

Ask Before Accepting
by Jake Skinner

As Suzan walked through the market, vendors from all directions yelled out the price of their goods. Anything could be bought or traded on the market. It wasn't long before Suzan fit in with the vendors and travelers from all around. She walked and hustled the streets day after day selling and trading wares. Occasionally when times were tough, though she didn't like herself for it she would sell her body for a few bucks. Such were the times in the New American Frontier.

After the crash of the United States economy it were as if every man and woman were out for herself. Churches were poor from lack of members with cash. Even the titans of the United States the big boys, Donald Trump, Bill Gates and Bill Cosby felt the sting in their pockets as the New American Frontier dollar banished the United States dollar into the value of Confederate cash.

In 2018 the people of the United States overthrew the government. The markets crashed. Factories were emptied and redesigned into care centers for the diseased and sick. There was no money for hospitals, and the hospitals those that still existed were apartments for middle class income. Doctors of this time were rare. If someone wanted to really better him or herself, that person had to do so by trading for the books needed for a particular field of interest. People were more specialized these days. They had to be in order to move up in this society. Everyone was self-taught these days. This was how the New American Frontier decided to weed out the people who only earn a career because of the money. The New American Frontier believed this was the only way people would be happy with how they lived their lives. Let them learn from their own

mistakes, was their motto. This is how the natural selection process worked, only the strong survived. If you didn't help yourself then you were a bum, a hustler or a scum.

Suzan was pretty sure she knew what she was doing. She didn't have time to sit around and read books, but she did teach herself enough on the street to do math and read. What she did she was good at. No matter what the consequences, she was into it for the thrills. She loved her life and that kept her going. She bumped into a man in the market and leaned in close to tell him something. She could smell the way that his hair hadn't been washed for weeks. His stench was fowl but this was business. "Drugs?" She asked.

The man turned to her eyeing her being precautionous. "I don't know you." He admitted.

"I know that you don't know me, but I'm not with the Frontier. So you have nothing to worry about." She opened up her backpack and let the man look through its contents.

"How do you know I'm not with the Frontier?" He stepped back a step. She saw the nasty stains on his trousers as if the man hadn't changed in months. He wore a dark trench coat that was frayed on the ends of his sleeves around his hands and the tail of the coat had been ripped and was still hanging on by a thread.

"A Frontiersman wouldn't smell like crack. Do you need anything or not mister? If not I don't have time for games." She looked at him and he was smiling widely.

"Don't you like games, little girl?" He hissed.

"No, I have no time for them." She looked deep into the man's eyes. There was something about this man something she felt that was evil. Looking into his eyes was

like looking into burning coal. Almost all of his eyes were black pupil, except for a tiny outline of oranges and reds that wrapped themselves around his large pupils. “Who are you, mister?”

“I don’t believe I need anything now, but I *will* see you again.” He stated and gave back her backpack. He turned away from her and walked away chuckling and hissing. She had never felt this type of tension before. The whole thing seemed eerie.

She then faded back into the market walking the streets. Her mind was cluttered with the man’s last words. Why would she see him again? She didn’t even have his name. She tried to put the thought out of her head and pushed on. It was close to the end of the month and she had to earn her rent. She saw another person who seemed down with drugs. She approached the man who was standing next to a streetlight that was powered by a loud generator. She tapped the man on the shoulder and he turned to her slowly holding a crystal. She lost track of what she was doing just for a moment fascinated by the multifaceted stone.

“That is beautiful.” She complemented the man. He was dressed in a gray wool robe. He had no hair, but did have a piercing rod that went through his nose.

“Thank you. Would you like to trade something for it? He suggested.

“I have some goods you may be interested in.” She opened up her backpack for the guy.

“I am interested in something here, but it’s not in this bag of yours. Why don’t you just hang on to the stone for me and on your way back through the market, see if you can find something for me that you think I might want? Buy or trade for that item and bring it to me.” He pulled his hood and nodded to her. She looked into the dark hood

and saw those dark empty eyes again. They seemed to burn into her eyes like cutting torch.

