Thicker Than Water

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Extract

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This is kind of how it would have looked, if you were watching from the outside – and this is how the papers reported it when they finally got hold of the story.

Ten minutes shy of midnight on 3 July, a van pulled off Coppetts Road into the front drive of the Charles Stanger Care Facility in Muswell Hill, North London. It was just a plain white Bedford van, unmarked and with very high sides, but it parked right in front of the doors in the bay marked AMBULANCES ONLY.

One woman and two men got out of the van – the woman in an immaculate black two-piece, the men in pale blue medical scrubs. The woman was wearing large, severe spectacles which gave her a stern schoolteacherly appearance – although she was unsettlingly beautiful, too, and she carried herself in a way that made the sternness seem to be an ironic – almost a provocative – pose. She checked her reflection in the nearside mirror, tilting her head to the left and then to the right while staring at herself critically out of the corners of her eyes.

'You look lovely,' said one of the two men.

The woman shot him a look and he threw up his hands in ironic apology. *I was only saying.*

The night was almost oppressively warm, and very quiet. The Stanger itself, normally the source of many unsettling sounds at night – screams, sobs, curses, prophetic rants

– was unusually still. There were crickets, though, despite the paltriness of the Stanger's grass verges, which seemed too meagre to support an ecosystem. But this was London, after all: maybe the crickets had to commute like everyone else.

The three went in through the swing doors, the woman leading the way.

The nurse on duty at the reception desk had seen them pull up and now watched them enter. She had to buzz them in through a second set of doors that had been installed very recently to enhance the Stanger's security. She did so without waiting for them to announce themselves, because she was expecting them: strictly speaking, that was a breach of security right there.

She noticed that the two men didn't look entirely convincing as hospital orderlies. One was a slender Asian man with a certain resemblance to Bruce Lee and an air that you could – if you wanted to be polite – call piratical. The other wore his scrubs as though they were pyjamas that he'd been sleeping in for three nights, and had a sardonic self-assured cast to his features that she instinctively mistrusted. His mid-brown hair was unkempt and his mouth subtly asymmetrical, hanging down slightly more on one side than on the other so that when his features were at rest they seemed to wear either a wry smile or a leer.

But these things she noted in passing, because most of her attention had immediately switched to the woman. It wasn't just that she obviously outranked the two men: it was something magnetic about her face and figure that made it an unmixed and startling delight just to look at her.

The woman's appearance, to be fair, was both striking and out of the ordinary. Her hair and eyes were black, her skin white – the undiluted white of snow or bone rather than the muddy pink-beige mix that passes for white according to normal labelling conventions. Since she was dressed in black, relieved only by the occasional hint of dark grey, she could have been a monochrome photograph.

The woman gave the nurse a civil nod as she walked up to the desk. 'Doctor Powell,' she said, in a voice that was as deep as a man's but infinitely richer in tone and nuance. 'From the Metamorphic Ontology Unit in Paddington. We're here to collect your patient.' She laid four sheets of A4 paper on the countertop: a transfer form from the local authority, a court document granting temporary power of attorney and two copies of a signed and notarised letter from Queen Mary's Hospital in Paddington acknowledging the receipt of one Rafael Ditko into the Hospital's care and jurisdiction. The letter was signed *Jenna-Jane Mulbridge*.

The nurse at the desk gave these documents the most cursory examination possible. She was secretly admiring Doctor Powell's easy self-assurance, Doctor Powell's very impressive outfit and, to be blunt, Doctor Powell's magnificent body. The nurse herself was only five foot three, so she envied this other woman's height and long legs. She noticed, too, how well the doctor's black hair, shoulder-length but pulled back quite severely, framed her pale, exquisite face. And she noticed that the blouse was buttoned all the way up to the top, giving no hint of cleavage: perhaps this was because the doctor's curves were ample, her nipples large and obviously erect, and there was no line or ridge in the blouse's hang to indicate the presence

of a brassiere. Any further display would tip over from arousing to indecent.

An incongruous image rose into the nurse's mind, making her blush. She imagined herself unbuttoning that blouse, pulling it open on one side or the other and planting a kiss on one of the doctor's breasts. She wasn't gay – had never even had a passing crush on another woman – but the black, bottomless eyes behind the big spectacles seemed to invite such intimacies and promise reciprocal explorations. Or perhaps it was the doctor's perfume, which was even more striking than her appearance. At first it had seemed almost harsh, with sweat and earth mixed up in it, but now it had an aching sweetness.

