

IN DREAMS

by Paul Watson

A return to the adventures of Faustus the Great, or more accurately some of his assistants, last seen in Tuition.

Dell stands before the the gaily lit box. Music blares from somewhere, carnival lights flashing around her. She licks her lips, pressing a button on the box, holding it as inside a motor hums. A mechanical arm slides smoothly across the ceiling of the box, the bright red horseshoe magnet on the end buzzing. Dell pushes another button to move it sideways and finally once it's in position, a third to send it dropping down to claim her prize. She hears the magnet clack against something, pressing a button to pull her winnings out. The bright red metal heart sparkles in the light as she edges the arm over to it's chute and drops her prize down into the dark.

She releases the buttons and pulls open the chute, pulling out the fleshy heart, feeling it beat in her hand, thump-a-thump-thump. Dell screams, dropping the beating heart.

“Allow me.” long, thin black wood fingers close around the heart, lifting it up. A carved pumpkin head turns towards her, candle-light spilling through its features.

“Jack?”

“Indeed.” he sketches a bow, “It is I, Jack O'Lantern, Esquire.”

“But it's not Halloween. How?” she looks around the carnival, “And where am I?”

“Oh, you're dreaming. Which is the answer to both how you're being raced by my presence and where we are.”

“I'm dreaming? You can come into my dreams?!”

“Can't a friend drop by unannounced? I promise to stay out of the really personal ones.” he crosses a finger across his chest. “Cross my heart. Speaking of which, this is yours. Well, not yours, that's still beating away in there.” he points to her chest, “But it is yours in a way.”

“What way?”

“Well, it belongs to your tutor...”

“Anne? Is she alright?”

“Well, yes, she's fine. No, really, but as she's my chief rival for your attentions, I'm having a little fun with her.”

“Rival?”

“I know, I know, it's silly to believe a mortal of any stripe could challenge one such as I, but, well,

you know what a sensitive soul I am.”

“What, what are you doing to her?”

“Oh, nothing terrible, I assure you.”

“But you're holding her heart.”

“I am, yes. Not terrible is quite a wide road for a woman who spent a year as a ghost.”

“Stop it!”

“Stop what?”

“Stop whatever you're doing to her! You can't just do...things to people because I'm friends with them.”

“It's only a dream, Ardelle, just a dream for us all. But, if it means so much to you,” he tosses the beating heart to her, “you can restore her.”

“I can't.”

“Can't you? This is your dream, is it not? And what are dreams but shadows? And if these shadows have offended, think but this and all is mended, to quote one clever mortal, and as a personal friend of shadows and mystery both these dreams shall yield to you.”

“What?”

“This is your dream, my dearest Ardelle. It will shape to your desires if you only will it so.”

“So I can just fix Anne? Just like that?”

“Well, maybe not quite so simply, for where's the sport in that?”

“For a friend, you're not being very friendly.”

“I am being very friendly, after my fashion. I cannot change my nature, said the scorpion, or I would not be me.”

“So how do I fix her?”

“A quest, of course. Honestly, do they not teach young people anything these days?”

“A quest? What kind of quest?”

Jack's smile stretches wider, “One where you'll pit your wits, courage and ability against some dastardly foe.”

“Dastardly foe? It's you, isn't it?”

“What? Why I...”

“Well?”

Jack pouts, “Alright, yes, it's me. But I really want you to win. Honest injun.”

“So why the game?”

“Because it is my nature. See you down the well, Ardelle.” a giggle emerges from his mouth and he slips into the shadows.

“Hey!” Dell gives chase, pushing through the crowds as Jack almost effortlessly outpaces her. She pushes herself forward, shoving protesting people aside until she sees him stop. He place one hand on a stone wall around a quaint little wishing well and leaps over the side, his other hand waving to her. Dell sprints after him, stopping at the well. “Well, if I'm the big damn hero on a quest, I need something to fight with. And if anyone thinks I'm wearing a chainmail bikini for this, they're out of their gourd.” she closes her eyes, feeling the heart in one hand, the gem in her palm pulsing in the other. The carnival sounds fade into the distance. Dell opens her eyes, a golden ray gun straight out of Flash Gordon resting in her palm. “Well, it beats a sword.” She pushes the gun into a leather holster at her belt, placing the heart into the other, adjusts the gleaming sheriff's star on her waistcoat and tips her white Stetson back, “Well, time to go varmint hunting.” She vaults into the well, tumbling into darkness and shadow until, with a dusty thump, she lands.

She looks around the dusty plain, tumbleweed blowing past, the sun high in a pure blue sky, red rock mesas in the distance, cacti rising up from the dusty ground, their arms giving them almost a human shadow. As she turns, a small western town comes into view, a cow's skull looming over the entrance in the stockade. “Well, I guess I know where to start.” she sets off to the stockade, her spurs jangling.

