

Cassie's Burden

By J. Davidson Hero

The flashing red and blue crawled on the shop windows like maggots on a carcass.

“Are you sure you don't want one of these?”

Officer Cassie LaPorte stared down at the hand of her new partner, a grizzled man, lined and weathered with hard edges and rough energy. He offered her the butt-end of a Glock 9 mm, shiny and black like a piece of hard candy.

“I can't carry, I'm sensitive... thaumaphasia.” The word settled in her throat like an apology, and that angered her.

He grunted and re-swaddled the spare in the small of his back. “Suit yourself. My last partner carried; just couldn't hit a horse in the ass with the tail between his teeth.”

Cassie stiffened. Obviously Roholt had little emotional attachment to his partners, at least the spell-casting ones. That was fine. Cassie faced the glare of a jaundiced eye before; she was young, she was a woman, and she was a witch. Now she was a cop, so it was unanimous, she was hated in all quarters. But appearances to the contrary, she was as steeled as a bag of six penny nails.

Roholt tipped his own gun twice toward the alley like a top hat, then marched off.

Cassie walked up to the front door of the shop and paused, her hand on the old cold blackened brass of the handle. The cold was electric and heightened her senses. She mentally ticked off her spells, then opened the door. An old fashioned bell jingled and she cringed, but all else was quiet, dust-covered, and death-like.

The shop was called *Hex, Tome, Knack and Other Bric-a-brac*. The interior was narrow, the outer walls lined with dust-smothered tomes. A narrow aisle ran straight to the back between glassed-in cases, tables, and displays of antiquarian fodder. The lights were out and everything was crouched in shadow. Cassie felt like a decoy. She listened. A distant crackle, like the forgotten too-familiar chirp of a cricket in the corner caught her attention. It came from the back room. She murmured some words of warding and moved forward.

The door to the storage room was ajar, and a faint glow outlined its angles. Cassie could hear a muffled voice speaking in the repetitive chant of incantation.

Slowly she pushed the door and looked inside. The storeroom was larger than she anticipated and littered with crates and more cases and shelves. But in the middle of the

room, poised above an old man on the floor, was a man dressed in robes and a cowl and clutching an antique statuette. Cassie realized it was just some punk, a gang member. Only hoodlums wore wizard hoods: that's how they got their name. But this wasn't some wannabe, he was speaking real sorcery.

Training kicked in. She began to speak a spell of disruption. In a moment the punk would be babbling on the floor under her power.

And then the thug cracked the old man across the brow with the statuette and ended his spell with a shrill exclamation. A void opened in the air behind his head and a hideous thing appeared. It floated and was larger than the man. It was a ball of red tentacles, sticky and constantly writhing, like a pail full of worms. And from moment to moment underneath the tentacles mouths filled with needle-like teeth and eyes of odd disproportionate sizes would appear and then disappear again, as if a hundred disassembled faces were palpitating behind a curtain.

Cassie's spell was lost. She had been surprised by the horror in the room and now she was panicking. This was way over her head. She knew the smart thing to do was to pull out and call for backup.

Then she heard Roholt bark from the other side of the room.

"Police! On the floor. Now!"

The punk turned at the sound and pointed with the statuette. The thing sailed across the room. Roholt fired, then screamed. Frozen, Cassie stared as the thing cracked Roholt's ribs like a cage of brittle lath. Roholt's head had lolled to the side, his eyes fluttered, and his tongue hung out dripping saliva. The worm-like tentacles both suspended his body in mid-air and worked methodically to pluck his organs out, like a child pulling apart a clockwork toy. Chunk-by-chunk it fed bits of the police officer's intestines, liver, kidneys, lungs to the ravenous mouths that surfaced in the mass of tentacles like hungry piranhas each tentacle pausing only long enough for the odd eye to examine briefly each morsel.

The speed of the death buffeted Cassie. Nausea punched her in the gut; a cold sweat slapped her in the face. She wanted to run. She wished she'd taken the gun. It wouldn't have misfired like she had.

Then she noticed how the hoodlum's motions telegraphed the motions of the beast, like a puppeteer's fingers weaving in the air. The implication hit her with another wave of sickness. This hideous thing was just a giant meat puppet. The punk was actually directing its every move. This wannabe piece of shit had murdered her partner; the thing was just his weapon of choice. And then she saw the chance to save herself.

She glanced from side to side looking for something heavy to use as a weapon. She reached out and snatched at a dusty wooden duck from a box of junk on a shelf.

Charging, she threw herself with all her might into the room and swinging the decoy, she cracked the thug across the head just as he was turning... surprised. Her body rammed into his, but he collapsed to the floor like a bag of bones completely unconscious.

Cassie looked up ready to face the writhing death with everything she had, but all she saw was a shrinking ripple in the air like a cooling current of convection.

And with that Cassie knew that she would carry Roholt's death with her every day from then on.

The End