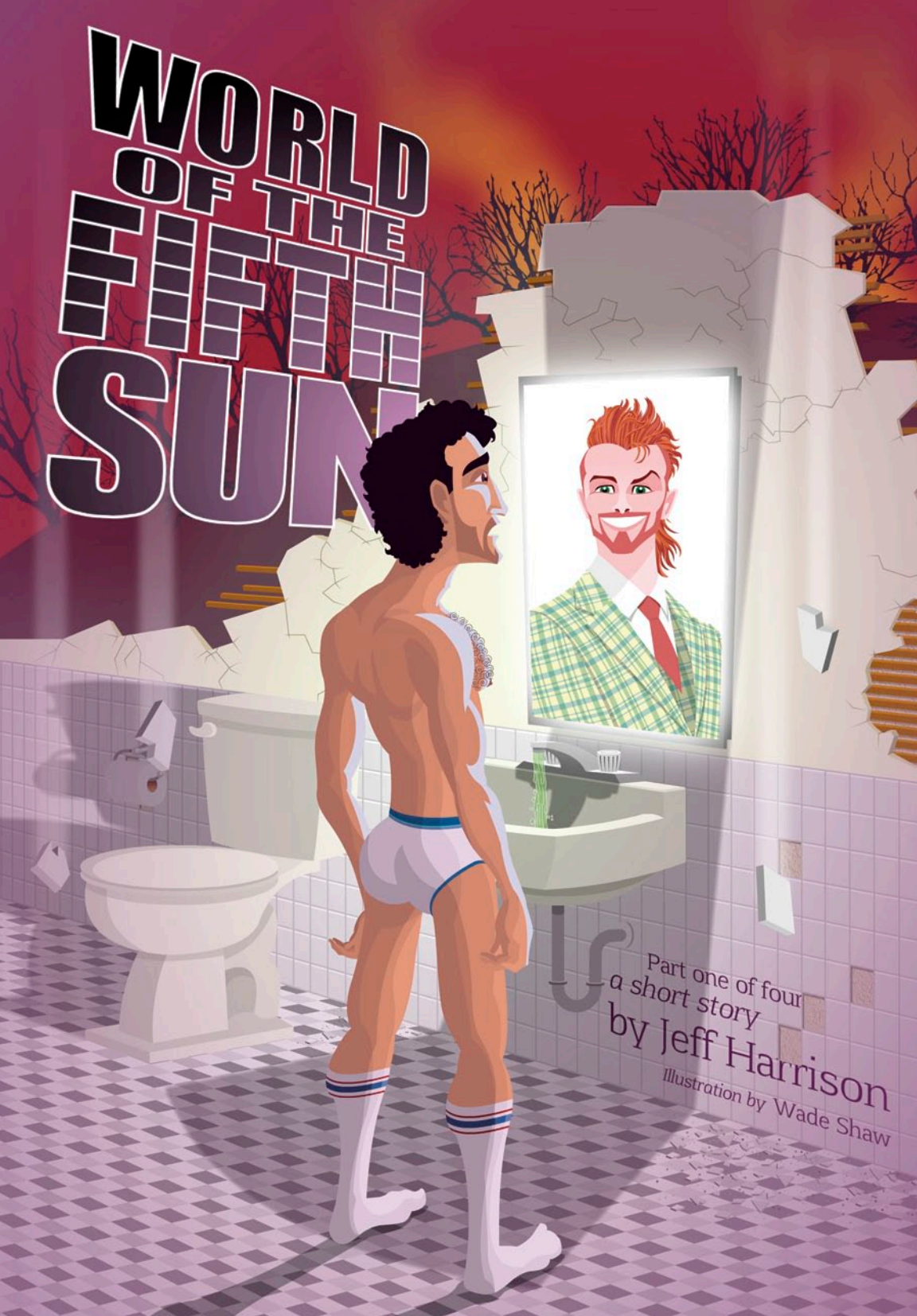


WORLD OF THE FIFTH SUN



Part one of four
a short story
by Jeff Harrison
Illustration by Wade Shaw

Zack rolled over again, tossed the covers off his sweat slicked skin, reached out a questing hand into the dark until he found his goal and punched the small smooth button on his iPhone. The glossy screen winked awake, bright numbers telling him it'd only been fifteen minutes since he'd last rolled away from performing this very action.

