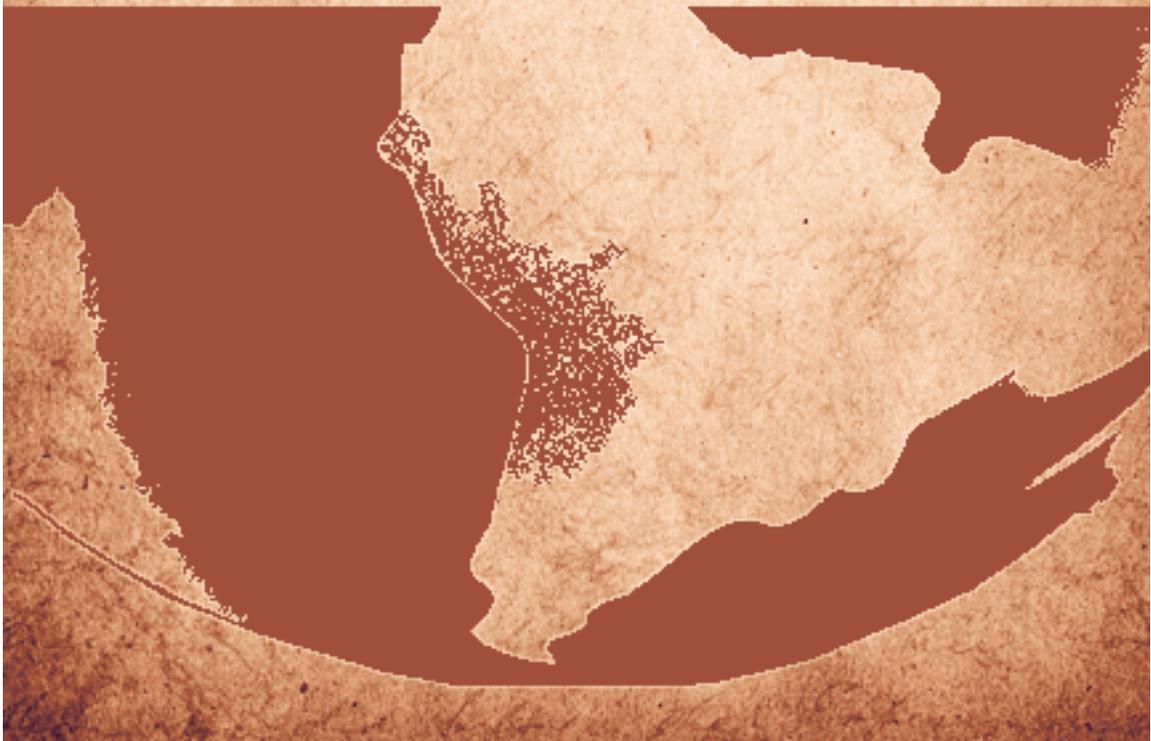




BENTO BOX 10

NEVILLE - EDWARDS - KINCAID - KENNEY



Artifice Comics Presents

BENTO BOX #10

Bite-Sized Fiction

by H.H. Neville, Martin David Edwards, Caleb Kinkaid, and Jason S. Kenney

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CONTENTS

TRIAL BY FIRE: PART ONE

by H.H. Neville

5

SUPERMAN'S REVENGE

by Martin David Edwards

7

CHEETAH

TIPS AND ASP

by Caleb Kinkaid

10

LOVE AMONGST STRANGERS: POST MODERN

PROBABILITY

by Jason S. Kenney

13

TRIAL BY FIRE: PART ONE

by H.H. Neville

Helsinki, Finland

Another Finnish winter, it stood out from none.

The sky gagged on a throatful of heavy, grey clouds. Slowly suffocating, the burdened sky gasped at the swirling winds; streams of frozen drool splashing from its dying mouth. The decaying spittle dribbled down to earth, a dense film of snow; the thickening puddle of snowy-drowning now choked the city's streets.

Standing tall amidst these streets—its chin thrust arrogantly amongst its haughty peers—stood a mighty brick and glass church, monument to a capitalist religion. Inside patrons feasted on the body of its Lord: cold hard cash.

Another Finnish financial steeple, it stood out from none.

At its feet passed the a disinterested populace, ignorant the rich baptism within. They had all heard of LNS FinDis (short for Laakkonen, Nylund, and Saari Financial Distributions), of course. Only in the way that an atheist might have heard of God.

