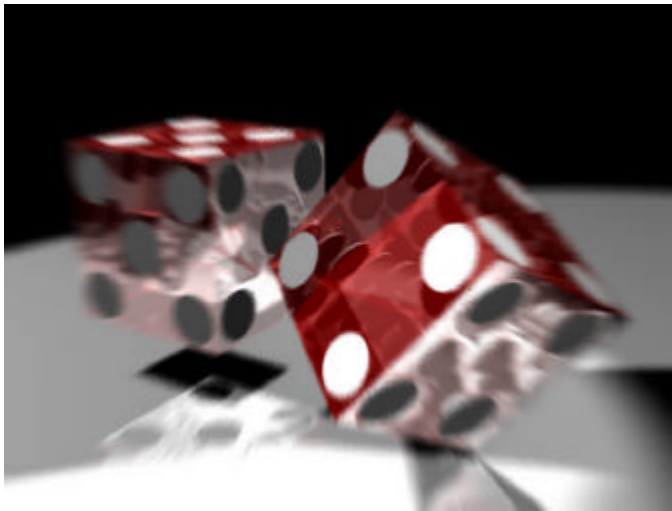


A Handful Of Dice

A Varul Hemming'ile Novel.

By
Calum Kerr



Down these green streets a man
must go who is not himself green,
who is neither alien nor human...
He must be completely human
and completely inhuman. He must
be the best man off his world and
a good enough man for any
planet. Or star system. Or galaxy.

-Breevan Stiars, *The Collected Collections*.

Chapter 1: Down These Green Streets

I was sitting at my desk on a cold, lilac morning, wondering what I'd done with the night before, when she walked into my office.

I heard the outer door of my waiting room swing open and then shut again, wheezing on its hydraulic arm, and the harsh tap of her heels on the boards reached me through my partly open office door. A shadow fell on the frosted glass that formed the top half of the door, but didn't break it. There was a moment's silence then it swung slowly open and stopped halfway. There was a short hesitation, long enough for me to hear a cautiously drawn breath, and she walked into my office.

I could tell right away just from looking at her that she was going to be trouble. First was the gaudiness of her low cut red dress. The beads round her neck swayed in time to her hips and her pointed shoes could have been used to cut a man's heart from his chest.

And then there were the arms. I must admit that I don't normally talk to anyone with more than four arms before breakfast. I've found that it can spoil the most important meal of the day. For once I decided to let it pass. Anyway, the bottle in my drawer was empty so breakfast was off the menu.

She had six arms, grouped in tandem down the sides of her torso with the last pair coming from the nicest pair of hips I'd seen in a greeb's age. Her legs went all the way down but didn't quite reach the floor. That was no problem, neither do the legs of my desk. Her hair was the green of freshly broken glass and her eyes were the deep, dark shade of red of fresh blood or old wine.

“Can I help you?” I asked, leaning back in my hard-worn chair to get a better view of those long legs.

“I certainly hope so.” She raised a cigarette to her lips and sucked. I sat forward, abruptly.

“Would you like to sit down, Miss...?”

“Elbott, Essee Elbott.”

She sat, and I saw slightly more of her legs as her skirt rode up. She followed the direction of my gaze and one of her left hands pulled it back down. I pulled my chair in towards my desk and sat up straight.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“You sound like my doctor.”

“Do I look like a doctor?”

“Well, you want to examine me don’t you?”

I gulped. “Do you always answer a question with a question?”

“Do you, Mr Hemming’ile?” She pulled again on her cigarette. The crinkling sound as her lips crushed the filter filled the room.

For a moment, neither of us said anything. She took the time to look me up and down and scanned the contents of my slightly ratty office with a pained expression. I knew how she felt. She said “I want you to find my husband.”

“Really?” I asked, unsurprised but stalling for time while I scanned her left hands for rings. There were none that I could see, but that didn’t mean anything. Some of the rarer non-earth transitional metals don’t always show up in normal light - or normal space.

