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Dead Inside: Returning Favors (collected vignettes)

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She said her name was Lucy, because she had the sun in her eyes. I said my name was Michael, and I'd love to row her boat ashore. She laughed.

We left the record store and had an ice cream, all the while talking about music. I couldn't stop looking at her maple hair and suntan eyes. She kept smiling; I kept smiling; we kept touching each other lightly – on the hand, on the shoulder, on the small of the back.

She came back to my place to hear the prizes of my blues collection. We hadn't even finished listening to Ma Rainey's "Black Cat, Hoot Owl Blues" before we were kissing. By the time Elizabeth Smith's "Gwine To Have Bad Luck For Seven Years" came on, we were half-naked on the bed.

"Do you want me?" she asked, her eyes shining.

"Yes."

"Would you like the best sex you've ever had, right now?" The afternoon light turned the skin above her bra buttery-yellow.

"Oh, yeah."

"It'll cost you."

I quirked an eyebrow at her. "I thought you were an architect?"

"Oh, I don't want money. Just your soul." She laughed, a trilling of birdsong.

I thought it was a joke. "Oh, all right. Sure."

And then everything was sweat and flesh and friction and release and darkness.

God help me, I thought it was a joke.

I woke up and felt like hell. I couldn't even call into the office and say I was sick. Lucy was gone. I fell back asleep.

I woke up eight hours later feeling even worse. Cold. Nauseated. Exhausted. It took fifteen minutes, but I forced myself out of the bed and stumbled to the bathroom. I needed aspirin, Pepto Bismol, NyQuil, anything. That's when I saw what she had written on my mirror with her lipstick.

"It wasn't a joke. Now I have your soul. Thanks, Lucy."

I looked past her rusty letters into my reflected eyes. They looked dry, glassy, dead. Like I felt inside. Dead inside.

The frozen chewing I felt in my chest made me want to cry. My head hurt. My limbs felt numb.

Then, my reflection blinked. I watched its eyes close. That means my eyes were open.

I'm going crazy, I thought. But my reflection immediately shook its head no, then reached up with a hand towards the mirror-pane. Both of mine clutched the edge of the vanity. It extended a finger, and was going to write on the glass.

My phone rang, and I jumped, knocking over a can of shaving cream. I looked away, watching the can fall, and when I looked back at the mirror, my reflection simply mimicked my dulled movements.

The phone stopped ringing after awhile, but my reflection stayed the same, slavishly following my movements. But its eyes told me it had something it wanted to say, but couldn't.

I'm going crazy, aren't I?

I ended up going to my shrink anyway; he gave me some pills. Something about him reminded me of a turtle, a clam, a jar of pickles with its lid screwed tight. He was so blind he couldn't see me shattering inside.

The pills didn't help. He told me to wait a month until my body adjusted. I waited two, and they *still* didn't help.

I felt a transparent velvet curtain around me, cutting me off from other people. There was a wind blowing through my holes, making a low whistle only I could hear. Inside, my heart was cold all the time. Ninety degrees in the shade, and I shivered while I sweated. I started wearing a sweater everywhere. The people just stared. I could feel their eyes poking at me, drilling through me like I was a wad of cotton.

Work was hell. I couldn't talk to them anymore. I didn't get the jokes they told around the water-cooler and in the lunchroom like I used to. When I tried to tell them about something I found funny, all I got was blank stares and polite, noncommittal smiles under eyes full of puzzlement and fear. I took all my saved-up vacation; they were glad to see me go.

I spent my time haunting the record store where Lucy and I had met and laughed. She never came back.

Who did show up was a skinny old man, stinking of cheap cigars, who seemed to glow from within. "You look like you're in bad shape, kid." He scratched the graying toilet-ring fringe of hair around his scalp.

I shrugged. "Yup." My voice had been a monotone for months.

He touched my cheek before I could turn away, and he felt *warm*. My cheek felt warm, for the first time in weeks. My eyes widened.

"I can help you find what was lost," he said. "My name's Oskar. Pleezedtameetcha."

I cried as he shook my hand.

"This world is hard and cold," said Oskar. "Most folks don't even recognize it, wrapped up in their shells. Your shell is cracked now, and you can feel the draft."

I nodded.

