

A DISCREET EXORCISM

by

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Sir Hilary Ashenden's apartment on the twentieth floor of the Royal Patagonian had a magnificent view of the Hudson. To be sure, one might notice something odd about the winged stone lions that flanked the balcony. One might. Most never did. The lions had a kind of Assyrian cast that seemed at variance with the rococo ornamentation of the Royal Patagonian's exterior. Yet a more telling judgment of the quality of any home is its interior, and the elliptical living room with its alcoves filled with obscure and sometimes deadly artifacts gave the apartment an undeniably charming air.

Sir Hilary was a tall, spare man, his skin brown as old leather, his nose prominent as an eagle's beak. He lounged against the wall and peered through slitted eyes at his two visitors.

The young woman, who looked to be a trophy-something-or-other, was all wide-eyed gaze. Her head kept swivelling between the mummified remains of Aken-ta-tet, the Tibetan demon-masks, and the disgustingly huge spider floating in a beaker. Sir Hilary noted with amusement that although she looked as if she expected something to spring on her, she never even noticed the far more dangerous cuneiform tablet from Akkad or the innocent-looking purple crystals that had been dredged from the seabed off Antarctica.

The pudgy young man who accompanied her was expensively dressed and carried a briefcase. He had the indefinable air of the sort of backroom executive whose function was the legal equivalent of dumping troublesome people in the harbor with concrete galoshes.

Ominously, he was sweating buckets.

And babbling.

Something about a wicked attorney general. And company lawyers who couldn't find essential parts of their anatomy with both hands. And an accountant with —ing *moral* scruples . . .

Then the pudgy man burst out, "And to cap it all, now—*now*, in our hour of crisis, the company finds itself—well—*decapitated!* Deprived of its leader! Mr. Abbott is irreplaceable. *Irreplaceable.* Without his guiding hand, we face ruin. *Ruin!* You are the only person we know who might help him."

Sir Hilary sighed gently, shifted a little against the wall, and said, "Can you tell me the nature of Mr. Abbott's problem?"

The young woman burst into tears and wailed, "There's this thing in his mind—it's fighting with him, trying to take him over—it's an evil spirit!"

"Oh dear. Distressing." Sir Hilary shook his head to indicate how appalled he was at this news. "Tell me, what brought this problem on?"

"We think it was connected to this funny antique that Father bought," said the pudgy man. "It's kind of a hobby with him. He collects these weird old things."

Then his eyes widened and he turned his head from side to side as if just now taking in the exotic objects that lined the walls and filled the shelves and alcoves of the room.

"Like what you have," he said faintly.

"Father?" asked Sir Hilary. "I was wondering if you were Mr. Abbott's lawyer."

The pudgy man looked back at Sir Hilary. He swallowed hard and plucked at his collar as if it were too tight. Then he pasted a glossy smile on his face though it twitched a little at the corners.

"Actually, I'm his oldest son, Stephen, but I'm also First Vice President of Omnizeta. I'm here today in both capacities. Son and Vice President. And this is Lorraine." He gestured vaguely toward the woman who straightened up and smiled bravely through her tears. "Mr. Abbott's personal secretary."

Sir Hilary straightened up and began prowling back and forth, all the while rubbing his hands together in an abstracted manner. Then he stopped and looked at them.

"Surely you tried other steps before coming to me?"

"We consulted doctors. The best and most expensive in the field. Useless. They wanted to institutionalize him." He shuddered. "We even tried a Catholic priest."

"Poor Father DaCosta," Lorraine burst in. "We sent him home in a taxi, weeping."

"But he did think to give us your name," Stephen interjected. "He called you—ahh—the *godless last resort.* And he wouldn't tell us anything about

you except to come see you. So tell me, Sir Hilary,"—here Stephen looked hesitant—"just what is your specialty?"

Sir Hilary's lips creased into the faintest possible suggestion of a smile.

"You might call me a private metaphysical consultant. The IRS, at any rate, seems happy enough with that description. And cases such as yours provide me with some of my most worthwhile employment. Please don't feel your problem is that unusual. If it is any comfort to you, the number of CEOs who dabble in the supernatural and satanic on the sly is amazingly high.

"But if I am to take your case, I must know more. This 'antique' of which you spoke—what can you tell me of it?"

