

# The Enchanted Stall

by T. M. Bemis

Hollander didn't expect his morning break to be any different than usual. Coffee from the machine in the lobby, a visit to the restroom, and back to work. No big deal. And when the deviation presented itself, it was a bagatelle, a trifle, hardly worth a moment's thought. But he did give it that much—and his decision would change everything.

Ordinarily, he used the first of four stalls in the company men's room. With an actual wall to one side, it afforded him more privacy than the middle two. The far enclosure was similarly advantaged, but that one had been broken for as long as he could remember. Today, however, the OUT OF ORDER sign was conspicuously removed, and Hollander—feeling adventurous—had elected to try it out.

Once ensconced, he'd inspected his venue with a critical eye. Should its ambience prove superior to that of Old Reliable, there was certainly no reason not to switch. But for all intents and purposes, they were identical: both were painted the same, blah, industrial blue, comparably lit, and even defaced with equivalent graffiti. (Efforts had been made to eradicate this latter, but it was hopeless, like shooing flies from your picnic lunch.) Between his Oxfords were the familiar two-tone ceramic tiles, set in a random pattern. He had learned that by forming these into well-known structures—Grand Central, say, or the Eiffel Tower—the boredom of confinement could be partially mitigated. Better in this regard was a magazine, and best of all a paperback novel—providing its storyline were as far removed from tax returns and balance sheets as creatively feasible. His current read, which he extracted now from a pocket of his sport jacket, was a yellowing whodunit from the used-book store. About to dive in, he realized that he wasn't exactly comfortable. The seat beneath him was cockeyed or something, and as he tried to center himself, his elbow struck the flush lever.

“Damn,” he grumbled, at a spritz of cold water. And then came...

...the *Voice*. “Greetings, Squire,” it said.

Hollander jerked his head around to a man beside him. He grabbed for his pants, but they were already up. Next he discovered that he was no longer seated, but standing—*outside*—in a field of grass.

“Greetings,” the man repeated. He was short and trim, with long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. He stood with his legs apart and arms akimbo, in black leotards, a scarlet blouse, and a three-quarter length cape that fluttered about him in the breeze. “It’s quite alright. Newcomers are often startled at first, but you are entirely safe here, I assure you.”

Hollander found his tongue. “*Who the cluck are you?*”

“I am Porcelino, the crown prince.” He stepped forward to offer a hand. The ring finger sported a ruby the size of a pearl onion. Hollander gawked at it.

“Ah, yes. The Regal Stone. A duplicate of my poor father’s, wherever he might be.”

A giggle drew their attention to a nearby conifer. A face appeared and was gone again: peek-a-boo. The prince chuckled. “Come on out, Tinkles. Out, now, and show yourself.” From behind the tree sprang an even smaller man—or no, a *creature*—a man’s body, but with the enormous head of a squirrel, glistening brown eyes and buckteeth. It walked upright, but precariously—as if all fours were the normal mode—in lederhosen, over a pelt of reddish fur. As Hollander watched, it covered its eyes shyly with a paw.

“This is Tinkles, the messenger,” said the prince. “It is he who informed me of your presence here today.”

“B—but,” stammered Hollander. He felt as though a high-voltage charge were arcing between his earlobes. “Where am I? And—how did I get here?”

“You are in the kingdom of Söoerland. A place far removed from the one you know. As to how you got here, I’m afraid that process remains a mystery. My people put great store in magic, and there’s a touch of that to be sure. I can tell you that you managed, by whatever means, to access...the Vortex.” At the sound of the word, squirrel-boy buried his face in the prince’s cloak. “There, there, Tinkles. It’s alright, son.

“You see Squire, the Vortex is a kind of portal between our two worlds. Nobody knows how it works, exactly; only that people can pass through it without warning, and in either direction.”

Hollander stared numbly at these apparitions, then beyond them at a huge stone castle looming in the distance. A rider was approaching from that direction. And as it drew closer, he saw that it was a dark-haired woman in white finery atop a majestic steed, locks trailing out in a gorgeous banner. The others turned to look. “It is indeed your lucky day, my friend. First you meet the prince of the realm, and now you shall greet his sister.” A squeal of delight escaped Tinkles.

