

“It smells terrible,” Ken said.

Marty shook his head. They were working their way through the sewer tunnels that ran below downtown Longview.

“You mentioned that.”

“It doesn’t just smell bad, though. This is terrible,” Ken said.

“Well it’s a sewer Ken, so yeah, it smells terrible.”

They continued for a few feet in silence before Ken spoke again.

“This bag is so heavy.”

Marty sighed.

“You mentioned that too.”

They had entered the tunnels on the edge of downtown so they could be sure no one

saw them go in. It was stuffy and dark inside and the heavy bags they were carrying seemed to get heavier with each step. Marty stopped walking and set the bag down.

“Let’s take a break,” Marty announced.

Ken dropped his bag and pulled a water bottle out of it. He then sat down on top of it and began drinking. Marty sat as well and got a drink.

“I thought you were excited for this heist,” Marty said.

“I was, but that was when I thought it was going to be like Ocean’s 11, you know? Their heist was cool and funny. They wore suits.”

Marty laughed.

“You could’ve worn a suit.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Ken answered with a laugh.

After resting a bit more Marty pulled out the phone they were using to track their location. It was Keiko’s phone and had pinpoint GPS technology. Marty used it and compared it to the engineer’s map Ken had gotten.

“We’re close. A left at the next junction and then about ten minutes and we’ll be there.”

Ken nodded. After taking a few more minutes to rest they got back up and labored along the last part of their journey. Finally

they stood at the spot. Ken held a flashlight while Marty used a compass to confirm their bearings. He then pulled out the blueprint of Sloan's building and studied it. He used a marker to draw on the wall as he figured out the spot they needed to attack. They double checked his calculations and then moved forward with the plan.

Marty pulled a pickaxe out of his bag and Ken produced a sledge hammer from his. They began hitting the wall, working to break through. The concrete tunnel wasn't thick but the job was harder than either of them had anticipated. It took them almost an hour before they had cleared enough of the concrete to allow them to get through.

Beyond the wall was dirt and a big section of it fell into the tunnel around them. The main sewer tunnel they were in was buried in the street and they would need to dig out and then up to get to Sloan's building. Ken pulled a shovel from his bag and Marty stuck with the pickaxe and they began tunneling into the hard earth.

They constantly checked their calculations to be sure they were moving in the right direction at the right angle. They dug slightly upwards. Their tunnel wasn't going to be long but they still stopped to build a brace to hold it up so it wouldn't collapse on them. Four hours later the two were soaked through with sweat, but they

had hit the foundation of Sloan's building at the exact point they had needed.

After an extended break they prepared to make their entry. Marty took the lead and used his ice spell to freeze the exposed section of the foundation. Once it was completely iced, Ken struck it with a metal pick, shattering it. They worked their way through the concrete to the steel security floor. While Marty knew it wasn't going to be easy to break through the steel he was encouraged to see it. This meant they really were underneath Sloan's vault.

Again he used his ice spell. The steel was much more difficult to freeze than the concrete had been. Marty kept the stream of

ice trained on it for minutes at a time, trying to freeze it through to the other side. Finally he had to stop. He was shaking and felt like he was going to pass out. Ken took the metal pick to it and broke through it with ease, opening up a hole. Marty rested for a few minutes and then climbed up into the vault.

The room was much bigger than he had expected. It looked more like a small warehouse than a vault. There wasn't much light in the room, just a few security lights, but it looked like the room was filled with things. Ken climbed up next and whistled as he emerged into the room.

“El Dorado,” Ken said breathlessly.

Marty swept his flashlight beam across the nearest shelves. The items there were as interesting as they were varied. An ancient looking sculpture in the shape of a buffalo, a box of guns, and a case of diamonds were just a few of the things Marty saw, and that was just on the closest shelf.

“It’s like a Costco for villains,” Ken said as he stood in front of another set of shelves and examined the many items there.

As he continued to look around Marty’s flashlight beam swept across a series of bookshelves along the far wall.

“Let’s check over there,” he said.

