

Days After Oz

A
New
Gaslight
Story
Issue O N E



Rain cascaded rhythmically, playing its soft staccato upon the cobblestone arteries of New Gaslight. Huddling under the overhang of a crumbling edifice, a lion found shelter. His coat, a canvas of dampened, hippocamp leather, provided scant comfort against the relentless deluge. Yet, even in his discomfort, he held gratitude for this rudimentary refuge. New Gaslight was a jungle of steel and smoke, a lethal terrain for one of his kind. He was always struggling with the urban squalor, the clinging smog – a stark contrast to the Ozmandian landscapes of his memories.

A place known as home felt like a spectral remnant from a past life rather than a tangible location. What remained after humanity had ravished the planet was no sanctuary for him. As he ventured through the rain-swept labyrinth of the city, the world's history played out in his mind. Earth had once worn a mantle of beauty and vitality, but the insatiable hunger and blindness of humanity had consumed its Akashan essence. The invasion of the Martians merely escalated the planet's downfall, a disastrous war leaving both combatants battered and weakened. Was it this cataclysm that had birthed humanity's tortured existence? Or was the seed of cruelty always nestled within the human heart? Lion could only speculate.

New Gaslight existed in perpetual twilight, a shadowy manifestation of literal and metaphorical darkness. Factory monoliths spat fire and smoke into the heavens, casting an unending veil over the cityscape. Gas lamps spluttered a sickly glow onto the grimy faces of the city's denizens, unveiling layers of despair and fear hidden beneath their hardened masks. When the sun dared to pierce this inhospitable environment, its rays were muted and melancholic, mirroring the city's dreary demeanor.

New Gaslight was a city of stark dichotomy. The opulent mansions of the elite, guarded by private mercs, stood as conspicuous anomalies amidst the sprawling slums. This city was a stage where the rich reveled, and the poor withered like dying flowers never to blossom. It was a city where immortality was a privilege of the highborn, and early death the destiny of the proletariat. Struggle was the only constant here.

Lion had come to know the city intimately, each twist and turn, every dim-lit alley and sigil laced corner harboring unseen horrors. Existence was a never-ending battle here, complicated further by territorial disputes of the various gangs and criminal syndicates.

The city was an urban battleground, fraught with danger and desperation. Pleas for mercy echoed through the dank alleyways, the soundtrack to a city forsaken by its own rulers, the government indifferent as long as their lavish lifestyles were preserved.

Under the imposing shadows of the smoke-spewing factories, the lion maneuvered through the bleak streets, his identity hidden beneath his coat. Drawing attention could prove fatal in such a landscape, especially for a creature of his background. Black magick sigils and red-hot steam pipes dotted the mechanized beasts of industry, augmenting the already grim scenery with an eerie glow.

Despair and hopelessness were etched into the faces of the city's inhabitants, a testament to their struggle against a society that offered them neither aid nor protection. In this urban jungle, the law of the wild prevailed – survival of the fittest, survival of the most ruthless.

Wandering through this labyrinth, Lion questioned the longevity of this way of life. How long would the ruling class indulge in their debauchery, how long could the citizens of New Gaslight bear their existence under constant fear of Torquemada torture, and the hunger, the desperation? The answers lay hidden in the smog-

choked air, but one fact remained clear: New Gaslight was a formidable mistress, an indomitable beast that would never be tamed.

Navigating the slums, he was enveloped in the thick, smoky miasma. The factories encircling the district were unregulated polluters, spewing their toxins into the heart of the slums. It was a cruel toll that the underprivileged paid for the city's industrial aspirations. A deep sense of unease accompanied him as he walked, well aware that danger was a constant companion.

At the journey's end, he stood before a derelict monument of the past, the current residence of the infamous Sherlock Holmes. The building was a crumbling relic, teetering on the brink of collapse, the sound of shattering glass and the muted groans of a man echoing from its decrepit walls.

