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*This story is excerpted from the book, **The Masques Chronicles vol 1: The Golden Age to the Silver Age** by **D.K. Latta** – if you enjoy it, please consider buying the complete book from Amazon. The two volume collection asks “what if?” there had been a Canadian comic book publisher like Marvel or DC, spanning the decades from the 1940s to today, and imagines the different stories and characters that might have been.*

This story takes us back to the 1950s. Superheroes were (temporarily) losing their appeal in comics, leading to other, sometimes hybrid genres. So this tale presents an odd-ball detective duo – a hard-boiled PI and his ex-superhero partner – investigating strange doings in that new, flash-in-the-pan medium of...television...

"Who Killed Captain Asbestos?"

(from My Date with the Girl with the Northern Vision #7, summer, 1953)

MY HANDLE'S BERNARD "Bunny" Lee. I'm a vet turned private eye turned one-half of an odd ball detective combo.

Ain't it funny the roads life takes you on?

I sat out most of the big one in a Japanese POW camp -- captured in 1941 with the fall of Hong Kong. The stories you've probably heard about how the Japanese treated their POWs?

All true.

When I finally got repatriated I weighed half as much as I had at the start of the war, and with a permanent limp thanks to a beating I received with a stick of bamboo.

Ironically, even though I was beaten and imprisoned by a bunch of Japanese fascists -- my best friend growing up was a Japanese-Canadian kid named Kenji Izumo. But when I finally got home to Vancouver I found he and his family had been packed off to an internment camp for the duration of the war, their house sold. And no one knew where they had gone after that.

I spent years in a POW hell, keeping myself going because I figured I was suffering for a good cause -- in the name of my friends and family back home. Only to come back to *that*.

I wasn't good for much in the months after I got home, drinking too much and dealing with a lot of anger. Even once I got my weight back up, the only skills I really had involved acting tough and pulling a trigger. The limp kept me out of the police force. My conscience kept me out of the rackets. So that basically left becoming a private dick.

It was strictly small time for the first few years: spying on cheating husbands (or helping couples fake affairs so they could get a divorce before a judge) or busting penny-ante embezzlers.

Until one case had me crossing paths with Tundrina -- The Girl with the Northern Vision. She was a crime-fighting Masque just at a time when being a Masque was losing its public lustre. I was a two-bit peeper in need of an angle and she was a parahuman in need of a shingle, so to speak. We became partners -- professionally, that is. Personally? Well, that's still a work in progress.

Not that that explained the precise circumstances that put us in a cramped dressing room standing over the body of a man known across the English-speaking part of the country as Captain Asbestos.

To understand that, you'd need to start two days before...

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“I am you and you, me; a Greek chorus,” said the skinny man in the black sweater, his beard clinging to his chin like a wisp of cotton candy he forgot to wipe away. He stood on the dais in the dimly lit Vancouver coffee shop, eyes hiding behind tinted granny glasses while a smouldering cigarette dangled between two fingers. The air was so thick with smoke it was like a fog; mostly tobacco but there was a faint scent of wet rope in the air that suggested someone in the room was sucking a roach and figured it wouldn’t be noticed. *“We scream our revelations of life’s cruel plot to an empty theatre, applauded only by oblivious drunks seeking sanctuary from the cold...”*

“What do you think?” whispered Tundrina, seated beside me at our table near the EXIT sign.

“It ain’t exactly ‘The Shooting of Dan McGrew,’” I grumbled.

She chuckled. “It’s the new poetry. It’s challenging. It’s hip.” Then Tundrina sighed, as though conceding the point. “But I guess I prefer Pauline Johnson.” She took a sip of her ice tea. It had been brought to our table as regular tea, but with one glance from The Girl with the Northern Vision -- presto! Ice tea. She was dressed in a slinky blue gown, her hair long and black, half covering her face like Veronica Lake. She was the elegant one in our partnership.

The raconteur finished his poetic soliloquy to subdued applause. Too much enthusiasm would’ve seemed gauche in this crowd.

It was Tundrina who had picked the spot. When it was her turn to pick we seemed to end up at jazz clubs or abstract art shows. I think she had made it her pet project to civilize li’l Philistine me.

