

MR. LYE'S LAUNDRY

of DOOM!



SPECIALISING
IN
CLOTHING COLLARS

CHINESE
HAND
LAUNDRY

by I.A.
WATSON

Mr Lye's Laundry of Doom

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The little shop was just off Toenail Alley in the nasty part of Limehouse. Well, the nastier part. The narrow passage was still paved with cobbled stones. A wrecked gas lamp stood beside the archway into the dark courtyard. But the shutters were rolled up and there was a light inside the laundry. Steam billowed out of the door into the cold night.

As the young woman entered the warm moist air almost chased away the evening's chills. The interior was much hotter, humid from drying clothes hung beside the radiators. There was an old wooden counter with an older mechanical cash register. Behind the desk a thick curtain was partially open revealing big laundry tubs and presses. The shop smelled of spices and wet fabric. The visitor's overwhelming first impression was of coat hangers.

"Hello?" the girl called. "Shop?"

A small Oriental man with a long pigtail scuttled forward. He was such a stereotype for a Chinese laundry that the visitor blinked. The casting seemed too perfect. "You call? You want laundry?"

"Er, no, not as such. You... in the shop door there was a

card. Workers wanted?”

“Ah, workers,” said the Chinese man, dropping the accent and standing up properly. “Okay, you’re after a job.”

“Yes. Please.”

“You work in a laundry before?”

“No. In fact really I haven’t worked much anywhere.”

“You never had a job?”

“I’ve had jobs,” the girl confessed, “But I’ve never really worked at them.” She leaned forward with an unhappy expression on her face. “I want to change, really I do. Please?”

“What’s your name?” Mr Lye asked her.

“Jane,” lied Eloise Prentiss. “Call me Jane.”

“Hi Jane,” the young man lifting the lid of a steaming pressure vat called out, as Mr Lye left Eloise with him to learn the ropes. “I’m Tanner.”

“Hello Tanner,” the girl answered uncertainly. “I’m baffled.”

“Could you be baffled and pass me those baskets?” Tanner asked. He’d pulled off his shirt to work atop the great machine. Eloise noticed his muscles rippled beneath his vest. *Stop that*, she told herself, *you’re falling into old ways*. She pushed over the wire baskets to receive the laundry.

Tanner grinned as the last of the whites was safely dropped into the containers “Thanks. Just lift ‘em onto this conveyor belt and they’ll go through to Legumo for ironing.”

Eloise helped send the washing on its way and then

Tanner had time to look at her properly. “Wow,” he admitted to the gorgeous girl in the frumpy laundry smock. “You must have been pretty bad.”

“Bad?” asked Eloise guiltily. “What do you mean? I got this job fair and square; I didn’t... do anything for it.”

“I mean to end up working at the Laundry of Doom,” Tanner noted. “Mr Lye’s Wash-House.”

“I just answered the ad in the window,” Eloise lied.

“Sure, because lots of girls wander down Toenail Alley alone in the middle of the night looking for jobs. Well actually they do, but not jobs in the laundry trade if you know what I mean.”

“Somebody told me there was a job going here,” Eloise said defensively. “I *need* a job.”

Tanner poured some coffee from his flask and handed it to Eloise. “If you say so. But usually somebody’s got to be pretty desperate before they come to work here.”

Eloise frowned. “You? Are you pretty desperate?”

Tanner considered this. “Guess I must be, since I’m here. Me, Cally, Shadrach, Legumo, Boilface. They don’t get desperater.”

I... see,” blinked Eloise. But she didn’t see at all.”

“We have a certain reputation,” Mr Lye explained as he gave Eloise the grand tour. The laundry was rather larger than it seemed, comprising a number of old brick nineteenth century buildings knocked together into a ramshackle warren

of rooms, staircases, corridors, and halls. After a while Eloise wasn't sure if she was above ground or below it.

"People come to us with their difficult laundry problems. They expect results," Tanner said.

"Results. Right," agreed the young woman. She stared at the carpet hanging in the centre of an otherwise empty room being beaten by a seven-foot tall grey-skinned man in a loincloth. "And strict discipline."

"Ah, that is Shadrach," Mr Lye said, as if that explained it all. "He is our best worker."

"Well sure, if you measure it by mass," agreed Eloise. "He seems to enjoy pounding the carpet."

"Difficult problem," the laundry owner explained. "Infestation of pixies. But Shadrach will get the little buggers eventually. This way."

