

PROLOGUE

Jerry Strauss and John Fortune walked through the double doors that opened onto the Mirage auditorium and stopped just inside the entrance to the cavernous room. Jerry didn't like the way it was set up. He didn't like it at all. About fifteen hundred seats clustered around a t-shaped stage whose runway projected deep into the auditorium. John Fortune had insisted on getting as close to the action as possible, so their seats were next to the stage, about half-way down the runway on the right side.

The kid looked at Jerry. "What's the matter?" he asked.

Jerry, who had chosen the appearance of Alan Ladd (circa *The Glass Key*) for this assignment, grinned at Fortune in Ladd's semi-sinister manner. "Nothing, kid," he said. "As long as the tigers don't go berserk. If you haven't noticed, our seats seem to be well within claw reach."

"Ah, jeez, Jerry—"

Jerry could see the look of disgust on the kid's face, and forestalled further complaint by holding up his hand. John Fortune had been closely protected, too closely in Jerry's opinion, all his life. His mother, the beautiful winged ace Peregrine, had watched over him nearly every second of his existence. When she wasn't able to watch over him personally, she hired men like Jerry for the task.

Jerry, who usually called himself Mr. Nobody, had almost as many names as faces. It got confusing sometimes. John Fortune knew him by his real first name, but as Lon Creighton he was Jay Ackroyd's partner in the Ackroyd and Creighton Detective Agency. Peregrine had retained the Agency for nearly sixteen years to help shield her son from danger. Actually, from even the remote possibility of danger.

The irony, Jerry thought, was that John Fortune's biggest danger was his own genes, and neither Jerry nor anyone else in the world could protect him from that.

"Okay," Jerry said. "It's cool. I guess I'll have to just throw myself in front of you if a hungry tiger tries to make you his early evening snack."

John Fortune grinned as they went down the aisle to their seats.

"Not much danger of that," the kid said confidently. "Siegfried and Ralph have been performing in Vegas for more than twenty years and no one in their audience has been eaten yet."

Jerry grunted. "There's always a first time for everything," he said.

Still, the kid was right. Peregrine's paranoia was rubbing off on him. Vegas, after all, presented a carefully groomed environment that encouraged

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visitors to relax, have fun, and spend as much money as humanly possible. Of course, he'd done nothing but bodyguard John Fortune since they'd arrived for the premier of Peregrine's latest documentary at the Vegas Film Festival. Not that he was a decadent hedonist who habitually sunk in the depths of every available fleshpot, but he'd hoped to catch the All Naked Review at the Moulin Rouge, or perhaps the charms of Brandy the Topless Magician, or maybe even the Midnight Fantasy at Jokertown West. Needless to say, having the kid in tow made all of that impossible. Jerry couldn't even get in any gambling. If he was on his own he could have hit the casinos that catered to wild carders, but he couldn't drag John Fortune along to those often-dubious establishments.

The show wasn't due to start for half an hour, but the auditorium was already thronging with patrons seeking their seats as performers went through the room, warming up the crowd. Not that John Fortune needed it. Ever since they'd arrived in Vegas all he could talk about was Siegfried and Ralph. It hadn't been easy to score tickets on short notice, but Peregrine had the connections and the bucks. Too bad, Jerry thought, she also didn't have the time to accompany them to the show.

As they made their way through the press of tourists they stopped suddenly as a tall joker with the head of a bird stepped before them and looked down at them intently with unblinking eyes. He was a lanky six eight or nine with long thin legs, long thin arms, and a long thin beak that jutted at least a foot out of his head. His face was covered by fine, downy feathers, though his sleeveless Egyptian-style tunic (similar, Jerry thought, to that worn by Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*) revealed normal human skin on his arms and legs.

Jerry pushed himself protectively between the joker and John Fortune. He hadn't guarded the kid all these years only to have him pecked to death by a skinny old bird-man.