“How can it be hip and challenging both at the same time?” I asked.

“Ah -- the eternal paradox.”

I grunted at the intruding voice, and a burly man settled, unasked, into the free chair at our table. He was in a brown suit that looked as though it might’ve looked

good on someone else, his hair brushed forward in a self-conscious attempt at hiding a recession

“Look, buster,” I whispered, leaning toward him, “there are plenty of empty seats at other-” Tundrina’s hand on my arm stopped me.

“Bunny, this is Morrie Felvshed. He’s with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation,” she said lightly, knowing I wouldn’t like it.

I frowned, realizing she had obviously set up the meet. “I thought you were the one who liked us to get away from work from time to time.”

“I am. I do. But our bank account is flatter than Saskatchewan. Morrie here is a potential client.” Seeing I still wasn’t mollified, she added, “He’s picking up the tab.”

I grunted, knowing I was defeated. But as I settled back I decided to ask the waitress for a cup of their most expensive brew next time she sashayed past our table.

“So,” Morrie Felvshed said pleasantly, as if our discussion hadn’t taken place right in front of him, “what do you two know about -- television?”

Tundrina shrugged. “It’s a luxury -- without the scope of radio, or the budget of cinema. I just can’t see it being much more than a novelty. Like 3-D movies.”

“I think you underestimate the appeal of novelties.” He glanced knowingly at the stage where the beat poet had just been. “Everybody wants to be part of the coming thing.”

“So what does this have to with us?” I asked, getting to the point.

“Are you familiar with *The Captain Asbestos Show*?”

“An afternoon TV series, isn’t it? With puppets and guests and hosted by some guy in a mask and cape? Sponsored by an asbestos supplier or something, I’m guessing.”

“No,” Tundrina says. “Captain Asbestos is the real-deal -- at least he was. He really has asbestos-based powers; invulnerable to flame and he’s strong thanks to extra tensile strength in his muscles or something. I don’t really know his origin, though. I

think in interviews he claims he had been in Lucifer's Legion -- that Canadian-American Masque commando unit during the war."

"If every parahuman who claimed to have fought with Lucifer's Legion was telling the truth -- it would've qualified as a battalion," I muttered ruefully.

Maybe there had always been parahumans. I don't know. But if so they mostly kept a low profile. It wasn't until the 1940s and the war that a lot of them started putting on costumes, making a splash, fighting the good fight. They were colourful heroes at a time when we needed heroes.

But the war ended and Masques lost their allure.

Maybe people were just tired of fighters. Or maybe they didn't want to be reminded that after all the death and destruction and sacrifices there was still injustice in the world. And of course there was Igor Gouzenko walking into an RCMP office and blowing up the Cold War. These days the Americans are practically eating themselves alive with paranoia about Reds under the bed. So it's all conformity and staying in line now -- that's what beatniks like the poet guy were supposedly objecting to.

In this new reality some people regarded Masques with suspicion, or as a bad influence on the young. So some Masques decided to retire. Some went semi-legit like my lady friend. And some, well, some decided to make themselves safe and cuddly and commercial.

"You're both right. Captain Asbestos is a real Masque -- and the show is sponsored by MacMillan Asbestos."

"So what about it?" I prodded.

"Just this: *The Captain Asbestos Show* is a jewel in the crown of the CBC's schedule -- surveys indicate it has crossover appeal, with teens and even adults watching. There's talk of American syndication," he said, eyes blazing in a way that reminded me of Humphrey Bogart thinking about gold in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. "And I

don't just mean licensing the format, but the actual episodes themselves. There's a lot invested in the show."

"And something's got you worried about your investment?"

He nodded vigorously. "Lately Captain Asbestos has been acting oddly. Missing rehearsals. Seeming rundown at production meetings. But it's next to impossible to get any information from the set because the show is largely pre-packaged. The puppeteers, some of the crew -- they all work for him, not the network. We're getting antsy. It could be booze or drugs, or maybe an affair. Or it could be more sinister. After all, he *is* a Masque -- no doubt with secrets in his past. In the States a lot of Masques are being hauled before HUAC -- uh, no offense," he said to my partner.

