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Black Butterfly

Mark Gatiss

The Hammerhead's mouth was jagged as a knife-wound.

The ghostly form of the shark pressed itself against the wall of the glass tank, oblivious to the thrum of the generators and the pellucid light that dappled its pale flesh. Shadows moved like living things, leaping and sloping over the oppressively low ceiling and concrete walls of the Aquarium.

Lucifer Box was dead tired. He thrust two more Benzedrine tablets into his mouth, stepped closer to the creature's enclosure and watched his reflection balloon as though glimpsed in a fairground mirror. A step back and the reality snapped into focus: a tall, slim, saturnine figure in the clinging form of the Siebe Gorman wet-suit, the damp black hair scraped off the forehead, the cruel blue eyes dilated by the queasy gloom.

Stealthy as a cat, Box moved on, leaving wet footprints on the concrete. The heat was suffocating and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead like dew on a rose. He wiped them away with the back of one hand and swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry.

Damn her! Damn the blasted girl!

If it hadn't been for Stiletto he'd be out of Hong Kong now, settling down on the Cathay Pacific out of Kai Tak: catching the eye of a tulip-slim stewardess as he downed his third single malt. Looking forward to dear old rain-swept England and getting away, far away, from the sweaty horror that had been the search for Gottfried Clawhammer.

What a punishing three months it had been! From the freezing saltmines of Petrograd to the nightclubs of Macao and finally to a confrontation with Clawhammer himself: twenty stones of pallid flesh, the shaved head like a bullet, the eyes obscenely liquid just like those of the deep-sea creatures that twisted and writhed in this very Aquarium.

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And then there was Stiletto, Clawhammer's mistress. Box recalled the moment he'd first seen her: blindingly beautiful, clad only in an ivory-coloured bathing costume, lying prone on the deck of the Beguine. As the yacht bobbed at anchor his eyes had devoured her. The long, lissom legs, the proud mound of the bikini, the perfect breasts in their pearly cups ...

There was a movement to his right. Box tensed and took a swift step into the shadows, his hand closing on the comforting chill of the Beretta strapped to his waist. His eyes, mere slits beneath dark brows, narrowed further.

The sound had come from another tank, this one blooming with the pulsing plumpness of a dozen blue-ringed octopus. One, its suckers big as two-shilling pieces, was clamped to the glass. The creature seemed to consider Box with detachment, then, tentacles spreading like petals, it darted away into the cloudy water.

He moved silently on, the thrumming metronome of the generators keeping time with his own thumping heart. Shaking his head, he tried to clear the image of Stiletto from his mind. He needed to be alert now as never before. But the girl's shimmering beauty, the memory of her body – warm and urgent beneath his – jutted to the forefront of his mind like the Hammerhead against the glass wall of its prison.

Damn the silly bitch! She'd get such a spanking when all this was over.

Box shook his head and bit his lip. First they had to get out of there alive. And his plan? He had none.

Box's left hand, slippery with perspiration, clutched the solid plastic handle of the Leibach translator machine. The instrument was compact – about the size of a portable typewriter – and it was heavy. But it was the price of Stiletto's freedom.

He turned a corner and what he saw made his heart stop.

Yet another huge glass tank stood before him. Within, submerged and bound hand and foot, stood Stiletto. Big lead weights were roped about her waist, her feet firmly anchored to the white sand that lined the bottom of the tank. Where the ropes had chafed too tightly against her wrists, droplets of rusty blood rose lazily towards the surface like a rosary.

The girl's turquoise eyes bulged with fright behind a diving mask, the ugly rubber mouthpiece of an aqualung clamped between the perfect 'O' of her lips. She saw Box and tried to move, sending a stream of air bubbles rocketing to the surface.

'She is unharmed,' whispered a sibilant voice. 'Whether or not she remains so, Mr Box, is entirely dependent on you.'

Box whirled round but he could make out nothing in the stygian shadows.

The voice came again: 'Please put down your weapon.'

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Box unholstered the Beretta and let it drop to the concrete.

'Kick it over to me.'

'I can't see where you are, damn it,' spat Box.

The softest of treads and suddenly the bloated shape of Gottfried Clawhammer glided from the gloom – like a conga eel from behind a nigger-head.

