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J.H. Wear

Castle

The Fall to Domum

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1555-5488 Vol.79-07SE

Midnight Showcase Fiction Presents
ISSN 1555-5488 Vol.79-07SE

Castle

By
JH Wear

Midnight Showcase Fiction
www.midnightshowcase.com

Chapter Three

For Jon it was a bewildering few seconds. He hadn't expected the dwarf to actually pull himself off the ledge. The dust and dirt on the marble floor caused him to lose his own footing and he tumbled out of the window while still holding on to the dwarf, banging his knee in the process. There was an odd shimmering around them with the air smelling like ozone. Liz's scream disappeared abruptly as the sky changed from mid-afternoon to night. A few seconds later he hit the top branches of a tree, causing him to release his grip on the intruder in the process. The ground was not quite as forgiving, but Jon landed with a roll and eventually stopped against another tree on an embankment.

The dwarf wasn't quite as fortunate and continued to roll past him and down the muddy slope. He moaned as he tried to dig his fingers into the soft ground.

Jon reacted quickly and dived head first, his arm extended towards the sliding dwarf. His fingers clutched at the shirt collar and held fast as he halted the downward progress. Jon looked up from his stomach to see empty space beyond the dwarf's legs.

"It's okay, I got you."

He hauled the struggling man back to the tree, where the dwarf pounded his arm with his fist.

"Ye moron! Idiot! Imbecile! Look what you done!"

"Hey, I just saved your life for crying out loud." Jon took a step back from what he thought was a crazed individual.

"Stupid, that's what you is!" the dwarf suddenly stopped and looked at Jon, "What yer mean you saved me life?"

"Just that. I stopped you from falling down into the river or whatever is down there. I saved your bacon."

"I don'ts knows about that, you can't prove it," but the reply was without conviction.

"Bullshit, you ungrateful thief. I saved your life and you didn't even say thanks," Jon found himself getting a bit hot, "So say thank you already, will ya?"

"Keeps yer loud mouth down, someone might hear us. You don'ts know for a fact yer saved me life, there's ain't no proof."

"Prove, why would I have to prove ..."

“Do ya even have a clue what’s going on here? Of course not! Let’s just jumps out of a window and see what happens. That’s you. Oh the fools I has to put up with. If ya want thanks, then thanks for nothing.”

With that he flopped on the ground and covered his eyes with his right arm in a tragic pose.

“I, I don’t understand. You ...”

“Of course ye don’ts understand,” the dwarf after a reluctant thank you resumed the offensive, “Because you’re an idiot. Why, oh why couldn’t ye let me be?”

“You stole something from ...”

The dwarf suddenly sat up. “Says who? I finds it there by itself. No one around. Tis mine now,” he sighed, “Gotta think what to do, what to do. Big, big problem.”

“What problem?”

Though by the fact it was now suddenly night time meant something had happened. He looked around, and realized he didn’t recognize the street in front of him, and instead of the iron fence around the Miller Castle there stood a stonewall.

“Shut up, me trying to think.”

The dwarf sat cross-legged, holding his chin with one hand.

By the time the dwarf jumped up and said, “I got it!” Jon had figured out he wasn’t in Ballymillier anymore. Besides the stonewall around the castle, the tree was also bigger and the buildings across the street appeared to be something from another time. The structures were made from stone blocks with wooden-framed windows, looking like they belonged in the middle ages.

“That’s good to hear. My name is Jon McKinney, by the way.”

The dwarf looked at him suspiciously as he relied “Ye can call me Gilbert.” Then with a snarl that Jon suspected was a semi-permanent feature on his face, pointed across the street at one of rough stone buildings. “Let’s go to the tavern, I knows someone there who can help us.”

At first he had trouble figuring out which building was being pointed to by the short dirty finger, but the dwarf gestured again and shouted out in a rather thunderous voice for a small person.

“Idiot! The tallest one is the tavern obviously. What else could the Cobbler Inn look like?”

Jon felt like protesting he didn’t know that the tavern was part of the Cobbler Inn but thought that would only bring another round

insults; he really didn't seem to be the friendliest person he'd met. Jon glanced up and down the dark street, the stone blocks looking damp where the light from the open windows reflected on them. A horse with a dark-cloaked rider slumped on the saddle walked by, hooves clacking on the hard surface.

