

RED IRON NIGHTS

by Glen Cook

Book Six of The Garrett Files

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1

When I shoved through the doorway of Morley's Joy House you'd have thought I was the old dude in black who lugs the sickle. The place went dead quiet. I stopped moving. I couldn't push uphill against the weight of all those stares. "Somebody sneak lemons into your salads?"

Quick check of the talent. It looked like somebody with an ugly stick had gone berserk. That or those guys spent a lot of time diving into walls and shaving themselves with hatchets. I saw enough scars and bent noses to open me a sideshow.

The Joy House boasts that kind of clientele.

"Aw, damn! It's Garrett." That was my pal Puddle, safe behind the bar. "Here we go again, troops." Puddle goes two-eighty, maybe more. His skin is the hue of somebody who's been dead awhile. You ask me, rigor mortis set in above the neck twenty years back.

Several dwarves, an ogre, miscellaneous elves, and a couple of guys of indeterminate ancestry chugged their sauerkraut cocktails and headed for the door. Guys I didn't even know. Guys who knew me did their damndest to pretend they didn't. A murmur spread as the ones who didn't know me got clued in.

What a charge for the ego. Call me Typhoid Garrett.

"Hi, everybody," I chirped, going for cheerful. "Ain't it a grand night out?" It wasn't. It was raining cats and dogs and the critters were quarreling all the way to the ground. I had dents in my head from random volleys of hailstones, not being bright enough to wear a hat. On the plus side, flash floods might clear the garbage festering in the streets. Some of that was ready to get up and walk.

The city ratmen get lazier every day.

"Hey, Garrett! Come on over."

Well. A friendly face. "Saucerhead, old buddy, old pal." I steered for the shadowy corner table Tharpe shared with another guy. I hadn't spotted him because of the gloom back there. Even close up I couldn't make much of Tharpe's companion. The guy wore heavy black robes, like some species of priest, complete with cowl. He exuded gloom like a miasma. He wasn't the kind you'd have over to liven up a party.

"Drag up a chair," Tharpe said. I don't know why he's called Saucerhead. He don't like it much but ranks it higher than "Waldo," which a parent or two hung on him.

I planted my behind. Tharpe's companion observed, "Seems you're less than welcome here. Are you diseased?" He wasn't just gloomy, he was forthright, a social handicap worse than bad breath.

"Ha!" Saucerhead snorted. "Ha-ha-ha. That's good, Licks. Hell. This's Garrett. I told you about him."

"The mist begins to clear." But not around him, it didn't.

“I’m starting to feel a little hurt here,” I said. “You’re wrong.” Louder, “You’re all of you wrong. I’m not working. I’m not into anything. I just thought I’d drop in and catch up on my friends.” They didn’t believe me.

At least nobody cracked wise about me not having any friends.

Saucerhead said, “If you’d come around and socialize sometimes, instead of just when you’re up to your crack in crocodiles, maybe folks would smile when they saw you.”

Grumble grumble. Hard to argue with that. “You’re looking good, Garrett. Lean and mean. Still working out?”

“Yeah.” More grumbles. I don’t much like work. Especially not workout-type work. I figure in any rational world a man will get all the exercise he needs catching his share of blonds, brunettes, and redheads. Got it so far? I’m Garrett, investigator and confidential agent, not animated by any overwhelming ambition, with a penchant for figures of a certain kind and a knack for stumbling into things friends and acquaintances don’t find enthralling. I’m a young thirty, six-feet-two, ginger-haired and blue-eyed, and the dogs don’t howl when I go by, though the hazards of my profession have left traces which give my face character. I say I’m charming. My friends disagree, say I just won’t take life serious. Well, you do too much of that and you end up as dark as this friend of Saucerhead’s.

Puddle arrived with a huge tankard of my favorite food, that divine elixir that makes it necessary for me to work out. He’d drawn it from his private keg, hidden behind the bar. The Joy House doesn’t serve anything but rabbit food and the squeezings thereof. Morley Dotes is a rabid vegetarian.

I took a long drink of bitter beer. “You’re a prince, Puddle.” I fished out a silver mark.

“Yeah. I’m in line for the throne.” He didn’t pretend to make change. A prince indeed. You could buy a pony keg wholesale for that, the price of silver being what it is. “How come you’re in here instead of gamboling through acres of redheads?” My last big case involved whole squads of that delightful subspecies. Unfortunately, only one of the bunch turned out palatable. Redheads are that way. They’re either devils or angels—and the angels are no angels. I think it’s because they try living up to an image from an early age.

“Gamboling, Puddle?” Where did Puddle pick up a word like “gamboling”? The man had trouble with his own name on account of it had more than one syllable. “You been going to school or something?”

Puddle just grinned.

I asked, “What is this, teak on Tommy Tucker night? With easygoing old Garrett playing Tommy?”

Puddle’s grin widened into an unappealing smear of rotten and missing teeth. He was one guy who should convert and become one of Morley’s born-again vegetarians.

Saucerhead said, “You make yourself a fat target.”

“I must. For everybody. You hear what Dean did?”

Dean is the old boy who keeps house for me and my partner and cooks for me. He’s about seventy. He’d make somebody a fine wife.

While we jawed, Tharpe’s tablemate filled and tamped, filled and tamped the biggest damn pipe I ever saw. It had a bowl like a bucket. Puddle snagged a brass coal bucket off the bar. Licks used copper tongs to transfer one small coal to his pipe. He puffed clouds of weed smoke potent enough to sky us all.

“Musicians,” Saucerhead muttered, as though that explained the ills of the world. “I didn’t hear, Garrett. What’s he done now? Found you another cat?” Dean was going through a stray-collecting spell.

I'd had to get firm to keep from ending up up to my belt buckle in cat hair.

"Worse. He says he's moving in. Like I don't get a vote. And he goes on about it like he's making some kind of supreme sacrifice."

Saucerhead chuckled. "There goes your extra room. No place left to stash you a spare honey. Poor baby. Gots to make do with one at a time."

Grumble grumble. "Ain't like I'm overstocked. I been doing with none at a time since Tinnie and Winger ran into each other on my front steps." Puddle laughed. Heathen.

Tharpe asked, "What about Maya?"

"I haven't seen her in six months. I think she left town. It's me and Eleanor now." Eleanor is a painting on my office wall. I love the gal but she has her limitations. Everybody thought my situation was hilarious—except Tharpe's friend. He wasn't hearing anybody but himself anymore. He started humming. I decided he couldn't be much of a musician. He couldn't carry a tune in a handcart.

Puddle stopped snickering long enough to say, "I knew you was up to something. Not your usual, but you still looking to get bailed out."

"Damn it, I just wanted out of the house. Dean is driving me buggo and the Dead Man won't take a nap on account of he's expecting Glory Moon called to do something and he don't want to miss the news. I defy anybody to put up with those two for half as long as I have."

"Yeah, you do got a hard life." Saucerhead sneered. "My heart goes out. Tell you what. I'll trade you. I take your place, you take mine. I'll throw in Billie." Billie being his current flame, a little bit of a blond with temper enough for a platoon of redheads.

"Do I detect a note of disenchantment?"

"No. You detect the whole damned opera."

"Thanks anyway. Maybe next time." Saucerhead's place was a one-room walk-up without furniture enough for company. I lived in places like that before I scored big enough to buy the house I share with the Dead Man.

Saucerhead tucked his thumbs into his belt, leaned back, smirked and nodded, nodded and smirked. A smirk on his ugly face is a wonder to behold. He ever holds one too long the Crown might declare it a national park. He claims he's all human, but from his size and looks you've got to suspect he has a little troll or giant in him. "You ain't ready to deal, Garrett, I can't say I got a lot of sympathy for you."

"I could've gone to some second-rate swillhouse and drowned my sorrows in ardent spirits, pouring my woes into the ears of sympathetic strangers, but no, I had to come down here . . ."

"That works for me," Puddle kicked in when I hit the part about ardent spirits. "Don't let us hold you up."

I never did count him as a friend. He just came with my friend Morley—though Morley's friendship can be suspect enough. "You take the joy out of the Joy House, Puddle."

"Hey, Garrett. The place was rocking till you walked in."

Saucerhead's pal Licks wasn't even gurgling now, but he kept puffing like a volcano and grinning. I was getting the smoke secondhand but was ready to start humming myself. I lost track of what I was saying, started wondering why the place was called the Joy House, which made it sound a lot more exotic than the vegetarian hangout it is.

Licks suddenly shot up like he'd been goosed. He headed for the door, sort of floating, as though his toes barely reached the floor. I'd never seen anyone do weed so heavy. I asked Tharpe, "Where'd

you find him?"

"Licks? He found me. Him and some other guys want to organize the musicians."

"Say no more." I could imagine their interest in Saucerhead. Tarpe makes his living convincing people. His technique involves bending limbs in unnatural directions.

Two or three Morleys descended the stair from the second floor, staring toward Licks as the musician hit the exit. Morley had heard about me. Puddle had warned him through the speaking tube to his office upstairs. Hard to tell through the smoke, but Dotes looked irked.

Morley is a breed, part dark-elf, part human. The elf side dominates. He's short, trim, so handsome it's a sin. And sin he does, as often as he can with anybody's wife who'll hold still. He'd grown a little pencil-stroke mustache. He had his black hair slicked back. He was dressed to kill—though his type looks good in anything. He drifted our way, showing a lot of pointy teeth.

"What's that thing living under your nose?"

Saucerhead offered a crude suggestion. Morley ignored him. "You quit working, Garrett? You haven't been around."

"Why work if I don't have to?" I tried looking smug—though my finances weren't comfortable. It costs to keep house.

"You have something going?" He occupied the chair vacated by Licks, waved at persistent weed smoke.

"Not hardly." I gave him my sad tale of woe. He laughed too.

"Imaginative, Garrett. I almost believe you. I have to admit, when you make them up they sound like things that *could* happen. So what is it? Something hush-hush? I haven't heard about anything shaking. This town's getting dull."

He talked that long only because I was stammering. "Damn! Not you too!"

"You never come around except when you need muscle to hoist you out of a hole you've dug yourself."

Not fair. Not true. I've even gone so far as to eat some of the cow chow his joint serves. Once I even paid for it. "You don't believe me? Then tell me this. Where's the woman?"

"What woman?" Dotes and Saucerhead and Puddle all grinned like shiteating possums. Thought they had me on the run.

"You claim I'm working. Where's the woman? I get into one of my weird cases, there's always a lovely around. Right? So you see a honey on my arm? Hell, my luck's so bad I'd almost go to work just to . . . Huh?"

They weren't paying attention. They were staring at something behind me.

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2

She liked black. She wore a black raincloak over a black dress. She wore high-top black boots. Raindrops shimmered like diamonds in her raven hair. She wore black leather gloves. I imagined she'd lost a black hat and veil somewhere. Everything about her was black except her face. That was as pale as bone. She was about five-six. She was young. She was beautiful. She was frightened.

I said, "I'm in love."

Morley's sense of humor deserted him. He told me, "You don't want anything to do with her, Garrett. She'll get you dead."

The woman's gaze, arrogant from amazing black eyes, passed over us as though we didn't exist. She chose to perch at a table isolated from those that were occupied. Some of Morley's patrons shivered as she passed, pretended they didn't see her.

Interesting.

I looked some more. She was about twenty. She wore lip paint so red it looked like fresh blood. That and her pallor gave me a chill. But no. No vampire would dare TunFaire's inhospitable streets.

I was intrigued. Why was she afraid? Why did she scare those thugs? "Know her, Morley?"

"No. I don't. But I know who she is."

"So?"

"She's the kingpin's kid. I saw her out there last month."

"Chodo's daughter?" I was stunned. Also a lot less romantically inclined.

Chodo Contague is TunFaire's emperor of crime. If it's on society's underbelly and there's a profit in it, Chodo has a piece of it.

"Yes."

"You went out there? You saw him?"

"Yes." He sounded a little vague, there.

"He's really alive, then." I'd heard but I'd had trouble believing it.

See, my last case, the one with all the redheads, ended up with me and my friend Winger and Chodo's two top lifetakers going after the bastard. Winger and I took a powder before the dirty deed, figuring we'd be next if we hung around. When we left, Crask and Sadler had the old boy ready to go on the meathook. But it hadn't taken. Chodo was still boss wazoo. Crask and Sadler were still his top headcrushers, like they'd never had a thought of putting him to sleep.

That worried me. Chodo had seen me plain enough. He wasn't the forgiving sort.

"Chodo's daughter! What's she doing in a dump like this?"

"What do you mean, a dump like this?" You can't even hint that the Joy House might be less than top of the mark without Morley gets his back up.

"I mean, obviously she thinks she's a class act. Whatever you or I think, she's got to figure this's a dive. This isn't the Hill, Morley. It's the Safety Zone."

That's Morley's neighborhood. The Safety Zone. It's an area where folks of disparate species get together for business reasons with a lessened risk of getting murdered. It's not your upper-crust part of town.

All the time we're rattling our mouths, whispering, I'm trying to think of some good excuse for going over there and telling the girl she's made me her love slave. And all the time I'm doing that, my little voice is telling me: don't make a damned fool of yourself, any kid of Chodo's is going to be murder on the hoof.

I must have twitched. Morley grabbed my arm. "You're getting desperate, hit the Tenderloin."

Common sense. Don't stick your hand in a fire. I hung on to my ration of sense. I settled back. I had it under control. But I couldn't help staring.

The front door exploded inward. Two very large brunos brought half the storm in with them. They

held the door open for a third man, who came in slow, like he was onstage. He was shorter by a couple of inches but no less muscular. Somebody had used his face to draw a map with a knife. One eye was half-shut permanently. His upper lip was drawn into a perpetual sneer. He radiated nasty. "Oh, boy," Morley said.

"Know them?"

"I know the type."

Saucerhead said it for me. "Don't we all."

The scar-faced guy looked around. He spotted the girl. He started moving. Somebody yelled, "Shut the goddamned door!" The two heavies there took their first good look around and got a read on what kind of people hang out in a place like the Joy House. They shut the door.

I didn't blame them. Some very bad people hang out at Morley's place.

Scarface didn't care. He approached the girl. She refused to see him. He bent, whispered something. She started, then looked him in the eye. She spat. Chodo's kid for sure.

Scarface smiled. He was pleased. He had him an excuse.

There wasn't a sound in the place when he yanked her out of the seat. She betrayed pain by expression but didn't make a sound.

Morley said, "That's it." His voice was soft. Dangerous. You don't mess with his customers. Scarface must not have known where he was. He ignored Morley. Most times that's a fatal error. He was lucky, maybe.

Morley moved. The thugs from the doorway got in his way.

Dotes kicked one in the temple. The guy was twice his size but went down like he'd been whacked with a sledge. The other one made the mistake of grabbing Morley.

Saucerhead and I started moving a second after Dotes did. We circled the action, chasing the scar-faced character. Morley didn't need help. And if he did, Puddle was behind the bar acquiring some engine of destruction.

Rain hit me in the face, like to drove me back inside. It was worse than it had been when I'd arrived.

"There," Saucerhead said, pointing. I spied the loom of a dark coach, figures struggling as Scarface tried to force the girl inside.

We pranced over, me unlimbering my favorite oak headknocker as we went. I never leave home without it. Eighteen inches long, it has a pound of lead in its business end. Very effective, and it don't usually leave bodies littering the street.

Saucerhead beat me there. He grabbed the scar-faced guy from behind, twirled him around, and threw him against the nearest building with a force that drowned the rattle of distant thunder. I slithered into the vacated space, grabbed the girl.

Somebody was trying to drag her into the coach. I slipped my left arm around her waist, pulled, pushed my headknocker past her, figuring I'd pop a bad boy between the eyes.

I saw eyes, all right. Eyes like out of some spook story, full of green fire, three times too big for the wizened little character who wore them. He had to be a hundred and ninety. But he was strong. He hung on to the girl's arm with hands like bird claws, pulled her in despite her and me both.

I swished my billy around, trying to avoid seeing those eyes because they were poisonous. They scared hell out of me. Made me feel cold all the way down to my tail-bone. And I don't scare easy.

I got him a good one upside the head. His grip weakened. That gave me a chance to line up another shot. I let him have it.

His mouth opened wide, but instead of a scream, butterflies poured out. I mean like about a million and two butterflies, so many the coach was filled. They were all over me. I stumbled back, flailed around. I'd never been bitten by a butterfly, but who knew about the kind that come flapping out of some old geek's mouth?

Saucerhead pulled the girl away from me, tossed me back like a rag doll, dived in there, and pulled that old guy out. You don't want to get in Saucerhead's way when he's riled. He breaks things.

The old man's eyes had lost their fire. Saucerhead lifted him with one hand, said, "What the hell you think you're pulling, Gramps?" and tossed him over to ricochet off the same wall that had been Scarface's undoing. Then Tharpe went over and started kicking, one for this guy, one for that, no finesse. I heard ribs crack. I figured I ought to calm him down before he killed somebody, only I couldn't think how. I didn't want to get in his way when he was in that mood. And I still had a flock of soggy butterflies after me.

Tharpe calmed himself down. He grabbed the old man by the scruff of the neck and pitched him into the coach. The old boy made a sound like a whipped puppy. Tharpe tossed Scarface in on top of him, then looked up. There wasn't anybody on the driver's seat, so he just whacked the nearest horse on the rump and yelled.

The team took off.

Hunching down against the rain, Tharpe turned to me. "Takes care of those clowns. Hey! What happened to the girl?"

She was gone.

"Damned ingrate. There's a broad for you. Hell." He looked up, let the rain fall into his face a moment, then said, "I'm going to get my stuff. Then what say you and me go get drunk and get in a fight?"

"I thought we just had a fight."

"Bah. Bunch of candyasses. Wimps. Come on."

I had no intention of going trouble-hunting. But it did seem like a good idea to get in out of the rain, away from the butterflies. I told you I hadn't used up my ration of sense.

One of the two thugs was blocking the water flow in the gutter in front of Morley's door. The second came flying out as we started in. "Hey!" Tharpe yelled. "Watch where you're throwing your trash."

I looked around inside. The girl hadn't gone back in there. Morley and Puddle and I settled down to wonder what it was all about. Saucerhead went off looking for a real challenge.

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3

I did my best to get my money's worth out of Puddle's keg while Morley and I dissected cabbages and kings and butterflies and the old days that never were that good—though I'd had me a moment now and then. We solved the ills of the world but decided there was nobody in authority with sense enough to implement our program. We were disinclined to take on the job ourselves.

Women proved a topic of brief duration. Morley's recent luck undershone my own. It was too much to take, seeing that great blob Puddle tipped back in his chair, thumbs hooked in his belt, grinning

smugly in regard to his own endeavors.

The rain continued relentless. At last I had to face facts. I was going to get wet again. I was going to get a lot wet if Dean failed to respond to my pounding and whooping at the door. With set jaw and scant optimism I took my leave of Morley and his establishment. Dotes looked as smug as his man. He was home already.

I hunched my chin down against my chest and wished I'd had the sense to wear a hat. I wear one so seldom it doesn't occur to me to top myself off when that would be wise. Right away rain started sneaking down the back of my neck.

I paused where we'd rescued Chodo's mysterious daughter from her more mysterious assailants. There wasn't much light. The rain had swept away most of the evidence. I poked around and was on the verge of deciding half had been my imagination before I found one big bedraggled butterfly. I salvaged the cadaver and carried it as carefully as I could, cradled in my left palm.

My place is an old red brick house in a once-prosperous stretch of Macunado Street, near Wizard's Reach. The middle-class types have all abandoned ship. Most of the neighboring places have been subdivided and rented to families with herds of kids. Usually when I approach my house I pause to inspect it and reflect on the good fortune that let me survive the case that paid me enough to buy it. But cold rain down the back of the neck has a way of sapping nostalgia.

I scampered up the steps and gave the secret knock, *bam-bam-bam*, as hard as I could while bellowing, "Open up, Dean! I'm going to drown out here." A big flash of lightning. Thunder rattled my teeth in their sockets. The sky lords hadn't been feuding before, just tuning up for another Great Flood. Thunder and lightning suggested they were about to get serious. I pounded and yelled some more. The stoop isn't protected from the weather.

Maybe my ears were still ringing. I thought I heard something like a kitten crying inside. I knew it couldn't be a cat. I'd given Dean the word about his strays. He wouldn't lapse.

I heard shuffling and whispering inside. I did some more yelling. "Open this damned door, Dean. It's cold out here." I didn't threaten. Mom Garrett didn't raise no kids dumb enough to lay threats on somebody who could just go back to bed and leave me singing in the rain.

The door creaked open after a symphony of curses and clanking bolts and rattling chains. Old Dean stood there eyeing me from beneath drooping lids. He looked about two hundred right then. He is around seventy. And real spry for a guy his age.

If he wasn't going to get out of the way I was going to walk over him. I started moving. He slid aside. I told him, "The cat goes as soon as the rain stops." I tried to sound like it was him or the kitten.

He started rattling bolts and chains. I stopped. All that hadn't been there before. "What's all the hardware?"

"I don't feel comfortable living somewhere where all there is is one or two latches to keep the thieves out."

We needed to have us a talk about assuming and presuming. I knew damned well he didn't buy that hardware out of his own pocket. But now wasn't the time. I wasn't at my best.

"What's that you've got?"

I'd forgotten the butterfly. "Drowned butterfly." I took it into my office, a shoe box of a room behind the last door to your left heading back to the kitchen. Dean hobbled after me, bringing a candle. He has decrepitude down to an art. It's amazing how incapacitated he gets when he has a scam running.

I used his candle to light a lamp. "Go back to bed."

He glanced at the closed door of the small front room, a door we shut only when there's somebody or something in there we don't want seen. Something was scratching its other side. Dean said, "I'm wide-awake now. I might as well get some work done." He didn't look wideawake. "You plan to be up long?"

"No. I'm just going to study this bug, then kiss Eleanor good night." Eleanor was a beautiful, sad woman who lived once upon a time. Her portrait hangs behind my desk. I go on like we're into a relationship. That drives Dean buggy.

I have to balance the scale somehow.

I settled into my worn leather chair. Like everything else around my place, including the house, it was secondhand. It was just getting adjusted to a new butt. Just getting comfortable, I pushed my accounts aside, spread the butterfly on my desk.

Dean waited in the doorway till he saw I wouldn't react to the accounts being out. Then he huffed off to the kitchen.

I popped a quick peek at the last entry, made a face. That didn't look good. But go to work? Gah! Sufficient unto the day the evil thereof.

Meantime, there was this raggedy old green butterfly. It could've been a beauty before, but now its wings were cracked and chipped and split, bent and washed out. A disaster. I suffered a moment of *déjà vu*.

I'd seen its cousins in the islands while I was doing my five years in the Royal Marines. There're a lot in the swamps down there. There's every kind of bug the gods ever imagined, except maybe arctic roaches. Maybe creation was handled by a heavenly committee. In areas where departmental turfs overlapped, the divine functionaries went to competing. And they all for sure dumped their bug-production overruns in those tropical swamps.

But the heck with the bad old days. I'm all growed-up now. What I had to ask was, what was I doing with the flutterbug in the first place?

I was definitely, for sure, guaranteed, not even a little bit interested in anything involving dried-up old geezers with stomachs so sour they belched up butterflies. I'd done my good deed for the decade. I'd rescued the maiden fair. It was time to get on with things dearer my heart, like hustling Dean's latest fuzball charity out my back door.

I swept the bug cadaver into the trash bucket, leaned back, started thinking how nice it would be to put myself away in my nice soft bed.

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4

Garrett!

"Hell!" Every time I forget my so-called partner . . .

The Dead Man hangs out in the larger front room that takes up the whole front side of the house opposite my office, an area as big as my office and the small front room together. A lot of space for a guy who hasn't moved since before TunFaire was called TunFaire. I'm thinking about putting him in the basement with the other junk that was here when I moved in.

I went into his room. A lamp was burning there. That was a surprise. Dean doesn't like going in there. I glanced around suspiciously.

The room contains only two chairs and two small tables, though the walls are hidden by shelves of

books and maps and memorabilia. One chair is mine. The other has a permanent resident.

If you walk in not knowing what to expect, the Dead Man can be a shock. First, there's just a whole hell of a lot of him. Four hundred and fifty pounds' worth. Second, he's not human, he's Loghyr. Since he's the only one of that tribe I've ever seen, I don't know if he'd set the Loghyr girls swooning, but by my standards he's one homely sucker. Like he was the practice dummy when the guy with the ugly stick was doing his apprenticeship.

After fat you notice he's got a snoot like an elephant, fourteen inches long. Then you notice that the moths and mice have nibbled him over the years.

The reason he's called the Dead Man is that he's dead. Somebody stuck a knife in him about four hundred years ago. But Loghyr just don't get in a hurry. His soul, or whatever, is still hanging around in his body.

I gather you have had an adventure.

Since he's dead, he can't talk, but he doesn't let that slow him down. He just thinks right into my head. He can also go rummaging around in there, amongst the clutter and spiders, if he wants. Mostly he's courteous enough to keep out unless he's invited.

I took another look around. The place was too clean. Dean had even dusted the Dead Man.

Something was up. Those two had gotten their heads together. That was a first. That was scary.

I'm nothing if not cool. I covered my suspicion perfectly. Knowing it was going to be something I wouldn't like, I decided to get even first.

The Dead Man made a big mistake when he taught me to remember every little detail of everything when I was working. I started talking about my evening.

The theoretical basis of our association is I do the legwork and suffer the slings and arrows and thumps on the head and he takes whatever I learn and runs it through his self-proclaimed genius brains and tells me whodunit or where the body is buried or whatever it is I'm trying to find out. That's the theoretical basis. In practice, he's lazier than I am. I have to threaten to burn the house down just to wake him up.

I was dwelling in lingering detail upon the charms of the strange Miss Contague when suspicion bit him. *Garrett!*

He knows me too well. "Yes?" Sweetly.

What are you doing?

"Filling you in on some odd occurrences."

Occurrences, incidentally, of but passing interest. Unless your passions have overcome your brain yet again. You could not possibly be considering involving yourself with those people, could you?

I thought about lying just to rattle his chain. We do a lot of that, back and forth. It passes the time. But I said, "There *are* limits to how much I'll let a skirt override my good sense."

Indeed? I am amazed and surprised. I had concluded that you have no sense at all, good or bad.

We do get going. Usually it's play, wit and half-wit. It's up to you to guess who's who.

"One point for you, Old Bones. I'm going to go put myself on the shelf for the night. If Dean explodes in another mad burst of energy and decides to dust you again, tell him he can wake me at noon." I have this thing about mornings. No sane man gets up then. They come too damned early in the

day.

Think about it. All those early birds out there, what do they get? Ulcers. Heart trouble. Caught by homeless cats. But not me. Not old Garrett. I'm going to lean back and relax and loaf my way to immortality.

I wish you could sleep in. After your valiant rescue job and your heroic attempt to turn a profit off that Puddle creature, you deserve a reward.

"Why do I get the feeling you're about to stick it to me? Why shouldn't I sleep in? I don't have anything else to do."

You have to be at the gate of the Al-Khar at eight o'clock.

"Say what?" The Al-Khar is the city prison. TunFaire is notoriously short on law enforcement and justice, but once in a while some clown is so clumsy he stumbles into the arms of the Watch. Once in a while some brain-damage case actually gets himself some time. "What the hell for? There's people up there don't like me."

If you were to avoid every place where someone does not like you, you would have to leave town in order to find room to breathe. You will be there because you have to tail a man who is to be released at eight.

I had it scoped out. Him and Dean had found me work on account of they were worried about our dwindling funds. The brass-bottomed nerve! They were both getting big-headed. But sometimes it helps to play dumb. I'm a past master at playing dumb. I'm so good I fool myself sometimes. "What would I want to do that for?"

Three marks a day and expenses. It should take only a modicum of creativity to shift our household budget into the latter category.

I got down and peered under his chair. There were still a couple little sacks down there. "We aren't broke yet." That's where we keep our cash. There's no place safer. Any thief who gets past the Dead Man is somebody so bad I don't want to mess with him anyway. "If I kick Dean and his cat out and cook for myself, that'd be beer money for months."

Garrett.

"Yeah. Yeah." It really was getting time to hustle up some money. Only I didn't like the idea of jobs being handed to me. I'm the senior partner in this chicken outfit. The boss. Har. "Tell me about it. And while you're doing that, put one of your spare brains to work thinking about who keeps a roof over whose ungrateful head."

Phsaw! Do not be petty. This is the ideal job. A simple tail. The client simply wishes to trace the movements of the convict.

"Right! So this clown makes me, leads me into an alley, practices the latest dance steps on my face . . ."

This man is not violent. Nor should he expect to be followed. It is easy money, Garrett. Take it.

"If it's that easy, why me? Why not Saucerhead? He always needs work." I sent a lot his way.

We need the money. Get some rest. You will be rising early.

"Maybe." How come it's me that has to get out and do the hustling? "But first, how about you drop me one or two more hints here? Like maybe a description. Just in case more than one guy graduates from college tomorrow. Like maybe the initials of the guy who's hiring me. So I can practice my deducing and figure out who I'm supposed to report to."

The client is one Bishoff Hullar . . .

“Oh, great. You got me working for a sleazy taxi-dance operator from the Tenderloin. Bring me down in the world, why don’t you? I used to play with real villains, like Chodo and his boys. Who do I follow? Somebody who stiffed one of his girls? And why?”

The target is one Barking Dog Amato. A colorful name . . .

“Gods! Barking Dog? You got to be kidding.”

You know him?

“Not personally. I know who he is. I thought everybody over ten knew Barking Dog Amato.”

I do not get out much anymore.

I resisted temptation. He’d want me to be his wheels. “Barking Dog Amato. AKA Crackpot Amato. Given name, Kropotkin F. Amato. I don’t know what the F stands for. Probably Fruitcake. The man’s a total loony. Spends all his time hanging around the Chancery steps with a brass megaphone, yelling about how the powers that be swindled his ancestors. He’s got a whole roadshow he hauls around, signs and banners and displays. He hands out broadsides to anybody who gets close enough to let him shove one at him. He’s got conspiracy theories that boggle master conspiracy theorists. He can connect anything up with anything and produce a diabolical plot to rule the world or fleece Kropotkin Amato of his birthright. He’s big on the Emperor being behind everything.”

The empire that preceded the Karentine state fell ages ago, but there’s still an imperial family hanging around awaiting the call. Its only influence on today’s world is it provides some small funding for the Bledsoe charity hospital. Nobody but Barking Dog could imagine them being secret masters of anything.

Interesting.

“Entertaining. In small doses. But if you get too close you’ll get grabbed and told the whole story of how his noble family got defrauded of its title and estates. Hell. His father was a butcher down on Winterslight. His mother was some kind of breed out of the Bustee. The only conspiracy that victimized him was the one that got us all. Conscription and the war. He started his barking after they mustered him out.”

Then the man is harmless, a deluded fool?

“That’d cover it. As harmless, deluded, and foolish as they come. One of our more entertaining street characters. Which is why they let him hang out with his megaphone.”

How did this harmless fool get himself thrown into jail? Why would anyone want him shadowed? Can he be more than he seems?

I was working on that already.

It had been a while since I’d seen the Barking Dog in action. But then, I hadn’t been onto his turf.

I hadn’t missed him. He wasn’t the sort anyone would miss if he disappeared. Maybe once in a while somebody would ask: whatever happened to that cacklehead what used to howl on the Chancery steps? He’d get a shrug and forget it. Nobody would get excited and go looking.

I was sure Barking Dog would have inventive things to say about his prison time. Maybe devils from another world were after him now. He’d never rattled anybody from this world enough to get himself locked up. Maybe it was Venageti secret agents. Or the little people. Or the gods themselves. The god gang don’t need excuses to turn malicious.

“I’m going to bed, Chuckles.” I got out before he could change my mind, muttering, “Three marks a day to tail Barking Dog Amato. It can’t be true.”

The foot of the stairs is just a couple steps from the kitchen door. I leaned in to wish Dean a good night. “After you get rid of that cat, start thinking about the floor in the Dead Man’s room, since you two are such good buddies now. It could use sanding and refinishing.”

He looked at me like he was seeing spooks.

I chuckled, headed for bed. He pulled any more stunts, I’d have him in there for three months, sanding and polishing and painting and generally getting himself a good dose of employer vengeance.

I hit my room, shucked my clothes, brooded about having to go to work for about as long as it took me to pop my head into my pillow. Insomnia isn’t one of my shortcomings.

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5

There are those, old Dean among them, whose major personality flaw is a compulsion to spring up with the first bird chirp. That’s a dandy habit—if you’ve *got* to get to the worms first. Me, I swore off exotic chow when I parted ways with the Corps. I won’t get into that situation again.

Dean suffers from the delusion that sleeping till noon is a sin. I’ve tried and tried to show him the light, but his brain hardened along with his arteries. He flat won’t admit the truth of my theories. No fool like an old fool.

I made the error of observing that aloud.

Hell, it was barely sunup. You expect me *to think* at that time of night?

I got me a drizzle of ice water down my spine.

I screamed. I cursed. I said stuff to set dear old mom spinning in her grave.

I got up, to no avail. The old boy had him a head start.

I sat on the edge of my bed, put my elbows on my knees and my forehead in my hands. I asked the gods, which I believe in once a week, what I’d done to deserve Dean. Hadn’t I always been one of the good guys? Come on, fellows. Let’s all play a prank on the universe and let true justice reign for a day. Get that old sucker.

I blinked. Between the heels of my hands I glimpsed Dean peeking around the doorframe. “Time to get up, Mr. Garrett. You have to be outside the Al-Khar in two hours. I’ve started breakfast.”

My suggestion about breakfast reversed the traditional alimentary process. He wasn’t impressed.

He clumped downstairs. I groaned vigorously and stumbled to a window. There was barely enough light to see. The city ratmen were banging and clanging their trash carts while they pretended to do something useful. A herd of dwarves hustled past, carrying bundles bigger than they were. They were a sullen, surly, silent gang. See what getting up early does?

Except for dwarves and street sweepers, the thoroughfare was barren. Sane folk were still in bed.

Only impending poverty kept me from easing back into mine.

What the hell? I could turn old Barking Dog into a career. Anybody dumb enough to have him tailed deserved to have his purse looted. Sure be safer than most jobs that come my way.

I prettied myself up and moseyed downstairs. I paused outside the kitchen to put on a heavyweight scowl—though at that time of night, if my rest is disturbed, scowling comes naturally.

Which did me no good. I stepped into the smells of spicy sausages, stewed apples, fresh hot tea, biscuits just out of the oven. I didn’t have a chance.

He won't cook like that when I'm not working. I'm just hanging around, it's maybe a bowl of cold porridge developing a crust. If I want fresh tea, I've got to put the pot on myself.

What do you do with these work-ethic fanatics? I mean, I don't mind if he busts his butt working for me—which I've never noticed him doing. My problem is, he's one of those characters who want to redesign the rest of us. His ambition is to see me collapse from overwork, rich, before my thirty-first birthday. I'm going to fool him. That won't never come. I'm going to stay thirty forever.

I ate. Too much. Dean hummed as he cleaned his pots. He was happy. I was employed. I felt abused, trivialized. Such a vast array of talents and skills wasted trailing a nut case. It was like using a rosewood four-by-four to swat flies.

Dean was of such good cheer about my employment that he forgot to kvetch till I was halfway through my second helping of apples. "You go past the Tate compound to get to the Al-Khar don't you, Mr. Garrett?"

Oh-oh. When he Misters me he knows I won't like what he's got to say. This time he was pretty transparent. "Not today." He was going to nudge me to make up with Tinnie. Which I wasn't going to do on account of I'd decided I was done apologizing to women for things I didn't do. "Tinnie wants to make up, she knows where to find me."

"But . . ."

I got up. "Something you need to think about, Dean. Maybe while you're finding a home for that cat. And that's what you'll do if I suddenly find me a wife to manage the house." That would hold him.

I headed for the front door. I didn't get there. The Dead Man's voice rang in my head. *You are leaving without taking adequate precautions, Garrett.*

He meant I was leaving the house unarmed. I said, "I'm just going to follow a crazy man. I won't get into trouble." Without bothering to go into his room. He doesn't hear physically.

You never plan to get into trouble. Yet each time you assume that attitude and go out unprepared, you end up wishing you had had the foresight to carry something. Is that not so?

That was uncomfortably close to the truth. I wished it wasn't. I wished we lived in a more civilized age. But wishing never makes anything so.

I went upstairs, to my closet of unpleasantries, where I keep the tools I use when the tools I prefer, my wits, fail me. I grumbled all the while. And wondered why I resisted good advice. I guess I resented the fact that I hadn't thought of it myself.

Lessons you don't want to learn come hard.

TunFaire is not a nice city.

I hit the street in a black humor. I wasn't going to make the city any nicer.

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6

Like most public buildings in this town, the Al-Khar is generations overdue for renovation. It looks like the prisoners could walk through the walls if they wanted.

The Al-Khar was a bad idea from the beginning, a pork-barrel project making somebody rich through cost overruns and corner cutting. The builder used a pale yellow-green stone that absorbed grunge from the air, reacted with it, streaked, turned uglier by the hour, and did not stand up, being too soft. It chipped and flaked, dropping talus all around the prison, leaving the walls with a poxy

appearance. In places there'd been mortar decay enough that stones were loose. Since the city hardly ever jailed anybody, there seemed to be no financial provision for prison maintenance.

It was raining still, though now the fall was just a drizzle. Just enough to be a misery. I posted myself under a forlorn lime tree as down-and-out as any alley-dwelling ratman. It didn't know the season. But its sad branches offered the only shelter around. I recalled my Marine Corps training and faded into my surroundings. Garrett the chameleon. Right.

I was early, not something that happens often. But since I started my exercises I move a little faster, with more energy. Maybe I should go for a mental workout too. Develop some energy and enthusiasm in that direction.

The trouble with me is my work. Investigating exposes you to the slimy underbelly of the world. Being a weak character, I try to make things better, to strike the occasional spark in the darkness. I have a notion my reluctance to work springs from the knowledge that if I do I'll see more of the world's dark side, that I'll butt heads with the Truth, which is that people are cruel and selfish and thoughtless and even the best will sell their mothers at the right time.

The big difference between good guys and bad is the good guys haven't yet had a fat chance for profiting from going bad.

A bleak world view, unfortunately reinforced by events almost daily.

A bleak view that's scary because it keeps on telling me my turn is coming.

A bleak street, that dirty cobbled lane past the Al-Khar. Very little traffic. That was true even in good weather. I've felt less lonely, less touched by despair, alone in the woods.

The street was a problem professionally as well as emotionally. I didn't blend in. People would start wondering and maybe remembering—though they wouldn't come outside. People in this town avoid trouble.

Barking Dog came stomping out of prison, thumbs tucked into his belt. He paused, surveyed the world with a prisoner's eye.

He was about five-feet-six, sixtyish, chunky, balding, had a brushy graying mustache and ferocious huge eyebrows. His skin was tanned from decades in the elements denouncing conspiracies. Prison hadn't faded him. His clothes were old and tattered and filthy, the same he'd worn when he'd gone inside. The Al-Khar doesn't offer uniforms. Barking Dog, so far as I knew, had no relatives to bring him anything.

His gaze swept me. He didn't react. He raised his face, enjoyed the drizzle, then started moving. I gave him half a block before I followed.

He had a unique way of walking. He was bowlegged. He had arthritis or something. He sort of rolled along, lifting one whole side of his body, swinging it forward, following with the other. I wondered if he hurt much. Prison wouldn't do wonders for arthritis.

Barking Dog wasn't in a hurry. He ambled, savoring his freedom. I'd hang out in the rain myself, enjoying it, if I'd been locked up. But I wasn't terribly empathic at the moment. I muttered and sputtered and grumbled. Such thoughtlessness! Keeping a crack investigator out in the rain.

Wasn't his fault, though, was it? I started plotting vengeance on the Dead Man.

