

“Intruder”

Robby Reed turned the key and entered his home. All the lights were off, save for the porch light above him; his wife must still be at her mother’s home. As soon as the door had closed behind him, he turned on a lamp and stepped quickly over to the phone. His heart fell as low as it could go. There were still no new messages. He sighed, taking off his hat and coat and hanging them next to the door, which he then made sure he locked. It looked like he wouldn’t be sleeping much again. His tongue rasped against the roof of his mouth; maybe a glass of wine would ease his misery. He made his way to the kitchen and lifted his hand to turn on the light.

But his hand never made it there. His world went black, and his body slumped against the wall. A pair of arms caught him as he fell, and carried him back to the sofa in his living room. Gently he was laid on the sofa, sound asleep. The hands that caught him moved to his head, one on each side. Thumbs moved to his temples, fingers moved behind his ear, under his chin, to his throat. The digits glowed for a few minutes before leaving his head. The feet below the hands climbed the stairs to the upper floor. The first step creaked, but otherwise no sound was made.

The intruder opened the door. The door to Robby’s little daughter’s room. He made no effort to conceal his entry; the girl was already long gone. A quick glance about the room, and he made his way to a small chair by the window. From the chair he plucked a teddy bear, carefully as if not wanting to harm it. He reached about his neck and lifted an amulet over his head. On the string was a soul-crystal, which he gently pressed against the bear. His hands glowed again briefly. When he was done, the crystal glowed faintly as he set the bear back down exactly as it had been before.

He smiled. Everything was going according to plan. From the mind of the rabbit Being passed out on the sofa downstairs, he knew that the girl treasured that teddy bear. And from all the time it spent with her, residues of her excess soul energy had deposited on the bear. He now had his link to the girl.

He turned around and double-checked his work. On the floor was drawn, in chalk, a small magic circle. Once he was sure that he had used the correct runes in the correct places, he laid over them a map of the city of Old Saloth. Once again he double-checked himself; his current location on the map had to be in the center of the triangle created by the runes. Finally, on his hands and knees, he held the crystal over the center of the map and let it fall to the end of its string. Still glowing faintly, the crystal began to rock back and forth and around the map, like a pendulum swinging about its axis.

He said a quick prayer. If the pendulum stopped straight down at the center, it would mean very bad news. It almost killed him how much time this spell took to work. Finally, after several minutes, the pendulum was winding down. His heart sank. The pendulum was definitely stopping at the center.

He cursed in grief and rage. All this trouble for nothing. No, it couldn’t be true. He must have made a mistake. He triple-checked his magic circle, the runes, the position of the map, and set his pendulum in motion once again. He growled. Same results. In his disbelief, he brought his face closer, to the spot where the pendulum almost touched the floor. His heart leaped. The pendulum had not stopped dead-

center, but at a slight angle, pointing to the next street over. He was incredulous that she had been so close all along, but he had found her.

Downstairs, Robby stirred from his sleep. Someone was shaking him. Blearily, he opened his eyes. As the magic-induced haze lifted, his ears twitched violently and he pressed his back into the sofa. A jackal being stood before him, with yellow and black fur patterns that looked like flames where they met. Before he could speak, the jackal put a finger to his lips. He felt a strange calm wash over him. The jackal flashed a toothy grin and spoke.

"I know where your daughter is."

Cyrus hastily loaded his revolver. The skunk was in shock. How had they found him? This wasn't the first time he had kidnapped a child, and they had never even suspected him before. He spun the chamber and crawled over to the open window. He put his back to the wall and peeked outside.

The police had his home surrounded. Floodlights lit up his home and he heard a male speaking through a megaphone. They wanted him to give himself up? To come out with his hands in the air? Not a chance. He whipped quickly around the edge of the window, pointing his gun randomly as the lights blinded him.

The police ducked down as quickly as they could. But nothing happened. Slowly, some of them looked back up over the hoods of their cars. Cyrus was standing there, his body angled from behind the wall. His gun was still pointed, his eyes still winced in the bright light, but he made no movements. A strange pinkish aura surrounded him. They turned their heads as the door not far from him opened slowly. But no one came out.

