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# Discount Soulmate



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It was dark, leaden and gloomy, but the rain was still holding off. The moisture in the air felt as impenetrable as the sidewalks. I was passing by a typical New York storefront. It was a monument to 60's architecture: single glass door, excessive lighting, the works. The type of place which was half plastic panels and half painted over the glass. Sitting in the front was a man, sprawled across an old lawn chair, who gave every indication of being blind. I started to hurry my way past. You never know when those kinds will start asking for money or irrationally preaching about the end times.

"Hey toots," he hollered in my direction, "You're hot stuff. All tits and legs."

I spun around to face him, annoyed at his misogynistic behavior. "And you're a pig." I spat back.

"Yes, I know," he answered as if it was the most natural reply in the world. "It part of my ongoing effort to make everyone else a better person. The lower I sink, the higher I can elevate everyone else." As he muttered on, I noticed the sign above the door. It was written in old, red marquee style letters from the 1950s and it read: Discount Soulmate.

"I see you've taken an interest in our sign," he commented. He rose from his chair, unfolding a cane as he stood. I waved my hand in front of his face. Yep, blind as a bat. "How did you know?" I asked.

"You believe in soulmates?" he asked, ignoring my question.

"Not at all," I suggested bluntly.

"Good for you," he stated candidly, rocking a bit from right to left and jabbing me in the foot with his cane, "It's all a lot of mumbo jumbo anyway."

"You're not a very good pitchman," I criticized him.

"The worst," he said nonchalantly. He turned and walked straight through the front door without saying another word. I stood for a time contemplating the sign. The whole thing looked like a Time's Square hellhole best kept at a distance. An electronics store where everything had been stolen off the back of a truck. Every part of the place screamed danger. Yet for some reason, which I couldn't fathom, I wanted to go in. My feet followed the blind man, even though my brain was telling me to run in the other direction.

The interior as a narrow hallway. At least it was clean, but it was only about four feet deep. Barely big enough to open the interior door. Although the door had been painted white, it was clearly one of those steel security doors. It even had a peephole slot at the top. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. The peephole didn't even slide open. It tried the door and it was unlocked.

The inside looked like the interior of a 1930's speakeasy. Fancy red carpets, red walls, even the woodwork was a deep red cherry. Between the wooden beams was frilly red drapery. When I looked closer the walls weren't painted at all, they were covered in red velvet wallpaper. Who does that? At the back of the room, the curtains appeared closed, but they soon parted. In walked a small woman in Hollywood's version of a gypsy get up. She wore a bandana on her head and a shirt/blouse combination which would only go together in a garage sale. The only thing missing was the cheap violin music. "You come to see your soulmate?" she asked me in a heavy accent, between taking drags on a filterless cigarette.

“See my soulmate?” I asked incredulously, “How much is this going to cost me?”

“No, you no pay me unless you see him,” she proclaimed, “First you sit, you have a look, then we talk money, yes?” She pressed a stud on the wall and part of the wall opened as if it was a mad scientist’s lair. Out slid a perfect replica of the 1930 barber’s chair, complete with headrest and red leather upholstery. Behind it, buried deep in the walls, was what appeared to be a stolen MRI machine. She motioned me into the chair. “You sit, relax. Close your eyes. Don’t think of anything. You see him.” She patted me as I sat in the chair. “I get you your soulmate wholesale. You see.”

What was I doing? I had things to do. I needed to get to work. Those were the thoughts which ran through my head as I unwittingly sat in the chair. Once I was settled in the chair, it went flat, and my head slid into the hollow of the MRI machine. “Relax dear,” the gypsy woman remarked, “Close your eyes, darling. I’m going to show you something important. You’ll see. You’ll see him. He’s waiting.”

I heard an electronic buzzing and several clicks, like the shutter of a camera, but I kept my eyes closed. There was a bright flash and I could see a farm or perhaps a park. The sun was shining and there was a rail fence in the distance. He was facing away from me, down the lower part of a slope. He sat so that only his head was visible. Dark hair, he seemed attractive, even from the rear. He had a rugged quality to him, which is hard to explain. He rose and turned in my direction. His face was deeply chiseled with a hawk nose and a majestic chin, but yet soft and warm at the same time. Below his neck was a massive, barreled chest which rested upon two legs that were more like tree trunks than legs. His whole nature, even down to the way he moved, displayed a rugged handsomeness.

I don’t believe in soulmates. I don’t believe in soulmates. God, he looked *good*. I could get lost in those eyes. Those beautiful brown eyes. I watched as he approached me, trying my best not to drool. I was desperate to run up to meet him, but now, my feet seemed frozen. They didn’t feel like they were standing on grass. They felt like they were resting on a long metal tray.

I was sitting up in the barber chair. “You see him?” The old lady asked. “You saw the one.” She proclaimed as if it had been foretold. I struggled my way to a standing position and mashed a \$100 bill into her hand. Staggering my way to the door on unsteady legs, I felt a tug on my sleeve. The gypsy woman was pressing a wad of small bills into my hand. “You forgot your change, dear.” She informed me. I was still weaving like I was drunk, but I tried to give the money back to her, “Keep the change.” I muttered. I could still see him in my mind’s eye. His face, it was seared into my memory.

“No, no.” She backed away with unexpected speed, “I no can take that. Ten dollar. Ten dollar. You get me in trouble with the authorities.” I stood tottering on my unsteady legs. “You go now. You go.” She announced and pushed me through the anteroom and out the front door.

Naturally, I expected to stumble my way out to the crumbling New York City sidewalk, but beneath my feet was a dry, dusty mixture of sand and dirt. The terrain was low rolling hills, covered sporadically with half burnt bushes. Rocks, the size of boulders, were randomly strewn about. I was wearing boots. Nobody wears boots in July. Not only that, I was wearing a pair of brown leather pants that fit me like a second skin. On my head was a wide-brimmed hat. I don’t do hats. My top was gone, and I had on, well, what could only be described as a worn blanket. It had a hole cut in the center and I was wearing it like a narrow poncho. It was open on the sides and I wasn’t wearing any underwear.

Before I had a chance to consider my attire in more depth, an arrow thudded into the ground at my feet. Yep, it was a goddamned arrow all right. I dove for cover behind a fallen over tree. I found myself next to a blue-uniformed US Cavalry trooper, circa 1870, who had also taken refuge behind the stump. When I prodded him, he rolled over. His face was missing. I grabbed his single shot carbine.

