

# Canvas

## Hamish Trolove

Shannon turned the object in her hands, the lamp light catching the polished brass of its surround and turning into a cascade of colour as it passed through the thick lens and dashed against the polished wooden floor. “What is it?”

“A psionoscope.” Andrew was proud of his find.

“A psionoscope?” Shannon looked at the turned wooden handle, and traced the line of a copper tube that ran from an ornate knob around the rim of the lens and disappeared into a recess of the other side of the device. She fiddled with one of the many knobs and held it up to her eye. “It's not much of a magnifying glass. So what's it supposed to do?”

“See the supernatural world.”

“What?” Shannon snorted and placed the device on the table before looking up at Andrew, eyebrow raised. “A steampunk version of the Ghostbuster's PKE meter?”

“Yeah. That's it. That's a great way of describing it.” Andrew drew up a chair. “The old guy in the antiques shop told me it allows you to see supernatural things, and find hidden doorways, and openings between worlds.”

“Ah huh.” Shannon's eyebrow raised a touch more.

“Well, even if it doesn't work, don't you think it looks cool?”

“I'll grant you it certainly looks cool.” Shannon lifted the psionoscope from where it rested amongst the wrapping paper and examined it. “How does it work? Where do the batteries go?”

“I don't know. It's from the 1880s so it doesn't take batteries. I think it's powered by the psychic energy of the user – or at least that's what the man in the shop said.”

“Right.” Shannon's disbelief was palpable.

“Well I like it.” Andrew held out a hand. “Where shall we put it?”

“How about the coffee table in the lounge?” Shannon passed the psionoscope to him with a smirk. “You're such a sucker for a good story.”

“Come quick!”

The shout had come from the lounge. Andrew was standing rigid in the centre of the room with the psionoscope raised. "Do you see that?"

"What?" Shannon shook her head. "What can you see?"

"The painting. It's glowing."

"Nice try." Shannon leaned against the door frame. "You almost had me thinking something had gone terribly wrong."

"No. Seriously." Andrew turned worried eyes towards her.

In two steps Shannon was peering over Andrew's shoulder. Through the psionoscope she could see the distorted shape of the painting. A creeping blue aura surrounded it. A chill ran down Shannon's spine. This wasn't rational. She looked at the painting. It was the familiar scene she was used to seeing. No blue nimbus around the edges. Just the familiar dark brown woods, with the patchy snow, the rutted track, the cottage and the old man leaning on a stile. Through the psionoscope again a cold fire burned, licking at the heavy dark wooden frame. "and the other pictures?" Shannon whispered.

Andrew shook himself, and scanned the room with the psionoscope. "No. Just this one."

"This is nuts." Shannon muttered. "There's no such thing as the supernatural."

Andrew flinched as Shannon's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Are you okay? You're shaking." she, uncurled his fingers from the psionoscope's handle and placed it on the coffee table.

"I'm just a bit shocked. I hadn't really expected it to work."

"Take a deep breath. This is weird but there must be an explanation." Shannon returned with a pillow case and dropped it over the picture. "Let's leave this mystery 'til tomorrow. I'm off to bed. Are you coming?"

With a quick backward glance at the covered painting Andrew followed Shannon up the stairs.

Shannon rolled over and put an arm out. The bed was empty. She sat up, suddenly awake. A prickling cold inching up her spine. "Andy?" There was a light on down below.

Throwing on a robe, she silently walked to the top of the stairs and looked down. The light was coming from the lounge. The light was wrong. Rather than the warm friendly yellow glow she was used to seeing, this light was a ghastly shifting blue.

Andrew looked up from the blue glow emanating from the psionoscope clutched tightly

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in his hands as Shannon tiptoed into the room. "I couldn't sleep. It's like it was calling to me." His eyes were those of a rabbit caught in the headlights of an unexpected car.

Shannon glanced at the painting, the pillowcase a crumpled heap on the cabinet below. "Put it away."

"I can't. Something's calling for help from the painting. The old man ..... The old man is beckoning." desperately he fiddled with the knobs and controls that surrounded the lens.

As one, they jumped when an ethereal weather beaten face suddenly flared in the psionoscope viewer and a cracked and dry voice whispered from it.

"You've got to help me." it sighed, the words ebbing and flowing amongst the crackles and whistles.

Both Andrew and Shannon stood in stunned silence, Andrew with the psionoscope at arms length.

"Can you hear me?" the face took on a pleading expression. "You must help me."

Andrew's voice finally found its way out, shaking and tiny. "Help you how?"

"Help me." said the face a look of relief softening his features.

"How?" Andrew whispered.

"I have been trapped in here for so long." said the face. "You must help me get out of here."

"Trapped in the painting?"

