

The Adventures of Alan Shaw

Volume Two

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Alan Shaw and the Lovelace Code

I

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Shanghai, China

PAPER LANTERNS BOBBED on the breeze, their rouge light making tricky shadows in the narrow street below. Steam rose from vents and grates as if Shanghai were a factory for creating the world's clouds. Plunging through the haze, a young man was visible only as a blurred impression by those he shoved; a whip of blonde hair, a muttered curse, and a glimpse of light on the steel of his revolver, boots pounding the slick mudslide that was the alley's floor. Covered with a mixture of dirt and blood, some of which was his own, Alan Shaw slithered across another alleyway's opening, throwing himself into the shadow, and bounced from the wall like a ragdoll. Managing to keep his feet, he careened into the opposite wall, which he clung to for a second's valuable rest. Sliding a hand into his coat's inner pocket, he found the small wooden box still nestled there, and gave a long sigh. Glancing back the way he had come, Alan wiped the stinging saltwater from his eyes.

On reflex, he jerked back.

Thunkthunkthunk

A trio of arrows thudded into the wall beside Alan's head, each one closer than the last until they were less than an inch from his eye. Their shafts were ancient, splintered, the feathers at one end mostly rotted by time. But damned if they weren't still effective.

His Adam's apple bobbed with a near-miss gulp, and he was running again.

Shooting out of the alleyway's opposite end like a cannon shell, Alan exploded into a Shanghai market that choked the street with noise and the food stalls' mouth-watering fog. Paying the scents no mind, not even when his stomach made beastly protests, Alan slid under a stall's counter, ignoring the angry screams from the owner, and scuttled up and over a mountain of crates to the excited clucks and squawks of their inhabitants.

"Balls!"

The rotten wooden laths of a crate collapsed under his weight, swallowing his boot. The previous crate's previous inhabitant laboured into the air with a startled honk. Maintaining his balance by luck rather than judgement, Alan yanked hard, but nothing happened.

"Double balls!"

Behind him, above the sound of hammering cleavers transforming flesh to food and other human ruckus, someone screamed.

The Jiang Shi were coming.

Fighting the urge to look back, and still dragging the crate on his foot, Alan reached a ladder which led up to the distant rooftops. Taking a firm grip of the ladder, he smashed the crate against the wall as hard as he could, once, twice, and was finally free in a shower of splinters, feathers and goosey pellets.

"Ha!"

There was no way he was risking the crates again. His only option was up. Alan's limbs moved with simian dexterity, propelling him skyward at an alarming rate. Shanghai fell away as the mud alley turned to a vista of brick and dirty glass, foul gutters and shanty wood roofs. A stiff wind tugged at Alan's tan duster,

setting the long coat whip-cracking behind him as his muscles began to burn.

This used to be easier.

Short winded, he vaulted the building's parapet and landed with a splash on the wet roof beyond. There was something about the chimneys, the sloping roofs, the strings of laundry hung like piebald Christmas decorations, and the grey sky above. If only there was a dome here, or a tower there, if only the hot stench of the Thames were in his nostrils, Alan could have been home.

The sound of powerful claws on the brickwork below roused him.

He was very far from London. And very far from safe.

From a sprinter's crouch, he set off across the rain-slick rooftop, building speed, and flung himself across the gap between two slums with as little thought as some might step from the pavement. As he landed, scraping his boots in a well-placed slide, he finally allowed himself a look over his shoulder.

There they were. One Jiang Shi landed on the rooftop behind him with preternatural confidence, another running along the wall of a tall building which ran parallel, both creatures moving like men one minute and like beasts the next, with bows and quivers slung across their backs. The stench of their moss-encrusted and tattered robes, along with their rotting flesh, preceded them. Eyes glimmered from under their hexagonal caps and tongues lolled like slivers of raw meat. Alan saw their claws digging into brickwork as if it were dough and he decided that he really didn't want one of them to get a hold of him.