"So where do we come in?"

"The show has celebrity guest stars. Comedians. Singers. We're trying to get Eleanor Collins." He looked my partner up and down. "So what would be more natural than for us to book a fellow Masque for the show? And while there, on the set, you could snoop around, see if there's anything we need to worry about."

"You mean you want to stamp out any scandals before they start -- and before they scare away potential American broadcasters," I said drily.

He smiled. "See? You *do* understand television after all."

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It was the middle of a Sunday morning two days later, the sun like a birthday balloon hovering with smug cheerfulness over the mountains to the east, when Tundrina and I arrived at the sound stage where they filmed *The Captain Asbestos Show*. It was just an old warehouse near the Gastown district, now re-purposed as a TV studio. But it was unremarkable from the outside -- like the building was its own civilian disguise for the Masque TV program inside. Tundrina was in a yellow dress with matching gloves, like she'd just got out of church, and I was dressed in a

rumpled seersucker suit and a bucket hat, like I'd just stumbled out of an all-night poker game.

I tried the door and it wasn't locked, so we went on in.

There's something about a TV studio that kind of resembles the gutted insides of a whale. There's no rhyme nor reason to the protuberances dangling from the ceiling or jutting up from the floor, comprised of lights and cameras and reflectors and microphones, with cables like intestines looping everywhere. It was smaller and more claustrophobic than the way they depict it in Hollywood movies, too. The locked-down cameras were impassive as inukshuks and beyond them was the standing set made up to look like a living room.

"Hey," I shouted into the emptiness. "Anyone here?"

Tundrina looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "I know it's Sunday, but I thought Morrie told us Captain Asbestos would meet us."

"Me to, doll."

"Doll?" screeched a voice. "Did you say 'doll'?"

We both whirled about. A hand puppet was perched on the back of the prop chesterfield; a bald little character in a miniature plaid jacket with matching bow tie.

"Aw -- nuts!" it shrieked in its exaggerated falsetto. "That's just a dame -- and here you got me excited."

Tundrina pursed her lips and started toward the puppet persona. "Cute," she said. "You're, uh, Tickle Tommy, right?" Tundrina had obviously bought herself a TV listing the night before just to get a sense of the show.

The puppet folded forward in a bow. "Tick-Tom to my friends. And you're that Masque lady-turned-PI."

"Well, Tick-Tom--" I started.

The puppet jerked toward me and almost seemed to glare. “You ain’t my friend, snooper!” After a tense moment the mouth suddenly dropped open and a hideous cackling filled the empty sound stage. “Gotcha!”

“You’re a riot,” I said coldly. “You should audition for the Happy Gang -- I bet Bert Pearl could use a hand-warmer. Now why don’t you stand up from behind that damn couch and stop acting like an ass.”

The mouth clamped closed, as though miffed, and the little glass eyes stared at me with an almost eerie sentience. Tundrina was just stepping onto the stage when the puppet suddenly dropped from sight behind the furniture. Tundrina peered over the chesterfield. “Bunny,” she called. I was at her side in an instant and saw what she saw:

No one was there.

“Dammit,” I hissed. “Showbiz types are screwy.”

“Can I help you?”

We spun about again, half-expecting to see another puppet. It wasn’t -- but it was almost as bizarre. It was a man. At least, it looked like a man. But since he was dressed head to toe in a black body stocking making him little more than a three dimensional silhouette, it was hard to make out for sure. Were these jokers in mid-rehearsal I wondered? “And you are?”

“I am,” he splayed his fingers dramatically around the darkness that was his face, “The Sponsor!”

Seeing my puzzled expression, Tundrina said, “He’s a character in the show. He transforms into pitchmen for the products.”

“You’re a parahuman, too? Able to shape-change?”

“Only through the miracle of the TV,” he said. “Like so...” He reached out and touched one of the studio cameras -- and seemed to flow into it, like being sucked down a drain. Tundrina gasped as he disappeared entirely.