"Not much," said Stephen unhappily. "We don't know where he got it—very obscure private dealers, you know—and we didn't even see it till a few days ago. After he—," Stephen swallowed hard, "flipped out. I tried to photograph it. The photos never turned out. Digital or film. Lorraine made a sketch, but she said it made her head hurt if she looked at it too long."

Lorraine brought out a small sketchpad, turned to a certain page, and passed it over.

Sir Hilary's eyebrows climbed his forehead.

"Oh dear. This is interesting. More interesting than I would like. Where is your Father? Might I see him? Now would be a good time. Right now would be an excellent time, and not a moment too soon."

* * *

The marble steps of the portico and the soaring Greek columns of the Abbott residence struck the eye with their splendor. The halls within echoed to their steps, and the great arched windows poured golden light upon the woodwork. The house was a hymn of richness and beauty. Either the elder Abbott had marvelous taste, thought Sir Hilary, or a designer of utter genius.

The elder Mr. Abbott had been confined to a room upstairs. It was spacious, bright with sunlight, and comfortable, but the windows were locked. Two men were with him at all times and another stood guard outside.

Ralph Abbott was a larger, more powerful version of his son Stephen though without as much hair. He slumped in a overstuffed chair, head bowed, looking dejected. He raised pale, blue eyes when his visitor entered.

Sir Hilary would have sworn that the man before him was crushed. Yet when Abbott looked up—

Eyes of steel!

"And who are you?" Abbott asked. There was a resonance in his voice as of bells tolling in the distance.

"Sir Hilary Ashenden."

"Ashenden." The older man's gaze locked on Sir Hilary. "Ashenden." A light sprang into his eyes and he slowly straightened.

Sir Hilary stared in amazement. He had exchanged half-a-dozen words with the man, yet somehow he was struck by a sense of—kingliness. Or, at the very least, of power. Of danger. Of command. As though it had been a lion that had unexpectedly reared its head.

Yet in that very instant, Abbott's face slid, crumpled, and changed into something—other. The light in the depths of his eyes sank to a strangely icy flame. To Sir Hilary, it was as distinctive as though a mask had slipped over the man's face. Yet scarcely a line or wrinkle of Abbott's countenance changed.

"Ashenden." The voice was changed. The word came out low and prolonged, almost a hiss. "I've heard of you. Your name has gotten . . . around."

"Really." Sir Hilary stood very still and watched the creature before him as he would a snake. "And who, sir, are you?"

"Abbott. Ralph Abbott." A crooked smile spread across the man's features. The cold flame within the eyes flickered yet higher. "And you, Ashenden, have come to help me. To release me from this strange pit into which I have fallen. You have come to help a poor old man, have you not?"

Ice crept up Sir Hilary's spine. In a way, his esoteric training was a curse. Where others might notice nothing, he could *feel* things. And whatever it was that peered out of Ralph Abbott's eyes, it affected him as though he had opened a closet and found it swarming with poisonous spiders.

Before Sir Hilary could formulate a reply, the face changed yet again. Some subtle yet unmistakable alteration rippled across it. The light within the eyes shifted from an icy flame to something warmer, deeper. And Abbott surged up from the chair.

"For God's sake, Ashenden—" The voice was touched by agony.

Involuntarily, Sir Hilary recoiled. Instantly the two men who attended Abbott grabbed him and forced him back down.

Abbott's eyes blazed, and in a voice that rang, he cried, "Ashenden, if you are a man, deliver me from this hellspawn Otherling!"

He choked on the words, and his face writhed.

It became a window through which one could see first one soul then another.

At one instant there was, in that face, something cold as northern desolation—half-words hissing out like wind across the wastes—a serpent keening in agony.

The next instant, there was a flash of something like a warrior—blue steel, bare and naked—a man terribly alone and caught up in desperate combat.

Back and forth they went—back and forth—one face melting into the other—a dance in damnation.

Sir Hilary took a step back. Then another. Then he stopped. With an effort of will, he broke his horrid fascination.

He drew himself up.

In as cool and level a voice as he could command, he said, "I shall do what I can."

He turned on one heel and left the room.

* * *

Stephen and Lorraine were just outside, where Sir Hilary had asked them to wait. Lorraine watched over a steel-paneled case that Sir Hilary had brought with him. It contained materials he had thought might prove useful.

"You showed me a drawing of the artifact," he said tensely. "Quickly, take me to it."

