

M7

from the unpublished novel (70,000 words)

by Mark Katzman

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He arrived at the Living Complex on a cloudy day in November. It was a large estate outside U-City. He'd read about it in the magazine Meta-Life that he came across in the bathroom of a party _____ had dragged him to years ago. It felt good to be among the living, where he hoped to remain, after so much lingering with the dead.

He was greeted at the door by Sub-Helper Mash. The Sub-Helper, sporting a long black frock coat, white linen shirt with a flashy purple and yellow cravat, tight black pants, and tall black boots, led him to the Office of Chief Steward Klugg.

Klugg was a man of sixty who ran a staff of one hundred and fifty various Helpers, Sub-Helpers, Pages, Protectors, and Confidants. He took his instruction from Housemaster Teegarden, who lived in a château deep under the Living Complex and hadn't surfaced for years.

After a particularly grueling series of upward stairs Mash removed his frock to cool off. His waist was cinched in. He was wearing a corset.

They stopped at the end of a long bare hallway where there was a single lit button next to an intercom. Above the intercom was a small gold plaque: Chief Steward Klugg.

Sub-Helper Mash identified himself, and the floor they were standing on slowly began to lower. When they stopped several stories down they were inside a cozy room with plush furniture and a fire going.

Chief Steward Klugg sat in a gilded leather chair smoking a pipe. He wore a long, emerald-green velvet coat with ornate silver buttons, a white silk shirt fluffed at the sleeves, black tights, and black pointy boots. A gold medallion with a series of interlocking circles dangled across his chest. His hair was long and gray.

"Please state your business, sir," said Klugg.

"I should wish to acquire lodgings, Sir Klugg, sir, while I pursue employment at the Library."

"You may address me simply as Klugg, young man. And where, might I inquire, do you hail from?"

"I don't recall, Klugg."

"You don't recall the place of your birth? The town, the hamlet, the park bench?"

"It was somewhere East."

Klugg wrote in the over-size black book which covered his desk: *Birthplace--Somewhere East.*

"I've crapped out in every direction, Klugg."

"Of course you have, son."

Klugg flipped through a few pages in the book.

"Show him to Upper Love, Sub-Helper Mash," he said.

They took a different exit route. Mash led him down long hallways, up staircases, along ramps. They passed Library workers attired in a variety of outfits. All had colored velvet coats and shiny buttons and insignias betokening their place of work and status therein. Most everyone they passed walked slowly, gazing towards the floor, but every now and then someone looked up.

Mash stopped before an unmarked door in the middle of a long hallway that seemed to go on forever.

"This is it."

"Thank you, Sub-Helper."

"There isn't a lock on the door."

"Just as well."

"We all must trust one another."

"Of course."

"I hope you find the accommodations to your liking, sir."

"I'm sure that I will. By the way, how did you come upon your name, if I may inquire?"

"My father was a boxer when he was young. That he was a brutal son-of-a-bitch is not under contention. His nickname was "the Masher." You have a sink, toilet and bidet in your room. The showers are at the end of the hallway. Meals are always available in the Dining Hall downstairs."

"You are too kind."

"That's kind of you to say, sir. Very kind. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Mash," he said.

The room was neither large nor small. It had a polished wood floor and pale blue walls. There was a desk, chair, table, lamp and bed.

He placed his few belongings into the closet and knelt before his small bed in a gesture of prayer. He prayed to the little gods—Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, it didn't make any difference. He loved them all.

He said his quiet prayer and fell asleep.