From the unclean masses emerged a single man, intent on the morning worship.

It was too early for the city shoppers to speckle the streets, instead they fed a flock woolled in muted, pinstriped business suits, and solid red neckties; heavy leather briefcases in tow. He provided a black sheep to the boring white fluff.

He was not Finnish; he stood out from everyone.

His salt and pepper locks—salty like a slab of bacon—were swept back messily toward the back of the skull and tied into a careless knob with a couple rubber bands. His eyes were deep set, and constantly ticking back and forth. Like a clock he never slept, but never failed to keep exact time. His face betrayed him, said he was an in-shape late fifties. Forty-five years of hard living will do that. His dishevelled beard rested awkwardly along his chin, full in spots and truant in others.

A well-lived in canvas military jacket hung from his trim, but understated musculature. He had one of those bodies that got referred to as “scrappy.” Underneath the white and green hoops of a Celtic FC jersey peeked out from the unzipped olive jacket. Trendy slim fit dark denim covered still had the creases across the thighs from the clothing store. He hadn't the time to be picky, nor put them through a wash cycle. He simply wanted something that held to his frame but didn't limit range of motion. His feet were kept warm from the biting cold because of heavy wool socks and waterproof duck boots. His laces were done up tight and excess tucked inside his boots. A trick popular with military.

His strode with purpose and steely intent. Other pedestrians only served to get his way, and he brushed past them carefully, but firmly. He paid little attention the doors to the LNS FinDis lobby, opting toward the accessibility entrance as opposed to the revolving doors. He paid equally as little attention to anyone in the lobby. A studious-looking female receptionist took note of him, and his stark contrast to the employees around him, but he ignored her too, marshalling toward the security checkpoint and card readers.

The checkpoint had no metal detectors, but several security personnel babysitters-with-benefits. Not that it mattered, everyone would soon be alerted to his presence anyway.

Bento Box #10

He reached inside his pocket and fetched not an appropriate keycard, but a SIG Sauer P226 sidearm. A weapon he was extremely familiar with as it had been issued to him during his years in the British SAS. He steadied it in his right hand, and stabilised it with his left, spotting his first target. He pumped the trigger.

The single bullet travelled several meters before burying itself in skull, displacing blood and grey matter through a hole in fractured bone. The gunman quickly snapped to another target and squeezed, and then again until all of security buoyed face down in a pool of blood, like bobbing for apples. Then the screams kicked in.

The shooter turned to his six, glimpsing a rush toward the revolving doors. Panic did little to explain how they had all fled into a death trap. Like shooting fish in a glass barrel. He readied his firearm and pulled the trigger, connecting the dots across five skulls, colouring in the exit with five corpses, a minefield of tattered glass and litres of blood. Even with all the carnage, these first eight had been spared; these had been mercy killings. Anyone still alive was going to get much worse.

“I’mma hope the rest of yas know the Queen’s English,” addressed the shooter in a musky Scottish accent. “Because I’ll only say this once, yeah? Don’t fuckin’ move!”

For those still alive in the lobby, the only muscles not paralysed in fear belonged to the vocal chords. A few screams severed the silence, but mostly sorrowful sobs affirmed that they all understood. The Scottish gunman assumed that even if they didn’t understand, being a deadly crack shot, followed by the liberal use of obscenities would sell his intent. Both were part of the universal language.

The Scot stalked past heaps of frightened humanity toward the exits. Some were too afraid of him to look up as he passed, others watched him intently, hoping to barter with pleading eyes. He obliged them each with a cocksure smirk. All of them—himself included—had found themselves in the killing fields, not the negotiating table. He kept his pistol down at his side.

“I’mma hope,” he started off familiarly. “That you lot don’t think you can shake me down from all of this. That ship already sailed. I’m little but a gatekeeper. Make sure nobody get in or out.

“You see, I was sent here by a group, goes by the name of Salem. And while I was puttin’ down some of your mates, *my* mates was rigging this place to burn.

“Why? ‘Cause Witches burn. The Trials are coming again. Starting ‘ere with me.”

The gun in his hand slipped lazily from his grasp, clattered to the floor sending a shiver through the air. From the opposite pocket that he removed the P226, he freed another handgun: a revolver, this one painted in safety orange; a flare gun. Without fear or second thought he crammed the gun down his throat and pulled. The inside of his skull ignited, lighting up like the Fourth of July.