They led him a short way down the corridor to an octagonal room with high narrow windows and a stone floor. There was a small wooden chest carved with dragons and scorpions that sat on a table, and Lorraine gingerly opened the lid.

The object within drank in the sunlight from the windows and drew the eyes of the onlookers into deep, cold depths. It was a crystal, bluer than sapphire or arctic ice, and it was shaped into the form of a rose with such fantastic delicacy that it seemed it must have grown that way.

Sir Hilary drew in a sharp breath. "*Yar'Ardol*," he whispered.

"Do you know what it is?" demanded Stephen.

"Pardon these lips," said Sir Hilary. His face was pale. "If you heard me speak a name just now, please blot it, I pray, from your minds."

He shook his head in amazement.

"This is an object of power." Color had returned to his face. "Brought, it is said, from the stars. From the Pleiades. Not an object of evil—but very

alien. To be approached only at peril to both body and soul. It might indeed be used as a portal by a mind from elsewhere. But what sort of spirit would dare . . ." A frown, a look of abstraction settled on Sir Hilary's face.

"Can you help Mr. Abbott?" Lorraine asked, voice rising in panic.

"A practical question. Did you fetch my little suitcase? Ah, there it is." Sir Hilary rummaged in the steel-paneled case.

"Well, Lorraine, let us see. Have Mr. Abbott fetched here. I'm afraid I must ask you to bind him in a chair. Then leave him to me. And pay no attention to what you may hear from this room. None whatever. It will be very distressing, but he may not be cooperative.

"If Heaven favors my efforts, I shall return him to you little the worse for wear and much more—singleminded. If it does not—then you may need straitjackets for both of us."

* * *

The great difficulty was to find a chair Sir Hilary thought sufficiently stout. A massive oak monstrosity was eventually located that he accepted with a shrug as the best that could be done at a moment's notice.

Then he sent everyone else out, locked the doors, and spread out tools from his case.

He drew three pentacles. One for Abbott, one for the artifact, and one for himself. He traced them on the stone floor using a special compound that fluoresced quite nicely when he laid wire connectors to a battery warded by fractal mandalas. (He did not dare plug into a house outlet—experience had taught him that *things* could disrupt such a power source.)

He spread out other materials on a podium inside his pentacle. Several wands, vials of murky fluids, candles, and some writings. Among the writings was an ancient and leathery parchment made from human hide and covered by spells in Sumerian and archaic Greek. Also an extract from the *Necronomicon*—tied firmly shut and for use only in emergencies. Then there was one of his most dependable resources, a grim and forbidding copy of Gödel's *Unentscheidbare Sätze*; Sir Hilary had discovered that mathematical proofs possessed remarkable metaphysical potency, at least if recited in German.

He leaned over the podium and gazed at Abbott. The older man slumped in an attitude of despair, eyes closed, head down.

"Mr. Abbott," said Sir Hilary gently. "Sir. I know that you are trapped in there, that you can hear me even if you cannot respond. I want you to

know that I will do everything I can to restore you. I have glimpsed the *other* that is in there with you—cunning, serpent-like, and steeped in evil. The agony that your soul must experience, intimately mixed as it is with his, I can only dimly imagine. But I have, sir, glimpsed your spirit as well. I do not know you as one person knows another in this world, but this I do know: There is, within you, both strength and nobility. And I tell you, I *shall* restore your body to its rightful owner. This, sir, is my pledge."

As he spoke, Abbott slowly raised his head and gazed at him in a most peculiar way. Whether with hope or rage could not be said.

Sir Hilary drew himself to his full height and proclaimed, "Let it begin."

* * *

That which now followed took a long and terrible time.

Though it was the middle of the day, the light outside faded into darkness. Then beyond the tall windows, lightning flashed while thunder rolled and howling winds lashed the building.

Within the octagonal room, the only light came from the pentacles . . . now red, now purple, now gold, rising and falling, shifting from one hue to another—and from the crystal rose . . . a cold, eerie blue that did not so much shine as pour over the sides of the casket and wash across the inlaid marble floor.

The room echoed with screams, and the form that was bound to the chair bucked and convulsed. Its face, twitching insanely, slipped from one personality to another.

Sir Hilary thundered chants, ritual commands, and mind-blasting spells. "*Nar, i-yog ayanssky!* Let that which comes from beyond this world be expelled! May the rightful heir to this flesh be restored to his dominion! *Jede kompakte zusammenhängende zwei-dimensionale Mannigfaltigkeit tri-angulierbar ist!*"

He grew haggard, his face drenched with sweat. His voice grew hoarse, and he felt drained, empty, trembling on the verge of collapse. Yet on and on he pressed, and again and again, he slipped from one chant to another, from one language to another.

