



The Man with the Metal Bra

THE FAMILY MANSION SUCKED.

Oh, sure, *you* wouldn't think so. You'd see the massive six-storey brownstone with gargoyles on the corners of the roof, stained-glass transom windows, marble front steps and all the other blah, blah, blah, rich-people-live-here details, and you'd wonder why I'm sleeping on the streets.

Two words: *Uncle Randolph*.

It was *his* house. As the oldest son, he'd inherited it from my grandparents, who died before I was born. I never knew much about the family soap opera, but there was a lot of bad blood between the three kids: Randolph, Frederick and my mom. After the Great Thanksgiving Schism, we never visited the ancestral homestead again. Our apartment was, like, half a mile away, but Randolph might as well have lived on Mars.

My mom only mentioned him if we happened to be driving past the brownstone. Then she would point it out the way you might point out a dangerous cliff. *See? There it is. Avoid it.*

After I started living on the streets, I would sometimes walk by at night. I'd peer in the windows and see glowing display cases of antique swords and axes, creepy helmets with facemasks staring at me from the walls, statues silhouetted in the upstairs windows like petrified ghosts.

Several times I considered breaking in to poke around, but I'd never been tempted to knock on the door. *Please, Uncle Randolph, I know you hated my mother and haven't seen me in ten years; I know you care more about your rusty old collectibles than you do about your family; but may I live in your fine house and eat your leftover crusts of bread?*

No thanks. I'd rather be on the street, eating day-old falafel from the food court.

Still . . . I figured it would be simple enough to break in, look around and see if I could find answers about what was going on. While I was there, maybe I could grab some stuff to pawn.

Sorry if that offends your sense of right and wrong.

Oh, wait. No, I'm not.

I don't steal from just anybody. I choose obnoxious jerks who have too much already. If you're driving a new BMW and you park it in a handicapped spot without a disabled placard, then, yeah, I've got no problem jimmying your window and taking some change from your cup holder. If you're coming out of Barneys with your bag of silk handkerchiefs, so busy talking on your phone and pushing people out of your way that you're not paying attention, I am there for you, ready to pickpocket your wallet. If you can afford five thousand dollars to blow your nose, you can afford to buy me dinner.

I am judge, jury and thief. And, as far as obnoxious jerks went, I figured I couldn't do better than Uncle Randolph.

The house fronted Commonwealth Avenue. I headed around back to the poetically named Public Alley 429. Randolph's parking spot was empty. Stairs led down to the basement entrance. If there was a security system, I couldn't

spot it. The door was a simple latch lock without even a dead-bolt. *Come on, Randolph. At least make it a challenge.*

Two minutes later I was inside.

In the kitchen, I helped myself to some sliced turkey, crackers and milk from the carton. No falafel. Dammit. Now I was really in the mood for some, but I found a chocolate bar and stuffed it in my coat pocket for later. (Chocolate must be savoured, not rushed.) Then I headed upstairs into a mausoleum of mahogany furniture, oriental rugs, oil paintings, marble tiled floors and crystal chandeliers. . . . It was just embarrassing. Who lives like this?

At age six, I couldn't appreciate how expensive all this stuff was, but my general impression of the mansion was the same: dark, oppressive, creepy. It was hard to imagine my mom growing up here. It was easy to understand why she'd become a fan of the great outdoors.

Our apartment over the Korean BBQ joint in Allston had been cosy enough, but Mom never liked being inside. She always said her real home was the Blue Hills. We used to go hiking and camping there in all kinds of weather – fresh air, no walls or ceilings, no company but the ducks, geese and squirrels.

This brownstone, by comparison, felt like a prison. As I stood alone in the foyer, my skin crawled with invisible beetles.

I climbed to the next floor. The library smelled of lemon polish and leather, just like I remembered. Along one wall was a lit glass case full of Randolph's rusty Viking helmets and corroded axe blades. My mom once told me that Randolph taught history at Harvard before some big disgrace got him fired. She wouldn't go into details, but clearly the guy was still an artefact nut.

You're smarter than either of your uncles, Magnus, my mom once told me. With your grades, you could easily get into Harvard.

That had been back when she was still alive, I was still in school, and I might have had a future that extended past finding my next meal.