Always an interesting mental exercise, that. What sanctions can you exercise against somebody who's been murdered? Aren't many options left.

Even us masters of the game get sloppy. It's easy when you don't feel threatened. I didn't feel threatened. Barking Dog wasn't the kind of street bruno I run into ordinarily, somebody big as a house

and half as smart and just as easy to shove around. Barking Dog was damned near a little old man. Little old men don't get violent. Or, if they do, they pay some big, stupid bruno to do it for them.

I strutted around a corner and—oooph! Right in the breadbasket. Lucky for me, Barking Dog was damned near a little old man and little old men don't get violent.

I folded up, tried to prance away from his follow-up. Wonder of wonders, I made it. He was, after all, damned near a little old man. I gagged and hacked and got my breath back. Meantime, Barking Dog added things up and decided he hadn't gotten enough oomph on his punch and his best move now was to apply heels and toes vigorously to the cobblestones.

Not unwise tactics, considering the mood I was in all of a sudden.

I got me trundling after him. Lucky me, I'd been working out so I was in good enough shape to come back quickly. Before long I was keeping up, then I started gaining ground. Barking Dog looked back only once. He saved his energy for streaking away.

Me, I started taking corners more carefully.

It didn't take me long to catch up, grab him by the shoulder, block his futile blows, and force him to sit on somebody's steps. "What the hell was that for?" I demanded.

He looked at me like I was a fool. Maybe he was right. I hadn't exercised a lot of wisdom so far. He didn't answer me.

It didn't look like he was planning to make a break, so I sat me down beside him, far enough off so he couldn't cream me with a backhand. "That hurt, guy. How come?"

That look again. "What you take me for, bruno?"

Oh. That hurt more than the whack in the gut. I'm an experienced investigator, not a street thug. "A crazy old man, ain't got sense enough to get in out of the rain."

"I'm one with nature. You going to get to it?"

"To what?"

"The threats. The arm-twisting."

Ha! My turn to do the looking.

"You don't fool me with that dumb look. Somebody sent you to keep me from telling the truth."

Craftily I asked, "What truth would that be?"

Craftier, he told me, "If they didn't tell you, they don't want you to know. Wouldn't want to get you in as deep as I am."

Crazy. And I was sitting there talking to him. In the rain. Downwind. They hadn't given him a scrubbing before they turned him loose. "No threats. I don't care what you do."

He didn't understand. "Hows come you're dogging me?"

"To see where you go." Get him with a new technique. Tell the truth. Confuse him all to hell.

It worked. He was puzzled. "Why?"

"Damned if I know. Guy paid my partner, who took the job without consulting me. Naturally, he's housebound. So I'm the one out here drowning."

He believed me, probably because I wasn't twisting limbs. "Who'd want to know that?" He seemed lost. "Nobody takes me serious. Hardly nobody, anyway."

I checked to see if we were drawing a crowd. Barking Dog had one voice level, loud. Like he'd

been yelling so long, that was all he could do. Too, I wondered what they'd fed him in jail. He had breath like a buzzard. Not to mention he wasn't appetizing visually, what with his wild eyebrows, mustache, bulbous nose, and buggy eyes. At least he didn't try to handbill me or want me to sign a petition.

Might as well push my experiment to the limit. "Guy called Bishoff Hullar."

"Who? I don't know no Bishoff Hullar."

"Runs a taxi-dance scam in the Tenderloin."

He looked at me queer, sure I was lying or crazy. Then he frowned. "A nominee! Of course."

"Say what?"

"A nominee. A stand-in who hired you for somebody else." He began nodding, grinning. Somebody was out to get him. He liked that idea. After all these years, somebody was out to get him! Somebody was taking him seriously! He was about to be persecuted!

"Probably so." I'd never spent much time wondering about Barking Dog. Occasionally I'd given thought to whether or not he believed what he said. It was common knowledge his claims about his family were exaggerated. None of his conspiracy claims had borne fruit, and that in a town where everybody who was somebody wanted scandal ammunition to use against other somebodies. Nobody tried to shut him up.

"What did they nick you for?" What the hell. I wasn't going to get much wetter. And the damp was toning down the miasma around Amato.

"Sixty days."

A comedian. "What was the charge? It's a matter of record. Wouldn't take me an hour to get the story."

He mumbled something.

"What?"

"Public nuisance." He didn't boom this time either.

"They don't give you two months—"

"Third complaint." His excitement over being persecuted had faded. Now he was embarrassed. He was a convicted public nuisance.

"Even so, more than a few days seems excessive."

"I kind of got carried away at my hearing. Fifty-five days were for contempt."

Heavy time, even so. The magistrates I knew were pretty contemptible. They ran their courts like feeding time at the zoo. It would take some barking to aggravate any of them.

I recalled outrageous claims I'd heard Amato make.

Yep. He had run into somebody with no sense of humor, somebody who didn't know Barking Dog was a genuine loony, harmless in the extreme. Nobody else could get away with the stuff he said. "Maybe you were lucky," I told him. "You get somebody really pissed, they could toss you into the Bledsoe." Part of the charity hospital is a madhouse. You get stuffed in there, you won't get out unless somebody outside springs you. There are plenty of stories about people who have gone in and been forgotten for decades.

Barking Dog went pale under his tan. *That* scared him. He started to leave.

"Hang on, old-timer."

He settled, resigned. He thought the threat had come. The Bledsoe. Just sitting there beside him, talking to him, I'd begun to feel like a candidate for the cackle factory. "You won't talk, eh?"

"No."

I shook my head. Water from my hair dribbled into my eyes. "I'm getting paid, which maybe ought to be enough, but I'd sure like a hint why I'm spending time with you."

I suspected that, on reflection, he'd decided that *he* didn't know. A cold drizzle can be a great cure for a case of the fantasies.

My thoughts flitted like drunken butterflies, trying to make sense of what was happening. The only answers I found were that this was a practical joke, or a mistake, or a sinister plot, or something. It couldn't be the job advertised.

I heard the Dead Man: "Three marks a day and expenses." I hadn't thought to ask if we'd taken a retainer.

"What're your plans?" I asked. "Right now."

"You're going to get wet, son. First I'm going to go see if I still got me a place to live. If I do, then I'm going to go buy me a bottle and get drunk. You want to hang around, wait for me to sneak off and make contact with your boss's secret enemies, you just go ahead." He spoke with conviction when he mentioned getting drunk. That wouldn't be the first thing I'd go for after leaving jail, but he was maybe a little past catching honeys. As a second choice it didn't sound bad.

"How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow it's back to the old grind. Unless it's raining. Then I'll stay in and make the acquaintance of another bottle."

I got up. "Let's walk over where you live, then. Get you tucked in. Then I'll see this Hullar clown, find out what's shaking." Nobody likes being made a fool—and I was developing the sneaking suspicion I'd done it to myself. I should've asked more questions when I was talking to the Dead Man.

I decided to start with him, work my way back to Bishoff Hullar.

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7

Dean let me in. "What in the world are you doing home?" He hoisted his nose at the dripping I did.

"Need to consult the genius." I pushed past but hung a surprise left into the small front room. Huh. No cat. No sign of a cat. But I smelled it.

Dean shuffled from foot to foot. I gave him my most evil look, pretended to twist a neck to the accompaniment of dramatic noises. I headed for the Dead Man's room.

He was pretending to sleep.

I knew he wasn't. He wouldn't nod off before he heard the latest from the Cantard. He was obsessed with Glory Mooncalled and expected news of the republican general's adventures momentarily.

I went inside anyway. Dean hustled in with a raggedy blanket he tossed over my chair so it wouldn't get wet. I settled, stared at the Dead Man, said, "That's a pity, him drifting off just when we finally hear something from the war zone. Make me a quick cup of tea before I hit the street again."

What news from the Cantard? . . . You are a treacherous beast, Garrett.

"The treacherousest. As bad as the kind of guy who'd send you out to follow a nut case as a joke."

Joke?

“You can come clean. I won’t hold a grudge. I’ll even admit it was a good one. You had me out there for hours before I figured it out.”

I hate to disappoint you, Garrett, but the fact is we have been hired to report the movements of Barking Dog Amato. The client paid a fifty-mark retainer.

“Come on. I admitted it was a good one. Let up.”

It is true, Garrett. Though now, seeing the thoughts and reservations and questions rambling across the surface of your mind, I grow curious myself. I wonder if I, too, have not been the victim of an elaborate hoax.

“Somebody really paid fifty marks to have Amato watched?”

There would be nothing under my chair otherwise.

I was sure he wouldn’t take a joke that far. “You didn’t ask questions?”

No. Not the questions you wish I had. Had I known what a Barking Dog Amato was, I would have asked them.

Somebody had begun pounding on the front door. Dean, apparently, was too busy to be bothered. “Wait a minute.”

I looked through the peephole first. I’d learned the hard way. I saw two women. One was hugging herself, shivering. Neither seemed to enjoy the weather.

I opened up. “Can I help you ladies?”

I used “ladies” poetically. The younger had twenty years on me. Both were squeaky clean and wore their finest, but their finest was threadbare and years out of style. They were gaunt and threadbare themselves. One had a trace of nonhuman blood.

Both put on nervous smiles, as though I’d startled them by being something they didn’t expect. The younger screwed up her courage. “Are you saved, brother?”

“Huh?”

“Have you been born again? Have you accepted Mississa as your personal savior?”

“Huh?” I didn’t have the foggiest what the hell was going on. I didn’t even realize they were talking religion. That doesn’t play much part in my life. I ignore all the thousand gods whose cults plague TunFaire. So far I’ve seldom been disappointed in my hope that the gods will ignore me.

Apparently my not slamming the door was great encouragement. Both women started chattering. Being a naturally polite sort of guy, I halfway listened till I got the drift. Then I grinned, inspired. “Come in! Come in!” I introduced myself. I shook their hands. I turned on the old Garrett charm. They became uneasy almost to the point of suspicion. I probed only deeply enough to make sure their brand of salvation wasn’t limited to humans. Most of the cults are racist. Most of the nonhuman races hold to no gods at all.

I confessed, “I’m not free to entertain a new system of beliefs myself, but I do know someone who should see you. My partner is the most ungodly sort you can imagine. He needs . . . Let me caution you. He’s stubborn in his wickedness. I’ve tried and tried . . . You’ll see. Please come with me. Would you like tea? My housekeeper just put the kettle on.” They chattered steadily themselves. What I had to say mostly got shoved in in snatches.

They followed me. I had a hell of a time keeping a straight face. I sicced them on the Dead Man. I didn’t stay around to watch the fur fly.

As I hit the rain I wondered if he'd ever speak to me again. But who needed spiritual guidance more? He was dead already, already headed down the path to heaven or hell.

But the grin on my clock wasn't any smug celebration of my ingenuity. I'd had me another attack of inspiration. I knew how to turn the Barking Dog business into a scam that would make us both happy.

The man could read and write. He did his own signs and broadsides. And he was harmless. And he needed money. I'd seen that where he lived. So why not have him keep track of himself? I could hand his journal over to my client, split my fee with Barking Dog, save myself hunking around in the weather.

The more I thought about that, the more I liked it. And who'd know the difference?

So the heck with Bishoff Hullar. I wouldn't press my luck there. I'd stay away except to collect. I chose a new destination.

I went off to sell Barking Dog. I didn't anticipate any trouble. I would appeal to his sense of conspiracy.

Some white knight, eh? Our hero, third-string con artist.

I didn't suffer much guilt. The Bishoff Hullars of the world deserve what they get. Hell, before I got to Barking Dog's place I was chuckling.

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8

Some of us take a notion we're what the world perceives us to be, so we create images the world feeds back. You see it especially with kids. You get some pathetic louse of a parent, always sniping at his kid, telling him he's no good and dumb, pretty soon he's got a dumb, no-good kid. That's your one-way version. I'm talking about creating yourself.

I worked at it, not always consciously, when I wanted the world to think I was bad. I didn't make my bed. I changed my socks only once a week. I cleaned house once a year whether the place needed it or not. When I wanted to look real mean, I stopped brushing my teeth.

Barking Dog must have lived in those same two rooms for about eleven thousand years without cleaning once. The place could become a museum where mothers showed their kids why they ought to pick up after themselves.

The smell suggested it was the one place in TunFaire not infested by vermin. The smell was the smell of Barking Dog Amato, confined and reinforced by time and made heavier by oppressive humidity. Barking Dog had no handle on the principles of hygiene.

Thank whatever gods he'd been out of there awhile.

I'd never seen that much paper anywhere, not even in the offices of royal functionaries. Once Barking Dog muffed both sides of a handbill sheet, he flipped the cull over his shoulder. When he brought in food, its wrappings, paper or cornhusk, joined the rejected handbills. The broken cadavers of earthenware wine bottles lay everywhere. Unscathed survivors apparently were returned for the deposits.

The entire history of Barking Dog Amato lay there, in sedimentary layers, ready to be excavated by a historical adventurer unencumbered by a sense of smell.

I took that in at a glance after Amato invited me in. I wasted a second glance on his furniture. That amounted to an artist's easel where he painted posters and placards and a rickety table where he calligraphed handbills. A semiclear corner boasted a ragged blanket.

Two steps inside, I saw that I'd leapt to an erroneous conclusion. Barking Dog did indeed clean house. There was a second room, with no door in its doorway, where he moved his trash whenever his primary got too deep.

He didn't apologize. He seemed unaware that his housekeeping varied from the norm. He just asked, "What did you find out from that Hullar?"

"I didn't go see him. What happened was, I had an idea."

"You didn't strain nothing doing that?"

It must be on my forehead in glowing letters that don't show up in a mirror. "You'll like it. Be good for both of us. Here's the plan." I told him how we could make a few marks. His eye developed a malicious twinkle.

"Son, I'm maybe gonna like you after all. You ain't as dumb as you look."

"It's my disguise," I grumped. "Want to do it?"

"Why not? I can always use an extra mark. But don't you figure we ought to go fifty-fifty? When I got to take time out of my busy schedule to do all the work?"

"I figure the split's fine at two for me and one for you. I have the contract. I'll have to rewrite whatever you give me. And I'll have to hike over to the Tenderloin to deliver it."

Barking Dog shrugged. He didn't argue. "Found money," he muttered.

"Speaking of money. How do you live? Not to mention pay for all that paper?" Even junk paper isn't cheap. Papermaking is a labor-intensive industry.

"Maybe there's some with enough sense to see the truth and want to spread it." He glowered. He wasn't going to tell me squat.

Could be a helpful believer. TunFaire boasts a fine crop of lunatics, with more ripening daily. Or maybe he was stealing paper. Or maybe he had a fortune stashed with the gnomish bankers. You never know. In this town, almost nobody is what he seems.

I answered surliness with a shrug. "I'll catch you every couple days."

"Yeah. Hey! Maybe you could give me a hand."

Only at long range. His breath had taken on new freight, a heavy wine odor that combined with its previous fetor in a lethal gas. Maybe we could bottle it and send it to the Cantard. It could discourage entire Venageti brigades.

"How?"

"Some religious nut grabbed my spot while I was away."

"Set up next to him, stick close, outlast him." The man's faith wouldn't outlast Barking Dog's aroma. "That don't work, then ask me."

"All right." He was doubtful. He couldn't smell himself. His nostrils were corroded to the bone.

"See you." I had to get out. My eyes were watering. My nose was running. My head was spinning.

I didn't hurry home. I let the rain rinse the smell off me. I wondered if it would ever stop raining. Should I invest in a boat?

The weather had a bright side. Flying thunder-lizards hadn't pestered TunFaire since the rains started.

Everyone cheered when those monsters first appeared. They gobbled rats and cats and squirrels and, most especially, pigeons. Pigeons don't have many fans. But the thunder-lizards shared some of the

pigeons' worst habits. The missiles they launched were both larger and more precisely targeted.

There was talk of bounties. The monsters tended to be attracted by the Hill, where the rich and powerful live. They favor high places. The upper classes and thunder-lizards both. If the latter had had the sense to stick to the slums, there would have been no dangerous talk.

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9

The only warning was Dean's smirk, filled with so much childish malice I knew something was going on.

Garrett!

Oh-oh. I'd forgotten I'd left him with those evangelists.

I considered taking a powder. But, hell, it was my house. A man is king in his own castle. I stepped into the Dead Man's room. "Yeah?"

Sit down.

I sat, warily. He was too calm.

Have you contemplated the state of your immortal soul?

I believe I screeched. Next thing I knew, I was headed down the hall staring back at his closed door with bugged eyes. Somewhere a cat meowed. This couldn't be happening to me. It wasn't real. I was going crazy. If this kept up, I'd be out there howling at the sky alongside Barking Dog.

It got worse. I ducked into the kitchen for a beer, found Dean at the table having tea with the religion women. One had a kitten in her lap. Dean seemed spellbound by the ropes of sand the other was spinning. The cat woman said, "Won't you join us, Mr. Garrett? We were just sharing the wonderful news with Dean. Won't you share the joy with us too?"

Joy? She was as joyous as the piles. She didn't know the meaning of the word. The fraud. She was smiling, but that was a domino. Everything behind it was holier-than-thou sour. She would remain constipated as long as she suffered the suspicion that somebody, somewhere, was having a good time. "Sorry. Some other time. I'm just going to grab a biscuit and run." I knew her kind. A Barking Dog with a bath, only her fantasy contained a harsh, metallic flavor of violence. Barking Dog was determined to expose imaginary devils. She wanted to scourge them with fire and sword. Yet she was painfully formal and polite. If I stopped moving for a second, she would pin me and soon drive me over the edge. She wouldn't let go till I'd gotten so damned rude I'd be embarrassed for a month.

I grabbed my biscuit and fled to my office. I asked Eleanor, "You haven't gone gaga on me too, have you?"

She gave me her best enigmatic look.

I settled behind my desk. Things were falling apart around me. I had to take charge before chaos conquered all. I had to get this storm-tossed ship back on a steady keel.

It was my own damn fault, trying to pull a fast one on the Dead Man.

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10

I groaned. I'd just gotten comfortable, and now somebody was pounding on the front door.

Nobody ever comes around except to see me. Nobody ever wants to see me unless they want me to work. Nobody ever wants me to work except when I've just gotten comfortable. Then my attitude improved. Maybe it was more evangelists. I could turn the new bunch loose on the pack already infesting the place. They could go to the theological mattresses right here. I could have a ringside seat while they fought it out, toe to illogical toe.

See. I'm an optimist. Whoever said I always look on the dark side? I did? Right. Well, when you do that, your life fills with pleasant surprises, and seldom are you disappointed.

Answering the door provided one of the disappointments.

I did peep through the peephole first. I did know I wouldn't be happy once I opened up. But I didn't have much choice.

His name was Westman Block. He was the law. Such as the law is in TunFaire. He was a captain of that same Watch that couldn't catch anyone more dangerous than Barking Dog Amato. I knew him slightly, which was too well. He knew me. We didn't like each other. But I respected him more than I did most Watchmen. When he took a bribe, he stayed bought. He wasn't *too* greedy.

I opened up. "Captain. I nearly didn't recognize you out of uniform." Polite. I can manage it sometimes. I glanced around. He was alone. Amazing. His bunch run in crowds. That's one of their survival skills.

"Can we talk?" He was a small, thin character with short brown hair graying around the edges. There was nothing remarkable about him except that he seemed worried. And he was almost polite. He'd never been polite to me before. I was suspicious immediately.

A healthy dose of paranoia never hurts when you deal with the Westman Blocks.

"I have company, Captain."

"Let's walk, then. And don't call me Captain, please. I don't want anyone guessing who I am." Damn, he was working hard. Usually he talked like a longshoreman.

"It's raining out there."

"Can't put anything past you, can they? No wonder you have that reputation."

See? Just not my day. I pulled the door shut without bothering to holler to Dean. What did I have to worry about? I had a heavenly host on guard. "Why don't we scare up a beer, then? I feel the need." For about a keg, taken in one big gulp.

"Be quicker if we just walk." His little blue eyes were chips of ice. He didn't like me but he was working hard not to offend me. He wanted something bad. I noted that he'd acquired a little mustache like Morley's. Must be something going around.

"All right. I'm a civic-minded kind of guy. But maybe you could drop me one little hint?"

"You figured it already, Garrett, I know you. I need a favor I hate to ask for. A big favor. I got a problem. Whether I like it or not, you're probably the only guy I know of can solve it."

I think that was a compliment. "Really?" I swelled with newfound power. It almost matched the growth of my paranoia. I'm the kind of guy gets really nervous when my enemies start making nice on me.

"Yeah." He grumbled something that must have been in a foreign language, because no gentleman would use words like the words I thought I heard. Watch officers are all gentlemen. Just ask them. They'll clue you in good while they pick your pocket.

"What?"

“I’d better just show you. It isn’t far.”

I touched myself here and there, making sure I was still carrying.

After a block, during which he muttered to himself, Block said, “We got a power struggle shaping up up top, Garrett.”

“What else is new?” We haven’t had a big shake-up or a king bite the dust for a couple years but, overall, we change rulers more often than Barking Dog changes clothes.

“There’s a reform faction forming.”

“I see.” Bad news for his bunch. “Grim.”

“You see what I mean?”

“Yeah.” I’d heard grumblings myself. But those were there all the time. Down here in the real world we don’t take them seriously. All part of politics. Nobody *really* wants change. Too many people have too much to lose.

“Glad you do. Because we got something come up that gots to be taken care of. Fast. We got the word. Else it’s going to be our balls in a vise.” See? He even talked like a gentleman.

“Where do I come in?”

“I hate to admit it, but there ain’t none of us knows what to do.” Damn! He *was* in trouble. He *was* scared. They must have showed him a vise heated red hot, with ground glass in its jaws. “I put in some time thinking. You was the only answer. You know what to do and you’re straight enough to do it. If I can get you to.”

I didn’t say anything. I knew I wasn’t going to like what I was about to hear. Keeping my mouth shut kept my options open. Marvelous, the restraint I showed in my old age.

“You help us out with this, Garrett, you won’t be sorry. We’ll see you’re taken care of fee-wise. And you’ll be covered with the Watch from here on in.”

Well, now. That would be useful. I’ve had my troubles with the Watch. One time they laid siege to my house. It took some doing to work that one out.

“Right. So what is it?” I had a creepy feeling.

Didn’t take a genius to figure it would be something big and nasty.

“I better just show you,” he insisted.

Despite his fine-sounding offer I was liking this less and less.

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11

We walked only a mile but that mile took us over the edge of the world into another reality, into the antechamber of hell, the Bustee. Now I understood why he was out of uniform.

TunFaire boasts peoples of almost every intelligent race. Mostly they clump like with like in closed neighborhoods. Likewise with humans not of the ethnic majority. Breeds fall into the cracks, live in between, catch as catch can, often welcome nowhere. Two-thirds of the city is ghetto slum. Poverty is the norm.

But the Bustee is to those slums as the slums are to the Hill. People there live in tents made of rags or in shanties put together from sticks and mud and trash scavenged before the ratmen could collect it.

Or they cram in a hundred to the building meant for five or ten two hundred years ago, when the structure had windows and doors and flooring that hadn't yet been torn up to burn for heat during the winter. They lived in doorways and on the street, some so poor they didn't have a grass mat for a mattress. They lived amidst unimaginable filth. The ratmen wouldn't go in there without protection. The soldiers wouldn't go in less than company-strong—if at all. Too many soldiers had come out of there and wouldn't go back even to visit.

The Bustee is the bottom. You can't roll downhill any farther. You roll that far, chances are you'll never climb back. Not till the dead wagons come.

Only the deathmen are safe in the Bustee. Each day they come with their wagons, wearing their long gray robes with the veils that conceal their faces, to collect the dead from the streets and alleys. They chant, "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!" as they work. They won't leave the streets to collect. They load their wagons and make their deliveries to the city crematoriums. They work from dawn to dusk, but every day they get a little farther behind.

Death in the Bustee is as ugly as life.

In the Bustee there is no commodity cheaper than life.

In the Bustee there is only one commodity of any value at all. Young men. Hard young men who have survived the streets. These fellows are the only real beneficiaries of the Cantard war. They enlist as soon as they're able and use their bonuses to get whoever they can out of hell. Then, despite their hard and undisciplined youths, they work hard at being good soldiers. If they're good soldiers they can make enough to keep their families out. They go down to the Cantard and die like flies to keep their families out.

That such love should flourish, let alone survive, in the Bustee is ever an amazement to me. Frankly, I don't understand how it does. In the more affluent slums, youth seems to victimize those closest to it first.

Another world, the Bustee. They do things differently there.

Block stopped walking. I halted. He seemed to be having trouble getting his bearings. I looked around nervously. We looked too prosperous. But the streets were deserted.

Maybe it was the rain. But I doubted that. There was something in the air.

"This way," Block said. I followed, ever more alert. We saw no one till I spotted a pair of obvious Watchmen, though out of uniform, peeking from a narrow passageway between two buildings that might have been important back at the dawn of time. They were as big as they get in the Bustee. The men faded back into the passageway.

My nerves worsened. I was supposed to go back in there with a guy loved me the way Block did? But he didn't dislike me that much. Not enough to bring me down here for that kind of fun.

I stepped into the passage—and almost tripped over an old man. He couldn't have weighed more than seventy pounds. He was a skeleton with skin on it. He had just enough strength to shake. The deathmen would collect him before long.

"All the way back," Block said.

I didn't want to go. But I went. And wished I hadn't.

I like to think I developed a solid set of emotional calluses in the Marines, but that's only because my imagination can't encompass horrors worse than those I saw and survived in the war. I keep thinking there's no devil's work that can surprise me anymore.

I keep on being wrong.

There was a little open area where porters had made deliveries in a bygone age. Several Watchmen were there. They had torches to break the gloom. They looked like they hoped the rain would drown the torches.

I didn't blame them.

The girl had been about twenty. She was naked. She was dead. None of that was remarkable. It happens.

But not the way this had happened.

Somebody had tied her hand and foot, then hung her from a beam, head down. Then they had cut her throat and bled her and gutted her like a game animal. There was no blood around, though the human body is filled with an amazing amount. I muttered, "They caught the blood and took it away." My meals for the month wanted to desert me.

Block nodded. He was having his troubles too. So were his boys. And they were angry besides. Hell, I was angry, but my anger hadn't had time to ripen.

No telling why she'd been gutted. Maybe for some of her organs. Her insides had been dumped on the ground but were gone now, carried off by dogs. They had been at the body too, some, but hadn't done much damage. Their squabbling had brought about the discovery of the corpse.

Block told me, "This is the fifth one, Garrett. All of them like this."

"All in the Bustee?"

"This's the first one down here. That we know of."

Yeah. This could happen here every day . . . I looked at her again. No. Even in the Bustee there are limits to the sickness they'll tolerate. They don't kill for sport or ritual, they kill for passion or because killing will, directly or indirectly, put food in their mouths. This girl had been killed by somebody insane.

I said, "She came from outside." She was too healthy, too pretty.

"None have been Bustee women, Garrett. They've turned up all over town."

"I haven't heard about anything like this." I hadn't been out listening, though.

"We been trying to keep it quiet, but word's starting to get around. Which is why we're about to go in the vise. The powers that be want this lunatic and they want him sudden."

On reflection, I said, "Captain Block, sir, I don't believe you're being entirely forthright. Maybe if there'd been fifteen or twenty of them and people were getting panicky, they'd bestir themselves up there. But you're not going to convince me they give one rat's ass what happens to four or five street girls."

"They don't care, Garrett. But these ain't street girls. They was all from top families. All of them gave some perfectly good, even trivial reason for going out the days they were killed. Extended errands. Visits to friends. Everything perfectly safe."

"Yeah? There's no such thing as perfectly safe in TunFaire. And that kind of woman doesn't go anywhere without armed guards. It's a status thing. So what about their guards?"

"Most of them don't got no idea what happened. They delivered their charges to friends' houses, went on about their rat-killing. There's something going on, but the guards aren't it. Though maybe their memories would improve some on the rack. Only we ain't been authorized to go that far. Yet."

"Any leads at all?"

"Diddly. Nobody's seen or heard nothing."

That's the standard state of affairs throughout TunFaire. Nobody sees anything.

I made a sick grunting noise and forced myself to look at the victim yet again. She'd been a beauty, slim, with long black hair. Unpleasant as the truth may be, you feel it more when they waste the pretty ones. Block looked at me like he expected some blast of wisdom. "So what do you want from me?" As if I didn't know.

"Find out who did this. Give us a name. We'll take it from there."

I didn't have to ask what was in it for me. He'd told me. His word was good. Like I said, he stayed bought. "What else do you know?"

"That's it. That's all we have."

"Bullshit. Come on, Block."

"What?"

"That right there tells you a bunch just by being what it is. Especially if the others were like it."

"They were."

"All right. They gutted them. They took their blood. That stinks of dark religion or black sorcery. But if it's a cult, it can't have a base, else the bodies would have been disposed of there."

"Unless they wanted them found."

"There's the weakness in my thinking. Maybe we're supposed to think it's ritual when it's just crazy. Or maybe crazy when it's ritual. Though it's crazy for sure. Nobody sane would do that."

"You keep saying 'they.' You figure on more than one?"

I thought about it. It'd been a gut reaction. "Yeah. Somebody had to get her away from her bodyguards. Somebody had to bring her here. Somebody had to strip her and tie her and string her up and do that. I don't think a solo crazy could manage."

I flashed on a kidnapping I'd helped break up one rainy evening, went stiff and cold. Any connection seemed unlikely, but . . . "These girls got anything in common besides being high-class? They know each other? They all the same physical type?" This one couldn't have been confused with Chodo's brat, but she did have a similar build, black hair, and dark eyes.

"Age range is seventeen to twenty-two. All with dark hair and eyes except for one blond. All between five-four and five-eight. Built pretty much alike, near as I could tell, seeing them this way."

"Five of them."

"That we know about."

There was that. In TunFaire there might be that many more not yet found or reported. "You have yourself a blue-assed bitch of a problem, Captain. These things are hard to untangle because there's nothing to grab hold of that makes any sense to anybody who isn't crazy. If you get many more, the thing will turn into a circus."

"I know that, Garrett. Goddamnit, that's why I came to you. Look, you want me to beg, I'll beg. Only—"

"No, Block. I don't want you to beg." That had its appeal, but I couldn't stomach it. "I want you to calm down. I want you to come walk with me in the rain and tell me everything you know. And I mean everything. Whatever little thing you hold back, to keep from embarrassing somebody important, might be the key."

I hadn't decided to get involved. Not yet. I wanted to distract him long enough to walk him over to

my place so he could have a sit-down with the Dead Man. The Dead Man could sort everything stashed in his feeble mind and, probably, hand him what he needed to solve his case. Thus would I satisfy my civic obligation. I could feel smug without having to stick my neck out.

Only thing was, going back out that narrow passage, Block's boys went with us, carrying their torches. Those spat and sputtered in the drizzle and gave me more light than I'd had coming in. Which meant there was enough light for me to spot the butterflies.

There were three of them. They weren't anything special. Just little green butterflies. But how come there were butterflies dead in an alley in the Bustee?

I stopped when we reached the narrow street. "Take that old man somewhere and feed him. Get a doctor to look after him. Do whatever you have to do to get him well enough to tell us what he saw. If he saw anything."

Block told his men, "Do it."

I headed for home, Block hustling along beside me, telling me anything he thought might help. I didn't listen as closely as I could have. Besides being horrified, I was bemused by the fact that I might hold the fate of the Watch in my hands. I could destroy the useless bastards. Or maybe even force them to become some small percentage of what they were supposed to be. Hell, people will do anything to keep their jobs. Sometimes *evendo* their jobs.

I wasn't used to that kind of power. Maybe I'd have to have Dean follow me around whispering in my ear to remind me I was mortal.

Dean had noticed that the door was unlocked. He'd locked it. I whooped and pounded till he tore himself away from his evangelists. When he opened up, he had a gleam in his eye that had nothing to do with salvation.

"You rogue, you." He pretended he didn't understand what I meant. Hell, a fling would be good for him and them both. If it didn't kill him.

I'd never let Westman Block enter my house before. He did so warily, like a soldier visiting an enemy stronghold.

The Dead Man is no secret. Anyone interested in such things would know he lives with me. But hardly anyone has seen him. They go into his room with all sorts of wild prejudices, then find out the real thing is worse than anything they imagined.

I told Block, "You take the chair. I need to pace."

He couldn't stop staring. "What're we doing here?"

"Old Bones there is a genius. You don't believe me, ask him. I thought we'd lay it out for him. He'll find connections, tell you where to start looking." Old Bones wasn't talking. I couldn't tell if that was a good sign or bad. I did know that if he cooperated he would bring more than genius to bear here. He'd been around a long time. Something from yesteryear might be the key to today's horror. It had happened before.

There are horrors that recur in long cycles, like locust plagues, but separated by generations. If these murders were cultist, they might fit one of those cycles.

The Dead Man wasn't talking but he was listening. He was poking around. He's damned subtle, but when he starts prying, I can tell. If I'm paying close enough attention.

Garrett. Shall we set all sham aside? Shall we abandon all childish efforts to abrade one another's nerves? I will not yet admit that we must pursue this monster, but I will stipulate that we owe the situation a close look.

“You grow up, I’ll grow up.”

Block gave me a strange look. He hadn’t heard the Dead Man’s end. The Dead Man can do that if he wants. It makes some of our conversations spooky.

Excellent. I will set my concern for your soul in abeyance for the moment.

Oh, boy. He wasn’t going to let me off. Those women had offended his sense of rationality. He hates people who won’t examine beliefs critically. Most of the time he hides it when he deals with me, but he holds the majority of humankind in contempt. Of the gods-know-how-many sentient species in the world, we humans are the only ones who insist on fervent belief in things logic and our senses demonstrate to be implausible. Amongst other races those who stumble into never-never-lands of wishful thinking are considered insane and are dealt with about the way we deal with Barking Dog. Or more harshly. Other races don’t make priests out of their nuts, then give them money and follow them wherever they lead.

“I take it you’re going to handle this, Garrett,” Block said. He was nervous as hell. Most people are around the Dead Man. He has a considerable reputation, all of it deserved. He’s done some amazing things since I’ve known him.

“We’re considering it.” I was fighting myself. Laziness and the desire not to get involved in another bizarre case warred with outrage. Outrage was ahead by a nose. The white knight had been on the shelf too long, his only chance to strut his stuff his rescue of Chodo’s spooky daughter. But the white knight has his weaknesses. While he doesn’t mind charging full tilt against a visible villain, rusty sword flailing, he hates having to hunt the villain down. Legwork buries his resolve faster than anything the hard boys can do by way of threat or violence. And this thing would be solved by legwork.

Relax, Garrett. It should not be so bad as you anticipate. I saw Block jump, so knew the Dead Man had included him in this time. *Captain Block. I sense that you have a great deal hanging upon the outcome of the investigation you propose.*

Block turned pale, took on kind of a green tinge around the edges. Having somebody talk right into your head is not a reassuring experience. Not the first time. And especially so when you’re a guy who has a whole encyclopedia of corruption stashed and doesn’t want it out where the world can see. I guess you’d say it was a measure of his distress and determination that he coped so well. He bounced back quickly. “Yes. There’s a lot of heat from the top of the Hill. It’ll get hotter every time some dizzy bitch gets herself offed.”

You are certain there will be more?

“Damn straight. What do you think?”

I think you are correct. The Dead Man was all business now. *The killings will continue and will come more and more rapidly until the people responsible are destroyed. I think we are up against something like nothing any of us has seen before. The evidence I glean from your minds tells me this is the work of a compulsive killer who cannot help doing what he is doing and who will have to do it again, ever more often, to appease the devil that drives him. But it also tells me he is not doing this without help.*

I asked, “You figure there’s a connection with—?” With what had happened at Morley’s place. Only he cut me short.

Yes. We had something he didn’t want handed to Block. *Garrett, I see you shrinking from the legwork this will entail. You are correct in your estimate. This will require talking extensively with everyone even remotely involved. The families of the dead women. Their guards. The people who found them, and the Watchmen who followed up. People in the neighborhoods where the bodies were found.*

He knows how to beat a guy down. I shrank with every word. I was the size of a mouse. I looked for a hole in the baseboard so I could scoot off and hide. He was talking about the rest of my life.

I do legwork because it's what I do; talk to people and talk to people and poke and prod until things start to happen. But I don't like it, partly because I'm lazy, but mostly because of the people. I never cease to be amazed and appalled by the sheer scope of human wickedness.

You are not considering our resources, Garrett.

Right. I was busy feeling sorry for myself.

We have the Watch. A thousand men for legwork. Is that not so, Captain? Will not every man of the Watch throw himself into this with the greatest vigor?

"It's our asses if we don't. They're already hinting. We have another five murders, I figure the Watch is out of business."

Break my heart.

I saw what the Dead Man meant. I'd been too involved in myself. The Watchmen would do anything to cover their asses. Maybe even their jobs. We just had to grab them by their instinct for self-preservation.

Then do as I tell you. I want to interview the bodyguards and the parents myself. Also those who found the corpses. Your men will canvass the neighborhoods where the women were found. Also the areas where they were seized. I doubt you will gain much cooperation, but cooperation is unnecessary. Even you Watchmen will have developed a rudimentary sense for when someone is not being forthcoming. Bring any such persons to me. I will open them up.

I marveled. The Dead Man makes me look hyper. Usually I have to threaten mayhem just to get his attention when there's work to do. He was jumping into this one headlong. I hadn't agreed to do anything yet. His enthusiasm suggested a secret agenda. Or he knew something he wasn't sharing. I eyed him narrowly as he continued with Block, telling him what times he wanted whom to come be interviewed.

Suspicion and paranoia become habits in this business. You take fits where you don't even trust yourself.

When the Dead Man takes a notion to snooze, he can hang in there for months. And when he's awake, he can go around the clock for days. He had that in mind. Poor old Dean was going to die answering the door.

Block had to borrow pen and paper to remember all his instructions. It took him half an hour to write them down. I paced and worried and wondered. Then the Dead Man dismissed the Watchman. I walked him to the front door.

"You'll never regret this, Garrett. I guarantee. We clean this up, you got a free pass for life."

"Sure." I know how long gratitude lasts. About as long as it takes for the bill to come due. Especially in TunFaire. The only guy I know who sticks to that kind of promise is Chodo Contague. He used to drive me crazy repaying imaginary debts.

That gave me a shiver. Old Chodo always paid his debts. And he owed me a big one.

I closed the door behind Block, put Chodo out of mind, went charging back to find out what the hell old Chuckles thought he was doing.

Not yet, Garrett. Dean! The Dead Man did not often extend his mindtouch beyond his room. That was a courtesy he extended us. *Get rid of those harridans. Commend them to your nieces. We have a commission.*

“His nieces?” I hurried into his room. “You want to create monsters?” Dean had a platoon of spinster nieces, all front-runners for Miss Homely TunFaire. They drove him to despair. Which was why he had conscripted himself as a full-time member of my household. He couldn’t take it anymore. “Can you imagine that pack in pursuit of a mission from God?”

Dean has sense enough to avoid that eventuality. While we await him, I will tell you what to do. Backtrack from events at Mr. Dotes’s place. But first bring Mr. Dotes and Mr. Tharpe to see me. We will want their help.

“‘We’ might want it, but how are ‘we’ going to afford it? My share of what I’m getting to watch Barking Dog won’t—”

Captain Block will assume expenses. You should pay closer attention. I quoted an exorbitant fee. He was desperate enough not to quibble.

“If they’re as scared as he puts on, they could put up enough from bribe money to pay anything.”

Exactly. We have been handed an unprecedented opportunity. Where he’s concerned, money has no provenance. It’s never dirty, only the people who handle it are. Intend to pursue it with vigor.

With my vigor, he meant. “That’s the reason you’re jumping on this?” I didn’t believe it.

Let us say that I find my mind growing as flabby and slothful as you allowed your body to become. I must get into shape before it is too late. I am not yet prepared to slide into oblivion.

