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Opening extract from

Mariah Mundi: The Midas Box

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Mariah Mundi

MARIAH Mundi stepped into the long thin railway carriage and for several moments blinked his eyes in the bright light. Swirls of steam and the sound of the stoking engine rattled the neat wooden floor of the corridor that appeared to run the length of the train. It was ghostly empty, as had been the platform where he had waited patiently for the last train to take him to the coast. He had watched the old beast arrive. Out of the dark and stormy night it had juddered along the track and under the large canopy of glass and halted abruptly at platform five. A heavy engine drew six dark and grubby coaches covered in dirt and mildew, so that it looked like an old leviathan rising from the depths of darkness. The guard had jumped from the mail van and shouted out the destinations and connections in his gruff voice. A large moustache curled from his top lip to under his chin, and a long pipe arched from his scaly chops. Mariah had watched as the man had wiped the grease from his hands upon the oily black waistcoat that held in his bulging belly. With every shallow breath that the man gulped, its buttons looked as if they were on the verge of popping as they heaved and strained.

Now as Mariah stood in the glare of the carriage he hesitated, unsure as to what he should do. The coach was much brighter than he had thought. A narrow gas lamp lit the drab walls and window blinds, billowing gusts of hot air that rolled across the ceiling of the coach and out of the open door. He looked again at the painted sign on the glass pane: *First Class*. He read the words on the ticket and matched the carriage to the number that had been scrawled in thick black ink by the hand of the old fat ticket collector at Kings Cross. Coach number one, compartment three, seat number two. First Class. Cautiously he counted the seats and looked at the silver numbered tags that marked each place.

In his own seat sat a tall man with a muscular frame, wearing the uniform of an army officer and with a thick scar across his right cheek. Mariah studied him as he took the seat opposite, holding out his ticket as if at any moment he would be challenged and the ticket would be snatched fom him, condemning him to the wooden benches of Third Class, just short of the mail van.

He had set off to travel north from London early that morning. In his hand he had clutched a ticket, presented the day before by Jecomiah Bilton, headmaster of Chiswick Colonial School, which had been his home for seven years. Mariah's parents had travelled to Sudan and had never returned. They had paid in advance and so, even on their death two years before, Mariah had been allowed to stay until he had reached his fifteenth birthday. That day had come and gone, along with a further six months of grace and clearing the refectory tables and washing the floors. Now he had been despatched with a Third Class ticket, a first-class suit and a writ of worthiness signed by the gentle Professor Bilton. In his pocket he also had a letter of introduction and a neatly ironed five-pound note given to him by his father on the day Mariah had waved his parents goodbye from Southampton docks.

It was as he had stood by the ticket office on the Euston Road, his train ticket in his hand, that he had noticed an agitated gentleman strutting along the recently laid pavement in a new silk top hat, examining his fob watch and looking up and down the street, closely scrutinising every horse carriage that drew close by. The man had cast him a quick glance and then looked away as several carriages drew up at the station and left their passengers on the cold stone pavement surrounded by their hastily thrown-down cases. The man had inspected from a distance the names on the cases as he had pretended to swagger the wide avenue in the cold December dawn.

Mariah had been fascinated, drawn in by the way in which the man twitched his head from side to side. Once, he had taken his long black cane and prodded a thickly lacquered trunk that had been bundled off an old landau and left unattended for several minutes before a petulant old porter dragged it on to his barrow and whisked it away. He watched the man and then the man watched him. The station clocked chimed the seventh hour. The gentleman looked up and then pulled a narrow pair of spectacles and a thin piece of paper from his pocket. He perched the glasses on the end of his nose and peered at the tiny writing that was scrawled on the bright white paper.

Then, when a tall dark carriage pulled up quickly before him, the man flushed with panic. He spun on his heels and dropped his gaze to the ground, marching towards Mariah as if he were the only person to be greeted in the world.

'My dear friend,' the man had said in the voice of one who had not long resided upon these shores. 'I beg of you a favour for which you will be highly commended. Here is a travel voucher, First Class, for any destination you choose.' He handed Mariah the thin piece of paper emblazoned with the crest of the Great North Eastern Railway. 'Take it as a gift, but I ask you one thing, tell no one you have seen me and . . . look after these.'