A ghastly smile, the blubbery lips peeling back to reveal tiny teeth. 'Now you see me.' Suddenly, from the sleeve of his well-cut kimono, the muzzle of an automatic protruded. 'Your gun, if you please.'

Box put one bare foot onto the Beretta and kicked it across to him. Clawhammer stooped to pick it up, opened the chamber and let the ammunition clatter to the floor. He tossed the useless weapon aside and, cocking his head to one side, looked Box up and down.

'I have enjoyed this game, Mr Box, and, though it grieves me to say it, you have beaten me. My little scheme to replace all the world's Swan Vestas with tiny sticks of nerve gas has, alas, failed.'

'You met your match,' said Box, with a small smile. 'Your pals in "Redland" aren't going to be very pleased, Clawham—'

'But there is still one ace up my sleeve,' cut in the whispering menace. His large round eyes swivelled in the direction of the tank. 'Miss Stiletto. Her body was pleasing to me in its way ...'

Box's fists clenched.

'... but now she has a use beyond the merely physical. I calculate she has two more minutes of air, Mr Box. If you are quick, you may be able to prevent her from drowning. And whilst you are occupied, myself and the Leibach – such an ingenious device, don't you think? – will be racing towards the Chinese border. The Riva speedboat is outside, as instructed?'

Box gave a grudging nod.

'Good.' Clawhammer held out his free hand and the sleeve of the kimono gaped like the sickle-mouth of the Hammerhead. 'The translator, if you please.'

Box stiffened with fury. There had to be a way out of this. Had to be!

He threw a frantic glance at the girl in the tank, whose eyes had taken on a desperate appeal. Her hands restrained and thus unable to gesture, Stiletto was urgently dipping her head towards the dials on the aqualung. The air was fast running out. Box nodded.

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'If you're going to go, you bastard, then go,' he barked, sliding the Leibach along the floor, in the same direction he had sent his pistol.

The big man carefully crouched down and grunted as he picked up the device. 'I've never cared for goodbyes,' he sighed, lips smacking wetly over his grey teeth. 'But I do have a little parting gift for you.'

His hand moved swiftly, and wrenched a nearby lever. Something whooshed down a concealed chute, hitting the water like a bullet, and there was a sudden flurry of movement in the tank. A flash in the water, bright as silver, then a wall of glittering shapes soon resolved into the ugly gun-metal grey of a shoal of fish.

Piranha!

Stiletto's eyes widened in stark terror.

Box froze. He was dimly aware of a soft, clapping tattoo that he realised must be the sound of Clawhammer's sandals on the concrete as the thug made his escape. But Box made no move to follow. All that mattered now was the girl.

The piranha swirled about Stiletto as though in a vortex. Disorientated for now by their journey down the chute and into the tank, they would soon begin to explore their new environment. To nudge and nip at Stiletto's soft flesh and then –

Oh God. The blood!

The girl was already bleeding from the ropes at her wrists. Once the deadly fish tasted that ...

Box knew he had very little time. His eyes searched desperately for some kind of weapon to shatter the tank. If he could manage that, then all their problems would be solved at one stroke: the piranha rendered impotent, the girl able to breathe fresh air. But there was nothing heavy to be seen, nothing but the endless glass rectangles of the Aquarium. If only he still had the Beretta ...

In the tank, Stiletto squirmed. The more she panicked, the quicker she would use up her precious air. She struggled at the thick ropes that bound her, hair streaming upwards like golden seaweed.

If only he still had the Beretta ...

And then realisation came like a punch on the jaw. Clawhammer had emptied the pistol but had discarded it on the Aquarium floor. Even as Box darted into the shadows in search of the gun, he saw, with a throb of nausea, the first piranha taking an exploratory nibble at the girl's wrist.

Dropping to his knees, he fanned out his hands, groping in the darkness. Nothing. Nothing but the cracked concrete, sticky with stagnant water and gently humming with the noise of the generators. Then his racing heart seemed to stop as he

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suddenly grasped the reassuring bulk of the Beretta's butt, its chamber still open, whirring round as his hand clutched the weapon.

He cracked shut the chamber, leaped to his feet, dashed to the tank and slammed the pistol against the glass.