Oblivion. I put that away where I could find it next time he started in on the condition of my immortal soul.

What he said sounded good. I didn’t believe it. And he knew that. But he didn’t let me press. *There is no time to waste. Get Mr. Tharpe and Mr. Dotes.*

Mr. Tharpe didn’t want to get got. He’d gotten rid of Billie and had replaced her with a little blond who could have been her sister. The new hadn’t worn off enough for him to see that. He wanted to stay home and play.

“Anyway, it ain’t even dark out yet, Garrett.”

“You only work at night now?”

“Getting in the habit, doing these odd jobs for Licks.”

“So sunlight for me. Talk to the Dead Man. You don’t want the work, no harm done. I’ll get somebody else. Won’t be as good, but I’ll make do.” Never hurts to butter him up.

“What’s shaking?”

“A serial killer. A real psycho. His Nibs can fill you in. I don’t know why he wants you. He just started spouting orders like a fountain.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to him.” He looked at his friend. She scorched me with a lethal stare.

I said, “I got to see Morley,” and got out of there before the woman carved their initials in my trunk.

Morley’s place was sparsely populated. It had just opened. His customers are like the stars, seldom seen before dark. Those in there then were early bats trying to get a jump on their competition.

Nobody got excited when I walked in. Nobody knew me. The guy behind the counter was new. He was a skinny little half-elf like Morley, handsome as hell but barely old enough to think about taking advantage of that. He was trying to grow a mustache.

It was catching. "I need to see Morley," I told him. "Name's Garrett. Tell him it's business and there's a shitpot in it."

The kid looked me straight in the eye. "Morley? Who the hell is Morley? I don't know any Morley."

One of those. "Kid, I'll take into account the fact that you're new. I'll take into account the fact that you're young and dumb, and figure you got to be a wiseass. When I'm done accounting, I just might pull you over the bar and pound away till Morley comes down to see about all the screaming. Get on the tube."

The audience wasn't much, but it did exist. The kid thought he had to show me. Quick as an eyeblink he showed me a razor. Elves have a love affair with sharp steel, especially the young ones. He was so predictable I was there with my headknocker as fast as he was with the blade. I popped his knuckles. He yowled like a stomped cat. The razor flew down the counter. The audience gave us a hand. And a mountain of a man lumbered out of the kitchen.

"Garrett. What you doing?" This was Sarge, another of Morley's old hands. He came out of the same production batch as Puddle.

"I asked to see Morley. Kid pulled a razor."

Sarge shook his head sadly. "What you want to go do that for, Spud? Man wants to see Morley, give Morley a howl. Morley wants to have him friends like this, that's his lookout."

"Spud?" I asked. What kind of name was Spud? Not even a dwarf would tag his kid Spud.

"What we call him, Garrett. Name's really Narcisio. Morley's nephew. His sister's kid. Got to be more than she could handle. Morley brought him down here so he could straighten him out."

Meantime, the kid talked to the voice tube that connected to Morley's office.

I shook my head. Morley Dotes going to set somebody's feet on the straight and narrow? Morley, whose real career is cutting throats and breaking bones and running an occasional con or even a straight ripoff if the stakes are big enough? My pal Morley?

Sarge put on a big grin. "I know what you're thinking. But you know Morley."

I knew Morley. He could believe mutually contradictory things at the same time, with religious fervor. His whole life was a tangle of contradictions. He lived them all with passion. He could sell you anything, because he believed every word he said when he said it. That was why he did well with the ladies. And no matter that he might take up a completely new passion five minutes hence. He was completely committed now.

Morley had done some good where Spud was concerned. The kid wasn't happy about being shown up, but he put it away from him. He told me, "Morley will be down in a few minutes. You want something while you're waiting?"

"Puddle still got his keg back there? Tap me one off it. He owes me a couple gallons."

Sarge chuckled. "Whyn't you finish the whole thing? I love to watch him puff up like a big old toady frog when he comes in and finds out somebody's been at his keg."

"I'll do my best. Company?" I jerked a thumb skyward.

"Yeah. His luck's coming back."

“Glad somebody’s is.”

Sarge chuckled again. “You shoulda married that Maya when she asked. She was all right.” He patted Spud’s shoulder, said, “You done all right. Just don’t be so fast with that razor. Next guy might not be nice like Garrett.” He headed for the kitchen. I wondered what he was doing back there. I wouldn’t trust him anywhere near food in preparation. Not even the horse fodder they serve at Morley’s place.

I figured the kid’s ego needed a boost so I sort of sideways apologized for being so hardass. The audience had lost interest, so he could halfway apologize too. “I only been here a couple days, Mr. Garrett.” He recognized the name now. “Always somebody coming in here to pester my uncle. You looked like an unhappy husband.”

I laughed. “Not a husband, just unhappy.” Morley isn’t satisfied unless he’s taking needless risks. Like refusing to fool around with a woman if she isn’t married. He used to have a bad gambling problem too, but he got over that.

Morley came downstairs looking smug. Without saying so, he wanted me to know his life was going great. Way better than mine. I couldn’t argue. Lots of people’s lives were going better than mine.

“What’s going on, Garrett?”

“Need some privacy to talk.”

“You on a job?”

“This time. Dead Man says we might need to subcontract. Also, he wants to pick your brain.”

“Take the table in the corner.”

I picked up the beer Spud had drawn off Puddle’s keg. “You have so many of them up there you can’t hide them all?” Usually we went to his office to discuss business.

“No. Place is just a mess. Got a little carried away.”

That one he didn’t make me believe. Maybe it wasn’t a woman. Maybe they wanted me to think it was a woman because it had to do with his real business.

I didn’t ask. I just went to the table and sat, then told him what there was to tell. He listened well. He can do that when he wants.

“You think there’s a connection with what happened the other night?”

“I don’t know. The Dead Man thinks so. And he knows how to handicap.”

“Interesting.”

“You’d say something else if you’d seen that girl.”

“I expect so. I don’t approve of killing people who don’t ask for it. I mean, I find interesting the idea of taking money from the Watch for once, instead of seeing it go their way.”

I raised an eyebrow. It’s one of my finest skills.

He said, “That’s the way it works, Garrett. I’m not under Chodo’s protection. I don’t want to be part of the outfit. There’s always a price for independence.”

Made sense when I considered it. There were a thousand Watchmen and only a handful of guys in his bunch. As long as the Watch didn’t get greedy, it would be easier for him to pay than fight. Not that he would like it. But he was very much the pragmatist.

The Watch wouldn’t bother Chodo, of course. *A lot* of people are beholden to him. And he wouldn’t take kindly to any attempt to muscle his operations.

Morley thought about what I’d told him. “Let me finish up upstairs. I’ll walk over to your place

with you.”

I watched him climb the stairs. What did he have going? He’d set it up so he’d be sure he was with me when I left. So I wouldn’t hang around outside to see who left after he did? That didn’t make sense. If I wanted to know, I could ask the Dead Man after Morley talked to him. If I let the Dead Man know I wanted him to peek.

Ah, paranoia.

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13

Saucerhead opened the door. “A butler,” Morley cracked. “You’re coming up in the world, Garrett.”

Saucerhead didn’t crack a frown. “Who shall I say is calling, sir?” He filled the doorway. A charging bull couldn’t have moved him. Morley didn’t when he started inside.

“Hey! What gives? Check it out, big guy. It’s raining out here.”

I said, “I’m thinking about getting into the boat business. Might be the coming thing.”

Saucerhead cocked his big ugly phiz like he was listening. He was waiting for the Dead Man’s go-ahead. Even on us. Which meant Old Bones had convinced him anything could happen. Saucerhead was the type to make damn sure it didn’t while he was on the job.

The Dead Man had him not trusting his own eyes? What was this? What did he suspect?

Saucerhead finally grunted, stepped aside. Like he didn’t think it was such a hot idea. Morley shot me a puzzled look, headed down the hall. He ducked into the Dead Man’s room. “Garrett says there’s something sinister about what happened at my place last night.”

For twenty minutes I felt like an orphan. “Five of them?” Morley said. “They’re keeping a good wrap on it, then. I only heard about one, last month, down at the Landing.”

I jumped in. “That was the one before the one before the one they found this morning. This nut is on a shrinking time cycle. After the first one he waited six weeks. Then four weeks for the one in the Landing. Then three weeks, then a couple days over two weeks to get this last one.”

“Unless there’s some in there we don’t know about.”

“They’d be hard to miss, all of them strung up with their throats cut and the guts gone. And the Watch hasn’t had any reports of daughters missing from the Hill.”

“The guy doing this has got to be doing some homework up front. He’s not just hanging out on the corner waiting for the right rich girl. He’s picking his targets and he’s working several at the same time.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He blew the snatch on Chodo’s kid but grabbed another woman in time to have her hung up this morning.”

Crazy don’t mean stupid, my old mom used to say. I’ve seen that proved often enough. The man doing this was doing a lot of planning. He’d be aware that his fun would cause a stir. He’d be real careful.

“Morley, the guy made a real dumb move last night. Maybe double dumb. He did it in front of witnesses. And he went for Chodo’s kid. He’d get less heat going after the King’s sister.”

“You remember she was scared when she came in. I have a notion the snatch was blown once already and somebody was desperate to cover his tracks. Far as going after Chodo’s kid . . . What you

have to do with this character—and I can't myself—is put yourself inside his head. Try to think like he does. He's a genius and knows it. He's been messed up and playing out psychotic dramas since he was a kid and he keeps getting away with it. Maybe he doesn't quite see the rest of us as real anymore. Maybe we're just things, like the bugs and rats he started out on. Maybe he thinks there can't be any kickbacks as long as he's careful. In his mind Chodo might not be a worry any bigger than Dean is."

I understood but wasn't sure Morley's ideas held any water. I didn't know what to think. TunFaire has killers by the battalion, but none like this. Muckers and coldblooded pros were the multiple murderers I knew. This monster was a hybrid, a mutant.

"Last night is the only starting place we have," Morley said. "We have to talk to the girl."

I made an ugly noise.

"I know. Means the outfit gets in on the hunt."

I was surprised they weren't already. I said so.

Morley observed, "Means she didn't mention it when she got home. Maybe she was doing something her father wouldn't approve." He wore a frown, though, like he thought that couldn't be quite right.

"Boyfriend?"

"She's human."

I backed off inside and considered, bitten by sudden suspicion. She'd run into Morley's place when she was in trouble. She'd shown no sign of knowing him, but . . . No. He wouldn't. His need to take risks wouldn't push him that far. Would it?

The Dead Man intervened. *Gentlemen, I sense the approach of persons I must interview. I will be at that all night. Garrett. I suggest you rest till morning. I may have suggestions for you then.* Apparently he'd shuffled through Morley's head and had gotten what he wanted. If there'd been anything there.

Sometimes that was arguable.

I was wound up more than I realized. "I could start—" Like I was eager to get to work.

If I calculate accurately, we have eleven or twelve days before the killer acts again. That should be ample time. The wheels of the law and Mr. Contague's organization will grind every clue fine by then. There is no need to rush and risk doing ourselves harm.

What? He was going to stamp his approval on my loafing? I'm no fool. I hustled Morley out the front door, brought in the couple I ran into there, introduced them to the Dead Man as the parents of the first victim, then headed upstairs.

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14

As soon as I was flat on my back I thought of fifty things I should have discussed with Morley. Like did he have any idea who those brunos were who stormed into his place after Chodo's brat? He would have tried to find out. I knew him. After he'd brooded awhile he'd have decided that booting them around and chucking them out in the rain wasn't good enough. He'd want a whack at the guy who'd sent them.

He might be miles ahead of me.

I let my thoughts drift back to what had happened, went over it, seeking a clue.

Nothing that special about the three men. If you had the money, you could recruit a thousand like them. Only thing remarkable was that they'd dared invade a place owned by Morley Dotes. Local professionals knew better. Those three hadn't had out-of-town accents. Therefore, they weren't professionals. Not streetside, anyhow. I didn't doubt they were professional thugs.

Which led me off blue-skying. Who had thugs on staff who wouldn't get into the streets much? Only priests and people on the Hill. The priest angle was so juicy I set it aside to look at the other first.

Off the Hill? A lunatic up there would be in a fine position to observe the movements of prospective victims. I tried to recall the appearance of the old geek with butterfly indigestion. That didn't match any Hill people I knew.

What about the coach? I recalled it, though details were getting vague. Big, black, and fancy. A custom four-horse job. Silver brightwork. The killer had money.

Couldn't be many coaches like it.

I fought it for fifteen minutes but it was a struggle foredoomed. Eventually I swung my legs off the bed, got up, and hunked downstairs. So much for good intentions. I donned a cloak and, marvel of marvels, a hat. The hat was Dean's. I didn't think he'd miss it.

Saucerhead came to see what I was up to. "I'm going out for a while. Shouldn't be long." I scowled at the closed door to the small front room. "Tell Dean that if that cat's still here when I get back, they both go out in the rain."

I went to see a friend. His name was Playmate. He was nine feet tall and black as coal, big enough to make Saucerhead nervous. But he was as gentle as a lamb and religious to boot. He was in the stable business. He owed me. Early in both our careers I'd saved him from human sharks.

He never ceased to amaze me. No matter what time I showed, no matter how inconvenient my appearance, he was always glad to see me. This time was no exception. "Garrett!" he boomed when I strolled into his stable. He dropped a curry comb and bounded toward me, swept me up in a ferocious hug. He turned me loose only after I started squawking like a bagpipe.

"Damn, Playmate, sometimes I wish you was a woman. Nobody else is excited to see me."

"Your own fault. Come around more often. Maybe you wear out your welcome."

"Yeah. It's been a rough year. I've been neglecting my friends."

"Specially that little bit, Maya."

I forgot my mission momentarily. "You've seen Maya? I thought she left town."

"Been a while, come to think. She used to come around, help out some, just 'cause she liked the horses."

"I knew there had to be *something* wrong with her."

The look he gave me told me more than he could have said in words. Maya had cried on his shoulder. I couldn't really look him in the eye. He said, "You've been having troubles all the way around, I hear. Miss Tinnie. Somebody named Winger."

He was implying it, so I said it. "Yeah. I have a way with the girls. The wrong way."

"Come over here and sit. I have a pony keg I've been nursing. Should be a sip or two left."

Which was all right by me, except it would be warm brew. Playmate liked his beer warm. I prefer mine just about ready to turn to chunks. But he was offering beer. Right then I had an inclination to surround several gallons. I settled on an old saddle, accepted a big pewter mug. Playmate plopped his behind on a sawhorse.

“Trouble is,” he told me, “those gals all been growing up, getting interested in something besides fun.”

“I know.” It’s hell, getting older.

“Don’t mind me. It’s the preacher getting out.”

I knew that too. Back when I saved his bacon, he’d been thinking of getting into the religion racket on his own. He’d have done good but wouldn’t have gotten very big. TunFaire has a thousand cults. Always there are plenty of disenchanted would-be believers eager to sign on with the thousand-and-oneth. Playmate had taken a look around, decided that he was insufficiently cynical and dishonest to make a real go of it. He may be religious personally, but he’s practical.

“The preacher is right, Playmate. And it’s maybe him I need to talk to.”

“Problem?”

“Yeah.”

“Thought so, soon as I saw you.”

What a genius. With Playmate I commit the same sin as with Morley. I don’t go around unless I need help.

I resolved to do better in the future.

Right, Garrett. Duck! Here comes a low-flying pig.

I laid it out for Playmate. I didn’t hold back. My story upset him so badly I was sorry I hadn’t softened it some. “Who’d want to go and do something like that, Garrett? Killing little girls.”

They hadn’t been little, but that was beside the point. “I don’t know. I mean to find out. That’s where I thought you might help. That coach outside Morley’s wasn’t any junker or rental. I don’t think there’s another like it. Nearest I’ve ever seen is Chodo Contague’s coach. And it didn’t have the gaudy silver brightwork.”

Playmate frowned at every mention of Morley Dotes. He didn’t approve of Morley. He frowned again when I mentioned Chodo. If Playmate was the kind to keep a little list, the first name on his would be Chodo Contague. He sees Chodo as a cause of social ills rather than as an effect.

“Custom coach?”

“I’d guess so.”

“And similar to Chodo Contague’s.”

“A little bigger and even fancier. Silver trim and a lot of carving. Tell you anything? Know whose it is?”

“Don’t know that, but I can make a good guess who built it. If it was built in TunFaire.”

Bingo! I almost let out a whoop. Maybe I did let out a whoop. Playmate looked at me oddly for a moment, then grinned shyly. “Helped some?”

“As soon as you tell me that coachmaker’s name.”

“Atwood. Linden Atwood.”

That name meant nothing to me. At my income level I don’t buy many custom-built coaches. I don’t hang out with those who do. “Where would I find Mr. Linden Atwood, coachmaker?”

“Tinkery Row.”

Excellent. That narrowed it right down to a whole neighborhood where potters potted, tinkers

linked, and at least one wainwright wrighted wains. The neighborhood lies south of the Tenderloin and north of the brewery district, stretching east to west beginning a few blocks in from the river, and parallels a street called Tinker's Lane. That is one of the oldest parts of town. Some artisan families have been established there for centuries.

Playmate glanced toward the stable door. "Going to be getting dark soon. You figure on going down there right away?"

"Yes."

"That's not a nighttime neighborhood. Pretty soon they'll all close up, have supper, then the menfolk will head for the corner tavern."

"So it's late. It's already too late for five women. The Dead Man thinks this guy won't kill again for another eleven or twelve days, but I don't count on it."

Playmate nodded, conceding the point. "I'll walk with you."

"You don't need to do that. Just tell me where—"

"Trouble follows you. I better go with you. Takes a certain touch to deal with Atwood, anyway."

"You've done enough." I didn't want to put Playmate at risk. He didn't deserve it. "My job is dealing with people."

"Your style is maybe a touch too direct and forceful for Atwood. I'll walk you down."

Arguing with Playmate is like arguing with a horse. Don't get you anywhere and just irritates the horse.

Maybe if he would get into another line I'd visit more often. Any line where there weren't so many horses around. I don't get along with those monsters. Their whole tribe is out to get me.

"I'll get my hat and cloak," he said, knowing he'd won before I conceded. I looked around, wondering where he'd hidden the circus tent he'd wear. I spied a horse eyeballing me. It looked like it was thinking about kicking its stall down so it could trot over and dance a flamenco on my tired bones.

"Don't waste time. The devils have spotted me. They're cooking something up."

Playmate chuckled. He has one big blind spot. He thinks my problem with horses is a joke. Boy, do they have him fooled.

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We stopped to have supper, my treat. Which strained my budget severely. Playmate ate like a horse, but not cheap hay. "You're on expenses, Garrett."

"I was just figuring on cleaning the Watch out of pocket change, not driving them into bankruptcy."

He got a good laugh out of that one. Simple pleasures for simple minds.

Tinkery Row is all light industry, single-family operations that produce goods without producing much smoke. The nastier stuff is down south, the nastiest across the river. The air gets chunky and takes on flavor when the wind is from the east, past the smelters and mills. Their stench can make you long for the heavy wood and coal smoke of winter or the rotten garbage of summer.

Tinkery Row is four blocks wide and eight blocks long, approximately, measuring by normal city blocks. There aren't many of those in TunFaire. There never has been any planning applied to the city's growth. Maybe we need a good fire to burn it all down so we can start over and do it right.

Playmate insisted on sticking with me. He said he knew the neighborhood and knew Linden Atwood. I gave up. I needed to spend some time with somebody who wasn't going to give me a lot of hassle.

I let him lead but insisted on setting the pace myself. My legs weren't long enough to match his prodigious stride. He strolled. I scampered. Once we got into Tinkery Row he chatted up people who still had their doors open hoping for a late sale. I huffed and puffed. Tinkery Row is a safe neighborhood. The villains stay away because the natives have this habit of ganging up. Justice is quick and informal and applied with considerable enthusiasm.

Everyone seemed to know Playmate. Nobody knew me, but my feelings weren't hurt. That's a plus in my line. I puffed out, "You spend a lot of time down here?"

"Grew up here. One street over. Pop made tack." Which explained the interest in horses, maybe. "But I changed in the war. Came back too nervous, just couldn't fit in. Kind of slow and timeless around here. People don't change. Get fixed in their ways. I could probably tell you who is where doing what right now, though I haven't been around for months. Right now Linden Atwood is having supper with his missus at home. His sons are having supper with their families, and his apprentices are eating bread and cheese while they clean the shop. About a half-hour from now they'll start drifting into the Bicks and Kittle. Each one will buy a pint of dark. They'll all go into a corner and nurse their pints for an hour, then somebody will say he'd better get on home and get to bed 'cause he has to make an early start in the morning. Old Linden will tell him to stay, have another on him, and he'll buy the round. They'll all sit another hour, find the bottoms of their mugs at the same time, then they'll get up and go home."

A thrill a minute, life in Tinkery Row.

It was the longest speech I'd ever heard from Playmate. While he made it he led me to and into the corner tavern with the name I found unfathomable. Most taverns do have odd names, like Rose and Dolphin, but that's because most people can't read. A sign with a couple of symbols will hang over the door, serving as both name and address. Bicks and Kittle didn't have a sign, and when I finally asked Playmate about the name, he told me those were the families who ran the place.

Some mysteries just aren't worth unraveling.

Playmate studied the layout. The place wasn't crowded. He held me back while he chose a table. "We don't want to trespass on the regulars." Apparently they became disturbed when casual trade usurped their traditional tables. Playmate chose a small one in the middle of the small room. It appeared less shopworn than most.

Playmate ordered but I paid. He asked for the dark beer. "You can get any beer you want as long as you're willing to go down the street for your pale or lager."

"Real set in their ways." I do like the occasional dark beer, though. And this proved to be a fine brew with a strong malt flavor. I like to taste the malt more than the hops.

"Hardheaded. Atwood comes in, let me pick the time and do the talking."

I nodded. Made sense.

The place began filling. Young and old, they were all cut from one bolt. I wondered if there would be a problem, what with Playmate's being the only dark face in the place. Nope. Soon guys started dropping by to exchange a few words of greeting while eyeing me sidelong, curiously, but with manners too steady to express that curiosity aloud.

Playmate identified the apprentice coachmakers when they arrived. "Atwood never took apprentices till a few years ago. The war's fault. He lost a couple sons, then none of his grandsons made it back. Has three still doing their five years, though. Maybe they'll get lucky."

The apprentices were old for that. Middle twenties. “In Atwood’s place I’d take kids, educate them so they could avoid the line units. Supply outfits always need wainwrights.”

Playmate looked at me like I’d missed the point of everything he’d said tonight. “Where would he find kids? Any Tinkery family with kids would bring them up in the family trade.”

All right. I did miss that, sort of.

The surviving sons appeared, then Linden Atwood himself. Linden Atwood was that rare creature, a man who fitted his name and looked like a coachmaker. In my preconceptions. He was a skinny little dink, old, with leathery skin, all his own hair, intelligent eyes, and plenty of bounce. His hands were hands that still did their share of work. He stood like he had a board nailed to his back, seemed confident of his place in the world. He and his crew were one big happy family. He was no aloof patriarch. He, his three sons, and four apprentices got into a spirited argument about whether or not the King’s Rules were turning TunFaire’s football players into gangs of whining candyassed wimps.

Now there was something worth arguing about. King’s Rules went into effect before I was born.

Karentine football, or rucker, is so rough now I wouldn’t want my enemies playing. In Old Style football I think the only rule was: no edged weapons.

“I take it football is popular down here.”

“Serious business. Best players come out of Tinkery. Every block has a team. Kids start out as soon as they can walk.”

Not only hardheaded but not very bright. But I kept that thought to myself. “Not very tolerant” goes along with the other two, most places.

“Played some myself when I was younger,” Playmate told me.

“Why am I not surprised?” He’d have made a team all by himself.

Playmate was slick. He managed to insinuate an opinion into an argument so old it was obvious ritual, elicited a response because, apparently, in his olden days he’d been a star. Before I understood what was happening, he and I were part of Atwood’s crowd. I pursued Playmate’s advice diligently. The Dead Man would have been impressed by how long I kept my mouth shut.

In time the Atwoods veered from the tried and true long enough to betray polite curiosity concerning Playmate’s presence. Playmate gave them a big grin, like he was mocking himself for taking anything seriously. “My pal Garrett and me, we’re on sort of a crusade.”

Those guys understood a crusade. They were religious. Real salt of the earth and backbone of the nation. Hadn’t had an original thought in generations.

Pardon. I do get overly critical at times.

Curiosity levels rose. Playmate played with them a minute, then said, “I better let Garrett tell it. He’s the one been closest to it. I’m just trying to lend a hand.”

I pictured Block exploding if he heard I was hanging out his dirty laundry all over town, grinned, told the story of the dead girls. The Atwoods were properly horrified. I played to that, noted the old man paying closer attention than the others, who just wanted to be entertained.

I said, “So right now it looks like the only way to trace this monster is through his coach.”

Everybody got it then. The whole gang got quiet and grim. All eyes turned to the old man. He considered me neutrally. “You suspect that coach came from my shop, Mr. Garrett?”

“I have no idea, Mr. Atwood. Playmate says you’re the premier coachmaker in TunFaire. If it was built here, according to him, you’re the only man with the talent to have built it.”

“I expect so. Describe it again.”

I did, recalling every possible detail.

The sons were less skilled than he at concealing their thoughts. I knew that coach had been built by Linden Atwood. The question was, would the man expose his buyer?

He would. “We delivered that coach, built to strict and exacting specifications, about three years back, Mr. Garrett. I do not believe in false humility. It was the finest coach ever built in TunFaire. I will accept responsibility for that, but I refuse any blame.”

“Excuse me?”

One son muttered, “Damn thing’s jinxed.”

The old man glared. “Madame Tallia Lethe, wife and mother of the Icemasters Direfear, commissioned it. Three months after she took delivery, there was an accident. She fell. A wheel rolled over her head.”

Oh, boy. “I knew we could get some big-time sorcerers into this.” Karentine wizards mainly belong to the Elemental Schools: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. The Windmasters and Storm Wardens of the Air school are common, Firelords more so. There may be Earth schoolers elsewhere in Karenta, but none in TunFaire. Water-school types are almost as rare. “I didn’t know we had any Icemasters here.”

“We don’t,” the old man said. “The woman lived here. The Icemasters are dead, anyway. Crossbones Bight.”

Ah. *The* big naval battle of the War. We got our Karentine asses kicked. Unfortunately for the Venageti, a naval triumph hadn’t meant much strategically. “I see,” I said, not seeing at all.

“Madame had no heirs. The estate passed to the Crown. The Crown agents auctioned everything. Lord Hellsbreath bought the coach.”

There was a name to conjure nightmares.

The only Hellsbreath I recalled was no healthier than Madame Lethe. “He had some bad luck himself, right?”

“He was murdered. The assassin got away.”

“He was in the coach when it happened,” a son volunteered.

“Crossbow bolt right in the eye,” another said. He demonstrated with enthusiastic gestures and sound effects.

“Then who got the coach?”

“Duchess of Suhnerkhan. Lady Hamilton.”

I knew that one. “Does seem like it was unlucky.” The King’s great-aunt, Lady Hamilton, had decided to visit the family estate at Okcok. She hadn’t bothered with an escort, though there’d been a full moon out. Werewolves had given her a fatal set of hickeys.

Linden Atwood grunted but conceded nothing.

“That was a year and a half ago. I guess it’s changed hands a few more times?”

“No. Crown Prince Rupert brought it back to town and stored it in the coachhouse behind Lady Hamilton’s town house. Far as I know, it hasn’t been out since.” The old man produced a pipe and pipeweed. He filled up, lit up, leaned back, closed his eyes, puffed, and thought. The clan waited quietly. I followed their lead. Playmate signaled for another round of the dark. On me, naturally.

The beer’s arrival wakened Atwood. He tilted forward, drained half his mug, wiped foam with the

back of a hand, belched, said, "I don't put no stock in this jinx stuff, Garrett." We were pals now. I'd bought him a beer. "But was I you, I'd be careful. Seems like everybody that gets near that coach gets dead." He frowned.

He didn't like that at all. What if word got out? What if people started thinking it was the coachmaker's fault?

"I'm not much on haunts and jinxes," I told him. "But if that coach is jinxed, you got any notion how come?"

"Beats the shit out of me." He guzzled the other half of his beer. "Shit happens. Sometimes it don't make no sense."

Playmate horned in. "Thanks, Mr. Atwood. Sure was good of you to talk to us." He nudged me with a knee, got up. I wondered why he was in a hurry, but I'd promised to follow his lead. I piled on my share of thanks and excused myself, followed Playmate into the rain.

"What was that? How come the run-out?"

"Atwood was getting glassy-eyed. In about a minute he was going to start in on his boys that didn't make it home from the Cantard. I thought you might want to get some sleep tonight."

"Oh."

"Yeah. You got to feel sorry for the guy. But that don't mean you got to go live in his hell with him. He's got to lay his own ghosts himself."

True. But I was surprised that Playmate thought so. I pulled my cloak tighter. There was enough wind to make the night cold.

"Past my bedtime, Garrett. Hope all that helped."

"You hope? Hell, it cracked the thing. All I need now is to find out who's been using that coach." And how hard could that be? I mean, the Crown Prince's duties included running Karentine internal security. The TunFaire Watch were one obscure arm of the many he oversaw. And if what Block said was true, the heat on the Watch had good old Rupert behind it.

"Come around more often, Garrett," Playmate said. "At least soon enough to let me know how this comes out." He strode off like he was late for a date with one of his mares. I stood absorbing some rain for a moment, startled, then shrugged. Playmate did these things. He didn't know he was being rude and unsociable.

What now?



Morley's place, that's what now.

It wasn't that far out of my way. I dropped by. My reception was no more charming than before. Maybe not as good. More people departed. The others seemed edgy, except for Saucerhead's pal Licks, who was at the same shadowed corner table stoned out of this world.

Puddle gave me a huge scowl, glanced down at his keg. I told him, "That rat Sarge said he was going to blame it on me. Morley here?"

Puddle already had a finger pointed skyward and an eyebrow up. I nodded to make sure he understood that I wanted to see Morley as well as to know if he was home. With Puddle you have to take it by the numbers. He don't fill in the gaps so good.

He was the kind of guy who thought if you couldn't solve a problem with a right cross or a club, then it wasn't a problem in the first place and therefore didn't need solving. Ignore it and it would go away.

Puddle grunted, growled at the speaking tube, fluttered a hand to indicate that I should go on up. Apparently Morley didn't have company.

I climbed the stairs, tiptoed to Morley's door, listened before I knocked. I didn't hear anything. Usually there was scurrying as somebody's wife headed for cover. All I heard was Morley telling me to come in.

I opened the door. Something zipped past the end of my nose. Morley was behind his desk, his feet up, leaning back, tossing darts. I didn't recognize the painted face serving as his target. "You doing the hoodoo voodoo on somebody?"

"Not really. Found all that in a junk shop. Velvet painting of a guy who looks like my sister's husband." Zip. Wham. Another eye put out. "What's up?"

"No company tonight?"

"Too wet out there these days. Nobody's going to be seeing much company as long as this weather keeps up." Zip. Wham. Right in the end of the nose. "Want to get those darts for me?"

"You're a bundle of ambition tonight."

"Yeah. Long as you're doing my legwork, you see that creep Licks downstairs? So I don't have to go look for myself?"

"He's there. Unconscious, I think. The smoke was pretty thick."

He snagged his speaking tube. "Puddle. Toss that creep Licks out now. Don't leave him where he'll get run over." Morley put the tube down, looked at me. "I hope he gets pneumonia."

"You have a problem with the man?"

"Yes. I don't like him."

"So bar him."

"His money's as good as yours. Maybe better. He spends it here." That didn't get a rise, so he asked, "What's up? You look like you can't wait to get something off your chest."

"I got a line on the coach."

"Coach? What coach?"

"The one out front that they tried to drag Chodo's kid into. I found the man who built it. He told me where I can find it." I explained.

Morley sighed, took his feet down. "Isn't that just like you? Here I am, having the time of my life, and you have to walk in and mess it up." He got up, opened a closet, dug out a raincloak and fancy hat that must have set him back a dozen broken bones.

"What you doing?"

"Let's go check it out."

"Huh?"

"Way I see it, that beats hell out of trying to get to see Chodo. You carrying?"

"Here and there."

"Finally started to learn, eh?"

“I guess. What’s the problem with Chodo? I thought you were tight. It’s me that’s on his list.”

“I don’t know. I sent word I needed to talk. That it was important. I never got an answer. That’s never happened before. Then comes a roundabout kind of hint that nobody out there wants to hear from me and if I’m smart I won’t bother them ever again.”

“Odd.” I couldn’t figure that. Morley was an important independent contractor. Chodo owed him a listen.

“Been odd ever since you and Winger went out there. And getting odder every day.” We were headed downstairs now.

I asked, “What’s with the mustaches? That the coming thing?”

“Huh?”

“I’m seeing them all over. On you it don’t look bad. On Spud it would look good if he could grow one. But on Puddle it looks like some damn buzzard built its nest on his lip.”

“He doesn’t take care of it.” Morley darted to the counter, spoke to Puddle briefly. I noted Licks’s absence and Puddle’s wet shoulders. Licks remained with us in spirit. The smoke was thick enough to slice.

: : :
17

When it rains and the wind blows, it gets real dark in TunFaire. Streetlamps won’t stay lighted, though those lamps exist only in neighborhoods like the Hill and the Tenderloin, where the wraths of our lords temporal and lords criminal encourage thieves and vandals to practice their crafts elsewhere. Tonight the Hill was darker than a priest’s secret heart. I didn’t like it. Given my choice, I want to see trouble coming.

Morley was as excited as a kid planning to tumble an outhouse. I asked, “What’s your thinking on this?” I looked around nervously. We’d approached Lady Hamilton’s place unchallenged, which made me just that much more anxious.

I don’t believe in good luck. I do believe in cumulative misfortune, in bad luck just lying back piling up interest till it dumps on you in one big load.

“We climb over the wall, see if the coach is there.”

“You could give Glory Mooncalled lessons in innovative tactics.” I didn’t like his idea. We could get ourselves arrested. We could get ourselves hurt. We could get ourselves fatally unhealthy. The private guards on the Hill are a lot less inhibited than their public-payroll counterparts.

“Don’t get all worked up, Garrett. Won’t be anything to it.”

“That’s what you said the time you conned me into helping deliver that vampire to the old kingpin.”

“That time you didn’t know what you were doing.”

True. But where would he get the idea I knew what I was doing now? “You’re too optimistic to live.”

“Comes of living right.”

“Comes of eating horse fodder till you have the sense of a mule.”

“You could do with more horse fodder yourself, Garrett. Meat is filled with the juices of things that died terrified. They make you timid yourself.”

“I have to admit I never heard anybody call a cabbage a coward.”

“There they go. All clear.”

There who go? Were we hanging around soaking because he'd seen someone? Why didn't he tell me these things?

He did have better night vision. One of the advantages of his elvish blood. The disadvantages, of course, started with a conviction of personal immortality. It isn't true, what you hear about elves being immortal. They just think they are. Only an arrow through the heart will talk them out of the idea.

Morley took off toward the Hamilton place. I followed, watching everywhere but where I was going. I heard a sound, looked for its source as I jumped ten feet high, walked right into the Hamilton wall.

“You must have been some Marine,” Morley grumbled, and continued muttering about no wonder Karenta couldn't win in the Cantard if I represented the kingdom's best and brightest.

“Probably a hundred thousand guys down there would be happy to let you show them how to do it.” Morley wasn't a veteran. Breeds don't have to go. The nonhuman peoples all have treaties exempting people up to one-eighth blood. The nonhumans you see in the Cantard are natives or mercenaries, and usually both. And agents of Glory Moon called besides. Except for the vampires and werewolves and unicorn packs, who are out to get everybody.

The Cantard is a lot of fun.

Morley squatted, cupped his hands. “I'll give you a boost.” The wall was nine feet high.

“You're lighter.” I could toss him right over.

“That's why you go first. I can climb up there without help.”

A point. Not one that fired me up to go first, but a point. This business was more in his line than mine. He wouldn't buy my plan which was to go pound on the front gate and ask to see the deadly coach. That was too prosaic for his sense of adventure.

I shrugged, stepped into his cupped hands, heaved my reluctant bones upward, grabbed the top of the wall in expectation of getting my fingers ripped to hamburger by broken glass. Broken glass is an old trick for discouraging uninvited company.

Oh, my. Now I was really disheartened. There was no broken glass. I pulled my chin up level with the top, peeked. Where was the trap? They had to have something really special planned if they didn't use broken glass.

Morley whacked me on the sole. “Better move your ass, Garrett. They're coming back.”

I didn't know who “they” were but I heard their footsteps. I took a poll. Opinion was unanimous. I didn't want to find out who they were. Up and over I went. I landed in a small garden, gently, failing even to turn an ankle. Morley landed beside me. I said, “This's too easy.”

“Come on, Garrett. What do you want? You have a closed house here. Who's going to guard that?”

“Exactly what I want to know.”

“You ever begin to sound optimistic, I'm going to flee the country. Come on. Sooner we do it, the sooner you're out of here.”

I grunted agreement. “Looks like the coach house there.” I don't like sneaking, much. I still thought we should have tried the front way.

Morley scooted to a door in the side of the coach house. I let him lead. I noted how carefully he

moved, for all he did so quickly. Whatever he said, he wasn't taking chances.

In his line you didn't get old taking anything for granted. My line either, for that matter.

Neither of us had brought a lantern. You do dumb things when you rush. Still, there was light enough leaking from nearby homes to let Morley see a little. He told me, "Somebody was here before us. They jimmed the lock." He tried the door. It opened.

I looked over his shoulder. It was blacker than the inside of a buzzard's belly in there, and about as inviting. Something made noises and shuffled around. Something breathed. Something a lot bigger than me. Always a courteous kind of guy, I offered, "After you, sir."

Morley wasn't that sure he was immortal. "We need a light."

"Now he notices. This the kind of planning you're going to do when you take over in the Cantard?"

"I'll be back in five minutes." He vanished before I could argue.



18

Five minutes? It was more like twenty. The longest twenty I ever lived, excepting maybe a few dozen times in the islands when I was in the Corps, dancing the death dance with Venageti soldiers.

He wasn't gone ten of those five minutes when, from my lurking place under a crippled lime tree—where I was trying to drown less speedily—I noted a light moving past a downstairs window inside the Hamilton house. Probably a candle. It had a ghostly effect, casting a huge, only vaguely humanoid shadow on a drawn shade.

I gulped air.

Damn me if my luck didn't hold. Somebody came outside and headed straight for the coach house. I heard muttering, then realized that there were two of them. The guy with the candle was leading.

Closer. It was my old buddy with the bad stomach. He didn't look like much now, a sawed-off runt in clothes that had been out of style since my dad was a pup. He wore the kind of hat they call a deerstalker. I'd never seen one outside a painting before. He was bent and slow and shaky and a damned near perfect match for my notion of what a pederast ought to look like.

Hunking along behind, having trouble navigating, was Scarface, the guy Saucerhead had bounced around so thoroughly. He moved slower than the old guy, like he'd aged a hundred years overnight. Saucerhead hadn't broken much but he'd left both of them with plenty of pain.

Now what? Jump in and make a citizen's arrest? Accuse somebody of something and maybe get my own bones rearranged? Maybe cause the geezer another attack of dyspepsia and have him belch carnivorous butterflies all over me? Maybe just end up in court for assault? My mind wanders at such times, examining the dark side. I wish I had Saucerhead's capacity for lack of doubt.

There *are* advantages to being simple.

While I tried to decide and wondered where the hell Morley was with the light, those two dragged their bruise collections inside the coach house. Light flowed through cracks as they lit lamps or lanterns. Talk continued, but I could distinguish no words.