Where do people find these things? he wondered. *Is there a crypt guardian guild I'm not aware of? And weren't there three of the buggers?*

A rush of air by his ear sent a sizzling line of pain across his cheek. If he hadn't dodged purely on instinct, the undead Jiang

Shi's talons would have made bloody ribbons of his face. Alan made some wordless grunt of pain as his foot slipped on the wet rooftop and he fell, hitting the wood with his shoulder. For a second the roof creaked as if it might give up altogether and pitch him into the god-knows-what below. But it settled. With silent relief, he returned his attention to the sizzling mass of pain that was his face. The creature's rotting maw snarled. Holding out one hand to the creature, Alan made a placating gesture, and reached inside his coat. He knew exactly what it wanted.

The Jiang Shi, its tongue lolling like a barber's bloody rag, shivered with anticipation and began some tirade which was surely a villainous boast in its native Chinese.

"Sorry. I'm English," Alan muttered, and whipped his revolver from his coat in one fluid motion, bringing it to bear on the creature. All six rounds hammered into its face. The Jiang Shi screeched, reeling back as chunks of dusty flesh flew into the air. It spun, its ancient robes fluttering, one remaining eye roving in its pulverised socket until it found Alan already accelerating into the distance. It screeched, not seeming to notice when part of its shattered jaw dropped off, and made chase.

Across the rooftop, Alan fumbled in his empty trouser pocket. Unless he felt like firing lint, his offensive options had run out. He stowed his revolver in its shoulder holster, and concentrated on making it to the next street.

There would be a gap, he knew. A big gap. And in order to escape he would need to be at street level fast enough that falling was the only real option. Even the Jiang Shi wouldn't want to throw themselves off a building if they didn't have to. Strong as they were, the rot of the grave made them squishy. And that's where Alan had the advantage. Falling off of things was practically in his job description.

Vaulting a low wall and rounding a stack of chimneys, he caught his bearings by the Union Jack which poked its way high over a nearby roof.

Sanctuary.

Alan's rooftop was rapidly running out. He could almost feel the hot breath of the undead guardians on his neck. Every now and then he would catch one in his peripheral vision, moving closer, flanking him, expecting him to stop when the rooftop ended. The men, or creatures, or whatever they were, were panting hungrily. They could taste victory.

He allowed himself a smirk.

"You underestimate my stupidity," he panted.

The rooftop ended. Alan's lithe musculature bunched and shot him forward. He soared across the square below, arms cast forward, fingers grasping for every spare inch they could as the world turned topsy turvy and the ground began to accelerate toward him. His duster whipped out behind him, doing nothing to slow his descent.

He grinned, albeit maniacally, as the air tugged at his watering eyes and the familiar rush of impending death swarmed his body. Letting out a roar of exultation, he hit the flagpole and, locking himself into its orbit by his sweaty palms and muddy boots. Spinning downward helter-skelter he hit the ground with a choked scream, spread across the flagstones and groaning.

Lifting his head just enough that he could see beyond the high iron fences of the British Embassy yard, Alan made out three pairs of glowing blue eyes retreating beyond the rooftop, narrowed to slits and shimmering. He let out a laugh and laid back, letting the dull throb of his bones take over.

A rifle hammer clicked, followed by another. When Alan opened his eyes, he was staring down two barrels with Her Majesty's guards at the other end.

And so his day got worse.

2

THE LARGE OAK door bounced from Alan's shoulder as he was shoved into the office.

"Bloody hell. Mind yourself!" he yelled at the soldier, who he mentally named Corporal Shovey, as he dragged his duster under control and stepped onto the small rectangle of carpet which housed the office's desk and the only other inhabitant. The soldiers followed him in, rifles still raised. Corporal Shovey started to speak:

"Sir, we found this reprobate—"

"Yes, quite. Leave us, Corporal," said the rotund man behind the desk.

The soldier's mouth snapped shut.

"Quick as you like, Corporal," Alan sneered.

Shooting a look of amazement at Alan, both soldiers backed out of the room and the door clicked closed, leaving Alan alone with the man behind the desk. Gaslight slid over the man's well-oiled hair and winked from his silver tiepin, matching cufflinks and spectacles as he regarded Alan. His shirt collar was so perfectly starched that Alan felt choked by it all the way across the room.