“Hey, kids!” I jerked around and spied a monitor screen to one side crackle to life, presumably used by directors to frame the shot and block the scenes accordingly. The black figure of The Sponsor was on the screen. As we watched the blackness slipped away, and a man dressed like some Hollywood singing cowboy was in the picture, twirling a six gun with one hand while puffing on a cigarette with the other. “Peco Puffs -- the smoothest smokes this side of the Rio Grande,” he said, grinning. Then his form rippled again, like a bad reception, and he was a cartoon animal -- Wilbur the Wimpy Wolverine if I knew my funny animals, cradling a box of breakfast cereal. “St-start yu-your day right, kids -- with Wilbur Wheat Flakes!” He shook the box and I jumped back, startled, as actual flakes went flying off the screen to bounce across my face.

“Whoops! Sorry!” And suddenly The Sponsor was standing next to us again. I looked around my feet -- but the cereal flakes were gone. “The manifestations are solidified static discharges -- and only stay coherent for a few seconds.”

I grunted, a bit embarrassed by how he startled me. “I guess that’s why you turned to being an ad man rather than crime-fighting.”

The featureless black head cocked to one side. “The pay’s better than being a private dick, for one thing,” he said pointedly.

“Uh, we’re looking for Captain Asbestos,” said Tundrina, always quick to play peacemaker when my caustic tongue soured the atmosphere. “I’m supposed to be guesting on your show this week.”

It seemed to me like the figure stiffened, but it was hard to make out since it was difficult to define the contours of his form. “First I’ve heard of it.” Then he shrugged. “Well, Asbestos isn’t around. He’s like that. Forgetful.”

Which was kind of the reason we were here, I thought -- but didn’t say it out loud.

“Hey ho, what ya know?” came another voice, with a deep, goofy timbre. We turned to see a bulky figure lumbering onto the stage from out of the opposite wing, costumed to look like a caricatured version of some sort of antlered creature. The only clothing over the costume was a white T-shirt with the logo of the show on it. No doubt sold in all sizes at Eaton’s and other department stores. He stopped, clearly not having expected to see strangers. “Uh -- what’s going on, boys n’ girls?” he asked cautiously. I recognized him from ads for the show: Carleton the Caribou.

“This is Tundrina -- The Girl with the Northern Vision. And I’m, uh, her agent. We’re supposed to be meeting with Captain Asbestos. But Corporal Tar-Baby over there says we missed him.”

The big caribou head cocked to one side, the foam antlers wobbling. “Pretty sure I saw him a few minutes ago. Try his office/dressing room down that corridor,” he gestured past us to a hall leading off from the sound stage.

“Thanks,” I said. “You’re certainly more help than that Tommy Tickler fellah.”

“You saw Tickle Tommy?” With an almost comical exaggeration the big head whipped back and forth.

“Just his puppet,” I said over my shoulder, having no idea what seemed to have put ants in his antlers -- and not really caring. Maybe they were having a lover’s spat -- showbiz types swing that way, so I’d heard.

As I followed Tundrina I glimpsed a movement from the corner of my eye. In the prop window cut into the set’s backdrop were perched what I took to be a trio of stuffed-animal sea otters. But as I stepped from the stage, I realized their little heads had swivelled to watch us go. They were puppets, too -- their manipulators staying hidden from sight, just like Tickle Tommy’s controller. “What a bunch of kooks,” I mumbled to Tundrina.

Seconds later we stopped before a door with “Captain Asbestos” stencilled on the frosted glass. Tundrina rapped on it with her knuckles. “Captain Asbestos? Are

you there? This is Tundrina -- I believe the network told you I was coming.” She knocked again -- and the door fell in by half an inch. She looked at me, brow crinkling.

“Hey -- Captain,” I said, pressing my lips to the crack. “You decent, fella?”

I remembered that the whole reason we had been hired was because of worries the good captain might have a drinking problem or something, so I realized it was possible he was sprawled over his desk with a case of Molson’s at his feet. Cautiously, I pushed the door all the way open. “Captain?” There was no answer -- and no sign of the star. “Guess The Sponsor was right after all.” Though a television against one wall was hissing and crackling as it showed a dead channel.

“Bunny!” Tundrina said, having brushed past me and moved further into the room. She was standing by the desk, looking at something blocked from my sight. I had a bad feeling as I sidled up next to her.