I crept to the doorway, still could make out nothing. I heard a horse snort, jumped. Boy, was I glad I hadn't gone in there before. They would've ambushed me for sure.

It sounded like they were fixing to harness a team. The cussing level suggested that was difficult when you were all bruised up. Sounded like some impressive descriptive work being done in there. I

wanted to hear more. I need to expand my vocabulary.

I slipped my fingers into the gap between the door and its frame, pulled outward slowly till I had a crack through which to peek. So I could spy on a whole lot of horse stalls and tack racks doing a whole lot of nothing. Pretty dull stuff. I had the wrong angle.

Someone had the right angle to see the door move inward. I heard one voice say something soft but startled. Heavy footsteps lumbered my way, like a stomping troll wearing stone boots. I thought about doing a fast fade but thought too long. I barely had time to duck aside before the door flew open.

I couldn't run, so I did the next best thing. I bopped Scarface over the head with my listen stick. His *conkthunked* like a thumped watermelon. He sagged, looked at me like I wasn't playing fair. Well, why should I? That's dumb with his kind. I'd get hurt if I tried. I thumped him again to make my point.

I bounced over Scarface, popped inside, charged the little character with the sour stomach and antique clothes. Don't ask me why. Seems plenty dumb in retrospect. Just say it seemed like a good idea at the time.

He was trying to get the street doors open. I can't imagine why. His team were still in their stalls. He wasn't going to drive away. And he wasn't going to outrun anybody on foot either. But there he went, heaving away and spitting green moths.

He heard me coming and spun around. For him a spin was a slow turn. His one hand dropped to a kind of frayed rope that served him as a belt, hitched his pants. His eyes started glowing green. I got there with my stick.

One of his moths bit me. Stung like hell. And distracted me so the old boy could slide aside enough for me to whap his shoulder instead of the top of his gourd. He howled. I bellowed and flailed at bugs. His eyes flared and his mouth opened wide. I avoided his gaze and the one big green butterfly that flew from his maw. I flailed crosswise, catching him alongside the jaw.

I put too much on it. Bone cracked. He folded like a dropped suit of clothes.

My juices were flowing. I bounced around looking for more trouble, so cranked the horses just backed up in their stalls and waited for me to go away. I checked Scarface. He was snoring, getting soggier by the second. I darted back to the old man . . .

Who wasn't snoring. He was making funny noises that said he wouldn't be breathing at all pretty soon. I'd broken more than his jaw.

A green giant butterfly crept halfway out from between his lips, got stuck. He held on to his crude rope belt with both hands, like he didn't want to lose his pants, and started shaking.

I'm not in the habit of croaking people. I've done it, sure, but never really by choice and never because I wanted to.

Now *I was* wound up. This was the Hill. Up here the guardians of the peace were no half-blind, unambitious Watchmen interested only in collecting their pay. If I was caught anywhere near a dead man . . .

"What the hell is this?"

I didn't quite leap into the hayloft. Just maybe ten feet. Not even a record for the standing broad jump. But I was out the door the old man had wanted to use, thirty feet into the wet, before I recognized Morley's voice.

Still shaking, I went back and told him what had happened. The presence of a dying man didn't rattle him at all. He observed, "You're learning."

"Huh?"

“Case solved and wrapped in a day. You dig up your buddy Block, tell him where to find his villain, end up with your pockets stuffed with gold. You still have the luck.”

“Yeah.” But I didn’t feel lucky. I didn’t*know* that that little old man had gotten his thrills carving on pretty girls.

Morley closed the yard door, eased toward the street door. I said, “Hold it. I have to take a look around in the house.”

“Why?” He said that sharply, like he didn’t want me going that way.

“In case there’s any evidence. I need to know.”

He gave me the fish eye, shook his head, shrugged. The notion of a conscience was alien to him. “If you have to, you have to.”

“I have to.”

19

I tripped over the old man’s sidekick as I stepped into the garden. Well! Another mystery. Some wicked soul had come along and stabbed him in his sleep.

I scowled at Morley. Morley wasn’t abashed. “Didn’t need him, Garrett. And now you won’t need to keep looking back.” Just because the guy had caused a scene at the Joy House.

I didn’t argue. We’d had the argument more times than I liked to recall. Morley knew neither pity nor remorse, only practicality. Which, he had a habit of reminding me, was why I turned to him so often.

Maybe. But I think I go to him because I trust him to cover my back.

I’d grabbed the old man’s lantern. It was out now, after my spill. I pushed it aside, dragged the body into the coach house, closed the door, and headed for the big house by the light of the lantern Morley carried. I snagged the extinguished lantern as I went.

The house wasn’t locked. It took us only moments to get inside and find something.

We entered through a dusty kitchen. We needed go on no farther. Seconds after we entered, Morley said, “Check this, Garrett.”

“This” was a three-gallon wooden bucket. A tribe of flies had made it a place of worship. Their startled buzz and the smell told me that it was no water pail. Rusty cakes of dried blood adorned it.

“They had to use something to carry the blood away.” I shone my light around, spotted a set of knives on a drainboard. They were not ordinary kitchen knives. They were decorated with fancy symbols. They were decorated with dried blood too.

Morley observed, “They didn’t take good care of their tools.”

“You didn’t see the way they moved. After they’d danced with Saucerhead they probably didn’t feel much like doing housework.”

“You satisfied now?”

I had to be. “Yeah.” No point lollygagging around, maybe getting ourselves hanged with all that evidence.

Morley grinned. “You really are learning, Garrett. I figure maybe another hundred years and you can get by without a baby-sitter.”

I wondered if maybe he wasn't a little too optimistic.

Being no fool, Morley went his own way. I found Captain Block the last place I expected, at the bachelor officers' quarters at the barracks the Watch shares with the local army garrison. Those troops are less use than the Watch, coming out for nothing but ceremonies and to stand guard at various royal edifices.

I got the usual runaround trying to reach Block, but it had no heart in it. Maybe he'd left word a certain battered old Marine might want to get hold of him sometime.

He was dressing when I walked in and started dripping on his carpet. "I take it you've got something, Garrett." For the life of me I couldn't figure why he wasn't thrilled to see me, just because it was after midnight.

"I found your man."

"Huh?" Dumbstruck is really amazing on a naturally dumbfounded face.

"That villain you wanted found? The fellow who entertained himself by whittling on pretty girls? If you want him, I've got him."

"Uh . . . yeah?" He didn't believe me yet.

"Put your slicker on, Cap. I've had me a long, hard day and I want to get on home."

"You found him?"

Ta-da! First thing you knew, he'd figure it out. "Yep. But you'd better get rolling if you want to cash in."

"Yeah. Sure." He was in a daze. He couldn't believe this. For a moment I entertained suspicions. They didn't get too rowdy. "But how? I had a thousand men looking. They never caught a whiff."

"Didn't know where to sniff. You get the nose when you have to make your living at it."

"Sounds like you plain got lucky."

"Luck helps."

"Should I bring some men?"

"You won't need them. They won't give you any trouble."

Must have been an edge to my voice. He looked me askance but was too shocked still to pursue it. He shrugged into an army overcloak, jammed a waterproof hat onto his head. "You don't know how much we appreciate this, Garrett."

"I have my suspicions. Just show me by making sure you don't forget to drop my fee off at my place."

"What?" He managed to look affronted. Somebody had the audacity to question the integrity of the Watch? "You think we'd screw you?"

"The gods forfend. Me? Think a thing like that about our brave Watchmen? Surely you jest, Captain."

He heard the sarcasm and didn't like it, but had become too excited to take offense. Hell, he took off like the proverbial bat, dashing boldly into the night and rain—till he realized he didn't know where the hell he was headed.

"I'm moving as fast as I can, Captain," I told him. And I was. I did want to get home. I had big ambitions in the night lumber trade. "I put in about two thousand miles of legwork today, tracking these monsters down."

“Monsters? There’s more than one?”

The man didn’t listen. I shook my head. He fell into step beside me, as bouncy as a five-year-old.

“One more than one, Captain. The big villain was a guy about a thousand years old who was some kind of wizard. The other was your basic street bruno, middle thirties.”

“Was?” Now he sounded nervous, even wary. “You keep saying ‘was.’”

“You’ll see.”

: : : :
20

He saw. He was less than thrilled. “Did you have to kill them?” He stared at the old man like he hoped the crazy bastard would rise from the dead.

“No. I could’ve let them kill me. But then you’d still be looking, wouldn’t you?” I stared at the old man, rattled. Block didn’t notice.

First, the old boy had crawled to the garden door before he’d checked out. Then he’d gotten naked. What there was of him was so dried up it looked like something had sucked out everything inside his skin. That skin was dead white. I wondered if maybe he wouldn’t rise from the dead. If he hadn’t already, a time or two. Then I shook off the fit of superstition and concentrated on a problem that was real and immediate.

Someone had been into the coach house in my absence. Somebody who had stripped the dead man and had ripped off a crazy miscellany from the tack and tool racks. That smelled of a crime of opportunity committed by some down-and-out amateur. By someone who had seen a door open, had darted in for a nervous peek, had taken what he could use, and had grabbed everything else he could carry that looked like it might sell for enough to make a down payment on a bottle of cheap red wine. Was I to go a-hunting this thief, I’d keep an eye peeled for a short, skinny wino all cocked up in a new suit of old clothes, complete with one of those absurd deerstalker hats.

Block complained, “Would’ve had a lot more impact if I’d been able to bring them to trial.”

“I don’t doubt it a bit. It would’ve been a circus. The show of the year. I would’ve loved to have seen it. But he was belching butterflies and staring green fire and getting ready to lay some serious sorcery on me. I couldn’t talk him out of it. Come on. Let me show you some evidence.”

I led him to the kitchen, showed him the bucket. I wanted to show him the knives but they weren’t where I’d seen them last. That damned Morley, collecting souvenirs. I felt more comfortable in the house now that I had an officer of the law along to explain to the local custodians. I took time to look around more carefully. I didn’t see anything new. “You satisfied?”

“I expect.” He held up a big glass jar Morley and I had overlooked. It contained a human heart in a clear fluid. “I’ll have my people come take the place apart.”

“You know who owns it?”

“I know. Ironic coincidence. There won’t be any problems, though. The Prince is determined. He’ll just be doubly pissed because somebody dared. He’ll breathe fire.”

I chuckled. “You’re welcome to collect the kudos, Captain. I don’t want his kind noticing me. Just see that I get paid. Then you’re happy, I’m happy, and TunFaire is happy soon as word gets out. Now, unless you insist on my help, I’m dragging my weary ass home and putting it to bed.”

“Go ahead,” he said distractedly. “And, Garrett?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. You’ll get your money. And I’ll still owe you for this miracle.”

“There you go.” I got me out of there while the getting was good.

The Dead Man was still doing interviews when I got home. There were people in with him and people waiting in the small front room. Dean was doing a shift on the door. I gave him my most malicious smile and sneered. “Now you know what it feels like to be up at an absurd hour.” I made a quick sally into the small front room in search of feline game but did not find my prey. Dean eyed me nervously and kept his mouth shut.

Excellent, I thought as I trudged upstairs. First thing in the morning we’d have a talk about that cat.



21

First thing in the morning, I didn’t talk to Dean at all. About cats, anyway. He rolled me out at some absurd hour before noon, told me, “His Nibs wants you in his room. I’ll bring your breakfast there.”

I groaned and rolled over.

Dean didn’t bother with the usual roust. That should have warned me. But it was morning. Who thinks in the morning? I just grumped some ill-placed gratitude in the general direction of heaven and burrowed into my pillow.

Bugs started chewing on me.

Felt like bugs biting, anyway. When I started flopping and swatting and cussing and digging around, I couldn’t find a thing. But the nibbling kept on keeping on.

It was morning. It took me a while to figure it. Old Dean hadn’t salted my bed with insects. The Dead Man was prodding me.

Still cussing and dancing and swatting, I pried myself out of bed. That part of my mind that was working duly noted the discovery of a hitherto unsuspected aspect of my partner. He would persecute his allies as readily as his enemies.

Though my eyes only pretended to be open and my legs rebelled at every step, I made it downstairs without suffering any disaster. I stumbled into the Dead Man’s room and dropped into my chair, weakly looking around for something I could use to start a fire as soon as I got the ambition.

Good morning, Garrett. You wouldn’t think you’d get much expression out of his style of communication, but he sure managed to sound as happy as a clam that didn’t know it was being fattened up for a chowder. *I am so pleased you could join me.*

The sentiments I expressed were less sociable. “What the hell you bubbling about? What the hell did you drag me down here for? The sun ain’t even up yet.” Which wasn’t strictly true. Somewhere out there, above the rain clouds, there was a sun that had been up for hours. It just hadn’t been up for enough hours.

I could contain my curiosity no longer. The gentlemen of the City Watch came round to pay their respects and debts this morning. They were generous beyond belief.

“Don’t mean much. Them showing up with one sceat makes them generous beyond belief. How much?”

The full one thousand marks. Moreover—

“Only a thousand?” I grumped. Naturally, I grumped. A thousand was a major score, but I’d have grumped if they’d brought money around by the wagonload. “You could’ve waited till a decent hour.”

Moreover, he continued, ignoring me completely, they brought the latest news from the Cantard. My theories have been vindicated at last. The expected collapse of Glory Mooncalled’s revolution, indicated by all those defections and desertions, has proved chimerical. He was just biding his time against the ripe moment.

“Aw, hell.” Now I understood why he’d dragged me out. Didn’t have a thing to do with money. He’d gotten his big chance to crow—with me in no condition to fight back.

I’d figured Mooncalled was on his last legs. The evidence was there. Defections and desertions had been strong indicators that the rebellion was about to fold. Hell, there were refugees from the Cantard scattered all over Karenta now. I’d seen plenty right here in TunFaire.

I didn’t bother asking how Mooncalled had conjured another miracle. The man did these things. I went to work on the breakfast Dean brought and waited on the Dead Man. He would want to rub it in. He loves it when I lose an argument completely.

He let me have it blow by blow, the uneconomical way. The way I do him when I want to yank his beard.

He claimed most of the defections and desertions hadn’t been genuine. Furthermore, Mooncalled had just been lying low, staying ahead of the various armies, occasionally encouraging the Venageti forces or Karentine to come to blows while he awaited one of those rare but exceedingly violent storms that sweep into the Cantard from the gulf. I saw a few of those while I was down there. All you can do is take cover and hope the cover stands up to the wind and rain.

While his enemies were paralyzed, Mooncalled had struck. In both directions. One force attacked Full Harbor, Karenta’s biggest bridgehead in the Cantard. He’d tried before and had failed. This time he’d succeeded, taking Full Harbor with all its supplies and munitions.

Another force attacked Quarache, Venageta’s logistical bastion in the southern Cantard. Quarache is bigger and far more important than Full Harbor. It surrounds the only big, reliable oasis in that part of the desert. The Venageti war effort hinges on continued control of Quarache. Without it they wouldn’t be able to project their power far enough to threaten the silver mines.

Losing Full Harbor would hurt the Karentine effort but not cripple it. Karenta has other bases along the coast. Venageta doesn’t.

I tried a weak sally. “Your boy is in deep shit now, Chuckles. They’ll send the Marines to take the Harbor back. He’s never gone up against Marines.”

Except for a sly touch of amusement he ignored me. He continued his story.

Quarache didn’t go the way of Full Harbor. Mooncalled hadn’t had the strength to carry it completely. Fighting continued as the Venageti rushed reinforcements in from everywhere, were reclaiming Quarache in prolonged, desperate, expensive house-to-house combat.

Like most ordinary Karentines, I’ve developed an affection for Glory Mooncalled. Not that I want my kingdom to lose a war. But when you spend your whole life a witness to the corruption, incompetence, and greed shown by our overlords, you can’t help but admire a guy who makes rude noises in their faces and brassily dares them to do their worst—then dances around mocking them while they stumble over their own feet. Too, I think a lot of us nurture the secret hope that Mooncalled’s antics will compel an end to the endless war.

“This is really why you dragged me out of bed?”

This and the fact that I wish to hear details of what happened last night. And he did seem

intensely interested. I recalled that he had been from the beginning, like he'd suspected something he didn't want to share. *How was it that you managed to conclude the thing so quickly?*

"Ah? I think I detect a hint of jealousy. A note of disbelief."

The law of averages suggests you should be capable of stumbling through unaided occasionally. It is true that I remain amazed at your ability to flout that law so frequently.

Yes. He was piqued. He'd put all that time into all those interviews, which we hadn't yet discussed, expecting to dazzle one and all with a startling indictment. Then I'd had to go spoil his game by tracking down that jinxed coach. Garrett the Killjoy, that's me. "You want to tell me what you thought was going on when Block first told us about the women?"

Somebody pounded on the door, timing it as though the Dead Man had had him waiting in the wings.

That will be Mr. Tharpe. I allowed him to return home last evening. He had personal matters to settle. Stay seated. Dean will handle the door.

I yelled, "Dean, throw that cat out when you let Saucerhead in." I waited till Tharpe came in before I started my story.

"You got lucky," Saucerhead said when I finished.

"Lucky, hell. That was a prime piece of deducting and detecting."

Tharpe grunted, unconvinced.

"I didn't see anybody else thinking about attacking it by looking for the coach."

"I still say you lucked out, Garrett. How about if the old geezer used some regular coach? How about if he walked?"

"But he didn't. And that's the point. And that's what cost him. He decided to break in on a closed house and use it for his base, and found him a spiffy, neat coach there and just couldn't resist going in style. And it cost him." For a second I wondered if the jinx had gotten old butterfly-breath. But I didn't care. I wasn't much bothered by having croaked him, now. I hadn't run into many people who'd needed killing more. I couldn't feel bad about doing the world a favor.

"You lucked out," Saucerhead insisted. And wouldn't be swayed. Neither would the Dead Man.

Mr. Tharpe, I have an errand for you, should you care to extend your employment.

"You pay, I play." Saucerhead liked the Dead Man for some reason.

This building has become suspiciously free of vermin. That was because I'd burned a dozen sulfur candles one day while he was taking one of his six-week naps. I thought I'd do him a favor. Bugs like to snack on him. I am accustomed to employing large numbers of insects when I examine the various permutations of action available to the forces operating in the Cantard. I cannot indulge my curiosity without them.

"You already heard what Glory Moon called done, then?"

Yes. I am excited. I need a few thousand insects with which to evolve through the options available to the surviving combatants.

He had a habit of lining bugs up on the wall, like soldiers, and running them through maneuvers. A disgusting vice.

"Now, wait a minute," I protested. "I just got this place deinfested." Bugs and mice are the Dead Man's worst enemies. Left unchecked, they would devour him in no time.

So. You are the villain responsible.

He knew darned well I was, he just hadn't brought it up before.

"I am he," said I. "I'm also the guy what owns this dump. I'm also the guy what's feeling damned put upon on account of I've got a housekeeper who's moved in uninvited and figures it's his duty to drag in every stray cat he can find. I'm also the guy what don't like the floor crunching under his tootsies whenever he starts looking for the chamber pot in the dark. Never mind about the bugs, Saucerhead. Let him use his imagination."

The Dead Man sent me an exaggerated mental sigh. *So be it. I fear, then, Mr. Tharpe, that we have no further need for your services.*

I gave the Dead Man a narrow-eyed look. He'd given up too easily. "He's right. What do we owe you?"

"Not enough so I don't got to go back to raising knots on heads for that creep Licks."

A sad story. Nobody liked Licks. Including me, and I didn't know him. "Guy has to make a living, I guess." I counted out a few coins, not much. Tharpe seemed satisfied. He hadn't done anything but answer the door.

"You might maybe add a little tip on account of personal hardship, Garrett."

"Personal hardship?"

"I had to be here instead of home. Though maybe from what I hear, you done forgot about women."

"Not quite. Not yet. But it's fading fast."

"So be cynical and self-serving. Go apologize to Tinnie." He liked Tinnie. Hell, I liked her. I just couldn't get along with her redheaded temper. For now. The songs you sing do change. Abstinence does make the heart grow fonder.

Saucerhead seemed in no hurry to leave. He and the Dead Man were wondering what might have snapped inside the butterfly man's head and left him wanting to carve up women. I figured this was my chance. I gathered my breakfast leavings, took them to the kitchen. Once I disposed of the evidence, I'd slide upstairs and catch me forty winks.

Somebody banged on the door.



What was this? I'd worked so hard to discourage customers that I didn't get this many visitors in a week anymore. Dean made like he was too snowed in cleaning up, so I took care of it myself.

Hoping for some randy sex goddess, I got Barking Dog Amato. I'd forgotten him completely.

"You forgot all about me, Garrett," he accused, pushing inside, forcing me back with his personal chemistry.

"No," I lied. "I figured you hadn't had time to get anything ready yet."

"Been raining. Not much else to do. Making signs and handbills gets old."

You'd think a drenching would wash the grunge away. Not so. Water just brought it to life. I considered propping the door open, maybe opening a few windows so the wind could blow through. If I'd lived on the Hill, I might have tried it. In my neighborhood you wouldn't dare. Even during a typhoon

there would be some opportunist ready to accept the challenge. Besides, I only had one downstairs window.

Once past me, Amato halted, dripped, reeked, looked around. “You got that thing, that whatsit they call the Dead Man. I’d sure like to take a gander at that, you know what I mean?”

I tried shallow breaths. I don’t know why we bother. It never helps. “Why not? You’re a man he ought to meet.” I wished Old Bones had him a working sniffer. I’d lock them in together till Amato sold him his whole zany conspiracy collection.

I opened the Dead Man’s door, held it for Amato. Saucerhead, in my chair, half-turned, saw Barking Dog.

His face scrunched up into a world-class frown. He didn’t ask, though.

He got a whiff, that’s why. He gasped, “I see you got a client I’d better go good-bye,” all in one long exhalation. He slid out the door almost before I got through. He tossed me a look that told me he wanted to hear all about it. Later. A lot later, after the miasma cleared.

I winked. “Make sure the front door is closed.”

Barking Dog said, “My God, it’s an ugly sucker. Got a hooter like a mammoth, don’t it?”

Another missionary, Garrett?

“This is Kropotkin Amato. You recall the arrangement we made.”

You know what I mean. You still intend to harass me? You will recall that your previous effort met with a singular lack of success.

“Me? No . . .”

Nor did you bother mentioning any arrangement, though I discern the details in your mind. We did not contract to have the man watch himself.

“We didn’t contract anything, Smiley.”

Barking Dog looked baffled. I would have too, hearing only half the conversation. I changed subjects. “You can understand why I did it.” I didn’t want to bruise Amato’s feelings. The Dead Man could peek inside his head, see why we didn’t have to mount a major campaign.

You are correct, Garrett. This time. However unlikely, he believes his theories. Which, you will understand, make them the reality in which he lives. I suggest you do meet our principal, try to ascertain why he deems it worthwhile to keep tabs on Mr. Amato.

Good morning, Mr. Amato. I have been anxious to make your acquaintance since Mr. Garrett first undertook to trace your movements.

The rat was going to lay it off on me.

“Uh . . . hi.” Barking Dog was at a loss for words. Maybe I ought to check to see if this was really him.

One breath and I knew I didn’t have to check. “Look here, Chuckles, don’t you go—”

Mr. Amato and I have a great deal to discuss, Garrett. I suggest you visit Mr. Hullar and see if you cannot unearth a reason for his interest.

“Yeah, Garrett. What you been doing, anyhow? You was supposed to . . .”

I fled, defeated. Would Barking Dog care that I’d neglected him only to save TunFaire from a vicious serial killer? He would be sure *they* had bought me off. Even though he was the subject I was supposed to investigate for *them*.

I gave the stairway one longing look, then got into my rain gear. I checked my pockets to see how much cash I had. Maybe I could rent me a room and catch a few winks.

I made a sudden sally into the small front room before I left, thinking I'd snatch Dean's cat and drag it along. But the cat wasn't in evidence, only the scratches it had left on my furniture.

Then I realized that I had nothing to report to Hullar. I trudged back and pried Barking Dog's report away from him. He and the Dead Man were weaving drunken spiderwebs of conspiracy theory already.

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23

The Tenderloin is that part of town which caters to the side of people they keep hidden. Any vice can be found there, any sin committed, almost any need fulfilled. The hookers and the drug dens and gambling pits are just the surface, the glamour. At least, those aspects of those things that can be glamorous when seen from the street.

It's a glitzy street. Or streets, really. The area is bigger than Tinkery Row. And more successful. Nothing sells like sin. After the Hill it's the most prosperous, cleanest, safest, and most orderly part of the city. Some very unpleasant people make sure it stays that way.

It all belongs, directly or indirectly, to Chodo Contague's empire.

Bishoff Hullar's taxi-dance place is as tame a dive as you can find there. That's all the girls do, dance and talk to lonely fellows and try to get them to buy drinks. Maybe a few make personal arrangements, but there are no facilities on the premises. The place is as shabby as they're allowed to get down there. Frankly, I don't see how Hullar stays in business, competing with neighbors who offer so much more.

The place wasn't jumping when I arrived, but it was just after noon then. A couple of sad-looking sailors sat at a table talking to a sad-looking girl who sipped colored water and didn't pretend very hard that she gave a damn about what the sailors were saying. A doddering ratman mopped around the other tables. All those had chairs piled atop them. There was nobody on the dance floor, though a couple more girls were loafing by the bandstand, where three worn-out old musicians weren't trying very hard to stay awake. Both girls glanced at me, wondering if I was worth the effort of making so long a trek. One, who looked like she might break out in a case of puberty any day, lazily packed a pipe with weed.

The guy behind the bar had to be the world's oldest dwarf. He wore the full costume, complete with a pheasant's feather in a peaked little cap. He had a beard that should have kept the floor swept of debris. "What's it going to be, Ace?" He wiped the bar in front of me with the same rag he'd been using to polish mugs.

"Beer."

"Pint?"

"Yeah."

"Light? Dark?"

"Light."

"Lager? Pilsner? . . ."

"Just draw one. Surprise me. Weider's, if you got it." I figured I owed Old Man Weider a little commercial loyalty, what with him having had me on retainer so long.

“Hasty. Always hasty.” He drew me a pint. “Wet enough for you out there?”

Oh, my. A talkative bartender. “Wet enough. Hullar around?”

“Who wants to know?” Suddenly he was completely alert.

“Name’s Garrett. I’m supposed to be doing something for him.”

“Yeah?” He wiped the bar next to me while he thought about that. After a moment he said, “I’ll check.” Off he trundled. I rose onto my toes, watched, wondering if he’d stumble over his beard.

“Hi. I’m Brenda.” The pipe smoker had puffed up enough ambition to hike all the way over. I glanced at her, resumed studying the wasteland behind the bar. The woman was less interesting.

Up close it was obvious she wasn’t a child, that that was just her hook. The gamine had gone a long time ago, probably before she was old enough to become a gamine. I said, “I’m just here to see Hullar. Business.”

“Oh.” Her voice had had little life before. Now it was dead.

I glanced at the musicians. “I could part with a few coppers, though, if you could explain why those band guys are here at this time of day.” I didn’t know Hullar’s place well, but didn’t think there was any music during the day.

“Somebody kicked the shit out of them last night after work. They’re waiting to talk to some guy about it.”

Licks? Coming in to put the arm on them?

“You’re in, Ace. The man says come on back.”

I dropped a half-dozen coppers into the woman’s hand. She made an effort to find a smile but had trouble remembering where she’d left it. I wanted to say something to waken her spirit but couldn’t think of a thing. So I just said, “Thanks,” and hurried after the dwarf. If I let him get too big a head start I’d miss out when he tripped over his beard.

Bishoff Hullar was five feet tall, three feet wide, bald as an egg, in his sixties, ugly as sin itself. The width wasn’t fat. I’d heard he was a strongman in his younger days and that he kept up in case there was a call for his talents. “Sit, Garrett.” He indicated a rickety antediluvian chair. He had a voice like rocks tumbling around inside an iron drum. Somebody had done the lead-pipe thing on his throat in his once-upon-a-time. “You got anything for me?”

I gave him Barking Dog’s report. He took it, started reading. I said, “I have some questions.” I glanced around his workplace. You couldn’t call it an office. He sat behind a table with some writing tools on it, but also makeup pots, which suggested the girls used the place for a dressing room. Overall, it was as tacky as the rest of the place.

“Huh?” He looked up, piggy little gray eyes narrowed.

“Basic stuff my partner never got around to asking because he thought this job would be a good joke on me.”

Hullar’s eyes got narrower. “Joke?”

“Barking Dog Amato. Nobody in the world is going to pay somebody to spy on a lunatic. Least of all a guy who runs a place like this down here. I can’t see you even knowing Barking Dog.”

“I don’t. Wouldn’t know him if he walked in and sank his fangs in me. What’s it to you? You’re getting paid.”

“I’m the guy what takes his butt onto the street amongst the slings and arrows, Hullar. I kind of like to know why I’m doing that, and who for. That way I have a notion what direction to expect trouble

from when it comes.”

“You’re not going to see no trouble.”

“They all tell me that. If there wasn’t trouble, though, they wouldn’t come to me in the first place. I don’t play blindfolded, Hullar.”

He put the report down, looked at me like he was making up his mind whether to kick my butt or not. Not won the toss.

“You got a good rep, Garrett. Why I picked you. I’ll take a chance.”

I waited. He brooded. The dwarf bartender waited at the door, maybe to see if the boss would need help. There wasn’t much tension, though. I didn’t feel threatened.

“I ain’t got much here, Garrett. *We* ain’t got much. But we’re like family. We take care of each other on account of we’re all we’ve got. This here is like the last ledge before the fall into the pit.”

I couldn’t argue that. I kept my opinion to myself. My old mom used to suggest strongly that I just might learn something if I could manage to keep my mouth shut long enough to listen. Mom was right, but I didn’t get the message for years—and I still forget it far too often.

“Somebody works for me comes to me with their trouble, usually I try to lend a hand. If I can. I do that, maybe they give me a little help when I need it. Right?”

“Makes sense.” Only in the real world it doesn’t work that way very often. “One of your people wants Barking Dog watched?”

He eyed me, still taking my measure. “You’re a cynic. You don’t believe in much. Especially not people. Maybe that’s a good thing in your line, kind of folks you probably have to deal with.”

“Yeah.” I was proud of me. I kept a straight face.

He glanced at the dwarf, got a response I didn’t catch.

“All right. Here’s the way it is, Garrett. Amato’s kid works for me. When he got himself tossed in the Al-Khar, she—”

“He’s got a daughter?” You’ve heard that one about knocking a guy over with a feather? That feather would have smashed me like a bug.

“Yeah. This Amato, he’s a loony. But harmless. You know that. I know that. Only he’s got a habit of naming names. She’s scared maybe he named the wrong one, some Hill-type asshole what don’t got a sense of humor. Maybe the old man is about to get his ass in deep shit. Girl’s a little light-headed herself, if you get my drift. But she’s family here, and when my people worry, I try to fix it so they don’t. So what I want from you is you should keep an eye on the old nut, let me know if he’s about to step in it so I can yank him out of the way before he gets run over. Understand?”

Yes. And no. Barking Dog with a daughter? How did he ever manage that? “A bit hard to buy.”

“Yeah? Something about it you don’t like? You just say you’re out. I’ll get somebody else. I picked you on account of they say you’re almost honest. But I can live without you.”

“It’s just a big chunk to swallow. You don’t know Barking Dog. You did, you’d know why. I can’t figure him for having a kid.”

“Crunch. Tell Sas to bring us a couple of beers.”

The dwarf left. We didn’t talk. After a while a woman came with two beers, light for me and dark for Hullar. I’d seen her with the gamine, muttering with the musicians. I hadn’t noticed then, but up close the resemblance to Amato was there. She even had those spooky eyes that looked like they were seeing things hidden from the rest of us. She pretended not to study me while I pretended not to study her.

“Thanks, Sas.”

“Sure, Bish.” She left.

“Sure looks like him,” I admitted.

“There you go. Any problems now?”

“Not really.” I wondered if she’d studied me because the dwarf had told her who I was. Probably. Maybe he’d sent her back more to give her a look than to give me one. “This supposed to be a secret?”

“Secret?”

“I’ll tell my partner, of course. He won’t kick it around. But is it supposed to be a secret from the rest of the world?”

“Probably wouldn’t hurt. The guy maybe does have an enemy or three.”

“Suppose he catches on that I’m watching? Am I allowed to tell him why?”

“I don’t figure that would do Sas no good. Look, I know this ain’t in your usual line. Pretty tame, you being used to mixing it up with sorcerers and gangsters and Hill folk, but it means something to us. You don’t got to make a career out of it. I ain’t paying that much. But we’d all appreciate it if you’d let us in on it should he get his ass into something he can’t handle. Right?”

I rose. “Good enough.” I believed him because I wanted to believe him. You don’t much see people do nice things for people. “One of your girls said your musicians are having problems.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. Taken care of.” For a moment he looked like the evil thing I’d pictured him to be. “Or will be, real soon. How about you take my mug back out to Crunch?”

I took both mugs.



24

The dwarf grunted when I made my delivery. For an old guy—especially for an old dwarf—Crunch was astonishingly polite.

As I headed for the street, I glanced at the bandbox. And almost tripped over my feet.

A man had joined the musicians. He was one guy I’d hoped I wouldn’t ever see again. He stared at me. I stared back.

He had nothing on me in height and only a little in weight, but size didn’t make this man. He reeked menace the way Barking Dog Amato reeked uninspired personal hygiene. He scared you just by being around, even when he smiled. His name was Crask. He was one of Chodo Contague’s top cats. He hurt people for a living. He enjoyed his work.

I realized I’d stopped to stare. He kept staring too. Each of us was wondering what the hell the other was doing there. When my brain unfroze again I had no trouble figuring him. He was there because of the battered musicians.

Old Licks didn’t have a license from the outfit. Him and his buddies would be in deep shit if Crask caught up. Especially deep for picking on musicians in the Tenderloin. The Tenderloin was Chodo’s. Even the King doesn’t mess around down there.

I almost made it to the door before I got stunned again.

The girl blew in as I reached for the latch. I dodged, gaped. For all she reacted, I was a ghost.

She was the one those villains had dragged out of Morley's place. The one Morley claimed was the kingpin's daughter. I turned, stared, maybe panted some, as she strode toward Crunch.

Crask's face went as cold as death. My heart jumped. But it wasn't me he was watching.

The girl glanced his way, stopped, made a little sound of surprise, whirled, and sprinted for the street. She ricocheted off me as she went. I purred. Whip me, beat me . . .

Crask came pounding up behind me as I stepped into the rain to watch her fly away. He halted beside me. "What the hell was that?" I asked.

"What you doing here, Garrett?" He sounded suspicious. Nasty suspicious. Like getting-ready-to-break-arms-and-legs suspicious.

"What are *you* doing here? I thought you were too big-time for legwork."

"She come here to meet you?"

"Huh?" That was a surprise notion. "Uh-uh. No touch. I'll break things." Crask was scary, but I wasn't afraid of him in any head-butting contest. I figured our chances were equal if we got to prancing around pounding on each other. He was scary because he was a killer and a smart one. If he decided to send you over, you might as well start counting your beads.

"You stay away, Garrett. Or they'll find parts of you all over town."

"I didn't know you had a woman. Who is she?" Fact was, I thought he and his sidekick Sadler had a thing.

"Huh?"

"I'm going to tell you this once, Crask. I don't know the girl. I have seen her before. Once. She walked into Morley Dotes's place night before last. Two minutes later a bunch of guys roared in and tried to kidnap her. Me and Morley and Saucerhead showed them what we think of guys who pick up their girls the rough way. She disappeared before we finished. Beginning and end of story. Now it's your go. Who is she? How come you got your balls in an uproar?"

"You don't need to know." The girl was out of sight now. Crask frowned after her, as much puzzled as angry. He'd bought my story, probably because I'd not lied to him much in the past. "What was she doing at Dotes's place?"

"You got me. Never said a word. Just came in looking scared, sat by herself, then three guys blew in and dragged her out."

He grunted. "I didn't know about that. Thanks, Garrett. I'll give you one back. Tell Tharpe it ain't going to be healthy hanging around with those guys trying to mess with the musicians."

"I was going to suggest that anyway after I saw you in there." I started moving, planning to put some distance between us before it occurred to him to bring up old business.

"Garrett."

Damn. "What?"

"You see the girl around again, pass the word. We'd like to know."

"Sure. But why? Who is she?"

"Just do it." He went inside without turning his back.

I hustled away, breathing hard. It had been an encounter I'd dreaded more than necessary. Maybe. Maybe the street in front of Hullar's place didn't strike him as the best stage for my demise.

Peace and harmony broke out all over. I had nothing to do but loaf, deliver the occasional report to Hullar, and keep an eye on Dean's crowd whenever he had them over for one of his rehab parties. You wouldn't believe how rowdy old men can get.

There weren't any cats around, and except for his barbs about me not working, Dean wasn't a nuisance. The Dead Man went to sleep, visions of Glory Moon called dancing in his head. Saucerhead resigned from the musician-organizing racket just before Morley reported that he was no longer obliged to endure the custom of that human smudgepot Licks. I got out and visited, bought a few rounds for friends, reforged contacts, even dropped by the brewery and spent a few days checking employee theft for Weider. As always, he wanted me to take the job full-time. As always, I couldn't overcome my horror of holding down a real job.

Nobody's life stays on that high and relaxed a level. Especially not mine. The gods have a special Garrett harassment squad dedicated solely to my persecution.

So I should have known the good times were over the morning I went out to run and found that the rains had returned.

I was in my office busting my skull trying to fake up numbers that would impress the tax thugs with the depths of my destitution. Somebody hammered on the door. I groaned. It was nearly suppertime and Dean was fixing a standing rib roast that would be bloody rare and would melt in my mouth, with all the extras. Smelling the odors from the kitchen had me drooling already.

Dean asked, "Shall I ignore it?"

"No. It's probably Saucerhead." Tharpe had been around a lot lately. His flame had walked. His luck hadn't been good since. "There enough to feed him too?"

"Barely." Saucerhead does put it away. "There won't be anything left over."

I shrugged. "I'll get even with him someday."

"You just want to get away from what you're doing." He tottered down the hall to the accompaniment of renewed pounding. Somebody was awfully anxious.

Dean was right. I did want to get away. I hate the whole idea of taxes. What have I ever gotten from the Crown? A pack and a collection of weapons and a five-year adventure in the war zone. I had to give back the pack and weapons. They just wanted to rip me off so they could give some other kid a chance to see the acne on the ass of the world.

I got out of having to be creative, but, all things considered, I'd rather I'd stayed with the taxes.

It wasn't Saucerhead. It was a guy I'd hoped never to see again, Captain Block. Dean showed Block into my office. Block looked frazzled.

I couldn't help myself. "Now what?"

Block planted his behind, settled his elbows on his knees, buried his face in his hands. "Same as before. You'll have to see it."

"Look, I bailed you out once. Isn't that enough? Dean's cooking supper. It'll be ready in half an hour."

"So he told me. Also told me you were busy doing taxes."

"Yeah."

“You wouldn’t be the kind of guy who’d forget to report a fat cash payment from the Watch, would you?”

Damned right I would be. “Why?”

“One mission of the Watch is to investigate alleged tax fraud. We don’t *do* much of that, but when there’s a report, we have to act to cover our butts.”

“I’ll find my hat. How far do we have to go?”

“Not far.” He smiled weakly. “I knew I could count on you. And I’m sure your purse won’t get hurt this time, either.”

No happiness came through his smile. He looked more stressed than last time. What had him by the short hairs now?

Something that would be politically painful, surely. By getting out, tapping the wind of rumor whispering through the streets, I knew Block had turned catching old bug-breath into a big score. Suddenly there was a lot of stuff going on in the shadows. Prince Rupert was getting behind Westman Block. Block had hidden irons in the fire. It all had the knights of the street feeling nervous.

I made sure I was equipped for trouble, just because of the company I’d be keeping. Trouble followed Block.

