

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

The Home of the Adventurer

Always busy, always fast, and always exciting, the port town receives many ships filled with goods for merchants to peddle in the market square. From the docks to the gate, there is always something going on. Yeomen and deckhands moor their vessels and unload their cargo. Merchants barter, bank, and sell in the square, which is always filled with people looking for groceries and treasures. Children chase each other in tight alleyways and side streets, using the entire town as their playground. Maids and housewives hang up laundry to dry on balconies as their masters and husbands are away on business and fishing trips.

This town is always growing, sprawling around the bay, and expanding further inland with more houses being constructed across the grassy meadow surrounding the town. The meadow and its flowers give a sharp contrast to the bustling town of stone and wood. The dirt paths from outside the city turn into cobblestone roads and lace the town in a web-like pattern. The bustle of children playing and carriages rolling resonates around the neighborhood blocks. Meanwhile, the shouts of the sailors and captains giving orders in the harbor echo throughout the whole town. The air is briny and fresh, blowing cool winds across the bay. The smell of the sea wafts through the air, carrying the smell of the day's catch with it. Restaurants and taverns cook the catch, and their fried and grilled concoctions can be smelled for miles around. Yes, the port town is an exciting place. A place where many young men find opportunities to start their life's journey, and it is the place where our story begins.

The Intrepid Explorer Returns Home

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

"Dad's home!" cried out the children of the Ulrich household.

"Ah, come here kids!" Dr. Karl Ulrich greeted.

Carrying behind him a cart with his luggage, the mustached, muscular man, dressed in his usual vest, knelt. The three children jumped into their father's arms, which were big enough to wrap around all of them, including the growing ten-year-old, Jason.

Jason Ulrich was growing to look more and more like his father with each passing day. His emerald eyes beamed as they looked up at his father. His brother and sister, Frederic and Hanna, looked up with just as much love and anticipation, for Dr. Ulrich would usually bring back souvenirs and stories of his expeditions out beyond the South Seas.

Dr. Ulrich sat his kids down on the burnish leather couch and turned to his wife, Melanie. She leaned in to kiss him, only to be swept off her feet as her husband picked her up and gave her a "welcome home" kiss. The matriarch of the family melted as the good doctor gently set her down next to Hannah. Dr. Ulrich walked to the center of the living room and began to pull stones and artifacts out of his satchel while regaling his family with tales of ancient civilizations, sightings of new creatures, and stories of his crew surviving the elements out at sea. Although he was always weary from his journeys, he often got a second wind after seeing his family and was always ready to tell stories to his children. It wasn't long before the kids were either asleep or waning.

But tonight, Jason was wide awake, his mind racing with questions and wonder at a particular ounce of metal ore, locked away in his father's brass briefcase, a circular window in the center of the case allowing him to see the ore's faint blue glow. His father had brought many other interesting items back home with him before, but this glowing rock had him mesmerized.

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

“Why does it glow?” Jason asked.

“We don’t know,” Dr. Ulrich replied, "that's what I'm trying to find out. But, from what we understand so far, is that this,” he began tapping on the container’s window, “could be the most valuable treasure we’ve ever found.”

The next morning, Frederick Ulrich was doing his chores, which included tending to the plants in his mother’s garden. The sun beat down on his dark brown hair and sweat beaded on his forehead. Just as he was about to stand up to get his hat, a shadow suddenly cast itself over him. Frederick turned and looked up to see Jason holding out a hat for him to take.

“Thanks, Jason,” Frederick said gratefully as he accepted the hat from his brother and slipped it onto his head.

“You’ll pass out if you’re not careful," Jason replied. "Done with picking the weeds?”

“Almost.”

“Okay, hurry up with it, Fred; we still have to tune the auto-gate before lunch.”

The younger Ulrich heaved out a sigh thinking about the tedious work ahead. Though he was thankful for steam technology, the extra maintenance on the gears and vapor valves was an annoyance. Thankfully, this only had to be done once every three months, thanks to some special fine-tuning by his father. As he finished his current task, he got up to follow his brother to the front gate, when a glow from the basement window caught his eye.