"Imprisoned here." said the face looking mournful, then suddenly savage. "By a demon magician with the ability to trap souls in paintings. It was he who incarcerated me here...."

"Who are you?" Shannon's eye narrowed.

"I .... I am H .... Hunter." for an instant the face looked worried, then flashed a fleeting smile. "..... just Hunter. Just call me Hunter."

"Andrew." said Andrew. "And this is..."

"Barbara." Shannon hastily interjected, squeezing Andrew's arm hard. "And why would this magician trap you in a painting?"

"I don't know." Hunter shook his head. "It's possible he took offense when I suggested he get a real job, when he came calling at my farm seeking food and lodgings for the night."

"Seems a bit harsh."

"To be sure. When you have power like his at your finger-tips, forgiveness and the

noble ability to overlook a slight are lost. He is more demon than man. We are less than bugs to one like him.”

“You seem to know a lot about him.” said Shannon.

“I have had time to speculate.” Hunter's gaze locked with Shannon's.

“How long have you been in there?” Andrew broke the tension.

“I don't know Andrew. I don't know.” Hunter's shoulder's slumped. “It was the autumn of 1762 when he came calling.”

“But.....” Andrew did a quick calculation, “That's about two hundred and twenty six years ago.”

“Aye. I said it was a long time. Plenty of time to think about the nature of the creature that did this to me.”

“So how do we get you out?” Andrew stared at the painting over the psionoscope. “I guess we burn the painting.”

“No!” Hunter's wavering image in the psionoscope distorted and twisted. “No. That might destroy me. Cast me forever into oblivion. I would never be able to escape. No, you mustn't destroy the painting while I am still trapped in it.”

“Then how?”

“There is a ritual that you will need to perform. It won't be easy, but I have confidence in you Andrew. You can do it.”

“A ritual?” asked Shannon her face neutral.

“What do you need us to do?” Andrew slightly twitched the psionoscope away from Shannon's direct view.

“I fear the painter may try to thwart us.” Hunter appeared to look around him before continuing in a confidential whisper. “He will be able to feel the stirrings and activity within this painting. He will be on his way.”

“After two hundred years?” Shannon almost scoffed but caught herself.

“I already told you that he is not human.”

“Can we get you out before he gets here?” asked Andrew glaring over his shoulder at Shannon.

“He can travel fast.” Hunter's concerned look reflected Andrew's. “We won't have time before he arrives. We can't risk him arriving during the ritual.”

“So what do we do about him?”

“You must set a trap.” Hunter's visage grinned. “There's a nice irony there, I feel. But first are there any other paintings by the same painter in your house?”

“I don't think so.” Andrew quickly scanned the other artworks in the lounge.

“We should check to make sure.” Shannon pulled at Andrew's arm.

Out of range of the psionoscope Andrew rounded on Shannon. “What's gotten into you?”

“I don't trust him.” Shannon was annoyed. “I'm surprised that you can't see this. What he's told us is so full of holes it could be mistaken for a Swiss cheese.”

“He's been alone for two hundred and twenty-ish years.” Andrew crossed his arms. “That's bound to make you a bit odd.”

“He seems to know an awful lot about magic for a 'simple farmer' or whatever he claims to be.”

“He's had two hundred plus years to think about it.” snapped Andrew. “Let's check on these paintings shall we?”

“Your painting is the only one.” said Andrew.

“That's good.” Hunter looked relieved. “At least he can't jump straight in here. He can travel through his paintings you see.”

“So how do we trap him?”

“Have you got a large mirror?” asked Hunter.

“Upstairs in the bedroom.” said Andrew. “If we take the psionoscope up there will you be able to see it?”

“No. You need the device pointed at my painting for me to be able to see and talk to you.”

“I'll bring it down then.” said Andrew.

“Good. I'll tell you what you need to do to set the trap. You'll need to move quickly though. I feel the approach of the painter in my bones. Don't ask me how I know - I just know.”

“How much time do we have?”

“I don't know. Andrew. It depends on what routes he can find to get here. At the moment he is still many hundreds of miles away. But who can say where his paintings are

after two hundred years.”

Andrew wrestled the large free-standing mirror down the stairs and set it up opposite Hunter's painting. Psionoscope in hand, Andrew stood aside so Hunter could view the mirror.

“Good! That will do perfectly.” Hunter radiated pleasure. “The painter will definitely come in here. We should set it up there in the middle of the room. That way I get to see his face as he gets a large slice of his own served to him too.”

“What do we need to do?”

“Well the bait's already arranged,” Hunter's smile was wicked. “Me.”

“And the trap?”

“A trap needs a guide and a trigger. The guide is easy. We'll just lay out some candles. You have candles?”

“Yes”

“Good. The painter will immediately be aware of what you plan as soon as he sees the candles, so you need to install triggers on all the entry points.”

