

Shadows on the Cave Wall

It is alarming to wake up and not know where you are. It is dreadful to wake up and realize that you are handcuffed to a bed. But it is simply *odd* to realize that the handcuff is in fact a cheap plastic toy.

Adam had never been handcuffed before, plastic toy or otherwise, and for several minutes he paused from breaking free solely out of a worry that there was some sort of strange ritual thing going on that he would violate at his peril. After a minute of this, Adam realized that he was apparently already in peril, so he might as well face it on his feet. And, indeed: it was the work of half a minute to break the handcuff.

The situation, Adam mused, was... surreal. He seemed to be in a room with lights on the ceiling, a bed, a broken handcuff... and a remarkable array of sheets, opened-up garbage bags, stitched-together rags, all hanging on wires and arranged to surround the bed, and presumably him. On the bright side, he was fully dressed, now free, and didn't feel particularly injured or sick. So far, so not immediately dangerous... and then a shape flew towards him!

It was a paper airplane. Clearly flung over the top of the wall of sheets. And it seemed to have writing on it... unfolded, the message was straightforward, if written out in a shaky, unsure hand: *DO NOT SPEAK*.

If Adam was still handcuffed to the bed, he might have been more hesitant; but he wasn't, so he decided to start being difficult. "Why can't I speak?" There was an odd sound as he talked, like ice freezing and cracking. And for a minute or two, there was nothing else.

When the next airplane came over the top, Adam was prepared enough to take note where it came from generally. The message this time was in a different hand: ***PLEASE DO NOT SPEAK***. Which suggested at least that things were not immediately going to get unpleasant.

Some more minutes passed, another airplane... *WE OF THE AETHERIAL CIRCLE, MOST PUSSAINT SORCERERS OF THE CONGLOMERATE PERFECTION, BIND THEE TO OUR SERVICE, CREATURE OF THE MATERIAL PLANE. BY THE THIRTY-SIX FRAGMENTS OF LEADEN DICTION WE COMMAND THEE. WITH OUR MASTERY OF THE SPACE AND THE TIME, THE LENGTH AND THE*

WIDTH, THE MASS AND THE GRAVITY, WE MAY AND SHALL ABJURE THEE FROM RISING UP AGAINST US. OBEY OUR DESIRES, AND THOU SHALL BE RELEASED. BE RECALCITRANT, AND WE WILL LEAVE THEE BOUND IN THY PRISON UNTIL THE END OF DAYS. SO SHALL IT BE!

Right. Adam did not feel particularly bound, commanded, or abjured (whatever that was). Before he could point that out, over came yet another paper airplane. *HEAR NOW OUR COMMANDS, CREATURE OF THE MATERIAL PLAN:*

- *THE LORD OF THE TWILIGHT GLOOM DENIES ALL OTHERS' RIGHT TO RULE. SPEAK HIS NAME AND SCOUR HIM FROM THE WORLD WE KNOW.*
- *THE VIRIDIAN AFFILIATION REFUSES TO ACCEPT THEIR PLACE BENEATH OUR HEEL. LAUGH AT THEIR FOOLISHNESS AND RAZE THEM FROM THE EARTH THEREBY.*
- *THE FIVE REALMS OF THE SHADOW SEA DARE RAISE ARMS AGAINST THE CONGLOMERATE PERFECTION. GAZE UPON THEIR CURSED REALM IN YOUR MIND'S EYE UNTIL THE VERY WATER ITSELF BURNS AND SHUDDERS...*

...and rather more of the same: groups and names and countries(?) that Adam had never even **heard** of, let alone had opinions on. And, frankly, if this was a joke and/or some weird serial killer thing, it had gone on long enough. So Adam decided to give his reply: "No."

More of that ice freezing/cracking sound. After a time, one last airplane came over the top. Different handwriting, again: *YOU **WILL** OBEY, CREATURE OF THE MATERIAL REALM! THE AETHERIAL CIRCLE WILL NOT BE DENIED! SUBMIT, FOR YOU ARE BOUND WITH CHAINS FROM YOUR OWN PLANE, AND ONLY WE HAVE THE KEY!* ...And that was it for Adam; he grabbed the handcuff, irritably said "What? This cheap thing?" - and tossed in the same general direction as where the airplanes was coming from.

A good deal more of that weird sound; and then an odd kind of scrabbling, as if somebody was trying to run through a bunch of hung sheets and rags. Admittedly, whoever was doing it was running *away* from Adam, and he was half tempted to just wait until the guy ran, but... maybe the exit was that way? So Adam followed.

Away from the cleared space things were difficult for a moment from all the sheets, but the strings holding them

up were apparently incredibly flimsy; a good push broke them off and sent the fabric flying. With more space cleared Adam soon worked out that he was in some sort of warehouse, which seemed promising; equally promising was the quick glimpse of an exit sign at one wall. **Getting** there was a bit of a chore, though. Oddly, there were a couple of cleared spots along the way that had nothing but a weird bunch of spiderwebs and a few mannequins made out of... paper-mache? Nothing dangerous, but definitely annoying to move through or around -

But there was the door! And, over to one side, some sort of flashing, moving thing. Adam looked over, then blinked a couple of times. No, it wasn't moving. That was just a trick of the flickering light. It was just a picture. A very odd, irregular picture: it showed a strange, vaguely alien looking landscape in the background; and in the **foreground** there was a vaguely humanoid man looking over one shoulder and with the most despairing look of terror on his face that Adam had ever seen.

Or was it? Another blink, and it was just a bunch of cracks in the wall that kind of *looked* like a picture. Which made more sense, as much as anything so far this morning made any sense; but, more importantly, if that unseen guy who had run away was still here and hiding Adam didn't

want to stick around. So he went out the door - and into a reasonably busy street. It was even a part of town that Adam was familiar with.

So Adam breathed a sigh of relief, and went to go find a police officer.

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