

DARK LANTERN

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The light was elusive. Matacek strove to keep his legs moving rhythmically in time to his breathing. The water around him seemed filled to overflowing with the sounds of inrushing and out bubbling air. But the dancing light disrupted his wordless chant and broke into the regular succession of thrust and sweep.

A flicker to one side. He turned to look and his flippers tangled momentarily. Phosphorescence played mockingly about in the turmoil his legs created. Suck in, kick, kick. Bubble out, kick, kick. The compressed air tasted cold and damp, yet burned at his dry throat. His jaw ached from biting continuously on the regulator mouthpiece, and his wetsuit had a definite chill.

Ten meters overhead the setting quarter moon shattered across a thousand tiny wavelet. That must be the source of all the teasing glimmers, he knew, but the knowledge could not keep his keyed-up reflexes from responding to each dart as a new threat. This underwater world glowed with menace.

Up there lay a subtropical paradise, a composition of islands, sea and moonlight straight out of an airline travel poster. The air had been warm when he left the beach, as warm as the previous night when he had lain there with Maria, their naked bodies caressed by the gentle sea breeze. It was hard to accept the existence of these two such different environments in close proximity.

But Matacek had planned as carefully as ever. He had spent a week with the scuba instructor from the dive shop, exploring the reefs and covertly studying the passage out to the Devil's Rocks. He went skin diving among the shallows, to perfect his surface dive and improve his breath-holding ability. Clad only in trunks under the baking sun, he could still appreciate the need for thermal insulation on a long night swim, and had insisted on a sweaty wetsuit practice session over the instructor's protests. The man probably thought him another daft tourist. But Matacek's specialty was survival, and he knew his business well.

He would have liked to surface and check his bearings, for the currents were tricky around the Rocks. A lot of good men had already died making this swim—the natural hazards were surely responsible for a number of the casualties. Statistics, however, proclaimed loud and clear that there was a human element involved that was far more malicious than tide and rocks. Matacek chose to face the natural dangers head-on and remain hidden from searching eyes for as long as possible.

The bottom was definitely beginning to rise in front of him. He must be on course. Mentally he conjured up the map of the Devils Rocks and the placement of the castle relative to the few known soundings. The landing was straight ahead, with its protecting jetty off to the right. It would be safest to enter the little harbor crested by the jetty, so safe that he had early ruled that possibility out entirely. Any traps or warning systems must surely be concentrated there.

No, it would have to be on the seaward side or not at all. He cringed at the memory of wave after wave attacking those rocks. There was a whirlpool visible almost continually just two hundred meters from the jetty. That portended vicious side currents and undertows in places unpredictable from the surface.

For three nights he had maintained a constant surveillance of the Rocks, in all stages of the tide, before he saw his approach.

Through binoculars, it was just a narrow band of calm water, and it only appeared for about half an hour midway through the flood of the tide, but it would serve his needs. He must literally sail between Scylla and Charybdis, between the breakers on the jetty and the hungry whirlpool to seaward, but he knew he

could make it.

Moon, wind and wave dictated that, he make his assault tonight. He was on schedule. Yes, there was the anchor chain for the channel buoy. Angle off to the right. More. One hundred strokes. Bubble out, kick, kick.

The environment changed rapidly as he left the lee of the jetty. No longer did the light mock him. The waves were wide and rolling, they grabbed moonlight in scoops and spread it across the sky in broad wet swaths. He could hear a dull pounding over the noise of his breathing. The brooding menace of the bay gave way by stages to open defiance.

Matacek felt an insistent tugging, a cold hand urging him toward where the whirlpool usually lay. It was time to surface. Automatically he looked up and extended an arm upward, as he had been taught. Breathe out, come up with your bubbles. Breathe out. He remembered to change over to his snorkel just before he broke the surface. The tanks were more than half full—and Matacek had every intention of making a return trip with them.

He blew the snorkel clear and, took a quick look around. He was too close to the whirlpool! Grimly he drove his legs against the clawing current, angling toward the rocks where the vortex was more disrupted. He sucked air in great hungry gobs and tried not to gauge his progress too soon. After a hundred strokes, he was closer to the Rocks, and certainly no closer to the center of the whirlpool. Another hundred strokes and he -was definitely gaining on the current. A hundred more and the looming surf was now the enemy.

The tidal pool was closer to the jetty. Its entrance to the sea should be sufficiently submerged by now to permit safe passage. His reconnaissance convinced him that the narrow tunnel was the only chink in the natural fortification of the seaward side of the Devil's Rocks. It was his one chance to enter undetected.

There was the lion's head he remembered. Just a little farther. He switched back to compressed air, dropped to five meters and streaked toward the spot where the hole must be. There it was! A wave threw itself against the rock overhead and he felt the countersurge dragging him back. No time to ponder—ride the next one in! Suck in, kick, kick.

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He reached the jagged mouth just as the water shattered above him. He grabbed rocks, scrambled, wedged a foot just in time to meet the surge. On the next wave he was through and floating in the relative calm of the pool.

Blackness. The moon had set during his last mad rush, leaving only the hard bright stars and the nearby channel-markers to light his way. He ditched his tanks and unpeeled the wetsuit. Dressed in trunks and diver's knife strapped to his calf, he was ready for the assault. Matacek believed in traveling light.

The rocks dug into his bare feet; a week of new calluses offered scant protection. There was beach grass to his left and a path, he knew. Grass portended sand and easier traveling. But he didn't want to chance missing the way and blundering about unprotected amid the razor-edged leaves. Besides, the path was a natural place to prepare a trap. He continued to climb and crawl gingerly among the rocks.

