

CHANCE OR DESTINY

A SHORT STORY
TALES FROM THE READING DRAGON INN

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Introduction

This is a short story which was created by me as a bridge between my novels *The Lucky Cricket* and *Thomas the Poisoner*. It features the first meeting between the two titular characters. I hope you enjoy it on its own merits, but for me its a little gift for the readers of my novels who may be curious about how these two first met.



Chance or Destiny

Chronicle of the first meeting between The Lucky Cricket and Thomas the Poisoner

Thomas looked at the Shadowine who entered his establishment. It was a black armored and black helmed nightmare over six and a half feet tall. Thomas raised an eyebrow and tilted his wide brimmed white hat back to view the entirety of this figure. Thomas' white hair could be seen thinning but still there as he pulled off his hat and placed it on the table beside him.

Thomas spoke, "How may I assist you today?"

The figure spoke, "My name is Rexis."

Thomas shook his head, "It is most certainly not Rexis. I know the herald of the White Raven called Yenton when I see you. If you want to sneak around hiding what you are, then I suggest you drop wearing the armor she has granted you. Of course that is if anything exists anymore underneath that armor. I imagine you are not much more than just a spirit by now."

Yenton spoke, "Your sight is very perceptive as rumored."

Thomas chuckled, "My sight is never fooled by one of the dead. What does the winter goddess called the White Raven require of my service?"

Yenton hesitated, "The White Raven requires a death. Your reputation as an unstoppable killer has proceeded your passage to the next life."

Thomas nodded, "You realize that I am already quite old for a Shadowine. I'm not quite the killer I used to be in my youth."

Yenton nodded its head, "Very true. You have only gotten better at it since that time. The White Raven has kept the tally of spirits you have passed on to the next stage. The count is very impressive even by her standards."

Thomas looked down in mock modesty, "Am I to understand that she actually appreciates my work? I find that hard to believe as I have long been an inconstant worshiper at her temples."

Yenton spoke, "Your work itself has been your form of worship. You've brought in many spirits whose time has come, yet no spirits too soon."

Thomas looked back up at Yenton, "Am I to understand that my time has come?"

Yenton shook its head, "Your time is not yet arrived by her reckoning."

Thomas gave a faint smile, "I'm not granted release yet then. Tell me what service I can render to the goddess of death. What brings her foremost herald to my doorstep?"

Yenton looked over at Thomas, "The White Raven requires a death."

Thomas quipped, "Will any death satisfy her then, or does she have a particular individual in mind?"



Yenton hesitated a moment, "It is a very particular individual she is worried about."

Thomas sat in thought, "Powerful then, and able to avoid her grasp."

Yenton remained silent.

Thomas looked at Yenton with a slight grin, "More than powerful, and also completely beyond her reach then. You've piqued my interest. No guarantee of success can be given if this foe is beyond her reach, but I'm certain I will at least make an initial survey of the situation. Who does she want me to meet?"

Yenton delayed momentarily before his carefully neutral reply, "A man known as Hap Sing."

Thomas lost his slight grin and became serious, "Only a man? You must be joking. The White Raven could send you to do such a job if necessary. I'm quite sure that no ordinary man could defy you."

Yenton replied, "Not only a man, but yes a man just as you are a man."

Thomas shook his head, "I'm a Shadowine just as you were in life, and both of us know that the Shadowine are among those touched by shadow. We are anything but just men to the rest of the normal denizens of the prime material. Is this fellow shadow touched as well? Perhaps a minion of the unfathomable creature Balinac?"

Yenton stood passive, "You don't understand what I mean. This Hap Sing is not shadow touched. He was born a human. He technically remains a human. Balinac is not his patron."

Thomas looked at Yenton carefully, "You know for an inscrutable suit of spirit ridden armor you do a poor job of misdirection. You forgot to deny any involvement by him with the Godkiller Balinac. If not a minion, then what?"

Yenton issued a hollow sounding sigh, "A patron of Balinac."

Thomas shook his head, "You want me to even approach a patron being of the Godkiller Balinac? Do I look insane to the White Raven?"

Yenton held steady, "You look highly capable to the White Raven. Assess the situation. Return with your report. Let her know through me what you think is possible."

Thomas asked, "Why me? Why not send you or one of her chosen after this man as you call him?"

Yenton turned to the door and began walking out, "You're special as you've well noted. Your spirit has meaning to Hap Sing. We hope to exploit that meaning for our gain."

Thomas stood up and placed his white wide brimmed hat on his head, "Where do I find him?"

Yenton looked back, "Follow me. I will lead you to the gateway to his world. It is up to you to find the talent to breach it."

Thomas shook his head, "This is getting just better and better. This Hap Sing has enough juice to have his own world? Did he conquer it?"

Yenton shook its head as he walked along, "He made it."



Thomas stopped as he closed and locked the door to his dwelling, "Only the gods can make worlds."

Yenton kept walking, "He is a demigod at best. It isn't that large a world after all. The problem is the guardian at the gate to this world."

Thomas started walking again, "Let me guess, Balinac."

