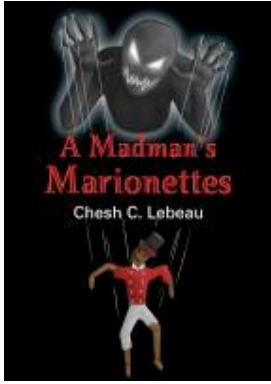




A Madman's Marionettes

Chesh C. Lebeau





Allyk, a young captain in the Problem Solving Division, is pulled from her moderately dangerous life in an alternate version of London into an extremely dangerous, dimension hopping adventure. Allyk, along with her cousin, Coot, a rat named Hamlet, and her former co-worker, Kast, must stem the tide of a mechanized menace, tangle with a wrathful ringmaster, and survive the twisted creations of a mad scientist bent on thwarting death.

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ISBN 978-1-63263-131-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014940010

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition

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Chapter One

A Book or Two

I stared at the small stack of books, trying to decide whether to buy *Dracula* or *The Practical Guide to Card Tricks*. My paycheck wasn't large enough for me to buy both, however much I wanted them. If I had unlimited resources, I would have scooped up the whole pile, *The Theory of Dimensional Barriers*, *Crow on the Roof*, *What Happened at Castleton* and all.

I didn't have the resources, so I sighed and reached for *Dracula*. I handed the broker the proper amount of money and set off down the road, thumbing through my new book. It was a thick one and its cracked spine told of the burden of being someone's favorite as did the many dog-eared pages within it.

As I walked, absorbed in my new book, someone tugged on my sleeve. "Excuse me, Allyk?" said a voice behind me.

"Yes?" I turned to face Kast, a coworker and close friend of mine. His hazel eyes shined brightly behind his round rimmed glasses and he seemed slightly sad yet at the same time relieved. He had his black cane tucked beneath his arm.

He rubbed at his short black hair awkwardly and stammered a bit. "Well," he said at last. "Some things have come up and I won't be coming into work tomorrow." He

trailed off as though he forgot what else he was about to say.

“Oh.” I tucked my new book under my arm. “Would you mind telling me what these things are?” For my job, I was required to ask these questions even though I felt as a friend I was invading his privacy. “Sorry,” I apologized, laughing nervously. I quickly reworded the phrase in the way a friend would ask. “Work must be getting to me. I mean to say ... is something wrong?”

“My uncle died,” he explained readily.

“Ah,” I said. I pursed my lips, uncertain what to say. His uncle, Dominic, was the last family he had. He didn't talk about it often but his immediate family had died in a house fire that left him homeless and next to penniless. His uncle, a highly respected individual with some money to spare, had helped him along until he was able to find himself a job. “I suppose you need some time off to sort things out. Will you be all right?”

“I'll live.” Kast shook his head and continued. “And he left me his entire fortune so ...”

“Oh,” I said as it dawned on me that he was quitting. “So that's it, isn't it?”

“Bright girl,” he said. “You and I both know that the PSD is a dead end job.” He was right, our workplace, the Problem Solving Division, was the deadest ended job there was. Our employers had high expectations and a firm belief that we enjoyed jumping through their hoops for peanuts.

I nodded. “What do you plan to do?”

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Kast smiled. "After I get everything settled around here, I plan to set out, travel a bit. I've always wanted to."

"We'll miss you back at the PSD," I said. I reached forwards to shake his hand and dropped my book in the road. "Drat."

Kast picked it up for me and handed it back. "I'll miss you too," he said, smiling regretfully. "Good choice, by the way. That's quite a find for a second hand bookstore."

"Yes, well, the choices were limited and my budget was even more so."

"Oh!" Kast exclaimed. He hit himself on the forehead with his palm. "Here I am talking about how I've inherited money and about to set off across the world and you're penny pinching to buy a book. I could give you a sum to help you along. You're never going to get ahead working at the PSD."

"No!" I protested. My face burned red as embarrassment set in. My friend had received a break in the midst of a sorrowful time and I didn't intend to guilt him into charity. "It's very nice of you to offer, but no."

