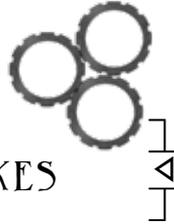




MR. SANDMÄN STRIKES



Sleep was the young boy's enemy. He refused to lie down, despite his mother's best efforts.

"Mother, something comes at night. I don't know what it is, but I think it wants to hurt me," he whispered.

"Such an imagination." She tousled the boy's curly blond locks. "Aren't you tuckered out yet?"

"I'm sure there's a creature in my room." He stared at the lacquered cabinet in the corner. The gilded design resembled snakes climbing to the top. "Sometimes, I hear it knocking."

She drew the soft cotton quilt up to his chin. "That's the house settling."

"No, the monster lives in the cabinet. It wants to eat me."

"Shh, shh, time to sleep." She turned down the oil reservoir valve on the astral lamp, but he grabbed her wrist.

"Please leave the light on," he begged.

She caressed his chubby cheek. "You know what you need?"

A bedtime story.”

He burrowed the back of his head into the pillow. “Yes! Read me a little more from that book. *The Prince and the Pauper*.”

“The book’s downstairs. Why don’t I tell you a tale about a man who guides children to a magical realm where dreams come true?”

“Who is he?”

“Mr. Sandman. You can tell it’s him by his bag of sleeping dust. He blows the fine bits of dust into children’s eyes to make their eyelids heavy, and when they fall asleep, he transports them to a train which travels on moonbeam tracks all the way to Slumber.”

“Do you think he’s in the cabinet?” The boy began to sit up.

She pressed him back to the pillow. “No, but he’s on his way. If you’re asleep when he comes, he’ll put you in the car near the front of the train.”

He nestled into the bed.

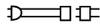
“Please, leave the lamp on so Mr. Sandman can find me.”

She sighed and adjusted the valve to brighten the room just a bit. Then she kissed her son’s forehead and walked out. She stopped at the doorway. “Good ni—”

A slight, high-pitched whistle cut her off. In the hallway, a tall man in a raggedy black suit stood a few feet away. Under his stovetop hat, his mottled face resembled a calico cat’s colouring. The whistling came from his sickle-shaped nose as he sucked in air.

“Who are you?” she asked, bristling. “What do you want?”

He raised a metal claw-like hand to his lips and blew dust into her eyes.



In the bedroom, the cherubic boy watched in horror as his mother slumped to the floor. Standing over her, the raggedy man in the tattered suit bent over her face and plucked a small orb. He deposited the bloody ball into the satchel at his hip then he touched the woman's face again.

"M-m-mother," the boy stammered.

Her body jerked in the hallway as the creature looked up and ogled the boy, his dappled face illuminated by the bedside lamp's dim light. He flashed a crooked smile, his yellow teeth stalagmites in a fetid cave.

"M-M-Mister Sandman?"

"No, fles-s-sh bag," the raggedy man said, his sibilant speech scratching at the boy's ears. "Ole Lukoje won't be here long. All I want is-s-s your tas-s-sty peepers-s-s."

He hopped over the threshold like a black-billed magpie and curled the fingers of his metal gloves. The overlapping plates of steel were laid like an armadillo's armour while the fingertips were honed to razor-sharp talons.

"I'll go to sleep. I promise. I'll go to sleep," the boy pleaded, shutting his eyes.

Ole Lukoje perched on the foot of the bed, reached into his jacket pocket and drew out some dust. He held his hand to his mouth and prepared to blow.

"I wouldn't do that," a voice said behind him.

A stocky teenager in a tan leather duster tipped a salute with his black bowler, revealing a set of gauges around the hatband. The teen's eyes glinted behind tinted goggles. He aimed a

teslatron rifle at the raggedy man's sickle nose. At the end of the its barrel that blossomed into a large doughnut-shaped coil, the blunderbuss-styled musket cracked with a blue-white energy

"Back away from the boy."

Ole Lukoje hopped off the bed.

"Ah, yes-s-s. You mus-s-t want my papers-s-s" He rummaged in his satchel, but produced nothing. "Deares-s-s-t me, I can't s-s-seem to find them."

"How did you get here?" the teen asked.

The raggedy man cocked his head to the side. "I came here like all the other travellers-s-s. Through Demon Gate."

"You're an illegal. Thought you were a burglar at first, but no human thief steals eyes."

Ole Lukoje cracked a thin-lipped smile. "Ah. Yes-s-s, I think I found what I need."

"Stop there." The teen raised his weapon. "Hands out. Put the bag on the floor."

The man in the tattered suit obeyed, dropping his satchel. He kicked it across the floor, spilling out some of the contents. Then he backed toward the window.

"Don't move," the teen ordered. "I said, don't move."

The goggled saviour strode forward. *Squish*. He lifted his heavy black boot. Something sticky and stringy clung to the sole. Ole Lukoje vaulted onto the young man's shoulders and his taloned gloves tore through his duster and thick wool shirt. Both fell to the floor. The teslatron slid under the cabinet. The raggedy man flicked dust into the teen's face, but the particles pinged harmlessly off the tinted goggles. The teen bucked off his attacker, rolled to his feet, and whipped his duster open to draw a volt pistol from his holster. A pencil-thick cylinder flew

out the end of the sleek barrel. Ole Lukoje ducked out of the way. An electro dart cracked the window and a web of electricity dissipated against the non-conductive glass.

The raggedy man swept the lamp from the nightstand and hurled himself out of the window. The cherubic boy, meanwhile, sat bolt upright on the bed, screeching. The teen tried to calm him, but his bug-eyed goggles sent the boy further into a panic. He ripped the goggles off to reveal an anchor-like nose and bushy eyebrows.

“Easy, kid. My name’s Ehrich Weisz,” he said with barely a trace of his former accent.

“Get away from me! Monster! Monster!”

Ehrich ignored the screaming as he ran his hand through his mop of brown hair. He jumped to the window, but the raggedy man was already halfway down the street. Ehrich hurriedly checked his wounds as he crossed the bedroom. Ole Lukoje’s talons had dug deep enough to draw blood, but not enough to slow him down. He holstered his volt pistol and picked up his teslatron. The coil sat askew on the barrel. He cursed the delicate design of the weapon, then pulled his goggles over his eyes and flipped the green lens filters over the primary lenses. Night turned as bright as day. He left the screaming boy, stepped over the fallen mother, and rushed outside. The hunt was on.