He looked at me, and the glowing on him intensified in his ice-blue eyes.

"Your name's Michael, right? And hers was L... Lucy."

The look on my face must have combined the dual shocks I felt: that he knew who I was, and that I had the strangest feeling that I knew how he knew – how he did it, I mean. How he Saw.

It was like he was full of electricity, and made it move up into his head. I had an adolescent memory wash over me of watching my dad shave. The sudden connection, the eureka, the "so that's how you do it." But I couldn't. I didn't have the juice.

"No you don't, Mike. Not yet," Oskar confirmed my thoughts. "But, if you struggle for it, do your best, go all-out, while chasing that piece of you that's missing, you'll get some juice." He pulled a fresh, if battered, cigar out of his jacket pocket, bit off the end, and jammed it in his mouth. "I know. I was where you are, once.

Down in the hole.” He fiddled with a safety match. “I can help you out of that hole.”

Before I could say anything, a dead man walked through the wall of the record store. We both turned to watch the ghost float through the shop. None of the customers saw the transparent figure. I realized that they were blinded by their own sufficiency and I had sight only because of my lack. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man gets a straightjacket instead of a crown. My voice stuck in my throat, wriggling like a carnival goldfish in a plastic baggie.

“Hey, Oskar.” The dead man waved as he floated towards the wall opposite.

“Hey, Raymond. Staying out of trouble?”

“You know it.” The ghost laughed, then slid through a wall-display into the Fashion Bug next door.

“Let’s go outside. Then I can light this up. And we can talk about what we can do for each other.”

I shrugged and followed Oskar out to the sidewalk, where he lit his cigar. By the time we had turned the corner into the alleyway, he was merrily puffing away.

“Listen, Mike, I can take you somewhere where things’ll be easier for you to get a handle on your situation. In return, I need you to help me out a little. Not that you don’t seem like a good kid, but do-gooding don’t pay the landlord. I need an extra pair of hands. You game?”

Why not? My voice squirmed free. “Sure.” Why not? Forced to choose between schizophrenic hallucinations and the spectral dead, I chose to believe in souls being sold for sex, serendipitous psychics, and friendly ghosts. “What now?”

“Let’s go Outside,” he said, holding up his hands. The glow on them intensified, and between them I saw a rainbow circle, like when I used to play with the garden hose instead of washing Mom’s car. Oskar stretched his hands apart, and the ring widened. “Step through the Gate, Mike. I’ll be right behind.”

I hesitated then, until I felt the breeze blowing from the ring, fresh and clean and warm. Comforting warmth. Not like the cold, cold world I had awoken into since that night.

I stepped through the Gate.

Through the rainbow Gate stood a forest. A Robin Hood forest, big trees and adventure. Afternoon sun slanted through the trunks and lit everything up nice. The leaves carpeting the forest floor did not match the trees above.

I didn’t care. I felt better than I had in months just being there.

“We are in the Spirit World now,” said Oskar. “We are in the Wood.”

“Why?” I asked. Branches creaked in the breeze. A squirrel chattered nearby. The tightness in my shoulders eased.

“I need to gather blood-berries for a Mage in the City. You’re gonna help me pick ‘em and carry ‘em back.” He pulled a handful of plastic grocery bags out of his pants pocket and handed me a few. “Then we’re going to try and find out something about your soul-thief, Little Miss Lucy.”

We walked a long time. The air smelled like oak, pine, cedar. Birds sang. Oskar talked.

He told me about growing up in Mobile, Alabama, rich and mean. He told me about the cars, the women, the booze, the drugs. He

told me how he ground into powder his inheritance, his family name, and his very soul. He told me about the woman who saved him: a woman named Violet. She taught him how to grow a new soul to replace the one he’d squandered.

“She was a Sensitive then - like I am, now - I was Dead Inside. Now she’s a Mage, I’m a Sensitive, and you’re the Dead Inside, Mike.”

“Was it hard? Growing your soul?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said simply.

Oskar pointed at some bushes, gleaming with sapphire fruit the size of a kiwi. “Blood-berries. Their skins are blue, but their flesh is crimson. They also taste like hell.” We started picking.