The two of them made their way over to the area. The large shelves were full of

ancient books and looked like they hadn't been touched in some time. There was a thick layer of dust on them and they slowly moved down the wall, looking for any signs of scrolls. There was a gap between each of the book cases. In these gaps were large, dust covered chairs.

Marty moved slowly, past one dust covered book case and its accompanying dust covered chair, then another, then another. He stopped suddenly after sweeping his beam across the third chair. Ken hadn't noticed and ran into him, causing Marty to drop his flashlight.

“What is it?” Ken asked.

Marty's eyes were fixed on the third chair.

“Point your flashlight there,” Marty said.

Ken did as his friend asked. At first he wasn't sure what he was seeing. There was a shape there, but it wasn't until the eyes opened that Marty realized it was a person. It was an old man.

“Oh hell!” Ken yelled, startled by the sight of the man.

The man looked as ancient as the books that surrounded him. He had a wild, gray beard that was full of dust and his face was sunken in. Marty quickly raised his hand and aimed it at him.

Ken jumped back as the old man started to stand up, running into Marty's arm and throwing off his aim. Marty fired off a stream of ice but it hit the book case instead of the old man. The old man raised his own hand and pointed it at them. It was bony and thin.

“Halusko,” the man wheezed.

A brilliant flash of colors appeared along his fingertips. Marty and Ken couldn't help but stare at it as it grew brighter, each color intensifying to an overwhelming white. Then it flashed with a great, terrible intensity that blinded them.

A.C. HALL



Created and Written by A.C. Hall

EPISODE NINE

αιχμάλωτος
(CAPTIVE)

Keiko walked slowly down the cramped aisle inside The Seasoned Reader. She was only half looking at the books on the shelves. Annabel walked past but stopped and stepped back.

“Keiko?”

Keiko looked up. She had hoped Annabel wasn't working tonight.

“Hey Annabel.”

“I didn't know we had any customers. I was about to close up early and get out of here.”

“Oh, I'll leave then,” Keiko said.

“You don't have to do that.”

The two young women stared at one another for a moment. Neither of them were in good moods and both of them could tell as much. Annabel looked away, thinking of finding something to do, but thought better of it and instead stepped closer.

“How come you're not off watching the BSU game?” Annabel asked.

Keiko frowned.

“That’s one of the reasons I’m in here. I date one of the football players and he’s hurt this week, so he’s watching the game on TV and getting angry about it.”

“Which player?”

“Brian Thompson. The quarterback,”
Keiko answered.

“Oh.”

Annabel had heard about his injury. They weren’t sure if he was ever going to play football again and she wasn’t sure what to say about it. Keiko could sense this.

“Yeah, as you can imagine it’s been a real enjoyable week,” Keiko said. “He’s not dealing with it well and has been taking it

out on any of us who are staying within arm's reach.”

They had only met the one time but Annabel nodded, feeling like she could relate to having guy problems right about now.

“Don't you hate that? When guys push you away even though both you and them know that it's better when you're around?” Annabel asked, getting a bit more emotional than she had meant to.

Keiko looked at her for a long moment before responding.

“Are you... are you talking about Marty?”

Annabel looked away.

“It’s okay if you are, I was just, curious is all,” Keiko said.

“I shouldn’t say anything. You guys are friends from back home, right?”

It took a moment for Keiko to respond. Referring to them as just friends didn’t sit well with her. It felt like it cheapened what they shared.

“You can tell me, I mean, you listened to me complain, right?” Keiko said.

“I guess,” Annabel answered with a smile.

She leaned against the shelf before beginning.

“It’s just that things are so good when we’re around each other. I used to hate this

job but Marty always seemed to find a magic here. He really opened my eyes to how special it is. That's how I feel about everything when I'm around him, like everything is special. Has anyone ever made you feel that way?"

Keiko could only nod.

"And the thing is, I know he feels the same way about me."

Keiko swallowed hard.

"He does?" she asked.

Annabel looked slightly embarrassed but couldn't help but smile as she continued.

"He told me he feels at peace when he's with me."

Now Keiko leaned against the book shelf. Her face flushed red and she felt weak.