When the horse had drawn to a halt and its rider dismounted, Hollander’s jaw fell. If before he’d been soaring through levels of bewilderment, tethered to earth by a gossamer thread, that thread was now snipped with a golden scissors, and the breaths of angels and cherubs wafting him ever higher into the void. For striding his way was quite simply the loveliest woman he had ever laid eyes upon. “Squire,” said the prince, “may I present to you Phloe, princess of Söoerland.” She closed the space between them, enveloped him in a ravishing scent, cradled his face in her hands, and kissed him full on the lips. He rapped his heels together blissfully as a dog might wag its tail, but then she was drifting away again like a boat departing the dock—

“Don’t go!” he shouted, lunging forward...

...to slam against a closed steel door.

“You alright in there?”

Hollander looked around him at the familiar blue walls. “Yeah,” he spluttered at last. “Thanks. I’m fine.”

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Reaching absently for the coffee, Hollander knocked it over. A mad scramble ensued as he rushed to save his documents. Only then did he notice Freddy Fellows’ pasty face, smirking from the opposite cubicle. He grabbed a pencil and winged it at him; it hit the divider and fell to the floor. Someone in pinstripes picked it up.

“Problems, Richard?” asked DeWitt, bearing a mirthless grin.

Hollander aped it. “Oh, no, sir. Thank you, sir.” When the boss had gone, he gave Freddy the finger. Then he turned back to his computer, determined to get some work done.

But it was no use. The Question blocked all progress like a mountain in the path of a railroad; something to be blasted away with ton after ton of TNT. But he only had a firecracker. And no matches.

He'd nodded off and had a dream. That had to be the answer. He'd never fallen asleep before in the john, but there was a first time for everything. And they only took a second, so even if it seemed like longer, that was just an illusion. So there it was. He'd just had a silly dream is all: *Q. E. D.*

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Fruit pies beckoned from a lighted case. The guy in the baseball cap was munching his daily burger, while waiters passed in and out of the kitchen like a relay team. In short, the diner was as it always was when he turned up there for dinner—a thirty-year-old bachelor, presently between girlfriends. (*Way between, he noted glumly.*)

A soccer match was commencing on TV. But instead of the players, Hollander envisioned a beauty on horseback, breasts abob in a clutch of satin and tresses flying in ravishing waves...

“Meatloaf no good?”

“Oh, no, Gretchen, it’s fine. Just not very hungry tonight.”

“How about dessert? A nice slice of pie, maybe?”

He shook his head. “Just the check, please. Going home to hit the sack early. This’ll sound nuts, but—did you ever have a dream so nice you wanted to get back into it?”

“Yeah, once,” she said. “In Atlantic City. But I sobered up.”

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It advanced with a maddening deliberation, like the minute hand of a watch. It was the minute hand of his watch. Hollander had checked it so many times now that the image was seared onto his retinas. Finally, he pushed the chair back and stood up. Nine-eighteen: time for a break.

Instead of the usual coffee fix, today he passed right by the machine and strode—chin-up and resolute—to the can. Entering the first stall, he shut the door and settled in. Nothing was going to happen, of course, he understood that. Nothing out of the ordinary, anyhow. And yet, much as he tried to resist it, he couldn’t suppress a certain *frisson*. A feeling that, maybe, just *maybe*... He took out his paperback and began to read. Polishing off one page, he started

down the next. But soon he became aware that he was only skimming the words with no comprehension, and stealing glances left and right—

He slammed the book shut. It hadn't been a dream, darn it! He'd been there! He'd touched her! But, why? How? There had to be a key, a triggering mechanism of some sort. He didn't have a clue what it was, but he did know one thing: if it had happened once, it could happen again. *And he very much wanted it to happen again.* C'mon, now, Rich; you're a college boy—think! Rub two brain cells together!