He felt the loom of the wall long before he noticed it against the night sky. At that, it was more an absence of stars than the presence of anything with a definite outline. Matacek spent a full ten minutes covering the last fifty meters, feeling for trip wires every careful step of the way. All his senses were keyed to the wind, the ground, hunting for any hint of strangeness in the neighborhood. More than once in his career had he evaded death because of some warning feel of *wrongness* that he could never quite put

his finger on, even in retrospect. The desire to *survive* strummed along his nerves.

Cold stone brushed against his fingertips. He was at the wall. Stillness enveloped him, and he suddenly realized that a persistent sea breeze had been playing over him all along. Only when it was blanketed by the castle wall had he noticed it by its absence. Fingertips brushing the stone ever so delicately, he made his way toward the seaward corner and the drain.

The smell of stagnant water heralded his discovery. It was just as Maria had described it, bars old and rusting but still quite intact. Except for the loose stone. Yes, there it was. Fingers traced the outline, rocked it gently. It was big and deeply embedded, but it looked possible.

Matacek unsheathed his knife and set to work on the dirt and rock chips around the stone. He worked silently and steadily, not wishing to make a disturbance now and waste his laborious approach. The grouting piled up slowly around his ankles.

That should do it. A tug. The stone slid out a centimeter and got hung up. He rocked it in place. More grouting sprinkled down. Another tug. Almost. To hell with it. Matacek heaved and the stone came free and rumbled out of its centuries-old bed. Squeals and rustling mingled with the final thump. Rats!

He could see red eyes throwing starlight back at him from their dank lair. There were over a dozen of them. Big. He- held the knife ready in one hand while he bent down. Keeping his eyes fixed on the pack, he felt around for some small stones, picked up three. He threw the first. Eyes winked out as the squeals rose up. He threw the second and the rustling moved farther down the pipe. He decided to keep the third stone for insurance.

Matacek sheathed his knife and laced his arms between the bottom bar and the gap that now lay unguarded. Head next, scraping an ear against splinters of stone. No good. He withdrew and reentered the hole with his back downward. Now he could follow the angle with the natural bend of his body. It was still tight. He felt his back being flayed by the sharp edge of the gash he had made in the wall. His ribs were being crushed by the bars.

Then he was through and drawing his legs quickly after. Blood trickled down his sides as he rolled onto his knees. There was only a short way left to go. He crawled along the fetid tunnel, straining to keep his knees and hands out of the filth in the center and recoiling whenever his raw back touched the dripping roof. Matacek tried not to think of the typhus and other diseases that must be flourishing in the slimy water, or how much of the stuff was entering his bloodstream through a dozen breaks in the skin. He crawled relentlessly toward his goal.

Light streamed down from overhead, dim but easily discernible to his night-accustomed eyes. No sign of returning rats. It looked like he was going to make it. He reached the overhead opening and held his breath for a few brief seconds, while his ears sorted through dripping water and pounding blood for any sounds of danger. Then Matacek moved swiftly. He wanted out of there.

His back protested the cold rusty bars against his wounds. But the grating moved. Steadying it with one upraised hand, he raised the heavy iron grille with his legs until it cleared the lip of the hole. Then with a final overhand heave he skidded the grating to one side and sprang out of the sewer.

An empty corridor. Light splashed around the bend far ahead, the sole source of illumination. Behind him, he could barely make out the seaward door to the castle. It was bolted and barred. Also bugged and booby-trapped, no doubt. There was no percentage in going that way. What he was seeking would be where there was light. He set off.

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There were doors opening off the corridor to either side, heavy iron studded doors anchored firmly to the stone portals. These must be the dungeon cells from the old pirate days. Brave men still shuddered in the island taverns when they spoke of these man cages. Many people had rotted here over the years because they had displeased whoever the current landlord happened to be. Bravery was of little use to a penned animal.

Finally the cells came to an end, much to Matacek's relief. The corridor walls were uninterrupted and smooth the rest of the way to the bend. Still no sound or other sign that he had been discovered. He relaxed perceptibly.

When the floor began to tilt he knew he'd been thoroughly had.

The slab was massive and already well-overbalanced by his weight before it let go. Even barefoot, he lacked the traction needed to scramble back above the pivot point. The walls offered no hand-holds whatsoever and the lip at the bend in the corridor was already out of reach. Such a simple, effective trap, it must date back to the earliest days of the castle.

He fell.

Even as he was falling Matacek studied the mechanism that had caught him and the room waiting to receive him below. He took the shock of landing and began spinning in place, scanning floor, walls and ceiling over and over while the light lasted. The slab slammed into place and blackness swallowed the room.

He reviewed the data he had accumulated. It didn't look good. A room three by six meters, the slab ceiling over seven meters high. There was a door on the pivot side and a mesh grille above it. The door had no knob. Only one piece of furniture in the room—a table equipped with old but quite serviceable manacles and, a ludicrous afterthought, a comfortable-looking mattress pad. Except for this modern touch, it could have been original equipment in the castle's torture chamber. Probably was.

Matacek felt his way along the wall to the door. Locked of course. The grille wouldn't budge. Well, no harm in trying. He fumbled toward the table, examined it thoroughly by touch. Curious. There was a smooth metal plate embedded near the head of the table, just under the pad. He felt the stout timbers underneath and down along the legs. Nothing. The legs were bolted to the floor.

He could use the pad somehow if anyone came through that door. And he had his knife. All he had to do was stay alert long enough and he had a chance. Then he heard the hissing of gas.

Quickly he unstrapped his knife and shoved it sheath and all deep under the pad. Then he leaped up on the table and stretched to tiptoe. He tried to keep his breathing shallow as he counted the seconds. He could have been killed easily by now—surely the gas was intended just to knock him out. Hopefully the density would not be as great near the ceiling. He concentrated on counting time.

Dizziness stole up on him in growing waves. The hissing had not yet stopped. He felt himself going fast. With a last drunken effort he lowered himself to the pad and arranged his body in a posture of resignation. A darker darkness waited to engulf him.