“He did?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah. And I can see it, too. He used to be such a hermit, but lately he’s been more open with me. Sometimes he seems troubled but never when it’s just the two of us. But now he seems confused as to what he wants,” she paused for a moment before continuing. “We went to the game together last week and were having the best time. But then he just ups and leaves at halftime and doesn’t call me for days.”

“Well sometimes it’s hard for him after he has a...”

Keiko trailed off as she realized how strangely Annabel was looking at her. She couldn't believe it, but it seemed like she might not know Marty had a seizure at the game.

“Has a what?” Annabel asked.

Keiko's mind raced. Had Marty not told her he was sick? It made a sort of sense to her as she considered it. On one level it even made her feel better. Of course he would feel at peace being around her if she didn't know about all of the complications in his life. Realizing that Annabel was still staring Keiko quickly put together an answer.

“Has a change. Like a life change. He just had to switch apartments and is dating someone new.”

Annabel thought about this for a long moment.

“Was he always like that? Afraid of change?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Keiko lied.

After another moment Annabel spoke again.

“What was he like when he was younger?”

Keiko looked around. She was a little uncomfortable talking about it. She had worked very hard over the past two years to bury thoughts of Marty deep in her mind but

since arriving at BSU they were all back at the surface. Talking about them stirred up feelings she was fighting desperately to keep under control. Still, Annabel was staring at her, expecting to hear something.

“Well, he was smart. We met in middle school, just barely teenagers, but we became good friends.”

She felt awkward talking about it.

“Was he cute back then?” Annabel asked.

Keiko laughed.

“Yeah. His glasses were too big, I don’t know why his parents didn’t buy him smaller ones. He got teased over it, but behind them he was, he was very cute.”

She remembered those glasses perfectly. In her mind she called up an image of Marty, age twelve, standing outside the school in those ridiculous glasses.

“He was mature, even then. He seemed more adult than the teachers, but as I got to know him I learned that he had a real fun side too,” Keiko continued, speaking more freely as she lost herself in the memories.

“Regular kids would go to the movies or to play mini-golf but Marty would find these off the wall things to do that somehow always ended up being a blast.

Observatories, hiking trails, museums, he had a way of turning even a walk into this fun adventure.”

Keiko was completely awash in the memories now.

“He had this way of making people feel like they were important. He didn’t have many friends but everyone knew who he was. He was kind and he had this way of listening to you that made you feel like the center of the universe. Sometimes he would just listen for hours and you could pour your heart out and know that there was no one better in the world to share it with.”

Keiko stopped suddenly, realizing that she had gone too far. She embarrassedly looked up. Annabel stood up straight and cleared her throat, looking just as embarrassed.

“I didn’t... I didn’t realize,” Annabel stammered.

“No, there’s nothing, I mean,” Keiko said, stumbling over herself as she tried to speak.

Annabel took a step back. Her emotions were churning, from embarrassed, to confused, to angry.

“Was there something you needed help finding? Here in the store, I mean,” Annabel blurted out, wanting desperately to change the subject away from Marty.

“Oh, um, actually yes,” Keiko answered, equally glad to have the subject changed.

“Do you have any of the scrolls in right now?”

“Follow me.”

Annabel led her up to the counter. She went behind it and pulled out a scroll that appeared to be in rough shape. Most were on a manila colored paper but this was gray. It was missing chunks and was worn and looked more like trash than anything else. Keiko studied it for a while, taking notice of the strange and intricate runes and symbols.

“I’d like to buy it.”

“Oh,” Annabel said, surprised. “Marty sort of asked that I not sell them to anyone but him.”

Keiko laughed, trying to keep the situation light.

“Well I’m no stranger. I’m sure he didn’t mean me. Besides, this one doesn’t exactly look like it would fit with his collection.”

Annabel looked down at it. She agreed with what Keiko was saying, it did look bad. She had argued with the man trading it in, not even believing it was one of the scrolls at first. She sighed. On one hand she didn’t want to go against what Marty had said, but on the other she was mad at him and could care less about going against it. Finally she shrugged.

“Whatever. Just tell him you have it, okay? He likes to look at these things.”

