

Vladimír Holý

*Voice from the Darkness*

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Inspired by the **Shuffle Heroes** card game from Jan Vaněček.

## Act I

### *Echo of Another World*

**I**t's snowing again. Why am I here? What brought me to this cold deserted place? I don't know. I hate snow. And apparently, there is nothing else. Just the ruins of a long forgotten city covered with a white blanket. I will not find anything valuable here. All the treasures were taken away by thieves and adventurers. People who used to live here left no legacy behind. Nobody knows what brought their doom. One day, all the residents just disappeared. It is said that the only thing left were pictures on the walls painted with their own blood. But even those are gone now. There is nothing but stones. So what am I doing here?

I have nowhere to go. I'm wandering without any aim. But I feel that someday, I will discover my purpose. Maybe today, maybe here. There could be more to this place than it seems at first sight. As if time has stopped here. It's because of the cold. And because of my solitude. I haven't met a soul for many weeks. I never needed company. And nobody desired to spend time with me either.

What was that? I heard something. I could blame the wind, but it's suspiciously quiet everywhere. Certainly I'm alone. I will look around more. I don't want to leave yet. I feel like there is something waiting for me. I just don't know what.

„This place is not yours“, said the voice behind me. I quickly turned around and saw a shrouded figure. It was surprisingly close to me. Under a shabby cloak and a pointy hat was a woman. She looked young. At least in the face. But she was dressed as some kind of vagabond. However, her appearance was not the most strange thing. How did she get here? There were only my footprints in the snow.

„Who are you?“ I asked terrified.

„Me?“ she halted. She had a faraway look. Her eyes were twitching from side to side as if they were watching hundreds of different things. Yet she

never looked at me.

„I'm not. Was. Will. Nothing else will.“

„What's your name?“

„Fiera? Yes, Fiera. That is what they called the first one. That is what they call all of us. If they are able to talk. No one spoke for a long time. Talking is useless.“

„What are you doing here?“

„Thousands of worlds, thousands of shards, thousands of reflections.“

The woman apparently lost her mind. She could be dangerous. I found my dagger under the coat. She didn't even notice it.

„This place is not yours“, she repeated. „Nobody is supposed to be here. Just Fiera. Just one. Just.... Just this Fiera.“

„I'll leave. I'll leave immediately“, I tried to reassure her.

„You will not leave. You will disappear“, she screamed. For the first time, she looked directly at me. Her eyes were empty. A chill ran down my spine. I took a few steps back. Maybe I'll manage to run away.

Too late. She held out her arms to me and they burst forth with orange light. Or at least I thought it was light. Everything happened so fast. Two giant bright orange claws grabbed my whole body. They clenched me so tight that I could not move, not even scream. They violently pulled me and dragged me down to the ground.

I must have lost consciousness. I don't know whether I was awake or not. Around me, only darkness. I tried to breathe, but I could not. The orange claws disappeared, but something still clutched my throat. A terrible noise was yelling to my ears. It had no source, it was coming from everywhere and it didn't stop. The sound was deep and high at the same time. Like if everything I've ever heard was pieced together and released at once. This is my end....

I didn't die. Even after a few endless minutes of helpless gasps, I'm still alive. I tried to move my arm. To my surprise, I managed to do it. Too much actually. My hand shot out with supernatural speed and hit me in the face. I tried to clamp down on the ground, but in vain. There was nothing. I just floated in emptiness. In the darkness. And my every move was greatly amplified. I don't know how long I spent in this state. Hours, perhaps days. Hard to say.

Suddenly the blackness changed. It formed a shape. I'm not alone anymore. Something came to me. Or someone? The noise grew louder. I don't know how this is possible, but I managed to see something. It was still very dark, but I saw clearly. Directly in front of me, a vast body spread. Or rather a hundred mutilated bodies joined into one. Somewhere, I saw

human hands and feet. Other had to belong to animals. And some could not come from this world. My world, that is.

Everywhere I looked, eyes were staring at me. My whole body was filled with some kind of energy. The presence of the creature quickly intoxicated me. I was filled with a feeling so unnatural yet so amazing. For the first time in my life, I have met something truly spectacular. But only for a moment....