As I did, two hostile natives charged me, screaming wildly with one waving a tomahawk over his head. I shot the first one in the chest and he crumpled to the ground. The second one grabbed the end of the barrel and he struggled to take it away from me. As we fought over the weapon, I slowly loaded it with another cartridge. I pulled the trigger and it ripped through his stomach, leaving powder burns on his white spotted war paint.

As I reloaded more arrows thudded into the wooden tree stump. I heard a horse approaching from my left. Fearing another native attack, I spun around, rifle at the ready. On the horse was a cavalry officer. His short black hair was mostly covered up by his dark blue hat. His sunbaked face was acutely chiseled, sporting a hawk nose and an imposing chin. Somehow his features seemed soft and warm at the same time. His whole nature, even down to the way he moved, suggested a rugged handsomeness. Beneath his blue coat, he had a massive, barreled chest. He swung his impressive leg over the horse saddle and his boot slammed into the ground with a hard crack.

He held two long-barreled six-shot peacemakers, one in each hand. "Need a hand ma'am?" His voice was a beautiful, melodious baritone. He shot down one hostile with the right pistol and finished off another with the left. I raised my rifle and plugged another one myself who was attempting to jump over the officer's horse. As I reloaded, he smiled at me, "You're quite a hand with a piece, if I do say so myself, ma'am." He shot down another one with his right and a second with his left.

Arrows started sprouting up in the earth behind us. He took me by the arm. "Best to get inside ma'am." He indicated a cabin behind me. Its door seemed to occupy the same space where the Time's Square storefront door had been only a few moments before. I hurried inside, and he followed me, slamming the door shut. Two arrows quickly embedded themselves in the wood, their rough steel points protruding into the cabin's interior.

Everything inside looked like a spaghetti western set. Rough wooden cot with a blanket. A crude table in the center, covered in tin cups and plates. There as a mud brick fireplace on the north wall, a fire burning under a primitive coffee pot. "Lt. Stephen Castle, at your service, ma'am" He swung open the wooden shutters of the cabin's front window and shot a hostile who was inches from the frame.

At the same time, another opened the back window and tried to crawl in. I plugged him and pulled the window's shutters closed after pushing the body back outside with my boot. "Sarah Greene," I announced.

"Mind if I ask what you are doing with the book all the way out here?" he asked, shooting down another one.

"What book?"

He indicated the bed. On the blanket was a large leather-bound book I hadn't noticed before. It had a plain cover, but its thousand pages were held tightly closed by three metal clasps. "They're after it," he

explained, and he gunned down another one. He had to duck his head to the right as a tomahawk flew into the room and embedded itself in the far wall only a few inches from my head.

I didn't have much time to look at it, as another one attempted to crawl through my window. Once again, he struggled, pulling on the barrel, trying to take away the rifle as I reloaded it. But, in the end, I won. I fired the round off into his face. "You're a hard woman miss," the officer commented. I joked, reloading, "Something wrong with that?"

"Not at all."

"We can't sway in here forever," he spat, "I'm getting low on ammunition. I've got to get to my saddlebags." A flurry of arrows sailed through the air and into the cabin as soon he opened the door. He rolled through the opening, shooting down one with his left pistol and a second with his right. Reaching up, he pulled off the saddlebags and threw them in the door. He followed swiftly behind, pulling the door after him. A burst of arrows knocked on the door as he closed it.

It ended almost as swiftly as it began. We stayed inside the cabin for a time. I stacked a whole line of bullets in a space between two loose boards in the wall by the windows, available and ready at a moment's notice. The sun was starting to set, its glow all yellow and orange over a rock covered hill to the west. He stood and slid his pistols into their holsters and calmly walked out the front door.

"What the hell are you doing," I screamed, half expecting him to become an instant pin cushion. He turned and glanced at me through the doorway. "Sun's going down ma'am. Ingins don't do no night huntin." He walked back into the cabin and picked up the book. "Best to get out of here and back to the fort before they come wondering back," he said.

I followed him outside as he mounted his horse. With one hand he held the book and the reins, and he held out his other hand to me. I grabbed it and he pulled me onto the horse with no effort at all. He pulled on the reins and directed the horse off to a loose dry-wash trail which led west. His back was warm and soft. The gate of the horse was slow and easy. You could have played the overture from *How the West was Won* and it wouldn't have been out of place.

"What happened to New York?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm sure it's still there miss, but it's a bit of a ride in the other direction," he answered as if the question was the most natural one in the world.

It was dark when we rode into town. The roads were dusty, but the oil lamps in the building looked cheerful. We stopped outside a corner two-story building. The second floor was a railed balcony and the main door was built into a curved wall at the corner. It had the typical Hollywood swinging louvered doors. The lieutenant got off the horse and helped me down. His eyes. Those brown eyes. I could stare into them forever. "You wait here miss." He announced. "Ain't no fit place for a woman. I got to see a man about some fresh horses. This one's plum wore out." He strode through the swinging doors and disappeared into the warm light.

Where before I had felt safe, I now felt suddenly alone and exposed. In the end, I decided I didn't want to hang around, by myself, in the middle of a Zane Grey novel, so I headed into the saloon. As soon as I entered the room, card games stopped, the piano player discontinued tickling the ivories, and every eye

at the bar was leering at me. I'd never felt more uncomfortable. It would have been normal for these men to sexualize me, but such was not their gaze. They stared with indifference like they were a bank of doctors in a hospital observing me with dispassion. It was unsettling, to say the least. I swung up my rifle in front of me and the piano player went back to playing the worn upright piano. One of the poker players laid down a two-bit bet and the men at the bar went back to downing their drinks of watered-down whiskey.

The cavalry officer came out of the back room. "Sorry, Sarah, no horses. We'll have to take the train." He motioned me towards the back door, but I stood, unwilling to cross the room. "Hurry along now," he called out to me, "Or we'll be missing the train."

Finally, gathering up my strength, I crossed the room. Cards were laid down and drinks emptied as I walked across the room. Even with the piano playing a raucous tone, it seemed to me the loudest sound was the thud of my boots knocking on the floor. The cavalryman hustled me through the back room and out onto a train station platform. The locomotive was spewing black clouds of smoke and whistling blasts of steam. The officer directed me to a car near the middle of the train. I walked up the stairs and stood before the railcar's door. I could feel my feet on a long metal tray.