“God only knows what she needs ‘em for. But she needs ‘em for something. It’s none of my concern.” He stopped picking, his fingers stained red. “This isn’t a patch on what she did for me, Mike. Nothing I can do, for the rest of my life, adds up to how she helped me. All I can do is pay it forward by helping you. And, if you make it, if you get your soul back or build a new one out of your pieces, you can do the same.”

“All right,” I said, and kept picking. The bags were almost full when a question occurred to me. “Oskar, why doesn’t Violet come here and pick these berries herself?”

He started tying off his last bag of fruit. “Things prowl around these bushes. Dangerous things, at least to people with a lot of power. I don’t have much to speak of” – I thought of the rainbow ring – “and you’re pretty well empty. So it should be safe for. . .”

His voice trailed off, his eyes widened, and his hands dropped the bag. His mouth worked twice before he said, “Run!”

“What is it?” I asked, turning to look behind.

A giant eyeball with a radioactive green iris hovered over a nearby bush. It was staring at us. Malevolently.

“It’s one of the Eyes of the Dead God. The other one can’t be far away.” Oskar pulled at my shoulder and set me on a path. “Run! Make for Wyld Park. Follow the dead branches of the pines. Go!” He pushed me. I ran.

I looked back to watch him snatch up the fallen bag and wave it in front of the Dead God’s Eye. He was teasing it. Luring it down the other path. Away from me.

I ran, looking for dead branches.

When running from the giant Eye of a Dead God, it’s difficult to tell the type of tree a dead branch hangs from.

I got lost. Real lost. Real damn lost. The trees seemed closer together; the path, more twisting and root-hurdled. The sun was setting in front of me, red-gold and huge. I thought of the Eye, and shuddered.

I stopped and knelt at a brook in my path. Its cool, glassy waters refreshed me. Maybe I should wait here, in case Oskar got away from the Eye.

The voice that then spoke came from the brook. “Michael, you can’t stay here.”

I looked around, and saw nothing. I looked into the waters, and nothing was there. Nothing but my own reflection looking up at me.

“Michael, the Eye will be back here after dark. We have to go.”

“Who are you?”

My reflection's lips moved, mouthing the words I heard in my head: "I'm your Shadow. Look behind you."

I turned, and saw the setting sun had painted my outline against a tree trunk. My Shadow lifted its hand and waved, while my hands still cupped water. All right. I turned back to the brook and my Shadow's face. Good-looking guy.

"Listen," he said. "Go upstream until you find the pine on the west bank. It's not far. Go in the direction the dead branch points. You'll be in Wyld Park before you know it. But get out of there before it gets dark."

"How do you know all this? Didn't we just get here?"

My Shadow's face smiled. "You just got here, Michael. I've always been here."

I stood up, hoisted my bag of blood-berries, and walked upstream.

My Shadow spoke the truth. I found the pine and turned, letting the dead branches point my path. Within a few hundred yards, the quality of the forest had changed. The air smelled slightly different. I heard people in the distance.

I stepped out of the underbrush into a clearing – and found myself within a park, obviously deep within a city of some sort. The sun seemed to be higher than it had in the Wood. People were tossing Frisbees, packing up picnic baskets, and walking arm-in-arm.

I saw skyscrapers looming, peering down into the green meadow in which I stood. The buildings slowly slid around the perimeter: some shed finials and shrank below the tree line, while others sprouted gargoyles and grew heavenward.

A shining lake sprawled out in front of me, with a skinny bridge leading to an island. People congregated around the bridge and nearby food carts. I whirled around to find an iron fence behind me, which I was sure that I hadn't walked through. What made me doubly sure was that beyond the fence lay a city sidewalk, and beyond that, a city street. I had come straight from the depths of a trackless forest into the heart of an otherworldly Central Park without even noticing it.

Teleportation and a Dali-esque cityscape probably would have made me question my sanity that morning. As it was now, it just made me hungry. Tying my bag of blood-berries through a belt loop, I started walking towards the food carts looking for something more edible.

"Deep fried bees' knees! Get 'em while they're hot! Sweet and tangy, crunchy and munchy! Bees' knees!"

"Soul cream? Have a soul cream? Sharing a thin memory of a winter gets you a frosty soul cream!"

