

IRRUPTION

by John W. Otte

It was not going to be a good night.

Charles checked and rechecked the straps on his synthetic mage-armor vest. His hands roamed from his chest to his belt, briefly touching the radio, the extra ammo clips, the stun grenades. His fingers caressed the magazine of the semi-automatic RD-440 which hung around his neck. Electric tingles snaked up his arm. The effects of the inhibium-jacketed bullets? He shook his head. Just nerves.

The one thing he checked the most were the bands holding his blond hair in a ponytail. He had wound them tight before boarding the helicopter. It wouldn't do for them to snap halfway through the mission. That would be a disaster, an absolute debacle.

His squadmates were lost in their own worlds, their hands performing their own pre-deployment choreography. They all were ready. Each of the eight men in the copter had completed dozens of lesser runs before transferring to First Response-Alpha Squad. This was the ninth mission they had went on together. Each time set Charles' nerves on edge. Too many variables.

Too much danger.

The overhead whine of the engines changed as the copter came to a hovering stop. The side doors opened and ropes dropped to the ground. One by one, the members of FRAS free-rappelled to the ground below. Immediately the squad turned back to back. Charles scanned the area in front of him. All clear so far.

FRAS-Lead, Chet, whispered, "Seven, what's the reading? Better, worse? What are we dealing with here?"

Seven, a young kid named Thompson, held up the sensor pack. "Disruption levels have risen from 10 to 45 while we were en route!"

The squad shifted. A spike meant trouble. Charles's gaze locked on the closest suppression tower. Looked like the blasted thing was working but one could never tell. Obviously something had gone wrong or else FRAS wouldn't be in the field.

"Any idea if it's a Ker or a Ter?" Lead asked.

Seven shook his head. "No clue. Levels are fluctuating. Could be as simple as a few kids hopped up on ley-juice lobbing simple spells. Sensors can misread that. But with the theta-levels...might be a bona fide magicker."

Charles glared at the suppression tower. That technology was supposed to keep the magick at bay, but there were ways around it: ley-juice, Arcane-X, or other illegal narcotics could grant a normal human rudimentary casting abilities. FRAS had gone on plenty of runs, ready for a firefight only to discover it was a couple of casters, or "Ters", turning dogs into lizards or setting each other on fire.

But a magicker? The towers were supposed to keep them banished out of the mortal plane. But every now and then, something would go haywire with the field and one could slip into existence and wreak considerable havoc. And there were worse things than magickers that sometimes slipped through...

FRAS was founded fifty years ago to deal with the irruptions of magick which inevitably found their way into civilized society. It had prestige but there were nights when Charles wished the suppression towers worked well enough to put him out of a job.

Like tonight.

Charles barely listened as Lead and Seven argued about where the disturbance might be located. He knew what was coming next. Lead turned to the squad.

“Partner up. Fan out. Locate and capture, fire only if fired upon. Move.”

Charles and his partner, Nick (also known as Six), took to the west as the rest of the squad silently fanned out. Charles’s breath thundered in his ears as each chirp of a cricket screamed at him. Even the sweet-smelling breeze felt like fire on his exposed skin. The sooner this was over and he was back at the base, the better.

“What do you suppose it is?” Six whispered. “Imp? Goblin? A siren, maybe? Been a while since we’ve tackled one of them.”

Charles ground his teeth together. The last time Six “tackled” a siren, the magicker sued the squad for sexual misconduct. She had no legal standing to bring the suit and got exiled just the same, but clearly Six hadn’t learned his lesson.

The muzzle of his gun leapt to each possible hiding place. Chills clawed their way up his throat. A dull ache throbbed around his skull and behind his eyes. He winced. *Not now! Not now!*

A burst of gunfire sliced through the night as someone screamed over the radio, “Delta, delta, del....”

The voice was cut off by a gurgle and a thud. Charles turned to Six, who had paled, his gun trembling in his hand. Code “Delta” was rarely used, an indication of a worst-case scenario. It meant FRAS was grossly out-matched. Tonight’s mission wasn’t about arresting a Caster. It wasn’t about containing a Magicker.