Keiko nodded. She paid for the scroll and then quickly walked towards the door. She turned back to say goodbye but Annabel had already disappeared back into the store.

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Marty blinked his eyes furiously, trying to clear the blinding white light from his vision. Finally it began to fade away and a few moments later he was staring up into a clear blue sky. Puffy clouds sailed slowly past and a light breeze blew and it seemed to be a perfectly pleasant day.

He was lying on his back and as he looked around he realized he was on a merry-go-round in a small neighborhood park. Ken was lying next to him but his eyes were still closed. Marty reached over and shook him. After blinking for a minute Ken looked over at him.

“Where are we?” Ken asked.

Marty shook his head as he stood up. He felt like he had been asleep for days and he stretched, trying to get the strange feeling in his muscles to pass. He turned around slowly, taking in their surroundings. The small park was surrounded by a high end suburban neighborhood. It was nice, but something about it felt off. Marty knelt

down and picked up a handful of dirt. He let it run through his hands, watching closely as it fell back to the ground.

“Since when do they put cemeteries next to parks?” Ken asked.

Marty looked up to see what his friend was talking about. When he had examined the surrounding area just a moment before he hadn't seen a cemetery and yet there it was, right next to the park. Ken walked towards it and Marty reluctantly followed, an ominous feeling settling upon him.

As they emerged out into the first row of tombstones they both noticed something strange about them.

“They're all blank,” Ken said.

Marty stopped, disturbed by this. Ken seemed determined to find one that wasn't blank and he quickly made his way deeper into the cemetery. It took him a few minutes but finally he spotted one.

“Over here!” he shouted.

Despite his growing uneasiness about the place, Marty jogged after his friend towards a distant tombstone. Ken reached it first and he came to a sudden stop. He stood, looking like he was paralyzed. As Marty approached Ken spun around, a sick look on his face.

“Let's go look somewhere else,” Ken said weakly.

Marty knew something was wrong and he stepped closer so he could read the tombstone.

Here Lies Marty Schultz

1989 - 2011

It felt like a fog was slowly being lifted from his mind as he let the words sink in. A stray thought that had been eluding him in the back of his head finally came into focus.

“This place isn’t real,” Marty said.

Ken was still shaken by the tombstone. He shook his head.

“It seems real.”

“Think about it. We were in the vault and then the old man, remember?” Marty asked, trying to help Ken along.

“Wait, you think this is some kind of a spell?”

Before he could answer a house across the street caught Marty’s attention. He took a step towards it, taking in all of the details. The well manicured row of bushes running along the sidewalk, the light blue paint, the white shutters, the dark blue door, the large bay window. This was Keiko’s dream house. She had spoken of it often, saying these were the things she wanted in their home once they were married.

It called out to him and almost against his will Marty felt himself moving towards it, any thoughts of the realness of this place gone from his mind.

“Where are we going?” Ken asked as he followed.

They crossed the street and then moved into the freshly mowed front yard of the house. Marty slowly walked towards the bay window, a feeling of peace coming over him.

“This is our home. This is where we were going to spend our life together.”

He pressed his face against the glass and looked inside. It was exactly what he had always thought it would look like. A series of photographs on the fireplace mantle caught his eye. They were wedding photographs of him and Keiko. Marty smiled as he looked at them. His emotions

welled up inside and he felt a tear running down his face.

“What’s that?” Ken asked, pointing at something in the house.

Marty tore his gaze away from the photos. There was a door that was partially open, it looked like a bedroom. At first Marty didn’t see anything, then there was movement, then it was gone again. Then back. He studied it, trying to make sense of it. A black feeling spread through his chest.

It was feet, swinging in and out of view.

“Keiko!” Marty screamed.

He ran towards the front door as fast as he could. He raised his hand to cast a spell to blow it open but nothing happened.

Despite this he didn't slow down. Marty lowered his shoulder and crashed through the door. He stumbled as he came into the living room but quickly regained his balance and rushed into the bedroom.

Keiko was hanging there, a noose around her neck, the rope tied to the ceiling fan.