Opening the door, I found the interior dark and musty. The car brightened as I entered. I suddenly realized I was wearing a dress. It was bright red and cut in the style of the 1920s. The sort of flowing silky outfit you'd see in pre-Hays Code films. I had some amount of trouble keeping the straps over my shoulders. The hat was gone, as were the boots. In their place was a set of heels, higher than those I might normally wear. The carriage was well appointed, as were the passengers. Top hats and expensive suits, complete with bright, white handkerchiefs sticking out of their breast pockets. I found my rifle was gone and I was holding a drawstring purse. It seemed a bit heavy for a purse. Opening the string I peered at the contents and noticed a long barrel Reising Arms 1920's .22 caliber semi-automatic pistol. I quickly pulled the string closed.

As I looked for a seat, the far door opened. In strode a man with short black hair that stood up, fanning away from his head. He was holding a bowler hat in his hands. His face was well chiseled exhibiting a hawk nose and a splendid chin, but yet soft and warm at the same time. Below his neck was a massive, barreled chest cut in two by a bright red tie. His whole nature, even down to the way he stood at the door, displayed a rugged handsomeness.

We crossed the carriage and met in the center. "Do you have the book?" he asked.

"No, but it's on the train," I replied with a seductive smile.

"We can't let it fall into the hands of the fascists. You know what they'll do with it." He whispered.

"I saw some of Lefty's men from Chicago on the train. Do you think they are after the book as well?" I asked in a concerned tone.

"It doesn't matter. We'll have to search the train, compartment by compartment." He suggested.

"When's the next stop?" I asked as we huddled in the center of the car. "Budapest," he answered looking around for anything suspicious.

“Why don’t I just ask the conductor, he’s bound to know.” We headed off towards the next car on the train. “We’d be wasting our time,” he suggested, “those types are sworn to secrecy.”

“I can be very persuasive,” I suggested, using my deepest possible voice as we reached the far door.

“I’ll bet you are,” he smiled.

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as we entered the next car. The corridor veered off to the right as we passed the private cabins on the left. “I’ll start at this end,” he explained, “check the berth on the other end and work your way back. We’ll meet in the middle.” He ducked into a berth and I proceeded to the end of the car.

When I arrived, the door slid open by itself. Standing in the doorway was a small man in a white suit and a narrow black tie. He had very thin, with oily black hair combed over his scalp. His face was astoundingly round. He was holding a well-oiled luger pointed directly at me. “Ah. Fraulein Greene,” he remarked in a thick German accent, “why don’t you join me.”

I crept slowly into the compartment and the door slid closed behind me. I reached for my purse, but the little man quickly held up his gun. “Let’s not do anything foolish now, shall we. I wouldn’t want this gun to go off ... accidentally.” He smiled a disturbing little grin and held out his other hand. “Would you mind handing your bag over, very slowly.” I handed him my purse and raised my arms.

He opened the purse and dumped the contents on the bed. The automatic bounced off the blanket. “Ah, a Reising woman. I wouldn’t have pictured you using a mere .22. Such limited stopping power.” I inched closer to the bed, hoping to recover my weapon, but he turned the Luger on me with frightening speed. “Let’s not make any sudden moves, shall we?”

We waved me over to a chair in the middle of the floor. He looked at me with an evil grin, “Strip,” he demanded.

“Now, just one minute,” I started to protest, but I found the barrel of the gun pointed directly at my nose. The little German man in the white suit put his finger to his lips. “Shush,” he whispered, “You wouldn’t want to make any loud noises. This gun has mit a hair trigger.” I started pulling off my dress. I clutched it in front of me, feigning being cold. The reality was I was about to break out into a cold sweat. “Drop it.” He commanded. I let the silk material drop to the ground. He stood coldly examining me as I reached behind my back to undo the clasp of my bra.

“That will be enough,” he explained waving the gun at me, “why don’t you take a seat?”

I quietly took the offered seat and the little man ripped down the silk cord that operated the drapes covering the window. You’d think railroads would learn not to supply such things for use by your average miscreant. He stood behind me. I could feel the Luger pressed up behind my ear. “Now,” he instructed me, “hands behind your back.” Reluctantly, I complied, but not without some prodding from the cold steel of the gun barrel. He tied my hands and then made sure the rest of me was secure.

Walking around to the front, he holstered his gun inside his jacket and lit a cigarette. “Now, my dear Fraulein Greene, you’re going to tell me everything you know about *die buch, ja*. Let’s start with where you are hiding it, shall we?”

"I have no idea what you are talking about. I thought this was my room." I responded as innocently as possible.

"Oh, I'm so pleased you've decided to go this way, *junge frau*," he announced with glee. He took out a huge hyperendemic needle from a briefcase by the bed.

"What do you have there?" I asked. This was rapidly becoming a nightmare.

"Just a *lot* of sodium pentothal," he announced with a creepy smile on his thin lips. "More than enough to cause an overdose. First, you'll tell me everything I want to know." he tapped the end of the needle as a small drop dripped down its metal edges. "Then it will kill you." He smiled even more unpleasantly as the door silently crept open behind him.

As he approached, the back handle of a Browning automatic came down on his head and he crumpled to the floor. "What took you so long," I spat at him.

"I found the book in the third compartment," he announced, throwing the tome onto the bed next to my revolver. He took the briefest of glances at me, being a gentleman, and walked behind me to start working on the knots. Although, if truth be told, I wouldn't have objected if he took a more lingering look. "You were right," he explained as he undid the knots, "Lefty's men are on the train. I got the book out of a compartment occupied by one of his men. I think they were planning on selling it to the Germans when the train arrives in Berlin.

"Can you hurry up with those ropes," I protested.

"Sorry," he defended himself, "but the little freak is very skilled at tying up women." Finally, he got me released from my bonds. As I stood he handed me my red dress from the floor. He turned his head in a gentlemanly manner as I slipped it back over my head. I recovered my gun and slipped it back into the purse as Castle grabbed the book.

Once I was dressed, I opened the door quietly and peered out. The hallway was empty. "Come on," I said, "the coast is clear." We both stepped out into the passageway. We quietly made our way toward the back of the train. As we approached, the door opened. In stepped several men in light tan suits and expensive Italian footwear. As they spotted the book they reach into their hands into their jackets and approached us menacingly.