It was confronting a member of an Elder Race, beings bred within and for magick. They were the reason why the suppression towers were built. They were the reason why FRAS carried inhibium-jacketed bullets.

They were also the reason why members of FRAS had short life-expectancies.

“Sounded like Seven,” Six speculated. “Let’s go.”

Charles and Nick jogged southeast in the hopes that Seven and Eight still lived. He tried to calm himself but found it to be a losing battle.

They spotted a fire tucked under an outcropping of rock. Four bodies splayed out around the fire. An old crone stood with her back to them, wrapped in a ratty yet colorful wool blanket, her stringy white hair billowing about her head in a breeze Charles couldn’t feel. She sang off-key in a language Charles didn’t recognize, yet the words danced like pins across his cheeks and arms. Occasionally, the old woman tossed small brown packages into the fire. The flames burst into different colors and static to buzz in Charles’ radio. She turned to face them.

When Charles saw her eyes, he cursed. They were completely black. Worse, the woman floated towards them, her feet hovering six inches above the ground. She was an *iysho*, one of the most powerful Elder races imaginable.

The *iysho* woman cackled, an odd resonance to her voice that rattled Charles’s jaw. “So you’ve come at last, child. I knew it would be you...”

Nick raised his weapon and ordered her to surrender. Instead, the crone batted a hand at him and he crumpled. Charles watched him collapse. Nick wore a content smile on his face.

“Don’t worry about them,” the old *iysho* crooned. “They merely sleep.”

Charles stared at the old woman. She floated toward him. She *tsk-tsked* as she moved.

“Metal and plastic and gunpowder, yet nothing you need for what you face,” she chided. “This does not bode well, but fear not, I brought a spare.”

She rummaged through a pack at her hip. Charles leveled the RD-440 on her. “That’s enough! Hands up, back away from the bag.”

The crone laughed. “Oh, come now, Charles Logan Tucker. We both know you’ve never fired a weapon in the field and you certainly won’t tonight. Be a good boy and take a seat. You’ll need your rest.”

Numbness swept Charles’ legs out from under him and he dropped. His gaze fixed on the old woman. “How do you know my name?”

“I know much about you. For example, I think it best to give Melissa Benson another call. She’s hoping you will ask her out again. You haven’t been able to reach her because she’s been putting in overtime on a big presentation at the office.

“And your parents, Charles. So proud of you, so thankful for your birth. But the way you treated them, such a shame. The ache? I know about that too. Ma and Da could help you, you know, but instead you ignore them and treat yourself with those nasty chemicals. Not the way to do it. There is such a simpler solution but you fear to try it.”

Charles’s gaze was drawn to the fire. Images sprang up within the flames. Shady corners, leering faces, money exchanging hands, syringes of bright blue...

He screwed his eyes shut and shook his head but the pictures shimmered in the darkness as if burned there. When he looked, the fire had dimmed and the crone capered around the ring. With each gesture, another part of the fire dimmed.

“No need for it since you are here,” she explained. “Enough spellwork to frustrate the towers so you mortals would charge in. But now I have you.”

Ice sliced through his skin. What did she mean? She didn’t elaborate. Charles pushed himself to his feet and tried to flee. Before he could take three steps, it felt as though his legs had sunk into the ground to his knees. He looked down and much to his horror, that’s exactly what happened. He thrashed his legs, hoping to kick them free, but they were stuck fast.

The *iysho* circled him. “Such a mighty warrior, so quick to run. What will happen when the true foe comes?”

“The what?”

“Yes, child. You thought you came out to fight an old woman setting fires in the dark, did you? No, I brought you here to protect your people from the real enemy.” She looked off in the darkness. “I can already feel his approach. The towers, they slow him but they cannot stop him. Nothing in your world can. Best get you ready.”

From the pack at her hip she drew a small crystalline vial. She waved the bottle under Charles’ nose. He was overwhelmed with the aroma: sweet and tangy, filling his sinuses to the point he thought they’d burst. His stomach convulsed even as his mind crashed through a wave of euphoria.

“This is a very rare essence in your world. My family has held onto it for generations out of time for such a day as this. Good we did, yes?”