"Couldn't I just climb back up through the window? It's high but maybe with a ladder I could ..."

"No, don't be daft. It don'ts work like that. Now let's gets be going."

Cautiously, as he had no intention of being run over by a horse, Jon crossed the street with Gilbert, who continued scowling and muttering to himself. The road was made up of uneven flat stones cemented together, giving a hard, durable surface. Perhaps it wasn't ideal for wheeled vehicle, but for horses it worked fine. The buildings were separated from the road by a wooden sidewalk that appeared to sit on top of the edge of the road. Jon later found out there were practical reasons for such an arrangement. Rain would wash the road of dirt and horse droppings under the sidewalk where eventually it would follow the length of the road, finally making its way to a small creek.

Jon crossed the road with Gilbert close at his heels. A low rumbling cry sounded from high above, startling Jon to stop short and look up. He spotted a large bird-shaped object glide above as Gilbert ploughed into the back of his legs.

"Imbecile! What the hell did ya stop for?"

Jon picked himself off from the street, wiping his hands on his pants.

"Did you see that, that thing up there? It was huge ..."

"No I didn't, I was too busy running into your ass. Can we cross thee road before we get runs over by a bloody horse?"

The tavern doors were well-lacquered with black paint and a gold circle drawn inside a pentagon in the center of the right door. Jon stopped to look at the twelve-inch symbol but Gilbert wasn't in a mood for any inspection.

"Hurry up, hurry up! I don'ts want to stand out here all blooming night!"

He turned the handle and pushed against the massive door, surprised to find it swung open fairly easily after the initial shove. It squeaked just a little but that noise was subdued compared to the boisterous noise that roared from the tavern.

In front of them stood an old wooden counter where a heavysset bald innkeeper looked up from a plate he was eating from. Gilbert gave him a toothy smile and flipped him a coin with a hole in the center. The large man was quick, catching the coin and favouring Gilbert with a smile.

“Ah, not big enough for a room so you’re wanting something else instead.”

“Me needs to see Council Madoc. Is he available?”

“I’m afraid to advise he’s out at present.”

“Then we’ll wait in the tavern. Tell him we seek his wisdom.”

This he said in a cordial voice and then nodded. The innkeeper returned the nod and Gilbert turned to open door to the tavern. Jon followed; surprised that Gilbert could sound pleasant and well mannered.

The noise of men arguing loudly to prove an unknown point assaulted them as they made their way into the dimly-lit tavern. Various tables, mostly rectangular in shape but a couple of circular ones sat scattered about the dark grimy floor. The chairs were also of assorted sizes and shapes that more or less matched their occupants. Several turned to watch as they crossed the room.

Gilbert took the lead and a few of the odd looking customers gave a short acknowledgement to the dwarf. Jon resisted the temptation of wrinkling up his nose at the reek of stale beer, cheap whiskey, smoke and body odour as they moved to one of the corners and sat at one of the wobbly tables. The chairs at the table were of normal proportion so Gilbert dragged a taller chair from a neighbouring table to their own, grumbling as he did so. He climbed up on the chair, scowling for good measure.

“Kind of an unusual place.”

“Compared to what? Ye don’t get around much, do ya?”

“I meant it’s unusual compared to the bars back home.”

“Oh yeah, the land of the feeble and noise.”

“The feeble and noise?”

Gilbert waved at the serving wench and then turned back to Jon.

“Feeble, ye idiots have lost your ability to use magic. And the bloody noise, machines all over your damned world. And if that wasn’t bad enough your ether is saturated with clatter from those infernal electrical devices. No wonder magic spells fall apart there.”

“Magic? What are you talking ...?”

“Hush up; we don’t need anyone to know that you’re from the Other-side.”

Jon was opening his mouth to ask about the Other-side but a dark haired young woman stopped at the table. She gave Gilbert a shove on the shoulder, and then stood with her hands on her hips grinning at him.

“How’s me short handle doing? Getting rich yet on stolen treasure?”

Gilbert looked a little uncomfortable with her questions as Jon took in her grin that displayed a missing front tooth. She wore a long dark skirt that was split open along one side clear to her hip. Her yellow peasant blouse was cut low enough that Jon wondered if it would cause her some serious problems with modesty as she leaned forward.