The knife made a comforting pain in the small of his back.

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Maria was crying. With his free hand Matacek wiped away her tears as he rocked her gently in the crook of a supporting arm. Crying women always made him feel helpless but he had early learned that if

you comforted them and didn't say anything they would eventually stop. He hoped it would be soon—he had many preparations yet to make for tomorrow night's swim. And he would need a good rest.

She was starting to settle down. He changed from wiping tears to stroking the flowing curves of her body. Both were spent from lovemaking, but a few erotic sensations might still offer a distraction. And he desperately needed more information out of the girl.

The sea breeze added its reassurance to his, and the warm sand cradled them. A blanket of stars spread its protection overhead. Matacek felt stirrings of regret that reality must intrude into this island dream world.

Maria was at the sniveling stage. He groped behind him for his pants, fished a handkerchief out of the back pocket. Blowing her nose, she was a pathetic little child, one who must take leave of a favorite puppy or playmate. She took a shuddering breath.

"You're going to die out there, Stan," she stammered, "I just know it. Please don't go. Please don't leave me." The plaintive tone was touching. But she was adding nothing new to his store of information. He assumed an air of braggadocio.

"Don't you worry about me. I've been in some pretty tight places before and always managed to get out of them." One more ploy. "Besides, this time I have someone to come back to." He cupped a spherical breast.

She shook her head, more in despair than impatience. "No, no. You don't understand what you're up against. Nobody returns from the Devil's Rocks. Ever."

"You did," he replied jauntily. "About five o'clock this afternoon."

"Oh, you know what I mean." More impatiently. "I am Dr. Knight's housekeeper. He signals me to come out whenever he needs me. But even I am not permitted to spend the night there, and there are many rooms I mustn't enter.

"The men talk in the taverns. It is well-known that many have tried to reach the castle uninvited. A few wash up on the beach, but most just disappear! They say the Devil himself built that castle, and he feeds on men!" Her voice rang with simple conviction.

"Evidently the Devil doesn't like the taste of Dr. Knight." They had been over this before.

"I told you, he is an unhappy man. And he never leaves the Rocks. If he hadn't sold his soul to the Devil, then he is suffering some torment for past sins." Her theology was well worked out.

"Dr. Knight is very kind to me," she continued. "He pays well—to cover the inconvenience of all the boat rides, he says, but it is still very good pay. And he is always asking after the welfare of my family. He even gives me books to read."

"He is a bad man, Maria," Matacek said softly. "He has stolen some secrets from the government of his country, a government that paid him well for years of service. And it is he, not the Devil, who has killed so many men. All they wanted was to recover what was stolen."

"And have you not also killed?" Equally softly. He looked at her in surprise and with fresh respect. "It is not an easy thing to hide, being a killer. You don't have to speak of it or even hint about it. The ruthlessness shows through in - everything you do."

Silence. After a while she continued in the strange new soft voice.

“I still love you, Stan. And I respect Dr. Knight. There is much violence in the world. We islanders see only parts of the bloody struggle, enough to know that we want no part of it. Whatever is between you and Dr. Knight does not affect me. I won’t let it.”

He barely heard the whisper.

“But I don’t want you to die.”

He held her in a fierce embrace.

“Then you must help me. I am going out to the Devil’s Rocks no matter what. Anything you can tell me about the place will increase my chances of survival.” He let that sink in. “New, will you go over once again the layout of the castle and the surrounding paths? And describe that loose stone by the drain as carefully as you can.”

There was fiat resignation in her voice, but she began. Matacek methodically correlated each part of her description with his personal - knowledge obtained from long- range reconnaissance. Her verbal sketch of what she knew of the interior agreed with the floor plans he’d obtained last week from the British Consul. Nothing new surfaced in this repetition, so he didn’t interrupt. Still, there might be something she said that would click later, so he forced himself to concentrate on her every word.

He rolled over on his back to stare up at the spangled blackness as Maria droned on. Must be a clamshell beneath him. He could feel the lump of it in the small of his back.

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The British Consul knew his business.

”Here are charts and floor plans, plus Bischoff’s last reconnaissance summary. We have reason to believe he made it to the Rocks, as far as the harbor, anyway. So his conjectures about the set of the current are probably correct.“ He tactfully forgot to mention that Bischoff’s body had never been recovered.

Matacek leaned forward in his chair to look over the documents. He would study them closely later. Right now he was still trying to get the general feel of the islands and the case.

“Do you have anything more recent on what devices he may have brought with him?” Knight had been in charge of research and development for the Department for many years before his retirement. He was three months gone before they began unearthing all the projects he had kept hidden. They were still discovering things daily.

The Consul looked uncomfortable. “His ability to foil infiltration is uncanny. But the Devil’s Rocks are formidable in their own right, and the castle was certainly designed to discourage unwanted visitors. No, we have no definite evidence that Knight has been using anything new.

”Except, of course, that damned “lantern ‘!”

“He’s still broadcasting, then?”

“Right on schedule, dammit.” He was definitely ill-at-ease. As the liaison agent on the spot, he bore the brunt of the responsibility for the failure of each assault, there being no one else left alive after each try. This whole affair must be damaging his career pretty badly. Still, he was good; he visibly stiffened his, proverbial British upper lip and continued. Matacek was impressed.

“He’s still following the old rendezvous timetable for the Russian subs. And so are they, even though they were supposed to have changed a month ago. I believe it was your outfit that dug up that intelligence.” He cocked an eyebrow in delicate inquiry. Matacek could have told him quite a bit about that acquisition—he personally had brushed with death to obtain it— but long habit kept him quiet.

”Well, no matter. The point is, Dr. Knight’s conversation still seems to be one way. Whether the Reds understand him or not is moot, but they’re as interested as we are. Enough so to send a special boat in for each transmission.”