He blew out a long frustrated sigh. 3:15am. It was hours until dawn and yet his mind was buzzing with a thousand voices, not the least of which was acrid self-recrimination for a missed deadline and the imagined voice of his editor, silky with begrudged allowance at his being late with his feature yet again. An allowance she'd entertain for a price.

Once, he'd taken great pride in never having missed an assignment, no matter how challenging, but that all fell apart over a year ago when the shit hit the fan and things had continued along that vein of abysmal luck since. Life had gone to hell and had continued to spin out of his control. That's when the dreams had started and the insomnia had begun to eat away at his sanity. Crazy apocalyptic dreams, total end-of-the-world, exploding disaster after disaster sweeping the planet, the city towers of civilization collapsing like dominoes.

And now here he lay, wide awake, eyeballing the slow passing of time with contempt, synapses screaming with stress even though his body felt bone weary with exhaustion—fall-out from ruined sleeping habits.

drip

Great. Now that his ears had zoomed in on the leaky faucet in the bathroom sink, there would be no return to sleep now that he was conscious of

this water torture. A dozen or so more drips and his annoyance finally boiled over, forcing him from the once comfort of his bed to pad out to the living room.

He wandered through the semi-dark apartment to gaze out the bank of windows that made up one wall of his small living space, gazing down on the city below that never slept, the night sky a glowing iridescent and flickering neon. He used to love the buzz of the urban sprawl, but now...

Now the city sickened him. It seemed like a rabid animal, cornered by irrational panic. These feelings were definitely echoed in his current piece of writing—a sensationalized hack piece on the end of the world writ large with half factual interpretations meant to foment panic rather than an intelligent discussion. However, rent was due and end of the world or no, the bills still had to be paid.

Zack turned away from his view and headed toward the bathroom, might as well take a leak so his bladder wouldn't wake him up again once he fell asleep. If he fell asleep. The sleeping pills he'd been popping—increasingly of late—seemed to do little for his insomnia. Instead, they filled his head with the bizarre dreams that kept him tossing and turning until the wee hours. When he finally did drift off from exhaustion, it was only to be woken what felt minutes later by his alarm screaming at him to get his ass out of bed and into work before he was late... again. As usual. As always, this past year.

Flushing the toilette, Zack leaned over the sink and splashed cold water in his face. He exerted his strength as he shut off the tap in the hope of strangling that rogue drip. Looking up, he squinted in the gloom at his barely perceptible reflection. The mirror seemed to ripple like the surface of a stagnant

pond. Flicking on the light, he stared hard at himself once his eyes had adjusted to the bright glare. The movement must have been a trick of the dim lighting. He looked tired, deep dark circles under his eyes—too bad he didn't feel it.

"You keep on going like this, you are going to be no good to anyone, my friend."

Zack took a startled step back from the face suddenly staring back at him. It wasn't his. A man with a narrow visage, high cheekbones, shocking crop of orange-red hair and thousand watt smile leered at him from the glass. Zack whirled to confront the stranger.

"How the hell did you—?!" No one was there. "What the fuck..."

Turning back in the hopes of facing his sleep deprived self again, Zack was afforded no such luck. The scruffy faced man, in a loud green tartan suit was still there. A second quick glance over his shoulder assured himself he had lost his mind—this guy was in the mirror only.

"*Heh*—wish it was that straight forward my friend. But no, you have not lost your mind. You have run yourself sufficiently enough into the ground that your defences are a mess and making it very easy for me to contact you. Thank the gods for small mercies."

Zack closed his eyes and took a deep breath in, held it and let it out slowly. He repeated this twice more before opening his eyes. The vulpine Ginger was still there.

"Name's Joaquim. And I'm here to give you a warning. The ladies are here and you are going to be forced to make a decision. Your choice will affect the future of the entire world, so make sure you know all your options before you decide, because this is the last chance and there will be no going back."

I've got to be dreaming, Zack thought, his mind reeling for an explanation.

"In a way, yes you are correct about that."

I've lost my damn mind. It was the only conclusion

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"Lost yes, but you can retrieve it with my help," Joaquim continued, answering Zack's stray thoughts. "If you are going to win this war then we need to get you ready for the coming conflict. First, these need to go." A hand reached out—OUT—of the mirror and snatched the bottle of sleeping pills from where

Zack had left them on the vanity and dumped the entire contents into the toilette. "You are doing no one any good, except perhaps *Her*, by numbing yourself out taking these dirty little reality killers."

