

Jack's New Assignment

a Forgotten Relics short story

These clothes itch. I've worn them every single waking moment for the last ten years, but today, they're too tight, too starched, too constrictive.

Correction: Not every moment. My attire was drastically different over the previous six months. But authority doesn't tend to smile on greasy t-shirts and eroded denim, so I've donned the severe black suit once again.

I shift my weight slightly to adjust the waistband of my slacks - they're a bit tighter than I recall - making my black leather shoes creak their newness. The noise breaks the silence of the dimly-lit office, and the man at the desk looks up from the mass of paperwork in front of him. I've been waiting for four minutes and seventeen seconds for my superior, Samir Patel, to acknowledge me. I'm moderately ashamed to admit I'd expected a more hospitable greeting for my return after such a dramatic exit. A soft, foolish hope. I should've known better.

"Ah, Jack," Samir says, as if I'd arrived unexpectedly. "Good to see you." He stands, and I let him circle around to inspect me. He makes an approving rumbling sound deep in his chest as he comes to a stop in the gap between me and the desk. "You're looking well, my friend. Vacation has agreed with you."

Vacation. Possibly the least accurate word to describe it.

Samir waits for me to reply or return his smile. I don't.

"I see you haven't changed much," he says. "Whether that's a pity or a blessing, I'm not sure." He holds my gaze for a brief moment, then shakes his head and returns to his chair. I don't have time to ponder the nuances of his evaluation before he's handing me a slim manila folder. "I wish your first assignment after reinstatement were less tragic," he says with businesslike detachment, "but in your field, it seems to be the standard."

I scan through the papers, and my not inconsiderable analytical skills, creaking and dusty after months of disuse, eagerly rush up in a groundswell of familiarity. But though I absorb the case details quickly enough - six-year-old boy, lost in transit - the old comfort of numbers and facts doesn't come. Instead, there's a hollow ring as information drops into an empty space within my mind. I need context, subjective

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experience, shades of gray. There's no satisfaction in simple knowing; black and white data is no longer enough. My time away seems to have altered more than my wardrobe.

If only Samir could see how much I've changed. If only I could, too.

Two hours and seventeen minutes later, I'm standing at the border between a dense forest and a brightly-lit field. Thunderclouds dancing with lightning slide surreptitiously closer to the mountains that form the near horizon. The air carries the tang of ozone, and I inhale deeply to catch any additional scent that might inform my search. A faint muddle of mildew and soap, likely undetectable to the average nose, turns my attention to the northwest. Without further hesitation, I stride across the vibrant grass towards a silvery pond, taking care not to tread on the wildflowers as I go. I've got to move quickly; the storm will arrive in thirty two minutes, and a child alone in it won't last very long.

Fortunately, the scent trail leads me directly to the little boy on the sandy bank of the pond. Years of careful training have made my footsteps practically silent, so he doesn't notice my approach. I observe for a moment as he stabs at the water with a long stick and laughs to himself, the motion rippling his pale aura. If I soften my focus, I can see right through him.

There's a rumble of thunder, closer than before, and I clear my throat politely. I need to ensure we get to safety before the lightning arrives. The boy starts at the sound of my voice and whirls around to brandish his stick at me like a sword against a dragon. I indulge the metaphor, holding up my hands in mock surrender.

"You got me," I say.

He stabs the stick at my midsection. "Who're you?" he demands.

Now that we're face to face, I'm able to study him properly. Remarkably dark skin, thick eyebrows, bald head, short for his age. But the most striking detail is his ice-blue eyes; I've never seen anything like them.

"A friend," I say, my own eyes locked on his.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Momma said don't talk to strangers. 'Specially not grownups."

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“That’s good advice. Let me introduce myself, then. My name is Jack Alexander.” There’s a moment where I stumble over the syllables of my own name, so long unspoken, but he doesn’t seem to notice. I slowly lower my hands and hold one out to him. “What’s yours?” I know it from the dossier, of course, but I need him to trust me.

He squints at my hand, then peers up at me, his dark brow furrowed in concentration. I wait. There’s another crack of thunder, and he seems to come to a decision. He offers his free hand to me, and I gently fold mine around it, stooping a few inches as we shake.

“I’m Xavier,” he says with a harmonic of uncertainty.

“Nice to meet you, Xavier.” I give what I hope is a friendly smile. It’s not a natural expression. “And now we’re not strangers anymore.”

“What do you want, mister?”

A shrewd question for such a young person. My first impulse is to lie, to sugar-coat the truth or twist it. He doesn’t need to know the reality of his situation. It’ll only complicate the mission; in this job, the truth leads to panic at best or violence at worst. But this assignment is supposed to be my fresh start. A new way to work, a new perspective. I’ve undergone too much to fall back into old patterns.

And so, I opt for the truth.

I let go of his hand and straighten. “You died in a car crash, Xavier, and you got lost. I’m here to take you to Heaven so you can be with your family.”

There’s a ripple in his skeptical expression, then his impossibly blue eyes brighten and he smiles so wide I can see which baby teeth he’s lost. “Mr. Jack, are you an angel?” he gasps.

I manage to hold my neutral expression as I reply. “Something like that.”

Ellie Di Julio: February 15, 2014

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