**One Late Night**

Chik klik tak

Chik klik tak

Chik klik tak

Chrack

Chrack

Kik-kik-kik-kik-kik-kik-kik-kik-CHUK

God damn it was noisy getting geared up for a job these days. Used to be, everything before the storm of battle and blood and struggle would be silent as the grave. There would be the occasional sword sharpening scrape or the sound of someone adjusting their stuff in its holsters and sheathes, but there was never this much hellacious noise. I suppose all the extra firepower did constitute extra noise. There were seven of us tonight. Three of them had shotguns, new ones from Browning. I think they shot as much as you wanted to as long as you still had shells and a finger to pull the trigger with, no pumping necessary. Reloading them was a bitch though. Bloody things didn’t want to take the shells properly half the time and cocking it, or whatever they called it these days, needed a whole lot of muscle. Two of them had machine guns. I’d wanted German models, or at least the American Thompsons, but we didn’t have the budget for it. We got the British version. The British version was crap. That’s all there is to say about them. Making up for our failings in the handheld machine gun department was the buzzsaw. The buzzsaw was absolutely fantastic at throwing a lot of big bullets at something on short notice. I didn’t have anything of the sort. I didn’t need anything like what the other guys were carrying, what with being a wizard and all.

Though, being a wizard tended to be not nearly as fun or advantageous when the evil grasping fingers of doom were ants in their pants to get your power. Wizards without proper training or preparation tended to get gobbled up quick by the first power hungry supernatural threat to come along. Eating one wizard could give birth to the sort of things nightmares don’t want to run into on a dark night. That’s why the wizards who did know how to find their metaphysical ass made sure that devouring a wizard and his power was hard as bedrock. The truck jostled and nearly sent me careening onto my face. I held my staff a little more firmly and used it to push myself back into my stately wizarding hunch. The wizarding hunch makes you look full of brooding complexity even when you’re about to take an impromptu nap.

The guys with me were not wizards. These guys were with the Fellowship of St. Martin. Age old collection of folk who really hated the supernatural and would do their best to fight it. No special powers, no spells, no nothing but normal human grit and determination. They were the ones that got all the small big work done. Killing large amounts of small time evils. Goblins, younger trolls, vampires of various flavors, were-things, and a hundred other various monsters from the worst recesses of the world. The Fellowship shot, stabbed, poisoned, blew up, and spat in the eye of whatever they possibly could and many things that they could not. The White Coalition did whatever they could to help out the Martinians, but the wizards and the other heavy hitters batting for humanity were usually going after the small big things. The continent destroying, civilization ending, world exploding threats. We didn’t usually work with the Martinians in person. Provide lots of gear yes, sling spells around no. I got assigned to this because something wrong was unearthed in… Where the hell was I again. Think it rhymed with Lorth Pagoda? Somewhere in America. Whatever it was could have been anything from tiny evil that you could get rid of with some wasp spray to the equivalent of Ragnarok. I love not knowing what I was getting into. I really do. I’m serious, shit’s like a drug. Why the hell else would I have agreed to do something so stupid?

~

Things were going smoothly. The excavation crew that found box full of Lucifer’s coffee grounds met us at the agreed upon location. They led us out to where they left the MacGuffin of ultimate damnation. I also got some coffee. I did not get sugar, despite making several requests for it. I did get called a ‘pussy wizard’ by some idiot stupid enough to stay in earshot when they insulted someone. I didn’t turn him into a toad or curse him to find his grandmother sexually irresistible. That stuff requires effort and this was just a small insult. I chose to take it in stride and only swat him in the back of the calf with a swing from my staff. My staff is about fifteen pounds of brute oaken heft. He sputtered out a few more insults to my lineage after that but I didn’t mind.

When the Martinians, me, and the excavation personnel brave enough to hold a pistol made it to the artifact, nothing awaited us. There was no ominous foreboding or obvious horror lurking just out of sight. This is, normally, seen as a good sign. Normally. I doubt anything involving a wizard, an evil box, and enough firepower to kit out a small army ever turned out as expected. I sipped my sugarless coffee and brooded over the box.