“I'll get the candles.” said Shannon. “How many do we need?”

“At least fifty.” said Hunter dismissing Shannon.

“Fifty? That's a few more than we have in the house.”

“What about the pack of tea-lights we bought a few years ago? They're up in the attic.” said Andrew.

“I'd forgotten about those.” Shannon hurried from the room.

“OK. Andrew. I'd like you to set the triggers. I know I can trust you. So for the one on the doors .... “ Hunter froze, a look of worry crossed his face and he blurred and dissolved for a moment. “Sorry. The painter has just taken another large jump. I thought we had more time, but he has managed to find a route through another artist's painting. You must move quickly. Here's what you must do.....”

“Why is there blood on this door?” Shannon was laying out a line of tea-lights between the mirror and the door to the hallway.

“We need it for the trigger.” Andrew pressed a pad against the palm of his hand. Blood stained the edges. Shannon frowned in the dim light. “The painter is closer than ever.”

Andrew whispered.

“Oh?”

“Hunter said that the painter is less than one hundred miles away.”

“Okay, so what else needs to be done before he gets here?”

“I have set all the triggers. Now we just wait.”

“He has entered the city.” Hunter's whispery voice hissed from the psionoscope propped up facing the painting.

“And what happens when he arrives? ... If he arrives at all.” Shannon's whisper was harsh.

“Hunter didn't explain. But I'm guessing he will trip one of the triggers as soon as he enters the room and be held by the mirror.”

“And then what?”

“With the painter trapped we can get on with releasing Hunter.”

“I'm not comfortable with this and I definitely don't trust Hunter.” Shannon began gathering up the line of tea-lights.

“Stop!” shouted Andrew, knocking Shannon sprawling. He snatched the box of tea-lights from her.

“This isn't you Andrew.” Shannon pushed herself to her feet. “Look at yourself! You're under some sort of spell.”

“I'm fine!” snapped Andrew. “You look at yourself! Here I am trying to help someone, and you're doing everything you can to cast doubt and stop me. I don't believe this. How could I be so blind to your manipulations in the past few years.”

Shannon was stunned. Lost for words. She stood up, her face a rigid mask of anger and hurt.

“The painter has jumped again.” Hunter's voice was a serrated knife raggedly cutting into the tense silence.

Shannon wheeled, and strode to the painting. With a quick flick, she grabbed the discarded pillowslip and covered the painting. The hiss and crackle of the Psionoscope faded along with what sounded like Hunter's voice twisted into an enraged howl.

“No!” Andrew hurled himself at the painting, ripping the pillowcase from it, almost knocking it off its hook.

Shannon dived for the psionoscope but Hunter's face flared again in the glass, a purple

static fire danced around the brass knobs on the device and bit into Shannon's grasping hand. She twisted in shock, her sudden convulsion pitching her over a sofa and into a wooden chair which splintered. Andrew was upon her.

“Throw her out.” howled Hunter. “She's going to ruin everything. You must get rid of her.”

Still groggy, Shannon found herself being dragged through the door. Unable to get her feet under herself she was helplessly propelled through the kitchen and pushed through the cellar door. The door slammed shut behind her and she heard the clunk of the lock.

“Andrew! Open this door!” Shannon hammered on the door. The footsteps on the other side receded as Andrew returned to the lounge. She fumbled for the light switch. The door was solid. Good workmanship, and solid construction was what had attracted them to the old house when they bought it. Right now a flimsy mass produced modern house with walls and doors made out of nothing stronger than paper was preferable. Shannon sighed. At least the hinges were on her side. She put an ear against the door. A faint mutter could be heard from deeper in the house, but otherwise all was quiet.

Stepping around the wine racks, Shannon pulled a rusty screwdriver from its nest in a tin of old nails and screws. A heavy hammer and screwdriver in hand, Shannon advanced on the door.

“Sorry Dad, I know you'd disapprove of this but ...” Shannon put the screwdriver under the hinge pin head and tapped it with the hammer. The pin rose infinitesimally. She tapped it again harder. The pin head ricocheted off the door frame and tinkled into a hidden recess amongst the stacked bottles.

“Curse you!” hissed Shannon. She stared at the three hinges; scenes of the last few hours chasing each other through her tired mind. She shook herself and concentrated on the door. From the tin of nails she found a particularly straight and heavy one. A smart tap from under the hinge pin lifted it slightly. With renewed vigour Shannon worked with the hammer and nail. Soon, two pins lay at her feet and she was making steady progress on the third when she suddenly became aware of another noise in the house. Someone else was out there. The slight scuff of soft-soled shoes and the tense breathing of someone concentrating hard came to her. She hadn't heard the front door open but these footfalls and breathing did not belong to Andrew. Hunter perhaps? Had Andrew released him already? No. This must be the painter.