The man handed Mariah a crisp pack of Panjandrum playing cards, still boxed and sealed with candle wax. On both sides was the face of the Joker, cross-eyed and holding his wand as if to cast a spell.

'When you reach your destination send me a postcard to Claridges Hotel. Mark it for me, Perfidious Albion, and I will make arrangements for the cards to be collected. Tell no one.'

Mariah didn't speak but silently nodded as the gentleman dashed off into the crowd, not to return. Two men stepped from the black carriage and scurried into the throng. It was as if they sought to follow the gentleman but had not seen in which direction he had gone. The boy had exchanged the voucher and acquired for himself a First Class ticket for the journey. As the train had ambled to the north, he had sat in state, looking from the window of the carriage at fresh fields that sprawled out before him. They soaked up the cold sun, and as the dark of the winter's afternoon had fallen he had looked upon the bright stars as they peeked from the high heavens.

Nine hours later, he exchanged trains and boarded the branch line to the coast. Now he sat in the warm carriage nearing the end of his journey, the crisp note and writ of achievement still folded neatly in his pocket.

'Please, sir,' Mariah said quietly as he held out his ticket towards the man sitting opposite him in the carriage. 'I believe that is *my* seat.'

'Seat? You believe it is *your* seat?' the man said, raising a furrowed brow and squinting at the boy. 'I believe this seat belongs to whoever owns this railway and that we only rent this space until we find our destination.'

'But my ticket says . . .'

'Your ticket says that you should sit quietly and not disturb your elders or your betters,' the man replied gruffly as he took a penny dreadful from his pocket. He opened the creased pages

and buried his head deep within as he grumbled to himself. 'And another thing, boy. If I choose seat number two, it is because I like to see neither what is beyond the window nor what is in the passageway. It is a quiet seat, where I will not be disturbed and where I can rest. Now if you don't mind, save your complaints for the ticket collector and keep quiet.'

Mariah sat quietly, holding his ticket in expectation of its early examination. The man buried himself in the dreadful, chuckling when he turned the pages again and again as he read the adventures of Fiery Jack over and over.

There was a long jerk as the train stretched and then contracted again as the engine pulled the carriages into motion. Mariah lurched forward but the man didn't move, holding fast to the paper that he held before his face. As the train pulled from the platform and moaned along the track, gathering speed, the lamp dimmed and the sound of steam hissed from beneath them.

Outside, the lights of almshouses flashed like phantoms in the dark. Faster, called the rails as the wheels clanked and churned and the great leviathan raced on into the night.

The door to the compartment opened suddenly. A perfunctory man in long black coat and a funeral tie wrapped around the neck of a crisp white shirt peered in.

'Compartment number three?' he asked mechanically.

Mariah nodded. The officer shrugged his shoulders as he read on, not bothering to take his face from the columns of black ink and cartoons that filled each page.

'A dark chilly night for us to be abroad,' the man said, hoping to bring a spark of conversation and smiling at Mariah. 'Do you travel far?' he said to the boy as he rummaged in the carpet-bag that he held nervously close to himself.

'The end of the line,' Mariah said. He fumbled with the ticket in his fingers and looked at the small leather bag by his feet.

'If I am not mistaken, you're a Colonial boy,' the man said, nodding his head and taking his seat next to the soldier.

'That I am. Do you know the place, sir?' he asked expectantly.

'Well, very well. Had a suit like that myself once. The five-pound suit, given for good behaviour and never to repay a penny.' He laughed as he leant forward and felt the collar of the boy's coat. 'Finer cloth than I ever had. Sent into the world to make the best of all they taught me, and now . . . I am a man of leisure, forty-one years of age and taking a winter's rest by the sea. Tasting the waters, with a prescription to bathe in the Oceanus Germanicus every morning, rain or shine. Good for the constitution. They say the water is remarkably warm, even in winter.' The man took in a deep breath as if he inhaled the fresh sea air; he then paused and looked about the carriage, talking as if he didn't want to be overheard. 'Travel from London this morning? Seven-twenty from Kings Cross?'