“A couple of your best Jessica. Clean mugs if you have them.”

“Alright then. And who’s your silent friend then?”

She turned to him with her unique smile and rested her hand on his arm.

“Jon. My name is Jon. Nice to meet you Jessica.”

She gave a big smile that might have been inviting if all her teeth were present. “Ohh, you’re the polite one now. Maybe we can talk later.”

She quickly turned away, yelling at some customer to see if he wanted another drink. Another of the dubious patrons gave her a slap on her rear as she stepped between two tables. She gave him a quick smile as she wagged her finger at him.

He tried to take in the rest of the tavern now that his eyes had adjusted to the dim interior. Besides the obvious size difference of the people, some also seemed to exhibit definite battle scars on their faces, including missing ears and part of their noses. Their dress was a mixture of colourful garments and armour; several of them had knives or swords along with protective plates on their bodies. Jon felt the scene would have looked at home in the medieval times.

Gilbert was inclined to sit with his arms crossed as he scanned about the room, nodding at a couple of tables. His main interest seemed to lie towards the entrance of the tavern where a set of stairs from the hotel part of the establishment was located.

“Gilbert, why are we here? I mean this is as good a place as any, but what exactly am I supposed to do? I don’t have any money with me by the way.”

His jeans had holes in the pockets and had been relegated to work only.

Gilbert waved an intolerant hand.

“Quiet, that’s what you’s suppose to do. It wouldn’t do no good for these scum to know where you’s from. I’m waiting for someone I know, a business associate of sorts. Get some advice on how to handle this. And yours money no good here anyway.”

Jessica returned with two metal tankards, dropping them on the table as the dark brown ale slopped over their sides. She didn’t appear to be concerned that it added to the growing mess of liquid and food bits on the table and floor. Gilbert quickly passed a bronze coin to her and she went off to the next table.

Jon tried the ale, finding it heavy and flat with a yeast taste to it. Still, it was drinkable and since Gilbert wasn’t in a talkative mood there was little else to do but watch and drink.

Several new arrivals entered the tavern before Gilbert reacted to a tall, distinguished man dressed in a white shirt under a dark blue jacket and pants. A small beard and short, combed dark hair set his face apart from most of the others in the tavern. He didn’t hesitate more than a moment as he passed through the doorway, heading straight to them.

He stopped just before their table, opening the palm of his right hand towards Gilbert.

“You desired to see me Freeman Gilbert?”

“Yes, yes Council Madoc. I need some help on a... on a rather peculiar problem.”

“I see.”

Madoc gave Jon a quick glance before pulling out one of the vacant chairs. He swept his hand across the seat before sitting down. Jessica hurried to their table and wiped the table portion in front of him with a grey rag, sending the contents to the opposite end. Jon had to move away from the table to avoid the debris that washed over the table edge.

“What can I getcha sir?”

“Red wine please.”

As she turned away he lightly touched her sleeve causing her to freeze on the spot. She looked back anxiously.

“Made sure it is of good quality, and not cut.”

“Oh, yes sir. Only the very best, I promises you.”

Madoc turned to Jon.

“And who might you be young sir?”

“Jon McKinney. Are you Council Madoc?”

“That is I,” he turned his eyes on Gilbert, “Perhaps you can inform me of this situation that has presented itself on you.”

Jessica reappeared with his wine, causing Gilbert to stay silent until she left. He hooked his thumb in Jon’s direction and then spoke in a growl as he lowered his voice.

“This here followed me from the Other-side. I don’t know what to do about him.”

Madoc raised his eyebrows, “Surely there is more to this tale than that. If I’m to assist you I’ll need more information,” he turned towards Jon, “Perhaps you can enlighten me Master McKinney.”

He caught Gilbert’s annoyed frown but decided Madoc offered him more hope of returning back to his own place than Gilbert.

“Well, see, I inherited this old castle. And I was having lunch when I saw Gilbert. I thought he was trespassing ...”

“Trespassing!! That castle belongs to ...”

“Freeman Gilbert, please let him finish first. You may add to his story afterwards.” he gestured with his hand at him, “Please continue.”

