

On the Flip Side

*D*oug Yates pushed his loaded trolley through the intersection, and into the main drive. The warm glow from his headlamp washed across the timber bracing and hewn stone walls. Already the steady thump of the battery was a reassuring beat promising sunlight ahead. He was happy – the new seam had proven profitable. He looked forward to being able to pay off the stamper battery and riffling boxes.

The skitter of small pebbles interrupted his thoughts. He cast a look behind him into the darkness. Nothing. As he swept the beam of his torch back forward, his eyes caught a glimpse of flickering redness up near the rugged ceiling. There it was, and a faint hissing sound. A tiny glow, tracing its way towards a red stick planted in the bracing beams rope lashings.

A flash of ice shot through his veins, momentarily freezing him in place. He jerked himself out of his shock, abandoned the trolley, and pounded towards the safety of light and open air. Doug threw himself into the ferns clustered around the mine entrance just as a deep thump, dust and pebbles, belched from the tunnel.

Cautiously, he peered into the dust choked air, soon spotting the pile of rocks which had claimed the tunnel as their own.

"I swear this place is trying to drive us off." he muttered.

"What was that?" Jack Taylor dashed up. *"I was quietly doing my nails, and nearly jumped out of my skin."*

"Us not breaking even," growled Doug.

"Bother! Not again!" sighed Jack. *"What happened?"*

"Sabotage, I'd say." spat Doug. *"There was a stick of dynamite in one of the props near the intersection. I just managed to escape with my life."*

"Deary me. That's the fifth weird event this week," said Jack. *"What was it yesterday? Biggs' claim had a cave in, and there was that unearthly piping in the bushes to the west."*

"Not to mention McCaskie's having their stamper battery jammed by a pentagram made of shovels wedged into the works, and John Fletcher seeing those shadows moving around their sluice box site." Doug muttered.

"Too weird," Jack helped Doug out of the ferns.

"We need an investigator." Doug brushed off the mud and leaves. *"A good one."*

"Do you think the others would pitch in with us?"

"Without a doubt."

"And freeze"

"Hello David. Thanks for accepting my invite. Please take a seat." Haywood closed a file on his computer and gestured toward the empty seat across from him.

David Smythe-Drisco glared at him and sprawled into the proffered seat opposite Haywood. Haywood steepled his fingers. "As you will be aware this is to discuss your performance and hopefully put in place systems and support to help you achieve the performance we expect from our employees."

David's nod was sharp, his expression sharper.

"I want you to understand that we do this to help you to be the best you can be and make whatever you do, a success."

David continued to glare at Haywood.

"You know, of course, that the story you were involved with didn't go as planned. There were quite a few issues which could be traced back to you, and some of your ... techniques," said Hayward. "Our job, is to make the stories work. We – do – not – get – involved. But we'll address this later. Our job is to set up the scenery, the props, and all those little hints and tips that make a story work. This was supposed to be a mystery story, and so atmosphere, and clues are important. The details of how the story runs is not up to us. That's for the characters to work out and the readers to figure out. You know this. *Ita fabula procedit*¹ as our company motto says."

1 So the story goes.

On the Flip Side

"And you tell me this, why ...?" snarled David.

"Well, there were a number of issues in this story you were assigned, where you would appear *not* to have had this front of mind," said Haywood.

"I was quite clear with the contractors, what was expected," snapped David.

"The contractors ... " Haywood referred to his notes, "*Dreamscapes* ... are a well recognised company who do exceptional work. They know this space inside out, and so will know how to set up a scene of this sort."

"They didn't follow my specifications for how to set up the introductory scene," sniffed David. "They ad-libbed and that set things up to follow the wrong path."

"On the contrary," Haywood pulled up a file on his computer, "They followed your instructions to the letter, but that was after they had queried some details with you, to which you had responded '*Do your f**king job.*' This is from an email they shared with me. That's hardly the sort of exchange we expect from our employees, and certainly not going to gain any points with the Dreamscapes contractors. But this is all secondary to a failing that can be directly traced to you."

Enjoying the last rays of sunshine on a rare sunny day, Lance Bridson, famous paranormal investigator, stretched his long legs out in front of him as he sat on the bench seat outside of the pub, The Dominion, where he was staying. He'd interviewed a few of the prospectors, those who'd experienced strange goings-ons, at least. Yes, there was something weird happening. As one of the prospectors had said, it was as if some malignant force were trying to throw them out. But what? What could want them gone? He mulled on the mystery. Could whatever it was be objecting to the gold mining operations, or the whole town?

While he mulled on this, his eyes lazily explored their surroundings. They lit upon a strangely neat, flat looking box of some sort, almost like a small portmanteau, sitting on the end of the bench seat. It was black, and covered in something that looked like leather but wasn't. Some sort of pale facsimile of leather that he's never encountered before. Fascinated, he shuffled along to the box. It had two clasps on one side, and some hinges on the other. Clipping open the clasps, the box sprung open, to display what looked like a meat pie, a rather un-nerving magazine featuring extraordinary colour photos, and titled 'Penthouse.' Lastly, there was a sheaf of papers. No where could he see the owner's name. While the magazine was breath-taking for being printed in colour, he felt safer opening the papers in the hope of identifying the owner.