Sprawled on the other side of the desk, his chair having tipped over backward, was the body of Captain Asbestos, arms splayed at his side, mouth agape. The first thing that struck me, oddly enough, was that the colours of his costume were completely different from the way I’d imagined them from the black and white publicity stills. The second was that he had probably died from heart failure.

In so far as the bullet wound in the middle of his chest hadn’t done his heart any good whatsoever.

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Who would want to murder an ex-Masque turned TV personality? An old foe seeking revenge? Or had the captain still been on the job, silenced before he could expose some criminal enterprise?

He hadn’t been dead very long at any rate. Possibly only minutes before Tundrina and I arrived at the studio. As we hoofed it back out onto the sound stage I was already drawing my pistol. Carleton the Caribou was over by one corner, big

hands on fat hips, seemingly chastising Tickle Tommy who was perched once more on the back of the chesterfield. “You shouldn’t bait strangers,” the caribou was saying. Then he looked up quickly as we came in. “Oh, hey -- whatee-o, folksy-wolksies-” The patented whimsical patter died in his throat. “Uh -- wha-?” He had spied my gun.

“Tundrina,” I said, ignoring him.

“I’m on it, Bunny.” She drew wing-tipped glasses from her belt, one lens red, one blue, resembling 3-D glasses. Donning them she stared at the EXIT door and her fists balled instinctively. Suddenly white foamed around the door, petrifying into a crust of ice as The Girl with the Northern Vision conjured an Arctic environment within her line of sight. It’s not that she created sub-zero conditions. Rather she could open some sort of time-space warp to the Arctic, the glasses helping her focus her power so she didn’t turn the whole room into an igloo. She turned toward another door and gave it her icy stare, too.

Carleton clapped his big mitten-like hands to his spongy face. “What’re you doing?!?”

“Sealing us in,” Tundrina said levelly. “So no one can escape until we identify the perp.”

“Perp?” said the walking mascot. “What perp?”

She turned toward him and her features genuinely softened. She’s good at that. When I look at people, all I see are suspects. “I’m afraid Captain Asbestos is dead.”

He stared at her for a moment. Then he abruptly fell back into a big arm chair. “Oh, Captain! My Captain!”

I heard a rustling and looked over. The sea otter puppets were still in the window, looking back and forth amongst each other in a way that was just obnoxious. Staying in character was one thing. But the puppeteers were making a gag out of their boss’ death. “You -- come out from around there!”

The little heads snapped about to look at me, as if startled to realize I had seen them. Then they looked at each other again -- and instantly dropped below the sill. "Dammit!" I said, launching myself toward the backdrop. But by the time I was peering through the window, the puppeteers had vanished once again.

"Leave 'em alone!" said Carleton, lurching to his feet. "They're just upset -- even knowing it was coming, it's a shock!"

I turned toward the caribou, gun held ready in hand. I had no idea how big the guy really was, but the costume made him look six feet at least. "You knew he was going to be murdered?" I snarled.

"What're you talking about? He wasn't murdered. He's been sick for months -- he was dying."

"The bullet hole in his chest says otherwise," I said.

"Bullet?!?" screeched a familiar falsetto and I looked over at Tickle Tommy. "What the hell are you talking about?" There was something bizarre about a children's puppet using that kind of language -- almost as bizarre as the puppeteer's insistence on remaining in character.

I started toward him, determined to grab him before he skedaddled again. Even as I did I thought that if Captain Asbestos had been terminally ill, that might explain the missed meetings and general malaise that had alarmed our client. But it left the question: why kill a walking dead man? Who benefits?

Carleton lurched to intercept me. "I said: leave 'em alone."

He was almost on me when I saw Tundrina stare at him, bringing her powers to bear. There was a blast of cold air -- and suddenly a flurry of beating wings appeared in the middle of the sound stage. Screeching the snowy owl swooped upon the costumed entertainer and he frantically flung up his hands to protect his face -- though I was pretty sure he had enough padding to keep him safe. Taking advantage

of the distraction, I tackled him like Normie “China Clipper” Kwong -- even as the owl vanished, instantly returning to its Arctic home the same way it had appeared.