'You need to stamp the bottom copy of the letter,' the doctor said in that same thrilling voice. The nurse, flustered, pulled herself together and did what she'd been asked, although the outline of the doctor's face and upper body remained on her eyes like an after-image as she fumbled for the stamp and applied it with trembling fingers.

'And sign,' said the doctor.

The nurse obeyed.

'I believe Mister Ditko has already been prepared for transfer,' the doctor said, folding and pocketing the letter. 'I'm sorry to rush you, but we have another call to make tonight and we're already late.'

In point of fact they were fifteen minutes earlier than their scheduled arrival time, but the nurse wasn't going to spoil the moment by arguing. She was fond of the music of Nick Cave, and a line from one of his songs went through her head right then. *A beauty impossible to endure.*

She paged the duty manager, since she wasn't allowed to leave her station, but she only paged once and she hoped he'd take his time in coming. In the meantime she engaged the doctor in conversation, ignoring the two men as if they didn't even exist. Later she was unable to describe a single thing about them: she wasn't even sure whether they were black or white. They could have been fluorescent green for all she cared.

The duty officer arrived all too soon, introduced himself unctuously to the distinguished visitors and took them away along the main corridor, out of sight. Forlornly, the nurse watched them go. She should have asked for a phone number, at least. But then, what would she have done with it? She was straight. Straight and married. A momentary madness had overtaken her, and now she struggled to fit the memory of it into her definition of herself. What did a woman's breasts taste of? Why had it never occurred to her to find out?

The duty manager had much the same experience, complicated in his case by the painful erection he got when he had been walking alongside the doctor for only a few paces.

'Mister Ditko is in the annexe,' he explained, adjusting his walk a little to de-emphasise the bulge. 'In a purpose-built room. The engineering was quite complicated – and very expensive – but your Professor Mulbridge seemed confident that she could duplicate it.'

'We have very extensive resources at the MOU,' said the doctor, sounding cool and detached and giving no sign at all of noticing the duty manager's crisis of etiquette. 'Our annual budget is eighty million, and that's supplemented

by donations from various sources. Mister Ditko's cell is already built and waiting for him.'

The duty manager winced. 'We don't like to use the word "cell" . . .' he began. But they'd reached their destination by this time, and the massive steel door, like the door of a bank vault, made the mouthful of euphemisms that he was about to utter taste a little sour, so he let the remark tail off.

A burly male nurse was waiting for them at the door, and on the duty manager's nod he now unbolted it. Three large bolts, at top, midpoint and bottom, and a formidable-looking mortice lock – another recent addition – at which one of the two orderlies (not the pirate, but his colleague) stared with undisguised fascination.

'I would have expected Professor Mulbridge to supervise this transfer herself,' the duty manager remarked conversationally. 'She's been trying for so long to make it happen.'

'She's got a lot on her plate right now,' said the man who'd been ogling the mortice lock. 'Saving the world, one ghost at a time.'

The remark struck the manager as surprisingly irreverent, and so it stuck in his mind. Like the nurse on reception, though, he was finding that the unfeasibly gorgeous doctor was acting like a kind of lodestone to his mind, pulling his attention inwards towards her whenever he tried to think of anything else. God, she smelled like – what? What was it? Whatever it was, you wanted to eat the smell, in shovelled handfuls.

The door swung open, revealing a room that was basically a featureless cube, without furniture or ornament.

A sourceless white radiance, harsh and even, filled it. The walls, ceiling and floor were also white.

In the centre of the room – the only thing it held – was a steel frame, about seven feet high by four wide. It was just a rectangle of steel: two uprights joined by two horizontal struts, to the bottom of which three sets of rubber-rimmed wheels had been fitted on cross-axles which had been set very wide to give the whole structure some much-needed stability.

Around the inside edges of the frame there were twenty or more steel loops to which thick elasticated cables had been attached. A man hung in the centre of the frame, dressed in an all-over-body straitjacket to which the free ends of the cables had been fitted. The overall impression was of a fly in a spiderweb. The man in the frame thrashed and squirmed, but his movements were absorbed by the cables so that he never moved more than an inch or so in any direction.

And his movements were sluggish and uncoordinated in any case. He seemed to have been drugged. His eyes were unnaturally wide, the over-enlarged pupils filling them to the point where no whites showed. His mouth was slack, and a little gluey liquid had collected at its corners.

'OPG,' said the duty manager, as if any confirmation of that was needed. 'Thirty micrograms, intramuscular. If you need any to take with you, we've got some doses made up already – and it's not likely we'll need them any more once Ditko is—'

'We're good,' said the man who'd spoken before. 'Thanks. We've got our own ways of calming Mister Ditko down.'

