

THE CAPTIVE INSIDE

By **Sharkchild**

There were certain shops that had no seizing affects outside of a planned visit, and then there were certain shops that quite brutally tortured if their magical, if not haunting, space was not investigated. Alluring displays, unorthodox merchandise, and toys—these were some of the things that made me curious, but the latter, the toys—those trinkets of deep imagining minds had the greatest pull on me. I had my dates with ordinary toyshops, but it was the hole-in-the-wall, washed-out places that really got my heart yearning. I wondered how they even existed. They were the shops of the strange and unique; the ones that sold old card decks, antique dolls, foreign games, and much, much more. Things that did not even have the right to be made were somehow resting on the shelves of these hidden and cavernous places.

I was not much of a collector; the mere and occasional trifling of these objects was enough to satisfy my taste. I touched them and played with them, though I rarely purchased them. There were a number of shops I frequented, but I was always on the lookout for somewhere new.

There was one particular shop that gave me much more than satisfaction, something much greater, but also much worse. The shop's name was Timeless Fortunes, and its entrance rested in the shadows of a hall, tucked away between two much larger stores on either side. The name, Timeless Fortunes, was labeled on the door, but nowhere else could it be found—not outside or inside of the place. The door chimed when opened and rattled as it closed. Inside, the hall continued on with old, worn posters covering the surfaces of the walls. Each poster was of a toy or contraption no one would have ever known about: laser guns with bulbous designs, masks made in the likeness of mice and rats, build-your-own fire block kits, centipede growth inducers, headache relief halos, Corpse: The Game of Fancy Graves, and human body part sculptor sets, to name a few. At the end of the hall was a short flight of stairs—this led into the shop.

The inside of Timeless Fortunes was an image worth a million words. There were things everywhere, and they encroached upon the sanctity of navigation. The ground was a bloodbath of those items that had grown unworthy of the shelves and even the shelves, as they ascended, harnessed around them an aura of greater importance and attraction. It seemed like every toy that had ever been placed still remained somewhere in the shop. Small light bulbs dangled from the ceiling every few steps, their light the only of its kind in the windowless mass.

This was the only toyshop ever that I visited just one time.

After looking around Timeless Treasures for a few moments, I was startled by a man who had somehow snuck up behind me. He was dark-skinned, short, and wore nothing but ordinary clothing. A white mustache hung slightly from the sides of his mouth. He introduced himself as the owner of the shop and offered to give me a tour, in full, of the different accessories and products he so passionately obtained. I, in my ever-mysterious ways, accepted his offer.

The peculiar man, whose name I never learned, led me around the shop, intricately down each aisle and through each shelf—even those toys upon the

ground held tales of which the man decided to share. My interest of it all never wavered and, in seeing that, the man grew delighted and expended even more details in the latter stories of his tour narration. By the end of it, my mind was exhausted, but my interests had thoroughly been pleased.

When I told the man that I had to leave, he showed no sign of irritation in my lack of buying anything. Instead, he told me to remain one more moment and then disappeared into a back room. When he reappeared, there was something in his hands.

He handed me a brown cardboard box.

"This is a puzzle," he said, "though it contains no guiding image on its box to aid with its completion. I have heard some different names for it, but the one I find the best suited is The Captive. I want you to have it."

"How much does it cost?" I asked.

"You do not have to worry about that. Today, it is free. There is only one requirement I ask of you when putting it together." The man produced a puzzle piece from his pocket not included in the box. "This must be the final piece placed. That is all. It is yours to take."

"Thank you," I said.

"Go now," the man said. "I will be closing."

That evening, I cleared off my kitchen table and began the difficult task of putting the puzzle together. When I opened the lid of the box, I was shocked to see about 2,500 pieces of which were dominated by intensely dark colors. Only the hues of dark purples, browns, and oranges subdued the chaotic, charcoal pieces of black, and the wisps of smoke that laced them.