“NO!” Marty screamed from the depths of himself.

He grabbed her legs and lifted, trying to make it to where she could breathe. Ken was in the room now and he grabbed the bed and pulled it over. While Marty continued to try to lift her from below, Ken stood on

the bed and untied the noose from around her neck.

“Come on baby, don’t do this to me!”

Marty yelled.

They lowered her slowly to the bed and Marty crawled up beside her. He broke into sobs as he looked down at her face. Her eyes were wide open and they were lifeless, empty, dead. She was dead. He broke into horrible sobs and pulled her close, cradling her head in his arms.

Ken stumbled backwards, away from the bed, a look of shock and horror on his face.

“What the hell is this place?” he asked, trying hard not to cry.

He backed into a tall dresser and it rocked slightly. A piece of paper fell from the top. It glided at a strange angle and landed right in front of Marty on the bed. He looked at it and read it out loud.

“Life just wasn’t worth living without him. I’m sorry.”

It was Keiko’s hand writing. Marty cried even harder now. Ken couldn’t take it and he stumbled out of the room, feeling like he was about to throw up. He looked out the large bay window and a figure across the street caught his eye. It was an old man. He was ancient looking and had a long gray, dust filled beard.

“Marty! It’s the guy! The guy from the vault!”

Ken could still hear Marty sobbing in the room. He ran in there and grabbed Marty hard.

“The guy doing this is right outside!”

Marty turned towards him quickly. For the rest of his life Ken would wish he could un-see the look that was on his friend’s face at that moment. Marty looked crazed with grief but Ken shook him hard, desperate to bring him out of it.

“This isn’t real, remember? The guy from Sloan’s vault is outside!” Ken yelled.

The tears stopped and Marty blinked several times. Again he felt like a fog was

lifting from his mind. He looked down at Keiko's lifeless body one last time and then jumped to his feet. From the look on his face Ken didn't have to ask what they were going to do.

Marty darted out the front of the house at a speed that Ken couldn't hope to match. He followed behind, running as fast as he could. In the distance he could see the old man running towards a baseball field. He disappeared through the gate and Marty followed quickly. A minute later Ken arrived. There were people all around and a game was going on. Marty was nearby but the old man was nowhere to be seen.

“I lost him,” Marty said.

The baseball field was familiar to Ken and as he slowly looked around he realized why. This was the field he had played on when he was younger, the place where he had fallen in love with the game. Marty was walking around, looking for any sign of the old man. Ken followed along, paying more attention to the nostalgia inducing surroundings. He hadn't seen that Marty had stopped and ran right into the back of him.

“What is it?” Ken asked.

“Your parents.”

Marty was pointing at the bleachers. There sat Ken and Keiko's parents, looking as stoic and proper as always. Ken hadn't

seen them in a decade and he smiled as he looked upon them.

“Now batting, Kenshin Ochi!”

The announcement sounded from the public address system and everyone in the crowd clapped. Everyone except Ken’s parents. They stared disapprovingly down at the field.

Marty turned his attention to the game. It was the bottom of the 9th inning and the team at bat had 2 outs and was losing by 1 run. Ken slowly walked towards the fence, his eyes wide as he remembered the details of this exact game. He watched intently, looking for his younger self to walk to the plate at any moment.

“Now batting, Kenshin Ochi!” the announcer repeated.

Still no one approached the batter’s box. After another long moment Ken’s old coach, a man named Mr. Burnett, stepped out of the dugout. He looked right at Ken.

“What are you waiting for? Get down here and bat!”

“Are you talking to me?” Ken asked.

“Of course I am lunkhead!”

Lunkhead had been Ken’s nickname in little league baseball. He turned around and looked at Marty, hoping for some sort of direction. All Marty did was shrug. Ken looked back at his parents in the bleachers. His dad had his arms crossed now.

After giving it a little more thought Ken decided to play along. He went onto the field and grabbed a bat, then slowly approached the batters box. A feeling of calmness and purpose surged through him as he felt the dirt beneath his feet. It had been years since he stepped onto a baseball field and for the first time in a long time, Ken felt like he was home.