The duty manager shrugged. 'Fair enough. Now, this thing is heavy.'

'We've got it,' said the doctor, stepping into the cell. She turned the frame around one-handed – a feat which made the manager's eyes widen, because he knew exactly how much it weighed.

The man hanging in the frame twisted his head around to look at her. He said something that the duty manager couldn't make out. It sounded like a single word – possibly a name – but it had a great many syllables and it certainly wasn't Powell.

'Asmodeus,' the woman answered, dipping her head in acknowledgement. 'It's been a long time.'

The man's head sagged. He was fighting a big enough dose of the drug to kill a small herd of elephants. OPG was a neurotoxin, cleared for clinical use only in a very narrow range of situations. This patient, Rafael Ditko, was explicitly one of them. 'Bitch,' he muttered thickly, sounding like a wet-brained alcoholic. 'Hell-bitch.'

'Does he know you?' the duty manager asked, curious.

'We met,' said the doctor. 'A long time ago.'

'You diagnosed him? He was your patient?'

'No.' The doctor gestured to her two attendants, who came and took the two ends of the frame. 'It was before he was confined.'

She didn't offer any further explanation, and since the context wasn't a clinical one the duty manager didn't feel as though he had any right to press the matter. He stood aside as the two men wheeled the frame out of the cell. It was noticeable that they had to lean into it and apply their weight with some determination to make the heavy

structure move: the woman hadn't done any of those things. She must be scarily, thrillingly strong, the duty manager thought.

Although he wasn't needed, and his job was done, he walked in procession with the little group as they made their way back down the main corridor. He offered the opinion that this transfer ought to have been carried out years before. 'Ditko has always been a problem for us,' he said. 'We're not a specialised facility, in the way that you are. We can't afford to watch him as closely as he needs to be watched. And we're under different kinds of scrutiny.' He lowered his voice. 'It's fair to say,' he murmured, with a quick smile at the doctor, 'that you can put him to some good use, yes? I mean, that you'll be doing more than just keeping him sedated? Professor Mulbridge has some research in mind, I'm sure. Into Ditko's condition. And it really needs to be done. He's an incredible specimen. I don't mean to be cold-blooded, but seriously – incredible. With the right equipment, and the right person directing things, you could find out a lot. And if you needed some input from us here; observations and conclusions, based on . . .'

The duty manager faltered into silence as the doctor turned to face him, raising a hand to stop her two attendants in their tracks. She stared at him, and her bottomless black eyes seemed to pull him in closer to her as though she had her own personal gravity field.

'Thank you,' she said. 'That's very good of you. I'll be sure to call on you at some point. Soon. I'll come soon, and we'll work together. Just you and me. Intensively.'

She turned her back on him and walked away, the two

men resuming their efforts and pushing the steel frame after her. The duty manager remained rooted to the spot, staring after them. He no longer had an erection. Doctor Powell had brought him to climax with her voice.

The doctor gave the nurse at the reception desk a civil nod as they left, and the nurse as she buzzed them out responded with a smile, feeling the warmth of the doctor's attention sweep over her like an intimate caress. She continued to watch them as they lowered the rear ramp of the van, loaded the steel frame onto it and raised it up again. These operations took perhaps three minutes, during which time the duty manager limped past her into the gents' washroom and did not emerge again.

The van pulled away, and the driveway was empty and quiet for perhaps a further minute or two. Then another van, dark blue this time, drove up and stopped. A sleek black car rode before it, and another behind it.

A large delegation emerged from the three vehicles, assembling itself behind an imposing grey-haired woman in her early fifties, dressed in a three-quarter-length dark blue coat in an antiquated and somehow faintly reassuring style. Her face bore an expression of calm and benevolence, which contrasted with the hatchet-faced mien of the big black-suited men who flanked her.

The nurse buzzed them in, but she was puzzled. The Rafael Ditko transfer was the only note on the duty sheet for the night, and this didn't look like a casual drop-in. In fact, it looked like a formal visit from a head of state.

'Jenna-Jane Mulbridge,' said the grey-haired woman, with a smile, presenting the nurse with a set of documents that was the exact duplicate of the ones she'd just filed.

'From the MOU at Queen Mary's. We're here to collect one of your patients for formal transfer. I think you were notified.'

The nurse boggled at them, her mouth opening and closing. She looked down at the paperwork, which seemed to be all present and correct. She looked up at the woman in the long coat, whose amiable, expectant smile was starting to turn down at the edges.

She paged the duty manager, who did not emerge from the bathroom.

'Well, this is going to sound funny . . .' she said, in a quavering voice.