"I'm sorry," Eloise said as she trailed behind her new employer. "Did you say pixies?"

"Probably pixies," Mr Lye replied. "I suppose they could be bookas. Trust Mr Shadrach to sort it out. Golems are very good at this sort of thing."

Eloise halted. "Golems? As in clay statutes brought to life by magic?"

Mr Lye nodded. "That's right. You'd be amazed how hard it is to get them work permits these days. Through here, please."

Eloise followed the Chinaman onto a metal catwalk over half a dozen huge churning vats. Through the steam the cloths below turned over and over, agitated by huge props. Presiding over a strange bank of manual levers at the far end

of the walkway was a fat timid man with a head covered in acne.

“Boilface,” guessed Eloise.

“He prefers Mr Boilface,” said Mr Lye. “This is the new girl, Mr Boilface.”

“Hello,” blushed the fat man. “I hope you stay longer than the last one.”

“The last one?” asked Eloise suspiciously. She’d already gone past the how-did-I-get-into-this phase and was well on the way to how-can-I-escape-this-madhouse? “What happened to the last one?”

“I think it was that consignment of vestments we had in from the cult of Shub-Niggurat,” Mr Boilface considered. “I don’t think she liked the whispering.”

“Okay. Nice to meet you Mr Boilface,” said Eloise politely.

Mr Lye led her onwards.

Legumo was a thin nervous man with haunted eyes who operated the steam presses in a cluttered underground chamber. He jumped when Eloise said hello to him, almost dropping the hot iron in his hand onto his foot. “Sorry,” he told her. “Sorry, sorry. I didn’t hear you come in. I’m sorry.”

“Hi,” Eloise greeted him. “I’m the new girl. I’m Jane.”

Legumo shook his head. “No you’re not,” he assured her earnestly. “But that’s really none of my business. Sorry.”

Eloise swallowed hard and tried to keep adrift in the sea

of strangeness. “Mr Lye said you’d direct me to where I should be?”

“No, I don’t do that any more,” Legumo flinched. “Sorry, but I don’t. It always leads to trouble. You don’t want to be where you should be. Sorry.”

Eloise looked helplessly around the steamy room and at the doors beyond. “But I have to find Cally,” she explained. “To help with the stitching?”

“Ah,” Legumo understood. “Sorry. Now I understand you. You weren’t seeking a life destiny or true seeing from me, you just wanted to know how to find the sewing room. Sorry.”

“A life destiny?” Eloise asked. “What’s...”

“I’m cursed,” the worried man babbled quickly. “Everyone here is cursed, one way or another, or else they are a curse. That’s why you’re here.”

“Which one do you think I am?” the girl wondered.

“Sorry. But my curse is to see the future, to know lies when they’re told, and to never be able to tell any myself.”

“That’s a curse?” Eloise asked.

“Oh yes,” breathed Legumo, muffling a sob. “Sorry.”

“I can’t sew,” Eloise admitted. “Or cook, or wash, or iron, or, well really any of those things.”

“You can stitch men up, though, dearie,” observed Cally, looking the young woman up and down. “You’ve done that

alright.”

“I... I don't do that anymore.”

The old woman in black snorted. She had the most angular face Eloise had ever seen, and whatever teeth she had were as dark as the paint on her talon-like fingernails. “Of course you do that, child, it's what you're good at. Anyway, stitching men is far more important than stitching garments. I know.”

Eloise swallowed hard. It was cold in the sewing room away from the washing tubs and steam presses. The attic skylights let in a little glimmer of star, but otherwise the only light was an old tallow candle. “Everyone here is more than they seem,” she ventured.

“Everyone everywhere is more than they seem, my dearie-o,” the crone told her.

“I don't know why I came here. I don't fit in.”

“You came because you do fit in, child,” Cally told her. “Otherwise you'd never have got through the door.”

“Other girls have come for a job, and left again. Mr Boilface told me.”

“Some of them left,” agreed Cally with a sinister cackle. “None of them work here now.”

Eloise lifted her chin up to show she wasn't afraid, though she was. “I was sent here by a man who claimed to be a sorcerer,” she announced. “And, um, jobbing occultist, chi therapist, tarot corrector and lifestyle coach. I went to him for guidance about how to change my life, and he sent me here.”

“Well, we do specialise in removing dirty stains.”

The young woman flushed. “It takes two to... stain, you

know. Or more than two, if there's a really large amount of alcohol."