She poured its contents in front of Charles. At first, it appeared as if the amber liquid soaked right into the earth. Within seconds, though, it flowed out into two channels. The liquid became thicker. It slowly piled into a column that rose a foot from the ground. The woman straightened with a smirk. Charles watched as grooves appeared in the column before him and the liquid hardened into what appeared to be metal.

“Take it,” the crone whispered. When he hesitated, she added, “If you don’t, you might be trapped like that when he comes and that won’t do anyone any good.”

Charles looked at her, and when she nodded, he wrapped his fingers around the stub. Hot needles peppered his skin as his hand trembled. Tightening his grip, he pulled, surprised that whatever it was slipped free from its earthen sheath. As he pulled, he realized he too was pulling

free from the dirt. He pulled all the harder, his boots and the strange object breaking out of the ground at the same time.

And then he realized he held a glimmering sword.

He dropped it, staring at it with wide eyes. The golden blade flashed as if it produced light of its own, radiating from its double-edged blade down to its gem-encrusted hilt.

The crone *tsk-tsked* again. "Is that the way to treat such a finely crafted weapon? Don't leave it on the ground, boy." She sucked in a nervous breath, her eyes darting around the darkness. "Pick it up! He's here."

The skin on his back puckered. He snatched up his gun and he pointed it toward the park. The darkness deepened and flowed around him. He backed toward the dying embers, thankful for even their dull glow.

"I told you, the weapons of man will be useless against him. Pick up the sword!"

Charles spat her with an angry gaze then turned his attention to the park. The tingle ricocheted off the base of his skull and raced down his back and into his boots where cold sweat pooled. The crickets had stilled. The park drowned in unearthly silence.

And then reality itself tore to pieces before him.

A glowing crack zigged through the air thirty feet in front of him with a thunderclap that knocked Charles over. Seven's sensor equipment screamed in fury as the crack widened, a creature pushing its way free. Charles glanced at the instruments in Seven's limp hands. The needles had buried themselves at the high end of their spectrum. This wasn't a mere caster. It wasn't a magicker. Even the Elder crone backed away from this monstrosity, whatever it was.

The RD-440 snapped to Charles's shoulder and he fired a round through the portal. Sparks flew as the inhibium tried to dispel the magick, but it didn't work. Scythe-like claws tore at the dirt, trying to gain enough traction to pull itself free. Charles stared as the breach tore wider, revealing a vortex alive with so many colors it hurt his eyes.

Within seconds, the creature emerged from the portal. The living shadow rose to its full height, taller than Charles by several feet. It looked around the park, working its jaws lazily, like a dog licking its lips.

He took a step forward, his gun raised. "By the authority of the United States government, I order you to return from whence you came. Your presence here is in violation of Penal Code Alpha-dash-eight-zero which states all magickal creatures are forbidden to set foot in the mortal realm."

The creature regarded Charles with its cold eyes. A rush of dampness coated Charles from head to toe. It felt as if his body had wrung all of his sweat from itself in one burst. He swallowed hard.

"If you do not comply, I am authorized to use deadly force..."

His voice trailed off as a picture rose within his mind. The dark creature chomped on his broken body before devouring his squadmates for dessert.

Charles shook his head, the vision fading. He glared at the creature. "By the authority of the United States government, I order you to return..."

Another image assaulted his mind. A litesome blonde stood in a bar surrounded by eager young men. Charles approached the group, calling out her name, yet Melissa Benson ignored him, slicing him with a *sotto voce* comment that caused her admirers to laugh uproariously.

Breath ragged, Charles winced and tried to banish the image from his mind. It was so real! Melissa's laughter echoed in his ears as he brought the RD-440 to his shoulder and fired.

The shot went wide as Charles staggered, a new picture forming in his mind.

This time, he was led from FRAS headquarters in chains. His mind reeled at the thought; they had discovered his secret. He knew agents would soon batter down the doors of Ma and Da's house to arrest them as well. He trudged to the banishment chamber, knowing the intense suppression field would likely shred his body as it forced him out of the mortal plane.

"Child, resist the images!" He could barely hear the crone over his own terrified screams. "You face a fear monger; his weapons are terror and he feeds on your response. Resist him. Fight back!"