We talked about the Cantard as we walked. Glory Moon called had abandoned his effort to capture Quarache but had hamstringed the Venageti ability to project their power far into the desert. I’d also been on the mark about the Marines getting the job of retaking Full Harbor. That operation had begun. I had mixed feelings. They brag that when they turn you into a Marine they make you a Marine forever.

The more we talked, the more I realized that Block was thoroughly spooked. Whatever his problem, it was going to be something I wouldn’t like.

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Now *I* was spooked.

“Identical,” I said, staring at the gutted, naked girl. She hung in an alleyway behind abandoned tenements on the near south side. Those tenements had been occupied by ratmen squatters until a few hours ago. They were long gone now.

In the rain and poor light the dead girl was a ringer for the one Block had shown me in the Bustee. “This can’t be, Block. I got them.” I had to believe I’d gotten them. I’m not made to shake off killing the wrong villains.

Block wasn’t so scared for his behind that he couldn’t see what was bothering me. “You got the right guy, Garrett. Don’t doubt that for a minute. After we got the Prince’s go-ahead, we took that place apart. You wouldn’t believe what we found. They’d been in there a long time. They kept pieces of all their victims. There were bodies in the cellar, girls, but not the type. My guess is they used them for practice before they went after the real thing.”

I stared at the new corpse, listened to the flies sing. “There was one thing . . .” I told him about that missing clothing and knives. I’d discovered that Morley hadn’t taken away any souvenirs. I didn’t mention Morley’s name. It wouldn’t appeal to Block.

“You didn’t mention any of this before.”

“I thought everything was wrapped up before. But—”

“Yeah. But. Elvis!”

A nondescript Watchman hurried over. “Captain?”

“Show Mr. Garrett what you found.”

Elvis had a folded scrap of paper tucked into a pocket inside his rain cape. Inside it were three green butterflies. I shivered as though the rain had turned to sleet. “How long since the last murder?”

“Twelve days. This one was right on schedule.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” I’d been confident he would. I don’t know why I asked. Maybe I hoped he’d show me I was wrong.

“The killer is dead but the killing goes on. How can that be, Garrett?” Now I understood why Block was so rattled. This wasn’t just a matter of his career being in jeopardy.

“I don’t know. What happened to the old man’s body?”

“It was cremated. I saw them both go into the ovens.”

“What did you do with the old man from the Bustee? Did you get anything out of him?”

Block looked embarrassed. “He died.”

“Huh?”

“We tried too hard. Gave him too much of everything. He overdid himself to death.”

I just shook my head. It could only happen around me. “You recheck the Hamilton place since you found this?”

“Got the report before I came after you. Nothing there. No connection.”

“What about the coach?”

“Hasn’t moved. The wheels are chained so it can’t be. And the horses were sold. They didn’t belong there. They were squatters too.”

“Know who this girl is yet?”

“No. But it won’t be long before we do. She’ll be somebody.”

He meant she’d be related to somebody. None of the dead girls had been important in their own right yet, but they’d all come off the Hill. “If the pattern holds.” I was scared and confused. I told Block I was scared and confused and didn’t know what to do now, except, “We’d better talk it over with the Dead Man before we do anything. He did interview all those people.”

Block brightened. “Yeah. If there’s anything to start on, he ought to have it.”

I recalled my roast. That wonderful, expensive roast that had had me drooling for hours.

I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“It probably don’t mean a thing now,” I said, “but did you ever find out who we caught?”

“The old guy?”

No, dipshit. The lead horse in the team in . . . “Yes.”

Block glanced around, then whispered, “Idraca Matiston.”

“Whoa! Scares me. Who the hell is . . . *was* . . . Idraca Matiston.”

“Keep it down, will you?”

“Somebody, I take it, that was enough of a somebody that you don’t want word getting around.”

Whisper. “Idraca Matiston, Viscount Nettles. Lady Hamilton’s lover. Had a bit of a bizarre reputation to begin, which is why we wrapped it fast and quiet and other quarters let it out he’d passed on from complications. He was in and out of the Hamilton house all the time and nobody thought anything of it because he’d always been. Now I know what I know, I’d go back and take a closer look at Lady Hamilton’s mishap if the Prince would let me.”

“I still don’t know who you’re talking about. I don’t keep up with the ruling class’s scandals. Guess it doesn’t matter now, anyway.”

“No, it doesn’t. We’re under orders to forget that episode.”

I was willing to forget everything except when I looked at the young woman without her entrails. I shut up, did not press Block, but I did wonder about a woman who would take an antique like old butterfly-breath for her lover.



“Your dream came true,” I told Dean when he let us in. “I’m employed. You’d better be more careful what you wish for.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Worse. Go wake up the Dead Man.”

“What about supper? Everything is overdone now.” He almost whined. He’s proud of his cooking.

“If you’d seen what I did, you wouldn’t want to eat either.”

“Oh. Then I’ll have to get everything off the stove and put away right away.” Thus he evaded having to deal with the Dead Man. He has a real talent for getting out of things by having something else to do that has to get done first.

I told Block, “We may have to light a fire under him. I think he’s only been asleep about a week. Sometimes these spells last for months. Dean. Since you don’t want to handle His Nibs, you get to go get Morley.” That would fix him. He was less comfortable at Morley’s place than in the Dead Man’s room.

The brave Captain Block endured our juvenile maneuvers without comment. Maybe there was a human being in there. Maybe I could grow to like the guy, incompetence and all.

I led the way, storming the ramparts. Or whatever.

I hadn’t been into the Dead Man’s room since well before his nap began. Things had changed.

“Gods!” Block swore.

I made an inarticulate sound something like a squeal.

The place was full of bugs. Big bugs, little bugs, enough bugs to carry the Dead Man away if they got into teamwork. And I knew who was to blame.

The fat stiff had worked a deal with Saucerhead behind my back. The real question was, how had he worked it so the creepy-crawlies hadn’t gotten into the rest of the house to give his scheme away? I muttered, “I hope you’re enjoying your dreams about the Cantard.” Despite my efforts, chitin crunched underfoot.

“What is this?” Block asked.

“He collects bugs. Believe it or not. And doesn’t bother to get rid of them when he’s done playing with them. Now I’ll have to use sulfur candles again. I hate it when I have to do that.” I wondered if Dean had been in on the deal. Probably. That would explain the absence of the cat. He’d know I’d start exterminating as soon as I found out. No cat would survive a thorough sulfur-candle job.

I started considering doing a sulfur-candle job on myself. It had been half an hour.

“He dead?” Block asked. “Like for good?” His Nibs hadn’t twitched a mental muscle.

“No. Just napping. Really. He picks his times for when it’s most inopportune.”

“How come?”

I shrugged. “These things happen to me.”

“What do you do?”

“Fuss and fume and threaten to light a fire under him. Scream and yell and run in circles.”

“What if that don’t work?”

“Then I muddle through on my own.” I started loosening up to do my screaming and circling. I’d exhausted fuss and fume and threaten.

Block started wadding scrap paper from a trash box nobody had emptied in an epoch. He tossed the wads under the Dead Man’s chair. I got attentive. “What’re you doing?” My money was under there. I hoped he hadn’t noticed.

“Going to start that fire you mentioned.”

“Hell, you got balls after all.” I talked about it but never seriously considered doing it. I leaned against the doorframe, watched. This could get interesting.

The bugs started getting excited—more excited than they usually do when someone is stomping around. I began to suspect that my partner wasn’t as far away as he’d like me to think.

Block grabbed a lamp.

Damn. He was going to go for it. All the way. I wouldn’t interfere in it for anything. Grinning, I observed, “I figure the fire will get his attention before it’s big enough to be a threat to the house. After four hundred years he’s pretty dried out. Ever hear about how when the Dewife invaded Polkta they couldn’t find enough wood to heat their stills—no trees in Polkta—so they dragged old mummies out of the ancient Polktan tombs and burned them instead?”

Block paused. “Really?” He had a big dopey frown on.

“Really. A body dries out for a few hundred years, it’ll burn. Not great, but good enough so you don’t have to do without your liquor.”

“Oh.” Block didn’t care about *curiosa*. In fact, he was baffled. What did this have to do with a bunch of drunken barbarian tomb robbers in a faraway land a hundred years ago?

I had to wonder about the man. And my cherished notions about the Watch. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they weren’t all bone-lazy and graft-bitten. Maybe some were well-meaning—like Block most of the time—but were too stupid to handle their jobs.

Block squatted to shove the lamp under the Dead Man’s chair.

Call him off, Garrett.

“It lives! Hang in there, Captain. I’m starting to get something.”

Garrett!

“Take a peek inside a head or two, Old Bones. We’ve got a problem.”

Block froze, flange a foot from the wastepaper, eyes a hair too high to spot my stash.

I have called you a curse upon my waning years, Garrett. I have been too kind. Many a time have I been tempted to terminate our association. I should have yielded. You are rude, pushy, thoughtless, uncouth. Only a certain crude charm shields you.

“My mother loved me. But what did she know, eh?”

I could spend hours cataloging your shortcomings. But this is not the time.

“You’ve done it often enough that I know them by heart anyway.”

Excellent. You do have your redeeming virtues.

First time I’d heard that from him. Tinnie and Maya and one or twelve other ladies had mentioned an occasional virtue and a more-than-occasional failing, but—

Including an all-consuming laziness. However, this once, you were correct to disturb me.

“Gods, you can carry me away. I’ve seen it all now.”

Your manners are deplorable. You might have found a more civil means of obtaining my attention. But your assessment is correct. You cannot handle this without my assistance.

Smug character, eh? I signaled Block to back off. “He’s awake.” I breathed easier with the Watchman away from the household fortune.

I feared it would come to this. The hints were there. But I allowed your success on the Hill, come so swift and with such apparent finality, to deceive me. Because I wanted it to be true. Yes. Even master realists such as myself may, in a lifetime, succumb occasionally to wishful thinking. The mind and the heart naturally eschew horror.

Brag about your failures loudly, longly, humbly, and you can make a virtue of them. Make it look like you’re a regular guy. I asked, “How come I get the feeling you weren’t asleep at all, you were just rehearsing? Cut the aw-shucks comedy, Chuckles. Girls are dying right on schedule. They shouldn’t be. You talked to everybody who had anything to do with the others. Did you get anything? Give us an angle. Tell us how to stop this thing for good.”

That may not be possible. Not in the sense you mean. If it is what I feared at first glimpse. Captain Block, I need to know about that man you took from the Bustee. Garrett, I want to know about those ritual knives.

I felt him digging into my mind, deeper than usual. Presumably he was doing the same to Block at the same time. Block’s eyes got huge. In my case I felt him digging after things I hadn’t noticed noticing at the site of the most recent murder.

It’s neither fun nor comfortable having somebody prowl through your head. I hate it. You’d hate it too. There are things in there that nobody ought to know. But I didn’t shut him out.

I can do that—if I work at it hard enough.

He surprised me. *Butterflies?*

“Yes. So?”

Three times now, butterflies. This is a new twist. Though no one has mentioned butterflies in connection with any of the victims you did not see yourself, I feel that we are dealing with a single killer.

“No shit?” I couldn’t see there being a bunch of guys all getting the same idea: hey, wouldn’t it be

neat if I found me a pretty young brunette and strung her up and bled her and cut her guts out?

Indeed, Garrett. Absolutely. One particularly interesting fact that emerged from my interview series was that the blond young lady, Tania Fahkien, was not a natural blond. In fact, the state of blondness had befallen her only hours before her demise.

“Are any of them natural blonds? Not many, in my experience.”

Just so. The point is, the coloring of the victims is worth pursuit.

Even Block had gotten that far. I said so.

Of course. But we forgot that in our excitement over having brought the killer to ruin. Correct?

“The details do seem inconsequential when you’ve got your bad guy nailed down and everything wrapped. You said you feared this. Did you have some idea what was going on before I spoiled everything by getting lucky but not as lucky as I thought?”

Yes. As you suspect, these sorts of murders have come around before. I know of three previous series, though without any direct knowledge of the first two outbreaks. Those occurred while I was still among the ambulatory, surrounded by a people whose foibles and tribulations were, at best, of marginal and academic interest. The victim types and killing methods were similar, but insofar as I recall, there were no butterflies.

“So maybe nobody noticed. You don’t see what you’re not looking for.” But Block’s one man had.

Perhaps. There was no reason to look for butterflies. Though, as I noted, I was not that interested in those outbreaks—other than as behavioral curiosities amongst the unwashed and ignorant latecoming barbarian, a creature capable of firing his distilleries with the remains of his dead.

He does like to get his needles in. “All right. You know something. You said you feared this. How about you get to the point before all the brunettes in town are lost to us? I confess to a personal penchant for redheads, but brunettes are a valuable resource in their own right.”

Horrors out of olden times, Garrett.

“It’s happened before. Right? Surprise me a surprise. Fact me a fact.”

I was never involved with those prior cycles. Yet they were dramatic enough to stick in mind, though with few useful details.

“I can see that.” I was getting exasperated. And he was enjoying that. “How about remembering what you can remember?”

He sighed mentally but forged boldly into new territory by ignoring my impatience. *Then, as now, the victims fell into a narrow range of physical characteristics. They were female, young, brunette, attractive by human standards, with very similar features. In fact, facial similarities seemed more important than height or weight.*

The faces of many women flickered through my mind, as he had reconstructed them from his interviews and ancient recollections. None were related, but all could have passed as sisters. All had faces much like that of Chodo’s daughter—if not as pale—and wore their hair as she had when I’d run into her at Hullar’s . . .

Hey. For the first time I realized that she’d worn her hair differently there. That she’d had a full head of hair, hanging long, not the helmet I’d seen at Morley’s place.

Hairstyle could be a key. The Dead Man produced several notions of styles from olden times. The faces and figures remained vague, but the hairstyles were identical with that worn by Chodo’s daughter

at Hullar's. All the recently departed had had bushels of hair.

"So maybe we got us an unhappy hairdresser," Block said. "Stalking down the corridors of history, eliminating the gauche and passé." The man had a sense of humor after all. Weird, but he had one.

I said, "This mess is getting kind of spooky, Smiley." And I wasn't alone in thinking so. Despite his flirtation with levity, Block was green around the gills.

There is sorcery in it, Garrett. Grim, gruesome, ancient, and evil sorcery. Necromancy of the darkest form. Dead men who have gone to the crematorium do not rise up and resume their atrocities.

"Really?" What genius. "Hell, I figured that out." I'm not a detective for nothing. Deductive reasoning. Or was it inductive? I can never keep those two straight.

There is a curse at work. If this outbreak is indeed connected with those that went before, it is a very potent curse. In those cases, when the guilty parties were apprehended and executed, the killings stopped.

"But did start up again later."

Eventually. Apparently. After generations.

"They started up again right away this time," Block said.

This was the first time the guilty party was caught quickly. This was the first time without a trial and execution. This was the first time the guilty party was cremated.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Block demanded. He was into the thing now. In fact, he was back over by that lamp looking like he was thinking about starting a fire just to make the Dead Man get on with it.

He wasn't as dumb as he pretended.

As I recollect, the earlier killers were caught, tried, convicted, and hanged. Two were hanged. I believe the first was beheaded. Beheading was the punishment in fashion then. In each case the remains went into unmarked graves.

Executed criminals still go into unmarked graves. That's part of the punishment. "And?" I asked.

"So?" from Block.

Garrett, Garrett, must you be so determinedly thick of wit? I have given you everything you need. Use your brain for something more than landfill that keeps your ears from clacking together.

The same old challenge. Use my gods-given mind and talents to figure it out for myself. He's no fun at all. But he thinks he's bringing me up right.

Block grabbed the lamp and headed for the Dead Man's chair.

I waved him off. "He's right. Sort of. He's given us what we need. Anyway, if you bully him, he gets stubborn. It's a pride thing. He'll let you burn him and the house both before he'll give you a straighter answer."

Block eyeballed me a moment before he decided I was telling it straight. "A goddamned oracle, eh?" He put the lamp back where it belonged. "So what's he talking about? Where's our point of attack?"

I didn't have the foggiest. All I knew was that the Dead Man had seen some fog, and if he had, then it was right there in front of my face.

Of course, you not being in the middle of it, stressed out and confused and still smelling the stink of a girl who died in terror, you have it all scoped out and you're telling yourself that Garrett, he's too dumb to be believed.

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I nearly had it. I started to get a eureka grin. My unconscious was hinting that it might pay off if I was a good boy. But then somebody went to hammering on the door. The front door is the curse of my life. Could I brick it up? Slide in and out the back way? If some pest found himself facing nothing but rough brick, would he persist in trying to inflict himself on me?

I lost whatever was about to surface. I glanced at Block. He looked like he was having trouble figuring out how to spell his own name. No help there. I trudged to the door, glanced through the peephole. I saw Morley and Dean staring back. I was tempted to leave them there. But Morley was the kind of guy who would chew his way through a door if he thought you were letting him cool his heels. Anyway, he didn't deserve to be left out in the rain. And I didn't see how I could let him in without admitting Dean too, so I opened up and let the whole crowd stamp in with their ingrate comments about how long it ought to take to unlock a door.

It occurred to me, not for the first time, that I could sell my place for a lot more than I paid for the wreck it was when I bought it. I could move on somewhere where no one knew me. I could get me a real job, put in my ten or twelve hours a day, and suffer no hassles the rest of the time. Whoever bought my place could enjoy what I left behind. I could make the sale more attractive by offering the house's contents at no extra cost. *Caveat emptor*. So long, Dean. Good-bye, Dead Man.

"You got me over here, you'd better catch my attention fast," Morley told me. Not even a query about my health. But what are friends for, if not to make us feel little and unloved? "I've got a date—"

"Indeed." I tried my Dead Man impression. "You will recall a certain corpse in a certain coach house on a certain Hill, not so long ago? Relating to a certain series of distinctly unpleasant murders?"

"As in the waste of high-grade dalliance talent?"

"Probably for someone far less deserving than you or I, but yes. The one we came across during our evening constitutional one night." Why were we doing this? I'd started it and I didn't know—except that Dean was there to witness whatever we said. But why should I care what Dean thought? The guy liked cats. There's something fundamentally wrong with a guy who likes cats. Why should his opinion concern me?

"What about it?"

"This about it. The gentleman who got his deserts that night, despite having found his way into a city crematorium, hasn't given up his hobby."

"Say what?" Morley couldn't stay with the game.

"There's been another murder. Just like the others. Right on schedule. We don't know who she was yet, but we will soon." I gave a jerk of the head toward the Dead Man's room. "Official company. The Dead Man tells us there's a curse involved. Sorcery."

"No! Really?"

"You don't have to take that tone. Dean! You have work to do. You want to hang out here twenty-six hours a day, you damned well better . . ."

He might be in his seventies, but he didn't let the years slow him a bit. He stuck his tongue out like

he was six. Then he headed for the kitchen fast as a glacier, smoke boiling around his heels. As he fled I told Morley about my plan to sell the place, as is, to anybody who had a few marks to invest. He didn't jump at the opportunity. Dean wasn't impressed with the threat. I had to spend more time on the streets, had to learn how to be nasty again.

Dean beat the seven-year locusts to the kitchen. I celebrated the new age by nudging Morley into my office, explaining the situation here. Being Morley, part elf and familiar with things sorcerous and eldritch, he cut straight to the heart of it, immediately finding the thing that had been nagging me since the Dead Man had told me he'd given me enough to go on.

"The man you skragged was naked when you brought the Watch captain. The men buried in the old days would have gone into the ground wearing whatever they had on when they were executed. Which would have been what they were wearing when they were caught. The clothes must be the key. Or something the old boy had on him. An amulet. Jewelry. Something that whoever got into the coach house took when he stripped the corpse."

"Cut it." By that point I'd gotten the point, if you follow me. It wasn't the man that was cursed, it was something that went with the man. Like maybe some knives.

I shuddered. I shivered. I went cold all over. This was grim.

I would have to do some legwork. One hell of a lot of legwork. I would have to dig out records that went back to imperial times to see what the villains had in common. What piece of apparel, decoration, or whatnot, that might carry a curse compelling a man to waste ladies who ought to be conserved for fates sometimes known as worse than death.

Is it really worse, girls?

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The case had developed a certain rhythm. I should have expected what happened next, as I was about to rejoin Block and the Dead Man. It was guaranteed.

Somebody pounded on the door. "Three guys with knives," I muttered as I headed that way, Dean having proclaimed himself incapacitated before the pounding stopped.

I peeped through the peephole. "I wish it was three guys with knives." I considered pretending nobody was home. But Barking Dog knew better. He had come around often enough to know our dark secret. Somebody was always home.

I opened up. "Uhm?"

"Been more than a week, Garrett. You ain't been over to get my papers." He bulled in behind the usual aromatic advance guard, dripping. He produced his latest report.

"You writing the history of the world?"

"What else I got to do? It don't stop raining. I don't like getting wet."

"I noticed."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Cabin fever's making me cranky. Maybe you ought to polish your speeches. It can't rain forever."

"No. Only all day every day. You noticed that? It's mostly just raining during the daytime? How did the weather get so screwed up, Garrett?"

I thought about tossing him something flip about the Cantard and stormwardens but feared he'd go off the deep end with some wild new theory.

"You'd think the gods themselves don't want me spreading the truth."

"Them probably more than most mortals." I left it at that, mostly because I didn't get a chance to say anything more,

Barking Dog froze. His eyes got huge, his breathing ragged. He threw one hand up, fingers twisting into the sign against the evil eye. He said, "Gah! Gah! Gah!" in a high squeak, retreated toward the door. "It's him!" he croaked. "Garrett! It's him!"

Him was Captain Block, who stood in the doorway to the Dead Man's room, gaping. When I turned back to Amato, I saw nothing but the door closing behind him.

"Gah! Gah!" I said, making the horns. "What was that?"

Block asked, "What was Amato doing here?"

"Him and the Dead Man are buddies. They get together to make up stories about the secret masters. It's amazing how they get along. What's your story? How do you know Barking Dog?"

Block's cheek twitched. He looked like he wasn't sure where he stood. "In the course of my labors as a minion of the hidden manipulators, the puppet masters who pull the strings on marionette judges and functionaries, I was forced to circumscribe Mr. Amato's freedom."

I laughed. "You arrested him?"

"I didn't arrest him, Garrett. Whatever he claims. I just asked him to come talk to a man who was put out about something he said. He'd have been fine if he could've kept his mouth shut for five minutes. But he just couldn't resist tearing into the best audience he ever had. One thing led to another. I had to take him in front of a magistrate for a formal warning about libel. He couldn't stop running his mouth. Donner doesn't have a sense of humor. He doesn't find Barking Dog an amusing street character. The more he bore down, the more Amato jacked his jaw. So he got pissed, gave Amato fifty-five days for contempt. And all of that is *this* running dog's fault. You never heard such carrying on as when we were walking him over to the Al-Khar. Hell, if he could've kept his mouth shut then, I'd probably have screwed up and let him get away. But he pissed *me* off."

"A different view of events," I said. "Though his version isn't much different. He said it was his own fault."

Block chuckled, but grimly. "I wish all our rebels were as harmless."

"Huh?"

"One of the reasons the Prince wants to get serious is, he thinks we're on the brink of chaos. The way he puts it, if the Crown can't demonstrate its willingness to fulfill its social contract with the Karentine people, in an obvious and popular fashion, we'll head into a period of increasing instability. The first sign will be the appearance of neighborhood vigilante groups."

"We already have those, some places."

"I know. He thinks they'll get stronger and become politicized. Fast, if Glory Mooncalled stays lucky. Each time he makes fools of us, more movers and shakers head down there to help tame him. The more that go, the fewer there are to keep the peace here.

"He thinks the vigilantes may connect up, form private militias. Then different groups that don't agree politically will go to knocking each other's heads."

"Got it. Some might even take a notion to get rid of the folks running things now."

“The Crown could end up as one more gang on the streets.”

Good boy me, I didn't say a word about that.

Overall, we Karentine rabble are unpolitical. All we want is to be left alone. We avoid what taxes we can, but do pay some as protection money. You pay a little here and there, the tax goons don't grab everything. Near as I can tell, that's the common man's traditional relationship with the state—unless he's a state thug himself.

I said, “I might have to take a closer look at this prince—if he really thinks the Crown is something besides a mechanism for squeezing out cash to benefit the privileged classes.” I buttered too much sneer onto my remarks. Block didn't understand that I was being cynical and sarcastic instead of seditious. He gave me a thoroughly dirty look.

I said, “Maybe I should pay more attention to the fable about Barking Dog's running mouth.”

“Maybe, Garrett.”

“What did you do down there?”

That's a question every veteran understands. And every human male adult in TunFaire who can stand on his hind legs, and plenty who can't anymore, are veterans. The one thing the Crown does very well indeed is find every man eligible for conscription.

“Army. Combat infantry to begin, then long-range recon. After I was wounded they moved me into military police. I saved a baronet's ass once, which is how I came to get this job.”

A hero. But that didn't mean squat. Most everyone who lives long enough to get out does something heroic sometime. Even some downright nasty scum, like Crask, have medals they trot out. It's a different world in the Cantard. It's a different reality. Regardless of where they stand, heroes or villains, the men with the medals show them off with pride.

Contradictions. Being human is contradictory. I've known killers who were artists, and artists who were killers. The man who painted Eleanor was a genius in both fields. Both natures had tortured him. His torment ended only when he crossed paths with someone even crazier.

I said, “We're wandering far afield. Let's scope out what to do about this killer.”

“You buy that about it coming back from the dead?”

“You mean like there's been outbreaks before?”

Block nodded.

“From him, yeah. I buy it. We'd better dig into the old records. You have the manpower and access for that, and the clout to get around functionaries.”

“What do I look for?”

“I don't know. A common thread. Anything. If the same spirit is coming back again and again, then it's been caught and stopped before. We see what they did back then, we can do it now. And maybe figure out how they screwed up so the cure didn't take.”

“If your buddy don't have something he caught from Barking Dog.”

“Yeah. If.”

“What're you going to do?”

“I saw the first guy alive and dressed. I'll work the clothes and hope I get lucky again.”

He eyed me narrowly. He thought I knew something. I did, but what good would it do to tell him there was a survivor of a murder attempt—and she was Chodo Contague's kid? He'd get himself a case

of heart troubles complicated by hemorrhoids.

“Right. So tell me one thing, Garrett. What the hell is Morley Dotes doing here?”

He wasn't dumb enough not to know that Morley and I went way back. “I know what he is, Block. And I know what he isn't.” But how to explain that this professional killer never offered anybody who hadn't asked for it? How explain that Morley had standards less flexible than most people on the right side of the law? “He's my window onto the other side of TunFaire. There's anything to find out there, he'll find it.” I hoped.

I wasn't sure why I'd sent Dean for Morley, now, though it had seemed the thing to do at the time. Maybe he could conjure me a connection with Chodo's kid. She had to know something. Her pretty head might hold the one fact we needed to nail this butterfly freak.

Right. She was the type who saw nothing but herself. She'd probably forgotten butterfly granddad as soon as the fear went away.

Block scowled, not liking Morley being involved. Gods spare me the born again—even when they're born again only so they can cover their asses. “Don't go righteous on me,” I said. “It won't help.” How did he know, anyway? Morley was keeping his head down.

Block's scowl deepened. “I'll go get my men started. I'll let you know what they find.”

Sure he would. After he milked every ounce of advantage. My opinion of him had improved, but not so much I didn't think he was a born functionary. Him using me was still a desperation measure.

“Do.” I saw him into the drizzle, then went to find out what the Dead Man thought.



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“Another thousand marks if I wrap it permanently?”

So the man promised. He delivered before. The Dead Man was pleased with himself for having wangled another cash commitment from Block.

“Occasionally I've complained about the way you—”

Occasionally? Would you not prefer 'frequently'? Or 'consistently'? Possibly even 'persistently' or 'continuously'?

“Once in a while. Whenever the seven-year locusts sing. But I did want to make the opposite point. That was a coup, getting him to pay again.”

He is desperate.

“And desperate times are the best times for those who are alert to opportunity. I understand. What do you think about interviewing Chodo's daughter?”

Morley had invited himself out of my office into the Dead Man's room. Now he invited himself to comment. “This came up before. My overtures were *not* greeted with cries of joy.”

“Leave it to me. I got style. Get word to Crask that I want to talk about the girl. Don't say what girl. He don't know I know who she is.”

“I don't get it. How can he not know? . . .”

“You don't have to get it. Just tell him I want to talk to him about a girl. You don't say which one, he'll know what I mean. Him and me can take it from there.”

“You’re working an angle, Garrett. You ought to know better. You always get yourself into deep shit. What is it? Don’t try anything with the kingpin’s kid. You get a notion like that, slash your wrists and save the rest of us some grief.”

“What do you think?” I asked the Dead Man.

An interview with the girl may prove unproductive, but an interview is necessary to demonstrate that. If possible, arrange to see her here.

“The very core of my master plan.”

You lie. But I do trust your sense of self-preservation will deflect your inclinations.

“I am a mature human being, sir. I do not look upon all members of the opposite sex as objects of desire.”

Morley sneered. “Only those over eight and under eighty.”

“You’re not helping. Sure, I don’t plan to be in bed alone when I go. But I don’t plan to go for a couple centuries, either.”

Ha. I convinced me. All but one tiny part that wondered what I’d do if Chodo’s daughter suffered some miraculous remission and not only became able to see me but decided to whisper sweet nothings . . . Sometimes even the stoutest-hearted of us white knights find the dictates of reason, conscience, and survival overruled by parts not amenable to the dictates of the mind. There’s a sociopath in each of us just waiting to miss the connection between an act and its consequences.

“Right.” Morley didn’t believe me.

I got the impression the Dead Man didn’t either.

My own doubts were less apocalyptic. I’d seen enough of the woman to have become deafened to the sirens of that fantasy. I might snort and stamp, but I wouldn’t lose control. She wasn’t my type.

We talked about this and that till Morley decided he’d heard enough bad news. He said, “If I’m away too long, Puddle and Sarge and the kid will have me set for the poorhouse.”

“Sure. Let’s go watch them race the flying pigs.” I saw Morley out, rejoined the Dead Man.

What now, Garrett?

“I’m thinking real hard about taking a nap.”

Indeed? And what was that Mr. Amato brought? I trust that you do recall that we have another iron in the fire?

“Come on. You want me to drag that mess down to Hullar?”

It occurred to me that doing so might be useful in more than the obvious way. When you deliver the report, invest a few minutes in trying to learn if anyone knows why the Contague woman turned up there.

“I did wonder about that.”

But you were not ambitious enough to pursue it. You really must make TNT your motto, Garrett.

“TNT?”

Today, Not Tomorrow. Take it from an expert. The only thing one should defer is one’s final appointment with Death.

Hang around with the Dead Man long enough and you can read him well enough to get messages that aren’t in his words. What he hadn’t said but meant was that if I didn’t go make myself a nuisance at

Hullar's place, I wouldn't get any peace at home.

You compromise. That's life. Every day you make deals that buy you peace—or an opportunity for a good night's sleep.

I decided the path of least resistance lay through Bishoff Hullar's taxi-dance place.

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Crunch and I were getting to be buddies. After only five minutes of squinting and thinking he remembered that I preferred beer. That saved him one question in his routine. I saved him the others by asking for a pint of Weider's pale lager, then told him, "Tell Hullar Garrett's here."

"Garrett. Right." He tiptoed away. I waited for his feet and beard to disagree. No such luck. That dwarf defied the laws of nature.

He took a while. I sipped beer and surveyed the place. I'd never seen it so busy. It was jumping. Three couples were dancing while the band snored through something I might have recognized had it been played by real musicians. Three tables boasted customers. There wasn't a girl left over to hustle me—though by now they had me pegged for a waste. They remembered better than Crunch did.

One of the girls caught my eye. She was new. She had some life left. And she was a great actress—unless she really was having a good time. She was younger than the rest, an attractive brunette who looked enough like the brunette I'd seen earlier to cool my fantasies.

"Be out in a minute," Crunch said behind me. I'd turned to lean against the bar while I studied the local wildlife. I glanced over my shoulder. Crunch looked back, puzzled. He didn't understand what was going on. He had an idea I was a bagman for the outfit, only I made deliveries instead of collections.

I'd caught him on a real good day first time around. Most of the time he was like this. Puzzled. By everything.

"Who's the brunette there, Crunch?"

He squinted, had trouble making her out. He fumbled out a pair of cheaters, perched them on his nose, pushed them back with a finger like a dried-out potato. I was surprised. Glasses are expensive. "That there's the new girl, mister."

Right. "Come with a name?" Her or me?

He puzzled it but didn't come up with anything before Hullar descended on the stool beside me, his back to the bar too. He accepted a mug from Crunch. "It don't get no better than this, Garrett."

I glanced his way. I read no more from his expression than from his tone. Was he saying this was heaven on earth? Was he stating a fact about business? Was he being sarcastic? Maybe he didn't know himself.

I handed him Barking Dog's latest.

"Shit. Don't you got nothing else to do? All I want to know is, is the crazy bastard getting his tit in a wringer? I don't need to know every time he picks his nose."

A point I kept trying to get across to Barking Dog. I said, "First time I dropped in here, Crask was here."

"Crask?" Wary, suddenly.

"Crask. Like from the outfit. He was talking to the musicians."

“If you say so. I don’t remember.”

He remembered fine. Else he wouldn’t have so much trouble with his memory. “A girl walked in just as I was going to leave. She headed for Crunch like she had something on her mind, only she spotted Crask and suddenly hightailed it.”

“If you say so. I don’t remember none of that.”

“What can you tell me about her?”

“Nothing.” He was real definite about that. So definite it was a cinch I’d be beating my head against a wall if I kept after him. I’ve used my noggin to dent a few walls in my time. All that banging has taught me how to tell when it’s going to be the head and not the wall that gets broken.

I dropped it. “Who’s the new girl?”

He shrugged. “They come and go. They don’t stick for a while, you never find out. Calls herself Candy. That’s not the truth. Why?”

My turn to shrug. “I don’t know. Something different about her. She’s having fun.”

“Get those sometimes. Do it for the kick. Takes all kinds to make a horse race, Garrett.” He tapped Barking Dog’s report. “What’s this shit say? He alive?”

“Same old Barking Dog, only going bonkers because the rain won’t let up long enough for him to preach.”

“Good. Next time, just tell me that. Never mind you bury me with five hundred pages of every time he picked a zit. I maybe agreed on expenses, but not on that much paper.”

I didn’t look at Hullar. He wasn’t in one of his better moods, but neither did he want to be left alone. Tenderloin people are that way. They want to spend time with somebody from outside who isn’t a customer or somebody with a moral ax to grind. They just want to feel like real people sometimes.

They *are* real people. Maybe realer than most. They’re more in contact with reality than are those who buy their time or those who condemn them. Their real sin is that they’ve shed their illusions.

Hullar missed his illusions. He wanted to be distracted from those nights when this was as good as it got. “Up for a story?” I asked.

“What kind?”

“Good guys and bad guys and lots of pretty girls. What I’m doing besides peeping Barking Dog.”

“Shoot. But don’t look for me to give you no help.”

“Gods forfend. It’s just an interesting mess.” I gave him most of it, edited where appropriate.

“That’s sick, Garrett. Real sick. I thought I heard of every freak there was, but this’s a new one. Them poor girls. And butterflies?”

“Butterflies. I don’t know if they’ve got anything to do with it.”

“Weird. You got a curse at work. Or something. Maybe you ought to find you a necromancer. Hey! I know. I know a guy, weird but real good, goes by Dr. Doom—”

“We’ve met. I don’t think he’d be much help.” Weird for sure, Doom was more fraud than expert. I think. He did have a knack for laying ghosts. I’d bring him in if that was what it took.

Hullar shrugged. “You know your situation.”

“Yeah. Desperate.” I eyed the happy brunette. “In more ways than one.” I wondered if there might not be something to the idea of apologizing to Tinnie. Fate wasn’t throwing anything else my way.

Hullar saw me looking. He snickered. “Go ahead, Garrett. Give it your best shot. But I’ll tell you this. Candy’s all talk and no play. She’s the kind that, far as she’s concerned, it’s good enough to know she could’ve got you if she wanted. She gets you there, she starts looking for the next one.”

“Story of my life.” I levered myself off my stool. “Catch you later. Got an appointment with an overcooked roast.”

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Dean does miracles when he wants. The roast wasn’t a disaster, considering. The go-alongs were excellent. I ate till I was ready to pop. Then, though it was early, I rambled into the hall and stared upstairs, awaiting a flood of ambition. It was a long climb to a cold, lonely bed.

This is where the sad strings are due—only with my luck, the orchestra would whip into an overture.

Right. It wasn’t mood music I got, it was: *Garrett! Come report.* Not quite an overture. But close enough.

No point arguing. The sooner done, the sooner to sleep.

What sleep? When I finished telling about my visit to Hullar I got: *I want you to go back there. Work the Tenderloin for the next nine evenings. Spend time with that Candy.*

“Huh?”

A notion has been brooding in the back of my rear brain. Your assessment of Candy as out-of-place hatched it.

“Huh?” What repartee. “What about all the legwork? The research on olden villains?”

Take care of that days. Work the Tenderloin nights, watching for young ladies off the Hill amusing themselves by playing lower-class roles.

It clicked. Candy. Chodo’s kid. High-class girls hanging out in low-class dives. For the kicks? Not unlikely. “If that’s some fad—”

I will ask Captain Block to revisit the families of the dead girls. I may have interviewed the wrong people. Sisters and girlfriends might have been wiser. Parents are the last to know what their youngsters are doing.

“You may be onto something.” Only a few victims had known one another, and that only casually. But if you put sisters and girlfriends and a fad for slumming into the gaps, you might find a pattern.

We might indeed.

“What do I look for?”

Girls who fit the killer’s particulars. Maybe we can identify the next victim before she is taken. We have nine days before the killer must slake his need. If the pattern proves out, if the girls were playing games, we will know how and where the killer selects his victims. With Captain Block’s help we can watch all potential victims and grab our man when he strikes.

“I’m way ahead of you now. Only, do we have to start tonight?”

TNT, Garrett. You have not been shortchanged on sleep recently.

True. And I was too fired up to sleep now anyway. Might as well go drink beer and ogle girls in the line of duty.

Hell. All of a sudden this mess had begun to look a little interesting.

TunFaire by night becomes a different city. Especially when there's no rain. It had stopped raining. For the moment. I carried my raincloak over one arm and strolled, checking out the nightside.

The ratman hordes were about their legitimate tasks of cleaning and illegitimate tasks of removing everything not nailed down. Kobolds and gnomes and numerous varieties of little people dashed here and there on business. Sometimes I wonder how so many peoples can live side by side with so little contact. Sometimes I think TunFaire is a whole series of cities that just happen to occupy the same geographical position.

I saw a troll family, obvious bumpkins, gaping at the sights. I got propositioned by a giantess of ill repute who was, evidently, suffering a business slump. I ran into a band of goblins riding red-eyed hounds that looked more wolfish than domesticated. I'd never seen goblins before. I walked with them a ways, swapped stories.

They were bounty hunters. They specialized in tracing runaway wives. They were a ferocious, unpleasant bunch clinging grimly to an old trail. The goblin woman they were after was, evidently, smarter than the bunch of them put together.

They had plans for when they caught up. They never doubted they could outlast a mere woman.

It would seem wives are a premium commodity amongst goblins, where five or six males are born for every female. Goblins don't go in for polyandry or equal rights or homosexuality or any of that wimp stuff. Real macho men, male goblins. One-third will die in fights over females before age twenty-three.

I watched the hunters ride off and didn't blame goblin wives for cutting out first chance they got.

I encountered several families of centaurs, refugees from the Cantard, working together, doing bearer-type jobs. What a concept. Jackasses with the brains and hands to load and unload themselves.

I have almost as little love for centaurs as I do for ratmen. The only centaur I ever knew well was a thorough villain.

There were dwarves everywhere. Day and night, TunFaire teams with dwarves. They're industrious little buggers. All they do is work. If they could figure out how, they'd do without sleep.