This display of freedom was mostly symbolic. From the bowels of the building, a cluster of ten oil drums punch drunk on plastic explosives erupted, ripping through edifice and flesh like hamburger, burnt to the crisp.

SUPERMAN'S REVENGE

by Martin David Edwards

“

If you had any initiative at all, you might actually get a sale,” Amit’s boss said. He was dressed in a black suit with thin white pinstripes, and red pinpricks glowered on his neck where he had cut himself shaving.

Amit nodded and tried to smile. But when he thought of his boss, his stomach turned to acid. There was nothing about him that Amit could like. He was a bully that refused even to share the tube of chocolate biscuits he kept on his desk.

When it was eight in the evening, Amit’s boss stood up from his desk and yawned. Following him at a distance through the office Amit watched him leave, followed by the receptionist. Her shift finished at eight, he remembered. Arriving back in the house where he rented a single room, he rattled his bedroom door to make sure it was locked. Sitting down on his bed, he reached under the mattress. A ridge pressing against his fingers told him that he had found what he was looking for.

Licking his lips, he unrolled the cover of a magazine. His pulse beating faster, he held up the cover showing a cartoon of Superman fighting a villain. Amit imagined Superman’s powerful blows landing on his opponent’s chest, his muscles rippling under his costume. With his arms wrapped in a protective ball around the magazine, he was soon fast asleep.

Back at work the next morning, Amit went to report to his boss already tapping at his computer.

“The hero of hard work. Some of us will be working late tonight while you are tucked up in bed,” his boss smirked.

“I am afraid to report I have a filling that has come loose,” Amit said. He inserted his fingers into his mouth and wobbled a tooth for emphasis.

“There might be a pair of pliers in my drawers,” his boss replied.

“My dentist can see me at lunch time. I can go and come back in my time for my afternoon calls.”

“Your enthusiasm to support my efforts is commendable.”

“I’m keen to progress.”

“We’re keen for you to make your targets.”

At noon, Amit left the office and looked for a window displaying the sign that he wanted. Entering the shop, he went straight to the counter.

“I know what I like,” he said to the cashier. Thumbing through a catalogue, he pointed at a photograph and took out his wallet to pay.

Back in the office, Amit tucked the bag containing his purchase under his desk and waited for his boss to begin his daily afternoon critique.

“I guess the tooth doesn’t hurt anymore now we’re nearing your finishing time,” his boss said, mimicking a whine.

“The dentist gave me root canal treatment. But I had an injection first,” Amit replied, touching his jaw for emphasis.

“I like my canals done raw. Injections make me dribble.”

Bento Box #10

At nine in the evening, Amit looked across the office. His boss's suit jacket was draped over his chair but the seat was empty. He closed down his computer and picked up the bag from under his desk. Amit estimated he had five minutes maximum while his boss remained in the toilet; he was prone to taking the newspaper with him to read the sports news. At the reception, he knelt down and looked for the grey box bolted to the underside of the receptionist's desk. Running his fingers across its front, he selected a button marked with a cross and pressed down. With a look over his shoulder at the toilet door, he then slipped into a meeting room carrying the bag. Removing his clothes until he was dressed only in his underpants, Amit shivered in the cold; he had forgotten that the room was heated only during the day. Removing two pouches from the bag, he unzipped their tops and removed their contents carefully; it would be a shame if he caused a tear. Wrestling with a pair of blue tights, he struggled to raise them above his knees. His attempt with the matching top was more fruitful, although he had to breathe in to avoid creating a bulge below the S sewed to his chest. But the red plastic boots were two sizes too small and he was forced to go barefoot instead.

Tying a red cape around his shoulders, he checked his watch. Four minutes and fifty seconds had passed. Risking a peek into the office, he saw his boss's jacket was still hanging on the back of his chair. Hiding under the reception desk, he waited until he heard the sound of the toilet door swinging open. Then he reached up to a panel on the wall and turned off a row of switches one-by-one. The lighting dimmed until only the beams of the moon remained to provide any illumination.

"I'm still working," his boss called out from the office.

Amit bit his tongue. Speaking was not part of his plan.

"I can't type in the dark," his boss continued in a louder voice.