Again, I was caught by the orange claws. They ripped me out of the blackness back to the snow-covered stones of the ruined city. The grip faded and I immediately collapsed to the ground. After thousands of unsuccessful gasps, I felt the freezing air.

I looked up and saw an incredible tangle of colors. The ruins of the city looked completely different. As if they were brought to life. In the snow and on the rocks, strange devices radiating bright beams were deployed. From each device, one color. All the rays then met in the sky and created a rainbow storm. I've never seen anything like this.

In the middle of all loomed the mysterious woman. Fiera. But this time, she was not alone. A short distance from her was another woman. They looked alike. The same faded coats and even the same hats. In fact, I don't even know which one is Fiera and which one is the newcomer. Their faces.... Their faces were also the same. Exactly the same.

„What you do is not permitted“, said one of them.

„What I do is the only choice“, other replied.

„What you do is a path to the end.“

„The end is the only choice, Fiera.“

„Your end, Fiera.“

Suddenly, they both held out their hands against each other. The air was filled with missiles. No, it was not missiles.... Rather cracks. As if they unraveled our world and let in the horror from another world. Both women tried to avoid those cracks. But one of them was faster. The other didn't manage to dodge. She just slid limply to the ground. The snow around her body was flooded with blood. The cracks slowly disappeared. The surviving Fiera came to the dead one and pulled up her sleeve. She had a pale thin arm. Soft like the snow around.

„This one was new. No challenge“, she sneered. Then, the woman pulled up her own sleeve. Her arms were covered with black scars. It might have been twenty, maybe more. She dug her finger into her skin. Violet light surrounded her for a while and then she gained another black scar.

„One less complication“, she said to herself. So far, she remained oblivious to my presence. But everything must come to an end, in that, she was right.

„This place is not yours“, she turned to me promptly.

This time I did not wait for anything and I began to run away. I don't know if she followed me or not. I was afraid to turn around. I was afraid to stop. I just kept running through the ruins on and on.

Suddenly, I tripped and fell into the cold snow. I remained lying. If she followed me, there was nothing I could do anyway. I was expecting to be taken away by the orange light again. I wanted it to happen. The visit of that strange place was scary, but I was looking forward to going back there. To experience the unreal again. To meet that creature again.

But nothing happened. No orange claws, only the white snow. I looked up and finally saw him. This time, he was all crimson. Stitched together from thousands of bodies. But something wasn't right. I realized that I was just staring at a painting on a wall. Breathtaking, yes, but not the meeting I desired. I got up and looked closely at the picture. I completely forgot about Fiera. Everything around here lost its color and meaning long ago. Only this painting glowed and attracted me. I stared at it for hours.

I know what caused the downfall of this forgotten city. I know who.

## Act II

### *New Age*

Summers passed, my body and face grew old. Otherwise, not much has changed. I had a dream. A nightmare. I was surrounded by darkness. And from it, the twisted creature from that painting on the wall stepped out. He was trying to say something. But he was too far away for me to understand. Yet too close to ignore. Every night, I had the same dream. Every night, he visited me in my sleep. It has been four years now, and every night was identical.

I have to find out who he is. Where he comes from. What he is trying to convey to me. So far, my search was unsuccessful. I've traveled the whole world, went through hundreds of libraries, but the truth remains a mystery. The quest led me here to Mirsodes. A relatively large seaport full of stench and dubious people. At least that was the case years ago, when I was last here. The Noble House Accius of Mirsodes allegedly owns a book describing creatures from other worlds. Maybe it's a red herring. Maybe it's just a bunch of fairy tales. But this is my only hope.

A big event was being held in the city. Nobody talked about anything else these last days. A giant airship was about to take off. Rather than a means of transport, it was said it will be more of a city in the clouds. When I look at those dirty sewers around, no wonder that people want to live in heaven.

The construction of the zeppelin was located far outside the city. Nobody missed the take-off ceremony. Crowds flowed through the streets. I also joined them. I needed some distraction.