He snorted. ”Gets bloody congested out there, what with everybody doing their own monitoring. Should form some sort of co-op, you’d think.”

The ”lantern“ was a modulated infrared laser. Its tight beam and high band width made it an excellent vehicle for covert communications. One of the first of Knight’s secret files that the Department came across contained engineering specifications for the device and an efficient receiver. Knight had code-named the file ”Dark Lantern.”

”Are you sure that he’s really broadcasting information? I mean, no one has cracked his code yet. It could be pure gibberish.”

The Consul shook his head. ”Our cryptanalysts swear that it’s meaningful, even though they can’t say what it means. Something “about the entropy being too low. They claim it’s English, in fact, because of its spectral distribution or some such.

“No. I’m afraid he is definitely trying to say something to the Russians. And with his background, he could have a lot to say.”

That was the rub. Knight had turned out to be a real sleeper. In thirty-five years of service, there were few secrets that he had not become privy to. He simply could not be ignored.

“I suppose you’ll be going out there,” the Consul ventured.

“I have my orders.” And the less said about them the better. Matacek leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on those of the Consul. The other man looked away first.

“Quite. Well, let’s get on with Bischoff’s report then.” He opened the folder and began arranging papers, unsettled by the agent’s brusqueness.

Matacek composed himself in preparation for deep concentration. The chair he was sitting in was one of those high-backed things you always see in old British movies. It was not very comfortable. He could feel an errant spring prodding him in the back.

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The man was too nervous. Matacek, had dealt with him on three occasions before, and he had always been jittery; but this time he seemed ready to bolt at any instant.

“Did you bring the money?” Between the stammering and the thick Russian accent, his words were barely understandable.

“Of course,” he replied contemptuously. Matacek disliked dealing with amateurs. The risks were always much higher. He made a point of sipping casually at his beer as he looked around.

They were in The Cock and Bull, a shoddy imitation of a London pub on the outskirts of Washington.

The place had been a biggish one-story residence, drowsing beside a lightly-traveled secondary road. Then along came urban sprawl, bringing the dubious fruits of a military research spending boom to the Maryland suburbs.

The highway outside was now four lanes wide and divided, buzzing night and day with people on the prowl. That portly gentleman behind the bar had bought the place for a song and got it rezoned and liquor-licensed, in the hopes of attracting some of the prowlers. Someone told him that a saloon had to have Style, so he settled on Victorian Ugly and opened the doors.

He guessed wrong. Sure, the place was packed on weekend nights with the *nouveau chic*, young dentists and lawyers whose wives adored the meretricious trappings. And by shelling out some of his scanty profits, the proprietor attracted the local college crowd three nights a week by hiring a genuine lute player *who* had an endless repertoire of off-color ballads.

But the real money in the saloon business lay in keeping a regular clientele—in fact a different set for each time of day—and in this The Cock and Bull failed. Laborers felt uncomfortable there. Collegians had too far to travel for a sixty-cent beer. Commuters and businessmen had to go out of their way just a little too much *for* a martini with a jumbo olive. As a consequence, the place was deserted more often than not. Matacek loved it for that reason—and for one other. It was the perfect place to conduct his sort of business.

“Let me see what you have,” he replied at length. His contact hurriedly unzipped a leather portfolio tucked beside him in the corner of the booth and handed Matacek a thin sheaf of papers under the table.

“Please. Do not wave them around so.” The man’s voice cracked. Matacek ignored his fluttering hands and raised the papers for closer inspection. He knew only a little Russian—the Cyrillic alphabet was impossible—but it was easy enough to decipher the scientific cognates. The papers looked legitimate, and the man had always delivered reliable goods in the past. Still, there was a *wrongness* about them.

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Matacek spotted the hummer almost immediately. It was in the form of a three-by-five file card, paper-clipped to the sheath. On it were scrawled the words “File Alpha.” And there was no good reason why a Russian attaché stealing Russian intelligence reports should brand them with a three-by-five file card written in English.

A hummer was a thin printed circuit transmitter that could be bonded even to the back of heavy stock paper. Making it into a sandwich that looked like a file card was trivial, and that made it even harder to spot. The moist electrolytic cells occupying most of the surface area could only put out a fraction of a watt for about twelve hours, but that was usually sufficient to tag a carrier long enough to run him to earth.

Matacek tilted the card slightly to catch the reflected light. He could see the familiar antenna pattern embossed near the side, and the score mark that started the battery action. Someone was on to this deal. He wondered briefly whether his contact was anxious because he knew about the trap, or whether his growing nervousness had tipped off his employers. It didn’t matter either way.

“This looks fine,” he said calmly as he reached down to unzip his own portfolio. He slid the papers inside, much to the other man’s relief. Deftly he slipped the hummer from under the clip and, in the hidden confines of the portfolio, worked it into the middle of the stack of soiled twenties he had brought. His hand reappeared clutching the bundle of bills.

This time he kept the transaction completely under the table. No point in alarming the rabbit any further.

Two zippers sounded simultaneously.

The man tossed down the last of his drink and slid out of the booth.

“Won’t you stay for another drink?” Matacek couldn’t resist the gibe.

“I must be back by nine. It is dark already. Thank you, but no.” The fool hadn’t even recognized the thrust. Definitely unprofessional. Matacek nodded a cold dismissal. The man fled.

Now to move fast. He was in the men’s room before the proprietor looked back from watching the other’s departure. He didn’t lock the door and he didn’t turn on the light. Instead, he opened the window wide, stepped up on the sill, then hastily back down. Two definite shoe prints remained on the sill.

He removed his shoes and climbed up on the toilet tank. Using just his knuckles, he raised the plasterboard cover to the attic entrance and gently pushed it to one side. No dirt or handprints, that was important. He tossed his shoes and portfolio up, then pulled himself up after. Just as carefully, he replaced the cover from above. This was the second attractive feature of The Cock and Bull.

