight of the American having the life gradually crushed out of him.

Dr. Shadows however, had let the massive wrestler gain the grip he had. The Granite Man knew that no single blow he could deliver would make it through the layers of muscle and fat on the sumo. The only way was to risk a close in strategy. So he appeared to play the monster’s game, and despite the pain in his ribs, let the man grab him.

As soon as the sumo began to squeeze the Grey Goliath, Dr. Shadows focused his mind to a red-hot pinpoint. He utilized the intense concentration he had gained in his years of paralysis at the Salsa Monastery. He raised his arms, and with an explosive exhalation of air, drove the points of his elbows down with sledgehammer force into the collarbones of the Japanese.

The giant's collarbones snapped with an audible crack. The wrestler let out a scream and fell back, away from the Granite Man. Dr. Shadows used the moment of release to leap into the air and execute a thrusting front kick to the man's head which snapped it back. The giant dropped to the floor, dead with a broken neck. Baron Yashita actually dropped his Saki cup in shock when the sumo fell to the ground.

His mind had a hard time imagining that the giant could ever be overcome, especially by so unorthodox a means. Before he could react or cry out, the Granite Man sprinted across the room and knocked the official out with a simple old-fashioned right cross.

"Okay, Baron," Dr. Shadows said to the unconscious Japanese, "time to go save your 'dutiful wife.'" He was suddenly conscious that the train was slowing down and the rocking motion had ceased. "They've uncoupled the aft section of the train," he thought, "the attack will happen any time."

He quickly shouldered the unconscious Baron Yashita and ran to the door of the car. He unlocked it and was out on the platform by the time the first gunshots from up front sounded. He jumped to the ground and raced off into the undergrowth with his burden across his shoulders like a sack of potatoes.

Once the Granite Man made it far enough into the underbrush to remain unseen from the rail line, he dropped the Baron behind some rocks and sat down with a groan. His sides were on fire from the fight and the exertion of the run.

The spot he had settled into was a little way up a slight incline and gave him a full view up the tracks for several miles. Less than half a mile up the line the train ground to a complete halt and the irregulars came swarming out of the darkness with guns blazing.

The Japanese soldiers had been alerted by the slowing of the train cars and had just enough warning to mount a defense. They fought well, contrary to many accounts of battles with the irregulars, repulsing the first attack with massed fire. It was a hope-

less position, however, as the Russian and Chinese forces of the irregulars had good fire discipline and tactics. They held off after the first attack and began to work their way backward from the baggage cars.

Dr. Shadows tore strips from the kimono of the unconscious Baron to bind and gag the man. He then took off his tunic and improvised a binding for his own ribs. When he had re-donned his leather tunic, he set to deciding the next step. 'I have to get this lump of nobility to the city now,' he thought, 'and while he's light, he isn't light enough to carry all the way.'

The Granite Man was able to sneak down near the tracks and steal one of the picketed horses of the irregulars. He mounted the Russian's white stallion and rode back to Baron Yashita.

The kidnapped Japanese was awake and complaining when Dr. Shadows returned. The gag muffled his words, but it was pretty clear they were all obscene and pointed directly at the American and his ancestry.

"Nice to see you're all awake, Baron," Dr. Shadows said as he hefted the official and placed him face down across the withers of the horse. "I wouldn't want you to miss the ride back to the city to see your dutiful bride." With that the Granite man mounted and rode off toward Harbin, serenaded by the muffled curses of the Baron.

VI.

A Balanced Account

Meeting the dawn deadline would not have been a problem if Dr. Shadows could have ridden straight up Torgovaia Street to the Hotel Moderne, but he could not. Not with a kidnapped Japanese official on a stolen irregular horse. He had to take a circular route through the back streets, twice avoiding Japanese patrols. All the way the enraged Baron continued to curse with an endurance of anger that truly amazed the American. “You might want to save your breath to try and talk Ling Fu out of killing you,” Dr. Shadows said, “because nothing you have to say to me will change our destination.” The Baron’s answer was to stare daggers at his captor and begin cursing anew. . It was an hour to dawn when he went up the back stairs as fast as he could with his burden. He reached the floor of the hotel suite just as Baron Yashita came awake with a fresh string of curses.

“You can stop complaining in a minute, Baron,” Dr. Shadows said, “We’re almost at our destination.” He moved down the empty hallway and stood in front of number twenty-one.

He knocked on the door and waited.

“Enter, Ghost Healer,” Ling Fu’s voice called out with no sign of weariness, “We await you.”

The Granite Man eased the door open but dropped the Japanese prisoner to his feet in the hall. The American held the squirming man at arms length out in the hall while he slipped partway into the room. Inside he could see that the corpulent bandit was standing by a table of zakuskist, Russian hors d'oeuvre, picking at them with his knife. Madame Yashita was reclining, still bound, on the couch against the far wall.

“I have returned with the Baron Yashita,” Dr. Shadows said, “Now you must release the woman.” With the mention of her husband’s name, the woman roused herself from a half doze and sat upright. Her face held an expression of hope.

“My husband has come to rescue me?” she asked in Japanese.

“Not exactly, Madame Yashita,” the American said. “I had to appeal to his humanity.” She looked at him oddly, then with a puzzled expression.

Ling Fu stepped up to the woman and cut her bonds, but placed a hand on her

kimono. "Show me this monster," he said, " then she may leave."

The Granite Man pulled the Japanese nobleman into the room and removed his hood and gag. He immediately began cursing vehemently.

When his wife saw that he was bound and had been brought by force, a light went out in her that had sparked with the American's arrival.

"You stupid woman," Yashita said, "how could you allow me to be put in this position; me, the representative of our most noble Emperor, treated like a common chattel for your sake? Why did you not take your own life for the glory of the Motherland? Stupid cow, you have jeopardized the conquest of this pitiful land with your incompetence? How will the Emperor ever re-"

With a strangled cry the woman pulled away from Ling Fu's grasp, yanking the dagger from his belt sheath at the same time. She whirled and with a fury that should have been beyond the capability of her tiny body, flung herself across the room and plunged the blade repeatedly into the chest of her startled husband. As she did, the kimono slipped off her shoulders and the account the Baron had written on her body over the years, was clearly visible in the uncountable scars that crisscrossed her alabaster flesh.

The bandit made a move to stop the woman, but Dr. Shadows was across the room and stayed his hand.

"No, Ling," he said, "It was your knife that has ended his life. Let that be enough; her blood debt was greater than yours and the account is paid in full."

The End



Outro:

Ballad of a Wanderer



*Of Treasures many my quests have found
Adventure and danger as well,
But of certain nothing like the loss of love
Is a surer passage to hell*

*Of Companions many my fancy sought
And ale friends are easy to find
But sword brothers are as few
As the gems of kings
For blood is the strongest to bind*

*So as twilight comes
My reflections rule and
The songs of my youth echo strong
The days grow short,
The evenings cold and the nights unbearably
long*

*Yet of regrets I've but a thimblefull
And enemies fewer than that
And of hope my pockets still o'r flow with
some
For I land on my feet like a cat*

*The horizon still calls
And I answer its hail
And my steps are still purposed and free
So this wanderer has miles to
Travel yet
And a myriad of wonders to see!*

Author Bio-

A professional fight choreographer, stuntman and actor. He has four books with ePress Online: Death at Dragonthroat, Tales of a Warrior Priest, and Knight Errant: Death and Life at the Faire, and a nonfiction book on how to write action scenes for writers.

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