"At least let me buy you a farewell present," he said. He took his cane from underneath his arm, put his hand on my shoulder and steered me back into the bookshop. "What do you want? Pick any book." A bell jingled as he shoved the door open and again when it swung shut behind us.

"Really, I can't," I stammered. "Besides, this should keep me busy for a little while." I held my copy of *Dracula* up.

Kast rolled his eyes then paused as a book caught his eye. He snatched it up and held it out to me. It was a fairly battered copy of *The Best Works of Shakespeare*. Its thick leather cover was cracked and faded. The corners were worn through from frequent use and the lovely crimson letters that spelled out the title were faded. “Do you have this?” Kast asked.

“No, but—.”

“Now you do!” He slapped some money down on the counter and pressed the book into my hand before I could protest further.

“Now, you'd better enjoy this book.” He smiled mischievously. “I've always particularly liked *Hamlet*, myself.”

“Kast, I can't accept this.”

He shushed me, putting his finger to his lips. “Happy birthday!”

“It's not my—.”

“It will be someday!” he said waving his cane dismissively. “Chances are I won't be here then.” He clapped me on my shoulder. “Happy birthday, merry Christmas, and happy new year. Goodbye.”

“Are you leaving now?”

Kast nodded. “I just have few more things to wrap up and I'll be out by nightfall.”

Kast nodded and walked out the door. That was the last I saw of him for three years.

Chapter Two

The “Three Years Later” Bit

I sat at the conference, wishing that I were somewhere entirely different, wearing a uniform that was much more comfortable.

I was in the army. Well, actually, I still worked for the PSD, an agency that was employed by the army and considered a special division. Basically, we had all the hardships of being in the army and none of the perks. I had the pleasure of being “Captain” of the division.

Our missions ranged anywhere from writing reports to venturing out into the field to discover the enemy's weakness. The problems the PSD solved ranged anywhere from finding the cause of a mass weapon/uniform failure to discovering a way to repel an attack of steel robots. Right now, we happened to be at a conference about the latter, and we all wished to be writing a report about the former. At least we would know what we were doing in that case.

London, our city, was having a bad run in with an army of robots. The city was experiencing repeated raids by steel machines that no one seemed able to destroy.

The robots would come, rush into a crowd of people or a building and cause mayhem. The odd thing about these raids was that the robots never took anything. The robots would simply push the people around, destroy stationary objects such as carts, boxes, two foot thick brick walls and the like, then leave very quickly after going through the

wreckage. There had been no resulting deaths until recently, during the fifth robot raid to be precise, and that was why it wasn't a serious matter until now. The robots had thrown a man who had pulled a gun on them when they were shoving their way through a crowded street. That man, like any other person who crashes into a brick wall as hard as he did, was no longer with us.

Conventional weapons couldn't solve this problem; they couldn't penetrate the robots' armor. The public could no longer suffer this trauma so the problem was turned over to us. We were the final stand, the light in the darkness, the man behind the curtain... It's odd how official people can call a meeting that makes a situation that you could give the most dramatic name seem utterly boring and pointless.

In my opinion, the army should have been given 3-3 blaster-pistols like the PSD carried. Unfortunately, they were deemed non-regulation issue due to several deficiencies in the safety field. Since the PSD wasn't an official branch of the military, they weren't overly bothered by what we chose for our standard issue weapon. 3-3s could reduce anything to rubble whereas the military's standard issues could be hampered by a particularly ambitious wet burlap sack. This is not an exaggeration: I had tested this theory out myself. Only two out of three sacks were extensively harmed during the testing.

The entire PSD lined either side of the long mahogany table in the conference room. At the head of the table, in

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the seat of honor, Major John Ashton sat. He was a gorilla of a man with cropped blonde hair and a deep booming voice. He scanned the room menacingly with his dark deep-set eyes that glared out from beneath heavy eyebrows, making it difficult for the PSD officers to concentrate as they rattled off their possible solutions to the robot infestation. Ashton was the sole military to PSD correspondent, so naturally he was the stiffest and most frightening person to ever enter the military.