"Hey! I need those!" Zack lunged out a hand to try and grab a few of the falling light blue pills.

"The hell you do. You're just burning out possibilities with them and giving *Her* an unfair advantage."

"Who the hell are you talking about?!"

"Ah see, this is where I'm really going to piss you off." The red-headed stranger flashed him that smile again. "I'm here to even the board because *She* is not playing fair, nor by the rules. However, I can't tell you who *She* is, because I'm not allowed to break the rules. However, because *She* has overstepped her bounds, I am allowed this visit. So lucky you! I can guide you, but I cannot answer any of your questions directly."

"You gotta be kidding me...I'm torturing myself in my own dreams—this is just masochistic."

A rumble groaned through the building, heaving the floor beneath Zack's feet and almost tossing him into the bathtub. There was an ear deafening crunching sound followed by a thunderous crash from just outside the bathroom. Dust swirled into the small tiled room on a chill breeze, even as the aftershocks still trembled through the floor. A new wan twilight filtered in and Zack could see the night sky reflected in the mirror behind his non-corporal guest. The brittle hollow *chink* of falling tiles smashing in the tub drew his attention to the fact that the night sky was no illusion—the bathroom wall behind him was gone...so was his bedroom.

And the apartments around him. The entire building above him had peeled away in what he now realized was an earthquake.

He stared out past the ragged debris of his miraculously intact perch and into the chaos of a city in ruin. The downtown—his once impressive view was now no more than jagged concrete fingers clawing at the sky. The massive CN tower had fallen, crushing everything beneath it as it collapsed through the heart of the city pulverizing everything in its path. The trees in the park across the street sent black smoke up into the hazy night obscuring the broken moon. The scene was exactly as it had been in his nightmares.

“Not a pretty sight, is it?”

Zack dragged his eyes, watering from all the dust, back toward the mirror and the strange man reflected therein.

“We don’t have much time.” The mirror cracked, emphasizing his point.

“I *am* dreaming...” Zack mumbled.

Joaquim’s arms lunged out of the flat reflective surface and gripped Zack’s shoulders, hard. “*This* time you are, but what you are seeing is the future, unless you do something about it.”

Zack opened his mouth, but no words came.

“Yes, *you*, Zack.” Another crack sliced smoothly through the glass, shearing off one of Joaquim’s arms, which fell into the porcelain sink and shattered into so many bright emerald bits. “Gods be damned—listen carefully! I’m only going to say this once.”

Zack couldn’t have interrupted him if he’d wanted to.

“When your path divides, two women will be waiting. You must choose to travel in the company of only one, but be wise in your choice because only one will lead you down the path that does not end. It will be a tough decision as they will both have charms Heaven sent just for you. Only one road leads to a future though, because the future that I am showing you now is no future at all, just an ending,

The massive CN tower had fallen, crushing everything beneath it...

an ending of all that was and all that will ever be.” Joaquim’s other arm fell to pieces in the sink. He seemed to be falling away before Zack’s eyes, back into the dark depths of the splintering mirror.

“What does that even mean?” Zack asked, afraid he was missing some important part to the nonsensical riddle spooled out before him.

“Do not forget...one path...”

And just like that the red haired man in the loud plaid suit vanished like a swirl of dark water being sucked down a filthy drain. Then the mirror exploded as a giant spotted cat burst forth, a sparkling jade serpent clutched in its teeth. Zack screamed and threw up his arms to protect his face. He gasped for breath, flailing hands to keep claws away from his flesh only to find himself back in bed tangled in his sheets.

“Fuck...I’ve got to stop taking those pills! They are seriously screwing with my head.”

Weak sunlight filtered through the window of his bedroom. Window, walls, apartment, downtown view complete with CN tower—all back to normal.

“It *was* just a nightmare.” He breathed a long sigh of relief. He slid from the mess of his bed and wandered to the bathroom. Flicking on the light he gave the mirror above the sink a long hard stare, then started to chuckle. No crazy ginger-haired man in a vivid plaid suit talking crazy-talk to him. Zack continued to laugh at himself and his insane dream the entire time he showered, letting the steaming water pound some sense back into him.

Turning off the faucets he felt as close to his old self as he’d been in months. Ripping back the shower curtain he reached for a towel and stopped dead, his eyes locked to the mirror once again. Three distinct words were scrawled across it in the moisture fogging the glass.

Do not forget!

Jeff Harrison is Editor-in-Chief of PinkPlayMags