

The Town Drunk

Presents

The Importance of Portents

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“Oh great and glorious augur who sees beyond the Veil of the present into the mists of the future, know that Paranbar, wealthiest of merchants, awaits your divination,” Duddle said with an impressive flourish.

“Oh he does, does he?” said Zoltar. “I don’t suppose he carries a bag, heavily laden with coin?”

“He has paid half your fee up front, just for the privilege of a rush reading.”

“Ah,” said Zoltar, wiping plum juice from his chin with an astrologically embroidered sleeve. “Clearly a man of good taste, and wise to consult with the former Soothsayer to the Court of Sheik Shadzam the Infirm. Tell him I am deep in meditation and will be with him shortly.”

Duddle bowed and backed from the room, the pretense of being shaken from his encounter with the mystical slipping effortlessly upon him for the benefit of the supplicant. *The stage lost a fine performer when I hired that man*, thought Zoltar. He eyed the bowl of fresh plums and sighed, hiding them behind the cloth of a small altar sitting beside him. Business before pleasure.

“I conjure thee, Beezlepub,” Zoltar said, clapping his hands twice.

A buzzing like a flurry of caffeinated gnats filled the room, and with a pop, the demon appeared. Beezlepub floated at face level, covered in tiny bubbles with a towel wrapped around his waist. He exuded annoyance from head to foot—all six inches of him.

“I require mystical etherea,” Zoltar said.

Beezlepub hovered for a moment, incanting in a high pitch that set the soothsayer’s teeth on edge. He then began darting around the room, trails of smoke roiling and cascading in his wake.

“Is that tabax I smell?”

Beezlepub spun to a halt in front of the soothsayer, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from his lips. The demon took a deep drag and blew a series of smoke rings at Zoltar’s face. “You said

you wanted smoke.”

“I said I wanted *etherea*, not dancehall.”

“Look, I’ve been working a lot of overtime these past few days. I’m tired, worn out, used up. This is the best I can do on such short notice, so take it or leave it.” The demon took another long pull, pushed the cigarette into his mouth, and chewed.

“Can you at least do something about the smell?” Zoltar asked, reaching over to retrieve his tall, conical hat. He pushed it hard over his head, gave a few preliminary swayings and head noddings, mumbles and mutterings. Assured it would not topple, he returned his attentions to Beezlepub. The scent of lavender drifted through the room.

“I suppose that will do,” the soothsayer said. “Now, I’ll want some mood music.” As he tapped his chin in thought, Beezlepub conjured a bongo drum. “The opening to the Metaphysical Manifestations, Movement Seven, I think.”

Beezlepub’s smile disappeared along with the bongo, and a set of chimes and bells popped into existence. The demon’s nails set the instruments to ringing, and a chill shot up Zoltar’s spine. *Perfect*. The music continued as Beezlepub drifted from view behind a tapestry.

Zoltar cleared his throat, adjusted his sleeves, shifted his backside upon the cushion and then pulled the bell rope with a word of power. From somewhere deep in the recesses of the attic, a gong sounded. The doors opened on cue and Duddle admitted the merchant.

“You come seeking wisdom on important matters,” said Zoltar grandly.

“Uh, yes,” said Paranbar, doffing his hat and clutching it to his chest. “It concerns—”

“Matters of business,” finished Zoltar. A merchant regarded everything as a matter of business.

“Yes,” Paranbar said, clearly impressed. “I have an investment opportunity, but I’m not certain I should pursue it. What do you foresee?”

“Ah!” Zoltar let the word linger as he rolled his eyes back in his head. Theatrics were crucial to any decent reading, and at his prices especially so. While his body swayed and his head twisted in mystical connection, he reached out with his power. He jiggled a teapot here, a wall hanging there, and in an inspired moment he even banged the shutter a couple of times.

“I see money,” he moaned. “I see probable success... but there is *something*. Yes, it lurks behind the Veil, but I will not let it go. I will... Yes! There is risk here, but also great opportunity.” Zoltar made a show of wiping sweat from his brow, panting with the effort. He glanced at Paranbar.

The merchant was smiling. “That’s just what *it* said,” he whispered.

Zoltar quickly snapped back from his journey beyond. “‘It’?”

“The machine. I came here because I wasn’t sure it could read the future, and I wanted a second opinion. But it said the same thing.” Paranbar removed a tiny, rectangular slip of white paper from his pocket, cleared his smoke-irritated throat, and read aloud, “‘Chance of success, opportunity involve risk. Lucky numbers: eleven, thirty, seventy, seven, three, five.’ Can you believe that? At five truckles a reading no less.”

