

# CASSIOPEIA LANE

## *LITTLE SHOP OF SHADOWS*

“I promise, that is truly from China”. The owner of this curious little shop seemed older than many of the items on sale. His wrinkled face was covered by shadows, and his wispy white hair dangled from the side of his head. His bony physique was covered in an old, three piece suit, while most of his not so impressive weight was on the carved walking cane he leaned on. The owner talked to young man, who was dressed in his most casual running pants and a sweater from the local university. In his hands, he held a small jade statue, carved in the shape of a pouncing tiger. Eyes made of rubies sparkled in the late afternoon sun shining through the stained windows.

“It says here it’s from the...Yuang dynasty?” The customer looked critically at a label dangling from the tiger’s paw, before raising an eyebrow and looking at the shopkeeper.

“Ah yes, yes. The Yuang dynasty is a fairly unknown royal Chinese dynasty. Not to be confused with the Yuan dynasty though.” He snickered, before a hacking cough left his mouth. The customer seemed unimpressed, and put the statue back on the shelf.

“I’m sorry, but no matter how exotic and cool this looks, it ain’t worth two-hundred bucks.”

“But think of the legend I told you: he who has the jade tiger, has a great future ahead” the shopkeeper replied, lifting the tiger back up from the shelf. The old man smiled, while holding the statue in front of the man’s face. The potential buyer forced a smile on his face, then waved at the old man.

“Yeah, not buying that. Have a good day!” he said, leaving the shop. The chimes above the front door sang their happy song, just before the door fell shut and silence returned to the collection of curious artifacts and antique objects. The old man sighed, as he put back the tiger statue and returned to his position behind the almost ancient cash till. The scent of his own aftershave filled his nose, as he looked around his shop. Charlie’s Curious Crib sounded like a nice anagram, but was not more than a broken dream of a man who thought he could make it by just pushing on. In all the years he had run his shop, Charlie had never been quite succesful. He sold enough exotic items to pay the rent and to treat himself to a fancy dinner on Christmas Eve. No matter his financial challenges, Charlie Webster pushed ever forward, hoping for a lucky streak. It might not be today, he said to himself in the mirror every morning, but it will be one day.

When the door swung open again and the chimes sang their metallic song, it did look like today would certainly not be Charlie’s lucky day. Again, a man entered his shop, but this one would be no customer. His face was hidden underneath the hood of an auburn sweater, only showing his thin lips and dark stubbles. A simple pair of jeans with a few tiny holes and brown leather boots gave the entire outfit a rugged look. The man approached the counter with slow, sure steps, looking around the shop.

“Good afternoon, Charlie” he said with a deep, yet warm voice. A smile appeared on the hooded man’s face, as he looked at the jade tiger on the shelf in front of the counter.

“Saw a man leaving your shop. Did you try to sell him the tiger?”

“Y-Yes. That’s not against the law, is it?” Charlie asked nervously, leaning with one hand on his

cane and the other on the counter. The stranger lifted the tiger up with one hand, looking at it from underneath his hood. As he turned it around with his hands, Charlie felt a chill crawling down his spine. A soft breeze went through the shop, rustling dreamcatchers and the metallic chimes above the front door. Then, for just a moment, the shopkeeper think he saw a flash of light in the stranger's hands. He did not get a second look to confirm this, but Charlie knew what had happened.

"It's not truly magical. I just tell the mortals it is" the shopkeeper said, just as the hooded man put the tiger back down. He stepped forward, resting both hands on the counter.

"And, does it increase your sales?"

"Not really" Charlie replied, a nervous smile on his lips.

"Does the part about the Yuan dynasty?" the stranger asked, leaning over the counter towards Charlie. Even though his face was so close, Charlie could not see anything through the darkness of the visitor's hood. However, he could smell his scent: crushed autumn leaves with a scent of sunflower. Charlie knew that only one man in this city had that smell.

"Y-You're the warden, right? What can I do for you?" Mixing with the nervousity now was Charlie's typical customer-friendly voice. He just pretended the man in his shop was just another customer, not the local authority on magical and supernatural law.

"Not *the* warden, but *a* warden. Call me Richard. We haven't met before." Richard looked around the shop again, a whistling tune coming from his mouth.

"It's a nice shop you got here, but it looks like the humans don't appreciate it. It's hard to be successful when you can't weave fate anymore, is it not?" Richard returned his gaze to the shopkeeper, who now had thick drops of sweat on his forehead. Charlie put both his hands on the counter, opposite from Richard's. As the warden looked down, he noticed how thin the shopkeeper's fingers were, and how his skin had such extremely dark veins running through it. As he looked closer, it seemed like it was not blood they pumped through the body, but thick oil.

"You did your homework, warden, but my weaving days are over. Besides, the mortal life is not as bad as my peers made it out to be."