Awash in the vendors' calls, I walked to what looked like a hot dog cart. As I got closer, I saw the letters on the umbrella spelled out "Dragon's Tails." Whatever. Any port in a storm. "Gimme one –" I began, and choked when I saw the vendor's face under the striped umbrella. The man had an elephant's head.

He saw me goggling, and made a snorting trumpet of annoyance through his trunk before replying. "Gotta getoutda Park at sunset." He wore a Steelers' baseball cap, and the short hairs along his proboscis gleamed with the last of the sun's rays. "Maket fast. Whaddaya want?"

"G-Gimme one with mustard," I said.

Lickety-split, a dragon's tail - slathered in brown mustard, wrapped in a bun - sat in his hand. "That'llbeyer last firstdate."

The words didn't seem to make any sense.

He trumpeted again in a slightly-cheesed-off tone. "New here, amiright?"

"Yup."

"Holdout yerhand." As I did so, he continued. "Tinkofda lasttime youwuz onna firstdate."

Myra from accounting: cute smile, great legs, no personality. Saw an Oscar nominee at a matinee, had Dim Sum for dinner. Home by ten. Nice enough time, no great shakes, no follow-up dates yet.

And suddenly, there was something in my hand. A black fortune cookie. Ominous.

The vendor's trunk bounced up and down as he nodded. "Awright. Just tinkabout sharing dat memory widdme, and I'll tinkabout sharing dis memory widdydu."

I felt a quiver, a shimmy, and a snap, and in my hand was the dog. The vendor held the cookie.

"You still remember her, Myra, right?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I took a bite of the tail. Tasted like tandoori chicken. On a bun. With mustard. Not bad.

"You'll learn, buddyboy. Just makedamn sure yadon't sell what you're supposed to share, awright?" He pocketed the cookie. "Pleasedoin'bidnesswitcha." Stubby fingers on stubby arms reached up to close the umbrella. The sun was setting again.

I swallowed a mouthful of dragon tail. "Hey, do you know where would I find a Mage named Violet?"

"Tower Row." His hands full of umbrella, the vendor pointed with a jerk of his head. "Luckyguy: go oudda dagate and crossda street. It's righttherenow."

I thanked the elephant man, complimented his wares, turned, and walked out the Park's gate.

I stepped onto the sidewalk outside Wyld Park, and the first thing I noticed was that there were few pedestrians, cars, or trucks. Looking down the wide avenue – which began to *curve*, bending around the Park as I watched – I saw a guy on a bicycle about six blocks away. Not what I'd call bustling for such a large city; more like a lazy autumn Sunday afternoon, after all the tourists had flown south for the winter.

Then, I saw a chunky lady about a block away *jump* across the street, from sidewalk to sidewalk. A thirty foot standing broad jump. And as soon as her chubby little feet hit the concrete, I knew how to jump like that myself... only I didn't have the oomph to do it yet. It was just like when I saw Oskar open the Gate. My soul was too weak to do stuff like that right now.

I walked down towards the crosswalk at the corner, looking at the buildings. The street sign said it was Tower Row, and there were certainly a bunch of towers along it – ranging from the medieval to the science-fictional – as well as domes, manors, skyscrapers, and buildings shaped like mythological animals. I saw weird beings like the elephant-headed vendor walking in and out of some of them; I saw a white-bearded old guy in star-spangled robes step out of a pure black cylinder and fly away. Again, I quickly understood how he did it, and was crushed to realize that I didn't have anywhere near the soul-juice to be able to fly.

I came up on the crosswalk at the same time as another pedestrian: an old lady in a green shawl, just like the one my grandma used to wear. She looked like me, all jagged and cracked and hollow: another Dead Inside. Her green eyes twinkled at me as she asked, “Do you need to cross here, too?”

“I think so,” I replied to the gray-haired little old lady. “Hey, you wouldn’t know where a Mage named Violet lives, would you?”

She pointed towards a slim lavender spire across the street, which seemed to be inching west. “I think that’s her place: the Indigo Tower.”

“Thanks.” I turned to walk across the street, but she stopped me with a touch on my arm.

“I know you’re a little big to be a Boy Scout,” she said, “but could you help an old woman across the street? I’m Gwendolyn, the Crone.”