We turned and went the other way. Before we could get farther than the middle of the car, the other door opened, and in stepped a group of men with dark hats and gleaming leather overcoats. One of them even wore an eyepatch. Standard Hollywood secret security men's attire. As they approached, they reached inside the lapels of their coats. Stephen looked at me. I could gaze into those eyes all day long but now was not the time. We raised our hands into the air as Castle slowly opened a compartment door with his foot.

As they approached he pushed me inside and jumped after me. The door slammed closed behind us. There was no other exit from the room. He quickly threw the latch lock, but this wouldn't hold them off for long. We both drew our revolvers and looked at each other. "Now what?" I asked, staring into those deep brown eyes.

"Do you trust me?" He asked.



“Do you have to ask?”

He threw the heavy book at the window and the pane smashed into a thousand pieces. We heard shoulders slam into the door. The wind crashed into the room, blowing around everything. We looked at each other. Not a word was said. I could feel my feet upon the metal plating on the floor of the rumbling rail car. We both leaped out the window, deep into the eerie blackness.

I rolled onto the ground, crouching like a cat. There was a sinister luminosity in the distance, as the light of a thousand campfires. It gave the horizon an odd glowing effect. The far-off light was so bright that not a star could be seen in the moonless night. It further illuminated around me a forest of stark, leafless trees. They rose as if they were the gray spears of countless warriors pointing skyward. I clutched my trusty bastard sword in my grip, my buckler shield in my off hand. My skin-tight leather pants had returned, as had my boots. My bodice, however, was also leather. It had an uncomfortably wide opening in the front which went all the way down to the waist. It was showing far more skin than I would normally prefer in a strange setting. Held closed by small bits of lacing, it had the effect of pulling things towards each other, mashing them together in plain sight.

“Do you think the wolf riders are still following us?” I asked, searching for evidence of their approach.

My companion with the short black hair, fanning away from his head turned toward me. His face was acutely chiseled with a hawk nose and a regal chin hidden behind a long, braided beard. Even so, his face appeared soft and warm at the same time. His massive, barreled chest was encased in shiny steel plate armor. He crouched next to me, bending the large steel plates that covered his legs. His whole nature, even down to the way he moved, displayed a rugged handsomeness.

“They don’t give up easily. They’ll not give up the hunt anytime soon. Not while their masters as still covetous of the book. Still, the blood from the group I slaughtered in the meadow should put them off the scent.” He declared, convinced of his success. We both paused, breathless and anxious as if we were an antelope halted in midflight through the savanna.

We were not out of the woods yet. Journeying through the land of the dead would be the last direction our pursuers would expect us to take, but it didn’t lack for other hazards. The dead staked this land. Without horses and on foot, the crossing would be all but impossible. The lands of the dead were a series of low foothills surrounded by marsh and swamp. Buried in the hills, ancient kings had placed their tombs and then filled the swamps with crocodiles to keep tomb robbers at bay. But these same rulers beggared the people to build their magnificent monuments, so the dead in the hills were restless. Always seeking the poor who had pilfered their treasures.

“Best we take our rest,” he explained, “and wait for the dawn to drive the mists from the moors.”

We gathered some of the twigs lying about and using flint and steel, he made a small, but cheery fire. As the flames warmed us, he laid down, covering his lower chest with a soft blanket. I rested my head upon it, soft curls interweaving with the threads of the blanket cloth. Occasionally I flashed a provocative smile at him. Spreading out, I twisted artfully, exposing ever more fully the vistas of sweat-glimmering skin between the halves of my bodice in the dim light. But alas, the strain of our travels was beyond us both and we drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

It didn't take long for them to find us. We awoke, surrounded by a hoard of ravenous ghoulish apparitions. I reached for my sword and took to my feet with more swiftness than a lemur jumping from tree to tree. The creatures were not immune to the slash of iron and I quickly severed one's head from his shoulders. They trashed at us with clawed talons, but the reach of our blades was greater than their arms could extend.

Each rush was met with a vicious counter strike, leaving a trail of bodies on the mossy ground. The creatures circled around to our side, heading slowly to take us from our rear. We stood back to back, swords at the ready. It was not an unpleasant feeling. I would feel the strength of his sinews as his muscles tensed under his armor. But the grizzly things knew their business, they lunged at us but stayed carefully out of reach. They could spend as much time as they desired, wearing us down. Being unnatural beings, they had no need to rest. They only had to wait us out, staying just out of range until we tired.

Things did not appear to be going well. I cursed myself for not taking advantage of the knight before when I had my chance. The way things were going, there appeared little likelihood that I might have another. Just as things seemed their darkest, the ground rumbled, and the spear-like trees shook. The Ghouls ran off without taking a second glance in our direction. We readied ourselves for whatever new terror approached us, driving off such hungry flesh-eating devils.

What loomed before us had more forest about him than features. He was the very image of a giant's toy doll. Each portion of his body was a section of a massive tree. The joints appeared as mere space between the elements of his limbs. The golem of wood threw branches of trees right and left, blazing his own circuitous trail as he advanced. We struck it with a storm of steel and sword. Yet our attacks had little more impact than the annoyance of a fly. Each blow bounced off the bark covering its exterior with little or no resulting effect. Having no other choice, we gave ground, staying out of the construct's reach. Yet it progressed inexorably, its ligneous legs thundering on the ground.

By and large, we were forced back to our little campfire. The knight grabbed my buckler shield out of my grasp. I practically spit with anger at the outrage. As I alone attempted to hold off the beast, the knight scooped up a pile of coals with the shield. He dumped them, unceremoniously, into the golem's belly. Where our steel had the effect of thrown pebbles, the coals acted as the smashing rocks of a catapult. The thing lumbered back but lacking actual hands it was unable to remove the coals. Soon the fire spread through its stature, whipped into a frenzy by the wind. It waved its limbs at the blaze, but the action only fed more oxygen to the flames.

Finally, the construct fell to the ground before us, a conflagration whose bright tips far surpassed the height of the trees. We made our way swiftly out of the area. Our little campfire would hardly have drawn any attention, but this bonfire was bound to draw every creeping indigent for miles around.