“What do you call yourself?” She asked. She did think that this little game it seemed like a fun task. She wanted to play along.

“They call me Luke. I *will* see you again.” With that he walked off into the crowd.

“I’ll be looking for you.” She looked at the crystal for a few seconds and looked back up. He was out of sight now. She pocketed the stone and pushed on through the market. She came across a tent full of beautiful items with no price tags. She had never seen such sculptures and all these items had some type of archaic symbols chiseled into them. Just then she saw a man who was discussing a piece in his museum with a barterer.

“I don’t want your money.” The attendant stated to the barterer. “You should trade something special for this gift. What do you have that I would want? Come back to me when you decide.”

The barterer muttered something under his breath and walked off. Then the attendant turned to her.

“Hello.” He greeted.

“Hi.” She smiled. “These things are beautiful. Where do they come from?”

The attendant took a seat and began dusting off his shoes with a piece of terry cloth. He was swinging the cloth hard enough to stir up the dirt underneath his feet coating his feet again with dust. He seemed not to notice and began telling her the story. “These items came from a place far away from here, but yet this place is right under your nose. These gifts are created, not made, and each one is blessed by His holy grace.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those Jesus people.” She was gathering her things and began to turn away.

“No, I mean *His* grace. He who created these is the destroyer.” He sat back in his chair. “That is if you believe in that sort of thing.” He paused and reached into his pocket. “Do you like this? He asked, pulling out a crystal that closely resembled the one in her pocket.

She reached out to grab the crystal. It was exactly like the one in her pocket. She reached into her pocket. It was the stone that *used* to be in her pocket. “How did you do that?”

“It would appear, lady, that someone else traded something to me for the wrong gift. This I believe was meant for you. Isn’t it strange how this came about? Strange how today you wake up feeling something is different about today and walked down to the market trying to do one thing and you end up taking on another task, just because it sounded like fun. What you need to worry about is how you will make your rent, that what you are here to do aren’t you? The attendant jested.

“How do you know all of this? Who are you?” She demanded.

“I thought you were too busy for games, my dear Suzan.” He teased.

“How do you know my name?” She demanded. “You’re freaking me out.”

“Look into this mirror.” He pulled out a fancy, ornate silver mirror and held it out in front of her.

She looked into the reflection and could see that she had those same eyes. Her pupils were dilated and burning with oranges and reds. She stepped back away from the mirror confused. “What’s happening?”

“Here are the rules for the game you got yourself into, miss. You will have to get rid of this stone or I will always hold your soul. When you agreed to play this game you knew that Luke wanted something.” He chuckled and hissed. “If you can get rid of this you will be freed of my hold and your eyes will be yours again. Know that whoever holds this crystal belongs to me. At the end of the day I will take my winnings and go home.”

She turned looking outside of the tent. How did she get herself into this? She wondered. She turned back and the tent was empty, yet she held the crystal in her hand. How could she get rid of this crystal, knowing that she will doom whomever she gives it too. “Shit!” She remembered that her rent was due tomorrow and she was unsuccessful in the market this day. The day was almost over. She didn’t want to doom anyone, but she had to look out for herself. She walked slowly back to her apartment. She met her landlord on the way up the stairs.

“Suzan, you are going to have my rent, aren’t you?”

“Umm, Yes, Ms. Davenport, I’ll have it for you first thing in the morning.” Just then she got an idea. Ms. Davenport was a widow and sometimes a bitch.

“Ms. Davenport, I know we hardly know each other, but I would like to show you a token of my appreciation for being fair about my rent when I am late. I picked this up today in the market.” She pulled something out of her pocket and handed it to her. She placed the crystal into Ms. Davenport’s hand. “I don’t want anything in return.” She smirked. “Goodnight, Ms. Davenport.” She turned away and walked up to her fourth story apartment. She felt bad, somewhat. When she laid down that night she did feel a little guilty, but as soon as her eyes closed she smiled.