

Timid Pirate Publishing  
Presents a Cobalt City Adventure  
A Neighborhoods feature by Rosemary Jones

Location, Location, Location!  
An Adventure in Parkside's Adventurer's Club

*Time: Three months before the Dark Carnival rolls into town*

"It's perfect," Berry yelled into thin air. "Exactly what they wanted. The hardcore fans will get it, and Umberto can turn it into huge Easter egg for his directors' cut DVD." She scrambled in the oversized tote threatening to spill off her shoulder onto the wet stone steps, searching for her tiny digital camera. So tiny that it was now buried under the marked-up script, her pens, the notepad, the measuring tape, the compass, and all the accumulated debris of a life spent constantly on the run from one end of Cobalt City to the other. With her other hand, she tried to keep her impractically small umbrella from blowing down the street packed with luxurious brownstones.

Luckily the Bluetooth headpiece eliminated the need for hanging onto the cell, although it did make her feel like she'd been assimilated to the dark side. Berry often wondered what other people thought when they saw her working: crazy redhead yelling into thin air on street corners to her imaginary friends?

Because Marcus might as well be imaginary. Her business partner once again managed to lose himself after exiting the freeway and was massively late to their meeting with the property manager. So here she was, wrestling her tote in a downpour to make it give up her camera, and somewhere out there circled Marcus in his SUV, touring past the high-end shops of Parkside and yelling at his off-track GPS.

"Look," screamed Berry to the ether, cutting off his diatribe about a GPS that couldn't find its electronic backside with both hands, "the guy from JMS is not here yet either. Stop and ask someone for directions if you have too."

She switched off the phone before she heard his response to that one.

Her questing fingers finally found the smooth metal case of the camera and she pulled it out of her tote to snap a few pictures of the massive oak door in front of her. Huge wrought iron hinges, oversized brass knob, and a stylized carving of chains crisscrossing the door. The thing was gorgeous. Amazing that somebody hadn't ripped the door off this vacant building long ago. Although, in this millionaire's neighborhood, the cops probably kept an eye on such places. Even more astounding was that none of Cobalt City's more flamboyant superheroes or mad geniuses had moved into this place after the Adventurer's Club closed in the 1980s.

If the interior proved to be in half as good condition as the exterior, Umberto Longhini would be ecstatic. Italy's biggest big budget producer kept emphasizing "real, you know, like the commercial, the real thing," in every one of their Skype-connected conferences. And it didn't get more real than the actual home of the first author of Solomon Cree's adventures.

Now she just needed to get inside. Maybe she should call the building management company again. The JMS rep was supposed to have met her by now. Berry searched in her bag for the old envelope that she'd written the number on. A deep thud sounded from

somewhere on the opposite side of the door, startling her into backing down a step. The wind snatched the umbrella from her hand and sent it flying down the deserted street.

“Oh, crap,” Berry swore. Thunder boomed overhead. Behind her, the tortured screech of rusted metal rang out. Berry whipped around. The door was now open and a shadowy figure beckoned with one pale hand.

“You should come out of the rain, miss,” the man in the doorway said.

An absolute wall of water poured out of the skies. Berry dived through the open door, shaking drops onto the marble floor like wet puppy.

“Hi, hi, hi,” she said. “Wow, what a storm. I’m so glad you are here. Sorry, they didn’t give me your name...”

“Tidwell,” said the cadaverous man in an old-fashioned black suit, white shirt, and skinny dark blue tie.

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Tidwell, thank you so much for coming out on this awful day to show me the Club,” said Berry. Privately, she wondered where JMS had found him. She’d dealt with the property management company when arranging downtown office shoots and had the impression that they only hired the Ivy League grads looking to become the next Donald Trump. Tidwell looked like his next job might be in a mortuary. Maybe that was why he was in charge of this mothballed building.

“I’m Berry Fields,” she added, in case JMS hadn’t given Tidwell her name and he was wondering how to ask her. “My partner Marcus is a little lost, but he’ll be here soon.”

“Very good, Miss Fields,” said Tidwell. “Can I take your coat?”

Berry glanced down at the puddle growing around her feet as the rain dripped off her. “Yeah, maybe, I shouldn’t go trailing this through the mansion.” And, as she struggled out of the coat while keeping a tight hold on her bag, she added, “I hope the heat is on.”

“The Club is kept at a pleasant temperature for all residents,” replied Tidwell.

“Residents? I thought the place was empty.”

For the first time, Tidwell appeared slightly nonplussed. At least, that’s how Berry interpreted his suddenly raised eyebrows.