"But only one to call the paparazzi, my duck."

"He broke my heart. So I..."

"Cashed in. And tore out his heart."

"I... I have to go," Eloise decided. "I can't stay here."

"You can help me with this little job then," Cally announced sharply. Suddenly she seemed much darker and colder. "Before you flee. One little mending."

The old woman gestured to the sewing table where a flimsy ragged cloth lay in two pieces. It was white silk, so finely spun as to be almost transparent.

"We got out the mud and the bloodstains," said Cally, "and the regret and the betrayal, though those are harder to sponge off. Now we have to try and patch it. Special order."

Eloise couldn't help reaching out to touch the fabric. It felt cool and soft, almost as if it wasn't there at all. It was almost like stroking feathery down.

"Mythlands weave," Cally told her. "They really know how to spin threads there."

Eloise realised that before it had been torn in two it must have been some kind of tabard or mantle, clasped by a belt perhaps and held at the shoulder by pins. "What is it?" she wondered. "Whose is it?"

"We don't ask customers' names here," the old woman sniffed. "We just do laundry."

"You mend tears."

"Sometimes," Cally admitted. "I've always been good with the weft and the weave, the casting of the thread and the

spinning of the fabric. Oh, and the cutting of the line at the end, to see what's been made. That's my very favourite bit, dearie."

"I... see."

The old woman pointed to a sewing basket full of blood-red wool and a ragged pincushion. "Now thread me a needle, child, because my eyesight's not what it was, and then we'll see if the Cailleach can't still pull a stitch in time."

Eloise placed the mended garment on a hangar and carried it back down the corridor, trying to retrace her steps to the front of the shop.

"Lost?" asked Tanner, coming up on her unexpectedly. "Don't drop the goods! I had real problems getting that thing cleaned the first time."

"Just trying to find the hanging area," Eloise said, her heart slowing down again. For a moment, out of the corner of her eye, Tanner hadn't looked like a handsome young man at all. The strange laundry was getting to her.

"This way," he pointed.

Eloise padded beside her guide. "Cleaning this was a difficult job, then?" she asked conversationally.

"Middling difficult," Tanner admitted. "Boilface had his work cut out for him, I'll admit. These magical garments are always a bugger to fix, especially when they've been ritually destroyed."

Eloise glanced at the gossamer gown in her arms.

“Magical?” she asked. “And ritually destroyed?”

Tanner grinned. “That,” he said, pointing to the garment, “is a genuine swanmay mantle. Accept no substitutes. It’s a soul object.”

“As is becoming far too common tonight, I don’t understand.”

“A swanmay is a creature of legend, a beauteous maiden who transforms herself into a swan – or maybe the other way round. They’re guardians of lakes and rivers of old, and they hate evil.”

“And they exist?”

Tanner shrugged. “That all depends on how you define existing. But they’re real, all right, as real as a golem in our tub room or the personification of winter’s terror in the sewing attic.”

“The what?” Eloise blinked.

“One set of mysteries at once, hey lass? So swanmays have magical mantles, vestments that let them shift from one form to another. All girls work magic with clothes, don’t they? And even greater magics when they strip their garments off?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” answered Eloise.

“And I’m equally sure you would,” Tanner smirked. “I have a good nose for this stuff. *Anyhow*, if a man captures a swanmay’s mantle he can command her, in the old forms. Command her as his slave. And if he destroys her mantle he breaks her power forever and she can never return to her sisters or her home.”

Eloise looked at the tabard in her hands. “Is that what happened? Somebody deliberately ripped up this mantle? To

enslave a girl?”

“Something like that. All I know is it was a bugger to clean the stains off, and Boilface was swearing as he tried to make it clean again.”

“But it’s fixed now? The swanmay can be free and go home?”

Tanner shook his head. “No, probably not. But at least she’s got her mantle back. She’s free. That won’t please the bloke who shredded it.”

Eloise found her way back to the shop. Mr Lye was waiting for her. “I’ve hung the swanmay’s tabard on the rack,” she told him. “But look, I don’t think this job is working for me. It’s... well, it’s just weird. I’m not cut out for this. Everyone here is...”

“Outcast? Alone? Desperate? Searching?” The old Chinese man stared at the young woman and his eyes seemed like dark tunnels to another place.

“*Weird*,” answered Eloise. “I don’t like it. I’m used to being in control, to being able to manipulate...”

“That’s what got you into trouble, isn’t it Eloise?”