Behind the window, seemingly ablaze was the azure stone that their father had brought in the night before. Jason and Frederick turned around and made their way to the window. Crouching down, they noticed the stone was out of the case and inside some sort of metal and

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

glass cylinder, with valves and pipes leading off its ends to a metal box. It was clear that Dr. Ulrich was running a test, but there were two problems. One was that that the apparatus was shaking violently, ready to explode. The other was that Dr. Ulrich wasn't there to stop it.

“Uh... Jason, that doesn't look good,” said a visibly nervous Frederick.

“Hurry, open the window!” Jason commanded.

Frederick opened the window while Jason slid down into the basement feet first. Frederick followed his brother in, and the pair rushed to the table, frantically trying to figure out how to shut down the device.

“The pressure meter is in the red!”

“Dad, where are you?!”

“Should I unscrew this cap?”

“This bolt's too tight!”

“No, not that one, turn the other valve!”

“Dad, come quick!”

“Grab the hose for the vaporic compressor!”

“It's getting really bright!”

“Goggles!”

“Dad!”

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

Where could their father be? Their mother and Hannah went out to the market for spices, leaving all the males at home. But Dr. Ulrich would never leave an experiment unattended. Even if he went upstairs for a bit, he surely should have heard the chaos stirring in the basement. The shaking was getting worse, making it hard for either of the boys to turn the necessary dials and bolts. The iron cube had exhaust ports that were billowing hot clouds of steam into a reservoir, which had a chimney leading out to the exhaust hood at the end of the table closest to the backyard wall. However, it was too much — steam began to leak into the room, and the device rattled and hummed louder and louder. The stone in the cylinder began to glow brighter than any electric bulb they had ever seen. The boys desperately worked together to turn one last valve, and then-

PSHHHH! More steam began to escape, this time from the main pipe at the top of the cylinder holding the stone, relieving more pressure. The hood managed to pull more of the steam out of the room, and the two brothers sighed the biggest sigh of relief of their lives.

However, they had little time to rest. Where was dad? The answer came quickly as the two were jerked up by their collars away from the table, and practically thrown across the room into the arms of a burly, mustachioed man with dark glasses. The boys struggled, but couldn't get out of his grip. Jason turned his head to see his father held at gunpoint, a repeating cylinder pistol pointed at his side, held tightly by a broad-shouldered man with a bandana obscuring his nose and lower features.

Jason's eyes widened in disbelief -- this couldn't be happening. Of all people, how could his father be on his knees at gunpoint?

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

The man that snatched him and his brother up began to detach the cylinder from the device. The smoldering stone was still glowing, casting its blue light across his partially covered face as he turned around. The tall crook was leaner than his cohorts, but just as imposing in his own way, partially due to his height, at least three inches taller than the burly man. The tall man wore a black mask that obscured his nose and the upper half of his face, along with a pair of dark goggles that eclipsed his eyes.

“Thank you, doctor, for wrapping our item for us,” taunted the tall man. “We appreciate your great attention to customer service.” The man laughed as he turned back to the ore.

“Dad, what’s going on?” cried Jason.

“It’s all right son, just don’t struggle.” replied his father.

“But da-urgh!” Frederick was cut off by a slight squeeze from the burly man, his muscular forearm pressuring little Frederick’s throat.

“Honor thy father, boy,” mocked the man with the gun.

“Easy Frederick. Just leave it alone.” his father commanded.

The tall man continued, “Gentlemen, let’s take our leave and our profits.”

He marched up the stairs ahead of his partners, while the burly man threw the children into their father, sending the family trio crashing into the wall; the man with the gun backed up the steps while keeping the pistol trained on them. When it seemed like the villains left, the family stood up.

“Frederick, Jason, are you two hurt?” Dr. Ulrich asked in a concerned tone.

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

“I’m fine. We’re fine,” answered Frederick.

“Dad, who were they?” Jason asked.

“No one, Jason. Just a few stragglers who were chasing us on the return voyage.” Dr. Ulrich answered. “Don’t worry about them. They’re not getting far.”

Jason and Frederick smirked at each other, knowing what was coming next for the thieves.

