

GEMSTONE

**Little Sarfield: August 7. 1998**

**21:57**

The room was dark, despite the light the fire threw out. He sat hunched over his game, folded into the armchair and forgotten. His hat sat by the table, watching its owner lose, conferring with the umbrella that lay beside it. His dull grey eyes stared at the board, as if willing the next move to make itself known. Nothing changed.

On the board, the battle limped on, nearing an end. A single pale knight sat protecting his king, nearly overwhelmed by a sea of dark forces. Behind him, two castles tried to provide shelter for their king, but to no avail. The pale knight's dark opposite was waiting, ready to capture the king and end the game.

There was a knock on the door. He ignored it.

'There's no-one in,' whined Tim.

Walker kept knocking. Tori held herself closer to Tim, stepping under his up stretched arms and the shelter of his raincoat umbrella. The rain was hammering down now, and the house's gothic facade offered them no shelter. It glared down at them with shuttered eyes, its warming fires held deep within its heart, its doors firmly locked. For just a second, Tori had thought that it had been growling at them, but that had just been thunder.

And Walker kept knocking.

'Perhaps no-one lives here,' suggested Tori.

'We could try another house,' suggested Tim.

'Someone lives here,' snapped Walker, 'and there aren't any other houses.'

And Walker kept knocking.

Then, a shape appeared behind the frosted glass - small and dark. The door opened a fraction, and a small strangely dressed wire haired man stood glaring at them. Tori smiled disarmingly. Walker stopped knocking. Tim stood forward to take charge, and rain dropped onto Tori's exposed back.

'Hello, sorry to bother you but our car's broken down.'

'Leave,' said the strange little man.

'No,' Walker told him.

'We only want to use your phone,' said Tori.

There was a moment that passed - Tori felt it. The stranger's eyes barely connected with her or Tim: they passed fast over the small brunette

and her tall shaven-headed lover. But when they rested on Walker, they drank in every detail. His raven black hair, his piercing green eyes, his long rat-like face, even the dark leather he wore: the stranger saw them all. A light from somewhere caught his eyes, glinting yellow.

‘You’d better come in,’

‘That’s better!’

The stranger dropped himself back into his chair, looking like he hadn’t moved for centuries. All around them, ghost books stared at them from oak panelled book shelves. On the board, the battle remained frozen in time, waiting.

‘So, you play chess then?’ asked Tim.

‘I used to,’ the stranger replied, darkly. ‘My opponent’s dead now. I hope.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ he flustered.

‘What happened?’ Tori asked sympathetically.

The stranger looked up at her with two cold grey eyes. He looked like he was deciding how much he could tell her.

‘An old school friend,’ he said softly, ‘died recently. An infectious disease. Very infectious.’

‘At least he got to finish the game,’ Tori ventured, her eyes on the board. The stranger stared at her: ‘That is check mate, isn’t it?’

‘No,’ his eyes were on the board, ‘there has to be a way out.’

A look between Tori and her lover.

'Listen,' said Tim, 'if you'll just show us where the phone is, we'll get out of your hair.'

'I haven't got a telephone,' the stranger said. 'That's why I've come here. To get away.'

'Oh.'

'Well, do you know where the nearest phone is? We really need to get our car fixed.'

'How long have you known your friend?' the stranger asked Tori.

'Tim?' she answered, pulling herself closer to him. 'We've been going out for near three years now.'

'No. The other one.'

'Walker?' answered Tim. 'We've only just met him. We picked him up in Nottingham. Needed a lift to London. Why?'

'Because he's missing,' the stranger told them.

Their heads snapped around, to discover it was true. Walker had gone, without so much as a sound. Tim, ever practical, opened the door and looked around. There was no sign.

'Perhaps he's gone to find the bathroom?' suggested Tori.

'Perhaps,' said the stranger. His tone of voice suggested that he didn't hold out much hope.

'Great,' said Tim. 'What are we going to do now?'

The stranger stood, picking up his hat and umbrella. Dropping the hat onto his head, he said:

'I'll go and find him.'

He headed to the door, stopped as if remembering something. He turned back to Tori, solemn.

'Don't go outside,' he warned. 'This is a very old house: it's not safe to wander around in. She's never really liked strangers, and she's been acting very strangely recently. Probably my fault.'

And with that, he left, closing the door behind him.

'Oh good,' said Tori, and lowered herself into the stranger's chair.

A darkened corridor, much like any other: the requisite two walls, floor and ceiling, dotted with unopened doors, a thousand opportunities. Somewhere above, a dim light glows, but that isn't much to distinguish it from any other.