“That’s supposed to be Jane,” the reluctant employee sighed. “But I suppose if you cope with golems and personifications of winter cleaning swanmay vestments I shouldn’t be surprised that you saw me coming.”

“You don’t have to be prophetic to work here,” Mr Lye told her, “but it helps.”

“Insane,” Eloise corrected him. “You don’t have to be insane.”

“Really? Anyway, if you’d be so good as to take care of the front of store for a while it would be very helpful.”

“I’m trying to quit!” Eloise warned him. “I can’t stay here! I don’t know how to sew or wash or anything like that, so...”

“So we’re putting you on the counter and you can deal with the customers,” Mr Lye suggested. “Public liaison. You’re good with liaisons.”

Eloise flushed. “I’ve turned over a new leaf, Mr Lye.”

“Who knows what you’ll find hiding under there then?” the old man wondered.

Before Eloise could think of a good reply he’d left her minding the shop.

As night passed, customers came and went. A pale woman brought in a basket of bloodstained shifts. A grey-faced ancient who shambled like a corpse collected some pressed bathrobes. Seven short miners dropped off a huge pile of socks to be mended and took away a brown parcel of similar size. A hefty man with a buff physique left a soiled spandex leotard.

The laundry did a lot of its business by night. Eloise was surprised when she looked at her wristwatch and found it was almost midnight.

The current patron was a genuine hunchback who was

pouring out a huge collection of soiled underwear into a wire basket. He might have modelled for Quasimodo. He smelled of sour whiskey and taxidermy fluids. He noticed the new girl behind the counter and adjusted his hump before fixing his face into a hopeful leer. “Well hello, little one. What time do you get off?”

“I’m not quite sure,” she admitted.

“Can I watch?” He’d clearly been waiting for his chance to say it.

Eloise sighed. “Really? That’s your line? That’s all you’ve got?”

“It’s late. I used all my best innuendos for today.” He smiled hopefully at the new assistant. “I’m Flapjack. Of the Carpathian Flapjacks. Would you like my phone number?”

“To pass on to the police?” Eloise didn’t need a late-night minimum-wage job in a seedy back-street wash-house, getting hit on by refugees from the Rocky Horror Show. “I was going to *be* somebody,” she objected. “I was a celebrity. Well, I was almost a celebrity. I would have been. Now I can’t even get an agent to return my calls.”

“There’s always porno,” suggested the hunchback hopefully.

“I’m even more desperate than that,” Eloise confessed. “I’m here aren’t I, taking your washing?”

Flapjack nodded. “Yeah. Why?”

“I did some things. They ended badly. I was a bitch.”

“You can’t have been that much of a bitch or you’d have done better than ending up here.”

“True. Next time I’ll try and be a bigger bitch.” Eloise

sighed. “But... I did some bad stuff, things I regret, things I can never take back or set right.”

“Then I guess you ending up here’s some sign that there’s some kind of justice in the world.” Flapjack looked up to heaven a little worriedly. “Oh, crap.”

“This isn’t for long. I’m not staying.”

“Yeah,” agreed Flapjack. “That’s what Tanner told my great great grandfather in 1792.” He snorted with vicious amusement and took his ticket. He was still chuckling when he slipped out of the door.

Eloise filed away the point that Tanner wasn’t as young as he looked. Nobody in the laundry was what they appeared. Or perhaps she had just slipped between the cracks of sanity all together. Maybe this was one long bizarre drug trip, Alice in Wonderland with soap powder?

She dared to reach into her pocket for her mobile. Even a long queue of hate-texts would be better than this strange isolated shop with its bizarre staff and customers, its sudden gusts of heat and cold and its waiting coat-hangars.

Her phone could not find a signal. *No service.*

The bell chimed again. Eloise snapped out of her gloomy self-doubt. A young man in faded shirt and mended jeans shouldered his way into the laundry with a pillow-case full of dirty linen. “Hey, Eloise, you found your way then.”

“Vinnie de Soth,” the new shopgirl recognised. “My lifestyle coach.”

“I just thought I’d check up that things were working out for you. I was worried.”

Eloise was used to men being ready to check up on her,

often late at night with a bottle of wine. Vinnie didn't seem the predatory type, though. The self-described jobbing occultist was almost shy. He seemed genuinely concerned that his client had found her way.