“Ah, certainly,” Tidwell replied after a short pause, head cocked as if listening for footsteps or other evidence of others, “there is no physical residents present at the moment. Other than myself, of course.”

“You live here? I’m sorry, I thought you were with JMS, you know, the property managers.”

“No, Miss Fields, I am the Doorman.”

“Well, I knew most of the Parkside buildings had a doorman...but it’s a little odd for an empty place like this. Or is JMS planning to reopen building? Turn it into high-end apartments or something?”

Tidwell turned away to neatly hang her coat in an oak wardrobe standing to the left of the door. Berry glimpsed a number of old coats hanging in it. One even appeared to be an ancient fur.

“That’s a pretty piece,” she said, “an antique?”

“Shipped from England in the 1960s. It was thought to be too dangerous to stay there.” Tidwell snapped the wardrobe door shut with a snap and started down the marble hallway. As he moved deeper into the Adventurers Club, lighted fixtures in the ceiling automatically sprang on, shedding warm golden rays from their etched glass shades.

“Dangerous? What is dangerous about a wardrobe?” said Berry as she trailed after him.

“Lost children, quite a few I understand,” Tidwell replied. “Until they arrested the mad Professor responsible.”

“I thought mad Professors were a Cobalt City specialty,” said Berry. “You know, like the guy who lived here.”

She scribbled a note on her scratchpad “antique wardrobe, fancy lights.” She snapped a few shots of the heavy entrance door and then swung around to snap a few more down the hall. Umberto would love the look of the place – but if the Club was crammed with antiques, they’d need to check into insurance coverage and maybe consider shifting a few things out of the way before the film crew set up. Or maybe Umberto would pay to use the original fixtures.

Tidwell sidestepped easily out of every camera shot. Berry thought about waving him back into the picture, just so Umberto could get a picture of the hall’s size in relation to a man. But then, maybe the doorman didn’t like having his picture taken. She’d run into that prejudice amazingly often in Cobalt City and she didn’t want to upset him. He was being very pleasant about her interruption into his day – maybe JMS had alerted him – but he didn’t have to be her guide through the Club.

“Can we go upstairs? I need to see the top floor apartment. The top floor where Professor Chandler, the writer, lived.”

“Professor Chandler’s old rooms?” Tidwell hesitated at the copper-and-marble inlaid doors of the elevator. The floor indicator needle above the doors pointed to a lovely art moderne metal number 1. The thing looked exactly like the descriptions in Chandler’s novels of the elevator that rose to Cree’s penthouse apartment and Berry tried, without complete success, to eliminate a small squeal of delight. The script called for Solomon Cree to have a fight in his elevator before setting out from Cobalt City to track the villains through the Himalayas. Of course, they’d mock it up in the studio, but this would be perfect for set-up shots. She snapped a couple more pictures.

“Does it work?” she asked Tidwell.

“Of course,” said Tidwell, pressing a button to open the heavy outer doors. He pulled back the interior safety cage door and gestured Berry to step inside. He followed her, carefully sliding the interior door closed. The manual controls included a big brass lever and Berry practically swooned. She was sure the script called for Cree to pull the elevator handle out of the control and reveal a hidden sword that allowed him to fend off the villainous Vikings attacking him.

“I do have the best job in the world,” she beamed at Tidwell, who failed to beam back. If nothing, the man looked more solemn.

“You must visit Professor Chandler’s rooms?” he asked, making no movement to engage the controls.

“Oh, yes,” said Berry. “If they are as good as this, we’ll totally be able to sell Umberto on filming here. Did they tell you about this? JMS?”

“I am the Doorman,” said Tidwell. “My purpose is to let people in and out, and take them where they request in the Club.”

“Well, they should have told you, because you’ll be opening doors a lot if Umberto decided to film here. See, they’re making this great big Euro-pudding of a blockbuster. Most of it is taken from the graphic novels, you know, when Cree became this demon-cursed character trying to regain his immortal soul. But the Italian producing and directing the whole thing, my client, he collects the old Ace paperback reprints of Chandler’s stories. You know, the ones with the bulging muscle guy slinging some screaming chick on his back and beating off crazy samurai warrior types with his shotgun. And Umberto wants the start of

the movie here, in Cobalt City, and in Chandler's apartment, except, of course, it's going to be Cree's penthouse Parkside apartment. And he wants it to have that retro look, which you totally have. At least downstairs. But if upstairs is half as good, I'm going to be Umberto's favorite location scout!"

"I am enlightened," said Tidwell. "You are a scout. You find things that need to be found. No wonder I heard you at the door."