Yenton nodded as they walked along the streets of the shadow realm in silence.

Thomas watched the curious tower with its red blinking beacon standing on top of the cliff. A stair carved from the stone of the cliff led up to the top and the tower sat near the edge. If this had been a sea instead of an arid desert plain of the Shadow Realm he would have called it a lighthouse. However no ships or caravans plied their trade this far from normal existence.

Thomas had studied the tower for three days, but other than seeing that a few dead spirits were strangely drawn to it in spite of the pull of the valley of death far to the icy north, it was unusual in location but not particularly remarkable as towers went. Distant physical examination was getting Thomas nowhere for the moment. He decided that an up close and personal spirit examination was in order.

Thomas sat in quiet meditation focusing on his inner self. After a couple of moments he managed to step free of his body with his spirit. He was prepared to resist the usual pull of the valley of death. What Thomas wasn't prepared for was the strength of the pull from the very close tower. Thomas took several steps forward in spirit before he caught himself. He carefully examined the mysterious tower and then it hit him. The beacon was a life gate. A gateway to the land of the living. Those spirits with unfinished business there would be drawn to it if their will was strong enough.

Then Thomas recognized the danger as well. The tower did not cast a shadow in this land of perpetual shadows, but a shadow unlike any other lay in wait at the base of the tower. It was the Balinac. Then Thomas realized it was fully aware of his spirit state and his physical form hidden among the rocks behind him. It was spiritually aware, and it lay in wait for him to approach.

Thomas figured his chances of escape from the Godkiller were slim to none if it had wanted him dead. This gave him an advantage in his mind. He was already a dead man if that was what would happen. There was nothing to lose by pressing forward. Thomas gave a faint smile as he awoke in his physical body. He had the advantage of knowing the Balinac didn't want him dead instantly.

Thomas approached the tower by climbing the staircase, and watching as the spirits all stopped just short of the ring of shadow on the ground around the tower. Thomas approached the ring of shadow, and let his own shadow cross the line it made on the ground.

Thomas felt his physical form stopped by something latching on to his spirit. A little smile curled his lips. He was being held by the Balinac but remained unharmed. The cards were playing in his direction already. A guardian told not



to kill instantly was a guardian which could be bypassed by figuring out the right approach.

Thomas spoke, "Oh mighty being Balinac. I feel your embrace upon my spirit, and I ask of thee a boon. I seek passage to the world you guard, and I am willing to bargain to gain it."

A deep rumbling voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once, "What would you have worth trading to me little Thomas the Poisoner?"

Thomas smiled, "I have several spirits which I have captured. Spirits of value."

Balinac's incorporeal voice rumbled, "Of what use are such trifles to me. I can reap the spirits of the gods themselves if I had a need to do so."

Thomas grinned even wider, "I'll take my spirits of the intelligent undead highly prized by the White Raven and leave then if you have no interest in such."

Balinac's low laugh echoed across the landscape, "You seek to press the Luck then I see. I will grant you passage for one hundred of such spirits. I know that is the number you have in your spirit jars. You may release them here and keep your jars. They may not escape me just as you could not escape me unless I will it."

Thomas nodded his head, "A deal is made then if you agree to let me pass through this gate you guard."

Balinac's voice echoed through the land, "I am agreed to this deal, but you had better figure out quickly what the Luck will require if you hope to survive as the same person you are now."

Thomas began releasing the spirits from his diamond spirit jars and watched as tendrils of shadow attached to each one immobilizing them and preventing escape. These lich and vampire spirits he had collected and contained represented over twenty years worth of special assignments on his own unpaid time. They were his insurance policy in case he got on the bad side of the White Raven by mistake. He couldn't help but feel a twinge that if things went poorly with this assignment that he would have little to show for twenty years worth of effort on his part.

Thomas released the last one and looked at the tower waiting to be freed himself, "Balinac if you don't mind me asking why do you need such things to curry the favor of the White Raven? By all accounts you could easily dispatch her if she became troublesome to you."

Balinac's voice laughed out loudly, "It is true I could dispatch the White Raven at will, but I will never do so before her time and she knows it quite well. Even us greater spirits can use a favor from a god from time to time. Don't forget that Thomas. Favors are powerful things when material existence has little real meaning. Your path is clear and I hope you meet the Luck in a good mood. Even I stay away when it is not in a good mood."

A path opened up through the shadow surrounding the base of the tower. Thomas felt his spirit freed from capture, and walked inside the tower. He could see that it had somehow been carved from a single stone. The floors were of an exquisite wood which had a healthy shine in the glow of the orange light globes



hanging on the walls. He climbed the stairway inside the tower until he reached the very top.

The top of the tower was a glass walled cupola with a rotating gem six feet tall in the center. The gem pulsed with the red light in what Thomas recognized as the same rhythm as a heartbeat. Ba da bump, ba da bump, ba da bump.

Thomas awoke lying on a divan in the base of the tower. His sense of the passage of time was unable to tell how long he had been unconscious, or how he had gotten there. He walked outside the tower to find himself on a tropical island nearly ten miles long by five miles wide. He could see some buildings down below along the beach and in the jungle a little ways back. A sense of fresh unspoiled landscape with bright skies and a crisp tropical sea breeze came to him.