Dropping his gaze to the floor tiles, landmarks emerged to greet him like old friends. He reasoned across the Brooklyn Bridge, cogitated around the pillars of Stonehenge, and was ruminating up an Aztec pyramid when penny loafers appeared in the space below the door.

“Hey, Rich! You in there?”

It was Freddy. “What do you want?”

“Better come out. Dimwit's been pacing around your cubicle for twenty minutes now.”

Twenty minutes? Ye gods! “O.K.,” he said. “Thanks.”

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“These are most impressive, Richard. Clearly you're wasting your time with all this accounting nonsense.” It was a ledger pad, filled with grade-school quality sketches of castles and horses and something that looked like a rat in a Boy Scout uniform. He hadn't dared to render Phloe. “Sorry to be so crass as to mention business, but there's that trifling matter of the Bloomberg account. You remember. Our biggest client? Moving along on that, are we?”

“Well, uh—”

The smile collapsed. “Now, listen to me carefully, Richard. Today is Wednesday. You'll have those books audited, annotated and on my desk by noon Friday, or you'll be finger-painting on somebody else's dime. Got it?”

Hollander gulped. “Got it, sir.”

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Lying awake for a second straight night, Hollander stared at the ceiling fan. It looked like a bug from a fifties' horror movie, ready to

pounce. He glanced at the clock: 4:15. If he went to sleep *right this minute*, he could still get almost three and a half—

Yeah, right; who was he kidding. After a sigh, he started in again, parsing every minute of the previous day. All the files he'd had open, all the calls that he'd made, every scratch, burp, yawn and wiggle he could dredge from a silted pond of memory. There had to be a detail, some crucial bit of minutiae that he'd overlooked—and then it was just there, like the name of that band you'd been trying to remember (*Badfinger*).

It was that *stall*. The one at the far end. He'd never used that one before yesterday—there had to be a link!

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The cold light of morning put a new complexion on things. When Hollander actually *examined* the Bloomberg account and saw what it entailed, that complexion became a deathly pallor, brightened here and there by the rosy buboes of encroaching doom. Suddenly Xanadu, or whatever it was, seemed as remote and ethereal as a Kindergarten sing along. Bottom line: he had a week's work to do in a day and a half, or he'd be scrounging empties for the mortgage money. Booting up his workstation, he squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and dove in.

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It was ten-thirty before he answered a call of nature. Commencing sometime earlier as a mere whisper, it clamored now for attention like a Klaxon in a phone booth. He hit the men's room door at a trot, flinging it wide to clear the old janitor's waxy visage by a whisker. "Sorry, Rex!" he blurted, and, seeing the man was cleaning his normal haunt, hurried on down to the end. Then he was locked inside and wrestling his buckle like a skydiver with a tangled ripcord. He plunged onto the seat off balance, his palm mashing the handle...

...and was jolted every which way at once, as if he were riding a bucking bronco. His vision cleared, and he found he was riding a bucking bronco, holding on in white-knuckled terror as the great beast stamped and gamboled beneath him. Suddenly it shot forward and settled into a run, giving

him time between spankings for a frantic look around. Shock arrived and dissipated in a bell-curve swoop; no chance for indulgence when a slip could break your neck. He was back in the kingdom, and surrounded by horses. But wait. Weren't those—horns? He peered again at the equine skull bobbing before him, and saw that it too had a three-foot spire protruding from the crown. Oh, no—it couldn't be. This was too much. And the riders! They weren't—*human*. Next to him was the squirrel-boy, and in front a kangaroo, and darned if that fuzzy one wasn't a marmoset—

He looked ahead at the castle rushing up to them and a drawbridge lowering from immense, clanking chains, and as they crossed the moat (a *moat!*), he glanced down at a fellow in a dinghy with a blazer and skipper's hat...

They tore through the courtyard at full speed, his efforts at braking having no effect whatever on the storybook quadruped between his thighs. Then it skidded to a halt of its own volition, launching him into the arms of a gap-toothed behemoth draped in animal skins. He struggled to free himself with all the efficacy of a bunny in a bear trap.