We made our way down a ravine, covered in lichens and moist earth. The environment was the perfect environment for frog and reptiles of all sorts, but the air was curiously still. The sound of croaking went missing in the gloom. We crept along on the mushy ground, balancing on a hard, dried shell which covered the moist elements beneath. Then the earth moved.

Before us rose the head of a giant serpent, with a maw big enough to swallow both a horse and its rider. Far from being on a mushy path, we stood, unsteadily, upon the creature's back. Unlike the Ghouls, this

creature's fangs far exceeded the reach of our blades. Oh, for the haft of a long spear. We fought valiantly, but the engagement was one-sided. Its bellows were a thunder, its hisses like steam escaping a kettle. The need to keep our footing prevented us from launching any effective attacks and it hampered our defense as well. One wrong move and we could both be swallowed in a single gulp, to be slowly digested in the bowels of this cold-blooded thing. I imagine it too was left to guard the tombs of the royal families, making meals of those grave robbers unlucky enough to be caught in its grasp.

The knight flew at it in a rage, both hands on his sword. But the creature merely ducked the blow and I saw him fall below the edge of the creature and out of sight. I had to think quickly. I knelt on the creature's back, my sword before me like a cross. Out of the corner of its cruel yellow eye, it saw my form as if I was offering myself to it as a meal. Not one to give up a free lunch it turned away from the fallen knight and positioned itself, jaw spread wide over my head. Its saliva dripped all around.

I had to pick my moment carefully, so I waited for it to make the first move. As it dived down, jaws closing, I rolled out between its monstrous teeth as its monstrous maw snapped shut. Spinning in an acrobatic lunge, I brought the point of my blade up to the fearful yellow eye now directly before me. I plunged it into the watery depths and found the tunnel connecting the ocular cavity to the reptile's brain. Where its scales offered no purchase for my blade, the armor immune to its cutting edges, the nerve tunnel offered no resistance. It slid into the creature's skull as lightning flows from a cloud. Soon the serpent was still.

We had little time to recover, the wolf riders had found us. Whether it was the bonfire of the golem or the thunder cries of the serpent which led them to us, I have no knowledge. But I could clearly hear the thunder of their feet upon the earth. The reverberation and crash of their armor was growing steadily louder. I dragged the knight to his feet and we headed for a doorway. A plundered tomb nestled into the face of a nearby hill.

We plunged into a trice-cursed tomb. The passageways were partially filled with roots growing down from the ceiling. In places, we had to cut our way deeper into the darkness with our steel. He held out the palm of his hand to halt my forward progress. I normally would have found such contact provocative, but now was not the time. I could feel my feet on a cold metal plate. It was the trigger of a trap. The floor slid open to reveal a chasm of endless depths.

Now, at last, the roots gained purpose. We jumped up to grab onto the vegetative protrusions and pulled ourselves across the abyss, hand over hand. We grabbed handfuls of the vine-like filaments, trading one group for another as we made our way to the far side. I could hear the first of the wolf riders arrive at the chasm. One leaped after us, but to no avail. The weight of his mount carried him deep into the abyss. A soundless journey which seemed to have no end. At last, we jumped upon solid ground gracing the other side, our feet making light falls like those of a cat.

I took off at a run. The going was made slower by the trail of my long white dress and the hoops of my skirt. They barely fit between the gray stones which lined the interior of the cemetery. Cicada chirped, and the screams of owls drifted across the granite markers. I saw the shadowy outline of a man in the distance. I couldn't make out much this far away. Everything in the dark was some shade of black or white. Yet even in the gloom, his face showed the shadow of a chiseled hawk nose and a sharp chin, which, none the less, seemed soft and warm at the same time. Before him, he cast a massive shadow

from his barreled chest and the mighty thews which made up his legs. His whole nature, every part of his shadow, displayed a rugged handsomeness, even in the darkness.

The moon's light shown down on the graveyard like a spotlight illuminating a stage. Bats flitted beneath the rays of its light. Off in the distance, on a hill, was a ramshackle windmill. The blades of the towers had seen better days. The canvas which once covered the wooden slats hung in tatters. The man I'd seen before seemed to be engaged in some activity. Drawing nearer I could see he was flinging dirt with a shovel.

He was already down two or three feet into the earth. The hole formed a six-foot-long rectangle. At its head was a plain wooden marker. There was no name, only a square of black paint with the number 323 stenciled in white on its surface.

A grave robber! As I swooned, the man's shovel hit something solid. "Help me with this." His request seemed earnest, so I climbed into the hole next to him. Half buried in the soil was an iron box held closed by a clasp locked with an ancient padlock. We pulled the box out of the hole and threw it on the ground next to the grave.

Climbing out of the hole, the man proceeded to smash the lock with the shovel. It took several blows with the heavy tool to show any substantial results. At last, the lock snapped open and the man managed to remove it from the clasp holding the box closed. He lifted the lid. Inside, resting on a dark gray velvet pillow was a large leather-bound book. It had a plain cover, but its numerous pages were held tightly closed by three strong metal clasps.

"I'd heard they buried the book out here," he remarked, "but I hardly let myself believe it. Until now."

I was curious. "What is it?"

"This book contains all the secrets of the universe," he explained, tapping the cover with his palm. "the work was surreptitious circulated amongst philosophers for generations, each one adding another section or a postscript. At the beginning of the last millennia, it was translated into Greek by a scholar from Constantinople. It was suppressed and disappeared shortly after the scholar was brutally executed for heresy."

Wolves howled in the distance. A band of torch-carrying villagers seemed to be chasing a large individual into the cemetery. The torches all seemed odd. None of them showed any of the red, orange or yellow light one usually associates with flame. All I could see was a dim white light making up the fire. "Come on," the handsome man took the book out of the chest and headed for the entrance to the graveyard, "Let's get out of here before they find us." I hurried after him.

Outside the graveyard's arched gateway was a lonely dirt road, but the dirt was gray and not brown. Across the street was a Victorian house on a low-rise hill. On the second floor, was a single room with a light showing. Now my long-distance vision isn't exceptionally good, but I swear I could see the corpse of an old woman in a rocking chair in the harsh light of the window.

We turned down the road to the left, but before we could get any significant distance a group of men appeared. They were shirtless and well-built. As they approached, I noticed they seemed to have

abundant facial and body hair. As time went on this only grew more pronounced. Several of them fell to the ground, landing on all fours like an animal.