Meanwhile, at the front of the house, in the foyer, the trio of crooks were just about to run out the front door that they entered through when suddenly, gas started spewing from hidden nozzles in the floor. The three men began coughing and sputtering, and despite his mask, the man with the gun was beginning to suffocate. He dropped the gun as he removed his bandana, only to breathe in more of the gas. His throat burned as he continued to cough, eyes tearing up as he flailed about, trying to get outside. The burly man rushed out the front door, only to succumb to the powerful vapors himself. He doubled over in pain and discomfort as the gas dissipated in the open air.

The tall man was able to make it farther out onto the lawn. He stumbled and took deep breaths of fresh air while exhaling the fumes. The doctor seemed to still have a few traps, and the tall man would have to be quick, but cautious on his way out. Thankfully, the muscle of this job, burly man, was just as tough as he was said to be, and was just able to get down the porch steps and onto the grass. The tall man recovered quickly in the fresh air and regrouped with his stronger partner. Their armed partner was still in the foyer and didn’t seem to be coming out anytime soon.

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

“Leave him, we have to go!” the tall man barked. The burly man followed close behind as they hurried down the long driveway towards the auto-gate. Their getaway was just ahead, but as they got closer, the horses snorted and stamped in the gravel. The animals began to turn around to run off, but the burly man sprinted to catch them. Something wasn’t right, and the tall man stopped in his tracks as he heard an unfamiliar sound.

“Wait! Move!” he shouted.

CRACK! The burly man crumpled over as something zipped right by him. With a rumble of the gravel and the hiss of steam from exhaust pipes, the culprit slid sideways to a stop.



Treasures in Darkness Prologue

It was a bronze machine, a steam engine on a frame attached to two wheels, like a bicycle. The tall man had never seen such a contraption. And sitting astride it, was Dr. Ulrich holding a baton.

“I’ll be taking that back now,” he declared triumphantly.

“I’m afraid not, doctor!” yelled back the thief.

Dr. Ulrich revved the engine and took off straight at the man. The tall man reached into his cloak and brandished a bola. In a blur of movement, he dove out of the way and threw the cord at the doctor’s wheels. The weights bounced off the side of the tire, but one of them found its place in between the spokes, and the cord wrapped around and locked up the wheel. The bike skidded and flipped, its rider nowhere to be seen until the tall man looked up. Dr. Ulrich had jumped off at the last second, and somersaulted in the air, collapsing into a roll across the lawn.

Dr. Ulrich looked up after landing his athletic feat to see the tall man already sprinting toward the gate. But he wasn’t worried, the trap was already set. The tall man ran, confident that with his stride and head-start, Dr. Ulrich wouldn’t be able to close the distance, and that he’d be able to pass the gate and lose him in the wooded area before getting into town.

Confident, until he slipped and stumbled all over himself.

He fell headlong into the ground, slipping as if he were on ice. The tall man groaned and checked his hand, which was covered in a bronze slippery substance.

‘The sly dog,’ he thought. Dr. Ulrich dumped an oil slick behind him as he charged ahead.

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

The tall man's fall gave the clever scientist more than enough time to catch up, running outside the area of the slick grass. Victorious, Dr. Ulrich dropped his knee on the man's belly and used his baton to leverage the man's shoulder and elbow, locking those joints around the cold steel, and turned him on his side. The man was defeated, and all the doctor had to do was tie up the criminal.

But why did the sky seem darker all of a sudden?

The question was answered with a mass of muscle slamming into the middle of Dr. Ulrich's back, carrying him off of the tall man and into the ground.