"Location scout. Proud partner in Fields and Moore. Marcus is the Moore and I'm the Fields, Strawberry Fields (Mom's a major Lennon fan). I was going to name it Strawberry Fields and Moore, but Marcus thought that was a bit much. If this Club works for Umberto, then we will have scored some major Hollywood street cred. Up until now, it's mostly been docu-dramas. Those Discovery channel recreations of the Protectorate's battles. Oh, and the Starcom commercials. They love filming that main shopping drag of Parkside, you know, the well-heeled types hurrying out of the finest shops and into their cabs with the latest Starcom phones clapped to their ears and their tiny dogs in expensive purses."

"I am sure that the Club will prove to be more than satisfactory. After all, your presence at the entry did summon me."

"Thanks, I really appreciate you picking up the slack since the JMS rep seems to be as lost as Marcus....oh, damn ....uh, sorry." Swearing in front of Tidwell made her blush. The guy looked like he was descended from Cobalt City's most pure Puritan families. "What if Marcus arrives when we are upstairs, how will he get in?"

"I will know if somebody appropriate is at the door and let him in," Tidwell responded.

"Great, perfect. Well, up, up, and away," said Berry. "I've always wanted to say that! Seems appropriate in an elevator."

"Very good, Miss Fields," said Tidwell. It might have been a trick of the flickering light in the elevator cab, but Berry could swear the man almost smiled. "It is pleasant to be of service again."

"Mmmm," said Berry, not paying much attention as she scribbled more notes for her presentation to Umberto. The elevator jerked a little but seemed perfectly functional. With a soft and discreet ding, it stopped and the outer doors slid open. Tidwell cranked back the safety door, gesturing Berry into the entryway.

Berry stepped out and a porcelain lamp shaped like an elephant carrying a howda lit immediately, shedding little diamond squares of light across the wood-paneled walls.

"Wow!" said Berry, turning in a circle to take in the crossed spears affixed to one wall, the compete conquistador armor on a plaster mannequin in the corner, and the full set of framed covers of Solomon Cree adventures. She moved closer and realized the covers weren't the printed copies found in any fanboy's basement. These were the original 1940s and 1950s oils done by Dunamis Macamber for the pulp magazines, showing the golden-skinned Cree battling Vikings, mad mullahs, and, in the final weird adventure written by Chandler, being dragged across a temple floor by wiggling tentacles sprouting from an enormous Chinese bronze vase.

"I had no idea," she breathed. Some serious Internet research into the lore of Cree when she was preparing to pitch their company to Umberto had turned her into an aficionado of the artwork depicting the fictional adventurer. Frankly, Macamber's paintings were far more her taste than the bare-chested figure of the Ace paperbacks or dark, distorted look of the later graphic novels.

"I'm surprised that these haven't been ripped off and sold at Comicon," said Berry. "Not that you should worry about Umberto's crew. He's adding so many layers of security

to keep props and scripts from walking off the set, he can do something for these too. Or maybe just put them in a bank vault during filming.”

“The Club has its own ways of keeping its contents safe,” said Tidwell. He remained inside the elevator as Berry slowly walked the perimeters of the room, jotting notes about the size, look, and possible use in the film.

“Miss Fields,” Tidwell gave a small cough, much more discrete than the elevator’s bell, “when you need to return to the main floor, please press the button. This is as far as I can go. Please remember, all you need to do is press the button to call the elevator and help will come.”

“Oh, you’ve been so nice. If you can just send up Marcus...if he gets here before I’m done. I swear he stopped to shop! Tiffany’s, if I’m lucky,” she grinned at Tidwell. The she waved her hand at his concerned look. “Just a joke. His apologies usually run to an extra doughnut with coffee, not diamonds. Oh, and that rep from JMS, he can come up or he can meet me downstairs. Doesn’t matter. I know Umberto is going to take this place as is. I just need to see the rest of the rooms and take a few more photographs for him.”

“Very good, Miss Fields, if you must remain,” sighed Tidwell. “I will send help to this floor when it arrives.”

The elevator doors slid softly shut and Berry shook her head at the doorman’s odd turn of phrase. Fancy calling Marcus, or maybe the rep from JMS, the help.

A dark mahogany door with a beautiful octagonal glass knob opened into a dimly lit library. The built-in bookcases were crammed with leather-bound volumes of all sizes, many tattered and torn across the top edges, as if they had been opened often.

Two club chairs flanked a small table and Berry caught sight of a crystal decanter set on one lower shelf, looking as if it still held a swallow or two of Scotch.