Shannon held her breath. The footsteps paused outside the cellar door. There was the faint hiss of fabric. In Shannon's mind's eye she saw the painter wave a hand over the door and maybe a pull out a device like the psionoscope.

"No. Not here." the voice on the other side of the door muttered under its breath.

Shannon shrank away from the door hardly daring to breath.

There was another rustle and the footsteps cautiously made for the corridor. Ear pressed hard against the door, Shannon heard the newcomer try the lounge door. The door handle rattled, and then a crash shook the house, a dull roar as of the throat of a tornado crested the noise. Shannon could hear things falling. The noise suddenly stopped, leaving a clanging silence. Shannon staggered.

Desperately she hammered the last pin out of the door and yanked it out of its frame. Hammer clutched in a white fist, she tip-toed to the lounge door.

The scene that greeted her was straight out of a horror thriller movie. Chairs were overturned, the floor was littered with glass and books, the lines of tea-lights cast a flickering and baleful light around the room. In the centre of it all stood the mirror, it's image wavered and warped, a tall thin figure struggled against invisible tethers, sickly purple smoke writing around him in the darkness. Holding the psionoscope and wearing a look of triumph, Andrew stood in front of the mirror.

"So you thought you could trap me." Andrew's voice had a strange crackling quality and harshness Shannon had never heard before. Entirely focused on the mirror and the trapped painter, he failed to notice Shannon slip silently into the room. "Thought you could drive me out of this realm."

"You must listen to me." the figure in the mirror gasped. "The Hunter has your mind. You must resist."

"Your pathetic pleading will not save you. You are weak. This one is mine."

"The Hunter is a demon of great power. He must not be released."

"Why. Thank you." snorted Andrew. "You flatter me."

"Destroy the painting." cried the figure in the mirror as a fresh wave of agony twisted his body.

"You have no power here." Andrew snarled. "I shall destroy your mirror and send you straight to the void. With you banished and with this body I shall be released."

Shannon looked at the hammer in her hand and the painting hanging unscathed on the wall surrounded by wreckage.

“No!” Andrew’s scream was an unearthly howl of anger and rage. He dived for Shannon as she vaulted the fallen table and leapt onto the remains of the cabinet, hammer already descending. With a splintering crack the hammer punched through the frame. The canvas ripped, orange sparks erupting from its ragged edge. Again Shannon swung the hammer, destroying the rest of the frame. Her third swing was interrupted as Andrew cannoned into her, knocking the wind out of her. The hammer flew out of her hand.

Andrew raised his head. Shannon raised a fist. As if his strings had been cut Andrew collapsed to the floor.

“Fire! Only fire can destroy it.” the figure in the mirror shouted.

Shannon pushed the limp body of Andrew to the floor. Hands shaking, she bundled the ruined picture up. It writhed in her hands, orange sparks crawling across its mangled surface. With a look of disgust she jammed it into the log-burner. Newspaper quickly followed by a match soon had flames licking hungrily at the edge of the painting. Strange coloured flames flowed around the firebox as the pigments caught, the flames took on the strange distorted shapes of faces both earthly and unearthly. Whispery screams and cries came from the firebox as the flames consumed the painting. Finally the flames died down to glowing ashes.

Shannon collapsed on the floor emotionally exhausted.

“Thank you.” said the figure in the mirror.

Shannon looked up through tear streaked eyes. “And who are you?”

“I am a painter who observed too much.” the tall figure hung in the invisible restraints, relaxed. “My name is Garrick.”

“What do you mean by that? Observed too much.”

“I found I could see the supernatural world. I encountered beings from other realms who meant us harm. I found I was able to capture them in my paintings and banish them. Unfortunately, the Hunter painting went missing, was stolen, from my workshop before I could finish exorcising him from this world.”

“How do I know you’re not the same as Hunter?”

“I assure you I mean you no harm. By destroying Hunter’s painting you have done me a great service. I don’t need to look for it any more. All that remains is scattering the ashes

widely preferably on a sandy beach. You can do that, or I can do it if released. ”

“That means nothing to me.”

“Fair enough. You have been manipulated and lied to. I offer you two options; you can destroy me or you can release me. To destroy me, face this mirror with another one to create an infinite hall of mirrors. That will shred my being. Then destroy both mirrors. To release me shine bright light or sunshine on the mirror to cast a reflection on a dark sheet. That will pull me out of the mirror and I will be released.”

Shannon crawled over to Andrew's sprawled body and combed the hair back from his face. “Will he remember this?”

“Yes. It will haunt him for the rest of his life. He will be changed by it.”

Shannon shuddered. “Very well. I shall release you.”