A dull thunk. He tried again, harder, harder. Then with desperation, smashing the weapon harmlessly against the unyielding surface.

Box clenched his teeth in frustration. He was a fool! The glass would be toughened to withstand the incredible pressure of the water. This wasn't like breaking through a blasted pantry window!

The sight of Stiletto's lithe form amidst the swirling horror of the piranha shoal made him redouble his efforts, belting at the impervious tank, hoping against hope for penetration.

And now two or three of the hideous creatures were clustering around Stiletto's arm, gnawing at the white flesh. The stream of blood steadily grew. Box felt his stomach flip.

Stiff with fear, air bubbles frothing from her mouthpiece, Stiletto thrashed her lovely head from side to side. 'No hope,' she seemed to be saying. 'No hope, no hope ...'

But Box was already on the flat of his Neoprene-clad stomach, hands turned into scrabbling claws as he sought out the missing bullets. Even as he searched, his gaze kept flicking upwards at the tank. At the oxygen dial and the needle that hovered over zero. At the hideous dazzle of the lethal fish, deadly teeth working even as their cold, doll's eyes flashed in the half-light ...

And then – thank Christ! – his fingers found a bullet, chill on the concrete.

In one practised move, Box flicked open the chamber of the Beretta, thrust the bullet home, shut the chamber, jumped up, aimed and fired.

The plate glass shattered with a massive percussion. At once, water vomited through the gaping hole, sending the piranha flapping and gasping into the foetid air.

Stiletto collapsed at once, and Box rocketed forward, using the gun to smash at the remaining glass. He climbed into the tank. Holding on to her tightly, he ripped the rubber mask from her deathly pale face. The remaining water sloshed about their ankles.

Box ignored the bloodied ropes and the leaden weights that held the girl down. He cradled her face in his hands and smoothed the soaking blonde hair from her eyes. Her lips were blue, her skin snow-cold.

'Come on!' he yelled at her. 'Come on! Breathe! Breathe!'

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He shook her like a limp doll. Then, suddenly, she gasped and retched, doubling up in his arms. Her eyes rolled down. Bloodshot and brimming with tears, but still beautiful to behold.

For a moment, she looked unseeingly at him. Then she smiled. 'Oh, Lucifer. I knew you would come. I knew you would save me.'

Box found his hand straying to the insistent curve of her breast – then, cursing himself, he pulled away. But Stiletto had other ideas. She feebly took hold of his hand and returned it to her chest. Box felt the nipple rise and harden.

'No,' he said shortly. 'You need to rest. And I have to get after Clawhammer and that damned Leibach.'

She shook her head, strands of damp hair clinging to her porcelain features. 'Later. Later. Please. For now there is only us. I want you to love me, Lucifer Box. I want you to spank me. Love me and spank me. To make love to me as if I was a beast. The lowest beast in—'

.1.

BELIEVED EXTINCT

'BOX? Box, old man! Shake a leg!'

I opened my eyes wide and blinked once. Twice.

Bewildered, I glanced about. Olive-green walls, a hissing gas fire. A cabbagey smell like a school dormitory. There was a loud creak as I straightened in the chair, though whether it was the cracked leather or my hips, I'm not sure.

It took a moment to orientate myself. Through the dirty window, the sky was a grey smudge. Bowler-hatted commuters surged past an austere arched entrance, an occasional red bus breaking the monochrome tide, like a speck of blood in a black eye.

London.

No sharks. No piranha. No pneumatic girls in shattered Hong Kong fish-tanks. Nor any of that stuff hammered out on Remingtons by ex-foreign correspondents in seersucker shirts.

I scowled at the portrait of the new Queen gazing down from the wall, as though blaming her for puncturing my dreaming. My lurid dreaming, I have to say. There's no other word for it.

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'What?' I said at last.

'The sainted Miss Beveridge is asking whether you'd like a cup of rosie,' said Allan Playfair, his voice as high and bright as ice plinking into a glass. He had one thumb on a grey intercom button.

I shook my head. 'Any coffee?'

Playfair pulled a face. 'Oh, Lord. Now you're asking. Got some Camp – any good?' I shook my head again. 'As for the real thing,' he chuckled, clamping his jaw onto the stem of a blackened pipe, 'easier to find Christine Jorgensen's nethers, old love.'