A squeal of brakes and a loud thump came from outside. Racing on all fours along the rafters, he hurried to the air vent at the front of the building. He was just in time to see the killer pick up the portfolio and drop another in its place. Then the man hesitated—he must have caught a glimpse of the dead man’s face. Evidently he collected his wits quickly enough. He picked up the second portfolio, drew something out of an inner pocket and stuffed it partway into the bloody jacket. The killer was back in the car and on his way before the first spectators arrived.

Matacek was impressed by the speed of the operation, and somewhat amused at the Russian mentality. The fluttering scrap of paper showed a large Star of David. And the killer wore a yarmulke. How quaint of the Reds to implicate the Jewish Defense League in such a heavy-handed fashion while they took care of their own dirty laundry.

The alternate portfolio, the one designed to be found beside his corpse, must have been equally imaginative. It probably contained some embarrassing revelations about American espionage. No, the police would guard government secrets, even ones that made them angry. More likely it was Russian secrets, containing a large measure of truth for bait but laced with some deadly poison of misdirection. That was their style.

Matacek forced himself away from idle speculation, and away from the view. He collected his shoes and portfolio. They knew he was still alive now; they would be looking for him. Conceivably they might accept his false trail and think he escaped out the back window. But the men guarding the rear would be reluctant to accept the blame for letting him get away. He must be prepared for both search and siege.

There was a depression at one point under the eaves. It was invisible from the entrance; he had only discovered it by making a thorough search of the attic on his first visit. He bought supplies on his second trip, iron rations and water and a large can in case he had to relieve himself. It was not likely that the fat proprietor had ever been up here or ever would. On his next trip he brought a gun.

Everything was just as he’d left it. Matacek lowered himself into his hole, checked over his stores and made himself as comfortable as possible, under the circumstances. Tomorrow night the college kids would arrive in droves. He could come down then and mingle with the crowd. If he picked up a coed he’d have an excellent cover while he made his exit. Yes, that. was the best course.

Light stabbed against the ceiling. Matacek froze. He could hear the cover being slid aside as the light grew brighter. Then something eclipsed the source. He heard heavy breathing. Matacek gripped the gun

and waited. It was just like being a kid again, hiding from the bullies. He could hear his heart pound.

The light flared up again, then was quickly snuffed out. Silence. Dimly through the cover he could hear guttural voices. Then they too were gone.

He breathed a soft sigh of relief. That had been too close. He wriggled about in the piled insulation, stretched to drain the tension from his muscles. He would have to feather this nest a little better if he were going to any sleeping here. Through the rock wool he could feel a rafter digging into the small of his back.

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“Hey, Stosh!”

The voices were coming closer. Stan Matacek hunkered down in the bushes and tried to still his frightened breathing.

“Stanislaus, where are you?” came the taunting cry. “Oh Staanley!”

“Hey Fred, do you think he’s hiding? I mean, he might be afraid of us.” The voice rang with cheerful cruelty.

“Naw, his old man’s a cop. Besides, Polacks are too dumb to be afraid, didn’t you know’

”Hey Jog, does your father work?”

”Naw, he’s a cop.”

”Honest?”

”Naw, the usual kind.”

Stan cowered in his hiding place, trying to hold back the team of humiliation. There were three of them, all two grades ahead of him. They would beat him to a pulp if they ever found him.

“Let’s go take a look at those bushes over there,” came one of the voices. “They look dirty enough to hide a Polack cop’s kid.”

It just wasn’t right. Stan’s father wasn’t like those stupid farmers who came over from the old country. In fact he’d just been promoted to sergeant. Policemen were the good guys; they made the streets safe for little girls to walk on. Stan clenched his fists in hopeless anger.

“Well, well. What do you suppose that is?” The voice was right in front of him. Stan looked down and realized that his white oxfords contrasted glaringly with the foliage. Resolution settled over him like armor. He stepped out to face his tormentors.

“Why, hello Stosh. Fancy meeting you here.”

“My name is Stan.” His voice betrayed him with a slight squeak.

“I never heard of no Polack named Stan before. Did you guys?” Much solemn shaking of heads.

“Only good Americans can be called Stan. Right, guys?” Nodding in agreement.

“I’m a good American.” His tone was stronger.

“Gee that’s funny. Because we heard a rumor that your old man’s a dirty Polack cop.” A gentle shove.

“Don’t you call my father names.” The boys were oblivious to the menace that had crept into his voice.

“Dirty cop.” Shove.

“Polack.” Shove.

“Dirt.” Shove.

Stan screamed. He lit into the ringleader with both fists flailing, wheeled to bloody a nose on one side, turned to kick on the other.

“American! American! American!” Stan screamed. The world was a red blur.

The boys backed off, arms upraised. They fell, tried to get up, were battered down by the dervish they had unleashed. Finally they crawled clear of the flailing monster and escaped whimpering into the woods.

Stan came to his senses slowly. He fell blubbering to the ground, crawled back into his hole and curled up into a ball. After a while he slept.

When he woke up it was nearly dark. His mother was going to give him hell for fighting and being late for dinner. But for the first time in his life Stan didn’t care. The new resolve was there to stay, the armor was impervious.

Never again would he give Evil a chance. He would fight for right and he would fight to stay alive. He would fight for America. If necessary he would even kill. His father was a good cop and Stan was going to be a good cop too. Better.

Comforted by his resolve, Stan rolled out from under the bush. He was stiff. His knuckles were skinned and swollen from the fight, and for some reason his back hurt.

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“Ah, I see that you are awake, Mr. Matacek.” The voice came out of the darkness somewhere above and behind him. His back hurt. He tried to roll over.