I smiled. “My name’s Mike, and I was a Scout. ‘Do a Good Turn Daily,’ and all that. I’d be glad to assist.” I offered her the crook of my arm, but she didn’t take it.

“It’s not that easy. That street is harder to cross than it looks. Take a step off.”

So I did – and sank a foot into what had looked like solid asphalt. “Whoa!” It was tough to move, like wading through deep snow or mud, but even heavier and stiffer. Thirty feet would be quite a chore.

“Can you still help me get across?” she asked, and there was something in her voice that made the cracks in my heart hurt even worse.

I thought about it a second, and made a decision. What the hell. “Hop on,” I said as I offered her my back, putting my hands on my hips.

She did, sticking her brown button-up boots through the loops formed by my arms and my torso. I started across. That little old lady wasn’t all that heavy, but it made the going just a bit rougher. Still, it was easy to see that she’d have never made it on her own. I buckled down and started slogging, letting my mind wander.

About halfway across, I started laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just thinking about Robin Hood and Friar Tuck, the frog and the scorpion, and St. Christopher. You’re not planning on doing something to me while we’re hip deep in street, are you?”

She laughed, too. “Nope, I’m not a holy man, forest outlaw, stinging scorpion, or the Baby Jesus. You don’t have to worry. But I will inflict a piece of advice on you: relationships are work, responsibility, and reward all in one.”

I chewed that over for a minute. “I’m not sure why you felt the need to tell me that at this moment.”

“Relationships are a two-way street.”

I shook my head, but after she said that, the going seemed a bit easier.

We reached the other side and she clambered down, her heels clicking on the solid walk. I levered myself up out of the asphalt, breathing a little heavier, but not particularly tired. I looked up with a grin. “Curbside service, ma’am.”

The old lady had *changed* during our crossing. She had turned young, her hair now black, her body now tall and shapely. Her eyes

glowed as she looked down into mine. “Well done, Michael,” she said, and touched my forehead. Heat seared through my skin, burning a path deep into me, filling me up a little inside. Imparting me with a drop of soul.

I fell down, gasping. “W-who-?”

“I am Gwendolyn, and in this form, I am your Anima. We’ll meet again, love. Be well, and good luck with Violet.” Then she faded away.

I crouched there on the sidewalk for a moment, regaining my breath. What the hell had just happened? Did it matter? I felt better – a lot better. Fuller. More whole. Who was she? We’ll meet again?

Lost in my thoughts, I almost didn’t see Lucy walk past me, holding a paper bag. She hadn’t seen me.

“Hey! Lucy!” I yelled. She turned back to look at me, and I saw her face go white. She spun on her heel and started to run.

I didn’t consider that it had been months since I last saw her. I didn’t think that she may have already used my soul for whatever purposes she had stolen it for. All I knew was that she wasn’t going to get away. Not this time.

She got away.

We were running – sometimes I gained on her, most of the time I lost ground. Blocks passed under my feet, the bag of blood-berries oscillated at my belt, and she just kept pulling away. I felt my energy dwindling, my breath coming heavy. I told myself that it was because of my exertions with carrying Gwendolyn across the street, but I knew that wasn’t it. Lucy just out-ran me. Then, at the end, just to add insult to injury, she did one of those Leaps up and over the street, and ducked into an alley.

With what I had gotten from Gwendolyn, I knew I had just enough soul-juice to make that kind of jump, but I didn’t want to risk my precious spiritual energy. She was gone. I stopped.

Then I looked around, and discovered what was worse than losing a race to a stinking soul-thief: the Indigo Tower was not in sight. Neither was Wyld Park.

I was lost, and it was getting dark.

I sat down on a Mage’s stoop, all carved with griffins and krakens and rhinoceroses, and rested my head in my hands. Streetlights along Tower Row flickered to life. I felt like crying.

“Why so glum, chum?”

The voice came from behind me. It was my Shadow, reclining against the steps.

“Hey. Did you see that?”

“Yup. So what?”

“Dude, she might have had my soul in that bag. Or at least she’d know where it is now. And I blew it. I could have used the juice to Leap, and I didn’t. I was afraid to lose it.”

My Shadow laughed. “I say again, ‘so what?’ Michael, you’re carrying a sackful of blood-berries. Don’t you know what that means?”