The man's face glazed with mild annoyance as he cast a look down at Alan's boots.

"You're leaking blood onto my carpet, Mister Shaw."

"Don't worry, Rook. It's not mine. Mostly."

“Thank you. That has set my mind truly at rest. Take a seat.”

Alan eased himself down into a high-backed chair opposite the desk. It wasn't until he tried to lean back that he realised he couldn't. With difficulty, he twisted an arm up his own back and found the problem. Shrugging off his duster, spilling more flecks of blood and mud onto the carpet, he poked his finger through the hole he found and made a little *humph* of annoyance at the back of his throat. Hand behind his back once more, he found the culprit and tugged it free. The arrowhead had embedded in the spinal support of his armoured waistcoat. At some point the shaft must have broken off. Lord knew when. The waistcoat had done its job, of course, but he'd need a needle and thread for the coat.

“Would you look at that?” he muttered to himself, turning the arrowhead this way and that. “The buggers bloody got me!”

Rook sighed. “So it seems. Aren't we lucky that you aren't so easily killed? Do you have the item?”

Alan gave a snort and dug into his coat pocket before tossing the box toward the man.

“Here. May it bring you great happiness.”

The box hit the desk with a hollow thud and slid across the wood, stopped only by Rook's manicured hand.

“The money has been deposited into your account,” the spy-master said.

“Already?” Alan asked, twirling the arrowhead thoughtfully between his fingers as he sat down and reclined himself into a position that ached the least. Depositing the arrowhead in his duster pocket, he whipped out a fusty handkerchief, and began to dab at his bloody cheek. It didn't seem too bad. The gush had already turned to an ooze.

“Contrary to my personal feelings, my superiors have what can only be described as *faith* in you, Mister Shaw.” Rook slid open a desk drawer and placed the box inside.

“Aren’t you going to check it?”

“Do I need to?”

“I suppose not.”

“Then I suppose I won’t,” Rook snorted, slamming the drawer shut as if it were a bank vault. “Curiosity would have me ask a question, if I might? Why didn’t you show the guards your Letter of Marque? You would have been treated with much less hostility.”

Alan humphed. “They wouldn’t even let me put my hand in my pocket to draw it out.”

A smile greased Rook’s face.

Collecting his coat, Alan stood: “You done with me, then?”

“Two minor things before you go.” Rook reached into his desk and produced a sealed letter. “Firstly, another task, if you so desire it.”

Alan leaned over the desk to pluck the envelope from Rook’s fingers. There was only a little resistance, but enough that Alan had to put some effort in if he really wanted it. He forced back a snarl as Rook smiled at him and released the envelope.

Alan held the Letter of Marque to the light as if deducing its contents, weighing the cost.

“What am I stealing this time?”

“Acquiring, Mister Shaw. You acquire objects for Her Majesty.”

“Feels a lot like stealing to me. And I’d know.”

Rook *humphed*. “A young genius by the name of Lovelace has had personal items stolen by some Russian devil or other. A box containing a set of pristine white cards.”

“What’s he a genius of?” Alan asked.

“*She* is a genius in the field of analytic algorithms. The cards are the result of her life’s work—”

“And I’m stealing them back. Got it,” Alan interrupted.

Rook held up a finger. “Not quite, Mister Shaw.”

“Oh bugger. You mean I’m stealing them *again*.”

“Let’s say that such technological advances shouldn’t be left in the hands of the French.” Rook’s smile positively writhed.

Alan nodded. “Fair enough. There was another thing?”

Opening another drawer, Rook produced a pile of letters bound with string. He tossed them toward the edge of the desk where Alan let them sit.

Rook stared at him. “I am not your personal mailman. Answer your brother.”

Snatching up the envelopes, Alan made for the door, muttering only one thing before slamming it behind: “Mind your own business.”

Alan stepped from Rook’s doorway with the Letter of Marque in one hand and a pile of mail in the other. After a moment’s consideration, he stuffed the string-bound pile into his coat pocket and tore open the other letter with a little more violence than was necessary. Turning down the corridor as he read, he realised that he only had until tomorrow morning before his next adventure began.