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EGMONT
We bring stories to life

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

Prologue
Out of the Rain

Young Master Rourke sat upright in his armchair, startled awake by a sudden noise. Despite his name, he was actually an old man, only a few days short of his eighty-fifth birthday. He was known as 'Young Master Rourke' because his father had been the one and only 'Mister Rourke' in the area for many, many years. Old Mister Rourke had built Rourke Castle and had bought up all the railways, shipping lines and the whaling stations for miles around. In doing so he had become one of the richest and most influential men of his time.

Most of the riches were now gone, but Young Master Rourke still owned Rourke Castle. A vast rambling palace that extended across two sides of a hill, it had towers, stables, three ballrooms, a Greek temple, a Venetian canal and a scale copy of an Egyptian pyramid that was a hundred feet high. (The Pyramid looked like stone on the outside, but was in fact hollow, made of concrete slabs over a steel beam skeleton).

Rourke Castle was so big that it was spread across two towns. Half was within the bounds of a small town called

Portland, the other half in the neighbouring town. When the castle had still had staff, they used to joke about going to Portland, or going to Dogton, when crossing from one side of the castle to the other.

Over the years, more and more of the castle had been locked up and left, as it was too expensive to maintain. Young Master Rourke kept moving from larger rooms to smaller ones as his needs shrank. Finally he left the main castle entirely and moved to the old porter's lodge near the front gates, past the lake that had once boasted real icebergs and penguins, even in summer. Now the giant ice machine was broken and the penguins had been sent to a proper zoo. The lake was just a dark expanse of water, choked by rotten lilies.

The lodge and the land around it were half a mile outside the boundary of Portland. Young Master Rourke had not thought this important when he moved. He had forgotten that someone had once told him that he should take care to stay on the Portland side of the boundary at all times.

The sound that had woken him came again. Young Master Rourke tilted his head back as he tried to work out what it was. The grandfather clock in the corner of the room ticked slowly and melancholically, but that wasn't it. The time was five minutes short of midnight and the clock far from striking.

The night was quiet for a few seconds. Then the noise came a third time – a quick rush of beats that swept across the roof and were gone.

'Is that . . . rain?' muttered Young Master Rourke, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

He took off his half-moon reading glasses and consulted the ornate, gilded barometer that stood next to the grandfather clock.

The barometer's needle was sitting at FAIR.

'Stupid thing,' Young Master Rourke mumbled.

He struggled out of his deep leather armchair and crossed the room to tap the face of the barometer firmly. The needle quivered, then moved, but not towards STORMY. It kept insisting the weather should be fair.

Another round of what sounded like heavy raindrops crossed the roof. Rourke went to the window and looked out. There were still a few lamp posts working on the broad avenue that led to the castle, alongside the lake. Above, the sky was cloudy and the sky utterly empty of stars, but Rourke couldn't see any actual rain.

'Just a shower, you daft old fool,' he told himself. 'Forget about it and go to bed.'

He bent down and picked up the book, his mood improving instantly. Rourke had read *Gorillas vs The Fist* before, but it was one of many favourites that he often revisited. Reading pulpy old detective stories was one of his two main activities. The other one was looking after the only legacy of his father's that he actually treasured: the animals of the old Rourke Menagerie.

In his father's time, the menagerie had contained elephants,

lions, tigers and other kinds of exotic animals. Now there were only two chimpanzees, a warthog, three lemurs, a zebra, a jackal, two wolves and a macaw called Cornelia, who was at least a hundred years old. When Young Master Rourke had been much younger, he'd believed Cornelia had been stolen from a pirate.

In old Mister Rourke's day, all the animals had been housed in a complete zoo, up past the eastern wing of the castle. But that area was a weedy wasteland now. The remaining animals lived in a much smaller collection of cages and enclosures built on the old polo field right next to the lodge where Young Master Rourke lived. It was nowhere near as impressive as the grand old menagerie had been, but it was closer and much easier to deal with.

The new cages were also outside Portland's boundary.

Rattling rain fell on the roof again as Rourke shuffled out of his study into the lodge's main corridor. This time when the heavy beat of the drops ceased, a sudden loud bang immediately followed, and then much heavier thudding along the roof.

'That's not rain . . .' whispered Rourke, looking up to follow the sound as it travelled towards the back of the lodge. His heart was suddenly thumping in his chest, faster than was good for him. 'That's footsteps.'

The sound stopped. Rourke's head snapped back down as a man-shaped shadow passed across the narrow stained-glass

window to the left of the back door.

There was someone out there – someone who had apparently come down with the rain.

It was only then that Rourke remembered the warning about staying inside the Portland town limits, and what might happen if he didn't . . .

The book was still in his hand. He raised it, gnarled old fingers moving faster than anyone might expect, and flipped it open to the back page, where there was a simple white sticker with the phone number and address of a business in Portland.