His uniform was bright red and smartly trimmed in black, and had gleaming golden buttons up the front. It stood out among all the PSD uniforms which were dull blue.

We also wore caps, blue just like the uniform jackets, and a pair of steel rimmed goggles with shatterproof glass lenses. The goggles handily slipped over the cap's brim and clapped onto the cap firmly for safekeeping while not in use.

"Lieutenant Jane Miller!" called a booming voice from the head of the conference table. It was Major John Ashton, the high and mighty officer in charge of decision making who called this atrociously boring conference. Jane Miller, the person who had been sitting right next to me, stood up, so I prepared to be called on. I knew that Jane, who was usually full of ideas, had only one thing to say.

"In your opinion, how should we go about destroying the attacking robots?" said Major Ashton.

Jane pushed a strand of her black hair out of her eyes, delaying her answer for just a moment more. “I don't know, sir,” she said quietly, keeping her eyes focused on the paperwork in front of her. The rest of the PSD stared forwards indifferently as she sat back down. They were well trained from experience, meaning they knew that in situations like this, what I had to say was most likely to get the worst response so they were quietly preparing for what was to come.

I let my gaze wander about the room as I waited for my name to be called. A crooked portrait of a grizzly bearded man in a top hat caught my eye. I squinted at it and was only slightly surprised to find that the frame was straight and the picture itself had been painted askew.

“Captain Allyk Jarki!” Ashton called my name, his voice already tinged with anger. A rustling of papers filled the room as my fellow PSD members quickly busied themselves by sorting through the notes they had taken during the conference. I gave the crooked portrait one last curious glance before I stood and turned towards the head of the table.

“What do *you* think the solution to the robot attacks is?” said Major Ashton. I paused a moment to wonder whether or not he remember the last time he called on me during a conference. While I pondered this he drummed his fingers impatiently on the table, leading me to believe that he did indeed remember last time.

“Well,” I said slowly, wondering whether or not I should answer in the way I had in mind. A small grin spread across my face as I decided in favor of my planned answer. “Tell your ‘highly trained’ combat specialists to tackle a robot and bring it to us, so we can inspect it and reach a conclusion.”

Major Ashton rubbed his forehead. He wasn't yelling... yet. Apparently, he had expected me to say something worse. There was plenty of time to irritate him though. I wasn't anywhere near ready to shut my mouth. Across the table from me, Second Lieutenant Baxter Shire, the youngest kid in the PSD, chuckled. This being his first year on the force, the poor boy didn't know yet that it was best to keep your head down when it was my turn to talk. Commander Ashton glared at Baxter, causing the young man to suddenly become interested with a knot in the wooden tabletop.

“Are you telling me that you want the combatants to take on a robot they can't find a way to destroy, somehow detain it, and bring it to the PSD?”

Ashton repeating what he was told was never a good sign but I didn't care.

“That is exactly what I'm telling you.” I picked up a rough sketch of one of the robots. The picture looked nothing like a robot. It looked a lot more like a tiptoeing Big-Foot, some sort of hairy, human shaped beast from the Americas. I had no idea whether or not Big-Foot tiptoed, but that's what the robot sketch looked like.

“How are we supposed to come to any conclusion with only this pitiful excuse of a picture for guidance? Was this drawn by a toddler?” I waved the Big-Foot/robot picture about in the air. “If it were up to me, I'd hand the army a few crates of 3-3's and tell them to have at it.”

Major Ashton's face turned bright red. I had succeeded in miffing him and now he was preparing to blow his top.

“You know very well that 3-3's are not—.” The metal detector at the entrance went off, cutting Ashton of mid-bellow. Everyone turned in their chairs to see what the disturbance was all about, subsequently forgetting about my talent of making Ashton's face light up like a lantern. Ashton himself had stood up and was glaring over the craning heads of the PSD at the source of the disturbance.

“Sorry! That's my fault!” The voice sounded so strangely familiar I had to turn around and see who had spoken.