Charles steadied himself. The creature's mouth twisted into a rictus of cold pleasure. Charles frowned, focusing his attention on the spot between the monster's eyes. He fired again, sweat in his eyes as he quelled the rising panic.

The inhibium-jacketed bullets hit home but they passed through the monger's head, sparks trailing their path. The monger winced but then bellowed, a rumbling boom that tore through Charles's chest. He looked up in time to see the monger charge him and, with one last blast of panic, knocked Charles unconscious.

The first thing he felt was the warmth. Like a blanket tucked securely around his body, it soothed him, calming frayed nerves and washing away the last vestiges of fear.

Charles opened his eyes. He was flat on his back. The *iysho* crone knelt at his side, her fingers dug into his temples. He tried to sit up but she clucked her tongue, refusing to let go.

"Rest, child, rest." She shook her head. "Such a fool, such a fool. I told you man's weapons wouldn't work and yet you fired anyway. What did you expect to happen? Those fancy metal bits would make the fear monger curtsy and return to the void? Why do you think I made you the sword? Now let me finish the healing."

He closed his eyes. Afterimages of the monger's attacks danced in the darkness. He could feel its hot breath on his chest and stomach as it slowly devoured him. He could smell Melissa's sweet perfume as she cavorted with her admirers. The hum of the banishment chamber thrummed in his ears.

Eventually those memories faded as new strength flooded through his being. The *iysho* crone released his head and Charles sat up, surprised at how good he felt.

"I will give you this: you are much tougher than you appear. Most would curl up in a ball and weep after that strong an attack by the monger. But you, you are ready to fight him again. The question, Charles Tucker, is how will you arm yourself?"

He followed her gaze. His RD-440 rested next to the golden sword. Charles grit his teeth. He didn't look forward to explaining this in his after-action report.

This was crazy. He shouldn't be running around the park in the middle of the night with no back-up and a sword as his only weapon. He shouldn't trust some Delta witch if he was going to face the—what did she call it? Fear monger? He should simply radio back to headquarters and call in Beta Squad.

And yet... And yet he couldn't do it. For some reason, his mind was the calmest it had been all night. Charles felt confident, collected, ready for anything. Had the crone enchanted him somehow? No matter. He would face down the monger and dispatch it.

A screech tore through the silence. Tightening his grip on the sword, he sprinted in the direction of the cry.

His stomach lurched at what he found. The monger had doubled in size. It crouched over

a young woman, smoky tentacles wrapped around her. Charles crept closer and looked over the victim. While Charles had never seen her before, he was sure she hadn't come into the park with such stunning white hair.

With a savage war cry, he charged the fear monger, sword swinging wildly. The creature turned to face him. A wave of fear coursed through Charles' mind but didn't faze him. It was more like running through a cold ocean wave. The fear monger reared back, releasing its victim as it turned to face him.

Charles skidded to a halt, letting his momentum carry the sword around in what he hoped would be a mortal blow. The sword should have connected, only the fear monger's body rippled away from the blade. The swing almost took Charles off his feet, but he steadied himself and raised the sword between him and the fear monger.

The creature's eyes narrowed at him and another spike of terror grazed his mind. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes and the sensation quickly passed. What was going on? Not long ago, the fear monger paralyzed him in a matter of minutes. Now he could barely prick Charles's mind. What was the difference?

He looked at the sword blazing in his hands with golden light. The monger slunk away from him, snarling, then charged. Its inky tendrils lashed out at Charles.

Charles brought the sword down on the first tentacle. The blade sliced cleanly through the limb. It fell away, dissipating into a gray mist. The monger hissed and pulled back again. A surge of warmth flooded Charles's chest. This was possible. He could beat the monger.

This time he charged. The monger shrank away from Charles as it ducked around trees and bushes. Charles pursued it, herding the creature back...back...

"That's far enough, foul being," a voice said.

Charles looked over the creature's shoulder to see the *iysho* woman behind it. The monger hissed at her. She smiled sadly.

"Such bravery in attacking an unarmed opponent, yet you retreat when faced with a true challenge? I can smell your own fear, beast. Stand and fight or return to the void in shame."