A heaviness enveloped the lion's heart, as he considered the tragic trajectory of Sherlock's life. The brutal assault by The Butcher's henchmen on his sanctuary years ago had ravished Sherlock's world. The once brilliant mind, celebrated for its keen detective skills, was now eclipsed by his notorious reputation as a bare-knuckle brawler, his victories rewarded with bottles of cheap liquor and dirt grown Opium.

Yet, even in this house of despair, the lion could discern a glimmer of hope. He rapped gently on the door, carrying with him the knowledge of Sherlock's past interest in the affairs of Oz, particularly following the War. Perhaps, despite the shambles that his life had become, he would lend his aid.

Eventually, the decrepit door groaned open, revealing the disheveled figure of a broken man. His former immaculate attire and groomed appearance were replaced by ragged clothing and neglected hair.

Bloodshot eyes, though clouded by inebriation, flickered with a glimmer of recognition as he gestured Lion inside.

"Why are you here? I thought you knew I'd turned my back on Ozmandian matters. That damned war robbed me of everything! All for what? What was the purpose?" Lock's words emerged disjointed and slurred, his form emanating the stench of liquor and narcotics. Fresh wounds hinted at recent brawls, augmenting his image as a man bereft of hope.

"Do you know what I sacrificed? For a land I'll never tread again? For a woman I'll never embrace again?" Sherlock's tirade continued, his voice echoing with bitter resentment and frustration.

"Sherlock, please," the lion interjected, attempting to pacify him.

"Do not utter that name," he retorted, anger flashing in his eyes. Clearly, Sherlock's scars from the war ran deep, and any invocation of his past was akin to rubbing salt on these wounds.

"Watson... my dear Watson... Now that we're separated, no one will call me that name! It's Lock now. Just Lock." Lock's frantic search for his opium pipe and a shirt continued.

Lock's utterances landed like a physical blow. The raw agony in his voice resonated within the lion, eliciting an empathic ache. Having known Sherlock for many years, it was harrowing to see his friend in such a state. The war had exacted a heavy toll on all of them, but it seemed to have marked Sherlock with deeper scars.

Observing Lock stagger around the room in search of his pipe and shirt, the lion wondered how he survived in this perpetual fog of intoxication. Broken liquor bottles littering the room further confirmed his fears.

"Lock, I deeply regret the assault, your loss. Watson was a wonderful woman," the lion offered, attempting to comfort him.

He wasn't certain what to anticipate from Lock, but he knew that beneath the damaged exterior, there was still a good man. New Gaslight was a merciless beast, consuming its inhabitants, and it seemed that Sherlock, too, had been ensnared in its clutches.

Lock's response was sharp and acerbic, his words tainted with bitterness and wrath. "Spare me your cowardly platitudes, Lion. What brings you here?" He growled, punctuating his query with a deep drag from his opium pipe.

The lion drew a deep breath, steeling himself. He knew his words needed careful selection, even the slightest agitation could further inflame Lock. "The Witch is rumoured to have returned. Whisperings of a cult, blood magick, sacrifices are circulating. Ozmandians are being preyed upon, and humans as well. No one dares to discern the truth, no one dares to undertake the quest. I was ho-"

He took a deep breath, bracing himself to further articulate his appeal for assistance. Yet, before he could even commence, Lock interjected. His eyes were inflamed and his voice blurred as he stumbled about the room, groping for his opium pipe and administering another hit.

"No! I've severed all ties with Ozmandian matters, you wretched Lion! Don't presume that our shared service warrants me any obligation towards you!" His words erupted in an incoherent, drunken tirade.

"Especially after the Tinman incident. We were a man short that day, just one man! Now, we're stranded in this accursed city, and I'm bereft of my wife's company! I have a child you filthy Lion, a child I will never meet!"

A bitter, humorless laugh echoed in the room. It was raw and borderline hysterical, suggestive of a man teetering on the brink of insanity. "But we succeeded in sealing the portal!" he hollered, his fist hammering the table with such force that the glasses jittered. "We shielded Oz from the damned humans! And now you return, groveling for my assistance? After everything that has transpired?"