Manacles clinked and checked him. He tested each limb in turn. All were fettered by cold iron. The chains were short, permitting little variation on the basic spread-eagle position. And the cuffs were tight. No, the left bracelet had some play. It would cost a lot of skin, but he might get that hand out.

“You do not reply.” The voice again. “Permit me to introduce myself. Dr. Thaddeus Knight, semi retired, formerly of your Department.” A pause. “But then, you must know that since you went to so much trouble to visit me.”

The hand would not come. He strained harder.

“I really must congratulate you, Mr. Matacek. You are the first one to make it all the way to my audience chamber under your own power. That means a lot to a man my age. It saves me having to drag you the last part of the way.”

Sweat and blood mingled in the wreckage of his hand. It would serve as a lubricant. He ignored the pain.

“Let’s see, You are the eleventh to make it to the Rocks alive. Bischoff told me there were seventeen who tried before him. That leaves eight unaccounted for. We really need more lifeguards around here. I understand the undertow can be terrific.”

Why wouldn't it come? Wait. Something was pressing into his palm. He flexed his fingers. The third rock! He'd actually carried it through the tunnel and held onto it while he fell without even thinking about it. That made one more weapon.

"I grow weary of monologues quickly, Mr. Matacek. If you don't wish to speak to me I will be happy to go away and leave you. For a long, long time." His voice became more distant even as he spoke the last words.

"Wait! I'll talk to you." He would rot here if he couldn't get Knight to open that door. He remembered the dungeons above.

"That's more like it. You see, I seldom entertain visitors for long here and I become quite hungry for gossip. You know. Shop talk. The good old days. That sort of thing."

"If it's intelligence information you want, you know I'm not authorized to discuss Department matters with retired employees." If the man were mad, he would play along with him.

"Tut, tut. Don't fret yourself over what *I* want. I have my own ways of obtaining information. After all, I said I'm only semiretired, if you recall." He chuckled. "I assumed that *you* would have a few questions. Or did the Department merely send you out here to kill me?"

"Not at all, Dr. Knight." That was near enough to the truth. Maybe the man was sufficiently demented to reveal the reasons for his defection. It would ease the cleanup job if they knew his motives. "We are all very curious about how you have been getting on since your retirement."

"Well enough, thank you. All things considered. I have taken up a new hobby, which has proved to a considerable success." His voice had lost its bantering tone. "Do you want to know what it is?"

His hand was free. He tucked the stone next to his hip and began working his way toward the knife. His manacles clinked. "Yes, please tell me about it." Keep him distracted!

"I collect dishonest men."

His voice took on a faraway tone.

"The idea first came to me nearly ten years ago. I suppose it had been brewing for some time even then. You see, I didn't like what was happening to the Department.

"In the beginning, everything was clear-cut. The Germans and Japanese were the enemy and we all knew the price of defeat by *those* gangsters. It was easy to give your all for the intelligence effort.

"Then it was the Communists.

They were advocating the overthrow of the US Government by force and violence, so we knew they had to be contained. But Senator McCarthy showed me something I didn't like to admit—that seditionists had already infiltrated the government in the name of anti-Communism. I think that was when I saw the first changes."

He had a grip on the knife. Now to get it out from underneath the mattress.

"The Department became more and more political. We were no longer opposing enemies of the US, Government, but enemies of the current administration. And I was deeply involved.

"One day I got a lab report from one of our brilliant young men. He had developed a hypnotic gas which

was remarkably effective in assisting interrogation. At the bottom of the report he suggested, jokingly by his standards, that we might use it on some Democrats to find out their campaign strategy. They were talking about budget cuts in those days, you see.”

He had the knife.

“Then I realized that there was a very good chance that the gas would be used for just such a purpose before much longer.” He hesitated. “The young man was killed that evening in an auto accident. So I hid the report.” The words came in a flood.

“After that it was easy. If I saw something I thought right be of more use to internal espionage than against our real enemies, I bottled it up. As head of R&D with an excellent service record, I had no trouble with audits. I got better and better at hiding things.

“Then the Department started hiring a new type of agent. Not sensitive, freedom-loving men but ruthless, super-patriots who never questioned orders and would kill as casually as they might cheat at solitaire. I sent a letter of protest to the Chief, explaining the dangers involved in working with this type of psychological profile. But all I got was a polite ‘thank you for your concern’ and the practice continued. Had I protested further I would have lost my job and forfeited any chance of countering the trend.”

There was a long silence. Matacek wondered whether he was expected to comment. But the scientist continued.

“It was then I decided to use the weapons I had kept hidden, against the real enemies of my country and world peace. It took my life’s savings to buy this castle, but then I have no family and I felt I owed my life to undoing some of the damage I had helped wreak.”

His tone became abstracted again. “There was too much information for me to take everything, too much to destroy at the last. I removed all trace of the nastier inventions and muddled the trail as best I could to the rest. Except for the lantern, of course. That was my bait.

“Diogenes walked through the world with a bright lantern, looking for an honest man. I took the opposite approach. I stayed here with my dark lantern and allowed the dishonest men of the world to come to me.

“You are such a man, Mr. Matacek,” he concluded.

“How can you say such a thing?” he replied quickly. “You hardly know me.”

“On the contrary,” came the confident reply. “You noticed the metal plate now under your head—it’s another of my little toys.” Matacek felt a twinge of fear.

“I told you I had my own sources of information. In conjunction with the hypnotic gas I spoke of and a few verbal suggestions, that induction plate stimulated you to relive a series of incidents in your life—I’m sure you remember them now. I unpeeled you like an onion.” His voice became sterner.

“You are not a very nice man, Mr. Matacek. It was not necessary for you to mark that Russian informer for death. Perhaps he was going to be killed anyway, perhaps not. But you didn’t even give him a chance. You could have just left the hummer in the booth and gained even more time for your escape.