I looked at the back hanging from my pants and shook my head no.

“Each of those nasty little fruits is just dripping with essence, man. Chomp on a couple of them, and you’ll get oodles of soul-stuff back.”

“But Oskar was collecting them for Violet. He said she needs them.” But I looked at them, and smelled the rank juice from where they’d been bruised. They did stink... of power.

“You need them, too, buddy. You’ve got no soul – not a whole one at least.”

The tone in which my Shadow said this made me hesitant. “Shouldn’t I get them to her? Then she might be able to help me out.”

“All the help you need is right in that bag. Eat some of her berries, and you won’t need her help.”

I didn’t say anything, but thought, “Her berries?”

My Shadow snorted. “I’m just looking out for you, buddy. After all we’ve been through, you’d think you’d trust me.”

I pondered. On the one hand, what my Shadow said was true – if I ate the berries, I wouldn’t need to visit with the Mage Violet. But he had said, distinctly, “her berries.” They weren’t mine to take, no matter how much I needed them.

I said to my Shadow, “No.”

He shook his head in disgust, and went back to following my movements. But this time, it felt like he was mocking me.

The rush of warmth and wholeness that poured into me at that second lifted me up off of my ass, set me on my feet, and made my head swim. In refusing the temptation offered by my Shadow, I had gained more soul-energy. My vision blurred...

...and I Saw. The Indigo Tower rose through the fog clouding my eyes, and I knew where it was, right then. Four blocks west, one block north.

I started running. There were more pedestrians in this part of the neighborhood, so I side-stepped and swerved around the ones on the ground. One or two Leaped out of the way, raining curses down on me from building ledges. I resisted the temptation to Leap myself. If not for the chance to grab my own soul, then not for this.

As I ran, I wondered – I was fuller of soul-power than any time since the accident. But shouldn’t my vision have used up some of that? There were rules here that I didn’t understand. Yet.

Ahead, two ghosts started to pop out of a wall; when they saw me, they ducked back into it, their cries of alarm cutting-off in mid-yelp. I remembered: Raymond in the record store. I hadn’t had to do anything to See him. Maybe this was like that.

I skidded to a stop in front of the huge oak door of the Indigo Tower. My sneakers sent up tiny wisps of smoke. I untied the bag of blood-berries from my belt loop and knocked on the door.

A huge black cat with three blue eyes opened the door for me. “Yes?” it asked in a surprisingly deep voice.

“I have something for the Mage Violet.” I brandished the bag. “From Oskar the Sensitive.”

Omigod. Oskar! He could still be out there, running from the Eye of the Dead God. I hoped Violet could help him.

The cat stared at me, and blinked at me in a triocular cascade: left, middle, right. “Come with me,” it said, and sauntered deeper into the Indigo Tower.

I followed, walking down a short hallway which ended in a cozy little parlor. It didn’t look much different than a living room in the real world – stereo, television, bookshelves, Ansel Adams print on the wall. Sure, the color scheme was slanted towards blues and purples, but it wasn’t particularly outrageous or witchy-looking. Then I glanced out the window, and saw that the room – or I – had suddenly jumped about twenty stories. The City spread out under Violet’s living room like a concrete quilt. I looked back, and saw the front door. Magic.

A middle-aged woman walked into the room from another door. She had salt-and-pepper hair cut short and wide violet eyes. She wasn’t cute, or pretty, or beautiful – she was what they call a “handsome woman.” You know, a classy, solid, attractive type.

“Hello,” she said, and looked at the bag. “Are those for me?”

It all tumbled out in a rush as I handed her the bag. “Yes. I got them with Oskar, he said you needed them. But an Eye of the Dead God showed up, and he ran off to distract it so I could get away. Can you help him?” In my worry, I almost didn’t feel the now-familiar excitement as more soul-stuff trickled into me. Almost.

“Your concern for him is a good sign – Michael, is it? – for your own tragic situation. Keep it up.” She looked into the bag, “A little banged-about, but serviceable. I still need more, though.” She set the bag down on the glass-topped coffee table. “But to answer your question, no. Not directly.”

“Why not?” I asked, frustrated.