“That old joker,” she murmured as she advanced into the room. “He really did just write what he knew.” The whole set-up perfectly matched Chandler’s descriptions of Cree’s inner sanctum, Solomon’s personal library where he always found the first arcane clue that started him on his fantastic adventures.

“There’s probably even a .38 revolver and a crazy chemical set in one of those cupboards flanking the fireplace,” she said to herself as she circled the room. As Berry moved closer to the tile-framed fireplace, the gas flames popped on, adding cheerful warmth to the room.

Remembering the last Chandler book that Umberto had mailed to them, Berry counted three bookcases to the left from the fireplace. There, as she half expected, she found a Celtic knot carved into the wood of the shelf. She snapped a quick picture and, with one trembling finger, pressed the center of the knot. A distinct click and the bookcase slid silently away from her, revealing a tiny inner chamber crammed with dusty boxes and odd shapes covered with canvas and rope.

“Umberto will buy this place and ship it back brick by brick to Italy,” she said to the long forgotten contents of the little room. “Or maybe I can rent it from JMS and lead tours through here after the movie comes out.” She considered the reaction of the Solomon Cree Fan Club boys that she’d texted about possible Cobalt City locations. It was George, wasn’t it, who had tipped her to the Adventurer’s Club in Parkside and the fact that Chandler had lived here? Berry decided she had to get George up here so he could see this. Of course, she’d need 911 on speed dial. He would so have a heart attack if he knew Cree’s secret treasure room really existed.

Her camera light was flashing, warning her that her card was nearly full. Her backup was down in the car, but she really didn’t need any more pictures. Except...well, why not

take the last one? What should it be? Berry stared at the tall chunky shape hidden just inside the treasure room door. Oh, it couldn't be? Could it?

With eager hands, she pulled the canvas covering away to reveal a giant bronze funeral urn. She knew it was a Qin dynasty funeral urn because that was exactly how Chandler described it in his last Cree adventure. Three triangular feet, weird pictographs encircling the greenish bronze sides, and a lid topped with a jade filial.

This vase looked so much more spooky than the mock-up that Umberto had e-mailed her last week. This vase appeared as if it could contain the soul-sucking tentacles of Wen Chang's demon from outer space.

She grabbed the jade filial, intent on lifting the lid and getting a shot of the interior, something that Chandler failed to mention in his novel. Of course, it probably held the opium or whatever the old Professor had been smoking when he came up with his crazy demon.

Berry struggled with the lid, which seemed to be jammed tightly into the neck of the vase, but she finally managed to drag it off. Unfortunately her final mighty tug set the vase rocking wildly on its tiny feet.

Berry leaped back as the vase tipped with a crash onto the floor.

"Oh, shit!" she said, praying that she had not just broken a valuable antique. What would Tidwell say?

As the first long, greasy black tentacle came snaking out of the vase, stabbing across the room, Berry swore again and lunged for the door. She remembered the drills in the school with a chilling clarity that would have made her first-grade teacher proud: When you see a monster, or even the tip of a monster, children, remember this is Cobalt City. Don't hesitate, Miss Anselm would say, shaking one bony finger at her small charges, leap, run, drop, roll, and scream! Remember, some hero will hear you if you yell loud enough, children!

Berry found the screams came naturally as she dodged a second tentacle slashing out of the bronze vase, as did the running jump, weave, and hop over one snake-like writhing black tip to make her way into the entry hall. She tried to slam the door shut behind her, but the tentacles grasped the edge of the door and whacked it back into the wall.

Grabbing the plaster mannequin dressed as a conquistador in both arms, Berry hurled it at the three tentacles now blossoming out of the vase.

The trio of black slime wrapped themselves around the mannequin, dragging it backward with crushing force that dented the armor. Berry winced at the destruction but did not pause in her rush to the elevator button. She pushed it hard and repeatedly, hoping that Tidwell was right. That help would arrive.

Another crash came from the library and the mannequin hurled suddenly into the entry.

Berry jumped to one side and ripped down one of the African spears on the wall. She swung it so the sharpened end pointed toward the door. With luck, the thing had been dipped in some arcane poison venomous to tentacles. Given the rest of her experiences in Chandler's rooms, that would be appropriate.

The tentacles, now four in number, slid through the door, sending questing tips across the floor. Berry slashed down at the one nearest to her, skewering it like sushi on a toothpick. With a force that dragged the spear out of her hands, the tentacle recoiled, snapping into its fellows.

Behind her, the elevator made its soft little ding and the doors slid open.

"This way, sir," said Tidwell, gesturing to a shadowy figure dressed in a fedora and trench coat.

For a brief second, Berry believed that the original Solomon Cree had appeared to save her. But the face that glanced briefly towards her was swathed in deathly pale bandages, not the famed glowing golden skin of Cree.