Thomas tried pulling out his pocket transversal locator. It was an indispensable tool for any planar traveler. He tried to take a reading and came up with a nonsense location. The result was meaningful. This truly was a pocket world unregistered by any other planar traveler. Then Thomas tried his planar gate dowsing rods. After several attempts he couldn't find any active or passive gateways within one hundred miles of his current location.

Thomas decided to walk down to the beach to see what he could find. Along the shore were five bungalows, and a building which appeared to be a small warehouse near a dock. Thomas looked inside each shore building and found that only the third one along the beach from the tower appeared to have signs of an occupant.

Thomas jumped at the unexpected voice behind him, "Excuse me. You are blocking the entrance to my bungalow."

Thomas whirled around drawing his dagger in a defensive strike thinking that in one hundred twenty three years as an assassin no one had ever got the drop on him from behind until today. Thomas was quick, and deadly. Everyone he'd ever targeted for death had died one way or another. Suddenly Thomas' fingers were burning with pain as he noticed his dagger was gone from his hand mysteriously.

There was a streaking arc flying over the ocean away from him like a meteorite falling from the sky.

A voice behind him from inside the bungalow spoke, "You'll want to brace yourself."

Suddenly a blinding light flashed from the sky over the ocean. A huge cloud rose up into the sky in the shape of a gigantic mushroom. A pressure wave traveled through the sea to the ground knocking Thomas from his feet. Then the air pressure wave struck him as he was struggling to stand again knocking him against the wall beside the doorway. Thomas willed himself upright in time to see the ocean cresting in an enormous fifty foot high wave toward the beach.

Then Thomas saw the indescribable insanity of a short little dark haired middle aged man wearing peasant clothes and a woven bamboo hat standing passively on the shoreline before the killer fifty foot high wave. The little fisherman whipped



his fishing pole through the air in a deafening thunderous clap which knocked Thomas off his feet once more and instantly flattened the approaching wave into a flat calm sea.

Thomas couldn't help muttering before he passed out, "Just a demigod my ass."

Thomas awoke lying on the ground along the shore just up from the sand. There was no sign of his dagger, and he quickly determined that all of his implements had been taken from him. All he had left were his clothes and whatever natural materials were on hand for his use. Thomas was beginning to think he might be facing a significant challenge. A grin came to his lips at the thought of a real challenge after all these decades.

Thomas sat up and saw the fisherman suddenly standing twenty feet in front of him where he hadn't been just a fraction of a second before. Impressive magical stealth indeed. Worthy of the best killers. Then Thomas realized he was quite wrong as the fisherman was standing just beside him less than a second later without him seeing any change in position. This transcended stealth into insanity once more. A being which could move instantaneously before Thomas could even see them do so.

Thomas smiled realizing he was alive and relatively unharmed baring the burned flesh on his dagger hand.

The fisherman spoke, "I am Hap Sing and I have been awaiting your arrival. You have passed your first test. You have accurately come to the conclusion that I am impossible for you to kill, and will remain so for eternity. I have at least fifteen hundred years of age on you, and a whole lot more knowledge than you could ever learn in twenty Shadowine lifetimes. I am recruiting, and you have been recommended by my subordinate Balinac. The question I have for you is are you interested?"

Thomas thought a moment, "What did you do back there? What caused that bright light and explosion?"

Hap Sing laughed, "I threw your dagger away. You won't be needing it for a while."

Thomas was confused for a moment, "The streak through the sky?"

Hap Sing nodded, "Your dagger accelerating to a speed beyond anything you can possibly imagine. The resulting explosion was on a scale to level a minor city at point of impact with the water."

Thomas shook his head, "That's insanity. Even the gods couldn't manage such a thing easily."

Hap Sing nodded, "Not with an avatar you are correct. None will ever be foolish enough to try it again without an avatar."

Thomas stood up, "You're afraid to kill. In fact I believe you've never killed before."



Hap Sing gave a faint grin, “You are correct that I will not kill a sentient being. However, you are mistaken in thinking that part of me has never killed.”

Thomas looked at Hap Sing with his most intimidating expression, “I’ve personally killed over forty two thousand sentient beings. Can this part of you even begin to approach the horror of that reality?”

Hap Sing shook his head, “I’ll let you ask it. Luck release.”

A terrible aura beyond anything Thomas had ever experienced struck him and made his knees weak. Hap Sing’s features took on a partially bestial aspect. A stiff deep voice emanated from his throat.

The Luck spoke, “Hello Thomas. Let me tell you something about horror.”

A few moments later as he listened to the tale told by the Luck, Thomas spilled the contents of his stomach on the ground in sheer unadulterated fear and in rebellion of the concepts expressed by the Luck. It had spoken that number with absolute conviction as to both its utterly inconceivable quantity, and the manifest lack of any kind of humanity in its cruel unfathomable alien intelligence.

Thomas couldn’t help muttering to himself later that evening as the uncertain sun set along the shore, “Just a god my ass.”