Truly, it wasn't an ordinary zeppelin. As far as the eye could see, there was lying this magnificent machine. I don't understand how something like this could take off. Hundreds of cabins, houses actually, stacked next to each other. Between them, all kinds of metal bridges, propellers and balloons. Indeed, it is a marvel of engineering. Of magic.

Crowds gathered around the wooden podium. A delegation was preparing for the opening ceremony. First to speak was an elderly gentleman who was so fat that he wasn't even able to get up from his mobile mechanical chair.

„Ladies and gentlemen, welcome“, he croaked. „Surely you all know me. For those who came from afar, my name is Ekram Accius.“

That's him. This man is quite possibly the answer to my search. To my obsession.

„As a patron of this magnificent project, it is my honor to introduce to you the inventor who will relocate us to the clouds. Master Ramplpanker.“

People started clapping and a slumped man with burned skin waddled to the stage. Almost all of the masters of his order were so small in stature and unhealthy in appearance. This was caused by prolonged exposure to otrium, a magical substance that drives all of their experiments.

„Yes, yes. Ahem.... To this day, there is no bigger machine than Nobu Urdo that can fly. Its deck can hold exactly twelve hundred residents plus a hundred-member crew. Once in the air, Nobu Urdo will remain forever among the clouds. It will need only occasional deliveries of fuel, food and other supplies. Ahem.... I will not delay any longer so we can move on to....“

„A new age“, the chubby nobleman muttered in Ramplpanker's ear.

„Yes, yes. Ahem.... We are on the threshold of a new age. A more luxurious life than anyone ever imagined awaits us all....“

Ridiculous. Even if similar cities will flood the sky, it will only remain a privilege of the rich and noble. Others will stay in the dirt on the surface. The extraction of fuel required for the operation of these flying vehicles will destroy the earth's surface even more. The poor and underprivileged will suffer even more in the infested world of the new age.

But not me. I will gain power. I will not wallow in the dirt as the rabble, I will not run to the clouds as the nobility. I will visit another world. I have to get the book. I need to find a way to be reunited with the creature from my dreams.

After more speeches and the cutting of the red tape, the zeppelin began preparing for takeoff. Flowing crowds of passengers gradually filled the entire machine. Only Ramplpanker stayed on the stage. I heard that apparently he is afraid of heights. How ironic. On the contrary, Ekram Accius was the first on the luxury deck of his airship.

The propellers started to spin. Purple flames blazed all over the airship and filled the balloons with hot gas. The onlookers were deafened by a huge creak and, to the general applause, the construction lifted itself off the ground.



The zeppelin went over the water. The sea wasn't yet polluted enough by mining companies and the air above will be the freshest. A true paradise.

Suddenly, there was an explosion. One of the balloons burst into violet flames. The cloud city began leaning to one side and descending towards the water. Passengers ran around in confusion over bridges and screamed desperately. They had no way to save themselves. Violet fire gradually spread throughout the whole structure. Until a loud crash into the sea extinguished it. A giant wave heaved from the point of impact and after a while, the whole town disappeared under the surface.

All the people on the land remained standing in complete silence. Just Ramplpanker dispassionately took out his notebook and began to write something.

„Next time, reinforce the balloons“, he mumbled to himself. „And maybe even add lifeboats.... Yes, yes. If there is some space left. Ahem....“

The crowd fell into panic.

Apparently, we will have to wait for the arrival of the new age.

## Act III

### *Smoke and Shadow*

**I**t was a great tragedy. Nobody survived. Some of the passengers burned to death, some drowned. Including Ekram Accius. The rest of his family remained on shore and escaped this disaster. Maybe now it will be even easier to get the book that will reveal to me the path to another world. The path to him.

I waited a few days. I have been searching for so many years. I understood that haste can only harm me. I came outside the house of the Accius family. I knocked on the door and waited to see what happens.

Accius was an ancient clan. It never belonged among the richest and most influential houses. But Ekram didn't lack ambition. He bet everything on the invention of the city in the clouds and he lost. This is also a possibility. From averageness to nothingness. Even such a fate might meet me. But it will not happen. I will rise up far above the clouds.