Playfair was about forty-five, with a utilitarian face and a suit as badly cut as his salt and pepper hair. He shifted uncomfortably within Prince of Wales check as he leaned towards the intercom and grunted: 'No tea.'

'Righto,' came Miss Beveridge's throaty Northern vowels from the outer office. Almost immediately, the machine sparked into life again, giving a rasp like a miner's lung. Playfair's face crumpled, irritated. 'Hold my calls,' he barked. Then he sat back and beamed at me.

'You shouldn't have let me drop off like that,' I said. 'Damned embarrassing – snoozing in someone else's office.'

'Seemed a shame to wake you,' he grinned. 'You looked so peaceful. And who wouldn't get a little drowsy after a slap-up nosh like that?'

I recalled with a shudder the wet lettuce and scalpel-thin ham that had passed for lunch.

'Besides ...' Playfair went on, flipping open a pewter cigarette case and offering me a spindly fag. Strands of tobacco tumbled out.

'Besides?'

He relit his pipe and then extinguished the match in a couple of swift swoops. 'Well, you've earned a rest.'

'Oh, don't say that, for God's sake. Makes me sound ...' I sighed and Playfair's brows rose. 'I could always take being envied,' I continued, 'or feared. But the one thing I never thought I'd be was venerable.'

He laughed explosively, his pipe jutting upwards so that the bowl almost touched his nose. 'That,' he coughed, 'you will never be. Monks are venerable, old love. Oxbridge dons, too. But a scoundrel like you? I think not.'

He chuckled again – rather hatefully. I said nothing.

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Allan Playfair was a dependable chap. Solid. Respectable. And about to replace me.

Me.

The man who'd prevented the revivified zombie of Captain Scott destroying New Zealand with his steam-dreadnought the Terror Nova. The man who'd pursued and destroyed Dr Cassivelaunus Fetch and A.C.R.O.N.I.M. – the Anarcho-Criminal Retinue of Nihilists, Incendiarists and Murderers. The man who'd come out of the Second World War covered in glory (and certain unmentionables) after preventing the Nazis from exploding a miniature purgative inside the Prime Minister's guts.

I had risen to the top of my curious profession (oh, for goodness sake, I'm not going into all that again. Visit the library!). I was officially 'Joshua Reynolds', President of the Royal Academy. Not the oh-so-respectable bastion of Fine Art you might be imagining, of course, but the front for Her Britannic Majesty's really, really Secret Service. (There, I've said it. No need to go to the library now. I've saved you the bus fare.)

But to my old friends, old lovers, old tailors but most especially, dear old Reader, to you, I remain Lucifer Box.

Would you know me, still? The tall frame a little stooped in the black linen suit, the hands knotty with veins. Perhaps the eyes would still surprise you. Sharp and brightly blue, like the sun-glistened edge of a melting snowdrift. Or do I flatter myself? Probably.

My scandalous career had been quite a ride but, like all good things, had to come to an end. The Royal Academy was finally to be absorbed by the traditional MI6 mob: the 'Service'. With their checkpoints and their microfilmed sex-acts and their shabby little assassinations in rainy Czech alleys.

Playfair held up a hand. 'Anyway, I'm in no rush, old love. You remember that. You have all the time in the world.'

'One month,' I said, contemplating the popping gas-fire. It was a stiflingly hot June, but Playfair was notoriously thin-blooded. 'It really doesn't take that long to clear one's desk.'

'What have you got on, anyway?' he asked. 'Something juicy, I trust? Something nice for me to inherit? Or are you going to sort everything out in four short weeks and leave me with slim pickings?'

'I'm winding down gently ...' I began.

'Out with it!'

'Well ...'

'I knew it, you old fox!'

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I shrugged. 'Something down in Cape Town. Locals have been looking for Coelacanth.'

'Beg pardon?'

'Species of ancient fish,' I explained. 'Long believed extinct but still hanging around.'

We both smiled at that.

'Well,' I continued, 'the Cape Towners caught something all right, but it wasn't what it appeared.'