There standing just in front of the metal detectors was Kast Rohk. Since he left three years ago, no one had seen him or even heard from him since. It was as though he had completely disappeared. There had been rumors that he was a part of a government conspiracy and had to go into hiding because his cover had been blown. I had quickly snuffed these rumors out as well as many others by telling of his uncle and his inheritance.

Whatever the reason for his disappearance, he now stood in our conference room being fussed over by the doormen.

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“Don't,” Kast protested as the doormen began searching him. “I'm sure it's this.” He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled a gun from deep within. He flourished it and a collective murmur went through the conference room. The doorman took a step back and held his hands in front of him as if they would protect him. I heard a few clicks as a few PSD officers readied their own guns. Unauthorized personnel carrying weapons into the conference wasn't tolerated in the least. PSD members were allowed to carry weapons because we were here on account of our job and our weapons were a part of said job. I didn't think they would take a three years removed member of the department as lightly. “Calm down people,” Kast said, an amused grin spreading across his face. He tossed his gun into the metal detector's aluminum pan and strode forwards with a pronounced limp.

“Excuse me, sir,” said one of the security men, tapping Kast on the shoulder. “You need to go back through the detector.” Kast paused a moment, glanced briefly over his shoulder, and continued on his way, ignoring the security man's protests.

I nodded to him in greeting and he smiled back as he walked up beside my chair. Leaning between Jane and me, he took the Big-Foot/robot picture from my hand and studied it with a lopsided smile on his face.

Now that he was close, I could tell his many years away hadn't been altogether kind to him. He wore an old brown leather coat and it was a little worse for wear. The

sleeves of his jacket were ragged and the white of the fold over collar that poked over the jacket's neckline was grayed. His dark leather boots were heavily scuffed and his clothes bore a harsh, smoky smell.

His hair looked as though it had grown long and wild then been chopped off with a dull knife. It was now an inch or two long and ragged, and probably more ragged than it appeared because at the moment it was damp from the London rain. His face looked worn and haggard. The only things that kept him from looking completely rough and ragged were his gold rimmed spectacles. Despite the many chips and scratches they bore, they perched on his face lending him an air of sophistication. Their lenses reflected the light in such a way that it was difficult to see his eyes.

“Now, I understand you’re having a bit of a robot problem,” Kast said to everyone or no one in particular.

“Yes, in fact we are,” said Major Ashton, glaring intensely. I was now regretting having angered him. “What do you know about it?”

“Quite a bit... at least more than you,” Kast said. He set the Big-Foot/robot picture on the table, picked up a pen and drew a few calculated lines. I peered at the paper. With just those few new lines, it looked more like a sketch of a robot than a sketch of a hairy tiptoeing monster. “But it’s not hard to top what you know,” Kast continued. “I hear you know next to nothing.”

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“Excuse me?” Major Ashton said, obviously taken aback. I nearly felt sorry for him. He wasn’t used to anyone but me speaking that bluntly to him.

“I’ve fought them. I’ve beat them,” Kast replied, not even looking up from his drawing; missed the opportunity to see Ashton’s face turn a lovely shade of red.

“You’ve been busy, Kast” I piped in. He looked up and smiled. All around there were indistinct murmurings. It was then I realized that I had been nearly the only person to recognize him. I could understand Baxter and a few other people we had recently picked up not recognizing him but the whole room seemed to be in shock. Even Jane was studying Kast’s face, checking to see if I was right.

“Yes, Allyk,” Kast said, ignoring the gawkers. “I’ve been up to a lot lately. I would definitely recommend taking a few years off work. It does wonders for your health.”

Taking into account the dripping sarcasm and the heavy limp, it was obvious that he was joking about taking off work.

Ashton placed his fists on the table and clenched them. He also appeared to be grinding his teeth. Before he could throw Kast out, I took matters into my own hands. “Can you bring the PSD one of the robots? Not one that’s reduced to a pile of scrap but not one ready to rip our heads off either.”