What you don't see much of at night, outside certain areas, is human people. You do see a human, be careful. Chances are his intentions aren't honest or honorable.

That, in fact, can usually be counted on to get you by—if you're young and strong and don't look an easy mark. Most people will stay away. Only the nastiest, craziest bad boys prey on other bad boys.

Hell. There I go giving the wrong impression. What I'm talking about is late nights, after the entertainment hours. Much later than it was then. People were out. I wasn't seeing them because I wasn't following the streets they usually chose for safety.

Sometimes I tempt fate.

At one point I joined several ratmen in a fast fade into an alley. We watched a gang of ogres tramp past, grumbling and cussing. They were headed for the north gate, on their way to hunt thunder-lizards. Night is the best time to hunt them. The beasts are sluggish then. There's good money in thunder-lizard hides. They make the toughest leather.

I don't like ogres much either, but wished this bunch luck. The southward migration of the thunder-lizards has been rough on the farmers, who have been losing both fields and livestock. More, it's always nice to see an ogre doing something honest. You don't very often.

Crunch recognized me right away. He plopped a pint onto the bar. “You back?”

“No. It’s my evil twin.”

He thought about that, couldn’t make sense of it, asked, “Need to see Hullar?”

“Wouldn’t hurt. If he’s not busy.”

“Hullar’s never busy. Got nothing to do.” Off he went. He didn’t step on his beard this time either. He was a magician.

I scanned the place. Business had dropped off, but the girls were still occupied. There were two I hadn’t seen before. Two daytime girls were gone. The new girls were a blond and a brunette not of the sort at risk. Both seemed out-of-place.

Maybe the Dead Man was right. Maybe the girls were slumming.

The streets are no place to play if you don’t know them. You’ll make more than your share of lethal mistakes if you come down off the Hill wearing your arrogances and assumptions. The natives won’t be impressed.

Of course, if it’s a game, maybe you’ll forget your superiorities while you’re playing. Until you get into a tight place.

Hullar waddled out, dragged himself up onto a stool, sucked up a beer Crunch had waiting, scanned the action, shrugged. You couldn’t disappoint Bishoff Hullar. A man after my own heart, he expected the worst. “Slumming, Garrett?”

“Not exactly.”

“I can’t believe you’ve taken a shine to the place. A man with your rep.”

“No. This has to do with that other thing I’m working.”

“The murders. You didn’t tell me there was another one last night.”

Word was getting around. “I got to thinking over supper. About Candy and the girl who wasn’t in here the other day, that you and Crunch never saw and don’t know. Occurred to me the rich girls might be playing bad girls, just for fun. Like the blond and brunette, there. Don’t look like the sort I’d expect in here.”

“Uhm?”

“You know the Tenderloin, Hullar. You know what’s going down. There a fad among the rich girls, bored because the guys are off to war?”

“How come you want to know?”

“Maybe my girl-killer spots his victims down here. Maybe I can spot him looking for his next target.”

“You in the guardian-angel racket?”

I grunted.

“You been out of touch, Garrett. Yeah. The rich broads been coming down. Not just the kids, neither. Them that only want into it at the edge work places like mine. The wild ones, mostly older ones, end up peddling their asses at the Passionate Witch or Black Thunder or someplace. The outfit goes easy on them. They’re good for business. You got a skillion lowlifes would love to throw the pork to some high-tone lady.”

“I understand the psychology.”

“Don’t we all. Don’t we all. And that’s what’ll cause the trouble.”

“Hmm?”

“Good for business, having all this fine young stuff down here. Gotten a lot of cash moving despite the weather. But how long before their fathers and husbands catch on? Then what do we got? Eh?”

“Good point.” The parents wouldn’t be pleased. And, human nature being what it is, the girls wouldn’t get the blame. The richer people are, the less they seem able to hold their kids responsible for their actions. “How many of them you figure there are?” Couldn’t be a lot or there would’ve been a lot of excitement already.

“I don’t get around much, Garrett. I ain’t out there counting heads and figuring who’s working the Tenderloin why. You know what I mean?”

“I know.”

“But they do stand out. People talk. You ask me, tops, there’s maybe been a hundred. Biggest part is over now. Just a few come-latelies and them that gets a special jolt from going bad. You got maybe thirty these days, mostly hard-core. Ones like my Candy are the exception now. Whole thing’ll be dead in two months.”

“They’ll find some other game.”

Hullar shrugged. “Could be. I don’t worry about rich kids.”

“Makes you even. They don’t worry about you.” I eyed Candy. Didn’t look like I’d get a chance to talk to her. She had a couple of sailors on the string. Hullar or Crunch would have to do some bouncing if she led them on too far.

“Going somewhere?” Eagle-eye Hullar had noticed me getting up.

“Thinking about eyeballing any other girls I can find. Any suggestions where to look?”

“You want just brunettes? Candy’s type?”

“Basically.”

He got thoughtful. He wasn’t concentrating on my problem, though. He had one eye on Candy’s sailors. He was getting steamed. “Crystal Chandelier. The Masked Man. The Passionate Witch. Mama Sam’s Place. I seen your type all them places, one time or another. Not saying they’s any there now. These gals, they come and go. Don’t do regular hours, neither.”

“Thanks, Hullar. You’re a prince.”

“Eh? What’s that?” Crunch snarled suddenly. He came up from behind the bar with a nasty club. “You want to watch your mouth, boy.”

Hullar shook his head. “Prince!” he yelled in Crunch’s ear. “He called me a prince. Got to pardon him, Garrett. He lip-reads. Sometimes he don’t do so good.”

Crunch put his stick away but didn’t stop scowling. He wasn’t sure he ought to trust his boss over his imagination.

Everywhere I go, I get involved with screwballs.

The Crystal Chandelier, as the name implied, pretended to have class. Hill girls would be just what the management ordered. I headed there first. I was in and out in the time it took to slurp a beer. I didn't learn anything except that somebody there knew my face and didn't like what I did for a living.

I did better at the Masked Man. I knew somebody there.

The name of the place was appropriate again. People donned masks before they showed themselves inside. Likewise, those who worked the place. The Masked Man catered to a select clientele.

The guy I knew was a bouncer, a breed nine feet tall with muscles on his muscles and more between his ears than anywhere else. I downed three beers before he understood what I wanted to know. Even then he wouldn't have talked if he hadn't owed me. And what he had to say wasn't worth hearing. Only one Hill-type gal worked the Masked Man these days, a blond so screwed up she scared the owners. He hadn't seen a brunette in weeks. The last had quit her second night. But he did remember her name, Dixie.

"Dixie. Right. That's useful. Thanks, Bugs. Here. Have a beer on me."

"Hey, thanks, Garrett. You're all right." Bugs is one of those guys who are always amazed when you do something nice, no matter how trivial. You'd think after a while the whole world would be nice just to watch him be amazed.

I drifted over to the Passionate Witch. The Witch was strange, even for the Tenderloin. I never quite understood the place. A lot of girls worked there, mostly dancing, mostly without wearing much. They were very friendly. They'd crawl all over you if they thought you might stuff a mark into their pants. They were available, but not to everyone. There was a kind of bid board. The girls worked the crowd, getting guys drunker and randier and driving the bidding up till closing. A crafty girl could pull more with one trick there than some who worked all night the traditional way.

Whatever will separate a mark and his money. It's there in the Tenderloin.

"Ever see so many bare boobs in one place, Garrett?"

I jumped. You don't expect your friends in those places.

I hadn't found one. "Downtown. Been a while. Nope. Never. And I shouldn't be seeing some of these here now."

Downtown Billy Byrd was the guy they'd had in mind when they'd decided somebody looked like a ferret. He was a walking stereotype. He looked slimy-sneaky and was. He spied on people, sold information to anyone who'd pay. I'd used him myself, which is how he knew me.

Downtown wore a lot of junk jewelry and flashy clothing. He carried a long-stemmed ivory pipe. He tapped its mouthpiece against his teeth, pointed it at a woman. "Case in point?"

"Right. Bigger don't always mean better."

"She was something before gravity set in." Downtown Billy Byrd was the kind who'd think gravity sets in. "You working, Garrett?"

I didn't have much use for Downtown's type but I stayed polite. I wasn't spending much. It'd help if I stuck with somebody whose cheapness was accepted. Else I might get asked to take my questions to the street.

"Would I be here if I wasn't?"

"Half the guys here would say that if I asked."

I understood, then, what Downtown was doing in the Passionate Witch. He was working. Looking for faces he might sell later. I told him, "I'm working."

“Something maybe I can help with?”

“Maybe. I’m looking for a girl. A special kind. Brunette, seventeen to twenty-two, five-feet-two to five-ten, long hair, reasonably attractive, high-class.”

“You don’t want much, do you? She got a name?”

“No. It’s a type. I’m interested in any woman like that working the Tenderloin.”

“Yeah? How come?”

“Because some creep is snatching them and cutting their guts out. I want to find him so I can explain why we don’t consider that behavior socially acceptable.”

Downtown eyed me a moment, weasel mouth open. “Come on over here, Garrett. I got a table with some pals.”

I followed but feared it was a mistake. Byrd ran his mouth steadily. How long before word spread? I wouldn’t catch anybody if the girls hid out and the bad guys lay low.

Downtown led me to the worst table in the dive. You had to send carrier pigeons to the bar. Waiters got lost trying to get back there.

Downtown’s two pals looked sleazier than he did. Cheap flash must have been in, along with mustaches.

They had bought their night’s supplies before lighting.

“Sit, Garrett.” There was a spare chair. “Shaker, give the man a beer.”

“Screw you, Byrdo.” Shaker had a palsy. He had a face like a rat’s. It was loathing at first sight. “What you giving away our beer?”

“Don’t be a butthead, Shaker. Business. The man might maybe be in the mood to buy. We got something he might want.”

Shaker and Downtown glared at one another while the third man contemplated the secrets inside a beer bottle. Then Shaker pushed a bottle my way. It was the old-fashioned stone kind, not used by commercial breweries anymore. Which meant the beer inside was cheap stuff from a one-man cellar operation, fit only for the poorest of the poor. My stomach started whimpering before the first blast headed south.

I couldn’t be intimidated. We investigators fear no beer. Besides, I’d swilled so much already that it had become hard to care what went down next.

Downtown didn’t introduce anybody. Common practice on the street. Nobody wanted anybody to know them. But Downtown didn’t bother not dropping names, either. “Garrett’s looking for a guy that snatches girls.” He looked at me. “Cuts them open, right? The one doing the jobs we been hearing about?”

I nodded, sipped from my bottle, was pleasantly startled. That was damned good for cellar beer. I found the trademark. It didn’t match that on the other bottles, so the brewer was putting his product up in whatever came his way. Too bad. I said, “Way I figure it, he grabs rich girls working the quarter for kicks. I expect he scouts them before he grabs them. I want to spot him doing it before he snatches the next one.”

Downtown eyed Shaker. “What do you say now, butthead?”

I asked, “There something that I’m not getting, Downtown?”

“One minute, Garrett.” He kept looking at Shaker.

“Well?” His minute had flown.

“I figure you got somebody big behind you, Garrett. Some girl’s father. Maybe a bunch of them. Somebody what’s got more money than sense and is out to buy revenge. Right?”

“Something like that.” Downtown’s bunch would melt like salted slugs if I told them who was paying.

“Somebody that might pay damned good if somebody handed them the whole thing on a platter?”

“I don’t think you can, Downtown. You’re shucking me. Running a game. You heard I was asking around. You decided to see if you couldn’t rip me off.”

Wound a man to the heart. Downtown Billy was in pain. “Garrett! My man! This is me! Your old buddy, Downtown Billy Byrd. I never done you wrong.”

“Never was anything in it for you.”

“You just being nasty. You know that ain’t my style.”

He’d never gotten caught. Everything was his style if he thought he could get away with it. “So I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. What’ve you got?”

“I tell you, then I don’t got nothing to sell.”

“I’m not buying a pig in a poke, Downtown. I’ve got enough cats already.”

His face screwed up into a frown that had to hurt. He didn’t understand. In the old days, less-than-scrupulous peasants sold gullible city folks baby pigs in tied sacks. Only when the sacks were opened, out jumped some very unhappy cats.

“All right, Garrett. I got your point. Here’s the way it is. Gal like the one you’re looking for, name of Barbie, worked here up to last night. Ain’t in tonight, you’ll notice.”

“So?”

“So the bidding went outrageous. Way high. And when it come time for her to deliver her half, two guys come in to pick her up and take her somewhere, not upstairs.”

It might be a lead. But I was less than excited. I’d dealt with Downtown before. He’d try to make a mountain out of some molehill and sell it for a fortune.

“You aren’t impressing me yet. It isn’t unusual for the high bidder to take his prize home. Not even unusual for him not to show his face.”

“He showed his face when he was bidding. Scruffy little dink. Like a bum somebody cleaned up, but not much. Definitely not no high roller.”

“Was a bum.” That was the third man. Downtown grinned. “Dickiebird says he seen the guy before, on the down-and-out. Anyway, it all looked funny. We decided to scout it out. You never know what might be handy to know. Like, here you are already, wanting to know what we saw.”

“Maybe I do. What did you see?”

“You want it all for free, don’t you? No way, Garrett. We got to live too. You ain’t heard enough to know if you want more, then you’re gonna have to do without.”

I pretended to study it. Then I dug out a few small coins. “I’m interested. But you’ll have to talk a lot more than you’ve done.”

Downtown traded looks with his pals. They had to trust his judgment. That put them in a spot I hoped I’d never occupy. I’ve never understood how Downtown survived his five in the Cantard.

“Going to take a chance, Garrett. Going to tell you more than I would anybody else, but only on

account of I know you. On account of I trust your rep for playing square.”

“My hair’s getting gray.”

“Looks to me like it’s falling out. Whoa! Touchy!”

“Talk, Downtown.”

“Right. Always in a hurry. Here it is. The two guys that come in for Barbie put her into a coach with the dink that did the bidding. Only he’d changed somehow. Gotten spooky. She didn’t want to go, but he grabbed her. I thought maybe I’d give her a hand, only the guy’s eyes got weird.”

“Green?”

“Yeah. Like green fire.”

“You’re holding my interest, Downtown. But if that’s all you’ve got . . . ”

“Shaker knew one of the guys helped push her into the coach.”

“Ah!”

“I don’t *know* him, see,” Shaker said. “It’s like I seen him around. He’s not somebody I pal with, like Downtown. Just a guy I seen around.”

“Here’s the one that makes or breaks you, guys. You know where to find him?”

Shaker said, “I know where he cribs.”

I dropped coins on the table. “I’ll be back in a while. I’m going to bring a guy to talk to you. If you put us together with this guy you know, he’ll fill your pockets.” I was out of there before any of them could respond.



35

Morley had company. I had to wait. Then wait. Then wait some more. While I waited, Saucerhead came in. I waved. He joined me, glumly. “Cheer up. I need some muscle,” I told him.

“Like now?”

“Right away. Unless your investments—”

“Can’t wait?”

“Would I be . . . ? What’s the matter?”

“Just don’t feel like it, Garrett. Not in the mood.”

“Since when do you have to be in the mood to make yourself a mark?”

“Hey, busting heads ain’t all the fun it looks like, Garrett.”

“I know. I know.”

“How would you? You don’t wale on nobody unless—”

“You feel good enough to pick up a few coppers running a message?”

“I guess. Yeah. I could handle that.”

I sent him to fetch Captain Block. If I had to wait around forever for Morley to finish playing, I might as well pull in the money man while I did.

I did wait. And I waited. And then I waited. I waited so long I got sober. No Morley. Block and

Tharpe showed up, dripping. It was raining again. I thought some more about getting into the boat business. When Morley still showed no sign of growing bored with his guest, I said, "The hell with him. We can handle it without him. Let's go."

Block was relieved. He didn't think it would be politic for him to associate with a professional killer.

Saucerhead said, "I'll tag along."

"Thought you weren't in the mood."

"Maybe I'll change moods."

"It's raining out there."

"It's always raining. Let's go."

Block said very little till we enjoyed the privacy of the street. "I hope this is something good, Garrett. I need it."

"Yeah?"

"Pressure again. You don't feel it down here. The Hill is in a panic. Some people up there are carrying on like the Venageti were at the gates. I need something fast. Anything."

"Tell you what. This doesn't pan out, you pass the word for them to keep their daughters out of the Tenderloin."

"Give me a break, Garrett."

"I mean it. There's a fad amongst the deb set. Go down and play sleazegirl. That won't make their fathers happy, but it's a fact. It looks like our killer picks his victims from rich girls working the quarter."

"That won't make anyone happy."

"Not when it gets out. You recall, none of the stories we got about the victims ever mentioned anything like that. I think we talked to the wrong people. People who didn't know and didn't guess because the bodies weren't found near the quarter."

"Maybe some suspected. I can think of several stories that sounded like somebody trying to make somebody look good." Block sniffed, grunted, hawked. He was working on a cold. "We get lucky, maybe we won't have to deal with any of that."

"We don't get lucky, maybe we can let the word get around without it looking like it's your fault. It will come out if this goes on much longer."

Block grunted again.

I glanced over my shoulder. My instincts were right. We were being followed. "Did you maybe bring a few helpers?"

Block glanced back. "Yeah. They're mine. Clumsy, aren't they?"

"They don't get much practice."

"Thought it might be handy having a few guardian angels hovering."

"Aw. You don't feel comfortable in the Tenderloin?"

"Make fun while you can, Garrett. Things are gonna change."

Nice talk, but I wouldn't put one copper on it. Good intentions can't overcome the inertia of decades.

We reached the Passionate Witch. I checked my companions before I went inside. Tharpe was fine. And Block didn't look like the law. "We're going to be talking to some real lowlifes. Let me do all

the jawing. No matter what. Understand?"

Saucerhead said, "Means you, Captain. You want to lose these guys fast, let them get a notion what you are." I gave Tharpe the fish eye. He said, "I know Downtown Billy Byrd, Garrett. Bottom of the barrel."

I said, "I'm going to try to bring them out here. You bring money?" I asked Block.

"Some. I won't let them rob me."

"They don't have imaginations that big. What they'd call robbery you'd call a tip." I shoved into the Passionate Witch.

The evening was fading but Downtown and his pals were hanging on, nursing their stone beer bottles, waiting for opportunity to knock. I knocked. Downtown grumbled, "I thought you forgot us."

"Had trouble finding my man."

"Huh?"

"Guy I work for. One who wants to know what you know. He's outside. Wants to listen. He brought money. You ready to deal?"

"Now?"

"You want to wait for the King's birthday? He don't have time to waste."

"Why don't he come in? It's wet out there."

"He don't want to show his face. You have to get wet anyway. You got to show us the way, right?"

"I guess. Shaker. Take care of the bottles." To recover their deposits, of course. "Dickiebird. C'mon."

I led the way. Downtown and Dickiebird followed like they counted on trouble. Each kept a hand inside his shirt. Knives. Shaker wasn't near the bar, getting deposit refunds. He'd vanished. "Awful nervous, aren't you, Downtown?"

"Think about it, Garrett. We got a bunch of murders, Hill gals what probably got daddies that eat no-counters like you and me for snacks. Could get hairy."

"Sure could." I didn't like being included in his no-count family. I'm at least a one-counter. "But it hasn't yet. We're counting on what you tell us fixing it so it never does."

"Yeah?" He was starting to think about holding me up.

Block stepped out of the shadows. "These the men?" Saucerhead wasn't to be seen. Somebody had to watch for Shaker. Block looked damned evil in a bad light. He might do.

"Yes. They say they think they saw the last victim, who called herself Barbie, get snatched. They think they knew one of the snatchers."

Block eyed Downtown and Dickiebird. "What's the deal?"

"Huh?"

I asked, "You have a plan, Downtown? You got a price? Talk to us."

"Uh. Oh." Downtown looked around for eavesdroppers, or maybe to see if Shaker had him covered. "Yeah. Like this. You pay half now. We show you where to find your guy. He'll be home, I guarantee." Like he'd maybe checked while I was collecting Block. "He don't go out. You pay us off. We split. You forget you ever saw us."

"Not bad," I said. "Only let's make it you get the other half after we grab the guy and make sure he

's the one you saw."

"Garrett! Take it easy, man. He'll know who fingered him."

"If he's the real thing, you won't have to worry about what he knows," Block said. "How much?"

Downtown tried to get a better look at Block. "This don't sound like nobody off the Hill, Garrett."

"Don't worry about where he comes from. Worry about earning his money."

"Yeah. Right. We figured about thirty marks would be fair. Ten apiece."

Small men have small ambitions. Block had trouble keeping a straight puss. He jingled coins, handed me three gold five-mark pieces. I passed them to Downtown, who stared at them in the light leaking from the Passionate Witch. "Damn." He was stunned by the certainty that he'd just blown a rare opportunity.

"Too late, son," I told him when he started to say something. "You set the price. Time to deliver."

"Uh. Yeah." He led off.



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We walked maybe a mile, into an area of dense tenements occupied mostly by newcomers to TunFaire. Reasonable enough. The man we wanted couldn't have been in town long. Only the ignorant would've gotten into what he had.

Downtown and Dickiebird led us to a four-story row place in the middle of a long block. Pure people storage, though more upscale than most. Depressing.

The clouds parted, let a moonbeam sneak through. It was the only light, but I didn't complain. It was nice to have the drizzle stop, even for a little while. Downtown said, "Top floor, rear door. Hired a sleeping room all to hisself."

"You did a lot of research, Downtown."

His weasel face stretched in a nasty smile. "*Iknew* somebody was going to want the goods on this one."

Block growled but stifled his opinion. Even starry-eyed idealists knew you couldn't sell TunFaire's people the idea of civic responsibility. Not after they'd watched their betters do nothing but look out for themselves for centuries.

"Top-floor rear," I grumbled, thinking of the climb. "Inconsiderate bastard."

"Right. You get him out, we'll finger him, we'll all go home. Right?"

"Right. Saucerhead?"

Tharpe materialized. He lugged a limp Shaker over one shoulder. "Yeah?"

"Just making sure you were there." Why had he bopped Shaker? Maybe just for the hell of it.

Block said, "Ripley, scout the place out."

Shadows detached from shadows. Downtown gawked as two men entered the row building. He knelt beside Shaker, muttered about maltreatment and distrust. I asked, "If you was us, would you trust you?" He didn't have an answer for that.

Block's man returned, puffing. "Somebody's in there, all right. He's snoring. There's only one door. Ain't no other way out. Unless there's a window."

Downtown volunteered, "There is. If he's got real spring in his legs, he could maybe jump across to the roof behind this place."

I said, "If he's asleep, he shouldn't have time to get up, open a window, make a jump."

"Better let me make sure," Saucerhead suggested, gently pointing out that he was the specialist.

"All right."

Saucerhead and Block and I went upstairs while Ripley went around back, just in case. We tried to be quiet, but there's something about your step when you're headed for trouble. I sensed sudden fear and alertness behind those doors where people were awake.

Block's other man waited upstairs. Block whispered, "Still snoring?"

He had to ask? Hell, yes, he was still snoring. I never heard anything like it. That ripping and roaring had to be one of the wonders of the world. "Careful," I told Saucerhead. He nodded.

Everybody got out of Tharpe's way. He seemed to swell up, then charged. The door exploded. Though I was right behind Saucerhead, it was over before I could contribute anything. Meat hit meat, snores turned to baffled groans, Saucerhead said, "Got him under control."

I said, "Take him downstairs."

Tharpe grunted. Block slid around, opened the window. "Got him, Ripley. Get around front."

We clumped downstairs. I smelled the fear from behind those doors we hadn't destroyed. The more I thought how this was for those people, the less I liked what I was doing.

Our prisoner was groggy when we hit the street. Block demanded, "Is this the man?"

Downtown and Dickiebird stayed out of the moonlight while edging closer. "Yeah," Dickiebird said. "That's him."

I asked, "You saw this man help put the girl into the coach?" I was playing a role now and Saucerhead was good enough to catch my cues. I believed Dickiebird. The prisoner was one of the men who'd tried to kidnap Chodo's daughter. We had a different killer but the same assistants, apparently.

"That's the guy, Garrett," Downtown insisted. "What do you want? Come on. Pay up."

Block had his helpers take the prisoner while he paid up. "You know these three men, Garrett? In case this is a con and I want to find them?"

"I know them." I was still reserving the incident at Morley's place, couldn't explain my confidence in them.

"Hey, Garrett! I ever do a number on you?"

"Not yet, Downtown. Go on. Enjoy yourselves." A man could make ten marks go a long way in this part of town.

Downtown and his buddies flew off like the breeze. With money in hand, they would be hard to find. For a while.

"You want to help with the questioning?" Block asked.

"Not particularly. Only if you insist. What I want is to go to bed. I've been knocking myself out finding this lead. I do want to hear what you find out from him."

"Sure." He shook my hand. "Thanks again, Garrett. Winchell. Get him moving."

I didn't say, "Anytime, Captain," because he was the kind who would take me up on it.

The Dead Man wasn't impressed. He refuses to be impressed by anything but himself. He's afraid I'll get a big head.

He did relent, though, when I returned from watching Block and his troops, with great fanfare, before numerous official witnesses, raid an abandoned brewhouse and nab a creepy old man who was, beyond doubt, the perpetrator of the most recent murder. Clothing and body parts were recovered. These monsters liked their souvenirs. Not to mention that the old boy spat a ton of butterflies, some poisonous, before they subdued him.

Subdued meant dead. Again. I didn't see that part, but the dozen Watchmen they carried off on stretchers implied that Block was right when he insisted there had been no choice.

The Dead Man remarked, *Ido hope Captain Block exercises appropriate precautions.*

"I think he will."

Excellent. So it would appear that the matter is closed.

"Except for collecting from Block."

Indeed. Take the rest of the evening off. Sleep in tomorrow.

"We're sure generous with time that isn't our own, aren't we?"

Tomorrow you must resume the investigation as though nothing has been accomplished. Continue seeking Miss Contague. Try to identify potential victims. And take a closer look at this fellow you rooted out tonight. He may have had more than one associate.

"He did. But the other guy headed out of town before we finished arresting the first one. He lived in the same dump. So what the hell? You finally gone gaga? You think we got the wrong killer?"

I am confident your famous luck held and you swept up the very villain. But you got the right man before and Death did not miss a stroke.

"You don't think it'll take?"

I have strong hopes. But I think a wise man would prepare beforehand against the wiles of evil and the ineptitude of the Watch. It would be most excellent if everything worked out. But should it not, no time will have been wasted. Not so?

"All a matter of viewpoint. I'm not the guy who gets to sit here daydreaming. I'm the one who runs back and forth till his legs get worn down to the knees. I'm going to bed. Wake me up when the war's over."

Should the worst occur, you will regret having failed to take minimal precautions.

Sure. All right. So maybe I'd play with it some more. Just in case. What could it hurt? Did I have anything else going? Anyway, there were some pretty pretties around the edges of the thing. I might luck onto one who was sane and sociable.

Staying in just meant doing time with Dean's cronies, anyway. The amount of beer those old boys were putting away while they were supposedly rehabbing upstairs, it would've been cheaper to hire professional help.

It was like nothing in my experience. I couldn't fathom it. The Dead Man was frothing with ambition. He had hold of the case like a starving dog a bone. He wouldn't let go.

It was easier to get out of the house, into the drizzle, and do legwork than it was to stay in and argue. Especially with Dean taking the Dead Man's side.

It might be time to think about an apartment.

The Dead Man still had Block digging through the records too. Block was our best buddy now. We'd turned him into the Prince's fair-haired boy. He was the hero of the Hill. His name was at the top of the short list to head the new, improved, serious, and hopefully useful Watch. What we hadn't been able to get him to do was pay his bill. He meant to stiff us.

He said he'd pay up just as soon as he was sure we'd given him the permanent solution he'd wanted to buy. Right. He meant to stiff us.

I didn't care if he was the Dead Man's buddy. I didn't care if he was tight with Prince Rupert. I had him on my list to turn over to the Saucerhead Tharpe collection agency.

Meantime, amidst all else, I maintained my thrilling surveillance of that ferocious threat to the peace, Barking Dog Amato, mainly by collecting his reports, skimming them, then passing a few appropriate comments to Hullar so he could give something to the daughter. Barking Dog's autobiographical ambitions dwindled as he foresaw the advent of better weather. I was grateful, especially after he went into rehearsals for his new, more forceful act, designed with the help of the Dead Man.

Days hurried past. I lumbered around town trying to get some line on the old-time killings. I got nowhere. If there was any glory to be had, Block wanted his boys to get it. I wasn't allowed access to any public records.

Evenings fled too. I made and lost friends in the Tenderloin. People down there were appalled by what had been done to those girls—but they were more appalled by what making potential future targets safe might do to business.

The consensus was, you got the guy. Don't bother us.

The Dead Man fell back on an ancient and adolescent device for getting some of the women out of the Tenderloin. He sent anonymous notes to their families.

Six days after my amazing coup involving Downtown Billy Byrd, I told the Dead Man, "I've found the girl. In fact, I've found two of them. One of them would have to be it."

Candy, at Hullar's place, of course. And the other?

"Dixie Starr. She works Mama Sam's Casino."

Dixie Starr?

"Really. Call it her business name. Barbie was the only victim who came close to using her real name." The most recent victim had been one Barbra Tennys, daughter of a viscount with obscure connections to the royal family, said family including Prince Rupert. Barbra's mother was a stormwarden on duty in the Cantard. No proofs would convince her father that his daughter had been selling her favors at auction, for kicks, before reality slithered dread tentacles into the fantasy. "Dixie's name came up before, at the Masked Man. This is a girl with problems. Candy, on the other hand, is a real innocent on the street. I don't think it'll be hard to find out who she is. I doubt she'd notice if I just followed her home."

And the identity of the Dixie woman?

"I have it already. She's Emma Setlow. Her father and grandfather are meat packers who found a better way to preserve sausages. They made their mint off army contracts."

And you have gotten nothing useful from your search for information from the past?

“Block’s made sure I can’t get near any official records. From what I can see, though, he’s not doing much looking himself. Whatever he says. He’s too busy making political hay and spreading his influence throughout the entire Watch.”

I suspect he will change his attitude.

Damn if I didn’t think he knew something he wouldn’t share.

There came a dawn when there was an actual break in the rains. Dean became so excited that it was still dawn when he wakened me. I cussed and threatened, but he won out. He got me interested. What did daylight look like without rain? My body whined and dragged, but I hauled out and headed for breakfast.

Dean had the kitchen curtains back and the window open. “Place needs airing out.”

Probably. I shrugged, sipped tea. “Streets are going to be crazy.”

Dean nodded. “I need to do some shopping.”

I nodded back. “Barking Dog will launch his new show, the rain doesn’t start up. I can’t miss that.”

Everyone in town would find some excuse to get out, even knowing everyone else would be in the streets.

“At least the city will be clean,” Dean observed.

“It will. The rains lasted long enough for that.”

“Now, if people would just keep it that way.” He delivered a plate of biscuits, steaming, straight from the oven. Drooling, I left him to do the talking.

I didn’t hear it, which meant I’d grown distracted. That had been happening more and more as more and more the women of my heart became the women of my imagination. Anyway, I looked up and found the old boy absent. Puzzled, I started to get up. Then I heard him coming down the hall, talking. He’d answered the door. He’d let someone inside.

Going to have to have a talk with him.

“Someone” just had to be Captain Block.

“Not again,” I muttered loudly enough to be heard.

Dean set another place, poured tea. Block settled, went to work daubing a biscuit with honey. I ignored his existence.

“Not sure yet, Garrett,” Block said around a mouthful of biscuit. “May be trouble again.”

“Ain’t my problem. Ain’t going to be my problem. Only problem in my life is deadbeats.”

Block got hot, sudden and major. He thought we were trying to exploit his misfortune. He was right. But he’d set the terms. And I figured he was getting off cheap, considering the alternative.

Block cooled down before he risked speaking. “Garrett, do you recall the knives from the Hamilton place?”

“The ritual tools? What about them?”

“They’ve disappeared. We got them back when we went after Spender.” Spender having been the accursed bum in the abandoned brewery.

“Huh?”

“They was locked up in the barracks armory. I got space there for keeping evidence. I saw them

there day before yesterday. Last night they was gone.”

“So?”

“Tomorrow night is the next time the killer would strike.”

“Wow. That’s right.” I laid on my most sarcastic tone, like I was amazed a Watchman could work that out.

“A Corporal Elvis Winchell, who was part of the raid force the other night, disappeared yesterday sometime. He had access to the armory. Apparently he and a Private Price Ripley were isolated with the killer’s corpse for about seven minutes during its trip to the oven.”

“And you’re afraid Winchell will—”

“Yes. I need your help again, Garrett.”

“It’s wonderful to be appreciated. It really is. But you’re talking to the wrong guy. You need to see my accountant.”

“Huh?”

I’d lost him. “The Dead Man. But he’s put out with you too. With me, it’s money, with him, it’s information.”

“Oh. Back to that.”

“Back to that. It’s the bottom line. I have a feeling that if you talk him into anything, he’ll insist on payment up front.”

Block didn’t argue. He didn’t dare. We were about to discover how desperate he really was. I passed him on to the Dead Man.

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I slipped out while their backs were turned. It was going to be a long, dull argument. Block hadn’t yet panicked.

Negotiations are fun for the Dead Man. My tastes are more earthy, more basic. Maybe not as simple as a hotfoot, but not cerebral. It always helps if there’s a lady along. Especially if she’s no lady.

Barking Dog got the better of his crackpot religious squatter by showing up earliest. The nut was there when I arrived. He was sullen. He growled a lot. Amato tended his placards and ignored him. Barking Dog looked confident. He was ready.

His return had been noted. His normal audience consisted of functionaries who worked in the area. They kept an eye on him, wondering when he’d start raving. Speculation was rife. His absence had left him looking primed with fresh madness. His reappearance was a happening resented by a single soul.

The holy crackpot finally left in a huff.

Barking Dog’s venue is the Chancery steps. Seems appropriate, in a sense. In the old days the Chancery was a court of equity, but time changes everything. Today it’s mostly a place to store official records, civil type, for the duchy, plus some royal records. Half the main floor has been occupied by the functionaries who manage military conscription in this end of Karenta. They migrated from the military Chancery years ago, after having been crowded out by procurement offices that grow faster and faster as the war winds down.

The Chancery structure is a relic of the empire, built late, evidently with an eye to impress. To

reach the huge brass doors of the main entrance, you have to climb eighty dark granite steps that span the entire front of the building. Each twenty steps there is a level stretch ten feet wide. Vendors and people like Barking Dog take advantage of those. If it can be sold from a tray hung from the neck, you'll find it for sale outside the Chancery.

Amato's spot was at the left end of the first landing. Most of the traffic in and out of the building naturally passed that way, plus Barking Dog was just high enough to be seen and heard easily from the street.

I planted myself on the stone rail alongside the next landing up, nodded to Barking Dog. He acknowledged my presence with a smile. He adjusted his placards. He had four, all on sticks with bases meant to hold them upright.

Whether entering the Chancery or just passing in the street, people slowed, paused, hoping the merriment would break out soon. Several clerk types accumulated, looking uncomfortable. Their superiors had sent them to keep track and to call when the nonsense began.

Barking Dog was as crazy as a herd of drunk possums, but he had his fans.

Judging from his placards, his text for the day would be a traditional crowd pleaser, the international conspiracy which denied Barking Dog Amato his rights and properties.

He let word spread before he spoke. He waited past the commencement of the business day. Then he started, soft and slow, without the brass megaphone, while word spread that he was starting.

I noticed something that had escaped me during more casual viewings. Barking Dog had him a kettle out, marked to encourage donations. Passersby surprised me with their generosity.

Maybe Amato was less the fool than I thought. Maybe this was how he paid for supplies. Maybe this was the whole point . . . No. That couldn't be true. He'd live better than he did.

He started gentle and slow and sane, almost conversationally. His chats with the Dead Man had paid dividends. His soft voice arrested passersby, made them strain to hear. I couldn't hear from behind him.

"Signs and portents," he said when he did raise his voice slightly. "Yea! Signs and portents! The hour is coming! It is at hand! The wicked shall be revealed in all their ugliness. They shall be found out and rooted out, and we who have endured, who have borne their weight upon our shoulders till we have become hunchbacks, we shall see our agony repaid."

I glanced around. Was there anybody here who might know me? That sounded suspiciously like he was going to take a plunge into sedition. That seemed an unwise career move to me. Sedition was the sort of talk that could get you thrown into a real prison—if you were dumb enough to talk it on the Chancery steps instead of at the bar in your neighborhood tavern. Outside, in broad daylight, it might sound serious instead of just bitching.

Ha! Fooled you, Garrett!

Everyone listening heard hunchbacks and jumped to the same conclusion. The crowd grew quieter, waited for Barking Dog to step into it up to his knees, then shove his foot in his mouth.

How come people get such a kick out of watching a disaster in progress?

Barking Dog veered off ninety degrees. "They have stolen my houses. They have stolen my lands. They have stolen my family titles. Now they strive to steal my good name so they can silence me when I denounce their wickedness. They had me incarcerated in the Al-Khar in their efforts to stifle me. They have tried to silence me through fear. But by stealing everything from me they have left me entirely without fear. They have left me nothing to lose. By stealing everything they have also taken those signs which remind them of who I am. They forget whom they consigned to vile durance.

“Kropotkin F. Amato will not yield. Kropotkin F. Amato will fight on so long as a single breath remains in his abused flesh.”

That was all old stuff, excepting the prison references. He began to lose his audience. But then he did something he'd not done before. He named names. And he started moving, stalking back and forth, flinging his hands around, shrieking in rage. Again I thought he was digging himself a grave, but then realized he'd named only names on the public record. And he hadn't said anything objectionable about them, he'd just surrounded their names with racket that might nail them through guilt by association. The man was damned clever.

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40

“The man's damned clever.”

I bounced high enough to bruise my skull on low-flying clouds.

“I mean, using the truth to tell lies that way.” Crask had appeared out of nowhere, behind me.

I barked, “Why the hell you got to do that?”

He grinned. “Because it's fun watching you jump.” He meant it. He would keep trying to make me jump till the day he really did greet me with a knife.

“What do you want?” My mood wasn't what it had been.

“It's not what I want, Garrett. It's never that. It's what Chodo wants. You know that. I'm just an errand boy.”

Right. And a saber-toothed tiger is just a pussycat. “I'll play. What does the kingpin want?” I tried to keep one eye on Barking Dog. Amato was into a foaming-mouth frenzy now, excoriating and denouncing everyone and everything and drawing one of the best crowds of his career. But I couldn't keep my mind on him with Crask so near.

Crask said, “Chodo wants to talk about the girl.”

“The girl?”

“Don't get cute. She's his kid. It ain't right she's down to the Tenderloin, whatever she's doing there. That don't look good. That can't get out.”

“You don't like it, tell her to knock it off.”

“There you go again. Cute. You know it ain't that simple, Garrett.”

“Sure. It isn't like she was some kid off the street, just slap her around, maybe kick in a few ribs when she don't do right.”

“You got a problem with your mouth, Garrett. I been telling Chodo for a long time you got a problem with your mouth. For a while there he couldn't see that. But he's maybe seeing things clearer these days. You'll maybe want to keep a lid on the wise-guy stuff when you see him.”

I always had . . . See him? I hadn't planned to see that old coot ever again. I told Crask that.

“We're all entitled to our opinions, and maybe even our little dreams, I reckon. But sometimes they got to change, Garrett.”

I glanced around. Crask wasn't alone. Naturally. He'd brought enough help to carry off three or four uncooperative characters my size. “I suppose you have a point.” I stood, indicated he should lead the way.

I considered taking a powder. Barking Dog's crowd might have made escape possible. But I had a feeling I wasn't in danger. Yet. Had I reached the head of the kingpin's list, they'd have just hit me. Killing was a businesslike business with Chodo and his main men. They didn't waste time tormenting their victims—unless there was a big public-relations dividend to be gained from killing somebody an inch at a time.