Me and Carleton tumbled over a chair, the big guy as awkward and ungainly as you’d imagine in that suit. In moments I was straddling him. “Alright, punk -- talk! Why’d you do it? Why’d you kill him?” I remembered how Captain Asbestos, despite his TV career, had been a crime-fighter. “Let’s see who you are,” I growled, figuring maybe one of the Captain’s old foes had infiltrated the set. I scraped my fingers along the felt, trying to find a zipper or a button. Thwarted, I looked for a seam, a weak point that I could tear open.

I couldn’t find one.

“Uh -- Bunny?” said Tundrina, a tone of incredulity in her voice I’d never heard before. I looked up. Tickle Tommy was peering at us from the chesterfield -- his puppet facing seeming genuinely aghast. The otters had returned to their familiar sill. A few other puppets I hadn’t seen before had gathered around. “Bunny -- where are the hands?”

It took me a moment to register what she was saying. Tickle Tommy stood upon the furniture on two stubby little legs -- but with no wrist descending from his backside. “Holy God!” I leapt off Carleton faster than a cat off a hot plate. “They’re -- they’re alive!”

“Well bully for Mr. Obvious,” sneered Tickle Tommy.

Clumsily, Carleton the Caribou leveraged himself to his feet, his bulky, pear-shaped figure not the nimblest.

“Who -- what -- are you?” demanded Tundrina, as shocked as I was. I could see how tense her muscles were, her eyes squinting as if at any moment she was prepared to unleash everything north of the tree line onto this sound stage.

Carleton looked at her. “We are the Sht’qyy-kwaten.”

I gawked. “The Sush-tikee-kwah-?”

“The Sht’qyy-kwatan.”

“The Shisht-?”

“It doesn’t *matter*,” Tundrina said impatiently. “*What* are you?”

“We hail from a distant planet,” said Tickle Tommy, still using that puppet voice that I realized was not an act. The other puppets nodded in unison, patting their little hands together. “We arrived on your world in psychic-matrix spheres.”

“And what’re those when they’re at home?” I demanded.

“We were free-floating consciousnesses -- not corporeal beings,” explained Carleton patiently. “We needed physical forms to inhabit. Fortunately the molecular bonds of the material used in the construction of earth puppets -- the foam, stuffing, and various fabrics -- are uniquely suited to absorb, and be transmogrified by, our mental energies.”

I stared.

“You mean -- you really are...puppets?” Tundrina said at last.

“Yuppity-do.”

“I need a drink,” I said, putting a hand to my head.

“And -- and what about Captain Asbestos?”

The caribou costume-that-wasn’t-a-costume looked sad. “He was our friend.”

“Our protector,” said Tickle Tommy.

“Our hero,” squeaked the otters in unison.

“Your world is not welcoming to outsiders,” said Carleton. “Your newspapers are full of warnings against communist infiltrators. Your movie houses and comic books are full of stories about alien invasions. If people knew about us we were afraid they’d put us in camps, or dissect us. But Captain Asbestos gave us a home -- this TV studio where no one would look twice at us. A venue by which people could become accustomed to us, before we revealed our true natures.”

I remembered how we were told that it was a closed set, without too many outsiders wandering about. Now I knew why.

“Wait a minute,” said Tundrina. “You said he was dying?”

The antlers wobbled as the head bobbed up and down. “He had -- I think you call it ‘cancer.’ His own powers had poisoned his system. He only had a few months to live. He had hoped to arrange another home for us before then -- perhaps on another children’s show.”

My mind was reeling from everything I had just seen and been told, but I could still see the irony. “Somebody murdered him for no reason, then -- not if he was dying already.”

“Unless,” Tundrina said after a moment, “it was for that very reason he was murdered.”

I looked at her. “How so?” If he was murdered because he was dying -- how did that make sense? Unless it was the way he was dying that was an issue.

“A bullet distracts from cancer,” she said, coming to the same conclusion. “Captain Asbestos is viewed by hundreds of thousands of kids, possibly millions if an American deal was made. He’s literally the personification of asbestos, his show sponsored by MacMillan Asbestos, Inc. Murder may be a tragedy -- but asbestos-induced cancer would be a public relations nightmare.”