“Do not worry, Squire! Harry will not hurt you!” It was Tinkles, sounding as if he were speaking through a kazoo. But sure enough, the ogre set him down gentle as a feather before a vaulted door. It was only then that he noticed his own bold attire: purple blouse with billowing sleeves above skin-tight black breeches and an orange cod-piece, the only familiar apparel his trusty brown Oxfords. Now the big door swung open, and he was swept with the others into a great hall lighted by flaming torches. The scene they revealed was so bizarre that he didn't know whether to soil himself or go blind. A table the length of a flatcar was heaped with food: baskets of pineapples and coconuts, mounds of un-shucked corn, and what looked like tubs of birdseed. Around this sat a menagerie of people, livestock, and missing links of every description, jabbering away in a haze of glottal gibberish. Behind them was a curtained archway with suits of armor to either side. The curtains parted and a figure emerged; Hollander recognized the little prince from his previous visit. He thought of Phloe then, and began a fervid search of the room. There was a woman facing away from him with a tumble of black hair atop alabaster shoulders, and when she turned, their eyes met for an electric instant—

“People of Söerland,” intoned the prince. “I must interrupt our feast with ill tidings. The sentries report that within the hour, we shall face assault—

yet again—from our most relentless tormentor. I refer, of course, to the insensitive, mean-spirited and wantonly homicidal *Clench, Earl of Rimstayne*, and his redoubtable Floaters!” A suck of breath set the torchlight afflicker. What did this mean? thought Hollander. Were there about to be hostilities? Should he try to escape? But, how? And—what the heck was a *Floater*?

“I wish I could spare you, good subjects, from this dire fate. But, alas, I am powerless. Even as I was powerless to protect my own father, the king—” (All heads bowed as one to reprise: ‘*The king...*’) “—borne away by the earl’s evil ally,” and here he dropped his pitch to a disdainful growl, “the *Wicked Wizard of Whoosh*—”

A burst of light and a puff of smoke, and when it cleared there stood upon the tabletop a shrunken codger in tattered robes and a conical hat, with a scruffy beard, and a nose so long that it dimpled his upper lip. Cries of anguish filled the air.

“*Did I hear my name?*” screeched the wizard, and he began a sort of frenzied tap dance, chalices and silverware scattering all around him. “Banish him I did! Your beloved king! Into the Vortex! And I’d do the same with the lot of you—only I’m old and tired, and can’t remember the spell too clearly.” He stopped prancing now to stare down mournfully at his slippers. “But I do recall *this* one,” he shrieked, and stabbed a gnarled digit at a fellow in a nearby seat. There was a *POP!* and the man was gone—replaced by a salmon that flopped about like a fish out of water. “*Hee-hee!*” tittered the fiend. “Fish chowder on the menu, I see! And how about you, Master Tinkles? Would you care to join in the fun?”

A yelp escaped the squirrel-boy as the demon singled him out. He grabbed Hollander’s hand for protection, the *POP!* sounded again, and Hollander found himself holding a squirming catfish by the tail. “Nyahhh!” he yowled, tossing it into a punch bowl. *POP!* and kangaroo-man was a mackerel. *POP!* and a woman became a crappie, piscine countenance puckered in surprise. “And now for the great and noble Porcelino!” the villain roared, spinning to confront the defiant prince. As he drew a bead on the diminutive figure, Hollander dashed forward. Scooping a coconut from one of the baskets, he hurled it like a shot-putter going for the gold. There was a *CRACK!* as the missile connected with the wizard’s skull; he tottered for a moment like a statue of Lenin, then pitched headlong to the floor.

Stillness reigned. Suddenly it was shattered with shouts of “*Hoorah!*” Hollander was hoisted into the air and spun like a pinwheel. “Harry Cheakes!” called the prince. “Set the squire down, lest he lose his lunch!” The hulk landed Hollander on the banquet table, where he staggered about drunkenly till a hand seized his own. It was Porcelino, and he wagged the limp appendage with fervor. “I can’t thank you enough, Squire! How ever did you summon the pluck?”