The lieutenant moved first. He stood, starting to approach the door with his gun drawn. Cyrus was still just frozen there. A few others followed behind him as he entered the house. Three of them went to check on Cyrus. He heard voices coming from the back of the house. Two of them. One was soft and high-pitched. The girl? The other was louder, and much lower in pitch. He quietly approached the room. He heard a little girl sniffing. He whipped around the corner, gun pointed at Cyrus' apparent partner. But there was only the girl. A single dark gray feather floated to the ground next to the window.

After checking that the room was secure and there was no one outside the window, he turned to the girl. Tears were drying on her cheeks, but her long bunny ears were perked up. She clutched a teddy bear tightly to her chest. The lieutenant knelt down to her level and calmly spoke.

"Miss Reed?"

The girl nodded and wiped her tears off with one arm.

He continued. "Who was in here with you?"

A grin crept across the little girl's face, minus a few baby teeth. "The wingie-man!"

The Reed home was abuzz. Little Jessie was finally home. All four of her grandparents and even her uncle Joe had come to celebrate. Strawberry Kool-Aid flowed and there was mint chip ice cream for everyone.

Suddenly, the house fell silent as they realized there was a stranger among them. A jackal with yellow and black fur had appeared out of nowhere, and was helping himself to a glass of Kool-Aid. He wore nothing but a pair of blue jeans. Fortunately, Mr. Reed recognized him immediately. He shook the jackal's hand enthusiastically.

"Sir, I can't thank you enough!" Robby exclaimed, throwing a hug around the stranger, who awkwardly returned the favor.

After breaking the embrace, the jackal stepped back and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. He grinned sheepishly as he said, "Aw shucks, I was just doin' my adventurer thing."

Robby's eyes lit up. "An adventurer! I should have known. What is your name?"

The jackal gave a sly grin in return. "Aw, you already know who I am!"

Robby said nothing, a quizzical face his response.

Suddenly, all eyes went wide as the stranger... changed. Yellow fur became blue. Black fur became white. The colors moved around his body like a painting with a mind of its own. His tail became longer and fluffier. His ears became a bit smaller. And finally, a two pairs of gray- feathered wings appeared; one large pair from his back, and a small pair from his head.

Robby stepped back in shock. He *did* know this stranger: "The Saloth Streaker!!"

The jackal, now a fox, took another sip of Kool-Aid. "Actually, it's Ben. Benjamin Buran, under Jakobson." He frowned a bit and continued, "You know, that's not really even 'streaking'; I always wear a Speedo, at least."

Before her mother could stop her, little Jessie ran to him, shouting "Wingies!!" He squatted down and they hugged. She sat on his arm as he stood back up.

"Bet you never would've guessed I was an adventurer, huh?"

Robby finally snapped out of his stupor. "Well, uh... No, I guess I wouldn't... But why are you *here*?"

“Well, during my last ‘escapade’ here in Old Saloth...” he said, handing Jessie back over to her mother, who seemed only too eager to get her away from him, “I read about the kidnapping in the paper. I *had* to help.”

“I... yes, thank you for that, but I meant... why would you...” Mr. Reed trailed off, gesturing clumsily toward Ben’s head.

“Oh, you mean, because I’m a ‘Cubi?” Ben said as he looked up, pointing to his head-wings. He blew a raspberry and gestured dismissively. “You shouldn’t believe everything your *racist* authorities say,” he continued, with a forceful emphasis on “racist.” “Speaking of which, I should probably get going. Wouldn’t want them to think you’re friends with the ‘Saloth Streaker,’ *hmm?*”

Ben began to cast a spell, but broke it off to speak once more: “Oh hey, if you ever want to repay me, all you have to do is spread the good word, eh? Remember, ‘Cubi’ doesn’t have to equal ‘bad.’” And with that, there was a flash of light, and he was gone.

Another flash of light, and the little girl’s teddy bear appeared in her arms. She giggled.

Two pairs of gray wings made out of felt had been glued to the bear; a larger pair on the back, and a smaller pair on the head.