Creeping forwards into the office, Amit held one foot up at a time and tried not to squeak on the carpet. It was just as well the boots failed to fit, he thought.

His boss was hunched over his desk and trying to read a sheaf of paper from the printer.

"Humour me," his boss said without looking up.

Amit edged closer silently in the darkness. Standing immobile behind his boss's chair, he paused for moment. But there was no going back. Holding the arms of the chair in his hands, he spun his boss round to face him.

"Have I fallen asleep?" his boss asked, his eyes bulging wide with fright.

Amit shook the chair, rocking his boss so hard that his head wobbled from side to side in a blur.

"If I'm awake I'm going to be sick," his boss declared, holding his head in his hands and groaning.

Amit spun the chair back to the desk; he did not want to waste the rest of his evening at home cleaning his costume.

His boss heaved in a gulp of air, shaving pricks bobbing on his Adam's Apple. Turning around, he looked at Amit face-to-face. Spittle coloured with brown dribbled out of the corner of his mouth.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Amit said nothing and pulled the chair closer to him so that their knees were touching. Opening his mouth, he bent down and licked his boss's cheek. He tasted chocolate and saw that the tube of biscuits sitting on the desk was empty.

"I'm married with two children," his boss stuttered, wiping at his cheek.

With a kick of his foot, Amit tipped the chair off-balance. As it spun on its side, his boss fell to the carpet with a thump.

"I'm too talented as a leader to die," his boss whimpered.

Pressing down with his foot, Amit felt the flesh of his boss's stomach bulge like jelly.

"Tell me what you want and I'll give you anything," his boss pleaded.

Bento Box #10

Amit pressed his foot harder until he heard a trickling sound. Looking down in the moonlight, he could see a dark stain spreading across the middle of his boss's trousers.

"Just do what you have to do," his boss croaked.

Amit cupped his boss's face in his hands, his fingers on each cheek. Turning sideways, his boss closed his eyes tightly shut. Amit then reached behind his back to spread his cape with a rustle. Tiptoeing backwards, he crept away in the darkness without saying a word.

Returning to the office the following morning, Amit saw his boss wagging a finger at the receptionist.

"He had a knife in his hand and threatened to kill me. I had to give him my wallet and even my Oyster Card before he was done," his boss said. "Rewind the security tape from last night and you'll see how close I came to being murdered."

Reaching under her desk, the receptionist pressed a button on the grey box. A miniature screen flickered into life, only to show hissing white dots against a black background. Then the box whirled to a stop and the screen turned blank.

"Good morning sir," Amit said behind him with a cough.

His boss turned around and looked at him with bloodshot eyes.

"Today I would like to be more successful with my calls, please kind sir," Amit continued with a bow.

His boss looked back at Amit with a blush. Brushing down his suit, he walked out of reception without a reply.

"I blame his dreams on eating all those chocolate biscuits," Amit said to the receptionist with a shrug.

CHEETAH
TIPS AND ASP
by Caleb Kinkaid

She pulled her tongue out of his cheek and thumbed the spittle from her bottom lip. “There.” Her voice was a lilting whisper, as she swept the bangs from his eyes with a clawed fingertip. “Better now?”

“Nuh...” His mouth hung agape, a lowercase “O” slightly aquiver. Anticipation clenched his eyelids tight.

“N-not yet. Maybe we can go another round?” A dimple dented his cheek.

She peeled the vinyl cowl off the laminate floor and slapped it across his bare chest. His eyes flared open.

“Get dressed.”

“Che says...” He squeezed onto the grand staircase around an eager geriatric couple smearing yellow body paint in “M”-shapes across their nude torsos. “Whose idea of a fetish is this?”

“It’s a civics lesson.” She dug a nail into the ivory railing and sliced a fresh groove, as she descended into the leathered and latexed gathering.

“Dressing up like a bunch of dead science heroes...?” He plucked nervously at the fabric between his fingers.

She pointed a claw at the portly man wearing stars-and-stripes nipple tassels, a plastic mask, and little else. “The President of the United States of America.” She flicked flecks of elephant tusk in the POTUS’ direction. “He screws everyone.”

Shifting uneasily on the velveteen carpet that lined the lobby of the Grand Burke Hotel, her companion tried to keep his backside hidden as he adjusted his hot pink thong. “Was CandyAss even a dude?”

She shrugged. “The names were randomly assigned. You got who you got.”