The scientist shifted his hips and spun around to find the burly man on top of him, recovered from the blow he received earlier. The man raised his fists in the air to slam down on the doctor's head, but the doctor's arms were free; and with a well-timed buck of his hips as the muscled goon swung down, he took the burly man's balance and arm, and hooked the brute's leg with his own foot as well. Dr. Ulrich slammed his right fist into the man's left armpit as he skillfully and swiftly rolled over his left side, carrying the burly man with him, and slamming the same brute on his back. The doctor reached across his enemy's face, grabbing the collar of his coat, but the burly man quickly turned his head and shoved his hand into the doctor's bicep on his other arm, blocking him from reaching in to finish the choke. Dr. Ulrich tried to lean in more, attempting to shift more weight on the man's arm than he could handle, but the burly man barely struggled, and even started to push back. This wasn't working. The doctor couldn't compete with this hulk's strength and size on the ground for long. Dr. Ulrich let go of his enemy's collar, striking the man's jaw with a back fist to distract him just long enough to jump up and put some distance between them. The giant started to get up, but winced and grabbed his

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

right side. The man was tough, but not tougher than the iron baton that cracked his ribs earlier. Thinking quickly, Dr. Ulrich saw his option to win, a well-placed kick might do enough to end it. Thankfully, his enemy wasn't quick enough, and the doctor's crushing kick found its target. The burly man's ribs cracked further as he cried out in pain. The burly man slumped over gasping and panting, as Dr. Ulrich deftly tied the man's hands behind his back.

It wasn't over yet, however. Panting from the struggle, the scientist surveyed his surroundings to find that the tall man had escaped... almost. He was only a few feet away from his destination: the broken auto-gate that he exploited earlier to invade the homestead. Determined, with the cylinder in hand, he dropped caltrops behind him as he made a mad dash to the exit, only for the gate to literally shut close in his face. The auto-gate's iron bars rapidly rolled along the horizontal track in the gravel, pushed on by the pneumatic pistons on the frame of the gearbox. CLANG! The gate shut fast, locking the tall man in, who was now running full speed into iron. He literally bounced himself off of the gate, losing his grip on the cylinder and crashing himself on the earth. Losing consciousness from the hit, the tall man looked over to the gearbox, not seeing the doctor, but his son Jason smirking triumphantly, the last person he saw before he woke up in the infirmary, attended by a lovely nurse and two not-as-lovely officers who were still, nonetheless glad to see him awake in time for his court date.

“The trio were working for someone else, not themselves,” the detective announced.

After a few days of interrogation and court testimony, Detective Muller was able to piece a report together for Dr. Ulrich and the Order of Natural Science, for whatever good it would do.

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

They got as much information as they could from the crooks, but they were merely mercenaries, hired thugs who didn't know much of anything about their client, not even a name. After a brief rehearsal of a two-page report, Muller left the podium at the front of the room and sat back down in the chair at the guest bench.

The council members of the Order of Natural Science, or the "Natural Order" as they were more commonly known, consisted of nine men, all scientists and researchers who were involved in some of the greatest inventions, discoveries, and advancements in science and technology that was ever produced in their country. The Steam Mechanization Boom of the last ten years was due in no small part to the efforts of the men on the council, one of whom, was Dr. Ulrich himself, a capable and brilliant inventor and explorer who had a knack for procuring some of the most useful elements on his expeditions into the unknown islands and lands of the South Seas.

One graying member noted, "This is a serious matter. Hiring privateers to stalk our expedition vessels, and having the same mercenaries invade our colleague's home to secure this element means that we've discovered something that's nothing short of incredible."

"Aye, this reeks of political sabotage," commented another.

"Dr. Ulrich, for security, of course, you will agree that your research on this stone must be done at the conservatory," said a bespectacled member.

The doctor gravely responded, "Yes sir. Considering the great troubles we went through to find samples of the stone, and the properties it has demonstrated-

Treasures in Darkness Prologue

“Properties, plural?” asked the councilman across from Ulrich. “In your report, you mentioned it was good for one application-”

“Yes, plural. Forgive my deception, but,” Dr. Ulrich stood up from his chair and took out his pocket watch, “this element has many secrets and many uses.” He clicked the latch release to reveal that it wasn’t a watch at all, but a container that held something in it that shone brightly. “What I’ve appeared to discover is a treasure, gentleman. A treasure hid in darkness. And I believe the people we met on our expedition-”

“People?! The territory isn’t deserted?!” another exclaimed.

Dr. Ulrich simply smirked and said, “Gentlemen, the world is bigger than we know.”

To be continued in chapter 1...

By: Lino Mendoza