

The Heirs of Cenpa

by Sandra McDonald

He left Cenpa in the dark hours of the morning and found himself in a parking lot somewhere on Earth. Vince didn't like parking lots. They sealed in the fertile earth, diverted precious drinking water and accumulated nothing but trash. Dishonorable things happened in parking lots: drug sales, rapes, murders and, of course, his specialty, kidnappings.

Rescues, he reminded himself.

The parking lot belonged to a concrete and glass hotel set back from a highway by a line of scraggly trees. Vince didn't think much of Earth hotels, either. He preferred the sturdy inns back home, where a man could down fresh-brewed ale with dinner and trade bits of gossip with other travelers. The beer in Earth hotels tasted bad, and guests rarely talked to one another. The hotel sign was written in English, which cheered him a little. He hoped the stones had taken him to America, because in America--

A pair of headlights blinded him. For a moment he was back in the Gray Room, inhaling the sour stink of bleach, oatmeal and soiled underwear. Scuffed linoleum stretched out like a sea beneath his feet. The sea separated him from the hallway, the staff and the locked cabinet where the Stones of Cenpa lay quietly calling to him. Only with their help could he return to his quest--

Vince squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, the passing car had vanished and he was alone under the starless sky. He pulled the stones from his pocket. Their reassuring green glow guided him to the back of the building, where a swimming pool shimmered within the confines of a chain link fence. Towels hung from several balcony railings. The stones tugged Vince's hand toward the second floor and he imagined a little boy sleeping peacefully in bed, his body lax and warm between soft sheets and his face so very innocent.

They were always innocent, the Heirs. Then frightened. Then angry. How could he blame them? He had been only eight years old when the comfort of family was ripped from him. He remembered standing in a driveway with his parents on a bleak, slate-gray day. His mother's face was red and her eyes swollen. His father frowned as he leaned down to button Vince's coat against the chill wind.

"I've failed in my mission," Vince's father said. "You must go now and be this man's apprentice. Find the Queen's Heirs."

Those people and that winter were fifty years behind him. Vince shrugged off the memory and considered his options for taking the boy. If the Heir's family had stopped only for the night, they might drive off at first light. If they were in town for a few days, he could rent a room. Either way, the stones would lead him. He checked his pocket and pulled out five Cenpa coins, each forged in a silver foundry and etched with the Queen's profile. In his wallet he found ten British pounds, thirteen francs, two

thousand lira and four American dollars. He would need much more than that.

Vince began walking. The air was warm and Earth's smog left him short-winded. The job of rescuing the Heirs belonged to a younger, healthier man with better knees. The parking lot led to a road and the road led to a turnpike of car dealerships, furniture stores and outdoor malls. At an open-all-night gas station he saw road maps for New England. The clerk was a young man with red hair and black tattoos on both forearms.

"You going to buy something?"

Vince wondered if the tattoos ran up the clerk's arms to his shoulders and chest. Body art had obviously come back into fashion while he was gone, as had long hair and earrings and rudeness.

"If you're not going to buy stuff, leave," the clerk said.

Vince left. A half-mile up the road he saw a fast-food restaurant and a sporting goods store. The restaurant opened just before dawn, and in a corner booth he ate a breakfast of rubbery pancakes and strong coffee. He skimmed *The Boston Globe*. He juggled the stones compulsively in his pocket and found, deep within his coat's folds, a small plastic bottle full of pills.

HALOPERIDOL, 10 mg, the label read. DR. ELIZABETH JACKSON. She had issued him the prescription months before she turned him over to the guards of the Gray Room. Vince put the pills back into his pocket and sipped his coffee. Despite her assertions to the contrary, he wasn't crazy. He wasn't schizophrenic. He had simply sworn an oath to take back what had once been stolen.

* * * *

The sporting goods store opened at ten o'clock. Vince gathered sunglasses, a duffel bag, a bathing suit and a handful of clothes. He used the stones to compel the clerk to hand over the cash register contents and then erased the woman's memory of the robbery. A taxi took him back to the hotel and if the short trip irritated the driver, he forgot his annoyance under the stones' magic spell. The air-conditioning in the lobby bathed Vince in coolness and the stones burned against his thigh. Still here, the Heir, and so very close.

"Good morning," he said to the clerk. "Would you happen to have any accommodations on the second floor, perhaps something overlooking the pool?"

"I'll check," she said, and began typing on a keyboard. "What's that you've got, a Polish accent?"

"Russian," he lied.