Then, something different: a short man, hat on head, umbrella in hand. This is something new.

'Chile?' he calls. 'I'm here. We can talk.'

There is, of course, no answer: this is, after all, merely another seemingly endless corridor, dimly lit, empty of life. The small man grumbles off down the corridor, mumbling to himself. A brief occurrence, but it did pass the time.

Another corridor, equally dimly lit, better populated. Let's watch. At first

it seems perfectly similar to any of the others, but a couple of seconds pass and a partnership appear. The tall man strode forward, his shaven head glinting in the dim light. Behind him followed a small brunette with dull brown eyes. Strangers.

‘He said we shouldn’t go wandering around,’ Tori reminded Tim.

‘He also said his house was acting strange. I don’t think he’s got his full complement of marbles.’

‘I don’t like the idea of creeping around a strange house.’

‘Look,’ Tim said, looking her in the eyes, ‘it’ll take us a couple of minutes to find Walker, and then we’ll get out of here. I don’t like this place any more than you do, but we can’t just leave him here without a ride.’

‘I suppose,’ Tori agreed reluctantly.

‘Good. Come on.’

Skulking down corridors, the man in the lead, the woman behind. They call something. A name. They’re searching for something, poking heads round corners, opening doors. Strangers. They’re the ones. Strangers. They won’t find it. They can’t have it. Strangers.

‘Walker?’ Tim called.

The gloom ahead was impenetrable. He could only just make out a corner, a bend in the corridor. There didn’t appear to be any doors. But was that something? A dark shadow just on the back wall? Perhaps . . .

‘What?’ asked Tori.

Tim strode ahead.

‘I think I see him. Walker?’

Five paces between him and the corner. Tori hurried her pace. Tim strode on, oblivious.

'Walker? It's us.'

Four paces. Something shifted behind the wall. Tori felt something in her shift. Three paces.

'We're getting out of here. You still want a ride?'

Two paces.

Then something happened. The shadows leapt out at Tim before he could even stop striding. He paced right into the thing's waiting grasp. Tori screamed. She managed to catch sight of claws, shredding through Tim's body as he screamed in pain. She saw glinting teeth as they sank into her lover's neck. She saw blood spurt.

Then she saw glowing yellow eyes as they looked up at her.

The human body is a remarkable thing. It has been centuries since there were any predators big enough or savage enough to pose a threat to it, yet still it retains its instincts. Adrenaline floods the body, the pupils expand, drinking in every detail of the danger. Power courses through the veins, and the brain makes a simple choice: fight, or flee.

'No,' breathed Tori, and fled.

'Chile?' the Doctor hissed.

There was no answer. He was growing tired of pacing around his own house looking for a stranger. He had more important things to be doing - he

had a game of chess to be getting on with.

‘Chile? I’m not looking for you any more. If you want me, here I am.’

He stopped dead, arms folded, eyes glaring into the gloom. The corridor was silent.

‘I haven’t got all day.’

Footsteps coming towards him. He grinned, unfolding his arms and resting on his umbrella. The footsteps were coming closer, fast. Chile was running. He must be eager.

A door burst open and Tori came tumbling through it, falling at the Doctor’s feet.

‘I thought I told you to stay put,’ he chided.

The fire in the drawing room blazed fiercely. The chess board sat in the corner, waiting. The door swung open, and the Doctor and his guest walked through it.

‘It killed Tim!’ Tori was shouting as she stepped through.

The Doctor remained impassive.

‘You brought it in with you.’

‘It’s going to kill us all,’ she said, falling into the chair.

The Doctor strode over to the fire. The flicking flames cast dark shadows in his eyes. For just a moment, Tori was more afraid of him than she was of the creature outside. His shadow covered the back wall: books with dusty spines disappeared into its darkness. He didn’t move from the fire as he

said:

‘No. It’s looking for me.’

Then, without warning, he crouched by the fire and thrust his hands into the dancing flames.

‘Jesus!’

He seemed to grope in the coals for a moment, then withdrew his hands: old, lined hands, not burnt in the slightest. Sitting in their rough grasp sat the biggest, greenest gemstone that Tori had ever seen in her life.

It was about the size of an ostrich egg, and roughly the same shape. It had obviously been cut at some point in its life, the sharp facets sending the firelight dancing and twisting in every direction. And the colour! It was the green of sunlit afternoons in the country, of childhood tree-houses, of lime jelly at a fifth birthday party. It was beautiful.

‘What is it?’ breathed Tori.