Hollander was giddy. “Well, your honor, I don’t really know. I’m not a violent man by nature—”

Another voice sliced through the din. “Harry Cheakes, lift me up to greet the squire.” He turned to see the princess rising fairy-like to his side. “In the name of our kingdom,” she said with a flutter of lashes, “I thank you for your gallant deed.” She gave him a curtsy, and the room erupted in applause.

Now the curtains parted anew, and something that looked like a six-foot parrot capered into the hall. “Prince Porcelino!” it squawked. “The enemy is nigh! Soon they will be upon us!” Panic set in at once. Guests ran in all directions, slamming into the table and forcing Hollander and the princess to opposite sides.

“Harry Cheakes!” shouted the prince. “Open the armory posthaste, and distribute the royal weapons!”

The giant lumbered over to a cabinet, and snapped the padlock like a candy cane. Men began queuing behind him. Hollander swallowed hard, then proceeded to join the line. Heaven knew what lay ahead, but he would fight if he had to to protect Phloe, and yes, even these animal-cracker chums of hers. A wry smile tickled his lips. Here he’d spent decades avoiding risk: the safe job, the safe house, girlfriends who never got too close—and look at him now: barfed through the looking glass, and about to engage in hand-to-hand combat in some kind of fantasy-world sprung to life. A knot was forming in his throat when the bird returned with more heartening news.

“*Sir!* They’ve scaled the walls! They’re crossing the yard by the baker’s dozen!”

Porcelino was beside himself. “Hurry Harry!” he enjoined, and the line shuffled faster.

Next it was Hollander’s turn: he was handed a spanking new, stout-handed—bathroom plunger? “Excuse me, sir, but are these all we have?”

“Yes, yes,” the prince told him impatiently. “The imperial halberds.”

Hollander shook his head, even as a terrible pounding began against the outer door.

“But—will they be effective? Against Clench and his men?”

“Effective? Against maces and broadswords? We’d be hacked to hamburger in the blink of an eye! No, Squire, there’s no thought of *fighting*; these weapons are ceremonial. We must flee, my friend, as fast as our pointy shoes shall carry us! To the tunnel!” he howled. “One and all! *Run for it!*”

Now the fireplace swung open to reveal a passageway big enough for a Mack truck. People poured into it as Hollander battled the tide, trying to reach Phloe. Beyond them, the great door began to shudder in its frame as a tremendous barrage was mounted upon it. When he was mere yards from the princess, her eyes widened and she stopped in her tracks. “Phloe, darling! Come along! To the tunnel!”

“Achilles!” she cried. “My hamster!” Hollander’s heart sank as she veered off toward the curtained arch. An instant later, the door gave way in a thunderous crash, and invaders began rushing through the breach. But they weren’t like any troops he’d ever seen before. They were—

Toads, actually. Toads the size of frogmen, advancing with hideous, awkward strides that made wet slapping sounds on the stone flooring. And in front, worst of all, ugly amongst uglies, loped Clench, Earl of Rimstayne, a mighty green blob with orbs the size of basketballs, swinging a spiked club to smash anything within reach.

Harry Cheakes stood guard at the fireplace, motioning stragglers to safety. Hollander panned from tunnel to archway; there was time enough to reach only one—he ran for the arch. At the curtain, he paused for a final glimpse of the hall. A squad of Floaters was assailing Cheakes; he took up a bench and felled the lot of them like so many bowling pins. Then he too was in the tunnel and pulling the facade closed behind him. There was confusion amongst the amphibians until Clench spotted Hollander, and thrust the club in his direction. “*Splomph!*” he spat, and the toads surged forward.

Hollander ducked behind the drapes. He found himself in a circular anteroom with three doors at the compass-points. Darting to the center one, he yanked it open, then raced to the rightmost, entered and shut the door behind him. He put an ear to the wood to listen. Sure enough, he could hear his pursuers slurping across to the decoy. Now he bounded up the spiral staircase, praying he’d made the correct decision. At the head of the steps, another

door—this one bolted—barred his way. Thrashing about anxiously, he thought he detected a womanly whimper. “Phloe? Is that you? Let me in!”