"Pity to miss the rest of this." I nodded at Barking Dog.

"Yeah. Old goof's on a roll. But business is business. Let's go."

Our immediate destination stood at the curb on the far side of the Chancery. It was a big black coach similar to the one the old butterfly man had ridden. Chodo Contague's personal coach.

"How many of these does he have?" It hadn't been that long since I'd fallen out of a similar one scant seconds before it became a lunch bucket for a thunder-lizard taller than most three-story houses.

"This is a new one."

"I figured." Since it looked and smelled new. You can't fool us trained investigators.

That other, earlier ride had sprung from a misunderstanding that had irked me at the time. So much so that I'd decided to whack Chodo before he came after me again. I'd joined forces with this very Crask to see the job done.

But Chodo was still alive, still in charge.

I couldn't figure it.

Crask is smart but he isn't much of a talker. It's a long haul from the skirts of the Hill out to Chodo's estate. You have plenty of time to consider the meaning of life. If you're traveling with a Crask and a couple other stiffes who lack even the redeeming value of having brains, you tend to drift away into philosophy. There's only so much amusement to be had from farting contests and exchanges of grotesque misinformation about female anatomy.

Try as I might, I couldn't get anything better going. All I got out of Crask was an indefinite impression that there was more going on than he cared to tell me.

Which made perfect sense if he planned to break my neck. You don't tell the pig ahead of time that it's come the day for making bacon. All I had going was the dubious comfort I could take from knowing that Crask had no cause to go to all this trouble just to ice me.

I hadn't seen Chodo's place since the night Winger and I broke in planning to hasten Chodo's journey to the promised land. Nothing appeared changed except that the damage had been repaired and a fresh herd of small thunder-lizards had been brought in to patrol the grounds and graze on intruders. "Just like old times," I muttered.

"We've added a twist or two," Crask informed me, grinning evilly, like he hoped I'd think he was bluffing and would have a go at sneaking in. That would appeal to his selective sense of humor.

⋮

Like old times. Chodo greeted his company in the pool room.

It was called that because there was a huge indoor bath in there. I've seen smaller oceans. The bath was heated. Usually—though this time was an exception—the poolside was decorated by a small herd of unclothed beauties, there just to lend that final touch of decadence.

While we waited, I asked, "Where are the honeys? I miss them."

“You would. Chodo didn’t want them around while his daughter was staying here. He never got around to bringing them back.”

What did that mean? That the daughter wasn’t staying here anymore?

Patience, Garrett. All will come clear.

The man himself arrived, looking little changed. He was in his wheelchair with a heavy blanket wrapped around his lap and covering his legs. Hands like tallow claws lay folded upon his lap. I couldn’t see his face. His head had fallen forward. It swayed back and forth.

Sadler stopped him at the far end of the pool, fiddled with his chair, tilted him back so his head stayed level. I’d never seen Chodo in anything approaching good health, but now he seemed way worse than ever before. He looked like somebody had poisoned him with arsenic, then he’d suffered severe anemia till the vampires got him. His skin was almost translucent.

He was dressed and groomed as though for dinner with the King—and that only made the sight of him more horrible.

I started forward. Crask caught my arm. “From here, Garrett.”

Sadler bent to Chodo’s right ear. “Mr. Garrett is here, sir.” He spoke softly. I barely heard him.

Nothing shifted in Chodo’s eyes. I saw no light of recognition. I saw no evidence that he could see at all. His eyes didn’t move and didn’t focus.

Sadler leaned forward as though to let Chodo speak into his ear. He listened, then straightened. “He wants to know about his daughter.” No pretense about her now. “Whatever you know. All your speculations.”

“I already told you—”

“*He* wants to hear it. With everything you left out.”

Bullpucky. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to notice. Maybe they didn’t care if I did. Chodo’s lips hadn’t moved. He hadn’t done anything but drool.

I flashed back to the night we tried to scribble the end of his story. We—Crask, Sadler, Winger, and I—had had him cornered, along with a witch he’d been chasing. The witch did get herself elevated to a higher plane before Winger and I cut out, but she’d made a final gesture before checkout. She’d given Chodo a fist in the face. She’d been wearing a poison ring filled with snake venom.

So. Rather than killing Chodo, the venom had induced a stroke.

How nice for Crask and Sadler. They must have thought themselves beloved of the gods when that happened. Their original plan had been to do Chodo and grab control of the outfit before anyone realized what was happening. That was the historically preferred solution to the problem of the transition of power in the underworld. But it meant a long shake-out period while potential challengers were eliminated.

This way there was no problem with the succession. Chodo was alive. They could pretend he was still in charge while they gathered the reins slowly.

It was grotesque.

I played along.

Not playing along would be a capital crime, I suspected.

Much of the time I function well in tight situations. I didn’t betray my thoughts. I pursued a conversation with Chodo, through Sadler, as though I sensed nothing unusual.

I gave them a thorough briefing on the serial killer and young women frequenting the Tenderloin. Sometimes it's best you don't shield people from the truth.

"Seen her lately?" Sadler asked.

"Not since that day at Hullar's."

"You didn't try to trace her?"

"Why? No. I lost interest once I knew who she was."

"You're not as dumb as you look," Crask observed.

"Like you. Protective coloration."

Sadler gave me the fish-eye. "You would've known who she was after seeing her at Dotes's place."

"Speaking of Morley, the reason I asked him to contact you is the girl might know something that would help stop this killer. And I didn't figure hunting her up personally would—"

Sadler cut in, "You said the killer was dead." He was determined to trip me up.

"Maybe. We hope. But he's been dead before. The killings didn't stop."

"You don't think they're going to?"

"The ritual knives disappeared. A Watchman who was around the corpse and who had access to the knives has disappeared. That may not mean anything, but why take chances? I've identified two women who fit the victim profile. I'll see them covered like a blanket." Did I sound like I was making sense?

Sadler bent, stayed bent a long time, though Chodo's lips never moved. "Yes, sir. I'll tell him that, sir." He straightened. "Chodo says he has a job for you, Garrett. He wants you to find his daughter. He wants you to bring her home."

"The resources he has, he can't find her?"

"Not without everybody knowing he's looking."

Crask said, "He can't go looking himself, Garrett. That would be like admitting he can't control his own family."

Yeah. And folks might even wonder why she'd run away. "I see." I turned away, pretended to pace, finally stopped. "I can handle it. But I could use a little something to get started with. I mean, I don't even know her name, let alone anything about her."

"Belinda," Crask said, "She won't be using it."

Teach your mama to suck eggs, boy. "Belinda? You're kidding. Nobody's named Belinda anymore."

"After Chodo's old granny." The man didn't crack a smile. "She raised him up until he was old enough to run the streets."

Crask had a faraway look. I hoped he didn't wax nostalgic about the old days. Chodo had a decade on him, so they couldn't have run the bricks at the same time, but Crask and Sadler, like most of Chodo's inside boys, had come into the business from the streets, with time out for special education at Crown expense, in the University of the Cantard.

"I can handle it," I said again. I seldom demur when dealing with the kingpin face-to-face. A weakness of mine, being fond of breathing.

Sadler leaned down as though startled, listened. "Yes, sir. I'll see to it, sir." He straightened. "I've

been instructed to advance you a hundred marks against your fees and expenses.”

Maybe it was the season, all these people throwing money my way. “I’m on the job,” I said. “Only I hope I don’t have to walk ten miles home.” Hint, hint. But I wouldn’t press the issue. I wanted out of there bad. Soon. Before there was anything more.

42

I thought a lot during the ride home, concluded that finding beautiful Miss Belinda Contague might not be healthy.

Crask and Sadler might consider me disposable once they had her in hand, under control.

My disposability probably had plenty to do with why they had chosen this particular investigator to investigate. There was one fine chance they figured I knew too much already. In fact, just to be optimistic, I was going to count on that.

So the one thing I had going for me was the fact that I hadn’t found the girl yet. As long as she stayed unfound, things would stay just dandy for me.

The more I thought, the more I was convinced I had to simplify my life. I didn’t have enough eyes to watch all the directions I needed to watch.

Night fell before I got home. With the darkness came rain, surprising me I don’t know why. Wasn’t like it was something new.

I headed up the front steps wondering how I could find Belinda Contague without seeming to find her, before I weaseled out of my troubles with Crask and Sadler.

“Where have you been?” Dean demanded before the door opened wide enough to admit me.

“What are you, my mother? You think it’s any of your business, you drop in while I’m explaining to His Nibs.” I could maybe drop a few housekeeping hints while I was at that. Anything to get a little cleaning done in there without having to do it myself.

Dean read me like a book. He was old and slow but far from senile. He harrumphed, headed for the kitchen, but halted as he came abreast of my office doorway. “I nearly forgot. You have a guest. In the small front room.”

“Oh?” A new cat, big enough to rip my leg off? Or Barking Dog on a midnight mission? . . . No. Amato would be across the way swapping insanities with the Dead Man. Evangelists?

Only one way to find out.

I opened the door.

Time passed. I finally came around when the woman cracked, “You like what you see? Or are you just a mouth breather?”

“Sorry. You weren’t what I was expecting.”

“Then put your eyes back in their sockets, Jocko. Why surprised?”

“Your father just drafted me to find you, Belinda. In his usual smooth-talking way, he offered me the job without giving me any chance to turn him down.”

That shut her up. She stared.

“His driver just now dropped me off.” I stared back. I liked what I saw. She didn’t hurt the eyes

at all. She still preferred black. She still looked good in black. “You look marvelous in black. Not many women wear it so well.” She would look good in—or out of—anything. She had what it took, though I got the impression she was used to hiding it.

For the moment the cat had her tongue.

I wondered where Dean had the beast hidden.

Belinda didn’t match the victim profile tonight. Her hair was short, black as a raven’s wing, made more remarkable by the pallor of her skin and the brightness of her lip rouge. I wondered if the pale skin was a family look, if she would resemble her father in a few years. She looked pretty much the way she had at Morley’s place and not much the way she had at Hullar’s. At Hullar’s, probably wearing a wig, she’d fit the profile perfectly.

They’re a protean breed, women.

Oh, I love them, I do, I do, however they disguise themselves.

Belinda rose like she meant to make a run for it. “My father? My father is—”

“Your father is in less than total control of his faculties. His lieutenants—who hijacked me and dragged me out to the estate—made a big show of it being his idea. Oh. Excuse me. I’m Garrett. Dean said you wanted to see me. I’m glad, too. I’ve wanted to meet you since that night at the Joy House.”

She looked puzzled. “The Joy House?” She edged sideways. She’d changed her mind about wanting to see me.

“Weeks back. In the Safety Zone? You ran in and stole my heart. Then some brunos tried to steal you. Remember? Big black coach. Old boy with green eyes and butterflies on his breath? Your basic every-night weird kidnapping upset when the gallant knight of the streets rescued the distressed damsel?”

“You’ve been dieting. You were four inches taller and sixty pounds heavier then.”

“Ha. Ha. That was Saucerhead. He used to be my buddy. He helped me a little. My heart was broken when you didn’t stick around long enough to say thanks.”

“Thanks, Garrett. You’re blocking the doorway.”

“No shit? You’re quick. I told Saucerhead you’d be quick. I told everyone you’d be sharp. Is that a problem? Me not moving? I thought you wanted to see me.”

“That was before you told me you work for the ugly twins.”

“Did I say that? I didn’t say that. I couldn’t have said that. I have a long-standing reputation for refusing to work for them or your father—though I might let one or the other labor under the misapprehension.” I tried my famous boyish grin, guaranteed to set any girl’s little heart going pitty-pat.

“Stow the bullshit, Garrett. Let me out of here.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re not dragging me off to the uglies.”

“No way. Why would I do that? My life wouldn’t be worth two coppers if I did.”

“Mine either. Mine especially. I don’t really know about yours. Let me out of here.”

“Not till I hear why you came.”

“Doesn’t matter now. You aren’t the guy I need.”

“Because I know Crask and Sadler?” I shrugged as though trying to shake off a broken heart. “Can’t win them all. But you*are* the girl I need. I’ve been looking for you for weeks.”

“Why?”

“It’s about the people that tried to snatch you. You’re their only target that got away.”

She got real pale. That wasn’t the reaction I’d expected. She asked, “What do you mean?”

“You’ve heard rumors about the killer who strings girls up and guts them?”

“I’ve heard talk. I didn’t pay much attention.”

“That’s funny. I would’ve paid a lot of attention after somebody almost dragged me off.”

“Was that them?” She was grim, suddenly. Hard, like her father.

“Yes.”

“Oh.” In a small voice. *An I feel foolish* voice.

“You and me, we’re the only ones who ever saw him face-to-face and lived.” She didn’t really need to remember Saucerhead, did she? “And I only saw him for a second. You must’ve had more to do with him and his boys. You were running from them when you showed up at Morley’s.”

“I was working part-time at Bishoff Hullar’s Dance Parlor. I don’t know why. For the hell of it. I didn’t do anything but dance. Some girls I knew used the place to make dates.”

“I know the scam.”

“One night—that night—two men tried to pick me up. Their boss had seen me, they said. He wanted to meet me. I’d be well paid for my time. I said no. They persisted. I told them to eat shit and die. They wouldn’t take no for an answer. Hullar had to run them out. But they didn’t go away. They tried to grab me when I left work.”

Plausible. Some guys think that when a woman says no she’s only being coy, possibly because so many women have only been being coy when they’ve said no. From what I saw at Morley’s that night, those guys hadn’t been long on social skills. “Why the Joy House? Funny place to run.”

“Morley Dotes. I hoped his reputation would scare them off long enough to give me time to think. Then, when they came in, I hoped Dotes would get upset about them getting physical inside his place.”

“He did.”

“I couldn’t run to my father’s people. I would’ve had to explain why I was in the Tenderloin in the first place.”

“What about the guy who wanted to meet you so bad?”

“I guess that was him in that coach. That was the only time I ever saw him.”

Well, hell. Wonderful. She’d be no help unless the Dead Man found something she didn’t know she knew. “Great. Back to where I started. So. Even though you’ve changed your mind, how come you’re here? What’s up?”

She studied me. “I think he’s after me again. Anyway, it’s somebody with that same smooth style, sending guys to talk for him. I got scared. I heard you were straight. I thought you could get him off my back.”

The butterfly man had good taste if not good intentions. Belinda wasn’t dressed for it, but she couldn’t hide the fact that she was a looker. Her mother must have been something. She hadn’t gotten those looks from her father.

“I could discourage him. Why’d you change your mind? Because I mentioned your father?”

“Because of Crask and Sadler. I’m not going to let them profit from what happened to my father. And they know it.”

Should I reveal my past role? Tell her Crask and Sadler had done nothing but exploit a situation that had fallen into their laps? Didn't seem the best strategy. "There's never been any love lost between me and the uglies. When they were your dad's top boys they strained at their leashes, wanting their chance at me. Now they can pick their time. I wish I had time to worry about that. But I have to concentrate on this killer. He's about due to strike."

She was distressed again. "Then he wasn't taken by the Watch? A Captain Somebody was doing a lot of crowing a while back."

"Captain Block. His optimism was premature." I told about the two killers so far and asked her to fill me in on the dandies whose sweet talk had so impressed her that she'd come running to me.

I learned a lesson. Belinda Contague didn't listen any closer than her father ever had. "I don't get it. How come the murders keep happening?"

I shrugged. "Crazy stuff happens."

"Inside somebody's head. You didn't get the right man."

Odd. Mostly Belinda was a girl of the street, what you'd expect of a thug's daughter. But something kept sneaking through, something suspiciously redolent of refinement. She'd been away from home most of her life, a secret because Chodo hadn't wanted her to become a hostage to fortune. I had a feeling she'd learned to be a lady while she was away.

"We got it right, Belinda. Both times. Without a doubt. The killers liked to keep souvenirs, and the men we caught had them. This time we have an idea who may have caught the curse—if it moved on—but we can't find him. We can guess when his compulsion will make him kill. We've identified his three most likely victims. You're one. And somebody's been bothering you."

"Actually, I thought . . ." Small, sour smile.

"You thought they were Crask and Sadler's beagles and you could leave me in the middle while you did a fast fade on everybody."

She nodded. "You're not as put out as I'd expect."

"That's what I do. Get in the middle. It's easier when a pretty woman wants me there."

"Save that stuff, Garrett. I'm immune. I've heard all about you."

Checking up? I put on my best hurt look. "What? Me? The white knight?"

"The rooming house where I stay—under a name I'll keep to myself, thank you—caters to single women."

Sounded like the antechamber to heaven. I maintained a neutral expression. "And?"

"So I've heard about you. You recall a Rosie Tate?"

I gasped, choked. Should I be outraged or should I laugh? "Good old Rose. Sure, I know Rose. I did her out of a fortune by making sure the lady her brother named in his will got what she had coming. I didn't let her get her way by wagging her tail at me. Yes, I know Rose. She's got a real boner for me. I didn't know they let her out on her own." Rose Tate running loose could be a disaster worse than a platoon of serial killers. The woman was nasty. As gorgeous as they come, but nasty.

"You think she's a joke?"

"Not hardly. Not Rose. Rose is a joke like a starving saber-tooth is a joke. Make that a starving saber-tooth with a toothache." I faked a laugh. "So she still holds a grudge."

"That woman wants your head. She didn't say anything about any money."

“Rose was never one to let little things like truth and accuracy get in the way when she was creating a mood in her audience.”

“Tell me about it. Didn’t take two weeks before every girl in the place was ready to strangle her.”

“Way it goes. It’s hard to be a crowd pleaser in my racket. So what about Crask and Sadler?”

“Garrett, I don’t really know. I can remember when either one of them would have died to protect me or the family name. They would have done anything to shield me from a breath of scandal. That’s the way those people do things. They have this elaborate code of honor.”

“I know. And part of it is that women and children are exempt. But. The last thing your father ever said to me was, look out for his baby.” I don’t know why I told her. It wasn’t a smart move. She didn’t need to know. I didn’t need to hoist up a sign saying here’s a way to manipulate me. “I said I would. I didn’t think I’d need to. Crask and Sadler said you’d be taken care of. Maybe they had their fingers crossed.”

“That sounds like them. Him and them too. My father had a thing about you, Garrett. He used to go on about honorable men. About how there were none left, except for you, and you were going to get yourself killed for your trouble.”

“He didn’t know me the way he thought. I have my bad moments like anybody else.”

“He was funny some ways, Garrett. Besides having crotchets about you, he was always honest with his daughter.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I was never in doubt what he did. Unlike most females near his kind. As far back as I can remember, he told me all the hows and whys and wheres and dirt that makes the business go. I never thought anything was strange till he sent me off to school. Then I got embarrassed. I lay awake nights. I prayed my little heart out. Then I found out all the other girls were embarrassed by their fathers too, and half of them made up the most outrageous stories to explain why . . . I realized that no matter what my father did, he did love me. And that was more than most of my classmates could say.”

Cue the violins, Bunky. The kingpin was a loving dad. When they were totting up the score at the gates to hell, he could tell them, “I done it all for my little girl.”

Chodo was the next thing to dead, and still he kept surprising me. “Belinda, I have to admit I admired your father—even when I hated what he was and what he did to people. But all that’s something we can go into later. Right now every minute brings me nearer to the time the girl killer will have to do what he’s got to do to stay happy.”

“What?”

“Bottom line. Some people need rougher stimulation than others. That’s what the Tenderloin is all about. Providing junk for the weird-stuff junkies.”

My sweet Belinda surprised me by responding in an accent neither of the street nor of the Hill. “My daddy woulda been proud a you, Garrett. Some people . . . Some people is just sick and cain’t get it off.”

“That’s the heart of it, isn’t it? Where’s the line between what’s unusual and what’s unacceptable? When does weird become dangerously perverted?”

She looked me straight in the eye. “I’ll let you know.”

“Hey . . .”

Garrett.

Of course the Dead Man would yank my chain right then.



43

“He wants to see you.”

Belinda looked puzzled. “Who does?”

“My sidekick. Watch him. He’s not fast on his feet, but he’s sly.”

“The Dead Man?”

“You’ve heard of him. That’ll puff his ego.”

Garrett, do get on with it.

“I thought I was getting on with it as good as I could, under the circumstances.”

Belinda gave me a strange look. The Dead Man sent, *Your love life was not my concern. Get her in here.*

“We’re a little hasty today, are we?”

“What the hell are you doing, Garrett? Talking to the walls?”

I wish to speak with you, Miss Contague.

“What the hell is this, Garrett? Get the hell out of my head!”

“It ain’t me, babe. I thought you knew about the Dead Man.” She wasn’t heading for the door, she was pressing closer to me, a development I didn’t discourage. I eased her across the hall. “I know. I know. You didn’t think you’d have to deal with him. You thought the stories were exaggerated. They are, mostly. Except about how ugly he is.”

Garrett!

“And testy. He’s real testy. Like a badger with bad teeth.”

“My God! Look at that nose!” She clutched my arm. I melted. I tried to slide the arm around her, to comfort her, but she wouldn’t let go. I’d have bruises in the morning.

Garrett, take your gloating, less-than-winning personality into the kitchen. Indulge your true nature guzzling beer while the lady and I exchange reminiscences.

“Hey! Let’s not get personal.”

I went to the kitchen and sulked, indulged in my favorite food, Weider’s pale lager.

Garrett!

Hell. Here I was barely through my fourth pint and he was rattling my chain. What did a guy have to do to relax? I stamped in there, past Belinda. She asked brightly, “Where can I find Dean?”

“Kitchen. What do you want, Chuckles?”

The girl is exactly what she appears to be. He was astonished, obviously. I am amazed that she is so honest and forthright.

“So it isn’t hereditary?”

That is not what I meant.

“What you really mean is, she didn’t know a damned thing we could use. And you’re thrilled about

it.”

After a fashion. I convinced her that it would be in her best interest to remain here, out of sight, in our guest room, till we do something about the killer.

“Say what?” He doesn’t like women, of any species. He doesn’t want them in the house to visit, let alone to hide out indefinitely. “You going through some change? Actually recommending that a female stay here?” He sure wasn’t trying to do me any favors.

It would not be the first time.

“That depends on how you add things up.”

I would love to match wits with you, but that game has lost its savor. I want you to go see if you cannot charm either the Candy woman or the Dixie woman into spending the night here.

“Why?” He had more faith in me than I did.

I despair of teaching you to employ your reason. Because once you lure the potential victim close enough, I can make sure she is not out there when the killer goes hunting tomorrow night. Because then I would have two of the three most likely targets under my protection, freeing you and Captain Block to concentrate on the remaining woman.

“Right. I’ve watched those two women in action, Smiley. Candy don’t play and Dixie is out of my price range. Snowball-in-hell time.”

I have faith. You will find a way.

“Right.”

This defeatism amazes me in a man who so regularly disturbs my naps with the gales of whooping and snorting emanating from his room.

“Regularly? I can just about count on the fingers of one finger the number of times—”

Garrett, I am dead, not stupid.

“Yeah. Well. So maybe I underexaggerated. But I do wish I was doing half as good as you think.”

I wish you were too. You are more easily endured when—

“Stow that. How’re we going to move a bunch of women in here? We don’t have—”

Dean can see to their wants. I will see to their safety. You go to the Tenderloin, bring us back one.

“If they’re even working. You have to remember, they don’t do this stuff for a living. It’s part-time, for kicks. Anyway, why should we bother? Did Block catch up on his payments?”

We came to an agreement. There are no financial obstacles.

“Really? Nice of you to keep me posted. I hope you took him so bad he won’t come around here ever again.”

I suggest you adjourn to the Tenderloin and lay groundwork.

Is that what you call it? “But I have to—”

Let everything else ride. Mr. Hullar will not expire if he misses his regular report on the adventures of Barking Dog Amato. I want to be right on top of this killer if he has survived. I insist.

I was willing to arrange that, only I didn’t know how to get him out there—unless maybe I hired a wagon and a dozen sturdy moving men. I could just see him dashing gallantly about town, bringing his

special style of derring-do, to the dismay of the wicked and cheer of the downtrodden.

Your brain has become a snake pit.

“But I have only one snake pit.” I withdrew, danced lightly upstairs to see how my unexpected guest was settling in. Mostly I got to watch Dean help her settle. He interposed himself like he was her maiden aunt.

Dean had been having his rehab parties for weeks. My bedroom, which lies across the front of the house, and the guest bedroom have been done for a while, but till Dean and his pals went to work, the other two rooms had remained untouched, repositories for junk that should have gone to the basement or street long ago. The parties had gotten the room across the back set for Dean, partly. It wasn't finished. But he no longer had to sleep on the daybed downstairs when we had company. Still, his room needed plenty of work to become really habitable. The more he got between me and Belinda, the more I considered leaving the gaps in the outside walls there for him to handle himself come winter.

“Look, what I really need to know is whatever you know about the girl called Candy. At Hullar's. I have to come up with a way to make her stay away tomorrow night.”

“I didn't work with her. I barely knew her to say hi.”

“Damn. Somehow I had the idea all you girls should know each other. I'm getting really tired of this whole thing. You can't give me anything?”

Dean scowled, though even he realized I'd intended no double meaning. Belinda caught his scowl, raised an eyebrow—I fell in love all over again, because that's one of my own great talents—then winked when Dean wouldn't see her. “No.”

I went away wondering.

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“Look,” I snapped when the Dead Man started in on me during my report, “I did my best. I let Barking Dog drive me crazy telling me about his day so I'd have something to tell Hullar. Then I spent two hours trying to get somewhere with a dame so dizzy she thought me trying to save her life was a new pickup routine. She finally told me to screw off and die. Not exactly a boost for the ego. But I did find out that she won't be working tomorrow night. She has family obligations.”

Excellent. If we fail tomorrow, we will have her as bait next time.

“How come you're so sure we'll have more trouble with this killer?”

I am not sure. I am taking a page from your philosophy, looking on the dark side, expecting the worst. If nothing happens, I will have had a wonderfully pleasant surprise.

“Yeah? I hope you get your wonderfully pleasant surprise. I'm going to bed. It was a bitch of a day.”

All that beer, in the line of duty.

“There are limits. Stand watch. If that woman finds she can't control her urges—”

Ha. She is sound asleep, without a thought of anyone named Garrett anywhere in her mind.

“What is she, then? A nun? Never mind. I don't want to know. I want to sleep. Good night. Tight. Bedbugs. Bite. All that stuff.”

I made it upstairs before the summons came. *Garrett! Come down here.*

Rather than prolong the pain by fighting, I went. “What?” This would have to be good.

You did not tell me about the other woman. Dixie. At Mama Sam’s. Remember?

“I remember. She didn’t show up for work. She was expected in but she didn’t make it. Nobody was surprised. That was the way she was. All right? She was time wasted. But she’s supposed to be there tomorrow for sure. She’ll be our bait. Good night.”

Whatever questions he had, he took answers directly, without forcing me to spend more time on one of our famous exchanges. I climbed the stairs again. This time I made it all the way to my room before he prodded me. *Garrett! There is someone at the door.*

Hell with them. Let them come back at a civilized hour. I settled onto the edge of my bed, leaned forward to untie my shoes.

Garrett, Captain Block is at the door. I believe he has brought bad news but he is too excited to read reliably.

Great. For Block I’d make special arrangements. He could come back next week.

Nevertheless, I pried my carcass off my bed and trudged down the hall, downstairs, up the ground-floor hall to the door, peeped through the peephole. The Dead Man was right. That was Captain Block out there. I held another brief debate about whether or not to admit him. I finally gave in and unlocked the door.

I was a tad more frank than usual. “You look like death on a stick.”

“I’m considering suicide.”

“And you came here for help? That’s not one of our services.”

“Ha. Ha. He grabbed a march on us, Garrett.”

Bring him in here, Garrett.

“Say what? You can’t go talking around things tonight. I’m so tired I’m wasted.”

“Winchell. He snatched the Candy woman. Tonight. Because he knew we’d be set for him tomorrow night. Ripley was with him.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw them. I was down there scouting out how I wanted to do cover tomorrow night. I saw them snatch her when she left work. I chased them till I collapsed. They saw me too. They laughed at me.”

“You lost them?”

“I lost them. I’m going to kill myself.”

I told the Dead Man, “You want to let him do that now so I can get some sleep? I’ll get rid of the body tomorrow.”

Nonsense. Captain Block, you must return to your barracks and turn out every man who knew Corporal Winchell or Private Ripley. Determine if any knows where either man might hide. Send squads to check those. Worry more about saving the girl than capturing the villains. A success there will endear you to the public and your superiors alike. I suggest you begin moving now. If, in fact, you do manage to overhaul the villains, do capture rather than kill them. The curse will be easier to control with its carrier still alive.

“I tried that last time. The clown made us kill him.”

I suspect that, too, is part of the curse. Whoever cast it originally, for whatever reason—you seem to be taking an inordinately long time examining the official records—was a genius. He did

not just toss off a spell that compelled someone to go forth and slaughter a certain sort of woman. He created a curse that interacts with its environment, that learns when it fails, that goes on and gets harder to overcome with time.

Block had grown pale. “There’s no way to beat it? If I do stop it today, it gets harder to stop tomorrow?”

I can think of several ways to stop it. None are especially appealing. You can make certain the current curse-bearer dies in the presence of someone so handicapped that he cannot manage a killing. Or with a prisoner who will never be released. I am now convinced that the accursed must be kept alive while the appropriate experts study him and determine how to deactivate the curse, cantrip by cantrip.

Alternatively, inasmuch as each transfer has been from a dead man to a living one through direct association, we might experiment with a live burial. Even better might be a live burial at sea. Perhaps entombment if we could be certain the tomb would remain unopened forever.

“You saying the curse itself can’t be stopped, only the guy wearing it?” I asked.

That has been the situation to date. In reality, burial has just been a means of passing the problem to a subsequent generation.

“I smell legwork.”

Indeed. Much of it legwork that should have been done already. I suspect actual dismemberment of the curse will require identification of the sorcerer who cast it and a clear picture of circumstances surrounding the casting. Motive may be as important as means. Knowing why the curse was created could provide a clue as to how to get at it, where to start unraveling it.

I told Block, “I’ll bet he’s been thinking this way since the first time you came around. And you’ve been sloughing off the research on account of it seemed like too much trouble.”

He didn’t argue and neither did the Dead Man.

I said, “Whatever’s happening now, I’m not involved. I’ve got sleep to catch up on.”

Block opened his mouth.

“Don’t start on me, Captain. How many times do I have to drag your ass out of the fire before you’re satisfied? You have the same equipment I have. Old Bones here told you what to do. Go do it. Save a life. Get famous. Where’s Dean? Can’t he let Block out? Gone to bed? Come on.” I grabbed Block by the elbow. “Do what he says. Get that research when you can. Good night.” Out the door he went, sputtering.

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I got me a few hours of horizontal, but not hardly enough. A big racket awakened me. I smelled food cooking, so it must’ve been around the solar dawn, though still a long way from any time when a rational being would be awake.

For whatever irrational reason, I pulled on my pants and stumbled downstairs. I rambled into the kitchen, dropped into my customary chair. “I thought those little shit morCartha were all taken by the army for aerial scouts in the Cantard.” MorCartha are a flying race, knee- to hip-high, resembling old-fashioned red devils with bat-style wings, only they’re more brown than red. They’re a contentious, loud, and obnoxious species possessed of no consideration whatsoever. They came from the north,

fleeing thunder-lizards. TunFaire had been plagued by them till somebody suffered a seizure of smarts and hired them as auxiliaries. If they did what they were paid for, they could have a dramatic impact.

“These come from a new wave of immigrants, Mr. Garrett.” Dean handed me a cup of tea. “Or so they say. I suspect the hired tribes are returning, hoping they can get paid to leave again.”

“Likely. Why couldn’t we have lived in imperial times? It’s one damned thing after another. Look at all this shit. MorCartha on the rooftops. Thunder-lizards everywhere. One of those five-horned things swam the river and went crazy on the Landing last month.”

“I felt sorry for him.”

“Huh?” I cracked an eyelid, looked to my left, discovered that I was sharing the table with my houseguest. And me in nothing but my pants.

“I felt sorry for the big stupid thing. It didn’t know what was happening. It was terrified, all those little creatures screaming and throwing pointy things at it.”

“You hear that, Dean? Ain’t that a woman for you? Here’s a monster going berserk, stomping people to death, ripping up property, and she feels sorry for it.”

“Actually, I rather felt that way myself.”

Yeah. And so had I. And probably everyone else who hadn’t suffered directly from the poor beast’s fear and confusion. When you went and looked at the thing, now caught in a big pen on a vacant lot, it just seemed a big lovable puppy that looked like it had moss and lichen growing on it. I don’t see how you can call something that weighs in at fifteen tons cute, but it was cute.

“I guess it was good practice in case one of the big carnivores tries the same trick.”

“He always have to play hardass, Dean?”

Come on. On a first-name basis already? The old boy drives me crazy doing that.

“Always, Miss Belinda. Pay him no mind. He means well.”

“Dean, you checked how you feel lately?”

“Sir?”

“You said something nice about me.”

“This is a nice young lady, Mr. Garrett. I approve thoroughly. I’d like you two to get to know one another.”

Holy shit.

“Ah. Yes, sir. I know who her father is. We cannot be held accountable for our choice of ancestors. I know who your father was.” That was news to me, if he meant that he’d known the old man personally, back in those olden days before Pop went to the Cantard to get himself killed. “As I understand the situation, this isn’t a problem. Mr. Contague, begging your pardon, Miss Belinda, is as good as dead, and the real say lies with Mr. Crask and Mr. Sadler.”

“Two fun-loving boys who haven’t stopped being dangerous because they’ve started running things by forging Chodo’s signature. What’re you trying to do, Dean?”

“I’m doing what I always do, Mr. Garrett. I’m matchmaking.”

His easy admission struck me dumb. Belinda found nothing to say either. We exchanged helpless looks. I added an apologetic shrug.

Dean said, “I’ve spoken with Miss Belinda extensively and find her quite your type behind her antagonistic public face.”

Belinda snarled, “Is this some kind of teamwork seduction effort, Garrett?”

I protested, “You have to excuse him. He’s got this thing about getting me involved.”

Dean didn’t listen. He hummed and did kitchen work while we traded excuses and accusations, then declared, “The Dead Man is napping. Why don’t you two go upstairs, make love two or three times, then finish arguing over lunch?”

I couldn’t believe Dean would say something like that. This just wasn’t the Dean I knew.

Not that I found the idea repulsive. Something about Belinda got to me.

Belinda just sat there staring while Dean smiled, then winked. I suffered the faintly hopeful suspicion that she didn’t find Dean’s suggestion entirely repulsive either.

However, this had become one of those situations where you couldn’t carry forward if both of you were randier than a cat in heat.

I said, “You’re pushing your luck, Dean. I’m going back to bed. I’m sorry, Miss Contague. Please don’t think ill of me because of Dean’s presumptions.”

I thought Dean was going to break out laughing. Was this some scheme to sabotage all hanky before it turned into panky?

Belinda didn’t say anything. As I fled I thought I detected the faintest look of disappointment.

You know how it goes. As soon as I was alone and the risk of her reaction was no longer part of the equation, I stared at the ceiling and entertained regrets while Belinda Contague grew more attractive by the moment, any warts magically fading.

An incurable romantic. That’s me.

46

I was about to head out and see what Block had accomplished. Or had not, as was more probable—though the fact that he hadn’t been back did seem promising. Belinda came bounding upstairs. “Can I go?”

“No.”

“Hey!”

“There’re people out there looking for you. I don’t think your continued good health is uppermost in their minds. And the way you look, we’d be in trouble before we got two blocks.”

“What’s wrong with the way I look?”

“Not a damned thing. And that’s the problem. Was I to walk out of here with you right now, my neighbors would hate me for life. Also, anybody Crask and Sadler might have watching the place would be sure to recognize you. It isn’t like they trust me to dig my own grave unsupervised.”

“Oh, hell!” She stamped a foot, a neat move you don’t see that often. It felt rehearsed.

“If you were a redhead, nobody would pay any attention. I mean, the uglies wouldn’t. My neighbors would hate me even more. And I don’t know if I could stand it if you were everything you are now and a redhead besides.”

Dean leaned out of the kitchen, behind Belinda, gave me a look that said he thought I was laying it on with a trowel.

Belinda said, "You're laying it on with a trowel, Garrett. But I love it. I hate being cooped up. I'll see about becoming a redhead. Or maybe a blond. Would you like that?" Breakfast was forgotten.

"Sure. Anything. I'm easy. Just don't put on a hundred pounds and grow a mustache."

She winked. My spine turned to water. But I wasn't a complete dummy. I wondered why she was getting so nice. I suggested, "You might change your look while you're at it. Especially if the black is like a trademark."

"Good idea." She blew me a kiss.

I looked at Dean, who looked back and shrugged, shook his head. I couldn't tell if he meant he didn't know or didn't want to be blamed.

I started toward the door again.

Garrett.

The story of my life. I can't go anywhere or do anything without everybody in range nibbling at my time.

I stalked into the Dead Man's room. "Yes?"

Tell Captain Block that, on consideration, I feel last night's abduction to have been that only. The Candy woman will not be murdered until tonight, at the necessary hour. If the captain has, as seems likely with him, given up searching and is waiting for a body to surface, then he is—

"I'm on my way."

I hit the street. I made the tail within a block. I took him for one of the outfit's boys, not chosen for his skill at remaining unobtrusive. Crask and Sadler wanted me to know they were watching. The really good tails would stay away till they thought I'd had time to do some serious searching.

I'd fool them. I wouldn't look at all.

Block wasn't hard to find.

I went to his headquarters hoping to get word where to look and, behold! There he was, right there in the shop. "What the hell you doing hanging out here?" I demanded.

"We didn't get anywhere last night. I had five hundred men on the street. They found squat. I called it off after midnight. Didn't seem there was much chance we'd do any good then. All the killings took place before midnight, near as we know."

"You're waiting for somebody to find the body for you. The Dead Man said you would be."

Block shrugged. "I'm open to suggestions. Unless you think you need another thousand marks just to open your mouth."

"On the house this time. The Dead Man said tell you the girl is alive. They won't do her till tonight. The killer never breaks his schedule. He just grabbed her last night because he knew we'd be watching later."

"Still alive?" Block grabbed his chin with his left hand and started kneading while he thought about that. "Still alive." More silence, more thought. "I've had all the men Winchell knew trying to guess where he'd go to hide, who he'd get to help him."

"Probably wouldn't need anyone but Ripley."

"Maybe not. Laudermill!"

A staff sort of sergeant materialized. A classic of the type, his butt was twice the width of his shoulders. "Sir?"

“Anything yet on Winchell or Ripley?”

“Winchell hasn’t contacted any family or friends. They’re still checking on Ripley, but he’s a negative so far too.”

I had a thought, which has been known to happen. “Maybe we could try looking on the inside.” When this happens, it always startles people. This one surprised even me. “What was Winchell working on?”

“Huh?”

“Case-wise. Look, Block, I’ve been close enough to know you’ve been going a little farther than you’re telling anybody except maybe the Prince. Looking to make a splash when they cut you loose, I figure. Whatever. I don’t care. But some of your guys have been making some serious efforts to do real police work lately. Was Winchell? What was he doing? Maybe—”

“I got you.” Block held a debate with himself, showing expressions that suggested he was reluctant to let a cat get out of a bag. Finally, “Laudermill. Get me Relway and Spike. In here. Soon as you can.”

Laudermill departed with astonishing quickness for one of his bulk. He was a twenty-year man for sure, growing anxious about his pension.

Block said, “These guys Relway and Spike were teamed with Winchell and Ripley on a decoy thing I wanted to test. They’re irregulars. They’re off shift now, so it might take a while to find them. I never thought to check the auxiliary operatives.”