'That . . . I did. I never thought it would take so long or that I would come so far,' Mariah replied as the thought of Perfidious Albion flashed through his mind. He slipped his hand into his coat pocket and fingered the deck of cards that he had pressed deep within, not wanting to give their presence away.

'Strange,' said the man. 'I should have travelled that train myself, but my companion didn't wait for me. I waited the half hour and caught the next train. Travelling alone can be so tiresome.' He tried to peer over the top of the penny dreadful and see the face of its reader. 'Do you travel together?' the man asked, attempting to engage the army officer in polite conversation.

'Alone,' the officer said monotonously, hoping it would bring an end to the questioning.

'Far?' the man asked, looking behind the paper and smiling smugly as he rubbed his hands in and out of each other.

'From the ends of the earth, by sea and sail and hackney cab and now by rail,' the officer replied, reading the words from the

hoarding above Mariah's head. 'And all in the day . . . If you would excuse me, my eyes tell me that they desire to sleep as within the hour we will all be thrown from this place to the cold street.' He slumped into his place and threw his feet across the carriage.

'Very good, very good,' the other man muttered, and he gestured for Mariah to be silent, shaking his head in agreement with himself as he rubbed his hands faster and faster in time to the clunking of the carriage over the chilled iron rails.

Together they sat in silence for the next nine miles. Mariah held his arms across his chest, holding himself against the thick piled seat as the man stared at him and they listened to the soldier's heavy snoring. The long journey north had numbed his mind. He wanted to join the soldier in slumber, but some inner thought or deep fear kept his eyes from closing, not trusting the man to be alone with him in sleep.

Clutching the large carpetbag upon his knees, the man looked back at Mariah and smiled a sheepish smile through his thin blue lips. 'You know a lot about me and I nothing of you,' he said as he fiddled with the strap of the bag, rubbing the leather through his fingers. 'Do you work at the end of the line, or are you there to take the waters?'

Mariah hesitated. It was as if the coach had filled with a thin mist that glazed his sight. He snuggled back into the deep pile of the seat as the carriage rattled back and forth along the shaking track. 'I go to the Prince Regent,' he said slowly, hoping never to have to say another word.

'Well, well, well, bless my soul. If that isn't a coincidence beyond all coincidences. I too shall be a guest in that fine place. The Tower Suite, a reservation for one until Lady Day. They say you can see the castle and the harbour and on a clear day the windmills of Holland . . . And you, in what capacity will you be gainfully employed?' He spoke quickly, not giving time for

Mariah to reply. 'Perhaps you will be my butler. Now that would be a fine thing, meeting like this in a *First Class* carriage and you being a servant.' The man stopped and looked at the ticket that Mariah held nervously in his fingers. 'You do have a ticket for this compartment, don't you? It wouldn't be good order for a Colonial boy to be thrown on the platform of the next station for riding without the proper papers.' There was a hint of scorn in his voice; the pleasant tone in which he had passed the time of day had suddenly gone. The man leant forward and snatched the ticket from Mariah's hand. 'Aha,' he said as he closely examined the writing on the ticket. 'You appear to be in order. First-class suit and First Class ticket, things certainly have changed since my time at the Colonial School, certainly have changed.' He sat back into the seat and cast a glance to the soldier sleeping next to him.

'Men! Men!' the army officer shouted as he twitched like a sleeping dog that dreamed to itself, his feet kicking out with every spasm of the vision that played with his mind. 'Line of fire, line of fire!' he screamed, and he woke from his dream with a sudden start, picking the penny dreadful from where it had fallen to the floor of the carriage. He gave a deep yawn and shook his head, rubbing his face in his hands and chomping his lips as if the taste of something awful filled his mouth. 'Not used to the English weather,' he said to the man next to him, who had leant away from him and now clutched the carpetbag even tighter. 'Haven't had a decent sleep since the Sudan, can't sleep on the ship, too hot by day and too cold by night. No place better than a carriage to rock you like a baby, though.'

'Sudan?' Mariah said without thinking. 'My parents were in the Sudan.'

'I take it they are not there now?' the bagman asked before the officer could speak.