He stepped into the batter's box and readied his bat. The pitcher went through his wind up and then threw the first pitch. It sailed high over Ken's head and hit the fence behind him.

“Strike one!” the umpire yelled.

Ken turned to face him.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me, that was ten feet over my head!”

The umpire just shook his head and pointed towards the pitcher, signaling him to deliver the next pitch. Ken had seen his fair share of bad calls but that was just ridiculous. He tried to put it out of his mind as he readied himself for the next pitch. This one bounced about four feet in front of the plate and rolled along the dirt across the base.

“Strike two!”

Ken whirled around.

“What?! You’re crazy if you think that was a strike!”

Again the umpire ignored him. Ken was pissed off now and turned back towards the pitcher. This time the pitch hit the dirt right in front of the pitchers mound. It rolled slowly towards the plate and had almost stopped when it reached the base. Ken swung downwards as hard as he could, looking more like a golfer than a baseball player. He kicked up a cloud of dirt as he hit the ball, sending it rocketing into the outfield.

Ken dropped the bat and took off for first base. The outfielder was chasing the ball into the corner of the field so Ken rounded first and headed for second. He was usually too slow to do better than a

double but when he again looked out into the outfield he saw that the fielder was just now reaching the ball. Ken gritted his teeth and rounded second, heading for third. The fielder threw the ball hard, but his throw was inaccurate. It sailed over the third baseman and Ken hit the base and continued on towards home for the unlikely inside the park home run. He was breathing hard and kept his head down as he ran as fast as he possibly could. He slid head first, gliding across the base on his belly for the tying score.

He laid there for a second, taking in the moment. Just then he felt something touch his back. He looked and saw that the

catcher had just now tagged him with the ball.

“Out!” the umpire yelled.

The crowd let out a collective groan.

“Oh, too bad, Kenshin Ochi has lost the game for his team,” the announcer said.

Ken jumped to his feet. He had been safe by a mile and he couldn't believe the umpire hadn't seen it. He angrily approached the man.

“Are you kidding me? That was robbery, I was safe for days!” Ken shouted.

The umpire just shook his head and then walked away. Ken wanted to follow him but he was too angry and was afraid of what he might do. Instead he turned back towards

the bleachers. His parents were standing now. They were both staring at him shaking their heads, a look of intense disapproval on their faces.

“No, I was safe!” Ken called out.

They turned to leave and Ken ran after them. He caught up to them just as they got into their car and started it. Ken banged on the window.

“Dad! That wasn’t a fair call! I was safe, you saw it!”

His father didn’t look at him. He put the car into reverse and pulled out of the parking space. Ken jogged alongside the car and continued to bang on the window.

“Please, just talk to me! It’s been ten years!” he cried.

His dad put the car in drive and pulled away.

“I just want to talk to you!” Ken yelled.

Marty was watching, an anger coming over him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the umpire from the game walking away from the baseball field. The man pulled off his protective mask to reveal a long gray beard, filled with dust.

“Hey!” Marty screamed.

The old man took off running and Marty set off after him. He had seen the love of his life dead by her own hand because of this man. Even if it wasn’t real, her lifeless eyes

would forever be burned into Marty's memory. It would haunt him for all of his days, it would punish him in his nightmares forevermore. Marty wanted to give this guy some punishment of his own.

As he chased the ancient man across the parking lot they passed a group of baseball players. One of them had a metal bat in his hand and Marty yanked it away as he ran by. The old man ran back into the neighborhood, past the house Keiko was inside. It was engulfed in flames now and Marty could see the shape of a person inside, banging on the bay window. It was Keiko.

“Marty! Save me!” Keiko screamed.

Marty gritted his teeth. It took every ounce of strength he had in him not to stop and rush into the house. He tore his eyes away and focused them on the old man, his anger renewed as he continued after him. He followed him around a corner. They were suddenly in a downtown area and the ancient man ran into an alley. Marty came around the corner behind him and smiled as he saw that it was a dead end. The ancient man stopped as he approached a brick wall in the back of the alley. He slowly turned around.