The peach-and-green room she rented to him smelled like stale cigarette smoke. Vince pulled open the balcony door and let fresh air blow in. The cigarettes of Earth were full of suspicious additives. He preferred Cenpa tobacco, dark leaves grown on mountains and cured by the fires of farmers, not chemists. Vince leaned over the balcony railing and peered down. Three dark-haired children frolicked in the pool under their mother's supervision.

"Mom, watch this!" One of the boys, perhaps only seven years old, dove underwater to perform a handstand. His small feet wagged in the air for several seconds before he resurfaced. "How was that?"

"Nine point eight, Robby," his mother said.

"I can do better." Robby's sister, a pre-teen with budding breasts, performed the same trick.

Their mother said, "Nine point three. You didn't point your toes."

"Like this, Carrie." Robby dove and illustrated. He returned to the surface with a grin. "See? You didn't do it right."

"Shut up," Carrie said.

"Both of you shut up," said the third sibling, a teenage boy with a stud in one ear. "You're lame."

Robby was the one he sought. The Heirs were always young and impressionable, torn between the comfort of mother and the rough, bruising ways of other boys. Vince changed into his swimsuit, donned his sunglasses and went down to the pool. He felt cumbersome and pale in the sun, a beached whale on a strange shore. Shortly after he sat down, a blonde woman with a toddler arrived and staked out two chairs under an umbrella. The mothers struck up the kind of friendship women formed in supermarket lines or at village wells.

"Staying long?" Robby's mother asked.

"Until tomorrow. You?"

"Friday we head up to Maine. I don't know which will be worse--the drive or visiting my mother."

"Mom, I'm hungry," Robby said.

His mother fished for dollars and quarters in her purse. She gave the money to Robby's brother. "Mike, take them to get some snacks."

Barefoot and dripping water, the three siblings ran inside.

"Isn't it a shame about that Chicago girl?" the other mother asked.

"Which Chicago girl?"

"Disappeared in the middle of the night. The mother found the back door open in the morning. They think the neighbor took her."

Vince recognized the story as a warning hidden as gossip, a reprimand disguised as sympathy. Mothers could be very cruel to one another. Robby's mother swung her gaze toward the hotel but didn't move. He wished he could hide behind a newspaper or towel.

"Perverts," the other woman said. "Everywhere you look. She was only six."

Men who took little girls only wanted them for obscene, destructive reasons. Vince's own motives fell so far from that description that he couldn't even begin to imagine how such a wretched mind worked. With relief he saw the children return - Mike first with potato chips and soda, Carrie following with root beer and chewing gum, and Robby trailing a moment later with chocolate on his face.

"I'm sure they'll find her," Robby's mother said.

"Dead, I bet," the other woman said.

The candy obviously didn't affect the children's appetites, for a half-hour later they started asking about lunch. At noon, just as Vince felt himself begin to pinken with sunburn, a tall man in a business suit arrived carrying sacks of Mexican fast food. Robby did an awkward back flip to celebrate.

"Dad's here!" he said.

"How was the presentation?" the mother asked.

"Hideously boring, but my part was brilliant." The father clapped his hands. "Everyone come eat."

While the children tore into tacos and nachos, Vince took the opportunity to cool off in the water. The chlorine stung his eyes. In Cenpa, children swam in clear blue lakes or slow-moving rivers. Their parents made home-cooked meals for them instead of buying food from assembly lines. As an apprentice, Vince had dined when his master dined and played only when given permission. The old knight had loved him, in a way, and taught him what he needed to know to carry on the quest. Vince had been happy enough.

"You said we could go to the movies tonight," Mike reminded his father. "I get a window."

Carrie's head jerked up. "I get a window."

Robby protested with his mouth full. "I get a window because I get carsick. Right, Mom?"

Once Robby was gone, the family would never again argue about window seats. His bedroom would become a preserved shrine of sorrow. Holidays would be impossible to celebrate. Disturbed individuals might call and dangle fabricated clues, but neither the family nor the police would ever discover how the unborn Heirs of Cenpa had been scattered across the Earth like the fluffs of a dandelion dispersed by wind. They would never understand that as many Heirs as possible had to be reunited so the kingdom's enemies could be defeated.

Vince went to the hotel restaurant and ordered a sandwich. He picked over the dry bread and tasteless meat while watching traffic speed by on the highway. After eating, he scouted out the vending machines and found them in an alcove across from the gift store. Back on his balcony, Vince watched as Robby did handstands, belly flops and cannonballs. At four o'clock Robby's mother took the children inside, and Vince gave them a few minutes to settle in before he went down the hallway with an ice bucket in hand. A slow stroll and careful monitoring of the stones led him to room 242.