Lines ran over it and intersected with each other to form shapes that looked like spiral staircases leading into endless black pits. I walked closer to the box, still sipping idly from my cup of coffee. Upon closer inspection, I found an obvious clue as to why the excavation crew called us in. The box was breathing. It was difficult to tell. You can look at anything for long enough and it’ll start to do strange things, especially if you expect it to. I expected it to, naturally. The kicker is that when I put my hand in front of it I could feel a moist warmth seeping out of the cube sitting in the middle of the floor. The regular humans behind me kept their guns trained on the box. If they shot more than a few of the rounds would hit me. That is why, as an intelligent and wise student of the magical arts, I’d brought a little insurance. Said insurance came in the form of an amulet hung around my neck. It would negate all physical force against me. It would do jack diddly if something tried to psychically bugger me, but physical and mental magic did not combine well. Making sure I didn’t acquire high velocity lead poisoning would have to do.

I finished the cup of coffee and laid the empty mug down on the floor. The ceramic made a gentle clack as it made contact. I didn’t take my eyes off the box. My shoes sounded loud in the almost silence of the room as I walked around the artifact. My knees felt humid and wet after a few moments of close proximity to the breathing box. I brushed my hands over it. The cracks shifted slightly as the box continued to exhale hot, wet air. I don’t think it actually took air in. I felt my foot fidgeting to relieve the tension building up in me. My hand wandered into a slot that I couldn’t see. Something inside the box twisted and it let out a grating mechanical vibration that set my entire skeleton on edge. I yanked my hand out and backed away with eyes still locked on the box. My muscles were tense, ready to run or throw myself to the side at a moment’s notice. I heard the noise of men hurrying to ready guns as the box continued to produce eerie mechanical screeches. The noise reached a level that managed to shatter the coffee cup near the box. Then it turned the shattered cup into dusty ceramic shards. Then it stopped. Everything was quiet. The kind of quiet that hangs in the air.

The box creaked open an inch.

One of the excavators fired his pistol.

Everyone started shooting.

I instinctively threw myself to the ground.

There was no sound except the gunfire. I listened to them keep shooting with wild abandon. The excavators all ran out of ammo about the same time. The Martinians were smart. Some of them had been firing slower than the others to give the ones out of ammunition a window to reload. Being smart didn’t do them any good.

The first hint that something was wrong came as I tried to stand up. Something hot and warm splashed my left side. I cut my eyes towards the direction of the splash and saw a space where one of the excavators had been standing. Some blood remained. I presume the rest of it was mixing in with the various stains forming around the box. A roiling mass of black boiled out of the horrifying thing. It hurt to look at it. My ass scraped against the floor as I scrambled away. I tried to keep my eyes on the darkness seething out of the box in spite of the pain forcing me to squint my eyes. I felt hands grabbed at my throat and screeched. The belated realization that the hands were mine came seconds later. More of the men with me were missing now. I could catch glimpses of them being pulled into the blackness of the box but whatever took them was almost faster than I could see. I watched one man give a start before he turned into a streak of blood. The men were yelling to each other but I heard them only distant noises after the hail of gunfire. My back hit the wall. I tried to keep track of the men still left with my eyes but they vanished into the coal dark pit of hell coming out of the box. I tried to summon up a spell but I couldn’t think of anything. I shouldn’t be this afraid. Must be something about the thing in the box. Must get under control. Close your eyes and breathe.

In.

Out.

I opened my eyes again.

They were gone. All of them were gone and I couldn’t even see the floor or the ceiling or the walls. There was only black. Only the black that gave off the stomach-turning sense that it was salivating at me. Salivating like a fat bastard presented with a particularly tough oyster. My feet curled up to my chest by themselves. I pulled them close and watched.

I didn’t notice at first. My hands started stinging and I lifted one up to my face. Words were etching themselves into the skin. Blood dripped down onto my pants from the wounds as the word WEAK appeared on my right hand. Then the stinging was all over my body. WEAK started carving itself into my body in a thousand languages. I felt blood drip into my eyes. Into my mouth. It went on for an eternity. I clutched the charms hung around my neck. They would protect me from anything physical. It was all in my head. All in my head. Needed to calm down and think of a way out of this.

I’d almost gotten my breathing under control when it started drilling into my teeth.

~

I can’t see. I can’t feel. I can’t smell. I can’t hear. I can’t even fucking taste. There is absolute black. There is not anything else. I need to keep my hands clutched tight around something. Need to focus on that. Need to focus. Tired. So tired.

Hear something. Distant. Feel again but everything is weighted. Taste something foul in my mouth. An acrid scent.

…kik-kik-kik-CHUK

I started awake and looked around. God damn it was getting noisy getting geared up for a job these days.