A long way west and a little way south, the white van pulled off the North Circular Road onto the weed-choked forecourt of a closed and derelict petrol station. Reggie Tang killed the engine and turned to look at me – quite an impressive feat, since it meant looking past Juliet. Reggie is gay, of course, but that's no defence against Juliet. Short of having your genitals surgically removed and locked away in a blind trust, there *is* no defence against Juliet.

'This is where I bail,' he said.

'I'm going across the river at Kew,' I pointed out. 'Then I'll come back around. I can take you a lot closer to home.'

Reggie gave a sour smile. 'Thanks, Castor,' he said. 'But I think I'll walk. If you get pulled over, I'd just as soon be somewhere else. You promised me a ton, right? I'd hate to think you were as big a prick-tease as your girlfriend.'

Juliet gave Reggie a thoughtful stare, then turned and looked inquiringly at me. 'Prick-tease?'

'Macho shithead obloquy,' I parsed. 'Means a girl who promises but doesn't deliver.'

'Oh. I see.' Juliet turned to look at Reggie again. 'But I *do* deliver,' she assured him, deadpan. Reggie blanched, which on his dark-hued face made a striking effect. Juliet held his gaze and licked her lips, slowly. To forestall pants-wetting and hysterics, I took out the small sheaf of tenners that was Reggie's pay-off, slapped him lightly in the face with it to break the spell, and shoved it into his hand.

'Off you go, son,' I said. 'And don't spend it all in the same shop. Remember, if the Met come rolling by, you were sat at home tonight with your dick in your hand. Or maybe Greg's dick, I'm not fussed.'

Juliet looked away, letting him off the hook. There hadn't been any real malice in the show of strength – except that even a faint whiff of misogyny pushes a lot of her buttons – and I know for a fact that she's on the wagon these days as far as devouring men's souls is concerned. Still, she can get inside your head and vandalise the furniture with frightening ease. And Reggie had been a real help tonight, even though he really didn't owe me any favours, so I'd have hated to see him leave with bits of his psyche hanging loose.

He muttered some kind of goodnight and scrambled out of the van. I took it out of neutral and started to turn the wheel, but Juliet put a restraining hand on my arm.

'I'm getting out here too, Castor,' she said.

'Seriously?' I was surprised. 'I can drop you off right outside your door.'

She smiled – or at any rate showed her teeth. 'And then the thing in the back would know where I live.'

'The thing in the back,' I said, a little grimly, 'is my best friend.'

Juliet shook her head. 'Not really,' she said. 'Not any more. There's a little of Rafael Ditko left, still, but mostly he's Asmodeus now. There's a kind of progressive deterioration that comes from being possessed by a demon – a deterioration of the human host, I mean. And because I know what Asmodeus is, and how he takes his pleasure, I'd prefer to keep him as far away from my private life as I can.'

I thought about that in silence for a moment. 'And yet you agreed to help me tonight,' I pointed out cautiously.

'Yes.' Juliet's tone was thoughtful. 'It's something I've been discussing with Susan. The idea that you can experience pleasure in helping someone else even when there's no direct advantage to be gained from doing it.'

'Altruism,' I hazarded.

'Yes, exactly. Altruism. I decided to be altruistic tonight, to see how it felt.'

Susan is Juliet's lover and more recently her civil partner – a union that's already done a lot for Juliet in terms of taking some of the rough edges off her and making her less likely to rip people's heads off in the course of casual interactions. But it's a steep learning curve, in some respects. Steep, and bumpy, and filled with sudden, unexpected potholes.

The reason why it's all those things is because Juliet is a succubus, which is to say a demon whose specific modality is sex. She feeds by arousing men's desires and then consuming them, body and soul – the guy's lust functioning in some indefinable way as a necessary ingredient

in the feast. I mean, maybe she could still bring herself to devour a man who was thinking about his tax returns, but it would be like eating plain boiled rice or pasta without sauce.

To describe Juliet's physical attributes is just a waste of words. She's tall and slender with narrow hips but full breasts. She has the pale skin, the dark eyes and hair and yada yada that I mentioned earlier on. But these things are accidents: she could be any colour, any size, any shape. The point is that Juliet does something to your brain. It's a combination of her scent – which is fox-rank on the first breath, ineffable perfume on the second – and her hypnotic gaze. Two seconds after you look at her you can't remember the face of any other woman you ever met, and you don't want to. She rewires your perceptions, painlessly, effortlessly: she becomes your Eve, your Helen, your long-lost and looked-for harbour.

Which until recently was an exquisite adaptation to a predatory lifestyle – as brutally functional as a tiger's claws or a shark's teeth. Now, as I think I already said, she's taken the pledge and wouldn't rend and eat you if you asked her to. It would just get her in trouble with her missus.