“Werewolves,” the man declared, “they must be after the book.”

Taking advantage of the delay caused by their change in form, we turned around and proceeded down the right side of the road at a pace. We barely got out of visual range of the werewolves when a group of men appeared to be coming toward us up the road. They were extraordinarily poorly dressed and dirty beyond description. They shambled up the road with an odd gait, one leg dragging behind another. We turned at once and headed back toward the cemetery gate.

The very moment we closed and locked the gate, the zombies and the werewolves came together with a crash. Arms and fur went flying everywhere. Sharp canine teeth snapped around the dry bones of the recently dead. Yet even the spitting blood looked like nothing more than sprays of black ink. I looked around in a panic to see if there were any other escape routes at hand. Behind me, the windmill was a flame, covered in a bright white blaze. It appeared surrounded by angry villagers.

We ran blindly between the grave markers, weaving frantically between the stones. At last, we found ourselves back at gravesite 323. The empty box was still there, but the hole appeared to be much deeper. The bottom was pitch black, not even the beams of the moon penetrated its murky depths. The man looked at me. I could have stared into those big eyes all night long, but I expected that we didn’t have much time. He looked at me plaintively. “I know this is going to sound strange, but we need a place to hide until this all this blows over. This may sound creepy, but the only place left to hide in down there.” He indicated the bottom of the grave at marker 323.

I stepped towards him. I felt my feet resting on a metal plate. “I trust you,” I told him. Then holding hands, we both leaped into the darkness of a freshly dug grave.

I landed in a pile of hay, sun streaming through the slats in the barn. I struggled to my feet. I found myself wearing a mid-range skirt and, God help me, bobby socks under a pair of strapped black shoes. I had on a loose blouse with a bandana wrapped around my neck. Something seemed to be on my head. It was a dark blue beret. The barn seemed well used, but there were no animals. I strode out into the sunlight. The barn was at the bottom of a set of low hills.

Atop one was a shirtless man. He had short black hair that stood up, standing firm atop his head. His face was deeply chiseled mixture of hawk nose and majestic chin. His features were soft and warm at the same time. Below his neck was a massive, barreled chest covered in sweat. His whole nature, even down to the way he moved, displayed a rugged handsomeness. He was raking together piles of cut grain. Beyond the hill he was standing on was a dirt road. An armored car with German markings led a line of Opel-Benz trucks. The man watched with interest.

After they passed, he picked up the rake and walk towards the barn. He glanced at me as he passed. “They are looking for the English flyers. We have to move them.” He explained in a thick French accent. Throwing the rake on the ground, he headed for the barn. I ran along behind him.

Inside, he brushed away some of the hay on the floor, revealing a trap door. Two men in RAF uniforms climbed up a ladder from a room hidden below. One of them carried a large leather-bound book with a plain cover. It was held tightly closed by three metal clasps. “The *Bosh* are looking for you. We need to

move you to a better safehouse. The Germans use dogs here to track down escaping Jews. It's not safe. We need to get you to Spain."

"It's not us they're after," one of the fliers commented, "It's the bloody book. You must help us. This book must not fall into Nazi hands."

"Nigel," The other one was frustrated, "If the Jerries' have dogs, the gig is up." You can tell when a man is ready to throw in the towel. You could see, in his face, this one had already given up and more.

"The dogs will not concern us," the shirtless man responded. Digging in a pile of hay he pulled out three captured German MP-40 submachine guns. He handed one to the English flyer without the book and the other one to me. "Get the bag," the Frenchman instructed me.

"Bag?" I asked confused.

"Over on the table. White bag with drawstrings." I glanced over at an old wooden table which had seen better days. On it, as described, was the aforementioned bag. I walked over and scooped it into my hands.

"Spread it around. All around." He directed me. I opened the bag and it was filled with a white powder. I took handfuls of the dusty material and started spreading it around the floor of the barn. The shirtless man addressed the two English flyers. "The Germans will be here soon. Their dogs will track your scent to the barn."

"Bloody hell," The book carrier complained.

"They will not be a problem," the shirtless man explained. "The girl is spreading cocaine. Once the dogs get a whiff of the powder they won't be able to find a place to shit, never mind our trail. But it would be best if we were not here when they arrive."

"Bloody good thinking!" the English flyer with the machine gun exclaimed.

"Don't get too excited," the Frenchman explained, "It's a long way to Spain." From the door, he pointed the English officers at a copse of trees at the far end of the farm. "Head for those trees. We've got a few more things to get. We'll join you there." The two Englishmen took off at a slow trot. The shirtless man handed me a satchel charge. "I didn't want to tell the English, but we'll have to go through St.-Jean-de-Luz."

"You can't be serious," I protested, "the entire 9<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division is stationed there."

"I know." He worked up a smile. "We'll need a diversion."

"What kind of diversion?" I didn't like where this was heading. I have no problem killing Germans. Although I must be honest, I wasn't fond of the idea of finding myself on the wrong side of a firing squad.

"That's what the satchel charge is for," he worked up a second grin, "You're going to blow up division headquarters." Before I could respond, he ran off towards the trees. Having little choice, I followed along.

The journey south was uneventful. We could hear the dogs arrive at the barn. There was a cacophony of barking, then silence. The cocaine must have done its work. We made our way across grain filled fields and across empty pastures. There were no tails. No signposts to tell us which way we were going, or to let us know how far we had yet to go. We knew as we neared the border, the way would be blocked with twelve-foot tall fences, topped by barbed wire. Only the main road though St.-Jean-de-Luz was left unguarded. The German's felt only a fool would saunter right by the 9<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer division headquarters. Right now, I was beginning to feel like a fool. A big one who was busy escorting two men in British RAF uniforms right through the middle of an enemy-occupied town.

As we arrived, keeping ourselves hidden between the building, we saw most of the headquarters staff standing in the street. They were watching a bare-knuckle boxing match between two shirtless soldiers. The two were circling each other slowly. One was clearly larger than the other, but each time the larger man threw a punch, the small man ducked under it and rolled away to the side.

"Sarah," the Frenchman whispered and pointed me towards the main door. I handed him my machine gun. I walked down the street and took an unattended bicycle which was leaning against a building. I rode up to headquarters slowly, but no one seemed to notice. They were too busy watching the match. I was easily able to slip inside.