Through the door he heard Carrie say, "Quit it!" and her mother say, "Robby, don't do that."

"I'm hungry," Robby complained. "Can we get some candy?"

The door swung open. Caught dead-on, Vince could do nothing but stare at Robby's older brother, who reared back from the sight of the stranger in the doorway.

"Mom," Mike said. "Some guy's here."

The mother appeared. "Can I help you?"

She wasn't a pretty woman, but she had bright eyes and an easy smile and freckles on her nose. Vince imagined her holding the newborn Robby in her arms after hours of backbreaking labor. She had changed his diapers and fretted when he was sick. She had sung him lullabies. If Vince succeeded at his task, she would have a gaping hole in her heart for the rest of his life.

"I'm sorry." Vince clutched the ice bucket more tightly. "Wrong room."

He forced himself to move away. The door shut behind him. Wiping sweat from the back of his neck, he went down to the lobby and pretended to peruse a rack of tourist brochures. Neither Robby

nor his siblings appeared with shiny quarters in hand. He took some of the brochures to the pool, where he sat in the late afternoon sun with an eye on the parking lot. At four-thirty Robby's father returned in a black sedan. At five-fifteen the family departed for dinner and entertainment. Mike and Robby got the window seats.

Vince returned to his room and stretched out on the bed. He only intended to sleep for a short time, but a dream of the Gray Room sucked him under like a riptide. Dr. Jackson's legions had tormented him with interrogations and drugs, but the worst of his ordeal had been the monotony of routine, the lack of purpose and the drudgery of being the only sane man in a sea of fools.

"Magical kingdoms aren't real," Dr. Jackson would tell him, over and over again. "They exist only in fiction."

When Vince opened his eyes the room was dark. Only the barest of breezes stirred the balcony curtains. The stones looked ordinary and dirty on the mattress beside him. The memory of the Queen's kiss burned against his forehead.

"Find my Heirs," she had commanded, and his journey had begun.

For an uncertain moment he wondered if both the Queen and Dr. Jackson were figments of his imagination, but the stones were evidence of the Queen's existence just as the pills were evidence of Dr. Jackson's. Vince retrieved the vial from his coat and studied the label again.

"What you do is wrong," Dr. Jackson had told him.

"What you do, you do for the entire kingdom," the Queen had said.

Vince splashed cold water on his face and went to sit on the balcony. Robby's family returned at ten-thirty. Robby's father carried the sleeping boy inside with one hand curved fondly over his son's head. Vince knew the weight of small bodies slung over his shoulder. He knew how to keep boys quiet, lest they summon unwanted attention. He considered pulling the fire alarm and luring Robby away in the confusion, but compassion won over. Let the parents have one more night with their family whole and undamaged.

Restful sleep eluded him. He dreamed of Robby cursing him for taking him from Earth. Robby became Justin Wolcott, became Carl Lopez, became dozens of other young boys. In the morning he woke drenched in his own sweat and uncertainty, and the morning news was full of pictures of a smiling little girl.

"The K-9 dogs discovered this shirt from a pair of pink pajamas Elizabeth was wearing when she went to sleep, but no body has been discovered--"

"--lawyer has called for restraint, saying his client is innocent until proven otherwise--"

"--said the chances are very slim she'll be found alive."

Vince pulled on his shoes and buttoned his pants. In the lobby, a few business guests mulled around a sideboard covered with pastries and fresh coffee. At the phone beside the vending machines he made a long-distance call.

"Is Dr. Jackson there? This is an emergency."

"Dr. Jackson? She left a few years ago."

"Do you have a number? Any way to reach her?"

"Were you a patient?"

"Yes. Once." Until the day he jimmied open a cabinet and retrieved the stones. Vince wondered if Jackson's hair had gone silver with age, or if she'd made herself famous, or if she had children of her own. He rubbed his eyes, trying to blot out the image of a girl in pink pajamas.

The receptionist gave him a number in a different area code. Vince called, identified himself and was put on hold. He clutched the phone tightly and stared through the glass wall of the closed gift shop. Cans of soda gleamed in the bright light of a refrigerator case. Souvenir T-shirts hung from hooks like thin white ghosts. He saw a rack of paperbacks and memory tugged at him, bringing him the image of his father in his study, his father's fingers moving deftly over typewriter keys.