To begin my endeavor, I segregated all of the pieces according to their type and color; I grouped the edge pieces, the purple pieces, the brown pieces, and the orange pieces, leaving the black pieces as the largest mass. In doing this, I quickly realized I would need more than my kitchen table and so also used the card table I had stored away in the closet. Once the pieces were divided in color, I then furthered the organization by placing the pieces in rows of type. Some pieces had all inward connectors, some had three inward connectors and one outward connector, some had two inward connectors and two outward connectors, some had one inward connector and three outward connectors, and some had four outward connectors—I grouped these accordingly within their color base.

Through the night I worked, completing the border of the puzzle, but not much more. It was indeed going to be a very difficult undertaking to finish. In only seeing the pieces as disconnected, individual entities, I had not even the faintest idea what the image awaiting completion could be.

Following the intensity of that first night, I continued to work on the puzzle in my moments of time and freedom throughout the subsequent days. And, when night would once again return, I would work until my eyes could no longer see the details of the pieces. And even then, I would continue to make the pieces fit by trial and error, trying each piece of a certain color and type until it snugly connected, joining to those around it in absolute companionship. Pieces were slowly coming together, but the progress was undeniably trying.

As the puzzle grew closer to its completion, the more anxious I became about finishing it. Though I still could not tell what waited in its image, I began to see things in those parts I had connected. I imagined the purple and orange

to be a part of a fading sky, dancing off into the unknown horizon. In its substance, I picked out faces of lost souls, and in their misery, I felt uncontrollably compelled to complete their surroundings so that they could run free in the artistry of the image. I also had the urge to touch them, each of them, with my finger. I would lightly place the tip of my finger upon those faces I saw as if to mark and account them and let them know they were seen.

After several weeks, the puzzle was nearing completion. Most of those pieces making up my fading sky had been put together and by that time I had found hundreds of faces within it. The largest holes in the puzzle were those sections that consisted of the black pieces. Not only did their numbers daunt me, but they held no appeal like the pieces that created the sky. Yet, however dreary those pieces were, I continued to find homes for them.

On the fourth week after I received the puzzle, only the last piece remained to be placed. What I saw was extraordinary: I saw a portal of worlds where the living joined the dead. I saw a crossroads of want, fate, and eternity. I saw a swirling accumulation of distraught souls, hounding and fighting each other to reach the front of a line that did not exist. I saw entities of authority, herding and striking, forcing order into a pandemonium unending. It was a look into the afterlife of someone's worst nightmares. The fact that I had formed this obscenity made me want to trash puzzle even before the completing piece could be set, but I restrained myself.

Before placing the final piece, I tried to understand why it had to be last and what difference it would make in the image by it being so. Its size was a bit larger than the rest of the pieces and the colors upon it were slightly different there was some gold and green that was outlandish against the charcoal black that filled the rest of it. If anything, I remember thinking, the piece will not even blend correctly with the rest of the puzzle.

Nonetheless, I placed the final piece and completed the puzzle.

What I had before seen in the image of the puzzle vanished. Those things I had identified and associated so successfully before were no more. Upon the placement of the final piece, the whole image changed, leaving nothing recognizable of what was once there.

From within the pit of my stomach, a terror unleashed itself as I gazed down upon the most disturbing thing I had ever laid my eyes upon. The completed puzzle showed the inside of my own soul. How that final piece contained a part of me, I could not understand. And how I recognized it as myself, I also could not fathom. But the act in itself of staring at the most vulnerable and intimate aspect of myself troubled me beyond the safety of death! If that image alone was what I saw, I would have curled into the corners of my home for days, but that was not all there was in the finished picture.

Encircling my soul within this image was a grotesque creature of vapor-like form. In the most sinister pose imaginable, this creature violated my soul. And as I saw it in the puzzle, I then felt it within myself, writhing in hideous glee.

Though I instantly overturned the table holding the puzzle, the image imprinted itself indefinitely upon the fabric of my tainted memories. I could not remove it from my sight and I could not remove the feelings from within me. I wanted to tear at my body and claw out that which was incorporeal from my

corporeal body. I wanted to escape the hellish parasite inside me, but that was no longer my choice.

I looked into my soul through a portal I should never have found, and saw what I should never have seen. My future did not rest in my own hands; I was the captive.