He crossed his arms over his still-stinging chest and cocked his head, then his brow. “There were two names in that e-vite.”

“Yes.” Straightening the corset over her fur-lined skin, she smirked over her shoulder at her partner, revealing a hint of fang. “And I’m obviously the Cheetah.”

Weaving through a dozen blindfolded men playing “Find the Scarab” with an overly ticklish woman in a magenta wig and matching mini-skirt, the couple made a beeline for the bar. A waiter with spiky hair of an unnatural blue hue stopped them short.

“Canapé?”

“If I only had some courage,” Candy sighed, eying up a tumbler glass just out of grasp.

Cheetah mustered her best polite smile and reached for a hors d’oeuvre, only for her hair to stand on end as a jolt ran up her arm.

“Sorry.” The waiter bowed sheepishly. “I’m Staticy.”

“I passed on the eel as well,” a voice boomed from behind the pair. “Shocking, I know.”

The couple turned to find their obese host stroking the head of a crouched man in a dingo pelt.

“Good evening, Mister President.” The cat-woman extended a clawed hand.

Bento Box #10

The POTUS pressed it to his plastic visage. “You must be Cheetah.”

“A pleasure, sir.” She curtsied.

“That is the goal, isn’t it? And, that makes you—” The host’s hand reached around and pinched the male guest’s exposed back check. “—Ah, yes, CandyAss.”

Candy gulped.

The President finally released the gluey glute and studied his fingers as he rubbed them together. “Impressively firm but not sticky enough, my boy.”

“I...uh...” The man in the hot pink thong and leather chaps stood motionless, his expression as blank as his vinyl cowl.

“Not to worry, my dear.” The host patted Candy’s meager bicep. “I have just the thing.” He slapped his canine-cloaked companion on the back and barked, “Clear a path to the boudoir, Talisman!”

CandyAss shot Cheetah a glance, and she responded with a curt nod before stepping toward the President. “We’re a package deal.”

The Commander-in-Chief’s vac-u-formed grin never wavered. “The more the merrier! Come, come!”

After hurtling down the halls on all-fours, Talisman stood upright to open the twin doors of the penthouse suite.

“That’s a good boy.” The President plucked a piece of bacon from the dining cart inside the doorway and tucked it into his pet’s slobbering mouth.

“This is quite the spread.” Cheetah took a mental inventory of all the marble, silk, and etched glass, while CandyAss pilfered a handful of crispy pork.

“You should see it lying down.” The POTUS motioned toward the California King canopy bed, his rub-on tan rubbing off as his armpit squeezed his tasseled teat. “Please, make yourselves comfortable, while I find something suitably sticky.”

Cheetah watched the President pull apart the dining cart. CandyAss watched Cheetah. Talisman watched them both.

“Now, I usually prefer fig jam.” The Commander-in-Chief spun on his heels, a glass jar in hand. “But, honey will have to do in a pinch.”

Candy winced at the word “pinch”.

Cheetah put on her smile. “Your secret’s safe.”

The President stuck two pudgy digits into the sweet goop. “And, my safe’s a secret.”

The cat-woman paused. Her eyes narrowed. Her partner swallowed hard.

“Oh, you didn’t think I noticed you casing my bedroom?” The host rubbed his hands together, heating the honey. “I know who you are, my dear. I’d recognize my favorite waitress anywhere. The fur rather gives you away.”

“Favorite?!” A snarl parted Cheetah’s lips, baring her fangs. “You’ve stiffed my tip every day for five years!”

“Much like you’ve stiffened mine,” the host hooted.

The feline lunged. The canine leapt. The host held up a glazed hand.

“Please. No need to resort to baser instincts. Gratuitous violence is no substitute for gratuity.”

The President stooped to address the man in the dingo pelt. “Leave us, Talisman. I’ll be fine.”

His pet slinked back into the hall slowly, still staring down the cat-woman.

“Now, then.” Wiping the honey across his chest, the host addressed his guests. “The money’s under the mattress, naturally.”

CandyAss wasted no time tearing off pillows, blankets, and sheets in a flurry of silk and feathers.

Bento Box #10

“Take all that you can carry.” The POTUS held a door open. “It won’t matter.”

“Because you’ve got plenty to spare.” Cheetah loosened her corset to stuff in another handful of bills.