“The last time I saw your personnel file, it said you had killed seven men. I wonder whether they have added his name to your list—or do you just get credited with an assist?” A pause.

“And you used my poor Maria very casually. The child will be heartbroken, and I’m sure you’ve impregnated her.” Knight sighed. “I had hopes of sending her to school. She is so intelligent. But if I can’t

talk her into an abortion then she's doomed to a life of poverty. All because you needed a little information and decided to relieve your glands in the process of getting it."

"What about you, old man?" Matacek knew he desperately needed to get Knight angry enough to come within striking range. But he had no trouble forcing wrath into his challenge.

"Do you consider yourself so far above sin that you can pass judgment on others?" Matacek probed for his soft spot. "Do you have the right to broadcast your country's security information to the Communists just to bait your little conscience-salving trap?"

Silence.

"Well?"

"Nice try, Mr. Matacek, but you missed. In the first place, I feel very much the sinner. My hands are no cleaner than yours when it comes to murder, but at least I do have a conscience.

"As for my broadcasts, so far I've sent out 'Alice in Wonderland' and most of 'Through the Looking Glass.' I'd like to put out 'The Hunting of the Snark'—somehow it seems appropriate—but I'm afraid the rhymes might show through the encoding, even though the code is changed randomly." Another pause.

"And I'm not salving my conscience. I'm merely exercising it as I see fit for: the first time in decades. Believe me, it causes a great deal of pain."

"So you set out singlehanded to rid the world of Evil?" Contemptuously. "You sound like a comic book hero."

"Yes I do, don't I?" He was still too confident. "No, I will not eliminate all of you before I'm stopped, but so far I've been making a pretty fair dent. That's enough for a start."

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This was getting bad. Knight might be a madman, but he was an intelligent one. His delusion was thoroughly developed and unshakable. Getting him to come into the room would be next to impossible, particularly since- he evidently knew about the knife. But he didn't know about the rock, or his free hand. Maybe.

"Whatever your plans are for me, Dr. Knight," he began, "I'm sure they don't include torture. You sound much to humane for that. Right now my back is killing me. I would appreciate your assistance."

A chuckle. "I'm sure you would. But you needn't worry, since I don't plan on keeping you alive to suffer much longer. I have all the useful information I can expect out of you, and I have a healthy respect for your resourcefulness. It is much safer if we end this business quickly."

He heard the sound of a gun being cocked.

Matacek fought down fear. He tucked the knife just out of sight and, clenching the rock tightly, snaked his hand under the confusion of chain around the manacle.

"You say you have a conscience. All right, then. All I ask is that you look me in the eye when you pull the trigger. If you're the man you say you are, you will do that." He waited tensely.

"You are right, of course." Light poured into the room. "But you forget the basic advantage of a gun—it

is designed to inflict fatal damage from a safe distance. It would be silly of me to give up such an advantage, particularly when dealing with such a specialist in survival as you.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Matacek, but I’m going to kill you now.”

Matacek wheeled and hurled the stone as the gun exploded.

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The exhausted animal cowered in the brush and waited.

It had dragged itself out of the ocean scant hours before, taken air in tentative gasps. It pushed clear of the surf with webbed feet, clawed its way up the beach. Its blood grew warm and it began slowly to think.

It was Matacek.

He was battered and confused, not so much by the physical ordeal of the past three days as by the assaults on his psyche. His mind felt bruised.

Back and forth went his thoughts between the disquiet engendered by his last interview with the Chief and the horror of his recent captivity.

Knight’s bullet seared the skin along Matacek’s spine, but the rock caught the old man square between the eyes. He fell dead just inside the doorway, well out of reach. It aroused Matacek’s deepest fear, that he would die of thirst before he could escape from his chains. The scientist had been too clever by half; he had been almost as good at survival as Matacek.

“You’re our last and best hope,” the Chief told him. He sat at the head of the long rosewood conference table, flanked by his advisers. The Ivy League Mafia, Matacek called them. “We want very badly to recover what Knight took, but the price is getting too high.

”We’ll give you seventy-two hours to escape or to take control of the castle and contact us,” he went on. ”Spiegel here estimates that you will either succeed or, ah, fail in that time.“ One of the nattily-dressed lieutenants glanced at the agent, looked quickly, away. ”After that we send in the Marines to dig you out.“ He beamed encouragement.

It took Matacek the better part of a day to cut the mattress up into strips and weave it into a net. How many times he cast it he lost count. It was like trying to work one of those penny arcade claw machines, he thought maniacally, only this time it wasn’t saran wrap but *rigor mortis* that frustrated his efforts.

At one point he found himself talking to the fallen figure. The strong back-lighting made a halo of the old man’s white hair. There was a priest who used to look like that, back when he was very young. Matacek confessed his sins over and over to the dead man, caught himself, laughed hysterically, caught himself at that, and went back to babbling between casts.

I am a fisher of men.

”We’ll have a devil of a time smoothing this over publicly,” the Chief went on. ”There’s a section working up a cover story, just in case. Still, an armed assault on a private residence can’t be hidden. and can’t be explained to everyone’s satisfaction. There’ll be hell to pay. Not to mention the fact. that we’ll probably lose Knight before we can get anything out of him.“.

The Chief was always ”losing“ people. Evidently it was not possible to say ”kill“ with a Boston accent.

”So you see how heavily we’re counting on you, Stan.“ The heartiness was back in his voice. “Don’t force us to rely on a bunch of jar- heads to clean up our problems.” The Mafia chuckled in unison.

He fell asleep once, or thought he did. He struggled out of a bad dream, back into a nightmare. Knight’s body was closer, but still out of reach. His arms ached as he lifted the net and cast again. And again.