A jiggle of latches, and she was in his arms. “Oh, Squire,” she sobbed. “We’re doomed! *Doomed!*” She gestured with a hamster toward the window; Hollander looked out on a courtyard packed with toads. “First things first. Is there another way out of here?” But even as she pointed, the door burst open into the room. And there, framed in the threshold, huffing and puffing and bristling with warts, tunic awash in mud and ichor (his normal state), stood Clench, Earl of Rimstayne, great club aquiver at his side. The monster took one pie-eyed glance at the princess, and commenced to drool like an overflowing bucket. In the next moment he was plodding her way.

Hollander stepped between them. Taken aback by such effrontery, the toad let fly with an oath. “*Glurmph!*” it sounded like he said. When he continued forward Hollander reared the plunger like a bat, and Clench paused again. The animal considered the weapon, and if it’s possible for a toad to chortle, this one did so. Then it directed a terrible blow at Hollander’s head. Hollander ducked and the club smashed the hamster cage from its perch. In a smooth follow-through it came again; Hollander leaned back as the spikes grazed his jersey. On and on it went: the toad hacking and Hollander leaping clear, the furniture annihilated piece by piece. Hollander knew that his luck couldn’t hold; sooner or later the club would connect, and then—

When it whisked by him next, he jabbed with the plunger. It stuck to the toad’s snout like a death mask. For the first time, a look of uncertainty clouded his eyes. Dropping the bludgeon, he grabbed the wooden handle and tried to detach the cup. But Hollander kept pushing, and soon they were circling the chamber like dancers at a lunatic ball. Hollander pushed harder to increase their speed, and at just the right moment—let go. Clench staggered rearward, caught the edge of the windowsill and tumbled out. There was a spine-tingling wail and a splat far below.

The lovers rushed to embrace. He was trying to quell her tears (a hamster mewling at his eardrum), when Floaters came storming in from either side, swords drawn. This time, there would be no escape. Hollander and bevy stood toe to toe when a particularly foul-smelling specimen parted blubbery lips to speak: “Oo chull glunk!” he asserted, for which Hollander was none the wiser. The next croaker was kind enough to interpret. “He says you’ve killed Clench, old boy. Never liked the chap, none of us did. Bit of a swine, really.

Good show.” He extended a three-toed extremity and, flabbergasted, Hollander shook it.

“Oh, Squire!” gushed the princess. “You’re a hero!”

“A *hero*,” he repeated dreamily, clacking his heels in rapture...

...and a knob was at his fingertips, so he slid it back and opened the door. But he could only take baby-steps. Blinking in a gathering sentience, he found himself in the restroom with his pants around his ankles—and he was not alone. Rex, the janitor, was scrubbing the sinks not ten feet away from him. He retreated quietly and closed the door. Emerging again, he went over to wash his hands.

“Ah, Mr. Hollander. How are we today, sir?”

Hollander would have spoken, but his gaze had fallen to the hand that held the scrub brush—and a ruby the size of a pearl onion.

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A feeling of separation. Like there’s a pane of glass between you and the world, and it’s smeared with chicken fat. That’s how it was for Hollander as he sat zombie-like for the rest of the workday, drove to the diner through a riot of red lights and honking horns, and ended up in bed—where it felt like he were floating. But not in water; in some viscous black ooze that would suck him down like a mastodon if he rolled the wrong way. But which way was right?

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At eleven o’clock, Mr. DeWitt passed by the cubicle. Hollander was hunched over his papers, as he had been all morning. The boss rapped knuckles on the metal frame until he looked around. “My office at twelve o’clock sharp, Richard.”

“Right, sir. Noon it is.”

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At eleven forty-five, Freddy said in a stage whisper, “Hey, Rich! A quarter till! Time flies when you’re having fun, huh?” He peeked across the