Playfair rubbed his hands together. 'Don't tell me! A robotic Soviet listening device covered in scales and fins!'

'Nothing so interesting. Just a body. An old friend of mine, in point of fact.'

He stopped sucking on his pipe. 'Oh, I am sorry. What happened?'

I shrugged. 'Looks like suicide. Drove his car into the bay.'

Playfair shook his head. 'Bloody shame.' He got up and started opening drawers. 'Tell you what. I think there might still be some sherry here somewhere. Left over from the Coronation.'

'No, thanks. And how about you?'

'Hm?'

'Cases? Pending?'

Playfair pulled a face. 'Usual pallid guff. Chinese making ugly noises. Narcotics scare out in the Balkans'. He paused with a dusty bottle of Sandeman in one hand. 'Leftist grumblings in Venezuela ...'

I nodded dully.

The parp of car horns and the unmistakable roar of the city sent a sudden and unexpected pang of emotion surging through me. I glanced round at the drearily respectable portraits and the drearily respectable room. 'I just hope ...'

'Yes?'

'I just hope you have some fun,' I said. 'It really used to be the most tremendous fun.'

'Don't think I signed the chit for "fun",' said Playfair. He smiled and raised his glass. 'To you.'

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He got to his feet and buttoned his jacket. 'Well, if you'll excuse me. Pleasure, as always. And I'm sure I'll see you again before you leave.'

'If you like.'

'Cheerio, old love.' He took my hand and then glanced down at the desk, his attention already elsewhere. For all his bonhomie, I had been effectively dismissed.

I went through into the outer office, a smaller, darker, cooler version of Playfair's. Miss Beveridge looked up from her desk and smiled.

Ah, Miss Beveridge.

Charming girl. Carrying out her sherpa-like duties for the Service without a word of complaint. Padding up and down the olive-green corridors with buff files under both arms. Scribbling memos, delivering dockets. For a short while, she'd been seconded to the Royal Academy and that's when yours truly, never content to doze off into a copy of Art and Artists when there's something delicious about, had noticed other things about Miss Beveridge. I'd observed her long, lovely neck, for instance, startlingly brown against the crisp white of her lace collar; the way her eyes disappeared into crinkled half-moons when she smiled; her infectious and frankly dirty Lancastrian chuckle. In addition, having studied dusty files of my adventures in her youth, she was a dedicated fan. Perhaps, over a Madeira or four, I could immerse myself in a very different Beveridge Report ...

'The young lad's here, sir,' she said brightly.

I had lost myself in dreaming again. 'Is he? Right. Thank you, Beveridge.'

'Smashing to see you again, Mr Box.'

'And you, my dear.'

As she began shuffling papers, I gazed at her. Slender, exquisitely coiffured and perfect. I was fooling myself. What the deuce would someone like her see in old Lucifer Box? An indulgent smile was all I would ever get.

But as I moved to the door, she looked up again.

'Sir? I just wanted to say good luck, sir. And ... well, it won't be the same without you.'

'Thanks.' I felt suddenly emboldened. Perhaps the party wasn't over just yet. 'Um ... I was wondering ... I have an appointment tomorrow. Rather a depressing matter, I'm afraid. Funeral. Old friend.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, sir.'

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'Well, I was wondering whether you'd be available to accompany me? Hate to go to these things alone. Then, perhaps, a spot of lunch? And I can regale you with tales of some of my more sensational past glories.'

To my delight, the girl's face lit up. 'Oh, that'd be grand, Mr Box!'

'Splendid.'

'I can drive us there, if you like,' she enthused. 'I've nowt flash, mind, in the car department.'

'That's perfectly all right. It's Number Nine, Downing Street.'

'Yes, I know that bit,' she chuckled.

'Shall we say eleven o'clock?'

Miss Beveridge nodded enthusiastically and, with as much insouciance as I could muster, I left the office and made my way down the peeling stairwell, grinning like a youngster and positively dancing on air.

Awaiting me at the entrance was a little boy. He was sitting on a bench, legs sticking out before him like two white poles in neat grey socks. A beret covered most of the thick blue-black coils of his hair. He looked up as I approached but didn't smile.

'Good afternoon, Christmas,' I sighed.

'Hello, Daddy,' he said.

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