The Doctor rose, the green light dancing around his body.

‘It’s the emerald heart of Kotchi the Deathless, a gift from some grateful friends, and the creature outside wants it.’

‘What are you going to do?’ she asked.

The Doctor looked grim.

‘Give it to him.’

Walker stood in the corridor, his long leather trench coat wrapped tight around him. The corridor seemed to grow steadily dimmer. He sniffed. He

could just make out the scent of . . .

‘Chile,’ the Doctor said, stepping out of the shadows.

‘Hello, you,’ he replied.

Tori appeared.

‘Walker? You know him?’

Walker smiled, eyeing the gemstone in the Doctor’s hand.

‘We have old debts to settle.’

The Doctor took a step forward.

‘I would have paid you. There was no need to bring the heavies with you.’

‘The creature has nothing to do with me.’

‘And you expect me to believe that?’

‘This is an old house.’

Walker held out a hand for the crystal, but the Doctor stepped back, his finger against his lips.

‘What if I ask you to get rid of the creature first?’

Chile smiled a thin smile. Tori shivered, but the corridor wasn’t cold.

‘You’ve already had your boon for that payment,’ Chile smiled again, ‘unless you care to make another deal?’

‘No,’ the Doctor conceded, and tossed the crystal.

It sailed through the air quietly, twisting twice before Tori leapt up and snatched it away. Chile glared at her.

‘I haven’t had my boon yet,’ she snarled. ‘Kill that thing.’

Walker stepped forward menacingly. His hand were reaching towards  
Tori. The Doctor took a protective step towards Tori.

'I . . .' began Chile, and then all hell broke lose.

Without any warning, the creature appeared. The Doctor got a glimpse  
of a powerful feline body and fierce yellow eyes as it leapt through the air,  
knocking him aside. As he picked himself up, he saw it pounding towards Tori,  
its teeth bared.

'No!' he shouted, but it was too late.

A powerful claw flicked at her, catching her arm and sending her  
spinning into a wall. She slid down it, dazed and bleeding. The creature paid  
her no attention. Its eyes followed the gemstone as it flew out of Tori's hand  
and span through the air. Before it landed it was moving, sleek and fast.

The gemstone bounced once, before a hand shot down and grabbed it.

The creature paused, its slit eyes glaring at Chile. He glared right back  
at the dark feline form.

'This stone is mine by right,' Chile snarled. 'If you want it, you will have  
to take it from me.'

The creature pulled itself into a pouncing position. Chile glared at it.  
Beneath its dark fur, muscles rippled. Its pupils contracted, focusing on the  
one thing that stood between it and what it wanted. Its lip drew back, revealing  
sharp teeth. A low, inhuman growl came from deep in its throat. Chile growled  
right back.

The Doctor leapt in and grabbed the gemstone from Chile's hand.

'Doctor!' Tori screamed.

The creature looked up at him, confused.

'Fetch!' called the Doctor, and threw the crystal away.

The creature dived after it, scooping it up in its powerful jaws and leaping straight at a wall. The wall rippled, and the creature leapt through it into nothing.

The threat gone, the Doctor hurried over to Tori.

'Are you alright?'

'My hand's bleeding. I've hurt my back.'

'You'll be alright.'

'You owe me my payment,' snarled Chile, towering over the Time Lord.

The Doctor smiled disarmingly.

'I have paid you. In case you didn't notice, the creature stole your property. I suggest you take it up with it,' the Doctor paused, his hands stemming the flow of blood from Tori's damaged hand. 'It's already killed once, presumably because it thought it had found you. I'm sure it would love to see you again.'

'Payment is still due,' Chile said firmly.

The Doctor glared up at Chile. The Time Lord's eyes glowed a bright yellow, and he snarled a bestial growl at the man. Chile took a step back, surprised, and conceded:

'I'll return another time to collect.'

With that he turned around and hurried away, heading for the front door. Tori looked up at the Doctor, and said:

'What the hell is going on here?'

The Doctor looked grim.

'That,' he said, 'is exactly what I'd like to know. Come with me. I'll get your hand cleaned up and get you on your way.'

In the drawing room, the fire still burnt brightly, although there was no one there for it to warm. Yet.

Slowly, the far wall began to ripple, and the dark feline creature leapt through into the small room, the gemstone resting in its mouth. Its yellow eyes flicked cautiously around the room, before it paced over to the fire and dropped the gem back in. The gemstone disappeared into the dancing flames, as quickly as the creature dived back the way it came and vanished.

With the stone returned, the fire burned as the house settled, contented