"Vince?" Dr. Jackson sounded sharp and concerned. "Where are you?"

"I found another Heir, Dr. Jackson."

"Vince, listen. Tell me exactly where you are."

She would call the police. They would arrest him and lock him away for the sake of the boys he had taken or would take, given the chance.

"Dr. Jackson, if Cenpa's not real, how do you explain the stones?"

"You know that they're just rocks, Vince. They don't glow or do any magic at all."

She was wrong. The stones were even now burning against his thigh with unusual urgency. Vince pulled them from his pocket and was led toward the gift shop. He put the receiver down and pressed himself against the glass wall. The stones wanted him to purchase a mug painted with the outline of Massachusetts? To buy earplugs, a sleep mask or a traveler's sewing kit? He focused on the paperbacks and read the title of the one closest to him.

The Heir of Cenpa. The classic novel now a hit movie!

His father had worked for years on that book, laboring over every detail and paragraph, determined to make the Queen's plight known to the people of Earth. Then and only then might they be persuaded to voluntarily return the lost Heirs. But the publisher had called it fiction and decades later, Dr. Jackson would tell Vince that his delusions were all based on that one source.

He picked up the phone. "You never understood, Dr. Jackson."

"Make me understand, Vince."

"When we're gone, tell his parents it's for the best. I'll look after him. I'll protect him--"

"Vince, listen to me--"

He hung up, calmer now that his fears had been assuaged. A little girl was in pain or dying or dead, and he hoped her abductor paid a terrible price for his crime. In Cenpa such a criminal would be executed. The American justice system would probably lock him away in prison or the Gray Room. Either way, Vince's mission was unaffected. He made a quick pass by the family's room and heard the blare of the TV inside. Mother and children emerged in their swimsuits at ten o'clock. Mike, Carrie and Robby visited the vending machines an hour later, and he was already waiting for them.

"I'm going first," Robby said.

Mike elbowed him aside. "You never know what you want. Get your soda."

Carrie had already put her money in the soda machine. Robby pouted, but the ice dispenser caught his attention and he started to play with the eject button.

"Yes, of course," Vince said, pretending to be engaged in a phone call. He waited for Mike to remember him as the old man outside the room and grow suspicious, but Mike ignored him completely as he retrieved a bag of pretzels. Carrie chose chewing gum again. Robby couldn't make a decision.

Carrie said, "Just pick something."

"I don't know what I want," Robby replied.

"We're going back," Mike said. "Don't make Mom come looking for you."

The older children left. Robby inserted his quarters but hesitated. Finally he punched in some numbers and watched the machine start to push forward a bag of licorice. Vince hung up the phone and took a step forward.

"Excuse me. Are you Robby?"

Robby reached inside the bin to grab his candy and gave Vince a sideways look. "I can't talk to strangers."

"I came to show you some magic." Vince unfurled his hand. "Look."

The stones glowed a bright, entrancing green.

Robby shrugged. "They're just rocks."

Sometimes the Heirs were resistant to magic and had to be overpowered them. One boy had fought with such vigor that Vince had accidentally suffocated him. Another had kicked Vince so hard that he fell and was nearly captured by the adults who came running. He had hoped Robby would be different, complacent, easy.

"Look closer. Don't you see?"

"My mom's going to -" Robby started to say, but the words fell off as his small eyebrows drew together.

See, Vince wanted to tell him. See the blue and green tile of the palace walls, and the worried lines around your true mother's eyes, and the glory that is waiting for you. He held himself still and kept quiet, afraid of breaking the spell. Robby's mouth opened just a little bit, but any last protest died away as his eyes grew round and blank.

Vince relaxed. He could have pushed the child into the pool at that point, and he would have drowned. He could have left him standing in the middle of a burning room, and Robby would have stayed exactly in place. He could lower Robby's pants--

--make him submit--

--make him surrender, student to teacher--

But he wouldn't. He was not the villain Dr. Jackson imagined him to be. He was the Queen's knight, and the future of the kingdom depended on his success. He laid his hand on the boy's soft hair.

"You'll like it," he promised Robby. "Everyone does, sooner or later."

With the stones firmly in hand, he led the boy to the green fields of Cenpa.

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About the Author:

Sandra McDonald is a former Navy lieutenant and Hollywood wannabe. She has traipsed through the jungles of Guam, braved the wilds of Newfoundland and conquered the Los Angeles freeways at rush hour. Her work has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Chiaroscuro*, *Rosebud*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, and more. Visit her at www.sandramcdonald.com.

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