"It is the one," the joker intoned in a deep voice, punctuated by odd clacks as his beak broke off his words, peppering his speech with oddly-placed silences.

Jerry suddenly relaxed. He didn't want to be bothered by paparazzi while working on a case, so he usually chose the appearance of old time actors, hence his current resemblance to Alan Ladd. But sometimes someone in the crowd still recognized him. Or rather, the particular face he'd chosen.

"Oh, well," he said to the bird-faced man, "I get that a lot. Of course, I'm not really—"

He fell silent when he realized that the man wasn't listening. The joker sagged awkwardly to his knees, as if suddenly over-balanced by his long beak. He bowed his head and held his hands straight out, his palms up.

"It is he blessed with the strength of Ra," the bird man intoned. "The

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power of the sun is his, the fire to light the world.”

Jerry realized that the joker wasn't talking about him, but John Fortune. And Jerry also suddenly realized that they weren't alone.

They'd come from all over the auditorium, moving silently and swiftly through the tourists who were mostly too busy finding their seats to pay them much attention. A handsome, broad-shouldered dwarf. A sinuous, fur-covered female feline with claws on the tips of her fingers and toes. A lean bald man with a braided chin-beard who looked like a leather-faced rock star who'd somehow survived the turbulent sixties. A man and a woman, obviously siblings, floating hand in hand five feet off the floor.

Jerry realized that they were the Living Gods, jokers, deuces, and even some rather minor aces who'd taken their names from the old Egyptian pantheon. He remembered reading that they'd been driven from Egypt by the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism, but he couldn't imagine the bizarre fate that had brought them to Las Vegas as members of Siegfried and Ralph's performing troupe.

They gathered around Jerry and John Fortune, kneeling before the boy, reaching out beseechingly to him. John Fortune looked on in consternation, but not a little disguised delight, as they were led in murmuring prayer by the bird-headed joker, who Jerry now remembered was named Thoth after the ibis-headed god of knowledge and writing.

“How do they know me?” John Fortune asked.

Thoth rose slowly to his knees, throwing the floating brother and sister a thankful glance as they helped him stand. Thoth laid a hand on the shoulder of the man with the chin beard, the only one of the bunch who looked older than the bird-headed joker.

“My brother Osiris, who died and came back to life able to see the future, knew you when you were in your mother's womb many years ago.”

Jerry nodded. “The World Health Organization sponsored tour to study the effects of the wild card virus around the world,” he told the kid, “before you were born, back in 1986 and '87.”

Jerry had read all about it in Xavier Desmond's book, which had chronicled the fateful journey that had changed so many lives—his included. The plane full of aces and jokers and reporters and politicians had also gone to Sri Lanka where Jerry was a cast member of *King Pongo*, the giant ape movie being filmed in the island's jungles. You might say that Jerry was the biggest cast member, as he was playing the big monkey himself. Jerry was then still the mindless Great Ape, a form he'd been trapped in since the mid-1960's. During the Sri Lanka adventure Tachyon had freed him from the ape body, using his mental powers to return Jerry to normalcy.

If, Jerry reflected, you could consider his post-Great Ape life normal. Not many would.

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Thoth frowned.

"Where is your *achtet*?" he suddenly asked John Fortune.

"Ac—*achtet*?" the kid asked, stumbling over the unfamiliar word. He looked at Jerry, who shrugged.

"An amulet of red stone," Thoth explained, "given to your mother for safe-keeping. For you to wear when old enough, to guide you in the use of your powers."

John Fortune glanced at Jerry, who shrugged again.

"You got me on that one," Jerry said. "Maybe," he added diplomatically, "Peregrine thinks he's not ready for it. After all, he, uh, hasn't come into his powers yet."

And, Jerry thought to himself, the odds of him ever doing so were extremely unlikely. Still, sometimes you beat the odds. Las Vegas, after all, was built on that theory. Or dream.

Thoth conferred with Osiris in Arabic. They looked at John Fortune and nodded.