“Come here, Miss Fields,” called Tidwell.

A whirlwind of stinging ash swept past her, herding the thrashing tentacles back through the library door.

“Miss Fields,” said Tidwell, sounding almost urgent, “the rest of your party is waiting for you downstairs.”

With a gulp and nod, Berry hurried into the elevator. “Shouldn’t we wait for him? Help him?” she asked.

“If Mr. Grey needs any help, I’m sure he will ring the bell,” answered Tidwell as he swung the brass handle to take the elevator to the ground floor.

Berry wrapped both arms around her bag and hugged it tightly to her chest. In some part of her brain that wasn’t still screaming, she felt incredibly proud that she managed to hang onto her things throughout her brief fight and flight. And follow Miss Anselm’s instructions. Apparently screaming loudly did attract heroes, or at least one famous hero of Cobalt City.

As the elevator slid to a halt, she couldn’t resist asking, “Tidwell, does that handle pull out and become a sword?”

“Of course, although I never recommend using it.” He twisted the handle and revealed a quarter inch of shining steel before pushing it back into place.

The outer doors opened and Tidwell neatly swung back the brass cage door.

Thinking about the movie, because that was less terrifying than the tentacles battling Mr. Grey a few floors above their heads, Berry said, “Why wouldn’t you use the sword?”

“Once you pull it out completely, the elevator is disabled. And the sword rarely goes back in easily. It tends to stick. Poor engineering, if I do say so myself.”

“Good to know.”

Across the hallway, she spotted Marcus talking to a slender guy in a suit that obviously came from one of Parkside’s most exclusive tailors, a rep from JMS if she ever saw one.

“Marcus!” screamed Berry and hurled herself across the floor, hugging her surprised business partner as her bag tumbled to the floor and sent a jumble of stuff rolling in all directions.

“Berry,” said Marcus, doing the awkward guy pat between her shoulder blades. “What’s up? How’s the apartment upstairs?”

Beside her, Tidwell gave one of his soft little coughs. “I believe Miss Fields found that Professor Chandler’s rooms would be most pleasing. Once a small pest problem is cleared away.”

“Oh, Berry, not a rat?” Marcus shuddered and turned to the JMS rep. “You know, no matter how many times they clean out the sewers, there’s always some crazy mutant rats trying to move into abandoned buildings. Was it a big one, Berry?”

“I just saw the tip of a tail, or something,” said Berry with a glance at Tidwell, who bent to swiftly retrieve all her things. He handed her bag back to her with a small bow. “Mr. Tidwell, are you sure that it is going to be gone before the filming starts?”

“I have no doubts about the gentleman’s expertise in removing such pests.”

Berry nodded a little uncertainly at him and turned to Marcus. “Other than that, it is perfect. Exactly how Chandler described Solomon Cree’s apartment.”

Marcus beamed at her and shook the JMS rep's hand again. As they went together out the door, Tidwell glided over to the wardrobe to retrieve her coat. He held it for her to put on. "Will it be all right, really? Filming here?" Berry asked him. "I mean, are you going to be OK having strangers here, going in and out? It won't stir up more trouble for you?"

"Oh, no, Miss Fields," Tidwell reassured her. "I think your movie is exactly what the Club needs. A little advertisement, as it were, to attract the right tenant. And anything that is found, like that vase you noticed today, needs to be found. I simply can't remember the last time that an accident occurred in the Club."

On the sidewalk outside, Berry thanked the JMS rep for coming out as Marcus gallantly held his umbrella over the both of them. The rain slackened into a light drizzle and the thunderclouds began breaking up to the east.

"I'm sorry that I was late. To tell the truth, I hate this place, that Tidwell gives me the creeps," said the man from JMS. "Half the time that I knock, he won't open the door. I was a little surprised that he let you in."

"Well, Berry's a charmer. She can talk her way into anything," said Marcus.

"Did you see the guy in a trench coat and a fedora?" asked Berry, staring up at the top of the building. She wondered if any of the darkened windows there were connected to Chandler's rooms. "Did he come in with you?"

"A man wearing a fedora? Sounds like Solomon Cree in his city clothes," laughed Marcus. "Nah, didn't see anyone else. Maybe you spotted a ghost."

"Maybe I did," Berry replied. "I bet there are a lot of ghosts and stories behind those doors."

"Hey, it's Cobalt City, of course there are," said Marcus. "Can I buy you a doughnut and a cup of coffee? Since I was late and left you to do all the work...."

"Sure," said Berry. "That sounds great."

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