

A Force of Nature

By Bob Boyde

The job was supposed to be simple. Vic had said it was an easy bit of wetwork, and the mark wasn't supposed to be very important. The slimy fixer had assured her an easy five thousand nuyen. So why had it all gone so terribly wrong? One moment Kat was pulling a B&E into the marks estate and next she found, along with the stomach churning aroma of piled heaps of refuse, the apparent mark was throwing spells at her! She hated spellcasters and this one, a particularly scruffy rat shaman, was quickly becoming that much more troublesome.

"Try to kill me will you, mortal?" the shaman screeched manically. Kat's ears perked up. She didn't say anything about killing him. She could have just as easily been here to rob the drekhead. He shouldn't have known any better.

This guy was nuts, but his words were starting to tell her something. It was time to show this freak just how mortal he really was. Lock and load. If all went well it wouldn't take long to drop the fragger and she'd be back at the waterin hole with a couple a hunks at her side and serious brain buzz to mark the occasion. How she loved to make wiz boys realize their weaknesses.

The silence of the room suddenly exploded into a dissonance of eruptions both magical and mechanical as both combatants let fly their most devastating attacks. Kat tucked and rolled to the cover of a pile of junk, letting fly a destructive burst of deadly Ingram sub-machinegun fire. The air rippled at head level with the mark where the rounds struck home, but impacted with dead air and fell to the ground, harmlessly.

"Oh drek." she squawked pouncing further into what she supposed was the domicile's living area and disappeared behind a slightly larger pile of garbage. He hadn't wasted time with putting up a magical barrier before they started trading attacks. Either the fragger was as paranoid as a shithouse rat or he'd been tipped off and had the barrier waiting for her. There was a spray of refuse as the shaman's powerball blasted into the heap. When the dust settled there was only quiet.

A grin spread across the shaman's puckered, rat like features. There was no movement from the area of the explosion and the shaman's lip twitched at the thought of what trinkets the corpse might hold. Confidently he peaked over the pile of rubbish and grinned rodent-like when there was no sign of movement. He inched closer, the giddiness almost too much for his greedy heart to tolerate.

"Did you bring me gifts," he chuckled greasily. "Have you brought me shiny things, or things that go, POP?" The shaman overtaken by his curiosity skittered to the other side of the ramshackle wreckage to where his spell had left a blackened and steaming hole.

His face grimaced and his eyes began to frantically dart about. He spun around eyes crossing inward to the tip of the pepper spray can pointed at just between his eyes. "All natural ingredients, asshole," she yelled. "At this range there ain't much chance of missin, ain't that right fragger?" The shaman howled as the gel saturated his eyes and face.

"You fragging bitch! I'll fraggin nibble on your eyes for that!"

"Tssk, tssk, tssk, Ratboy. You only have yourself to blame," she chided. Kat casually walked around the crumpled form of the shaman as he frantically clawed at his burning eyes. "I thought it was curiosity that killed the cat, not the rat? Isn't that the way it's supposed to go?" The immediate response was his continued rolling around in the filth.

"Your slottin iced fragger," he finally choked, waving his one free hand and crying out, "Kill the invader. Geek her."

Kat's eyes popped wide as she realized that there was something else in the room, something mundane or mechanical vision couldn't see and she hadn't noticed. The air pulsed and the surrounding trash animated taking shape into an amorphous mass of writhing filth.

Kat was suddenly a flurry of blurred motion, dropping the Ingram to let it hang by its secured strap and drawing the magical knife at her back she struck out with several quick stabbing motions into the creature. The screams of the spirit echoed throughout the cavernous chamber, its pain and rage sounding like tearing paper and breaking glass, grinding and groaning soda cans. Each strike of the dagger flashing with sparks of magic. The creature lashed out with a powerful pseudopod which Kat frantically dodged with a glancing blow and spun around stabbing at the monster's main body again and again.

A creeping chill rose up Kat's spine, and doubt and fear began to force their way into her psyche. Kat held back her attacks and crouched low, the hair on her neck rising with her sudden feelings of despair. The creature settled into the mass of rubbish and Kat questioned her precarious position. Uneasy and unlikely emotions rolled over her relentlessly like waves. Kat was cold and unfeeling on a job, but the fear and insecurity flooded in. Memories of her troubled childhood started flashing into view. She was seven again and it was the "night of rage." She and her mother huddled in a corner of their Seattle

apartment, cringing against the angry words and curses, the screams and cries of agony, the explosions and concussive destruction of the riotous mobs rising against meta-humanity. Images of her elvish mother being brutally beaten and raped while she hid from the mob of Humanis Policlub enforcers thrashed about in her head.

Fear began coursing up like bile in her mouth. She knew the feelings weren't real, trying to force them back down. The memories of the carnage and wanton violence were hers but the emotions she felt weren't. She had killed every single one of the humans that had assaulted her mother and the only regret was that her mother couldn't be there to watch their slow painful passing. That night of racial purging had made her what she was. It had made her angry and cold. That day was the day she had been truly born.

