

BAGGAGE CHECK

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The old man shuffled up to the security gate with a briefcase grasped in one trembling hand while resting his weight on the handle of an ornate cane gripped in the other.

He got into line with the other passengers and eventually came to the table full of plastic trays.

Emptying his pockets of a set of keys with an attached Health Care flash drive and some coins, he also took off the heavy necklace that held the Eye from around his neck and the Shield Bracelet from his left wrist. Placing them all in the plastic tray alongside his shoes he put his briefcase on the conveyor behind the tray and moved down the line as the conveyor took his possessions through the x-ray tunnel.

Shuffling along at a steady pace with his fellow travelers, he eventually approached the new porno-scanner that was all the rage. Terrorists in their huts laughed as travelers were subjected to the high-tech intrusion.

When his turn came he gave the guard a white card.

He was not that bothered by the same modesty concerns as some, it was the scan itself. The energy waves used might not be a bother for most people, but they played havoc with his ability to do *his* particular job and he could drive to his contract before *those* effects wore off.

The old man waited patiently while the guard read the card then the ID the old man held out and waved him around the scanner. On the other side of the checkpoint another guard gave him the standard speech, then performed a fairly quick, but thorough pat down.

He endured the mild, legal assault of his person stoically then retrieved his shoes, the Eye and Shield Bracelet from the plastic tray. He then waited patiently while the guard opened his briefcase and inspected the contents.

The guard touched the bundle of business folders stuffed full of documents and photos then admired the newest style of compad resting in a padded pocket. "My oldest kid just got one of these"

The guard looked up and smiled at the old man. "I got her old one, and I still haven't learned how to use the one I got from her younger brother only a few months ago."

The guard smiled as he added. "Their mother and I get all their hand-me-downs. Go figure."

The old man smiled patiently and nodded his head politely.

The guard closed the zipper and opened one of the two small pockets on the side of the briefcase. His smile died as it was replaced by his business face. He opened the double-zipper

of the side pocket and poked at the vials inside while asking a series of serious questions.

The old man dutifully answered each question as the guard opened the second small pocket and peered cautiously inside, then the old man produced his ID again when the guard asked for it.

The guard then pulled two security-tagged plastic ties from a pocket and attached the two zipper ends of each briefcase pocket together. He filled out a security tag and gave it and the briefcase back to the old man. As the old man accepted the Security receipt and briefcase, the security guard recited the standard warning about breaking the ties before security did so at his destination.

The old man automatically spoke the appropriate responses.

Finished with his duty the guard smiled and asked politely if he needed a cart.

“I may be old, young man, but I’m not feeble!” The old man grumbled as he pushed off with his intricately carved wooden cane, which had received its quota of nervous glances from those security personnel around him, and a few fellow passengers as well.

Halfway to his gate the old man wished he’d taken the guard up on the offer of a ride.

When he finally got to his boarding gate he went through another round of presenting his ID intermixed with suspicious looks at his briefcase ... and fearful looks at his cane ... before he was finally passed through the gate to board.

With a great sigh he collapsed into his seat.

Almost immediately a steward came by to ask if he needed anything and he ordered something to calm his nerves.

He hated flying! Of course he wanted something as soon as they could bring it!

The current flight was as much of a constant terror as he remembered from his last time off the ground only two months earlier. The only reason he’d flown that time was because, being an emergency job like this one, it was quicker than going by boat and speed had been a part of the contract.

He always put two contracts out for bid at the same time.

One was for a job done at his leisure ... and the other for *immediate* resolution with designated specifications.

The latter was always his premium wage earner.

It was hard to turn down *those* kinds of contracts when someone agreed to the bid price and conditions of his premium bid.

The steward brought his drink as soon as the plane leveled off and the fasten seat belts light went out with a musical *ding*.

Way too happy a sound for his mood.

Sipping his bourbon with one hand and gripping his briefcase with the other, he tried unsuccessfully to relax as the plane settled into its flight.

The twins were old enough to demand promises without thought to the schedules of adults.

And he was old enough to know the value of a promise, despite the vagaries of life, and in spite of the fact that it had been *him* who'd made the original promise *and* the job bid.

He snorted as he realized the twins had trained him well. He would be at their birthday party ... even if he had to travel to and from an emergency job by air.

There was no use complaining.

He had made the promise without coercion or other bribery.

He ordered another drink and tried to relax.

He tried to *not* think about how he was seven *miles* above steady, firm, safe ground.

As the steward brought another drink, he tried to think about his job.

He had bid for a twenty-four hour contract, and charged high dollar for a successful completion. But that did require a successful mediation in less time than that to make sure he could get back in time to attend his grandchildren's birthday party.

He simply had to complete an almost impossible twenty-four hour contract in less than half that time or break the hearts of the only two people in the whole world who thought he could do no wrong.

The flight was as nerve-racking as he remembered from the last time he'd endured this particular misery, but a knowledgeable steward was able to give him a measured amount of bourbon to help him from curling into a ball. The first-class meal also helped balance the quantity of bourbon the thoughtful steward supplied.

Properly greased, he was able to get in a nap to cover the second half of the flight and soon found himself repeating his security check and baggage search at his destination.

The ties on the zippers of his briefcase were checked with the tag he presented, *then* cut and removed and the interior of the pockets examined suspiciously before the inspectors smiled their practiced smiles and sent him on his way.