“Oh, no, because this city won’t exist, come tomorrow.” The President’s matter-of-fact tone was undercut by his ever-present grin. “At the stroke of midnight, Lunar Central Time, we’ll celebrate a very special bicentennial... with a bang.”

“Bicentennial? I hate to break it to you, Prez, but this town hasn’t been around for two hundred years.” The cat burglar slipped a single into her partner’s g-string.

The Commander-in-Chief sighed. “No one has a sense of history anymore. Two hundred years ago tomorrow, the original Pacific City was destroyed, and we’ll celebrate by re-enacting those events. Every municipal building is rigged to explode, and, once the damage is done, the water supply will be loosed to deal with any survivors. New Pacific City, like its forefather, will be a flooded crater by dawn.”

CandyAss looked at the President, then at Cheetah, then back to the President. “Rhesus monkey and Joseph... Okay, all right, I’ll be the one to say it, then: you’re insane.”

“Perhaps, my boy, or perhaps I’m merely a man clinging desperately to a long-gone past.” The POTUS gripped his mask and lifted it upward. “You see, some events leave a mark.” He trailed a sticky finger along the scar that ran from his scalp, past his glass eye, through his lips, and to his chin.

“Che says...” Candy couldn’t look away — until Cheetah grabbed him by the cowl and twisted his head in her direction.

“Hey, eyes on the prize.” She shoveled currency into his arms. “We’re ready to roll here.”

“I had dreams of being your sidekick.” The host traced the caricatured features of the mask with his fingertips. “A Cheney to your Bush. But, you left me for good, and society left me for dead. What a perfect time for my powers to kick in: pinned under a bank vault with no hope of rescue, drowning and resurrecting every day like clockwork.”

“Great story and great party, but we’ve gotta go.” Cheetah pushed past the host, pulling CandyAss by the hand behind her.

A row of taxis hovered in wait outside the hotel’s main entrance. Cheetah tore open the door of the first one she saw and leapt inside.

“Where to?” The cabbie — a thin, bearded, bobbing head from what the passengers could see — released the brake.

“Just drive.” The furred female pulled off her top, as her partner peeled off his chaps. Bills fluttered throughout the cabin. “Drive as far from here as you can.”

The driver smiled. “Whatever you say.”

“Twenty... Sixty... Eighty...” Candy lined the back seat with neat piles of cash, “One thousand.”

“A grand from the Grand.” Cheetah slumped in her seat.

“1k?” The cabbie snorted. “1k won’t even get you out of this city, let alone off the moon.”

LOVE AMONGST STRANGERS: POST MODERN

PROBABILITY

by Jason S. Kenney

“

Do you realize that you've been talking to yourself?”

Jeffery Carter's attention snapped from the bar in front of him and the world came back into focus as he noticed the woman seated to his right, the smile on her lips showing in her copper eyes, and he breathed a sigh of relief to find her friendly.

“That would explain why my drink is empty,” Jeffery said.

“No, that's just because of shitty service.” The woman shifted in her seat, reached up to tuck some loose strands of her pitch black hair behind her ear, her smile never changing.

Jeffery thought she might be flirting with him. But there was a nagging voice in his ear...

“They're telling you not to trust me, aren't they?” she said and Jeffery stiffened. His eyes flickered from her to the bartender at the other end of the bar who stood there cleaning a glass and eyeing him as if he'd insulted someone's mother.

“Who are you?”

“Someone with a shared interest,” she said, pulling a purse into her lap and fishing inside.

“In?”

She looked up, still smiling. “Angels and scarabs, Jeffery.” She pulled what looked like a flip-top lighter out of her purse, opening it and sparking the wick before setting it on the counter still burning.

“And that?”

“Is magic, Jeffery.” She nodded down the bar. Jeffery looked to find the bartender absolute still, as if frozen in time. “We have five minutes. I'm with UKXD.”

“Oblique...”

“Doesn't know I'm here. And I'd like to keep it that way, so let's just keep this meet and greet between you and me, eh?”

“Who are you?”

“I'm from the Probability Department.”

“Probability Department?”

“Think a thousand monkeys at a thousand typewriters, only instead of Shakespeare we're predicting the future.”

“Fortune tellers.”

“More or less. Mister Oblique told you to go to Prague in six months, am I correct?” Jeffery nodded and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Hold still,” she said, putting a hand on his thigh, “this thing has about a three foot radius. Did he give you any further details?”