The fear monger hesitated then faced Charles and, with an ear-splitting roar, vaulted. He swung his sword, slicing off another limb, but that didn't stop the monster this time.

Ice wrapped around his arms and legs as the monger drove the flat of the blade to Charles's chest. It enveloped him in a cocoon of shadows. He could feel its chill breath on his neck and cheek. He couldn't move his arms. Wave after wave of fear slapped his mind, each stronger than the last. Horrific images percolated in his mind and soon, Charles knew he would be overwhelmed.

He couldn't let that happen. Anger burned within him as he sucked in a ragged breath. He focused his thoughts on the sword. If he could move it, even a little, maybe...

Much to his surprise, the fear monger's grip slackened. Charles gulped air. He tightened his grip and opened his eyes.

It felt as if he stared into the sun. The sword's brilliant rays hewed through the monger's body. With an agonized scream, the creature fell away, limp. Charles held the sword aloft, its light driving away the darkness and eating more of the monger's body. The foul beast shriveled smaller and smaller.

"Finish it, child," the crone whispered.

Charles brought the sword around and the blade sliced the now tiny monger in two. In a puff of smoke and with a pitiful shriek, the creature vanished into the night air.

Strength drained from Charles's legs. The sword clattered next to him. His mouth was

parched and he could smell blood. His? He didn't care.

"Well done, Charles Logan Tucker. I knew you would succeed."

The crone picked up the sword. She caressed the hilt lovingly, then met Charles's gaze.

"It served you well, yes? And it is now yours. You never know when you might need it again. But of course, you can't carry this off the field of battle. No, no, too many questions, none of which you would or could answer. So we must sheath it in a safe place."

Before Charles could react, the woman caught his hair and pulled his head back. His eyes widened as he realized she was dangling the tip of the sword over his right eye. A scream formed in his throat, but the sword melted, the amber liquid pooling over his eye. Warmth rushed down his neck, along his jangled nerves, leaving serenity in its wake. The *iysho* released him and he slumped to his knees, his head lolling forward. She tousled his hair, then cupped his chin in her hand.

"There it will stay, safe and secure until you need it again," she whispered.

With that, she rose and returned to her fire. Charles willed his legs to move. He followed her to the fire ring and watched as she kicked dirt over it. She turned to him.

"Farewell, Charles. May you be well until—"

Her voice turned into an agonized shriek as her body convulsed. She fell to the ground twitching, revealing Six standing behind her, stun gun in hand. He spit on her body.

"Serves you right, you old cow," he said, then looked up at Charles. "Are you okay?"

Charles nodded numbly.

"Good. Let's rouse the rest of the team and get her back to headquarters. I can't wait to banish her and get some sleep."

Fear spiked through Charles as he marched down the hall to the banishment chamber. It was so like the visions he had as he fought the fear monger.

The *iysho* crone's tribunal had been swift and predictable. None of Charles's squadmates had seen the fear monger. The victim from the park couldn't remember the attack. FRAS-Lead didn't believe Charles's story, calling it hallucinations created by Elder magick. Much to Charles's surprise, the crone hadn't said anything either. She stood mute as the governing tribunal ordered her immediate banishment.

As one of her victims, Charles had the right to witness. He didn't want to but felt strangely compelled to be there.

He stepped through the doors into the sterile room housing the banishment chamber. It was a simple box set in concrete, the walls made of true mage-armor, with a suppression field generator wired into its top and floor. Once activated, the generators would force whatever was in the chamber out of the mortal plane. Based on the agonized screams that accompanied the hum of the generators, Charles always suspected it didn't tickle.

He took his place along one wall, the other members of FRAS flanking him. A set of metal doors across the room banged open and the crone shuffled in, her hands shackled with inhibium cuffs. Her guards prodded her into the chamber. She stepped in, her head held high and her eyes shining with pride. One of the guards stepped to the activation switch and turned to her.

"Do you have anything to say?" he asked.

"I do," the crone said.

An uncomfortable murmur rippled through the witnesses.

