

Only the Wicked

A World of Skills short story

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Thank you.

“When did you last reset your clocks?” Asked the investigator.

The accountant jumped in his seat; eyes wide. “Me?”

“You, your colleagues, anyone at all. When were the clocks on that wall last adjusted?” A gloved hand pointed at the three circular clocks hanging one above the other on the wall, each labelled with a different location.

“Oh,” the skinny man relaxed back into his grey suit, relieved the question wasn’t an accusation. “I don’t really know.”

“A week ago, a month ago, a year ago?”

“Oh no, not a year, certainly no more than a couple of weeks, but I wouldn’t remember the exact...”

The investigator was obviously no longer listening. His body was leaning over the table that was set against the wall, so that he could look very closely at the cheap plastic timepieces.

At the top was “London”. The local time. The second clock was “New York”, and the third “San Francisco.” Cheap printed labels were stuck to each to indicate the time zone.

Molly looked at her mentor from the door, trying to understand why the clocks held his attention. He never said anything that wasn’t pertinent, and while he was awful at sharing his process, she could learn from him if she paid close attention to the details. At least that was what she told herself.

“Right then,” said the investigator, turning on his heel and walking so fast towards the door Molly had to scramble to get out of the way.

She was desperate to ask, but knew from hard experience that this would just annoy her mentor, who was now muttering to himself as he paced down the corridor on his long, skinny legs.

“A full four minutes,” he muttered, “Can’t be very far, unless they’re particularly gifted.”

He stopped outside the security center and knocked on the door, which was opened by a security guard a moment later.

“I need to see those tapes again.”

The guard hung his head in resignation and stepped out of the way. Investigator Cricket wasn’t making any friends today, but that was normal. Molly squeezed into the security center behind him and found a position from which she could see the screen - no small feat given that everyone was twice her size.

“Back to their escape down the service corridor, every angle you have.”

“We’ve only got the one angle there.”

“No need to point out your failings, just show me what you have.”

The guard went a little red in the face, but managed to hold back a reply.

There they were on the screen, the four most notorious jewelry thieves in the world, hustling down a corridor with a unique and heavily-insured necklace in one hand. No attempt was made to hide their faces. Specian Ridge was grinning right at the camera, his film-star good looks posing for the picture he knew would be leaked to the press within the day.

“Here you are, sir,” said the guard, emphasizing the last word ever so slightly, “they turn down this service corridor where the staff bathrooms are.”

“But they never make it to the staff bathrooms.”

“No sir, there’s a camera black spot between the top corner and the bottom half of the corridor where the doors to the bathroom are, and they never reappear.”

It was always the same trick, the gang of four would disappear from one camera and never appear on another. Every theory had been explored, from manipulation of the video files to teleportation, but the first would have required an inside man in every one of two dozen different heists, and the second was a Skill so rare it was almost unknown, risky as hell, terribly inaccurate and it left telltale residues that were not present.

“Invisibility?” asked the second guard who was leaning so far back he was testing the limits of his ergonomic chair.

The investigator snorted, “Doesn’t exist. Just because you’ve heard of some Skills doesn’t mean everything your imagination can invent exists in the world.”

“But it has to be a Skill,” said Molly, before clapping a hand over her mouth for having spoken out loud.

This time though, Darius didn’t berate her for speaking out of turn.

“Obviously Molly, but why?”

He was asking her? Her skin prickled and she felt sweat break out along her hairline.

“Um. I think.” Her brain finally got over the fear of failure and she managed to say, “Because we’ve eliminated everything not Skill-related.”

He turned to her and nodded. “Yes. We know it’s not an inside job, we can account for every single potential insider in almost every heist they’ve pulled. We know it’s not a technological solution because they beat dozens of different security systems with exactly the same trick. But it’s always the same trick. That never varies. So they’re dependent on a single method, almost certainly a Skill.”

He turned away from her to look back at the screen, leaving her feeling like a huge step forward had occurred in her relationship with him, no matter how small or redundant her contribution had been. He had used her actual name!