The smile on Marty's face grew as he raised the bat and took a step forward. He normally didn't like the idea of brutality but

right now it seemed like the best idea he had ever had. The old man pointed at the bat and it suddenly shifted forms, turning into a snake. It twisted around, baring its fangs and hissing. Marty didn't even look at it.

“It's not real,” Marty said as he took another step forward.

The snake bit him again and again but Marty didn't even feel it. He continued to walk forward, continued to smile. The old man's sunken eyes went wide and he took a fearful step back. Feeling the brick wall behind him he turned around and waved his hand at it. A door appeared but before the man could flee through it Marty pointed at it. He knew that the ancient man was

manipulating the world around them and he decided that he too was going to wield that power. He concentrated as hard as he could.

“No,” he said.

The door disappeared, replaced again by a brick wall. The old man wheeled around just as Marty was upon him. The snake had turned back into a bat and it crashed into the old man’s head, knocking him to the ground.

Another flash of white light appeared in front of Marty’s eyes. He blinked furiously and after a moment Sloan’s vault came into focus around him. He and Ken were standing there in the same spot they had been before. The ancient man was lying on the floor of the vault, unconscious.

Ken swayed and had to grab onto a nearby bookshelf. He wiped the sweat from his face before speaking.

“I feel like I’m back in high school and just stayed up all night watching Pink Floyd’s The Wall.”

Marty nodded, feeling very weak and groggy himself. He glanced at his watch. He stared at the number it was displaying.

“This can’t be right.”

“What?” Ken asked.

“Check your watch. How long have we been in here?” Marty asked.

Ken looked at his watch. He groaned loudly.

“Man, I really hate magic,” he said.

All Marty could do was shake his head.

“We’ve been in this vault for almost nine hours,” Marty said, still struggling to accept it.

Finally he looked away, scanning the vault.

“We need to find what we’re after and get out of here.”

Ken stood up straight and nodded.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

They began quickly working their way through the vault. The first thing Marty picked up was a briefcase. He opened it and found that it was full of money. Ken was surprised when Marty removed it from the shelf and brought it with him.

“Blake said the man who identifies scrolls is really expensive. But I’m not going to use this healing scroll until I know it’s the real deal, so we’ll need some money to buy his services.”

Ken smiled.

“Now it’s feeling like Ocean’s 11,” he said.

In the back corner of the vault they found a series of large drawers that contained scrolls. Marty used the picture Blake had brought him to identify the healing scroll. Once he had triple checked that it was the right one he picked it up. Before they turned to leave, Marty continued to stare at the drawers.

“Wanna take all of them?” Ken asked.

It hadn't been their original plan but Marty didn't like the idea of leaving all of these in Sloan's possession. If it was powerful enough to warrant being in the vault then it was probably something better kept out of his hands. Finally Marty nodded and he and Ken loaded up the rest of the scrolls. They then retreated back to their tunnel and into the sewer.

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Both of them were sore from their hard labor the day before but Marty and Ken walked with a purpose down the street.

Keiko walked beside them. She had insisted on coming along but so far none of them had said much. They were in the small town of Clatskanie, Washington, just fifteen miles west of Longview. This is where Blake had told them they would find the man who could decipher scrolls.

“This is the place,” Marty said.

They were standing in front of a small run down business called Odds and Ends. Ken was clutching the briefcase full of money and Marty was clutching a sealed folder that contained the scroll. He was having trouble breathing as he stood in front of the door. He felt overwhelmed by the idea of what it would mean if this man

confirmed that the scroll really did have the power to heal him completely.

Keiko stepped next to him and lightly put her hand on his arm. Marty looked over at her and she smiled. It gave him strength and he nodded and then opened the door. A bell rang as they stepped into the store. It was even smaller on the inside than it had appeared from the street. It was like a miniature pawn shop, with a few small televisions, a bucket of tools, and an electric guitar taking up residence alongside one another on one of the few shelves.

“Can I help you?”

They all looked towards the back of the store to see a man standing. He wore a

brown sweater and looked to be about sixty years old. He had receding red hair and a well manicured red beard. He also had on heavy dark sunglasses and held a white cane in his hand and had it outstretched, tapping the floor in front of him.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Ken said.