Kast hesitated a second, taken off guard at the sudden change in pace. “Sure thing,” he said and he slapped me on

the back to seal the deal. I winced. The blow he dealt to my back was reminiscent of the time my encyclopedia had fallen from its place on my bookshelf and landed on my spine. Since then I had started keeping my encyclopedia on the bottom shelf along with my hefty volume of *A Guide and History of Dimension Exploration*.

“Wait a minute,” Major Ashton yelled from across the room. “Who’s in charge here? Me or you?”

“You are of course,” I said, uncharacteristically sweet. “But in the mean time you expect the PSD to solve this problem for you and that’s exactly what I’m doing here.”

Ashton fumed silently, once again grinding his teeth together; but finding no fault in my PSD conduct, he couldn’t say anything, anything at all. He pushed his chair back and glared in my direction. “This meeting is over,” he growled. He gathered up his papers and stormed past the snickering PSD officers and through the metal detector which beeped sullenly.

“Sir?” ventured the security man.

“Go jump off a cliff,” Ashton said. He tipped his hat and exited, slamming the door behind him.

Kast and I exchanged glances and, after a second, burst out laughing.

“Picking on Ashton will never get old,” Kast said, shaking his head. “Have you been keeping him nice and riled up while I was gone?”

“Of course,” I said, pushing my chair back to get up. “How’s life been treating you? Not too well, I can see.”

“Oh, this?” Kast gestured at his rugged clothes. “This is just for show.”

I looked at him dubiously and crossed my arms.

“All right,” he said. “You’ve called my bluff. Life’s been horrid ... but, hey! I’ve gotten to see a great deal of the world!”

“Oh?” I leaned against my chair idly. “Such as?”

“Greece! The Americas! India! Egypt, most of all Egypt...” He trailed off as if remembering something about his trip, or trips, to Egypt.

“Oh, what was Egypt like?”

Kast paused and thought about it for a moment, brow creased and fingers drumming against his chin. “Sandy,” he said. “Egypt was sandy.”

I rolled my eyes, shoved my chair into its place at the table and walked towards the exit. Kast scooped up my papers off the table and trotted up after me, limping as he did so.

“You left these,” he said, handing them to me.

“So I did, thanks,” I said with a small smile. I flipped through the papers to make sure that they were all there. When I looked up from the papers, I frowned, not because papers were missing (all were present and accounted for), but because how severe Kast’s limp seemed. “Does your leg hurt much?”

He gave me an odd look. “What do you mean?”

“Your limp,” I said. “Don’t deny it, you have a very bad limp.”

“Oh, that,” he replied offhandedly. “It doesn’t hurt at all.”

I rolled my eyes. “Kast, have you become an incurable liar while you were gone?”

“No, really,” Kast protested. “I’m serious this time. I ... hurt it a while back and the limp’s just ... an old habit.”

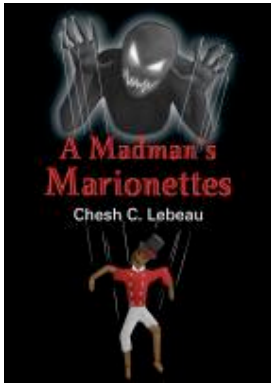
I shook my head in disbelief. “Whatever you say, Kast.”

“Well,” he said, checking the time on a battered pocket watch. “We’d best get going if we’re to get everything settled by dark. I’ll just go find a robot and meet you back at PSD headquarters, how does that sound?”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll meet you then.”

Kast winked at me and grabbed his gun from the metal detector’s plate. He then rushed through the metal detector, setting it off again.

“I say!” exclaimed the security man. He had reason to be miffed; he had just managed to shut the beeping up. I humored the man and went through the metal detector in the proper fashion.



Allyk, a young captain in the Problem Solving Division, is pulled from her moderately dangerous life in an alternate version of London into an extremely dangerous, dimension hopping adventure. Allyk, along with her cousin, Coot, a rat named Hamlet, and her former co-worker, Kast, must stem the tide of a mechanized menace, tangle with a wrathful ringmaster, and survive the twisted creations of a mad scientist bent on thwarting death.

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