The more he read, the higher his eyebrows rose, and the more puzzled he became. Flicking to the end of the document, he read what was there, and sat back, dumbfounded. He shuffled back through the document, nodding, and murmuring "so that's it," and "Ah, yes," and "Okay, I hadn't found that." He sat silently for a while, his thoughts churning.

"That was your briefcase, right?" Haywood leaned forward.

David looked away, scowling.

"Not only did you create an anachronistic anomaly, by leaving a document featuring colour photos – choice of magazine aside - but you also left the project run-sheet."

David went to say something, but Haywood held up a hand.

"A document, detailing which clues were to be placed where, what they pertained to, and whether they were false leads or not." Haywood shook his head. "So, knowing what the mystery was and how to solve it, what do you think the investigator did? Shall we look?"

"Gentlemen. I think I have a solution to your problems." Lance flourished the run-sheet at the gathered group of prospectors. "I came upon this document which details everything about this situation, and the solution."

"So what's it all about?" asked Jack.

"It's very simple," said Lance. "As many of you had guessed, the town is being threatened by a malignant supernatural being, which is directing a tribe of imps to do the dirty work. This entity seeks to stop your prospects."

"There's no way I'm leaving our claim." shouted Doug from the back.

"And there is no need to." Lance flicked though the run-sheet. "It says here that the being has a fetter-"

"A what?" snorted another prospector.

On the Flip Side

"A fetter." Lance flicked through some more pages. "It's an anchor for the supernatural entity. A ghost will haunt the location where it has some sort of deep personal connection. That's a ghost's fetter. Our supernatural being is held here by its own fetter. Its fetter is a large quartz crystal which I believe to be-" Lance ran a finger down the page, "-in your house, Jack, on a shelf beside your dinner plates, and your cut glass figurines."

"How did ..?" Jack was stunned.

Lance tapped the page. "It's written here."

Jack pushed his way forward, read the passage, and looked at the diagram. "Good god!" He flicked through some other pages. "Dan, I didn't know you collected bone china tea sets."

"What of it?" muttered Dan, owner of a particularly long beard, even by prospector standards.

"Okay. So what do we do?" asked Doug.

"We need to remove the fetter from the area," said Lance. "As simple as that."

David sat in sullen silence.

"As I'm sure you realise, this short-circuited the story somewhat." Haywood ticked off a box in his sheet, then directed a serious, non-judgemental look at David. "These errors aside, I wanted to discuss with you the following most concerning incidents in this whole project."

David returned his stare, but with a good dose of hostility added.

"If we step back a little through the story to before the meeting with the prospectors, the investigator, Lance Bridson, decides to take action based on what he has learned from the project run-sheet. Would you like to explain to me what events transpired?"

David's lips tightened, and his scowl deepened.

"Very well. Allow me to summarise with a montage."

Lance strode through town, his feet firmly set on the path to the Yates and Taylor claim. Ahead of him a rickety crane creaked and groaned as it lifted a load of hastily stopped bracing timber over the road. With a tearing sound the stops gave way and the load crashed down behind Lance's heels. Deep in his own thoughts, he didn't notice.

Harry Chamberlain was busy chopping wood outside his hut, with an axe that had seen better days, months, and years. Just as Lance passed, the axe head whirled off, narrowly missing his ear. Deep in his own thoughts, Lance didn't notice.

Walking on, a cloud of questions buzzing around his head, Lance came abreast of a dark, bracken filled recess between Shaw's hut, and Taggart's firewood box. A glint of steel caught the light, just before a dagger erupted from the gap plunging straight for Lance's head. Lance stooped and picked up an interesting piece of greenstone. He straightened and held it up to the light. "Huh! Beautiful!"

"Okay. So it appears you directly intervened in the story, in an attempt to do away with the investigator," said Haywood. "This is a very serious breach, and potentially a case for instant dismissal. What were you thinking?"

"I wanted to turn the story into a thriller," muttered David.

"And yet we were contracted for a mystery."

David glowered.

"Being a mystery, the investigator character is so heavily protected by *plot armour*², that not even a nuclear explosion is going to harm him."

"I wanted to use nukes, but we didn't have any," muttered David.

"We *do* – *not* – *get* – *involved*!"

"Well we should."

Haywood waved him silent. "We *do* – *NOT* – *get* – *involved*! This is a serious breach of our rules. I'm sorry, but this is going to have to be recorded on your employment record."

David threw his hands up in the air. "I can't believe this."

2 Sometimes referred to as "Script Immunity" or a "Character Shield", *Plot Armor* is when a main character's life and health are safeguarded by the fact that they're the one person who can't be removed from the story. - Tvtropes.org

On the Flip Side

“Please point out any errors in fact, or anywhere where I have misunderstood something,” said Haywood.

David glared in sullen fury.

“I want to help you.” Haywood slid a slim document across the table. “This is your performance improvement plan. Despite some very serious errors in judgement, we’re prepared to give you another chance. This performance improvement plan has the necessary steps and recommended training we feel you need to move you to being able to fulfil your function within this organisation. Please take some time to read this document and get back to me with any comments or concerns you may have. You may want to discuss this with our EAP³ Services provider.”

David glared at the paper in front of him, stood up, snatched the document up, and stormed from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Haywood, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. “Okay, now for some damage control. Maybe we can turn it into a very meta comedy.”

3 EAP - Employee Assistance Programme