In the first room was a corporal, sitting behind a desk, shuffling papers. I had to keep his attention off the explosives I had strapped to my back. At a distance, it just looked like a simple backpack, but up close its real purpose became obvious. I unbuttoned the top three bottoms of my blouse and casually approached the desk. The corporal barely looked up. Once the fact my buttons lay open sank in, his head popped up like he was coming to attention. "Can I help you?" he asked suggestively.

"I have an appointment, with ... with," I stammered, looking for the right ploy to explain my presence.

"Oberst Lutz," the corporal obligingly answered for me.

"Yes," I smiled deceptively, "Oberst Lutz. Is he in?"

"No," the corporal smiled back at me, "He off inspecting the new vehicles. They've sent us Panther tanks to replace our old Mark IV's. You can stay while you wait." He indicated a chair by his desk. "Perhaps in the meantime, we can discuss how I might console you until the Oberst returns."

I took the seat next to him and put on my most attractive smile. "You're not watching the fight."

"Oscar will tire of his ducking and weaving eventually," the corporal joked, "and Heinz will land a single punch and it will all be over. It's always the same."

"Heinz," I tried to look interested, "is he the big one?" I asked, "the one laying on the ground?"

The corporal anxiously put down his papers and walked over to the window to observe the contest.

As he stood, I took off the charge and pulled the ring attached to the detonator. I tucked the charge under the part of the desk which held the drawers. While the corporal was busy looking out the window, expecting a surprise upset in the match, I quietly slipped out the front door. I got back on the bicycle and headed off down the street. Halfway across the cobblestones, an explosion ripped through the first floor

of the building. Over my shoulders, I could see smoke and dust pouring out the windows. Men were running everywhere. A siren screamed in the distance.

I saw the two Englishmen and their French escort heading off down the street toward the Spanish end of town. No one noticed them in the confusion. I rode my bicycle to catch up to them. I threw the bicycle down when I arrived, and the Frenchman threw me my MP-40. I caught it in midair.

We hurried down the street. The French citizens attempted not to notice us, no one wanted trouble with the Bosh. Turning a corner, a pudgy-faced man appeared wearing a dark suit and hat. On his lapel, he wore a Nazi party badge. Behind him stood two well-armed infantrymen.

“Monsieur Castle. Madame.” The took off his hat. “Why all the rush?” the two guards leveled their machine pistols at us and we heard the distinctive sound of jackboots on the cobblestones behind us. We raised our hands in the air. “Englanders.” The detective muttered, “I see your circle of acquaintances continues to increase.” The soldiers who approached from behind relieved us of our weapons. The man indicated a doorway in the adjacent building. “Why don’t we go into my office. You can introduce me to your new friends.”

Keeping my hands above my head, I allowed them to lead me into the building. I suddenly remembered my open buttons as I stepped on a metal plate covering the threshold. The room inside was dark, with only a few yellow button-sized lights on the far wall. The fluorescent lights flashed on. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. The airlock door was closed and the indicator on the wall showed the chamber was filling up with a breathable atmosphere. On the wall, I could see the readouts showing our heart rate. It was a little fast.

I opened the two fasteners around my neck and took off the helmet. My partner also took off his helmet. He had short black hair which stood up, the like of close-cropped coifs popular with astronauts. His face had a classic pilot’s hawk nose and a serious chin, yet it was unusually soft and warm at the same time. Below his neck, the spacesuit made him look like he had a massive, barreled chest which rested upon two thick legs covered in the white linen suit. His whole posture, even down to the way he moved, displayed a confident handsomeness.

It took us a while to get out of those suits. Steve had those brown eyes of his, they always look so happy. When the alarms when off, we were still wearing just the standard sleeveless undershirt and those ridiculously tiny and tight shorts. I waited impatiently as the internal door to the airlock slowly opened. I didn’t have the patience to let it open completely. I ducked under the opening and ran down the hall toward the bridge. The low gravity made it difficult to say on my feet. I made repeated use of the hand railings in the passageway to keep going. Steve was close behind me. Gaining any more forward momentum increased in difficulty as the ship started to sway violently. Weapons blasts rocked the ship.

“You see,” Steve commented sarcastically, “I’m off the bridge for two seconds and everyone forgets how to fly this thing. Did I ever tell you about the time ...”

“They’re after the book.” My voice was unsteady. It cracked as I spoke. There are times to be calm and not panic. This was not one of them.

“Who the hell thought up here would be a good place for it,” Steve remarked, dipping his well-formed cranium under a bulkhead.



“The UN thought if they sent the book up here it would calm everyone down.” My voice was still a little bit shaky. “Plus, you need a rocket to get yourself up here. This limits the number of countries which can get involved.” Of course, no one expected some hot shot to hire the Insectoids to seize the book on their behalf.

When we reached the bridge, I could see the smaller Insectoid craft swarming around the ship. The bad news was the ships were traveling so fast, the defensive fire was so ineffective as to be a waste of time. The weapons systems couldn't move fast enough to keep track of the targets. The good news was their speed was making it difficult for those same ships to score any effective hits on our hull.

Steve sat in the fire control chair and started working the defensive turrets manually. With any luck, he could score more hits the computer. The lights of weapons fire filled the bridge. I took the co-pilot's seat and immediately began taking some evasive action. I wasn't in a good mood. I did a sudden crazy Ivan to the port side and smashed directly into one of the fighters who was passing too close for his own good. The ship exploded in a shower of sparks. Steve got another one in his sights or maybe it was blind luck. The result was the same, a second cloud of debris wafting over the ship.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw it jump in its plastic case. That stupid leather-bound book with the plain cover held tightly closed by three metal clasps. It didn't belong out here. If it had been in an airlock, I'd open the outer door. Just as I was thinking this, there was a big thud. Troop carrier. So, this is why the fighters were scooting around so fast. They were covering for the approach of the boarding party. The ship's hull groaned as the plasma-cutters started going to work burning through the hull.