“Zoom in on his right hand.”

The guard obliged.

“I see,” he said, then he turned and slipped out of the room. As Molly strained to see the blurry enlarged image on the screen, she heard him talking into his phone, asking for the security department at Vantage Insurance and Recovery, their employer.

On the screen, she could see Ridge’s hand, clenched around the necklace. On the joint of the thumb was a telltale red smudge, the ink from the security device he had set off when stealing a collection of rare bank notes from a safe in an apartment in Miami a couple of weeks ago.

That was the clue, but what did it mean?

“Minimum six days,” said Cricket, before leaning his head to one side and producing a remarkable crack from a joint in his neck. “Maximum eight. They should be here shortly.”

“And you figured this how?” asked the heavily armored intervention agent who was squatting behind a bulletproof and fireproof barricade set up at one end of the corridor leading to the toilets. They had been here for three days now, looking down the empty hallway.

Cricket was sitting on a cheap folding chair in plain sight of the corridor, wearing his usual three-piece suit, slim leather gloves and skinny black tie.

“Security ink fades at a predictable rate. The ink on his hand was five or six days old. They jumped seven or eight days into the future after the last heist and walked away when the investigators had abandoned the site. Five days later they came here for another job, so the ink was five days old. If they hadn’t time-skipped, the ink would have almost completely faded. All three known examples of time-skippers were unable to vary the length of each skip.”

“They’re just going to appear here?”

“Something like that.”

The guard was unconvinced. “Well that just sounds...”

The four appeared without fanfare, a slight breeze caused by displaced air was the only physically detectable effect, along with a barely audible snipping sound as the boundary of their displacement bubble disappeared and the atmospheres blended.

To Molly, however, their appearance was an explosion of fireworks combined with a symphony from an orchestra of wonderful alien instruments. She reflexively

clapped her hands to her ears, even though she knew it would do no good. The sounds and lights were in her head.

The smile was still plastered on Specian Ridge's face, the necklace loosely held in his left hand. For him, no time had passed. Although the three others appeared normal to her, Ridge glowed as though a bright white light emanated from beneath his skin. It was very different to the coruscating colors that seemed to flicker around the exposed wrists of Darius Cricket.

"Well, damn," said Ridge.

"Hi Spec," said Cricket, from his seat. "Please don't jump again, I have a dentist appointment this time next week."

The intervention agent rose to a half-crouch, pointing his oversized weapon over the barricade at the newly-materialized group of thieves.

"Show me your hands!" He shouted at the top of his lungs.

Cricket's small rubber cudgel smashed down on the agent's hand, knocking the weapon out of alignment, throwing the agent to the floor and putting a single bullet hole in the plaster ceiling.

"Please, officer," he said, "no violence here."

Turning to the thieves, he kept his tone conversational. "Stand down Spec. We don't want this to go any further."

The thief and the detective looked at each other across the hallway for long moments.

"Guess it was always going to be you," said Ridge, before tossing the necklace to Molly, who caught it awkwardly. "I see you've found another one," he added, looking at Molly.

"Wish it were otherwise," replied Cricket, before throwing the thieves four sets of jet-black handcuffs inlaid with odd runes.

Ridge handed them to his teammates.

"Put them on boys, you really don't want to see what he's capable of."

The officer, who was holding his bruised wrist in one hand, looked up at Cricket with barely-concealed loathing.

"Who the hell are you to defend this scum?"

If Cricket was in any way affected by the murderous look in the man's eyes, he didn't show it.

"We hurt only the wicked, officer," he said, "these are just thieves."

Molly chased after him as he walked out, the phrases, "what he's capable of", and "found another one" rattling around in her head like loose marbles.

About the Author

Nick Lavitz fits writing into the gaps left after work, family and travel. He enjoys living in his imagination perhaps a little too much. He starting putting his imagination to paper in 2001. Those words started finding their way into the world in 2018.

You can find his work at <http://www.salocin.com>

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