Keiko stomped on his foot.

“Kenshin!”

“What? Am I the only one that realizes that the guy that’s supposed to decipher this is blind?”

Marty cleared his throat and stepped forward, hopeful that the man hadn’t overheard.

“I was told that you can decipher scrolls and tell what they will do before they are used.”

There was a table in the middle of the store and the man slowly made his way to it. He carefully sat down and then rested his hands on the table.

“Not interested.”

Marty hadn't expected that.

“Oh, I brought money. Lots of it.”

“Not. Interested.”

Marty turned around to look at Ken and Keiko. They looked just as puzzled as he did.

“Sir, I'm in a bad situation and it would help me out tremendously if you could just

take my money and look at this one scroll and tell me what it will do,” Marty said.

“I don’t want your money.”

He said it with a finality that hit Marty like a punch in the stomach. He had been counting on having the scroll verified. He took a step back just as the man pointed towards the door where Ken and Keiko were standing.

“You. Play me at checkers.”

Ken and Keiko exchanged a confused look. After a moment, Ken shrugged and then stepped forward.

“Prepare to king me, pal, because I never lose at checkers,” Ken said.

“Not you. Her,” the man repeated, this time clearly pointing at Keiko.

“Me?”

“What is your name?”

She looked at Marty, then back at the man.

“Keiko, sir,” she answered.

“You will play checkers with me?”

Again she looked at Marty. His expression was tense. She knew how important it was to him to know for sure if this scroll was real.

“It would be my pleasure,” Keiko said at last.

The man reached below the table and pulled out an old checkerboard. He started setting it up with blinding speed.

“You two, go outside and let us enjoy our game,” the man commanded.

Ken stepped forward angrily.

“I don’t think so buddy,” he said.

“Your sister is safe here,” the man said.

“You can watch us through the front window if you like.”

Keiko looked slightly worried but she sat down across from the man.

“Keiko, I don’t know about this,” Marty said.

“I’m fine Marty, you guys just go outside,” she replied, trying to stay brave.

“Young man, I assure you that your girlfriend will not be harmed. Now, go.”

Marty looked down at Keiko, wondering if he should correct the man about her being his girlfriend.

“You guys go, it’s okay,” Keiko said.

Marty and Ken reluctantly started to make their way towards the exit.

“Leave the scroll,” the man commanded.

After looking down at it for a moment, Marty laid it on the table beside Keiko. He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it gently, then moved towards the exit.

“I’ll be watching your every move!” Ken called out as he left.

The two of them played checkers for hours. Marty and Ken kept a close watch from out front. With no idea of what was being said they were growing more and more uncomfortable. Keiko had laughed several times and there was no sign of danger, so they did as they had been told and stayed out. Finally, she stood up and walked towards the door. She had the scroll held tightly in her hands.

Marty and Ken stared at her expectantly. She smiled, and nodded, tears forming in her eyes.

“This is it, Marty. He said it’s a full heal spell. He called it Analeptikos.”

All Marty could do was stare at her. He tried to speak but couldn't form any words. Keiko stepped towards him, the smile on her face growing as she held the scroll out to him. Her eyes were overflowing with tears now.

“This is it. This will make you well again,” Keiko said.

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Tammy looked up as someone knocked loudly on her motel door. She was sitting in front of her laptop. The screen was littered with windows, all of them displaying information about Frederick Moreno, his

super company known as Ubermensch and its offshoot company Zarathus Pharmaceuticals, the company Blake claimed was developing the experimental brain cancer cure that would be used on Marty. So far she had found nothing about a cure and the deeper she dug the more disturbing the information became about Ubermensch and the fearsome man who ran it.

When there was another knock she stood up. She hadn't told many people where she was staying yet and she wondered who it was. She pulled the door open to find a revolting man. He had on a stained white

tank top and his balding head was sweaty.
He smiled perversely and stepped forward.

“Tammy Schultz, you’re coming with
me.”

END OF EPISODE 9

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