“Okay. Anyway I thought Gilbert was a trespasser or trying to steal something so I chased him into the castle tower. I caught him, but when we struggled we both fell out the window. We landed on a tree that broke our fall and Gilbert almost tumbled into the lake or river but I caught him first. I thought he’d be happy that I maybe saved his life, but he was pretty upset with me afterwards. I sort of got the impression I’m caught in a different world but I don’t really understand how that could happen.”

“Is that essentially correct Freeman Gilbert?”

“Yes, but ...”

“A moment if you please.”

Madoc massaged his forehead and then took a drink of his wine. He looked up at the two of them.

“There are several problems here. First, Master McKinney is not here in our place with authority. I also suspect that you, Freeman Gilbert, did not have permission to seek fortune in the Other-side.”

Gilbert pursed his lips together and then nodded.

“There is also the delicate circumstance of you, Gilbert, being in debt to Master McKinney for saving your life.”

“But I didn’t need him to do that!” Gilbert raised his voice in protest but then as he caught Madoc’s look, lowered his tone, “I would’ve survived.”

“Possibly. But all that has to be accomplished in determining obligations is if Master McKinney truly believed he was saving your life. It is the intention that is the requirement, not possible outcomes if he didn’t act.”

“Oh, of all the curses of a dragon’s nest,” he slammed his fist on the table and suddenly looked worried, “Oh pardon me Council Madoc, I means no disrespect!”

“None taken. This situation does have a resolution. If you, Freeman Gilbert, play an active role in returning Master McKinney to his own home this will likely resolve your life debt to him. If you can accomplish this quietly and discreetly you may also avoid detection that you went to the Other-side without proper authority.”

“Ah, a way to get me off the hook.”

Jon looked at Gilbert who was grinning away.

“I have a question. How do I get back home? I mean Gilbert said I couldn’t just climb back up through the way I came.”

“Excellent, you have a keen mind for details. Yes, unfortunately you just can’t return the way you came in. Nor can you go the way Gilbert does; that only works for a very few people here. You do not possess, or rather control, enough magic to return home. What you must do is increase your magic by obtaining certain devices to amplify it. This is where Freeman Gilbert comes in; he must help you in your quest as payment of his debt. It won’t necessarily be easy, but it certainly can be done,” Council Madoc stood up, “I trust I have been of some assistance to both of you. Unfortunately I have to arise early tomorrow and must now bid you goodnight. If either of you require my expertise I will be available in this area for another fortnight.”

Gilbert reached into his pouch, bringing out several gold coloured coins.

Council Madoc held up his hand.

“No need to pay, perhaps I can make use of your service in the future.”

Jon looked at Gilbert after Madoc had left.

“So how the heck do I increase my magic to get home?”

Gilbert gave him a withering look.

“It’d be easier turning Jessica back into a virgin,” he shook his head, “I need to get drunk,” and he did.

As Jon watched Gilbert consume tankard after tankard of ale he reflected on several things. One, somehow he had fallen into a rather strange world; two, his way back home involves learning magic; and three, for a little guy Gilbert could drink an enormous amount of ale.

* * * *

Jon woke up on the floor with a thin blanket covering him. He tried to peer at his watch, noting that the time was 9:10. Whether that was supposed to be AM or PM he couldn’t be sure; it certainly wasn’t nine o’clock anything as far as he could tell. Only an overly bright moon, attesting to it being sometime in the middle of the night, lighted the darkness of the room. The room was warm and humid, even with the window open. He had taken off his shirt and jeans to try to cool down and used the thin brown blanket to shield his back from the hard floor.

Gilbert, meanwhile, was lying on the bed and kept up a steady stream of mutterings as he slept. Jon had more or less carried Gilbert up to the room after borrowing a few coins from the dwarf’s pocket that he gave to the innkeeper. He even tried to haggle a bit with the innkeeper with the amount but without knowing what each coin’s worth put at him at a heavy disadvantage. Jon attempted to act drunk as well so that that it didn’t appear to be too suspicious that he couldn’t count out six ferns. Now all he could do was wait for Gilbert to wake up so he could start his quest to find my way home.

One thought that appeared suddenly was that Liz was probably wondering what happened to him. Another thought: Nadine would try the hotel and find he had left and was now living in the Miller Castle.

‘If she was to fly down and meet Liz...no that couldn’t happen’.

He pondered that unpleasant possibility when there was a knock on the door.