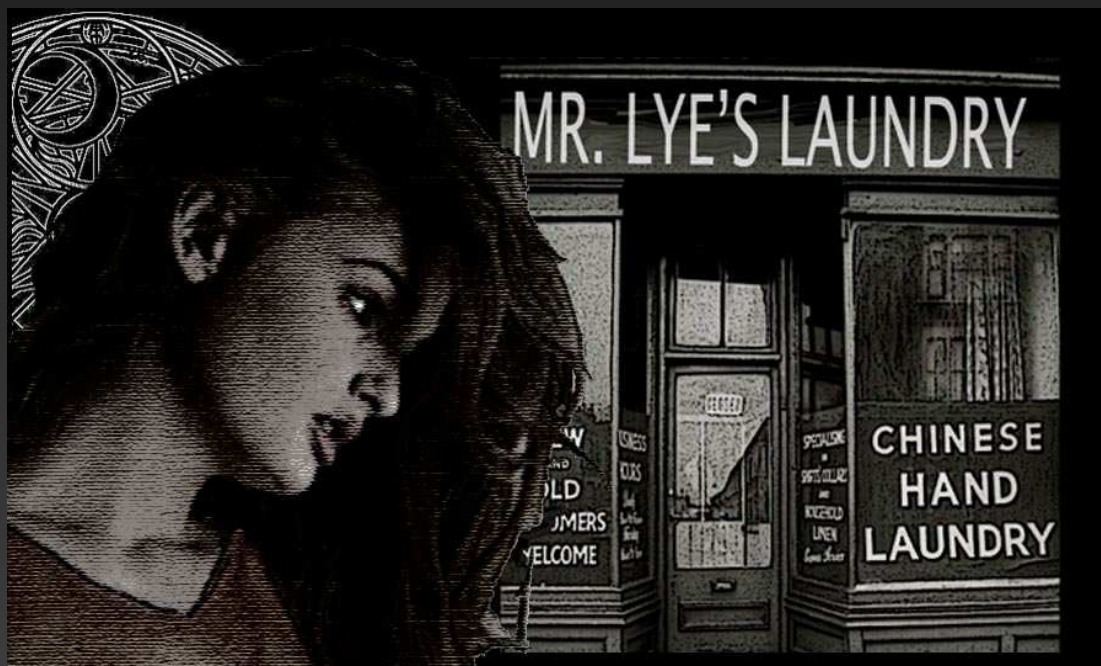
"I don't think I'll be keeping the job," she confided. "It's not really me."

Vinnie handed in his bundle and got a receipt for it. "Isn't that the point? To be someone different? Someone who everyone doesn't want dead in a ditch?"

"It takes two to commit adultery, you know," the girl objected.

"I'm not the one assigning blame."

"Everyone else is. I'd never have sold my story if I'd thought his wife would... if I'd thought about her at all, really. Or about anyone but me. Now everyone hates me –



and they're right. *I* hate me."

"Well, if it's any comfort," Vinnie told her, "everyone here, all the staff and quite a lot of the customers, have done things much worse than you have. They've all got much deeper stains to scour clean."

"The Laundry of Doom." Eloise recalled Tanner's wry comment.

"Yes." The jobbing occultist smiled tentatively at Eloise. "Keep the job. There's a lot of competition for it. You might even turn out to be good at it. That's my advice."

"You think I should work with spooky weirdoes and get hit on by hunchback latches?"

"Flapjack? He's okay. And there's worse things to be than spooky weirdoes." Vinnie turned to leave. "You know what you've done since you came here?" he pointed out. "You've not hurt anyone, and you've even helped. Isn't that new?"

"I... suppose it is."

"Well then, keep up the good work. Also, no starch please in my order. Legumo seems to feel that underwear doesn't count if it can't withstand small arms fire. I just hope he's not trying to warn me about something."

Eloise's watch had stopped, perhaps because of the steam, but she judged it couldn't be far from morning when the bell on the door clanged again. A tall man in an old-fashioned grey double-fronted coat entered, muffled from the foul weather with scarf and hat.

"May I help you?" Eloise asked him, priding herself that

even at this humble task she could bring a certain flair and style.

“I am here for the mantle,” the tall man told her. “The swanmay’s garment.”

He didn’t look like a swan maiden. “May I see your ticket please, sir?” Eloise asked him.

“No,” he answered starkly. “Bring me the mantle.”

Eloise hadn’t had any training about the systems and procedures here, but she could tell when something wasn’t right. “I don’t think I can hand over the merchandise unless you have a ticket, sir,” she decided.