In one corner of Randolph's office sat a big slab of rock like a tombstone, the front chiseled and painted with elaborate red swirly designs. In the centre was a crude drawing of a snarling beast – maybe a lion or a wolf.

I shuddered. Let's not think about *wolves*.

I approached Randolph's desk. I'd been hoping for a computer, or a notepad with helpful information – anything to explain why they were looking for me. Instead, spread across the desk were pieces of parchment as thin and yellow as onion-skin. They looked like maps a school kid in medieval times had made for social studies: faint sketches of a coastline, various points labeled in an alphabet I didn't know. Sitting on top of them, like a paperweight, was a leather pouch.

My breath caught. I recognized that pouch. I untied the drawstring and grabbed one of the dominoes . . . except it wasn't a domino. My six-year-old self had assumed that's what Annabeth and I had been playing with. Over the years, the memory had reinforced itself. But, instead of dots, these stones were painted with red symbols.

The one in my hand was shaped like a tree branch or a deformed *F*:



My heart pounded. I wasn't sure why. I wondered if coming here had been such a good idea. The walls felt like they

were closing in. On the big rock in the corner, the drawing of the beast seemed to sneer at me, its red outline glistening like fresh blood.

I moved to the window. I thought it might help to look outside. Along the centre of the avenue stretched the Commonwealth Mall – a ribbon of parkland covered in snow. The bare trees were strung with white Christmas lights. At the end of the block, inside an iron fence, the bronze statue of Leif Erikson stood on his pedestal, his hand cupped over his eyes. Leif gazed towards the Charlesgate overpass as if to say *Look, I discovered a highway!*

My mom and I used to joke about Leif. His armour was on the skimpy side: a short skirt and a breastplate that looked like a Viking bra.

I had no clue why that statue was in the middle of Boston, but I figured it couldn't be a coincidence that Uncle Randolph grew up to study Vikings. He'd lived here his whole life. He'd probably looked at Leif every day out the window. Maybe as a child Randolph had thought, *Some day, I want to study Vikings. Men who wear metal bras are cool!*

My eyes drifted to the base of the statue. Somebody was standing there . . . looking up at me.

You know how when you see somebody out of context and it takes you a second to recognize them? In Leif Erikson's shadow stood a tall pale man in a black leather jacket, black motorcycle pants and pointy-toed boots. His short spiky hair was so blond it was almost white. His only dash of colour was a striped red-and-white scarf wrapped around his neck and spilling off his shoulders like a melted candy cane.

If I didn't know him, I might've guessed he was cosplaying

some anime character. But I *did* know him. It was Hearth, my fellow homeless dude and surrogate “mom”.

I was a little creeped out, a little offended. Had he seen me on the street and followed me? I didn’t need some fairy god-stalker looking after me.

I spread my hands: *What are you doing here?*

Hearth made a gesture like he was plucking something from his cupped hand and throwing it away. After two years of hanging around him, I was getting pretty good at reading sign language.

He was saying *GET OUT*.

He didn’t look alarmed, but it was hard to tell with Hearth. He never showed much emotion. Whenever we hung out, he mostly just stared at me with those pale grey eyes like he was waiting for me to explode.

I lost valuable seconds trying to figure out what he meant, why he was here when he was supposed to be in Copley Square.

He gestured again: both hands pointing forward with two fingers, dipping up and down twice. *Hurry*.

“Why?” I said aloud.

Behind me, a deep voice said, “Hello, Magnus.”

I nearly jumped out of my shoes. Standing in the library doorway was a barrel-chested man with a trim white beard and a skullcap of grey hair. He wore a beige cashmere overcoat over a dark woollen suit. His gloved hands gripped the handle of a polished wooden cane with an iron tip. Last time I’d seen him his hair had been black, but I knew that voice.

“Randolph.”

He inclined his head a millimetre. “What a pleasant

surprise. I'm glad you're here." He sounded neither surprised nor glad. "We don't have much time."

The food and milk started to churn in my stomach. "M-much time . . . before what?"

His brow furrowed. His nose wrinkled as if he detected a mildly unpleasant odour. "You're sixteen today, aren't you? They'll be coming to kill you."

DOOMSDAY
IS COMING

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