“Where did you see him last?”

“Three days ago. He said he was going out for a bottle of milk. I should have been suspicious at the time.”

“Why?” I asked. I knew the answer, but I just wanted to see if she would lie to me this early in our relationship.

“Milk’s poisonous to us.”

She wasn’t lying about that. The easiest way to kill a six-armed Dagobajan is to slip milk into his gasoline and witch-hazel. They puff up and swell up and eventually blow up. It’s not pretty.

“Okay.” I pretended to think. Show is everything in a conversation like that. There was no point in showing how bored I was at having this conversation for the thousandth time. “Any idea where he might have gone?”

“Only this.” She said holding out her middle right hand. She opened it palm upwards to show me a small white object covered in spots.

“A dice?”

“Die.”

I didn’t rise to her semantic bait. “Whatever.”

I lifted it off her hand, briefly making skin to skin contact and feeling the body heat baking off her palm. It looked like an ordinary dice. It felt like plastic, was off white and had inset black dots. The only difference between it and an ordinary dice was that it’s six sides all showed the number five: five dots arranged 2 - 1 - 2, in a nice neat X. However you rolled it, it would always show 5.

I rolled it across my desk: 5.

Again: 5.

One last time: 5.

Unless it was doing something extra-dimensionally, it was a pretty ordinary - but pretty useless - dice.

“Where did you find it?” I asked, not looking at her but at the small cube I was twirling in my hand.

“In the trousers he was wearing the night before he disappeared.”

She considered how to tell her story and I held her gaze. She finally had my interest. “He came in, took them and the rest of his clothes off and got into bed. He wouldn’t tell me where he’d been, just went to sleep. Next morning he was up and dressed before me wearing all of his best clothes. He even had all of his gloves on. ‘I’m going out for some milk’ he said, then he was gone before I could stop him. That was three days ago.”

I was taken with the case and even more with the client. My mind was engaged.

I pushed back in my chair again and swung my legs up to put my feet on the desk. She stared at them. Maybe it would have looked better if I’d had my shoes on, but I think better in my socks. I took them down again as I asked my next question.

“Why did you take so long to come to me?”

“Well, I thought he would be back. He’s been away before but he always came back after one night. He’s never been gone for two before.”

A sliver tear formed in the corner of her crimson eye and trickled down her porcelain cheek, leaving a mercurial trail. It gathered for a moment before dripping off her sharp chin onto the wide red canopy of her dress front. Once there it started to smoke as it slowly burnt through the fabric.

“You can stop the waterworks, Mrs Elbott.” I said, probably more harshly than I should. “They don’t suit you and this office is far too flammable.”

She stopped crying far too easily, and flashed a wry smile at me. “You’ll take the case?”

“I’ll take the case. My fee is twenty five Centaurean dollars a day plus expenses as I see fit.”

“That seems fair.”

“Fair has nothing to do with it. Every man has his price, that’s mine. And I’ll need the dice, a holo of your husband, and a list of friends he had and places he went.”

She pulled a small sheaf of real paper out of her pocket and flung it onto the top of my desk. “Anything else?” She asked, standing up.

“Just a number I can reach you on.”

She gestured to the pile of papers. “On there.” She pulled on the last of her cigarette and dropped it to my office floor grinding it underfoot. I didn’t mind, it would make an interesting change from the dust and dead insects that substitute for carpet.

I stood to face her. “I’ll need to see you again when I’ve thought of some more questions.”

Again the smile. And this time with a raised eyebrow. “When you need me, Varvl, just whistle. You know how to whistle, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I said, simply, and she left.

I sat in my excuse for an office for a few moments after she left, turning the dice over and over in my hands trying to make some sense of its identical faces as the spots blurred past. Nothing came to me except a vague cramp in my fingers, so after some minutes I stopped.

Frustrated, but intrigued, I slipped the dice and the papers into my pocket and left my office, locking the door behind me.