A young white-haired girl opened the door. All in black, as was proper. She looked quite miserable.

„Who are you, geezer?“ she said. She obviously lacked manners. Or she was just overwhelmed with grief.

„I was supposed to have a business meeting with your father.... My condolences.“

„I don't care about business.“

„Nonsense. Everybody wants something.“

Of course, I did not come uninformed. I knew that it was Casquiel, a daughter of Ekram, who was standing before me. I also found that she had a fondness for a drug called anpya. Expensive, rare, but obtainable. I showed her a few marinated leaves of anpya and she let me in immediately. I found myself in a large entrance hall full of paintings. It was dominated by a family portrait. I almost didn't recognize Ekram Accius without his wheelchair. He stood alongside his wife and besides them, there were just

two little girls in the picture. The nobleman had apparently two daughters. I didn't know that, I've heard only about Casquiel.

She led me into a secluded room. She didn't talk much. She just took the anpya from me and began to prepare a hookah quite expertly.

„So what'cha want, old-timer?“ she asked lazily. She carefully spread leaves of anpya on the table and began to chop them up. I sat on the couch. Suddenly, I didn't know how to talk to her. How to make her give me the book. She didn't seem too mournful. She hadn't even realized in what situation she and her family is.

„Your father owned a book which I'm interested in.“

„Books have a different prices. I don't know much about them.“

„This one has value only for me.“

„How much?“ she said curiously and looked up from the chopped up drug.

„How much you say“, I answered without thinking. Obviously, I'm no merchant.

„So we have nothing to talk about“, she frowned. „You want to trick me, that's for sure.“

„You have to give me the book!“ I screamed at her.

„I don't have to“, she whispered. Suddenly, she became a frightened little girl. But she didn't stop preparing hookah. She mixed the anpya with tobacco and filled a ceramic pot.

„Oh yes, you do have to, little doll“, I spoke to her harshly. „Your father is dead. The family wealth is lost. Soon, you will end up on the street and a girl such as you can earn money in only one way. You'll be grateful for anything I give you today.... You do have to give me the book.“

Suddenly, she began to cry. She turned her back on me and walked to the fireplace. Her sobs echoed throughout the house.

„She doesn't have to“, said a child's voice. It was not Casquiel, she was still crying. This voice was clear and hard. The room darkened. Around Casquiel, black smoke spread. No, it was not smoke, but a giant shadow. It had the outlines of a man. It just didn't belong to anyone. It moved as it pleased. It was alive.

„She doesn't have to“, the shadow repeated menacingly. In its black hands, a dagger appeared. I will not test how real this dark mirage is.

„I brought a gift for Casquiel“, I said as calmly as I could. I took several packages of anpya from my bag and carefully put them on the table.

„He will not hurt me, little sister“, Casquiel said softly. The shadow still maliciously circled around me, and I rather didn't move at all.

Casquiel took a hot piece of charcoal from the fireplace and placed it on the water pipe. She lazily lay down on the couch, took the hose in her hand

and began to smoke. The more smoke she exhaled, the more the shadow shrank.

„Go to sleep, little sister“, Casquiel whispered and the hookah bubbled. After a few more minutes of smoking, the shadow disappeared completely and the room was filled with only sweet smoke.

„That-That was your sister?“ I stammered.

„Yes.... She died. It's been a long time now. It was an accident. It wasn't my fault.... Really. It was an accident. I tried to save her. But she just lay lifelessly on the ground.... I brought a necromancer to her. He promised that he would return her back. Everything was supposed to be as before. But it was not.... He tricked me. Her body disappeared, and since then she is only a shadow. She remains close to me, my poor little sister. Sometimes, it's hard to comfort her. She suffers a lot.“

I didn't know what to say. What life could she have with this specter always behind her back? I felt pity. For a while. This is not my concern. The world is full of bad things.

„At the end of the hall is a library. Take what you want and get out“, she told me, exhausted.

I did as she said. After a moment of searching the shelves in the library, I finally found that tome. On the cover lay the word Grimoire. I briefly flipped through several pages to make sure that this is the right book and I quickly vanished from this cursed house.

I've got what I came for.