How many times had she been in a similar situation? How many times had she overcome the worst of her dilemmas? How many times had she been King of the heap? It was those times that defined her. It was the death of her newborn son, her frightened husband's inadequacies, the corporate axe that cut her as a wage slave and put her on the streets, it was the loss of her Signature Individual Number effectively adding her to the millions of United Canadian and American SINless who struggled to survive in the slums of the awakened world, and far more desperate moments that forged her into the killing monstrosity she had become.

Kat shook away the fear and doubt and ran full out for the nearest wall knowing that if the spirit attacked she would be vulnerable. She needed the security of the wall to her back allowing the spirit only three avenues of approach. Her footing was treacherous at best attempting to vault over heaps of filth in her pistoning charge. Normally cat like in her reflexes she stumbled, still dazed by the emotional effect of the magical despair, and before plummeting headlong into the trash she rolled herself into a ball, tumbling back to her feet from the somersault, and continuing the charge.

The sound of the creature behind her spurred her into fevered action. It had now formed into a single stretching column of battering power. Leaping at the last moment, Kat ran up the wall, her legs piston-like, and using the force of her momentum to vault backwards over the creature, plunged the magically forged blade with both hands deep into the monster's structureless frame. There was a wail of agony like grating steel and breaking glass, and then only the sound of falling trash. The pillar once alive and formed of old cans, papers, broken bottles, and other foul unmentionable debris broke apart and tumbled back into piles of inanimate waste.

"That the best you got wizzer?" Kat rasped, catching her breath. "Ya know, drekhead," she

said waving the dust away, "I'll never understand how you uneducated sewer slots are able to control such power and not know there are other forms of magic."

Kat dusted herself off. She slung the spiritual ectoplasm off of her knife and hands and slid the magical weapon in its sheath. "You all must slot from the same mold thinking that just cause the magic ain't coursing out in explosive devastation it ain't real magic." That ain't so."

Kat picked up an old twentieth century Steppenwolf CD case, cracked and useless for not much else but a coaster. She fingered the titles resting on "Snowblind Son" and snickered. Fifty years after the change of the millennia and despite technology progressing to levels of merging man with machine or putting men into space for deep space mining, men are still victims to their flaws. Power corrupts and ultimate power corrupts ultimately.

"You've got some strong ju-ju, Ratboy. It's nice and showy. I just choose not to sling mine. I choose to keep it nice and personal. All bottled up deep like a case of PMS that just don't wanna go away. That's the way of the warrior, the path of the adept. That's my magic. Did you think that just because rats speak to your crazy ass that you have some special link to immortality?" Kat chuckled kicking through the refuse in a straight line towards the crawling figure.

"You killed it? You can't."

"I did."

"It was too powerful."

"It was a toxic spirit and you're nuttier than squirrel drek." Kat placed her thumb against the side of one nostril and blew, blowing out the accumulated dust and grime. "If I had a nuyen for every freak street wizzer who thought he was some old god or goddess, I could retire to some warm tropical island named after me and sip rum till I went blind. Now hold still fragger." She chuckled softly to herself. "It's time for a game of cat and mouse."

Kat followed the crawling man as he blindly picked a path through the heaps of disheveled garbage. The shaman's face was streaked with grime and tears and red from the spray. His eyes had swollen shut and he trembled. She could have felt badly for the old codger, though she found it hard to. The magic of the sixth world sometimes was too much for the minds of some folks. It happened all the time. They could practice the art for years and one day just snap, unable to cope with reality.

Kat was thankful that her magic was limited. She could jump higher, swim, run, or climb faster than normal men, she could punch through solid walls and bend iron. Fifty years ago at the end of the twentieth century she'd be considered unnatural, supernatural, a super-fraggin-hero. Hell her powers of the body were impressive even to present day expectations. Most cybered up razorguys wouldn't conceive of messing with her. She was one gun-for-hire that was respected and feared, which made Kat wonder why Vic would even think of double crossing her. She was one elf that shouldn't be fragged with. He knew that. Something had to have turned him. She thought she would sure hate to lose a good fixer, but this sort of thing was bad for business.

"Ratboy, you got one chance." The shaman paused fearfully when she kicked him sprawling into the trash. "you tell me everything that you know about Vic?"

"S-sure. Anything."

"You'll tell me what he told you about my coming?"

"Yeah."

"Did he tell you to contact him after I was deep in a dirt nap, or was he doin you a favor?"

"He said it was an act of good faith. He said someone had hired you to kill me. He said he didn't want my blood on his hands."

"You blowin smoke up my ass?"

"N-no. Swear it. Swear it."

"Then you might live to sneak cheese another day, chummer."

Kat took out a cigar and placed it between her teeth. She stood over the shaman and lit the tip then breathed in deeply. Why can't jobs ever be easy?