The merchant looked up, smiling. Then, remembering whom he addressed, he stared at something of great interest on his shoes.

“Er,” he continued, “thank you for your efforts. I’ll just pay the remainder of your fee to your man then and uh...”

His voice died under Zoltar’s glare, and he backed from the room. Time passed. The outer doors opened. The outer doors closed.

Zoltar summoned Duddle, who handed the soothsayer a small bag with the remaining coin. “Shall I count it, then?” Duddle asked.

“Never mind that now. It seems we have some competition. Apparently there is some *thing* divining the greater mysteries. I want you to follow that man, learn what you can, and report back to me.”

Zoltar watched Duddle go. He removed his pointy hat and dismissed the smirking demon. A machine that foretold the future. Preposterous! Outrageous! But what concerned him most of all was—*five truckles*. Five!

He grabbed the plums from their hiding place and popped one in his mouth. It tasted like dirt.

Zoltar scrutinized his schedule of appointments. In the past week there had been a mass of cancellations, and the blank spots on the calendar glared at him like an augury of doom.

“Tell me again what you saw,” he said.

“Well,” Duddle began, “it was down on Cheapside in the big field where they always set up the traveling shows. Just this little tent with a guy hawking out front, ‘Ask the Mystical Seven Sphere and the secrets of your future will be revealed,’ stuff along those lines. Not nearly as good as your stuff. But there *was* a line out the door.”

Zoltar winced. “Did you see this thing?”

Duddle hesitated.

Zoltar put down the calendar and focused his dissecting gaze upon his assistant. “You didn’t?”

“Well... I did ask it maybe one or two things. Don’t look so disgusted. I had to. Purely research.”

“How does it work, then?”

“I don’t know. It’s just this big spherical thing with a crystal window at the top. You focus on your question, gaze through the window, and up from the murky depths of the— ‘Phantasmagorical Eternal Ether,’ they call it—floats your answer. Then a little bell rings, and from out of a slot in the base comes a small rectangle of paper with that answer in tiny red print. As a bonus, it also gives your lucky numbers.”

“And what responses did you receive?”

“Once it said, ‘Reflect carefully and you will know the true path—important decisions need deep thought,’ and another time, ‘The Veil is heavy, ask again later.’”

Whatever it was, it was a pro, Zoltar thought. Pithy, vague, and *cheap*—this thing would put him out of business. It was time for drastic measures.

“Send in the man you fetched earlier,” Zoltar said.

Jartan the Savage entered, or rather, a miasma of sweat, brothel and alcohol entered followed by Jartan the Savage. His bloodshot eyes scanned the room for any hint of trouble, any stray bottle of booze. Finding neither, he relaxed his grip on his sword hilt. His biceps bulged.

“You’re probably wondering why I asked you here,” Zoltar said.

“You need job done. Something needing muscle and probably illegal,” Jartan grunted, smiling and flaring his lats.

“Yes.”

“Hah!” he laughed. “Who is the future-predictor-man now? Hahaha!” His chest muscles flexed alternately in time to his mirth: left, right, left, right.

Zoltar waited for his laughter to die down, trying to be patient and breathe shallow. “You mean *soothsayer*?”

Jartan fell deathly quiet. “Be careful what you call me, magic man. This ‘Sooth’ thing of which you speak means nothing to me. Perhaps you should have said, ‘You mean *savage*.’ And I am. And usually I am paid to remove magical heads from magical shoulders, so take care that I don’t come over there and bash you.”

“Yes, well, very good.” Zoltar cleared his throat. “You, ahem, come highly recommended.”

There is not a cutthroat or brigand in all the city that doesn't curse your name."

Jartan beamed.

"What I need is a mystical sphere destroyed and for its owner to disappear. My servant—" There was a snort from the outer room. "—can give you the details. Is this agreeable?"

"Yeah, okay," Jartan said, his stomach muscles undulating, "as long as you pay."

Jartan turned and left. The smell did not.

Zoltar conjured Beezlepub. "I don't suppose you were eavesdropping on that conversation, demon?"

"This demon thing of which you speak means nothing to me," he mimicked, flexing his stubby, misshapen arms. "Of course I listened. I am a demon, after all."

"Good. I want you to follow that savage and make certain he makes good on our deal."

"But—"

"Quit whining. And before you go, I will most certainly be needing etherea. Any etherea at all will do, preferably something that disinfects."

Zoltar stewed in his anger and ate his plums. No one had shown up for their appointment for several days. Even the new signs—"Discount Prices" and "End of Week SALE!"—had failed to drum up any business. Jartan the Savage had never returned, and Beezlepub had ceased to answer his summons. Something diabolical was happening, but what?