“Because if I popped over to the Wood looking for him, we’d both probably die. The Eyes hunger for power, and I’d be a beacon.” She studied me closely, and said, “You, however. You might be able to do something. That is, if Oskar yet lives.”

She turned and spoke to the television. “Show me Oskar.” The TV flipped on, and displayed an image of a scratched and bloody Oskar running down a brook in the moonlight. “Show me the Eye.” The scene pulled back, back, back, and showed the Eye on Oskar’s trail. It cast about like a bloodhound, but was moving fast. The image collapsed into a bright line, then a single point, then faded, just like on an old-time TV.

Violet turned back to me. “He’s alive, but not for long. The Eye is herding him away from the safe paths back to the City. And it looks like he’s been hit with the Stare at least once. As I said, I cannot go. But will you?”

There was nothing to deliberate about. He had saved my life – what there was of it, at least – by leading the Eye away. Time to return the favor. “What can I do?” I said, and immediately was struck by a wave of spiritual energy, although this time, it was tinged with chilling fear.

“Excellent,” said Violet. She walked over to a credenza that lolled under an Escher print. The décor increasing reminded me of the apartment of one of my Lit professors from college. She opened a drawer, and began rooting around in it.

The three-eyed cat came in, carrying a pair of reptile skin boots in his mouth. He didn’t look happy, and spat them out onto a rag rug near the coffee table.

Violet didn’t turn around, but said, “Thank you, Ricaard. Michael, put those on.”

Ricaard the cat sniffed disdainfully, and retreated to elsewhere in the Tower as I grabbed the boots. I sat down on a leather wingback chair, took off my half-melted sneakers, and slipped them on. They fit perfectly – magic.

“Ah, here we are.” She shut the drawer, walked over to me, and put a cowrie shell in my hand.

“Okay, what. . .” I began, but she interrupted.

“Those are Leaping Boots.” She pointed to my feet. “That is a Sea Key.” She pointed to the shell. “I will open a Gate from here to the Wood, somewhat off of Oskar and the Eye’s path. The Eye will be attracted to the Gate, and will swerve off. Meanwhile, you will run as fast as you can, scoop up Oskar, and find a pool of water in the brook wide enough for both of you to pass through.”

She sat down on the overstuffed sofa and continued. “You will then throw the Sea Key into the pool. When the water glows, dive

into it. You will be transported into the Sea, anywhere from a mile up to three miles from shore. Then you will run back here.”

“The boots will let me run on water, right?” I was beginning to get the hang of this place.

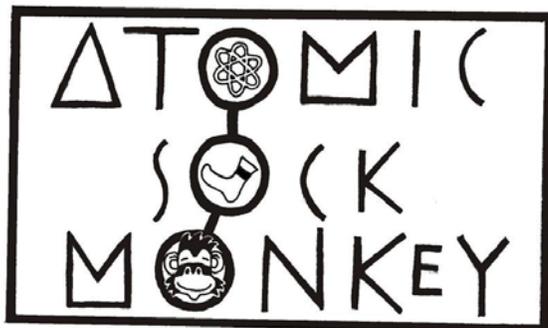
She smiled. “As you say. And, if possible, bring back the other bags of blood-berries. If you can’t, that’s okay; you and Oskar are more important. Any questions?”

“Just one. How do I make these things jump?” I tapped the toe of one of the boots on the floor.

“You don’t have to. They already know.”

I hitched my belt, made sure I had a good grip on the shell, and clicked my boot-heels together. “Let’s go.”

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MISSION

Atomic Sock Monkey Press is dedicated to high-quality, off-kilter, imaginative fun. Currently, that means tabletop games of both the "beer & pretzels" and roleplaying game (RPG) varieties.

In the future, we may expand into other areas. For now, Atomic Sock Monkey Press is concentrating on games.

GOALS

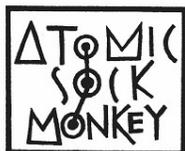
To produce fun games that are quirky, thought-provoking, professional, and affordable.

WHY ATOMIC SOCK MONKEY?

Well:

- Monkeys are funny.
- Sock Monkeys are weird.
- Atomic energy gives you superpowers (unless comic books have lied to me).

See? Simple.



ATOMIC SOCK MONKEY PRESS

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