“No,” Jeffery said with a sigh.

“Then he's trying to get you killed.”

Jeffery laughed and shook his head. “Not surprised...”

Bento Box #10

“In six months time you will find Erlend Romanov in Prague,” the woman said, “but Prague is a big city and six months is a long time. What happens between now and then, where you go, who you talk to, all of that will have a great deal of impact on the success of your encounter.”

“And whether or not I survive?” She nodded. “And what does the Probability Department have to say on the matter?”

“Were I not to meet you here you’d have charged head first into a situation that would not end very well for you, Jeffery.”

“How so?”

“There are a lot of people very interested in your whereabouts, Jeffery. And dead or alive is in their lexicon.”

“They’re welcome to try,” Jeffery said.

“And they would have succeeded. But now that you and I have met things are looking up for you.” She dug back into her purse, pulling out an envelope and a pen. “There is someone you must meet before you leave London. She’s someone who shares our interests.”

“Angels and scarabs,” said Jeffery as she wrote on the envelope.

“Angels and scarabs,” she said, pushing the envelope in front of Jeffery. “Meet with her soon, within 48 hours preferably. Stay no longer than the afternoon. After that, use these documents,” she tapped the envelope, “to get out of England. Wherever you go is up to you, but be discreet and be in Prague in five months, not six.”

“Why the change?”

“Because I met you here, Jeffery. Now everything has changed.” She nodded to the lighter on the bar. “You can keep that. It’s the number one tool in a probabilist’s arsenal and if anyone else gave you theirs I’d have their head for it. But I run the department and can always get another.”

Jeffery reached for it but she grabbed his hand. Her grip was gentle, her touch cold despite the heat of the room.

“As long as the flame burns you get extra time, but only five minutes and it takes about twenty four hours to recharge after each use.”

“So it stops time?”

“Relatively speaking.”

Jeffery gently picked up the lighter, making sure not to put the flame out.

“Who are you?” he asked. She smiled.

“Oblique’s opposite but equal reaction.” Jeffery stiffened.

“Opposite but equal,” Gasparo Leonzio had said of Oliver Twisted before the insane man had taken him.

Her smile grew wider. “Call me Miss Direct.”

“Clever.”

“In more ways than one. You’ll want to pocket that,” she said, nodding to the envelope on the bar. Jeffery grabbed it and shifted to tuck it into his back pocket.

“Two last bits of advice,” the woman said as she stood up. “The blonde Leer is psychic.”

Jeffery looked around the bar for a blonde. He didn’t find one. In fact, the place was empty aside from the two of them and the still frozen bartender.

“Blonde Leer?”

“And two,” she said, leaning close, whispering, “the bartender is a robot and he is going to try to kill you.”

She blew out the flame.

Bento Box #10

The movement out of the corner of his eye was quick but Jeffery had a split second head start. He grabbed the woman and dropped to the floor as the bartender's hand sent a blast through where they had both been seated.

"Go," Jeffery said, leaping to his feet and immediately being sent across the empty room, through chairs and tables, and back to the floor after being on the receiving end of one hell of a punch.

He cursed as he pushed himself out of the splintered mess he'd created. The woman was gone as the robot came off the top of the bar, hand outstretched, glowing.

Carter cursed again as he was blasted through the wall of the bar and out into the street.

He shook his head as he pushed himself up. Too many things were happening at once: the woman who knew an awful lot, this robot bartender attacking him, the envelope in his back pocket, the magical lighter of time travel, this damn robot bartender attacking him...

The crunching sound of the robot stepping into brick and debris snapped his attention back and Carter was quick to his feet, spinning around, fists up.

"Everyone, run!" he shouted to the people nearby, in case they hadn't panicked at the sight of a man being thrown through a wall and surviving.

There was silence as Carter planted his feet and the bartender stood unmoving. Carter glanced around and found the street to be empty.

Which was odd for any part of London at this time of day.

"I thought we could get some privacy," a voice said behind him. "Wouldn't want any interruptions after all."

Jeffery spun around to face the voice and found a couple, a man and a woman, both smiling at him as if they'd been waiting for his arrival.

"I see you've met Seven," said the woman, a redhead in a leather catsuit.

"Or Seven met him," said the man, also frighteningly in a tight leather catsuit.

He was blonde.