“You think he was murdered by the sponsors before the cancer could kill him?” asked Carleton.

“No,” I said, turning. “I think he was killed by -- *The Sponsor!*”

Standing quietly back this whole time, the black shape of The Sponsor was completely expressionless. Of course.

“We have motive -- The Sponsor is the sponsors’ man on the ground. We have opportunity -- he was here when the murder took place. And we have method. You see, we haven’t seen a gun and none of you puppets could even fire one with your

fingers. But there's one here who could manifest a gun -- a gun that could fire a bullet that would exist just long enough to penetrate a heart." And I remembered how we had found the TV on in Captain Asbestos' room.

Suddenly the black figure jumped at the nearest studio camera and vanished into its lens.

"He's getting away!" shouted Tundrina.

"We're not broadcasting right now," said Carleton. "He can't leave the studio."

Suddenly The Sponsor popped up on the black and white monitor in the corner, shifting into the figure of a man in a pin-striped suit, hair slicked back, and a cigar clenched between his teeth. "You won't get me, you dirty rats!" he sneered.

Almost too late I realized what he was doing.

"Down!" I shouted as the gangster on the screen hefted a Tommy Gun and spewed bullets into the studio. The slugs would exist just seconds, but seconds would be enough to kill someone. Humans and puppets alike dove for cover.

I'd heard watching TV could be bad for you -- but this was ridiculous.

Tundrina hit the ground, rolled to her knees, and glared at the screen.

"Hah!" sneered The Sponsor, aiming at my partner. "Say g'night, Gracie -- uh, wha-?" There was a rush of icy wind and a huge, snarling white shape erupted out of nothingness. "Yaaah!" screamed The Sponsor, eyes bulging in horror, as the polar bear swiped an enormous paw at the monitor. The box was torn from its stand and sent smashing against the wall. Instantly the bear vanished back to its Arctic stomping grounds even as The Sponsor burst out of a nearby television camera, barely having escaped being smashed along with the monitor. His black shape reformed in the studio -- and I was ready for him.

With a right cross that would've made "Rocket" Richard proud, I sent him crashing to the floor.

“Is everyone okay?” Tundrina asked, looking around. There were mumbled squeaks and squawks, indicating no one had lost any stuffing.

“What now?” asked Tickle Tommy.

“Now we call the cops,” I said.

“Yeah, but...” He hesitated. “I mean -- what about us?” He looked at his companions. “With no show, what do we do? Where do we go?”

I looked at them, a sour expression on my face. “Look, I sympathize, I really do -- but equally, it ain’t my problem. It may have escaped your notice -- but I’m not exactly a people person. I learned my lesson in the war. I became a private eye ‘cause I don’t want people caring about me, and I don’t care about them.”

“Oh, Bunny,” said Tundrina, “I don’t believe that’s true. Under that hard boiled shell is a soft boiled yolk.”

I glared at her. Then I looked at the open, weirdly innocent faces of the puppets. Far from home, strangers in a strange land, with the only one who ever looked out for them lying dead in the next room. And I thought of my pal Kenji Izumo and his family and how no one had stood up for them. My shoulders sagged a little as I looked back at Tundrina. “Well, y’know, I suppose there is one possibility. If *you’re* game, doll...”

~

The Girl with the Northern Vision Show will premier in two months.

After all, Tundrina’s powers have a lot more interesting possibilities for a weekly TV show than Captain Asbestos’ (no offence to the dearly departed) -- and if you’re talking crossover appeal, I can imagine a lot of dads would wander in from the kitchen to get an eyeful of the host, and the mom’s will want to check out whatever she’s wearing from week to week.

So everyone wins. The network keeps its slot a ratings winner. The puppets have a safe home in an uncertain era. And our PI firm gets a lot of free publicity. Assuming we stick with that part of the business in the long run.

I mean, who knows? Maybe this television thing will prove to be more than a novelty after all.

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For more stories set within the “Masques” universe check out

The Masques Chronicles vol. 1: The Golden Age to the Silver Age

by DK. Latta

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