"Still bad enough to find a way of returning to your godhood, or what did Nino promise you for getting his contraband around?" Richard stood straight up, towering above the small old man.

"Contraband?" What are you-" Still facing him, Richard pointed with one hand at the tiger statue.

"That's just a small statue! You checked it yourself! No magic!" Charlie protested loudly, but not loud enough to stop Richard from lifting up the jade statue and smashing it on the wooden floor of the shop. As the green material shattered, a screeching sound came forth from it. The shop was filled with whispers in a hundred tongues, and a shadowy presence took shape in the middle of the shop. It had long arms ending in three claws, and walked on six arachnid legs. Reaching all the way to the ceiling of the shop, the creature made from fog and shadows looked down on Richard and Charlie, the latter dropping down behind his counter, a wail of fear coming from his mouth. Richard simply looked up, locking eyes with the monstrosity. The whispers became louder, filling the warden's ears. Covered by their sound, Richard could not hear the front door opening, and the customer from just a few minutes ago entering. It took the mortal a while to realize into what a bizarre scene he had stumbled, but it took Richard only seconds to react. He lifted his right hand and pointed at the visitor, who was just about the flee the shop screaming. In the blink of an eye, orange runes and arcane symbols surrounded Richard's hand in ellipses

and circles, and an incantation left his lips.

“*Auris fazhaar!*” Before the man could run, he fell down where he stood. Richard looked to see if the man was truly unconscious, and when he was sure he was, the warden returned his attention to the shadowy being. He now also raised his left hand, which was covered in the same burning runes as the right one, hovering just above the skin. Richard raised both his hands above his head, opening his mouth to speak another spell in a language from a time before ours, but a strike from the creature interrupted him. The claws of the monstrosity crashed into Richard’s side, flinging him across the room into a shelf full of old pottery and clockwork. The warden let out a silent cry of pain, but regained his posture before the second strike was upon him. Leaping from the pile of crushed vases and clocks, Richard dodged the following attack with a quick roll forward, and cast his spell while still on his knees.

“*Odruunim elil!*” he shouted, and white chains appeared out of the ground. They wrapped themselves around the monstrosity’s limbs, pulling it down to the ground. The whispers had turned into screams by now, and an even louder cry came from the fanged mouth of the creature. Richard stood up straight, and looked into the twenty eyes made of obsidian that were now underneath him. When the creature tried to snap at him, he simply pulled down his hands, commanding the ivory chains to do the same and pin the creature.

“Charlie, what is this thing’s true name?” Richard yelled through the shop, the thousand screaming voices making communication hard.

“Rak’t hul!” the shopkeeper yelled from behind the counter.

“What? Wrak’nul?” the warden replied, confusion in his eyes. Charlie pulled himself up, looking angrily at the warden.

“No, Rak’t hul! Does that thing look like a water demon to you?!” he yelled, and Richard simply nodded in reply. The warden raised his hands and closed his eyes.

“*Odruunim elinamon, Rak’t hul!*” he screamed, and before the shadowy presence of the creature vanished into nothingness, the screams flew out of the shop in a gust of wind that tore down a few little pieces from the shelves. The white chains burst into tiny shatters, melting away like ice. Silence returned to the shop. Charlie got his walking cane and marched from behind the counter towards Richard, who was already kneeling next to the unconscious customer. When Charlie tried to open his mouth, Richard pointed a single, rune-covered hand at the shopkeeper, while still checking the knocked-out man.

“One: I surely see the difference between a water and a shadow demon. Two: did you or Nino put that in there, and three: better answer that question truthfully or I’ll turn your not-so human ass into dust”. Richard said all of this with a certain calmness and without any sign of anxiety. Charlie swallowed, then blurted everything out in a single breath.

“Nino told me he could restore my ichor, as he had done with Lydia a few years ago. All I had to do was to spread these demons throughout the city. I don’t know how or why he put them in the artifacts, so don’t ask me about that!” He exhaled, then awaited the warden’s reply. He had to wait a full, long minute before receiving one.

“I’ll take care of this man” Richard said as he rose, turning around to face Charlie.

“You will clean up this mess and be more careful about who you help in the future. Nino Cervantes is no man to trifled with, and he will punish your failure. He can’t give you back your godhood.” With a heave, Richard put the man over his shoulders and opened the door. Before he left the store,

Charlie cried out.

“He can, warden, he can! He turned Lydia into a deity! I saw it myself, five years ago!” Richard stopped in his tracks, turning around slowly. The late afternoon sun was burning down on him and the unconscious man on his shoulders, casting a long shadow across the empty street of this calm neighborhood. For a moment, Charlie just stared at the old man, then he spoke with a deeper voice than before.

“No, he turned her into a monster” was all he said, before trodding down the street to the nearest hospital.