'Well, how was it for you?' I asked, clearing my throat which felt a little dry. 'The altruism, I mean?'

'Interesting,' said Juliet. 'And not unpleasant. But I think a little of it may go a long way, Castor.'

'Meaning . . . ?'

'Meaning I've got a full caseload, and if you need any more favours in the days or weeks to come don't hesitate to ask someone else. And conversely, if I should need a

second gun on anything I attempt I expect you to drop your own affairs and be available to me at any moment of the day or night.'

'Nothing would make me happier,' I said, deadpan. 'Day or night.'

Juliet studied my face for smutty double meanings, but all the meanings were right there on the surface. If she asked, I was there. She knew that. Unfortunately, it was true of most of the people she met so it didn't mean all that much.

'When Professor Mulbridge finds out that you stole her prize specimen from under her nose,' she observed, 'it will make her very angry. She'll want to get back at you. She'll think of ways to do it that you won't see coming.'

I acknowledged this with a vague shrug. 'She's been angry at me ever since I turned down her job offer,' I said. 'Let her come. I'll be ready for her.'

Juliet looked as though she was reserving her own opinions on that one, but she let the point go. 'Bind Asmodeus well,' she said, getting out of the van. 'If he gets loose – really loose, with no anchor in your friend's flesh to hold him back – you can't imagine the harm he could do.'

But on that point she was wrong. My imagination is just fine, and I know what will happen if Rafi's passenger ever finds a way to step off the bus.

'I'll be careful,' I promised.

'Yes,' she agreed, with no hint of sarcasm in her face or voice. 'I know you take no unnecessary risks, Castor. Not by your own definition.'

'Thank you.'

'Shall I tell you now how flawed your definitions are?'

'Give Sue a kiss from me,' I said. 'Platonic. On the cheek. Nothing threatening.'

'She has *my* kisses.'

'Then I guess she's doing okay.'

Juliet smiled with real and sudden warmth. 'Oh yes,' she agreed. With a final wave she stalked off into the darkness, and was gone more suddenly than the darkness itself could fully explain.

There was a Judas window in the back of the cab that let me look into the rear of the van. I slid it open and peeped through, although there was really nothing to see. Nothing to hear, either: the silence was absolute.

'You okay, Rafi?' I ventured, after a few moments.

No answer. Well, better nobody home than Asmodeus taking Rafi's calls. And better that he sleep all the way to where we were going, because it would make unloading him at the other end a lot less complicated.

I wound up the window and drove away. I still had to get to Lambeth and back tonight, and I wasn't looking forward to the drive. Or to what was waiting at the other end of it.

But I did what I had to do, which – when it comes right down to it – is the epitaph to most of my days. I handed off to Imelda's people down in Elephant and Castle. There were two of them: handsome black men of few words who were ten years my junior and could have folded me backwards until I broke if the notion had come into their heads. I gave the van's keys to the taller of the two, who wore a beanie and bands in rasta colours and had a braided beard that impugned the manhood of any man he met. He waved the keys at me like a schoolteacher waving a pointer.

'Imelda wanted me to say this to you,' he rumbled. 'And she wanted me to say it slow, one word at a time.' He tapped the keys against my chest five times, once for each word. 'Don't – make – me – regret – this.'

Being on his turf and his time, I took the insult with as much good grace as I could muster. 'You ever get any snarl-ups south of the river?' I asked.

He gave me a suspicious scowl. 'What?'

'The beads,' I clarified, pointing to his beard. 'Do they get in the way when you muff-dive?'

His eyes widened and his mouth set in a tight line. 'Man, you're asking for some real—'

I nodded, making the wrap-it-up gesture used by studio floor managers. 'Tell Imelda I'm grateful,' I said. 'And tell her I'll sort this out soon. She's got my word on that.'

South Circular. Kew Bridge. North Circular. In Pen's car now, which at least didn't handle like a barge, but I was at the end of my rope, physically. Tiredness kills. Ask anyone. The only thing that kept me awake was surfing the news channels to find out if I was a wanted man.

Pen was waiting in the kitchen with all the lights on. She wanted a debriefing, which was extensive and occasionally hysterical, shading eventually into alcoholic.

When I rolled into bed at last, drunk with fatigue and spent adrenalin and a great deal of actual alcohol, I fell into sleep like a man stepping off the edge of a cliff. On the way down, I thought with a slightly numbed wonder about all the shit that was going to hit all the many and various fans when the morning came.

And decided to sleep until noon.

* * *