Lock's tirade escalated, the veins in his neck standing out in stark relief. His palpable rage caused the lion to involuntarily recoil, pressing against the wall. "You require my aid?" he spat. "You wish me to gamble my life once more, after all the sacrifices I've made? Never. I refuse to return there, not for your sake, nor for anyone else's!"

He took a lengthy puff from his pipe, his eyes fluttering shut. A moment of silence prevailed as he seemed engrossed in introspection. When he spoke again, his voice had mellowed. "Leave me in peace, Lion. I've had my fill of this war and of you. Just...just leave."

The sight of his former friend succumbing to addiction and anguish caused a wave of despair to crash over the lion. The war had cost Lock dearly, and it seemed he had lost himself in the process. "There remains a good man within you, Lock. It's a pity even you fail to recognize that." The lion turned to leave, a lump forming in his throat. Words had exhausted their utility. He exited the room, the door creaking shut behind him.

Leaving Lock's abode, his heart pounded from the emotional intensity of their encounter. The sounds of New Gaslight's pandemonium accompanied him as he traversed the desolate park, the city revealing its harsh reality. What were once verdant trees and shrubs had now succumbed to decay. The only vestiges of life were stray animals scavenging through refuse bins in search of sustenance.

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Debris littered the surroundings - used cigarette butts, discarded liquor bottles, and scraps of paper adrift in the breeze. The earth was barren and dusty, desiccated due to lack of rainfall. It was a disheartening spectacle, as if the park was in a state of suspended animation, anticipating a change, any change, to disrupt its bleak monotony.

Settling himself on an abandoned park bench to eat his lunch, the Lion was struck by the haunting vacancy of park. No sound of children's laughter filled the air, no families spreading their picnic baskets, no couples meandering with interlocked fingers. The park, it seemed, had become a desolate wasteland, a makeshift sanctuary for the hopeless and downtrodden.

As he savored the simple flavors of his meal, the Lion's gaze drifted over the eerie scene before him. Towering smokestacks punctuated the horizon, their ceaseless belching of dark, inky tendrils serving as an unkind reminder of the city's rampant industrialization. Childhood innocence had been forfeited to the brutal demands of the factories, mines, and sweatshops, which now speckled the cityscape like malignant tumors.

Indeed, the only inhabitants of the park were the ragged creatures of the city's underbelly - the skeletal dogs and scrawny cats, relegated to scavenging for mere morsels amongst the trash.

Lighting up a cigarette, he inhaled deeply, allowing the smoke to fill his lungs before expelling it in a languid plume of grey. His gaze lost in the distance, the Lion reflected on the city's woeful state. New Gaslight was gasping its last breaths, suffocating beneath a suffocating shroud of smog.

The first droplets of toxic rain began to fall, mingling with the omnipresent smog to form a noxious haze that stung his eyes and scorched his throat. Depleted supplies – painkillers, strawbloom herbs – nagged at the corners of his mind. A potential resupply beckoned him – the Black Hands were dealing at low rates, tantalizingly close by.

The city's winding labyrinth was an interlaced jigsaw of shadows, each building, each alleyway, holding onto fragments of a hushed conversation between the sinking sun and the encroaching night. As twilight cloaked the city, the Lion found himself lurching towards the street car station.

A symphony of distant, fading echoes accompanied his steps - the cries of the city's nocturnal children, the whining lament of rusted gears, and the wind's hollow howl through the skeletal remnants of abandoned structures.

He threaded his way through the streets, past the walls that stood sentinel, their stone facades weather-beaten and scarred by time. The glow of elusive will-o'-wisps pulsed in the deepening twilight, their spectral luminescence casting ghostly shadows that danced in the encroaching darkness.

Above, an airship, massive and branded with painted sigils, hovered ominously against the night sky, its hull catching the ghostly gleam of the waning moonlight. The Lion glanced upwards, his gaze narrowing at the sight of the airborne leviathan. "Fairy dust," he muttered under his breath, a note of disdain curling around the words.

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