Rourke stumbled to the ancient phone that sat on a seventeenth-century chestnut table in the corridor and put one shaking finger into the rotary dial.

At that moment he heard Cornelia the macaw, who had a free run of the new menagerie, but most often slept in a custom-made box under the eaves at the back door of the lodge. Cornelia normally never said anything but 'Who's a pretty girl?' and 'Nellie wants a nut'. Now she started shrieking.

'To the boats! Abandon ship!'

The other animals started braying and screaming and kicking, making noises that Rourke had never heard, not in all his long lifetime spent looking after them. They were hooting and howling, barking and biting, shaking their cages and filling the night with unnatural terror.

Frantically, Rourke dialled the number.

As the dial whirred in its final rotation, the noise of the

animals suddenly stopped, as if a conductor had snapped down his arms for a sudden finish.

Rourke held the phone to his ear, hardly hearing the sound of ringing at the other end. All his senses were focused towards the back door and the menagerie beyond.

The animals were quiet now, but there were other noises. Cages were swinging open, one by one. These sounds were familiar to Rourke, who opened them every day. There was the screech of the chimps' door, the one he had been meaning to oil for weeks. There was the scrape of steel on concrete, the bent door in the fence that surrounded the wolves' enclosure . . .

The phone kept ringing, and now Rourke could hear animals moving. Much more quietly than normal, though he still heard the soft pads of the jackal, the hooves of the zebra, and the shuffling gait of the warthog. The wolves, he assumed, remained stealthy, moving with their characteristic silence.

'What?' asked a tired voice on the phone. A man, grumpy at being woken up so late.

Rourke's mouth opened and closed. He struggled to speak, but couldn't get any air into his lungs. The uncaged animals were at the back door now – he could see their shadows against the stained glass.

'No!' he tried to say, the word emerging as little more than a croak. 'No!'

The handle of the back door slowly turned. The door edged open.

'Who is this?' asked the voice on the phone.

The back door swung open. A man stood there, a man wearing a hat and a trench coat just like the one on the cover of Rourke's book, except both were thoroughly wet. Water dripped from the brim of the hat that shadowed this man's face.

The animals were gathered round the stranger, silent companions pressing in as close as they could as he eased through the doorway.

'David?' the old man gasped.

There was something very odd about the animals. It took Rourke a second to process exactly what it was.

'Their eyes . . .' gasped Rourke. 'Their eyes are white!'

The phone fell from his hand as the man in the door lifted his head to stare at him. The shadow of the man's hat brim rose and light fell on his face, reflecting from his eyes – eyes that just like the animals' eyes were completely and utterly white, without pupil or iris.

++Where is it, old fool?++ asked the intruder. No sound came from his mouth and his lips did not move, but the voice was clear in Rourke's mind. **++Where is it?++**

Rourke opened his mouth, but only a choking rattle came out. His hand flew to his head, as if he could ward off the stabbing, awful communication that was going straight into his brain.

++Answer the question!++

Rourke suddenly clawed at his chest with both hands. *Gorillas vs The Fist* fluttered forgotten to the floor.

++No!++ shouted the stranger. He dashed forward and caught Rourke as he fell.

White began to swirl in Rourke's eyes too, but it could not outpace the other change that gripped the old man.

Young Master Rourke went limp. The white ebbed from his eyes, leaving them open and unseeing.

The stranger lowered the heavy body to the floor. He grabbed the phone and pulled it from the wall, the cord coming out with a piece of plaster the size of a dinner plate. Then he bent down and searched through the pockets of Rourke's dressing gown.

Without any sign or gesture from the stranger, the two white-eyed chimpanzees went into the study, while the other silently roamed the study as though looking for something.

The stranger flicked through the pages of Young Master Rourke's book. As he did so, a thick grey mist formed above him and several heavy drops of rain fell on to his back. He paused and looked up, and made an angry dismissive gesture that caused the mist and rain to immediately disappear.

In the study, the chimpanzees began to move books out of the bookcases, carefully opening each one before dropping it disinterestedly on to the floor. The wolves circled Rourke's fallen body as though looking for something.

"It *must* be here," whispered the stranger, using his voice this time. It sounded strangely like a growl, at first neither man nor animal, but then shifted to being fully human. 'But if it's not, there's always Plan B . . .'

Behind the chimps, the clock shook. Springs whirred inside its cavernous casing, cogs grated and a melancholy chime sounded the first of the twelve strokes of midnight.

The sound echoed through the lodge and, faintly but clearly, outside. The ancient macaw, hiding in the topmost branches of one of the great elms that lined the castle avenue, heard the clock and lowered her proud-beaked head.

'Every parrot for herself,' she muttered, and launched herself into the air, beginning a slow but steady flight to the east, towards the shimmering lights of Portland.