And then—and then—at long last, something changed.

He felt it.

It was as definite as though the floor had shifted beneath his feet, yet there was nothing physical. As if something had suddenly given way—had collapsed.

Abbott's chair rattled up and down, his body arched in a way that should have broken his back, and a piercing scream ripped from his throat.

Something welled from him and poured across the room to the crystal rose.

A radiance ...

A wind ...

Streamers of dwindling cries ...

...all of it shot through and through with swirling colors bluer than ultraviolet, deeper red than the roses that bloom beyond death.

Abbott's head fell forward; he appeared to be unconscious. The radiance of the crystal rose died away. The light in the room faded to the pale glow of the pentacles.

Sir Hilary stood a moment, exhausted, breathing deeply, just glad to be alive.

Then he realized that the blackness outside the windows had changed. He could see stars in the sky. All the day had passed away, night had come, and the world outside was normal again.

* * *

Stephen, Lorraine, and several board members of Omnizeta were waiting just outside. The hope that lit their faces was almost pathetic. Of course they did not just take Sir Hilary's word that Mr. Abbott had been restored, but it took them nearly twenty minutes to revive the elder Abbott.

A weary Sir Hilary took advantage of this hiatus to carry out a leisurely inspection of the more arcane relics and artifacts Abbott had acquired and of the rare and sometimes dangerous books in his library. It was always fun to see what the rich and reckless had been up to.

Finally one of the hired help came by and informed Sir Hilary that Mr. Abbott wished to speak to him.

The retainers about the elder Abbott parted like the Red Sea to permit Sir Hilary to approach. He noted that Stephen stood close beside his father and that Lorraine was practically in his lap. Mr. Abbott looked up and smiled.

"Well done!"

Sir Hilary's stomach felt as though it had dropped into an abyss.

Abbott's eyes were like coals from the floor of hell. The crooked smile that ran across his face was that of a serpent which has just enjoyed a particularly tasty kitten.

The creature that was Abbott grasped Sir Hilary's hand and shook it vigorously.

"Well done, I say again! You have, sir, served the purpose for which you were brought here. Served it well! I could tell you were a bit confused at times, but all's well that ends well. And I shall see that you are royally rewarded. Lorraine! We shall not detain this eminent gentleman further. Please take him to his ride."

Before Sir Hilary could gather his shattered wits, Lorraine led him from the room and down a long, marble-floored hall. As her heels rapidly clicked its length, she beamed and bounced and chattered bright and meaningless things.

At the main door, Sir Hilary stopped her and frowned down at her.

"Something," he managed to say through tight-clenched teeth, "has gone wrong."

"Oh?" The woman's eyes widened in bewilderment. "But Ralph is fine. He knows us all, he's got his mind back—"

"Something has gone wrong! I saw a mind that was *kingly*—my God!—where is it now—"

"But of course it's Ralphie!" Lorraine insisted shrilly. "We could tell because as soon as he got himself together, he started figuring out what the company needs to do."

Lorraine grew conspiratorial. "Like that DA that wants to investigate us—but *Ralphie* knows something the man did with an underage girl, so it won't happen. Ralphie knows 'cause he set it up two years ago. Just in case the man ever gave us trouble!"

She giggled. "You didn't hear me say that. That other thing—the demon or spirit or whatever it was that got into Ralphie—well, he could make people jump all right. Like we had a vice president that got caught with his hand in the till, and this demon-thing that was in Ralphie, he made an example of the guy, and next day they found body-parts all over town. That was before Ralphie started fighting to take back his body. Well that was all right.

"But Ralphie now, he would have got the money back. He would have got the guy to sell his kids for their organs, then made him feel guilty, then commit suicide some really nasty way. *Then* he would have held him up as an example to all the other vice presidents and said how heart-broken he was. And all the other vice-presidents would have been *really, really* on their best behavior!

"See? That was how we could tell the difference between the whatever-

it-was and Ralphie. That was how we could tell you gave us back the real Ralphie! The one we need and love. That demon—he couldn't come up to Ralphie's level!"

As she talked, she gently steered Sir Hilary out. And the door closed firmly behind him.

THE END