Steve and I rose at the same time. We grabbed two lasers from the racks on the wall. In a flash, we were working our way down the main passageway. Then the gravity failed completely. The bugs must have cut through the wiring, shutting off the power to the generators. Still, we managed to get to the break-in point as the final cut was being made. The heavy panel fell into the floor with a loud crash. Then they started dropping down through the now open ceiling. The first alien charged down the hall like a crazed buffalo. It was a cross between a huge six-legged beetle and a large praying mantis. My laser blaster shots filled the air. Steve was right behind me the whole time. Flakes of debris and dust flew from the wall as we scored near missed. Damn those things are fast. I squeezed the trigger and a ray of red light flashed from the laser straight into the chest of the charging alien. Blood and gore painted the walls and the deck plating. The creature crashed to the floor with a grunt, its legs shaking rapidly ... and then nothing. It lay on the floor, immobile ...

There was a loud noise, and someone tried the knob on the door to the left. It was locked. Everyone could hear the crash of the ram bashing into the door. It slowly deformed and the hinges holding the door to the wall gave way. The door came to a crash on the floor.

Inspector Norris stepped through the open door followed by two uniformed police officers carrying a hand-held battering ram. His expression was blank, the archetype of the policeman. Contemplative, logical and relentless.

“You can't come in here,” Dr. Leclerc demanded. He was standing by two hospital beds. The woman was resting at a 45-degree angle, held up by a long steel plate at the bottom of the bed. The man was lying flat because he was covered in an iron lung. The device made his chest look massive. Still, even in the

machine, the hawk nose and the pronounced chin were distinctive. He could easily have had a career as an actor. Both were wired to brain scanning monitors hanging from the wall.

“I’d heard you’d taken two patients out of the hospital, but I didn’t believe it until now.” The report had come in over a week ago, but the inspector resisted taking any action. However, his superior felt differently. The inspector and the doctor gazed at each other without further comment. Each had their own point of view, their own reasons which led them to be in this room. Norris turned to his associates with a cool demeanor. “Why don’t you two gentlemen go down to the little café on the corner and get yourselves a cup of coffee.” They started to protest, but he held up his hand to halt them. “I’ll call you if I need you.” The two looked at each other and stepped out the door.

“These are the only two survivors of the freak bus accident in Time Square, aren’t they?” Inspector Norris asked, gazing closely at the woman.

“Yes,” Leclerc replied. “Sarah Greene and Stephen Castle. All the others were killed.”

“There’s no evidence which suggests they ever knew each other,” Norris elaborated. “Two total strangers riding on a bus.” The inspector gazed into their unblinking eyes.

“You can’t keep them here,” Norris informed him with a bit of uncharacteristic sadness, “The families have already signed the paperwork. There is a coma, Leclerc. The medical board has pronounced them brain dead.”

“Don’t you see,” Dr. Leclerc protested, “Look at the monitors, there’s brain activity!”

“Leclerc, you look at the monitors! They’re picking up stray environmental signals. They have to be.” He gave a sad, disappointed scowl. “They are exactly the same. No two people have the same brain patterns, I shouldn’t have to tell you this. Just look at it. They’d have to be participating in the same dream for those readings to be real.”

“They’re not dead, Norris,” Dr. Leclerc griped, “Miss Greene’s feet even move from time to time. I have a record of her pressing the steel plate.” He held up a sheaf of papers. Norris had rarely heard even the most rigorous prosecutor speak with such passion.

“Fingernails and hair continue to grow even after death,” Inspector Norris announced. “I’ve seen stranger things happen to bodies with missing heads.”

Dr. Leclerc looked defeated. “Look,” He sounded-off defensively, “They are not costing the hospital anything. I’ll sign the paperwork. Let them stay here. No one has to know. Families can be happy. They can collect the insurance. The hospital can go about its business of not caring.”

“Leclerc, you’re not a hospital.” He seemed disappointed in the old physician. “What happens to them if something happens to you? How will take care of them?”

An older man stepped into the doorway, avoiding the broken-down door. “I will,” George announced, “and if I’m not around, my son will do it.” George and his son lived in the apartment across the hall. The two must have been attracted by the noise of the officers crashing through the doors. They stood near the doorway, in solidarity.

Inspector Norris walked over to a table between the two patients. They were holding hands tightly on top of a book. "Please don't." Leclerc was practically begging the inspector. "The minute you separate the two of them their brainwave patterns go to zero. That's how I know it's not background noise. It's their brain waves."

Norris looked at the doctor. "Can I look at the book?"

"Please, don't take it out of the room," Leclerc pleaded. "Their heart rate skyrockets whenever it leaves the room."

Inspector Norris pulled the book out from under their joined hands. It was an old paperback. The binding was warped and worn, the result of too many pages being forced into a simple glue back format. The paper was old and yellowed as it had been made before the days of acid-free paper. The cover was straight out of the fifties. It was a painted image, like a comic book. The main character appeared to be a small woman in gypsy garb. It was a horrible stereotype complete with a bandana over her head. Both the shirt and blouse were covered in over-the-top flower prints, but they were in clashing colors which would only look acceptable if one was color blind.

She seemed to be in some kind of generalized saloon or perhaps a speakeasy. She was staring into a crystal ball. The image in the ball was upside down and indistinct, but it was clearly a large man and a woman. In one hand the gypsy was clutching an assortment of bills, four twenties and a ten.

The title of the book stood out in large, bold Helvetica lettering. The white title read: *I Can Find Your Soulmate for You Wholesale*. Norris slid the book back under the joined hands of the two comatose patients. He stared up at the monitors, watching the patterns bounce along the screen as if one was a duplicate of the other.

"The book doesn't belong to either of them." The inspector commented as an aside, knowing full well its origin.

"No," Leclerc explained, "It's from the hospital library. Someone left it in their room." The two eyed each other once more. Life is a strange thing. No one can tell for sure when it starts and fewer still can make claim to knowing when it ends. The one thing that almost everyone will attest to, including most scientists, is the fact the world is a strange place. Stranger than most of us can imagine.

"Do you believe in soulmates Inspector Norris?" the doctor asked.

"Not at all" replied the inspector, "It's all a bunch of literary allusions." He wrung his hands together, still internally debating what he should do. The legal officer in him wanted it reported, a crime solved. But there was a sentimental portion deeply buried in him as well. One which sided with the good doctor. "You know, the whole idea of romantic love only started during the Victorian era." He explained. "It doesn't seem logical humans should acquire soulmates in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century."

Leclerc gazed at the inspector. He slowly glanced up at the monitors and at their hands, joined together over an old romance novel long out of print. "Perhaps you should reconsider. Perhaps we should all reconsider."