

A Planet Named Magic

a sf short story

by John Argo

In the Strelson Arm of the Nictitating Galaxy, around 3000 C.E., was one rather Earth-like world named Magic. This world, the sixth planet of a G0-3 star not worth mentioning, had derived its name from a rather interesting effect of gravity -- but more of that in a moment.

Magic was a water planet. It had lots of peninsulas and lagoons and the like, but no major continents. It really had only two useful commodities -- breathable air and potable water -- so people did drift there by and by to do such things as drive around, look each other up, keep shop, be bank tellers, serve as cops, admire sunsets paled in sea mist, have children, need new shoes, and die.

Magic had several large-ish cities, nothing to write home about. Mundane was one of these cities, so called by its founders in the fervent hope that nothing out of the ordinary would ever happen there, thus making it one of the most livable cities in the Old ManTime Universe.

Mundane, barely a century old, still had most of its original glass. It stemmed from the era of building pencil-thin buildings, and a quiver of these glowed dully pink in the sunset on Largo Peninsula. Amid the buildings were parks and trees and places for children to play. There were hotels and restaurants, hospitals and schools, banks and yes, a large jail, for in Mundane lived those beings known as People, and when there were People, you never knew what might happen next.

Especially when you discovered that gravity on Magic was unlike gravity anywhere else.

Annie Stella was the 13th female clerk in the 6th row from the window in the main accounting department of the Mundane Savings Bank (men clerks were paid almost the same but had to sit in another room where there wasn't a window to look out of, or a clock to watch). Annie wasn't blonder or taller or more buxom than any of the other women clerks. Annie, however, had mystique. She had a kind of beauty. Maybe it was the big eyes. Or the way she would toss her bronzed pageboy. Or the quick, mischievous grin before she looked down again at her reconciliation statements or at the terminal screen. Whatever it was, she was the one at whom men always stared.

The thing about women like that, they always had really shtark boyfriends. All of the men staring were losers, as far as Annie was concerned; to the opposite, Tommy Doone was the most superlative guy around. He was a tall, dark, lean detective with MPD. He had easy, challenging eyes that mocked and frightened bad guys, but reassured good guys. Tommy was Annie Stella's guy. Had been for years. They were getting married soon, and Annie talked of nothing else. Normally that drove women crazy, to hear a woman carrying on about her intended, but Tommy Doone was every woman's dream, and they talked about him no end.

One day, Stella called Tommy at the police department. She was at work in a 100-story pencil thin building overlooking the sea, and in tears. "I can't even go out on my break anymore and look at the ocean."

"What's the matter?" Tommy said in his easy manner, putting his feet up and tilting his ball cap back while his cannon dangled by his elbow in a leather shoulder holster. He was in another pencil-thin building by the park in the center of town, a mile away.

"There is this really creepy guy who keeps coming around."

"Calm yourself, sweetie. Stop sobbing and describe this sphincter."

Annie sobbed a few more times, and Tommy closed his eyes thinking of how he loved to lay his face against that heaving chest, feeling her tender breasts against his cheeks. She sniffled and started to describe the man -- and as she did so, the terminal on Tommy's desk began to sketch out the culprit. "Looks like a real loser," Tommy said, studying the man's young, pudgy face, the petulant lips, the mussed hair.

"He scares the living heck out of me!"

Tommy looked closer. "Yes, there does appear to be some evil in those eyes. I'd say lurking. Yes, that would be a strong enough term without overdoing the drama. A real sicko. Does he say nasty things to you?"

"No, he just stares."

"Aw hell. I can't arrest him for staring. Can't you get him to say something nasty to you -- never mind. Oops, look." The screen had looked through the central database and found the person to match the sketch. It displayed on Annie's screen at work also, Tommy knew, and he heard her gasp of dislike. "What a creep," Tommy said.

Tommy watched as the central database unveiled the suspect's shady nature. He was Raddy Blorr, an antisocial deviant type who worked as a lowly clerk in a beer barrel shipping house. Tommy knew the brand -- Seaside Brew, which really sucked -- so it didn't surprise him to find Blorr had landed there.