“You can,” the customer told her. “You will.” And his strange heavy-lidded eyes locked on her. “You *will*.”

Eloise shrugged off his gaze, although she felt like slithery things were crawling over her flesh. She’d auditioned for the Big Brother house; she wasn’t going to fall for any kind of hypnotic glare. “If you’ll just wait here I’ll go find the manager,” she answered. “I’m sure he’ll be able to...”

“You will bring me the garment,” hissed the tall man. “And you will bring it to me now, while you still have breath to scream and flesh to sear.” One hand darted out and caught her wrist in a painfully tight grip.

Eloise grabbed the spike that was used to hold the returned tickets and jabbed it through his hand. He didn’t even wince. He only tightened his grasp, threatening to shatter bone.

“Alright,” she whimpered in agony. “I’m sorry. I’ll get it!”

The hand withdrew. “Quickly,” the intruder told her.

Eloise staggered back to the rack and found the translucent white swanmay tabard. She picked it up and held it out. "I'll just get this properly wrapped," she said quickly, and ducked through the doorway into the back.

She heard the tall man hiss some rude words. He scrambled to follow her. Eloise pelted up the creaking wooden stairway and tried to recall which way took her to the boiling room.

"Help!" she called. "Help!"

The tall man seemed remarkably fast, and he was almost on her when Tanner interposed himself. "Problem?" he asked her, and then in a growl to the intruder: "This isn't a customer area."

The tall man gestured and bright sparks flew from his fingers to slam Eloise's rescuer against the stairwell. Tanner snarled, rolled, and leapt forward, a dark shadow from winter woods, white of fang and claw.

"Okay, I am so not Red Riding Hood!" Eloise objected as she fled away through the steam rooms. Behind her a grizzled grey wolf tore at the tall intruder, and wherever his claws raked, bits of illusion were torn away. The interloper was hardly human, and certainly not alive.

Then the growls fell silent.

Eloise almost tumbled down an unexpected single step then recognised the sound of a spinning wheel clacking above. She hauled herself up a rickety flight to find Cally's sewing room. "He's behind me!" she cried, hurling herself into the attic.

"Yes," agreed the old woman. "And he's almost caught

up too.”

“Help me!”

“Why?”

“He’s not human?”

“He was, on his mother’s side, when he was alive,” the Cailleach answered.

Eloise didn’t wait for more revelations. She spotted a trapdoor with a ladder and hurled herself down it before the monster could break into the attic.

The intruder burst into the sewing room. “Where did she go?” he demanded, but there was only darkness there to mock him.

Eloise pelted along the brick-lined corridor trying to find a landmark. She heard the hiss of the steam press and dragged open a door marked NO EXIT.

“Legumo!” she screamed, clutching the swanmay’s garment to her chest. “I need help!”

“Yes, I know,” winced the timid man. “Sorry. I can see the future. Baron Mortus is going to catch you.”

Eloise didn’t want to hear about that future. She raced across the catwalk and fled into the chambers beyond. She could hear the heavy clattering of a large creature behind her. The undead intruder had dropped all semblance of his glamour of humanity. Now he was a pulpy, rotten thing, flayed and burst, flouncing after her on shattered legs driven by hate alone.

Eloise tumbled into the vat hall and slithered across the tiled floor to sprawl almost at the feet of Boilface. “Mr Boilface!” she called. “He’s after me! He wants this mantle and

it's not his!" She was surprised by how strongly she wanted to deny the intruder his ill-gotten gains.

Baron Mortus, eight feet tall with his swelled inhuman head split open on one side, shattered the door and stamped into the room.

"You're trespassing," Boilface warned him. "Get out!"

"Or what?" hissed the dead man. "You might be a terror to the living, but I am past the touch of pestilence."

"Past my touch, maybe," agreed the pus-ridden laundryman. "But not past his"

And Shadrach the golem reached over and plucked Mortus from his feet. Golems hate evil.

Mortus snarled. His flesh burned at the clay man's touch, but he lashed out at Shadrach's head and wiped his fingers over the inscription drawn on the golem's brow. The word *emeth*, truth, was altered to *meth*, death, and Shadrach ceased all motion.

"It's simple to stop a golem when you know the trick of it," boasted the undead.

"But not the divine justice that powers it," scorned Boilface. "Run, child. I'll hold him while I can."

