

When Jim Conley wiped the beads of cold perspiration off his brow, that's when he felt it.

Flashes of blue light. Chains clanking in the dark, moved by unseen limbs. Laughter echoing stridently across buttresses that could not be of this century. The calling cards were flowing all too readily through his mind, like a sped-up motorcade. It was time again.

He had never seen the castle before, and, as much as its pre-gothic architecture stood out against the pink brick and faux wood paneling of the other Blakewood Crest houses, that much he knew he would have to intrude upon its antiquity, and silence the visions.

Not that Jim was off his rocker. He was pretty regular, actually, with his t-bone steaks and hunting shows every night. By today's episode, he had managed to cut his work-week down to ten hours of investing at the private office, and on the odd weekend he liked to race catamarans. His long-legged wife Leona was, like everything Jim could call *his*, a conquest.

The door at once creaked open, taking almost a minute in its oaken 90-degree pivot. *Even more normal*, Jim thought. He rolled up his starchy cotton sleeves.

I wouldn't bore you with the circuitous route, and hazards therewith, by which Jim reaches the laboratory in its unlikely suburban emplacement. As accustomed as he is to meeting the backs of his foes first, and unfazed by the tension of their turning, he is by no means ready for this. This evil scientist is the image of Jim himself: older, more lank, born in a different state maybe, but there can be no doubt. As heroic as Jim is, he wants to sit down on the floor, put his head on his ankles. He feels sick, which alarms him even more. He'd fought beasts hideous in the manner of childhood nightmares, and out-played men whose intelligence etc. etc.

"I've taken great precautions to make you feel at home, but that will no longer be possible, I'm afraid." Dr. Kilner gathered the sleeves of his antiseptic white coat and pulls on a huge electrical switch, which falls with an approving *clang*. "But look at me, ever the dilettante! I do care, Mr. Conley, and you know that I do need you. For one last experiment."

Tasting the blood from his lip (and briefly cursing the ghoul-bear, whose remains lay floors above), Jim breathed in deeply. "I don't get it! Who are you, that you can frighten me this way? In all my adventures..." Careful not to add: *Always rattling off some snappy saw while relying on the strength of my arm.*

"Leona," Dr. Kilner said deliberately, "is with me now. I knew just what to say to her, being that I am you, but without the swagger and lofty ideals. And she can appreciate a man with money. Not that you are poor—" (a checked laugh, like a snare drum) "but it seems that I truly know how to use it. Observe," he said, pointing to a wall-mounted monitor.

Leona, in a two-piece, lounging by the beach. A drink with umbrellas near her limp hand. Strange, too-small men are fanning her with palm fronds.

"She's left you, Jim," Kilner enunciated in his impossibly clear English. "On to greener pastures."

Jim's fist tightened. He took the first step.

"Easy," the Doctor said evenly. "You won't be wanting to kill me just yet. You see, what if *we* — that is, you and I — are the same person?"

Nervously, his eyes searched the room. He glanced at a machine labeled *Time Portal*, and a strange twinge passed over him. "A little too easy, doc. It's been done before." Nearly in arm's reach.

"You're definitely one to talk," Kilner said humorlessly. "I'm trying to help you, Jim. I have to be mysterious. It motivates you. But I can't tell you the truth. It would be too much for you. Who, really, is the woman you just saw?" Dr. Kilmer drew himself up to an impressive height. "Do you *really* like to hunt? Does it all fit together for you—"

At once a dimensional portal opens, and a singed Jim-2 hops through just in time. "Jim! No time to explain," it huffs. *Get on with it*, Jim (who is now Jim-1) thinks. "He's a hypnotist! He's lying! Kill him! Hurry! Before he can—"

But by then Jim-1 is fingering the fractured vertebrae right above Dr. Kilmer's rubbery shoulder.

"Good!" Jim-2 leaned over them. "The time machine took me—"

"I figured it out, already." He looked around him one last time, before the whole thing came to a close. "We gotta get out of here."

"What? Oh, we can never leave, *now*," Jim-2 says, indicating Dr. Kilmer's corpse, as if that explained it.