It didn't surprise him either that Blorr was peripherally associated with the Magic Underground, a network of men who couldn't get dates and women who could only make it with such men. Magic's crosswise gravitational orientation in the upper ten superstrings of reality caused it to have a curious effect. To a certain extent, brain waves could be forced -- if you worked hard enough and had time on your hands -- to perform certain quasi-supernatural tricks. For example, an adept could levitate a brick from 100 feet away; big deal, normal people like Annie and Tommy thought, who cares? After the first year or two of colonization, the effect had worn thin so people didn't talk about it. You could read someone's mind within ten feet; you could cause miniature tornadoes that weren't strong enough to knock over a milk bottle. You could do all kinds of stupid, senseless, ineffective things if you didn't have better things to do. In polite society on Magic, it was considered retro and really gross to be into this kind of stuff. And that was just the ticket for social rejects like Raddy Blorr. If they couldn't get dates, they would make themselves noticed somehow.

What did surprise Tommy was that Blorr had an arrest record for various offenses related to attractive women above his appearance, personality, and stature in life. Those arrests included several attempted rapes (the gals always managed to grab him, throw him down, and sit on him until police arrived). "This could be serious," Tommy started to say. Then his terminal shut down, winking away Annie's tear-streaked face.

Tommy found himself shoved by an invisible force, thrown to the ground, kicked in the ribs. As he sat nursing his bruised side, he looked up. An evil-looking figure in a long black cape hovered in the middle of Tommy's office. Through the dark cowl, Tommy recognized Raddy Blorr, whose mad cackling laugh filled the room. "So, Copper, in the end you get yours. Let me rephrase that. In the end, she gets hers. Or maybe I should say, in the end she gets mine, and you get yours in the end." He leaned close with crazed eyes and shouted: "Right up yours where it belongs!"

"What?" It seemed the only way to respond.

"Your girlfriend!" the apparition boomed, flickering angrily. Blorr raised his hands, and threads of red and blue lightning crackled noisily from his fingertips. "Now I am in control, and it feels good, Copper. So!"

Another kick from an invisible foot, and Tommy crawled in circles holding his gut, wondering where the next blow was coming from. The thought of Annie being in danger made him feel utterly frantic and helpless.

"So guys like you always get the best girls! Haw, haw, haw. Now it's your turn to see what it feels like. I joined the most powerful of the magic cults." Blorr waved his fist. "Even there, I was an underling, because the lead sorcerers there always get the best of our kind of women. I decided to become the greatest of them all. I have read all the arcane texts. I have mastered the most powerful spells." Blorr's eyes radiated as he stared into some phantasmagoria in which he was God and the galaxies whirled around him. "I hold in my hands such power that no other sorcerer dares to try! One wrong syllable, a mistake in a gesture, a symbol wrongly placed, and the universe can turn against me!" Blorr laughed. "But I make no mistakes, Doone. I want your woman. I will have her now, even as I feel you tracing me through your feeble electronic net, and you will not be able to stop me! Her lunch break is over, and she is even now turning back to her terminal. In a moment I will rush out of Magic space like a whirlwind of cosmic power. I will transform her into a golden storm of electrons and abduct her far away into the kingdom of the dynamo jungle, where you will never find us. To follow us there would mean death for you, but we will live forever, your woman and I."

Laughing madly, Blorr vanished into thin air. He left a fading halo of evil lechery in the air. Despite his injuries, Tommy Doone heaved himself erect. First he tried calling the bank; there was no answer. Of course -- Blorr had killed the connection. Tommy raced for the elevator, holding his side.

Staggering down the street, he threw himself into his police air-cruiser, turned on the flashers and siren, and sped between the buildings to the bank. Parking, he jumped out, drew his gun, and raced up the stairs with his long raincoat billowing. People turned to stare. As he rode up in the elevator among startled bank workers, he began to wonder if Blorr had merely played some cosmic joke on him.

But when he got to the 40th floor, where Annie worked, he smelled smoke. The lights were out and startled workers milled about with nothing to do but ask questions. And the battered ribs in Tommy's side were no joke either.

Still waving his gun, Tommy found Annie near her desk. She and a few other women were staring at the black, smoking ruin of her terminal. Tommy put the gun away and took his beloved in his arms. "Are you -- ?"

"I'm okay, darling," she said, "but you look a mess. You had a visit from Blorr?"

"He got the best of me," Tommy grimly admitted. "But you -- you look fine. He said he was coming here to take you under his power with magic spells."

Annie smiled mysteriously. "I know. But I saw it coming. I caught him before he could get his fingers on me. He's gone for good, somewhere in data heaven. He'll never bother anyone again."

"But Annie, how did you know? Are you a magician now too?"

"Silly. Of course not. It's just -- ."

"Just what?"

"Well, I was taught in school, to always use my -- ."

"Your what, for heaven's sake!"

"My spell checker, darling. I always use my spell checker. Works like a charm!"