"Yes," he said. "But Osiris says that your time will come soon." The old man smiled peculiarly with his stiletto beak, but Jerry could see warmth and benediction in his eyes. "The blessings of Ra upon you and yours," Thoth said, bowing deeply. He gestured at the other members of the Living Gods, who bowed as well. "We must be off about our duties," he said.

Jerry nodded. "It was nice to meet you all," he said. "We have to go now, too."

He glanced at John Fortune, catching his eye after a moment.

"Yeah. Um, nice to meet you," the kid said.

They all smiled, bowed, and, murmuring their farewells in Arabic, drifted off to various quarters of the auditorium.

"Weird," John Fortune said. "Why do you think Mom never mentioned this prediction to me, or never gave me that *achtet* thing?"

"Your mom has a busy life," Jerry said as they made their way toward the runway. "Maybe she put it away and forgot about it. Or, maybe..."

"Yeah," John Fortune said a few moments after Jerry had fallen silent. "Maybe she thought they were all just nuts."

"Maybe. But I've seen a lot of apparently nutty things in this world actually come true."

"The power of Ra," the kid said musingly. "What do you think that is?"

Jerry shook his head. He did that a lot around the kid.

"I don't know," he said. "But I do know that it's almost time for the show. We'd better hustle to our seats."

As Jerry had feared, they were disconcertingly close to the action, which to his taste was loud, flashy, and somewhat nonsensical. John Fortune, however, loved it.

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The show was Egyptian-themed, which explained the presence of the Living Gods, although there were also snarling white tigers jumping through hoops and a chorus line of babes tricked out in metallic bikini armor and Ralph transmorfingising into a leopard and be vies of lions and Ralph getting crushed by a giant mechanical crocodile and prancing white stallions and Ralph getting spitted on a giant metal spear and almost-naked dancing muscular guys and almost-naked long-legged dancing girls and disappearing elephants and Ralph swinging ten feet above the audience on a wire and an evil queen sawn in half by a great electronic buzz-saw and endless costume changes involving flowing glittery capes and rhinestoned jumpsuits and thigh-high leather boots and puffy shirts with lace. And that was just on Siegfried and Ralph.

It was all so flashy and noisy and glittery and exciting. Jerry could see why the kid was into it. The white tigers were beautiful. Their apparent ferocity contributed to their magnificence. Siegfried and Ralph, though they wore a little too much makeup and a few too many spangles for Jerry's taste, did have an authenticate rapport with and love for the beasts that they put through complicated routines. The big cats actually seemed to enjoy jumping through their hoops and leaping about like furry, four-legged acrobats.

That made it all the more terrifying when disaster struck like a lightning bolt from a clear summer sky.

Ralph was kissing a seven-hundred pound tiger on his nose pad when the tiger casually reached out, put his paw behind Ralph's head, and drew him in closer. His massive jaws crunched together where Ralph's neck met his shoulder. Then the tiger calmly walked back up the runway, dragging Ralph's twitching body and leaving behind a smeared trail of blood. Jerry and John Fortune were so close to the action that a spatter of Ralph's blood showered down at their feet.

John Fortune made a strange sound in his throat. Jerry tore his eyes away from the chaos on the stage and looked at the stricken expression on the kid's face. At first Jerry assumed Fortune had been frightened by the horrific tiger attack, but then he realized that it was something more. Something terribly more.

"John—" He reached for the boy, cursing, as a man rushed by, bumped him, and knocked him to the floor. Jerry's ankle twisted, the man stepped on it, and Jerry felt something give.

Shit, Jerry said to himself. He didn't think it was broken, but it hurt like sudden Hell. The last thing he needed was a bad ankle as the crowd around them dissolved into crazed panic. He stood and swore again as he tried to put his weight on it. No go. He tried to ignore the awful pain. Something was wrong with John Fortune, and Jerry was afraid that he knew what that something was.