And laughed at his own terrible joke. They both did. Jeffery didn't laugh as he looked from the two of them to Seven.

"You're a hard person to find, Jeffery Carter," said the redhead. "You have no idea what my brother and I had to go through to find you."

"I'm afraid you've got the wrong guy," Jeffery said, trying to figure out the situation.

They both laughed.

"Not sure why that's funny," Jeffery said, stepping back to try and get some distance between himself and the others. "You're psychic, right?" The blonde man was suddenly confused.

"Maybe..." he said.

"How would you know that?" the redhead asked.

"I know things. If he's Seven," Jeffery nodded toward the robot bartender, "where are the other six?"

The blonde smiled. "You already met two of them. But it's been a while."

He let that hang for a bit while Jeffery was left confused, having no idea what he was talking about. The blonde signed and strode across the street, past Jeffery and to the robot.

"The Siege Engine Mark Seven," he said, patting the robot on the shoulder. Jeffery hissed a curse and hoped no one heard. "S. E. Seven. Top of the line, bleeding edge technology from Burke Enterprises, combining innovative robotics with the fresh face of the boy next door. He can also make a mean drink, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know," Jeffery said, "service in there was shitty at best."

Bento Box #10

“Oh?” Blonde looked to his robot friend and studied its face. “That’s unfortunate. We’ll have to work on it, won’t we, Shanda?”

The redhead named Shanda giggled and shook her head, shrugging as Jeffery looked to her. “Boys and their toys. Cava, dear, can we get down to business please?”

“Of course,” the blonde named Cava said, turning from the robot and back to Jeffery. “So you can surrender now if you’d like, or we can have Seven here beat you into submission and we can just drag you back to Australia. Alive, of course, they won’t pay for a corpse unfortunately.”

“Sure they will,” Jeffery said, “just not as much.”

“Which is as good as no payment at all,” said Shanda.

“So we’d like you alive,” said Cava.

“Except I’m not who you think I am.” Shanda sighed and Cava shook his head.

“Enough games, Mister Carter...”

“Wait,” Jeffery said, holding up his hands. He pointed at the redhead. “Shanda?” He pointed to the blonde. “Cava?” They each nodded in turn. “Leer?” They both nodded again.

Jeffery started laughing and put his head in his hands.

“Seven!” shouted Cava. “Attack!”

The Siege Engine was quick but Jeffery leapt into the air as Seven passed where he had been standing. He landed and spun, ducked to avoid a punch that probably would have hurt like hell, and quickly came back up with an uppercut that sent Seven’s head airborne.

The robot crumbled to the ground before its head landed down the street.

“Top of the line?” Jeffery spun to the Leers. “Call me when they release Seight.”

The world went white.

“So you are psychic,” Jeffery said to the right emptiness around him. “Why didn’t you do this sooner?”

“I didn’t want it to come to this, Mister Carter,” said Cava, suddenly appearing in front of Jeffery. “It’s a bit of a strain to hold all those innocent bystanders away, but for you I’ll go the extra mile.”

“What about for her?” Jeffery thumbed over his shoulder and an angel emerged, growing to tower over him, her eyes afire, wings spread wide, a scream of fury emerging from her lips.

The world came back and Cava Leer went down with a scream, clutching his head.

“Cava!” Shanda rushed to her brother’s side and clutched him, turning her glare onto Jeffery. “What did you do to him?!”

“Not me,” Jeffery said, fishing at the chain around his neck, pulling a scarab from under his shirt and showing it to her.

“So this is going to go one of two ways.” He started walking toward the Leers as he tucked the scarab back into his shirt, Cava holding his head as if it were going to crack open, Shanda’s breathing coming in quick huffs. “You can take your toy and go home or I can leave you in a similar state and let the authorities clean it up.”

“I have another idea,” Shanda said, her eyes suddenly glowing red. Jeffery paused and readied himself.

“No,” gasped Cava, “not like this.”

There was a pop and they suddenly disappeared.

Jeffery stood there for a moment and listened. Nothing but the noises of London. He looked around and saw that Seven and its head were gone. He was alone in the street next to the hole he had made in the side of the pub.

Bento Box #10

He pat his pockets to make sure the envelope and lighter were still there and nodded to himself in satisfaction.

With a shake of his head and a soft curse, Jeffery took off down the street and away from the mess he'd made.

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