The town, for want of a better word, reeks of cattle. Low wooden buildings straight out of central casting line the one street, horses tied to their troughs. Dell looks around as she walks through the town, noticing people scurrying away from her, hiding behind their doors. “Now what?” she spots the saloon, piano music rolling out of it, “Of course.” She walks up, hitches up her belt and pushes the swinging doors open, striding in, the music stopping with abrupt suddenness into dead silence.

At one table, a figure in black turns towards the door, a black Stetson perched on his gourd, a smouldering cheroot inside his jagged mouth, smoke curling up out of his eyes. “Mighty brave of you to be here, Sheriff. Didn't I done say if you were still in town come high noon, I'd fill yer belly fulla lead?”

Dell swallows, licking her dry lips, “I never did listen.”

“Ain't that a shame and a half. Say hello to Boot Hill for me, Sheriff.” he rises, pushing his poncho back, hand over his black pistol.

“No need to be hasty, pardner.” *Pardner? Heh.*

“You was warned, Sheriff. Time to take this outside.” Jack swaggers into the street, bending low to whisper “Am I doing it right?” as he passes.

Dell follows as Jack stands in the middle of the deserted street, crows converging on the gables of the ramshackle buildings.

“Well, Sheriff Christian, gotta admit ya got guts. Shame ta spill 'em.”

“Not going to happen.”

“Hah. Y'all got sand, Sheriff, but ah'm the fastest gun west of the Pecos, wherever they are. Now, slap leather an' draw!” he grabs at his gun.

Dell screams, yanking her gun out of its holster, watching in slow motion as Jack raises the pistol, the black barrel pointing directly at her. She's still screaming as her own gun lets loose a mighty zzzzzotttt and a smoking hole appears in Jack's chest. The gun drops from his woody fingers.

“Ya-ya got me, Sheriff.”

Dell runs up to him as Jack drops to the floor, his head rolling off his shoulders. “So, did I beat this stupid quest?” she asks, lifting up his pumpkin head.

“Well, it wasn't very sporting bringing a ray gun to a gun fight, but, whoever said a hero had to be whiter than white and purer than pure? Certainly not I. Did you like the voice? I watched soooo many Sergio Leone movies to get it just right. John Wayne, too. Did you know his name was really Marion?”

“So, how do I get Anne back?”

“Honestly, you do take the fun out of these things quickly. No appreciation for the artistry involved.”

“Anne?”

“Yes, yes, I'm coming to that. First you need a witch's cauldron...”

“And where the hell am I going to get one of them?!”

“Such language! I really don't...”

Dell levels the ray gun at a space between his eyes, “I still have a ray gun and I know how to use it.”

Jack's triangular eyes widen, “I see. You have a somewhat abrupt negotiating style, but I concede that I have been defeated. You don't need a real witch's cauldron, anyway, although, as a witch in training, any cauldron you have is technically a witch's cauldron, so I suppose any cauldron would do.”

“And how many cauldrons are around here?!”

“As many as you want. It's your dream, after all, Ardelle.”

“This...” she waves the gun around, “...is not my dream.”

“Well, no, not exactly, I might have...tinkered a little, but, underneath it all...”

Dell's finger tightens on the trigger. The gun unleashes a mighty zzzzzotttt and a nearby building explodes. With a loud whistling that almost drowns out Jack's screams, a black iron cauldron rockets out of the explosion, thumping into the ground at her feet, smoke trailing from it. “So it is. So, what's next?”

“'ahem' Yes, well, first you put the heart in...” Dell pulls the slowly beating heart out, placing it into the cauldron, “...and then you just set it on fire.”

“On fire?!”

Jack nods, throwing his gnarled arms over his face against her scream. “Just for the look of things. Really. It's not going to hurt anyone.”

Dell raises the gun and fires, flames leaping up from the cauldron. A pale hand emerges, followed by the rest of Anne in a scarlet saloon girl dress. “Where am I? What am ah doin' dressed like this? An'...” she stops as Dell throws her arms around her.

“It worked!”

“Hey, it's hard enough breathin' in this get-up as it is without you crushin' me ta...is that yore Jack?”

Jack bows, “Greetings, Miss Annie-May Evans. We meet at last, in a sense.”

“Charmed, ah'm sure. Ah'm guessin' ya got somethin' ta do with all this?”

“Guilty as charged. I just wanted to introduce myself, and meet your delightful protégée once again.”

“Yeah, well, ya done that. An' ah was havin' a great time with Idriss Elbar before ya dreamnapped me, so if ya'll excuse me...” she steps out of the cauldron, and grabs Jack around the neck, “Oh, ah almost forgot. If ya do anythin' like this again? Ah will be eatin' pumpkin pie for a week an' a half. You're just lucky ah'm a lady.” she drops him to the dust and walks out of town, vanishing into the distance.

“She didn't...”

“Oh, dear Ardelle, of course she did. I wouldn't want it any other way. But it's time to let you have your own dreams one again.” He pushes her Stetson back, leaning in, pressing the smooth, waxy edge of his mouth against her forehead, “See you later. In your dreams.” the world whirls away from her as Jack dusts himself off and steps into the shadows, the town vanishing behind him.



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