He made his way through the airport and to the taxi stand outside where he gave the driver the address he had written down. Sitting back in the taxi seat with his briefcase clutched in his hands, he watched the signs of the highway flash by as the cab took him out of the airport and around to the outskirts of the city of Atlanta.

With the sun setting behind them, the cab was soon taking an exit that led into the darkness of the outer edges of the more populated areas. Before long the cab left the lights of suburbia where the only light cutting through the growing night was from the cab's headlights.

It was another half-hour before the cab came to a closed wrought-iron gate. The old man got out of the cab and gave the driver a generous tip to go with the fare.

"I won't need you to wait." He said as he leaned on his cane.

The driver nervously took his fare and practically leapt back in his cab. The taxi made a three-point turn to go back the way it had come with tires spinning at the last. The old man could feel the relief of the taxi driver as he drove away with tires spinning briefly as they lost traction in his haste to get away.

The old man watched the taxi speed away, then turned to the gate and pushed it open.

The new owners were anxious to remodel and turn the old plantation house into a first-class weekend resort and bed and breakfast. They were anxious to do business, but none of the local contractors would return to the property till someone was able to clear the way of certain obstacles that had developed since the beginning of remodeling.

With the lessons learned from earlier failures, the old man moved ahead cautiously to do just that.

He stepped slowly through the gap in the gate and let it swing shut behind him as he moved onto the main yard of the plantation.

As he moved he raised his left arm and shook the Shield Bracelet loose of his sleeve then with his right hand pulled the Eye from its resting-place on the heavy necklace around his neck beneath his t-shirt.

Placing the Eye in front of his right eye, he looked through the hole in its center at the spectral world. With the Eye, he was able to see the spirits that had endured the majority of their lives within the confines of this particular geographical piece of land.

His first sight through the Eye told him that they were thoroughly pissed!

The angriest of them consisted of several generations who had endured a life of misery as slaves. Now, long after the relief of death when their spirits were finally getting the peace of forgetfulness, they were drawn back to the source where their misery had sprung.

For years they had rested tranquilly as the emotions generated over generations had slowly diminished and their pain had relaxed. But then they'd been awakened from their peaceful slumber by new emotions.

They had slowly awakened to discover that the place where they were bound was being invaded by construction crews who would be followed by laughing and smiling people who would dismiss the hardships of those who had come before them.

The resident spirits were even more than thoroughly pissed!

They were *really* thoroughly pissed!

As he watched through the Eye, many of them flew at him in diving plunges that would have only registered as indistinct feelings if he did not have the Eye to show him the source of those feelings.

Others reactions to the anger of the spirits were strong enough to make the leaves and limbs of nearby trees rustle as a result of their agitated movements.

Before the resort and its fancy restaurant and gift shop could be built, the spirits of those who came before would have to be pacified or this could never be a happy place.

The old man sighed. "Can't the dead just let it go and at least make an effort to get along with the living?"

He snorted. "And can't the living learn that the dead were here first and can't just be dismissed?"

The old man left the question unanswered as he reached to retrieve a specific potion from a vial in his briefcase while making his way in amongst the spirits of hundreds of years of pain and misery.

All he had to do was get them to restrict their antics to cordoned-off *scary areas* in the new commercial enterprise so that the new owners could market the haunting as an attraction.

A couple of rooms and a stretch of wooded forest should be enough for both sides to be happy.

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With contracts *endorsed* by his new clients in a new folder in his briefcase, the old man smiled as he approached the security area of the airport. He hoped those who had accepted his bid for this job would agree to the compromise he had brokered with the long-term residents of the property.

If they did they could have a first-class business on their hands with a registered haunting classification, and he could rack up another successful mediation between the living and the dead ... and add considerably to the legacy he would leave to his grandchildren.

Or he would go back and try again.

Both the boy and girl showed a more than adequate capability and a keen interest in learning the knowledge he had to share.

He only had another couple of decades before he would need to retire and there was a lot to teach. It would take about that long to pass his life's knowledge on and he could not think of two more worthy students than the twins of his second daughter.

Looking at the nearest clock high upon the wall of the airport, he saw that he had plenty of time to make it to his grandchildren's ... and his ... birthday party.

Moving in line, when he got to the plastic trays he shed himself of metal and shoes, showed his ID, went through another pat-down and search of his briefcase with accompanying tie-down securing of his potion vials, then endured yet another terrifying flight.

Despite the rigors of this particular job, as tired as he was he was still too excited to take a nap despite staying awake all night hammering out the compromise he'd made with the plantation's permanent residents. He would sleep after he wrapped the presents he'd bought the two in New Orleans when he'd been down there on another job just before this last contract.

The twins were going to be ten tomorrow at exactly 12:01 and 12:07 Aye-Em respectively, bracketing exactly his one hundred and tenth birthday at exactly 12:04 Aye-Em on the same calendar day.

The combined birthday was always celebrated the night before then all day the next day.

He didn't intend to miss *that* party!

As he fastened his seat belt and clutched his briefcase in his lap, the steward came by his seat and asked if he needed anything.

He ordered his usual hot Ghost Tea with marshmallows and gripped his armrests with open anxiety while he waited for the terror of takeoff as coach loaded noisily around him.