The Mafia spelled out the details *of* the operation, each reciting his little piece. Matacek had trouble paying attention to their words. The detached singsong was just a background to his growing unease. He wished ,they would be quiet so he could work out what it was that was bothering him.

Matacek fought against shaking muscles to heave the stiffened corpse to table height. He was deathly afraid that the keys would fall out of the man’s pockets before he could reach them. He missed them on his first search, in fact, because they were wrapped in a piece of paper.

It was a note.

There was a wrongness in the Chief’s attitude, that was it, in the way his advisers looked at Matacek. He knew they regarded him as a blunt instrument at best. No, as a pawn—a passed pawn, perhaps, but still just a pawn in their complicated power struggle. Yet this was a different attitude entirely and Matacek was pretty sure what it meant.

There would be no Marines. Matacek would have to save himself or he would rot. The Department was sure he would be killed within three days if he did not succeed; that was what Spiegel’s cold-blooded calculations really showed. The promise of rescue was just false assurance.

Matacek didn’t like it, but at least he understood the reasoning behind such a decision. It was the sort of thing he might order himself.

“To my murderer,” the note began.

“Congratulations on succeeding where so many have failed. You are a killer of the first rank. I bequeath to you my collection of nasties, and safe passage away from the Rocks. There are instructions for finding both, written on the reverse side of this message.”

Matacek turned the wrinkled sheet over. There was a map and a list of directions. He turned back to the note.

“And now my condolences; for as much as you disagree with my methods and my goals, I bequeath them to you also. You have proved yourself worthy of them by killing me.

”Before you attempt to rid yourself of your albatross, consider this: killers never, retire. They do not, they may not, they cannot. Test the truth of this before you decide what to do.“

The Chief had an arm around his shoulder and another clasping Matacek’s gun hand a little too firmly. ”Remember, Stan, you have seventy-two hours. Bring this one in for us, boy.“ Matacek disliked being pawed and disliked being called ”boy“ by a man only three years his senior. And he was get tin tired of this farce about a rescue attempt. He never relied on the help of others; he would rather they didn’t pretend to give it.

The note was honest. It led Matacek to water and food and safety and an iron box full of S , documents. There were no tricks, there were no traps.

The shape of the moon told him he had been more than two days in that hole. Spiegel was right, he admitted grudgingly; he could not have lasted three. He spent several hours combing the castle, but he

found nothing that was not detailed in the documents. Tired as he was, numb as he was, he felt a growing sense of urgency.

Suddenly it came upon him that he wanted to get away, as far away from the Devil's Rocks as he could before sundown. He didn't know why. It did not make sense. He should rest and search some more.

Instead he fled.

And dragged himself ashore with his last ounce of strength to wait and watch.

Maybe he was wrong about the Department. Perhaps they were going in to try to save him. He had to know; he could not resist making the test Knight suggested. He waited.

The explosion was blinding. Many seconds later the first sound hit him, then echo after echo from around the harbor. Matacek's eye recovered in time to see huge stones poised hundreds of feet up in the air, before they fell back onto the Rocks or rained into the hungry waters. He hadn't heard the bomber and couldn't see it now. It must be flying very high.

Everything that could burn was ablaze. Nothing alive could have survived that holocaust. They didn't even give me a chance.

Matacek understood then why the Chief had emphasized the time limit even as he lied about the Marines. This really was the last effort to recover Knight's thefts; the Department was cutting its losses. And Matacek was to be casually written off with the rest.

Explosions were much easier to explain away than attacks by armed troops. Was it Spiegel who suggested this solution? Probably.

Matacek wondered what explanation they would have for him, should he come struggling into the harbor after a last-minute escape. The Chief was a fluent liar; it would be good. There would be supporting evidence, an apology from the pilot who accidentally dropped a salvo instead of a preattack pattern. General expressions of relief all around that he had survived.

Knight had been so right and yet so wrong. He understood the politics of murder, but he killed the wrong men. It wasn't the Mataceks and Bischoffs of this world that must be stopped—they were tools no better and no worse than Knight himself.

No, it was the Chief and his gang of cold-blooded intellectuals who were the real danger. They cared not for people or nations or even ideals so much as they enjoyed wielding their covert power.

Matacek was infected by guilt at having worked unthinkingly for such men. He could accept most of the things he had learned about himself these past three days, but not that. Knight had conquered death through him, just as the note prophesied. *Thy will be done.*

The Devil's Rocks had settled down to a bright glow across the water by the time Matacek stood up. He was stiff and weak and sorely in need of medical aid, but he hardly noticed. He started down the beach and promptly stumbled.

It was impossible to walk forward in sand with flippers on, tired as his legs were, and he was too weary to take them off for the short distance.

Lying there, he remembered the iron box. He crawled back into the brush and located it by touch. It was a box full of death. He could almost feel it oozing down the cold metal sides. Death, death, and more death. Was there no end to it? He hesitated, then shoved the box deep in the foliage. It

could go undetected for centuries.

Matacek wanted to cry. Somehow he felt that if he were still able to cry, perhaps things could work out better for him. Perhaps not. At any rate, he had lost the ability to cry. And that made him sadder.

There was no more time to lose, however. He would have to be discovered in the harbor soon if his story were to be believed. His blood felt cold. At least he would not have to fake exhaustion. He stood up.

He would have to husband his strength. It would be ironic if he were to drown before they fished him out, now that he had a real reason for living. He would not feel at ease until he could collect the iron box and stow its contents safely away at The Cock and Bull. The Chief, Spiegel, a lot of people were going to die with. the help of that box, and it would take all his survival skills to keep from being one of them. It was high time he began planning for his retirement.

The light from the Devil's Rocks was guttering now; soon it would be out. It seemed to be tapping out a message to the world with its flying flutters, but Matacek didn't want to read it. Resolutely he turned his face away from the light and, backing down the beach on his webbed feet, retreated beneath the sea.