'Lost – missing – dead,' he said slowly, the words coming in the order of events that had broken his heart two years before. Mariah stared through his piercing blue eyes at the leather bag thrown into the luggage rack above the soldier's head; he read the words etched in black on the tan hide: *Captain Jack Charity*. 'It was in the uprising, a mission post. My father was a doctor and my mother a nurse,' he blurted out. 'At first we heard they had been taken prisoner,' he said hopefully. 'But later, Professor Bilton told me that news had come that they were . . .' Mariah couldn't get the words from his mouth. They stuck like dry bread on a hot day.

'On your own, boy?' the soldier said as he edged the man away with a sharp dig of his elbow.

'Now that I have graduated from the Colonial . . .'

'Family?'

'Not one left,' he said as he looked to the floor.

'A hard life, but still, worse things happen at sea,' the army officer said as he leant back in his seat and opened the penny dreadful, immersing himself in the reverie, every now and then chuckling yet again at tale of Fiery Jack.

'A story like my own,' the bagman said as he took a packet of thick toffee from the carpetbag and offered a piece to Mariah, handing him the crumpled sack of brown paper filled to the brim with matted lumps of sticky goo. Mariah quickly filled his mouth. 'Whatever your circumstances, let it be known that despite your present station in life, by virtue of our being both old boys of the Colonial School we are practically brothers. Isambard Black – here is my card.' He held out an empty hand; then, with a twist of his wrist, a neat gold-edged calling card sprung out of fresh air to the tips of his fingers 'Take it,' he said with a smile. 'If you are ever in London and need gainful occupation then call upon me. You never know, the coast may not suit you and the London smog may be a place to hide.' He

chuckled to himself, twisting his hands again, and brought forth an old Panjandrum playing card.

Mariah gasped, his mouth bubbling with frothing toffee.

'I have a friend at Claridges, he could help. In fact I was supposed to travel with him today but he never came.' The man held out the card to Mariah. 'The fool, the Joker without jest, behind his smile is great tragedy and malice, never one to be trusted.'

Mariah couldn't speak, Albion's command to tell no one echoing in his mind. He swallowed hard as the Joker with its telltale cribbed edge and brightly coloured mantle flashed before him, spinning in the man's hand as he made it bob back and forth and then twist on his fingertip in some elaborate conjuring trick. It disappeared suddenly, vanishing from view.

'Gone,' said the man as he reached towards Mariah, who pressed himself harder against the seat, one hand firmly in his pocket clutching the pack of cards that Albion had entrusted to him. 'And now . . .' He reached into the top pocket of Mariah's new suit and pulled forth the card as if it had been there all the time. 'Aha!' he exclaimed. 'The card dances about my new friend.'

'Party tricks,' muttered the Captain from behind the rustling paper. 'Next you'll be littering the carriage with rabbit droppings and pigeon feathers from all the beasts hidden in your dangerous undergarments.'

'Such a trick would be too crass. I am a magician – part-time, of course, but sleight of hand that fools the eye is my passion. I travel the world collecting the most audacious illusions that I can find and using them to bring mirth to those I meet.'

Mariah sat wide-eyed, twizzling strands of his thick, dark, curly hair in his fingers as Isambard Black balanced the Joker on the tip of his finger once more – and then in a puff of smoke that blew from the palm of his hand, it vanished, never to be seen again.

'Where does it go when it disappears?' Mariah asked.

'That I cannot tell you. I am bound by oath never to divulge the secret of the Order of Magicians. It would be on pain of death to give such vital knowledge to the uninitiated.'

'You can buy those tricks on any street corner where you're going, boy,' the Captain said without even raising his head from his paper.

'There is one illusion that cannot be bought,' the man said quietly to Mariah, hoping to be ignored by the soldier. 'A magic tin box that turns anything placed within it to the finest gold. That would quench all of my desires; it would surpass any sleight of hand or scurrilous palm. If I could have the Midas Box, I would be a happy man. '

'You could turn anything to gold?' Mariah asked.

'Anything, and everything,' the man replied. Just then the train's whistle blew as it was consumed by a tunnel, disappearing into the blackness.