Eloise clutched the mantle to her again and dodged away.

"It will be mine!" Mortus called after her. "The swanmay shall die and by her death I shall live again! I shall be supreme again! It has been promised!"

Eloise had taken a wrong turn. She was deep in the cellars now, amidst rotting crates, stood in two inches of dirty water from overflowing drains. Only dim infrequent naked bulbs on ancient waxed-wire strings kept the shadows from overwhelming her. She had tightness in her chest and her heart felt like it would burst from her body.

And it was a dead end. She'd never appreciated the full meaning of those words before.

Baron Mortus stalked down the stairs, lurching where his broken body twisted in places it shouldn't. Eloise cowered behind a pile of barrels and tried to think of a clever way of surviving.

It occurred to her to give him the shift and beg for her life, but she wasn't willing to do that. If this was where she was going to die, a forgotten failure, a nobody, then she was going to have a last stand. A final bow.

"You can't hide," Mortus warned her. "I can smell your fear. I can hear your terrified heartbeat."

"I can smell you as well," Eloise answered him, stepping from concealment. "I don't think you'd have smelled too good even when you were alive."

The undead glared at her. "Nothing can save you from horror now," he promised. "Your apostate wolf and your winter hag, your cursed prophet your walking pestilence, your clay mannequin are all as nothing to me. You will give me the swan maiden's garment, and this time I shall foul it and her beyond any cleansing. Thus shall I fulfil my bargain and regain all that I lost. And I shall share with you the pain that was given me on my death and since, by those who loosed me

to take my revenge.”

Eloise held the mantle between her hands. “What if I rip it now?” she challenged. “It might not help the swanmay, but you lose as well.”

“You still die,” Mortus replied.

“But if I’m going to die horribly anyway, I have nothing to lose, do I?” Eloise pointed out. “Only I can rob you of your victory. I’m that big a bitch now. I’ve learned, you see. Learned not to do half a job.”

The Baron paused. The yearnings of his undead body conflicted with the difficult dilemma he was presented with.

“Tough call, eh?” Eloise sneered. “Nice to know I’ve still got it.”

Mortus lurched forward to destroy her, regardless of the loss.

“That will be enough,” said Mr Lye quietly; and Eloise would have sworn he wasn’t between the undead and her a moment before. “You are not required on these premises, Baron Mortus.”

The monster lashed out with claws to shred the Chinaman, but only managed to claw away his tunic. The old laundry owner was covered in ancient tattoos on every inch of exposed flesh.

“And now you have transgressed the charter,” Mr Lye told him. “By virtue of my Office I reprimand you.” The Chinaman’s eyes blazed. “You are *cleansed!*”

And Baron Mortus exploded like a Chinese firework.

“Ouch,” complained Tanner, as he limped down to see Eloise in the shop.

“So you survived too,” the girl said, and was surprised how relieved she was.

“Yes, but I’ll never play the piano again,” he told her. “And also I ruined another good shirt.”

“Take this one,” Eloise offered, picking one from the hamper beside her. “It belongs to Vinnie.”

Mr Lye came from the back rooms. “All is in order,” he reported. He was wearing another oriental tunic just like the one he’d had before. “Mr Boilface is re-inscribing Shadrach. We should be back on schedule in time for the day shift.”

Eloise realised the first smudges of dawn were creeping over Limehouse.

She wanted to ask questions; about the laundry, about the old Chinaman and the meaning of those tattoos, and the Office he had mentioned that allowed him to sear Mortus from existence. She wanted to know about Tanner and Boilface and Legumo and Shadrach and the Cailleach. She wanted to know who had murdered the Baron then dredged the undead from his grave and set him stalking. She wanted to know who the swan-maiden might be that Mortus hated so much, and why she had to be destroyed. But she was afraid to hear the answers.

“You may go now,” Mr Lye told her. “Your next shift begins at sundown. Do not be late.”

“Another shift? After last night?” Eloise snorted incredulously. “You have got to be kidding! I nearly died!”

“*Nearly died* is another way of saying *still alive*,” Tanner pointed out. “And living people need jobs.”

“No,” Eloise replied, shaking her head. “Not here. Not this girl. No way. No how. Just... no.” She grabbed her purse and hastened out of the door so they couldn’t drag her back.

Mr Lye watched her flounce out of the shop, then turned to Tanner. “You had better clear out a locker for Eloise’s things.”

And then it was time for the day shift, and a new set of challenges.

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