"Foolish mortals. So desperate to banish the magick from your lives, yet you don't realize how dangerous that is. You assume your technology will keep you safe from what lies beyond

this plane, yet you don't realize how vulnerable it truly makes you. None of you can face what waits beyond. Until you realize this, you are all doomed.

"A greater reality strains to break into your world. You are so sure it is nothing but evil that you cut yourself off from what would be a greater good. And you may keep it out for a while, but when the dam breaks, I fear you will all drown." She sighed and her shoulders slumped. "But no matter. Who among you will listen to the words of one old woman? Do what you will. I have said what I can."

The guard threw the switch. The hum of the generators crescendoed to a wail and, in a flash of light, the *iysho* was gone.

After the sentence had been carried out, FRAS-Lead offered to take the squad out for a beer. Charles begged off. He ignored his squadmates persistent efforts to change his mind until they left the barracks.

As Charles left the locker room, Seven called to him from the tech lab. Charles sighed. He wanted to get out of there.

"This'll only take a moment, I swear," Thompson said. He motioned Charles to join him at a monitor. "This was taken when the *iysho* got banished. I thought I saw something unusual during the procedure and wanted to check. Watch this."

On screen, the crone waited in the chamber until, with a flash of light, the generators banished her from the mortal plane. Charles groaned and glared at Thompson. The younger man held up a finger to cut off his words. "Now watch it again in slow motion."

Thompson cued up the footage again. It crawled by, frame by frame. The crone stood stoically, awaiting her fate. Then her face shifted. She looked right into the camera and winked. Then, much to Charles's surprise, her body faded from view a split second before the generators fired.

"What do you make of that?" Thompson asked. "It appears to me she disappeared before the suppression field could get her."

"I have no idea," Charles finally answered. "Must have been a glitch in the cameras. That happens from time to time due to the suppression fields."

Thompson studied his face for a moment or two then shrugged. Charles patted him on the shoulder before strolling out of the tech lab. He had to restrain himself as he left the barracks. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. The *iysho* escaped? Normally he would have been horrified at such a development but this time, it didn't really bother him. If anything, he felt relieved. Good for her!

By the time he reached his apartment, the dull ache that accompanied him all evening now threatened to split his head. He wanted nothing more than to deal with the pain and then sleep.

Once he made sure his door was locked, he went into his bathroom and removed the top from his toilet tank. He pulled out a vial which glowed faintly blue in his trembling hand. He grimaced. Almost out. He'd have to hit Little Fairyland soon, see if Ko-Lan had brewed some more Arcane-X.

He twisted the top from the vial, desperate to feel the warmth of the magick ease away his pains. He lifted the vial to his lips.

But then he paused.

Something was different. True, it felt as if his skin would peel from his skull. If he didn't take the Arcane-X, soon people would begin to suspect what he really was. That could lead to

uncomfortable questions, possibly jeopardizing his job, his friendships, maybe even his continued existence in the mortal plane.

Yet he didn't care. The gnawing fear that usually dwelt at the back of his mind was silent. It no longer whispered anxiety to him. So what if someone found out? He'd deal with that if it happened.

He held out the vial as far as he could and studied the glimmering contents for a moment, then with a smirk, upended the bottle and dumped the rest into the toilet. He watched with satisfaction as the glowing drug swirled down the drain.

That done, he reached up and undid his ponytail, allowing his hair to break free. As his blond hair spread out into the air, his headache slackened and faded. As his locks swirled around him, practically dancing for joy at its freedom, Charles felt his feet lift off of the bathroom floor. He laughed, the resonance of his voice thrumming through the glass.

He floated there for a moment or two before setting down. There was still one more thing he had to do tonight. He padded into the kitchen and snared the telephone. After dialing the number he had committed to memory weeks earlier, he waited, fighting the urge to hum. Even the humming of a half-*iys*ho like himself could wreak havoc on electronics.

"Hello?" a musical voice asked after half a dozen rings.

"Hello, Melissa?" Charles asked, warm confidence surging through his veins. "This is Charles. I was wondering if you were free Thursday night. Say dinner at my place?"

He glanced in a nearby mirror as his wild mane of hair continued to sway in an unfelt breeze and smiled at his own reflection. Maybe tonight wasn't such a bad night after all.

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