"Duddle?" he said.

Nothing.

"Duddle!" he shouted.

Still nothing.

Very well, he thought, placing his hat on his head. I will simply divine the matter. It's been a while, but I can do this for real. It's not that hard. Let's see, I'll reach out with the Power and ring the gong. There it is, good. And now I'll just relax, let my mind wander in the mists of time. Good, good. Just relax. Yes, wander toward the Veil... wander... wander... I really do like plums. So juicy and tasty and...

"Damn it all!" He threw his hat down. "This isn't going to work. I'll just have to find Duddle

myself. He'll know what's going on."

Zoltar stormed into the outer room. A number of scrolls had been shoved through the scroll slot in the door, and they lay in an unsorted pile where they had fallen. Clearly, Duddle had been gone for some time, since the delivery was always early in the morning. The remainder of the room seemed tidy, and all was in its proper place, *except*—a small slip of white paper on Duddle's desk. Zoltar picked it up with dread.

"New opportunities await decisive action. Lucky numbers: twelve, fifteen, seventy-six, two, five, eighty," read the tiny print.

Zoltar crumpled the paper and set it aflame with an igniting spell. So, they wanted to play hardball, did they? Well, he would just go to Cheapside and show them how hard his balls could be.

It wasn't difficult to find. Big, garish signs pointed the way to the Great Mystical Seven Sphere, and a line of people trailed out from the little tent. It was crude and ridiculous and very, very crowded. Zoltar shoved his way through the milling throng, clearing his path with needle spells, itch curses, and bony knees and elbows. Muttered curses of a different sort followed in his wake.

"You there!" called a voice from ahead, "show some patience. All will get their chance to inquire of the future, for the Great Mystical Seven Sphere never sleeps, never eats and is never wro..." The voice trailed away as Zoltar shoved the last people aside.

"Wrong?" finished the soothsayer. "Hello, Duddle."

"Oh. Well." The little man turned and ran into the tent.

Zoltar hiked up his skirts and followed. "Not so fast," he said.

He barged into the tent. The familiar smell of mystical lavender etherea wafted into his nostrils. The faint sound of bongos filled the air. Jartan the Savage posed brutishly next to a coin box, and Duddle cowered behind his massive frame.

"You backstabbing ingrates," Zoltar said. "You would dare work for this stupid, mechanical thing?"

A bell rang, and a slip of paper issued from the sphere. Zoltar yanked it free. "Signs point to favorable," it read.

"That will be five truckles," said Jartan, pointing at the slot in the coin box.

"We don't work for the machine," Duddle said, peeking out from behind the savage's legs. "We work for Paranbar the merchant. You're the one who told him to buy this thing. Remember?"

Zoltar felt his rage building. Maybe he *was* no oracle. He looked at tea leaves in a cup and saw a mess of goop, watched the birds fly and couldn't care less. Entrails had no meaning unless they were stuffed sausages. But he had the Power, and he could call down curses. Sure, skills like that were ten truckles a dozen, but he had them.

"I call on the gods of wrath," he boomed, lifting his arms skyward. "Seana the Spurned, Harpy the Scorned, and Gibbet the One-Legged Goat."

Outside, the sky darkened and the wind began to swirl. Lightning crackled through the air. Huge drops of red rain fell, and the occasional fish, frog, cat, and dog plummeted earthward. The people waiting in line, suddenly empowered to see their future for themselves, hurried home so as best to avoid it.

Zoltar lowered his eyes and glared at each of his foes in turn. "I'm going to destroy this fake," he said, pointing at the sphere. "What do you think of that?"

A bell dinged. Zoltar ripped the paper from the slot and crumpled it in his fist without looking.

"Now that's *ten* truckles," said Jartan.

"Why you filthy, stinking drunkard..."

"I call on Sheckel, and Narpo and Whassit," Zoltar screamed above the roar of the raging storm. "Bring down your wrath, your anger, and destroy this fraudulent thing!"

A brilliant flash of light seared the tent, blinding all within as the power and fury of the gods was unleashed. When their vision returned, Zoltar was gone. In his place sat a pile of ash, the crumpled paper, and some plum pits.

Duddle bent down and retrieved the slip of paper. "Be most careful what you ask for," it read.

Jason E. Thummel lives in southern Indiana in a log cabin which he shares with his family, sundry woodland creatures, a slew of domesticated animals, and some newly acquired—and seemingly barren—chickens. He eagerly awaits a day when his son will be old enough to take over the joyful act of caring for them all so that he can return to other pleasures like home-brewing, hiking, woodworking, and sleeping in.