The irregular Watchmen appeared sooner than Block expected, and way too soon for me where peace of mind was concerned. Neither was human. Relway was some unlikely breed that was half dwarf and fractions of several other things. He was *ugly*. Also, to my surprise, he seemed to be decent and pleasant, less scarred by his ancestry and appearance than I’d have guessed. He was committed to the mission of the new Watch, an apparent fanatic.

Likewise Spike, who was a ratman. I don’t like ratmen. My dislike verges on being a prejudice. I couldn’t believe this ratman was for real. An honest ratman is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron.

Block told me, “Relway and Spike are volunteer auxiliaries till I get my budget approved. I already have a verbal commitment for funds sufficient to add four hundred undercover operatives. These two will direct one of the companies, down where they’ll be taking you.”

Scary stuff, secret police. Great crimestoppers to begin, maybe, but how long before Block’s ambitious Prince discovered that they could be employed to root out persons of doubtful political rectitude?

Sufficient unto the day . . . “So let’s find out about our boys.”

Block questioned Relway and Spike. They did know of a place where Winchell and Ripley might be hidden. It was a hole they’d scouted while scoping out their operation. They hadn’t used it, but that wouldn’t keep Winchell away now.

Block snapped, “Garrett, you go with these two. Cover the place. Scout it out. I’ll be right behind you with reinforcements.” Away he flew.

Relway and Spike eyed me expectantly, probably figuring me for a Watch officer. They were excited. They were going to be part of something big and real before they were even officially policemen.

I jerked my head toward the door. “Let’s do it!”

Elvis Winchell and his sidekick had guts. Relway and Spike told me about the scam they'd started before chance brought the corporal and Price Ripley up against something too big to handle.

Their target area was the waterfront around Ogre Town. Real badlands. Winchell would wander the worst parts pretending to be drunk. Ripley, Relway, and the ratman would blend into the derelict scenery, then would jump whoever jumped Winchell.

I admired Winchell's balls but had reservations about his methods. He'd made only two actual arrests, of two fairly inoffensive young muggers. But he'd sent a bunch of thugs home kneecapped, set to spend the rest of their lives on the victim side of the line. He felt that word would spread and the bad boys would take their business elsewhere.

"Maybe," I said. "But I think they'd have just killed you."

"Four of us?" Spike demanded. I was startled, not at all used to being addressed as an equal by a ratman. A second later I was amused by this discovery of my own flaw. Spike continued, "Muggers don't have a guild and they don't work in crowds. I lived in this area for years. The muggers never work in groups of more than four. Two is most common. We handled foursomes easily. Captain Block gave us the tools."

"Maybe I'd better not pursue this. I don't think I want to know."

"There's a New Order coming, Garrett," Relway said. "Lot of people have had all they can take. The pendulum is swinging. You're going to find people saying that if the Crown won't solve social problems, they'll take care of them themselves." The man went on, at great length, till I was ready to send him off to debate those women I'd sicced on the Dead Man that time. Relway, though he had no human blood, was determined to be a factor in TunFaire society.

I suggested, "Maybe you're overstepping, friend. Non-humans are here only by treaty. They don't want to be subject to Karentine law, they better not claim its protection either."

"I hear you, Garrett. And you're right. There should be one law for everyone. You're born in this city and live in this city, you should help make this city a decent place to live. I done my part. I did my five in the Cantard and took my Karentine citizenship."

I got the message. Don't look down because he was a breed. He'd paid his dues same as me.

I edged away from Relway. He was a committed activist. Every third sentence included "the New Order," clearly capitalized.

Politicals make me nervous.

Translation: they scare the shit out of me. They're weird and they believe the weird shit they say without looking at the implications of their becoming successful. Luckily, politicals are few in TunFaire, and those few are despised, outcasts.

They ought to learn to be less threatening, like Barking Dog Amato.

Now I saw how Relway had sublimated the anger and hatred that should result from being an unusual breed and notably ugly besides. He would keep on smiling but would restructure the world so he'd become one of its shining lights.

Fine. Go for it, buddy. Just include me out of the revolution and its aftermath. I'm happy with my life the way it is.

Relway and Spike led me to a tenement that had burned recently but incompletely. Though abandoned, its cellars remained habitable—defining habitable by liberal standards.

I asked, "How do we find out if anybody's in there?"

It was broad daylight. I was strutting around with two guys Winchell knew, two guys with no ability to cut any slack. They had black-and-white minds. An hour earlier Winchell and Ripley were their best buddies. Now those two were just names on the sleazeball list, scum in need of expungement.

Relway gave the ruins the fish-eye. "Spike, you're better at getting around quietly. Check it out."

Ratmen are sneaky bastards. Spike went off like a ghost, not toward the place that interested us. Relway and I made ourselves invisible while we waited. Relway was a chatterbox with a nose a foot long. He wanted to know all about who I was and why I was interested in the case.

"None of your business," I told him.

In a huff, Relway said, "You could at least show some manners. You could be polite. I'll be important in the New Order."

"I'm not polite to Block. I wouldn't be polite to his boss. I'm not going to waste polite on you and the rat. I didn't particularly want to be here. Fate keeps messing me around."

"I hear what you're saying. Same shit happens to me. Maybe more, looking the way I do."

"Nothing wrong with the way you look," I lied. "There's the rat. What's he signaling?"

"I think he means they're in there. He wants to know what we do now."

"What we do now is wait for Block. I got a feeling this Winchell is nasty. I'd just hate it if he got away over my dead body."

"I know where you're coming from, Garrett." Relway waved and poked the air. So did Spike. "I'm not big on becoming a dead hero myself. I do want to see the New Order arrive. You wouldn't be the Garrett that's the investigator, would you?"

"Probably. Why? I didn't mess up any of your family or pals, did I?"

"No. Nope. What you're looking at is something you ain't going to believe exists. A real one in a trillion. A pervert. An honest breed who comes from a family that's never had even one member taken in for questioning." His tone was challenging, and deservedly so, because my attitude reflected the general prejudice. What was embarrassing was that it wasn't a prejudice I really felt.

"We're off on the wrong foot here and it's mostly my fault, Relway. It isn't personal. I've been in a foul mood since I got up. I usually save my venom for the ratmen."

"You're weird, Garrett. Here comes the man." He meant Block. Evidently Block was held in high esteem in some quarters.

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Block still held me in high enough esteem that he sought approval before he moved. "The place is surrounded. Gonna take some doing for anybody to get out."

"Dead Man says take them alive if you can. The curse probably can't transfer while they're still alive."

"They?"

"Part must be touching Ripley somehow. Or Winchell, whichever isn't the primary carrier."

"Yeah. Got you. I guess there's no reason to stall anymore. Might as well do it."

A thought had wormed through my head several times lately. I'd pushed it out over and over. It came back again. I was going to be sorry, but, "I maybe ought to go with the first rush. The girl will recognize me. If I let her know it's a rescue, we can maybe keep the panic level down, maybe save ourselves some people getting hurt."

"That's up to you. You want to go, go. I'm giving Relway first shot. Tell him what you're doing, then don't give him no grief while he's doing his job. He's better than any of my regulars."

"Right." I joined Relway. "I'm going in with you. The girl knows me."

"You armed?"

"Not for blood." I showed him my headknocker.

He shrugged. "Don't get in the way of the real cops."

What a straight line. It was all I could do to avoid temptation.

Relway's storm group were armed up to take a town from a Venageti Guards division. I hoped they'd had some experience along those lines. They hadn't had any training since.

"You figure to face that much trouble?"

"No," Relway said. "But this bunch will be ready for whatever trouble they do find."

"Good thinking. No way you can get chewed out for not being ready when you go in ready for everything."

Relway smiled. "There you go."

I looked across the street. Spike was restless. "Things always get more real at moments like this."

"You had it that way down there?"

"Worse. Lots worse. I was a scared kid then."

"Me too. You ready?"

"I won't get any readier."

"Follow me." He took off. Garrett the white knight pranced the cobblestones a step behind, followed by a half-dozen uniformed champions of justice who had no idea how to accomplish what they'd been ordered to do. They hadn't joined the Watch to capture madmen or protect TunFaire from villains.

The ratman had a tiny basement window scouted. As we arrived, he dived through, wriggling, his hideous naked tail lashing behind him. I think that's what gets me about ratmen. The tails. They're really disgusting.

"After you," Relway said as that tail slithered inside.

"What?" That window was too small. It wasn't meant to pass a body. It was as big as it was only because some small-timers had worked on it so they could get inside and clean the place out. Of what, I can't imagine.

"You said you're the hero she knows."

"Shit." And I did volunteer for this.

I flopped on my belly and shoved my feet through the window. The ratman pulled. Relway shoved. I popped through, hit the floor, stumbled over a loose brick, muttered, "Where are they?"

"Back where you see the light," Spike whispered. That made him real hard to understand. Ratmen have trouble enough talking without whispering. Their throats aren't made for speech. "You cover while

we get more men down.” This ratman had spent a lifetime dealing with humans. He hadn’t hidden himself away from the mainstream, content to live in society’s cracks, taking only what no one else wanted. My respect for him rose.

I readied my headknocker, advanced toward the light, which leaked around a poorly closed door. I wondered why Winchell and Ripley hadn’t either attacked us or made a run for it. Seemed to me we were making an armageddon sort of racket.

All of a sudden I had three guys behind me and Relway telling them, “We’ve got the other way out covered. Let’s do it. Garrett?”

I took a deep breath and hit the door. I hurled myself at it, expected to demolish my shoulder.

The door collapsed. I didn’t know my own strength. I was a regular Saucerhead Tharpe. I tore it right off its hinges.

I collapsed after two staggering steps over a footing of broken bricks.

Elvis Winchell and Price Ripley were hard at work snoring on beds of sacks and rags. Evidently carrying a curse was exhausting work. The only open eyes around belonged to Candy. She responded to my entrance but not in any wild display of joy.

Hell. She didn’t know why we were there. For all she knew, we were pals with Winchell and his sidekick. I stumbled to my feet. “We’re the rescue crew.” Winchell and Ripley had begun to respond, finally. Relway bopped Ripley over the head before the poor guy could get his eyes open. Relway wasn’t having any trouble with the footing. He looked positively graceful.

Spike had less luck putting Winchell back to sleep. Winchell evaded his blows, scooted away, his eyes trying to sparkle green. Maybe he didn’t quite have the hang of it yet.

Gods, he looked awful. Like he’d aged fifteen years in the time since he’d helped bring in the villain Downtown Byrd had given us. Ripley, too, looked bad, but not nearly as bad as Winchell.

“Rescue crew? You sure? You look more like a circus act.”

Spike and two Watchmen were chasing Winchell. Winchell wasn’t cooperating at all. Relway and the other man were stuffing Ripley into a big sack.

Block appeared at the other entrance to the cellar, was careful not to place himself in extreme danger. I called, “Hey, Captain. This one don’t need rescuing. She’s got it under control already.”

Candy said, “You’re the guy who’s been hanging around Hullar’s.” I cut the cords binding her ankles. They were nice ankles. I hadn’t noticed how nice before. I’d been entranced by all the nice stuff higher up. “Garrett?”

“That’s me. Trusty knight-errant. Invariably refused and abused for trying to warn people that they’re in danger.”

“Watch the hands, boy. I’ve heard about you.”

Ripley was headed for the street now, out of it, but Winchell was putting up a fight, even though Relway and Spike, working together, had a sack over his head and arms. Neither Relway nor Winchell was in uniform. Having been employed, both had been able to afford reasonably nice civilian clothing. Vaguely surprised, though, I noted that Winchell used a rather heavy-looking piece of rope for a belt.

“I’ve heard about me too. Sometimes I don’t recognize myself. What did you hear? Obviously not that I’m a prize.”

Spike, Relway, and the gang managed to get Winchell tipped over and all the way into the giant sack. Relway got busy tying it shut.

“Prize pig. You remember a Rose Tate?”

Relway kicked the flopping sack. “Better than a cell on wheels,” he told nobody in particular.

“Ah, sweet Rosie again,” I said. “Yes. Let me tell you about Rose. This is a true story that you’ll believe if you know Rose and will call a fairy tale if you don’t.” I had time. The boys seemed to be getting along fine without me. Just to make sure I didn’t lose my audience, I became totally inept at untangling and cutting. Relway and the boys started dragging Winchell toward the door. Winchell writhed and cursed all the way. He wasn’t alone in that sack. In fact, green butterflies fluttered around the basement, confused, more worried about the single candle burning than anything else. Again I wondered what the butterflies had to do with anything, if they did. Maybe they were just something like a skunk’s spray.

Then there was just Candy and me, and she didn’t seem distressed by my lack of haste as I talked about Rose Tate. In fact, I started looking around for the knives I’d seen at the Hamilton place while I talked. In the back of my mind was a curiosity about how she knew Rose. When I finished my story I asked, “How’d you come to meet Rose?”

“You have a good idea what’s going on with me? I know you’ve been asking around. Hullar told me.”

“I was just trying to keep you from having a date with the guy they just hauled out of here. He likes to whittle on rich girls.”

“I got that part. I guess maybe I should thank you for not letting him eat my liver.”

“That would be nice.” I finally found the knives under the mess Winchell had been using for a bed. I didn’t want to touch them, but supposed they’d be harmless as long as Winchell was breathing.

“Thank you, Garrett. And I do mean it. I get real sarcastic when I’m scared.” Notice how we weren’t talking about how she’d met Rosie? I didn’t.

“You must be scared shitless all the time when you’re down to Hullar’s, then.” That was how she was known there. As a sarcastic bitch.

“You’re going to ruin your chances, Garrett.”

I made a sound like a steam whistle. “You’re beautiful, but I’m losing interest fast. In fact, I’m beginning to wonder why I wasted my time here. Your personality is sabotaging the advantages nature gave you.”

“Story of my life, Garrett. I make a point of shoving my foot into my mouth whenever things start going good. I’m predetermined to fail, that’s what my mother says. All right. I promise. I’ll try. Thank you. You saved my life. Other than the obvious, what can I do for you?”

Block appeared in the doorway and stuck his oar in. “What are you up to down here, Garrett?”

“Looking for stuff.”

“Find anything?”

“Yeah. Those knives. The Dead Man said we should break them.”

Block came a couple steps closer, looked at the four naked blades. “Is it safe to mess with them that way?”

“Winchell and Ripley still healthy?”

“Yeah.”

“Then they’re safe. Unless you go sticking yourself.”

He made a rude sound, took the knives. "I'll bust them up right now." He left.

I told Candy, "Other than the obvious, which is less obvious than you think, you can come to my place and talk to my partner. He's the brains of the outfit. He wants to see you."

"He some kind of freak? Can't come see me?"

"He's handicapped." I hid my grin. Nobody is handicapped like the Dead Man is handicapped.

We climbed out of the cellar. Candy never stopped yammering. I did gestures of defeat, tried to introduce her to Block formally so she'd know who got official credit for her rescue. It didn't sink in. She was chattering at me. He was interested only in breaking the knives, which he accomplished thoroughly, cracking each into four pieces. "That ought to take care of that." Block was puffed up and happy.

Pride goeth before, I told myself. "Better make sure they don't have anything else off that bum. We don't *know* it's the knives carrying the curse."

"We burned the bum and everything he was wearing. Now we'll burn these . . . Yeah. Right. Not before we can do something about the curse."

"Later." Candy was still after me. I said, "Woman, I'm not going to keep on. I don't do masochism. But do walk along with me, see my partner. My place is right on your way home."

I paused to stare at the captives. Both were lost inside burlap sacks. Winchell's seethed. Ripley's did nothing, but left me with an uncertain frown. A little bitty thing like a clothes moth fluttered away while I was looking.

Meantime, Candy demanded, "How do you know your house is on my way home?"

"I admit I haven't figured out who you really are yet. But I do know you come off the Hill. Rich girls are the only kind this killer liked. So if you're going to go home and hide out from the real world and tell yourself how lucky you were and forget all this and treat the lower—"

"You an Acmeist? Or an Anarchist?"

"Huh? You lost me." But I hadn't lost her. I was heading home and she was tagging right along. The Dead Man would be pleased.

"They're crackpot underground groups, Garrett. There are dozens of those. Pointillists. Deconstructionists. Calibrators. Avatars, Atheists, Realists, Post-Moderns. The way you were going on . . ."

"I don't have anything to do with politics, mainly in hopes that politics won't have anything to do with me. It's my considered, cynical opinion that, no matter how much we're overdue for a change, any human-directed change will be for the worse, to the benefit of a smaller and more corrupt ruling class." At that moment I saw the face of the next fad: revolution. "Meantime, do you have a name? A real name?"

All those *ists* would have as their troops poor little bored rich girls.

"Candace."

"Really? You're using your real name?"

"Might as well. Nobody ever used it but my brother. He died in the Cantard last year. He was a cavalry captain."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, Garrett."

“Huh?”

“You lost somebody there too.”

I got it. “Yeah. Not like it’s a unique experience, is it? So what do most people call you?”

“Mickey.”

“Mickey? How did they get Mickey out of Candace?”

She laughed. She had a wonderful laugh when she was doing nothing but being happy. I could feel myself becoming distracted. “I don’t know. From my nanny. She had pet names for all of us. What?”

I was chuckling. “You wakened a memory. My little brother. We called him Foobah.”

“Foobah?”

“I don’t know. My mom. She called me Wart.”

“Wart? Yeah. I can see that.” She danced away, pointed. “Wart! Wart!”

“Hey! Knock it off.” People were staring.

She did a pirouette. “Wart. The famous investigator, Wart.” She laughed, took off running.

She ran because I started after her. She could run pretty good. She had the legs. They were such nice legs, I didn’t try too hard, just floated along enjoying the view.

That started when we weren’t far from home. It swept into Macunado Street, so I caught up, said, “Couple blocks up that way. This is my neighborhood. People know me.”

She laughed as she fought for breath. “Yes, sir, Mr. Wart. I’ll maintain your dignity, Mr. Wart.” She was still laughing and giving me a hard time when Dean opened the front door.

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Belinda was in the hallway. She scowled at Candy. Candy scowled at Belinda. Wasn’t any doubt they recognized one another. Candy gave me one last jab. “Did you know his nickname is Wart?”

“Dean,” I growled, “bring refreshments to the Dead Man’s room. Also smelling salts in case I bop this one over the head.” I had a problem suddenly. I was caught between two gorgeous women, both interesting, each eyeing the other like a cat fixing to sharpen her claws. On me.

I was out of practice but remembered how my luck ran. When the fur started flying, most of it would be mine. They’d be happy to gang up on me.

I heard a noise from the small front room and suffered the inspiration of my life. I popped in there before Dean’s latest stray made cover. It was a little furball so friendly that even I, if pressed, would’ve admitted it was cute. I darted back into the hall, where the ladies were exchanging killer stares. I got that kitten purring. “I guess you guys know each other.” I told Candy, “She’s hiding out here. From the killer.” I told Belinda, “The killer snatched her last night. We just rescued her. I brought her by to talk to the Dead Man.”

“I figured. I’d heard she’d been taken.” She looked at the kitten without that sparkle kittens ignite in the eyes of their fans. Damn. Inspiration wasted.

“Aren’t you sweet,” Candy cooed.

Great. Halfway there, anyway. “Why don’t you hold him while I check in with my partner?” She hadn’t reacted to me calling him by name. I played pass the kitty, headed for the Dead Man’s door. As

I neared it, Candy jumped, frowned in that way people do when first they hear from His Nibs direct.

I stepped inside. “You see what I got out here? Any special way you want to handle her?”

Just bring her in. He was vastly amused by something. I could guess what. Two women. Me panting shamelessly, trying to conjure some way to have my Belinda and Candy too. *This will be a true test of your fabled charm. Especially as both women have been forewarned by your old friend Rose Tate.*

“Make fun of my misery.”

Prepare her. She is under a great deal of stress still. My appearance may be too much for her as a surprise.

I thought she was handling her stress pretty well, taking it out on me.

The kitty thing did work. The women were together now, examining the cat but talking about Candy’s adventure. I said, “He wants you to come in now. I need to warn you, he’s not human. Don’t be too startled when you see him.”

Candy didn’t seem surprised. “Is he real repulsive? Like an ogre?”

“No. He’s just fat, mostly. And he’s got a big nose.”

“He’s a sweetheart,” Belinda said.

“Who is?” I demanded.

“Can I take Josh with me?” Candy meant the kitten. Named already. Belinda nodded, never consulting me.

“All right,” I said, as though anyone cared what the owner thought in his own home. “Good idea.” The cat could be a focus for some good feelings, good thoughts, when those might still be pretty hard to touch.

Candy went into the Dead Man’s room. She didn’t start screaming.

Belinda remarked. “I really do think you may be one of the good guys, Garrett.”

“Huh?”

She waved a hand like she’d heard things about me she didn’t want to repeat in my presence. I was baffled. How much could those two have said while I was with the Dead Man?

Women. Go figure them.

Belinda took my arm, cuddled up to my side. “It too early for you to take me to the kitchen and buy me a beer?”

We found Dean putting the final touches on a hot meal. “What’s this?” I asked.

“You need to eat. And the young lady you brought home obviously hasn’t had a decent meal for some time.”

Food is serious stuff to Dean. If he had his way, every meal would be a production. He’s appalled by my attitude, that food is just fuel—though I do enjoy good food when I eat it. I just won’t go out of my way or spend any extra. Call me a savage.

I drew beer for Belinda. She said, “I’ve been thinking about my problem with Crask and Sadler.”

“Good.” I hadn’t had time.

“Can you get the door, Mr. Garrett?” Dean asked. An impressive amount of racket had broken out there. “I can’t interrupt this.”

“Sorry,” I told Belinda.

She just smiled and winked.

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“Now what?” I groaned as I stepped aside so Block could come in. “Don’t tell me you screwed up again. I couldn’t stand it if you told me you screwed up again.”

“Winchell got away, Garrett.”

“*I begged* you not to tell me you screwed up again.”

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“The hell it wasn’t. You were in charge. The guy was tied up in a gunnysack. How could he get away?”

“Some damned fool decided he wanted to take a look, so he opened the sack.”

I nearly screamed. “And the butterflies got after him and Winchell just politely crawled out and waltzed away. Right?”

“Right.”

“What I ought to do is take you and this other damned fool and tie you both up in a gunnysack and dump you in the river.”

“This other damned fool is Prince Rupert. And he’s been quite good about not trying to shift the blame.”

“Well, good-ee. I’ll cheer when he’s crowned. So what? Why’re you here bugging me?”

Block sneered. “I’m not. I want to see your partner. He’s done well guessing what the killer will do.”

“Because he has a diseased mind too. I’m sure he knows you’re here. He has somebody with him right now. Just hang out in there.” I indicated the small front room. “He’ll call you. I’m having lunch.” And you’re not invited, you incompetent sonofabitch.

I sat down opposite Belinda. “Why don’t we kiss off TunFaire? Why don’t we get married and run off to the Carnival Islands and open a fortune-telling booth?”

“That’s an interesting proposition. What brought it on?”

“The Watch let the killer get away. That madman is back on the street and he’s got eight or ten hours to play his little prank.”

“But if Candy and I are here—”

“He’ll kill somebody else. He has to kill somebody.”

Somehow, like it or not, my house became the tactical headquarters of the hunt for Elvis Winchell. By sunset Prince Rupert had made himself a guest. I couldn’t keep him out, but I was a hardass about his yes-men. Jumped in there with a ferocious, confrontational smile and said, “Your lordship, I haven’t the facilities to serve all those men.” When he wasn’t instantly offended enough to holler for the headsman, I went so far as to suggest, “Their numbers are attracting attention.” It was way late, but the night people were out there and they were noticing the crowd.

We compromised. He didn’t bring anybody inside.

This Prince Rupert was the first royal I'd met. What I saw didn't impress me either way, though later the Dead Man did blather on about the good intentions he'd found in the man's mind. At that time I wasn't in one of my better moods, so just remarked that the road to hell was paved, and so forth.

The sun hadn't yet risen when word came that they'd found Emma Setlow, AKA Dixie Starr, in the usual state. The troops had arrived while the ritual was winding down. Winchell had taken another successful powder but his helper had been captured. The knives had been recovered.

"Knives?" I asked. "What knives? We already broke the knives."

The knives in question turned out to be plain old kitchen knives, not the best for the job they had done.

The Dead Man observed, *I suspect we will find that the knives were not the vehicle for the curse.*

"Hell," I muttered, "I had that figured. Winchell wouldn't still be on the hoof if they were."

The knives are broken, shattered, but the curse goes on.

"Cute. What about the guy they caught?"

The helper was a retarded ratman (an oxymoron again) who admitted he'd been baby-sitting Dixie since her kidnapping, which had taken place well before the snatch on Candy. Meaning Winchell had decided to stock up on brunettes. After he had escaped from Block and the Prince he'd just run off to where he'd had Dixie stashed.

I muttered, "I don't like this. This Winchell sounds too damned smart."

"Winchell?" Block sneered. "Winchell needs help tying his shoes."

It is the curse, gentlemen. This time around—meaning this return to the world—it has reached some critical stage of growth. I suspect it would not be false to state that it has reached a point where it has begun to teach itself, not just to learn in the slow way a dog does, through numerous repetitions. It might behoove us to consider the horror of the possibility that it may develop an ability to reason.

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute. A curse makes your cow go dry or gives you shingles or makes your kid crosseyed. It isn't something that—"

In the world of your village charm seller, you are correct. Probably no sorcerer alive today could cast this spell. But this spell comes down from a time when giants walked the earth.

Giants were walking the earth right outside. Well, within a mile, anyway. But I didn't argue. One of the earliest lessons I learned about dealing with Old Bones is: don't get him going on the good old days. "Giants? Well, maybe. But we're here to develop a strategy."

Considering the Prince and Captain Block, that strategy would be as much political as it was aimed at removing a major villain from the streets.

The Dead Man agreed with me. *Winchell will keep as short a profile as possible but he will not be able to remain hidden. He may be able to do without a helper, but his need to kill is on a short and shortening cycle. Six nights from tonight he will have to kill again. Inasmuch as Miss . . . Altmontigo . . . has been rescued, he will have to develop his next victim from scratch — assuming we can keep our two houseguests isolated.* That he sent to me alone. Our guests didn't need to know we had anyone special squirreled away. *He will be hunting. If he manages to get his victim without help this time, he will still have to recruit helpers. He cannot stop killing and he cannot stop the circle of death growing smaller every time, so that he has to kill sooner.*

"Whoa! Whoa!" Block said. "There a point to all this yammer?"

Yes. Winchell's financial resources cannot be vast. Counter his recruiting efforts by offering a substantial reward for his capture.

"Who's Miss Almontigo?" I asked, regretting it before I finished speaking. Yet I wondered why he'd hesitated that instant, before and after. Because of Block and the Prince?

Candy to you. Or Mickey.

One very unsettling point here. The Almontigos are an ancient and honored family from the highest heights of the Hill. What was I getting into? I had a royal prince and as high-toned a young woman as could be found visiting at the same time? Not to mention I was giving shelter to a princess of the underworld.

All of that meant notice. I don't like being noticed by people with that kind of power.

The arguments went on and on. Dawn came and went. I said the hell with it. I wasn't contributing anything and wasn't hearing anything useful to me. What suggestions I did make were ignored. So let the great powers scope things out their own way. After they screwed up and looked like complete fools, I could lean back smugly and tell them they should've listened to me in the first place.

I stopped at the foot of the stairs. Belinda was up there. Candy was up there. Dean was on the daybed in the small front room again.

That damned kitten started rubbing up against my ankle, purring, trying to get in good. I picked him up. "Little buddy, first thing in the morning you get to learn a valuable lesson. You can't get by on cute and the kindness of strangers. You're going to hit the street."

The cat purred. And somebody pounded on the door.

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I didn't get in any hurry. I ambled toward the front door wondering if I couldn't booby-trap the front steps, putting in something where if you didn't trip the secret safety you got dumped into a bottomless pit.

Wonderful idea but, unfortunately, not really practical. The practical thing to do was ignore the door. Only most people who want to see me know I have that habit and know that I'll storm to the door eventually if they just raise hell long enough.

This little nightmare visitor was one neglected subject slash coconspirator name of Barking Dog Amato. Just what I needed in the middle of the night. Well, morning. It had turned morning when I wasn't looking.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"No. Me? I haven't been to bed yet. I was just heading there. It's been a nasty day in a nasty week in a nasty month."

"The girl killer? I heard there was another one."

"That's on the street already?"

"Word gets around when people are interested."

"I guess. Come back to the kitchen." I jerked a thumb at the Dead Man's door. "Your old pal Block is in there cooking up something with His Nibs." I settled Amato at the kitchen table. "Beer?"

"Sure."

“What’s up?” I asked as I drew two.

“Well . . . It’s an imposition, I know. I got up, it was raining out, I was sick of doing signs and handbills. So I got out and started walking. My feet brought me here.”

What the hell? I didn’t need sleep. Who needs sleep when you lead a righteous life? “Some leftover apple pie here. Want some?”

“Sure. I don’t get much decent food. What did you think the other day?”

“You made a hell of a start. I didn’t get to see it all, though.”

“I noticed you disappeared.”

“Not by choice. Some of Chodo Contague’s thugs came around, told me the man wanted to see me.”

“I thought I saw some of those guys just before you disappeared.”

“You know Chodo’s people?”

“Not by direct experience, thank heaven. But I’ve watched the outfit for years, gathering information. They haven’t tried to profit at my expense yet, but when they do, I’ll be ready.”

Which meant what? There was someone inside the outfit who suffered from mercy and tolerance? Not hardly.

Belinda walked in. Candy was right behind her. Neither was formally attired. Barking Dog immediately proved that he wasn’t all crazy. His eyes bugged. He drooled. If the moon had been up, he would have howled at it. He squeaked, “Who are these lovely ladies, Garrett?”

“They’re involved in the serial-killer thing. This one is Belinda and this one is Candy. Guys, this is Kropotkin Amato.”

Belinda wasn’t impressed but Candy practically jumped out of her underwear. She just *had* to ask: “Barking Dog Amato?” Looking me right in the eye, “Sas’s father?”

In two blinks Amato was a changed man. “Sas? Like in a nickname for Lonie? You know Lonie Amato?”

Belinda caught on, grabbed Candy’s hand. Candy was chalk pale but, apparently, Belinda’s move wasn’t fast enough to stifle her. She said, “Sure. We work with Sas. Don’t we?” So, I thought. You girls have wasted the night away having a hen session upstairs. I hoped a guy named Garrett hadn’t played too prominent a role.

Barking Dog said, “Lonie is my daughter. Not many people know . . . I haven’t seen her since she was five. My wife . . . She never believed in what I was doing. She thought I was crazy. Maybe I was. Maybe not. It didn’t matter. She took off. With Lonie. You know Lonie? You really know Lonie?”

Even crackpots get to shed their tears.

The girls didn’t know what to say. I waved them off. I said, “Old buddy, I guess I owe you a little confession. The reports we’ve been doing? They’ve been going to your daughter through Hullar. Yeah. He was a nominee but not a villain.”

“Lonie? Really? You know my daughter, Garrett?”

“I’ve seen her, that’s all. I don’t know her.”

“Is she all right? Tell me about her. Tell me everything.”

“I’m going to break your heart, old buddy. I can’t. We get along and we’ve worked some things together, but you aren’t my client. Hullar is, for your daughter. I can’t tell you anything unless they say it’s

all right. I will tell you that she's healthy. She ain't up in the world, but she's a long way from down. You want to know more, I'll see what Hullar says."

Belinda said, "I've changed my mind. You're a real shit, Garrett."

"What if I was working for you? Would you want me telling your business without permission?"

She grumbled. She made noises. She understood. Barking Dog might well be enthusiastic about news of his daughter, but would the daughter be eager to have him intrude upon *her* life?

Lonie's wishes had to be consulted.

Barking Dog reached that conclusion too. Maybe faster than I did. He said, "Garrett, you talk to her. See if she'll meet me. You work that out, where I can see her, I'll be your slave for life. Anything you want, it's yours. I loved that girl. And I haven't seen her since she was practically a baby."

Belinda and Candy looked at me like they expected pearls of wisdom to drip from my lips, as though with a wave of rusty knight's blade all could be made right between Barking Dog and his long-lost child. There was a lot of sentimental emotion floating around. If I was going to gain any ground with either of these beauties, I was going to have to play for the reunion.

I'm a cynic. I admit it. I had to do it to maintain my chances. No way was I going to waste my precious time on that out of sentiment. I'm one of the hard guys. You can't get me with that mush.

I hoped Amato's heart didn't break when he found out what his daughter did.

Hell, *I* didn't know what she did. Did I? She danced for Bishoff Hullar. That didn't make her a whore. Anyway, that wasn't any of my business.

I said, "I don't want to be impolite, guys, but I really am beat. I've been hustling all day. You ladies want to stay up, talk to Mr. Amato, that's fine with me. Make sure the front door is locked when you go to bed. What that means is, one of you has to stay up till Mr. Amato and those clowns in there with His Nibs leave."

The Dead Man proved that one of his brains had room left for me while he entertained royalty. *You need not concern yourself, Garrett. I suspect that I will not get rid of this prince short of being so rude he hauls us up on charges. I am confident Dean will be awake in ample time to see our last guest out. Do get some sleep.*

That didn't sound good at all. He isn't kind to me unless he has plans for me. If he wanted me rested, he meant to run me into the ground later.

I patted Amato's shoulder. "Talk to the girls. I'll see about your daughter."

Two minutes later I was between the sheets. I killed the lamp and was unconscious before my head hit the pillow.

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The Dead Man ran me into the ground for days. I got to do all the legwork Block's men were supposed to have done already.

Actually, they *had* gathered all the relevant records into one room in the Chancery cellar. They just never got around to doing anything with the documents. So I got to winnow and collate—where I could. I had to bring in help with the older documents, which were recorded in the abandoned Odellian alphabet and wouldn't have been readable anyway because the language has changed so much.

While I goofed off days and spent profligate evenings in the Tenderloin, Block hunted Winchell and

tried to avoid public notice. Word was out that he was the man charged with ending the killings. It was also out that he wasn't having much luck. The scale and scope of the mess were getting exaggerated. The precursors of hysteria filled the air—which made no sense because people get murdered every day, curse or no curse.

I think Block's mistake was offering a reward for Winchell, despite that being the Dead Man's idea. That focused attention. Attention got the poor fool working on an ulcer. His buddy Rupert couldn't shield him from all the high-ranking dolts who just had to explain to him the best way of doing his job. The Prince himself was guilty of forgetting they were after a killer who was a bit out of the ordinary.

"Tell the man," Block grumbled. "He don't listen to me."

"Getting disenchanted?"

"Not yet. But close. I can still realize that he's got his own problems and that's why he can't give us more help. It's just a tad irritating when he shuts out whatever he doesn't want to hear, though."

I shrugged a cynic's shrug. I had no faith in his prince.

So Block made excuses for him. "He does have enemies, Garrett. Plenty of people think TunFaire is just dandy the way it is now. Mostly they're people whose fortunes would suffer from an outbreak of law and order."

"If it isn't law and order it'll be an outbreak of something." The signs were growing stronger. "I ran into some old ladies who want to demolish all the breweries, wineries, and distilleries."

"That's going too far."

"I tried to tell them. I said, 'There is no civilization without beer. Beer is the lifeblood in the veins of society.' They wouldn't listen."

That put a smile on his face. "Fanatics. What can you do? We get fifty complaints a day about these religious nuts, Mississans, whatever they are." His grin meant he thought I'd invented the old ladies. I hadn't. They were working the Chancery steps a few levels above Barking Dog, crowded into a spot nobody else wanted. I wasn't worried about them. In no rational society would theirs be an idea whose time could come.

I saw a lot of Amato, spending my days at the Chancery. He wasn't the same Barking Dog. The old fervor had gone. I made a point of catching him on his break. "What's happening, hey? Something gone wrong?"

"I'm scared." He didn't beat around it.

"Scared? You? Barking Dog Amato?"

"Yeah. Me. People haven't really noticed yet, but they will. You did. Then where'll I be?"

"What's the matter? What happened?" Maybe he had somebody persecuting him for real.

"My daughter. Suddenly I'm vulnerable. When I didn't know about her, nobody could get to me."

"You're safe. Hardly anybody knows about her now. We're not talking." I sniffed the air. What was that? Aha! Amato wasn't nearly as aromatic as once he'd been.

"Yeah. I guess. I keep telling myself them what knows is decent folk. Then I get scared *of her*."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I snuck down to the Tenderloin. I figured she had to hang out around that Hullar's place sometimes, else how would he know to hire you. Right?" Everybody thinks he's an investigator. "So I hang out and hang out and finally I get me a look at the gal they call Sas."

“And?”

“She looked all right.”

“I told you that. She’s got people to look out for her.”

“Now I know about her, there’s no way I can get around meeting her face-to-face. And that scares the shit out of me. What do you say to your kid you ain’t seen since she was this high?”

It would terrify Sas too. When the time came. She didn’t know that he was aware of her existence. I kept debating whether or not to tell Hullar. It would piss him off, but I guessed I’d better. “I understand. But don’t let the stress get you. You may have a valuable mission ahead.”

“Huh?”

“You should get out among the people. Hang around the taverns and sidewalk cafes.” Plotting urban revolution isn’t a poor boy’s hobby. Poor folks stay too busy working to keep body and soul and family together.

Amato shook his head. “I wouldn’t fit in.”

“Sure you would. Get yourself some new clothes. Put in some time getting in touch with today’s popular climate.”

“How come?” Mild suspicion. He still didn’t trust me completely.

“There’s a new spirit afoot. It doesn’t amount to much yet, but it could. You ought to be aware of it.” I thought he could become a real force on the street if he addressed real fears and angers. Lots of people had heard of him. He was a folk hero. People did listen when he stopped talking about himself.

He spoke largely out of imagined pasts now, but there was no reason he couldn’t apply his passion to futures as yet unimagined.

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Captain Block caught me during my chat with Barking Dog. He looked less like a Watchman than ever, though he was well-dressed. His henchmen, too, were trading uniforms for street clothing. Apparel had become a statement. Those who shed the red and blue meant to take their work seriously. The rest would become unemployed if Prince Rupert gained control of the city’s police powers.

“How’s it going?” Block asked. He ignored Amato. Barking Dog pretended Block was invisible. It was a good working arrangement.

“I’ve got a story. Sort of. It’s not as clear as I’d like. It won’t be much use. The documentation is all of the we-did-this-and-that, this-woman-got-killed, so-did-that-one, we-caught-the-villain-and-hanged-him-and-buried-him-where-he-fell variety. Not a hint how to control the curse.

“Back then the curse didn’t migrate from villain to villain the way it does now. It didn’t get the chance. I think the people involved understood it better. And it wasn’t as sophisticated as it is now. And the local wizards weren’t always out of town. The job wasn’t just up to the Watch.

“Before the second killing round ended, everybody knew they were dealing with an accursed man who’d opened the grave of the first killer.” And we, as brilliant as our forebears, had gotten that far too. Hooray.

“They didn’t do anything about it?”

“Sure. They hanged a man and buried him where they thought he wouldn’t be found. They were wrong. I’m no expert on sorcery, but I’ll bet this curse has some kind of summons built in that calls till somebody hears it and sets it free. Smarter and nastier than it’s ever been before.”

Block mused, “And today we can’t do anything about it even if we want. We don’t have anyone who can neutralize it. Because of the war.”

Yep. All our real badass wizards were in the Cantard.

“What about your end?” I asked. You never know. He or his boys might have tripped over Winchell.

“Not a trace. We’ll have to trap him. It’s set. The girl goes back to work tonight. She skips tomorrow night, works the next two nights. The extra one is in case he can hold off for a day. Your partner says he wouldn’t move two days early.”

I didn’t think Winchell would be dumb enough to go where he was expected at all.

Block continued, “The only people in the place not part of the cover team will be Hullar, the dwarf, and three girls Hullar trusts with his life. There won’t be no way Winchell can get to her. If he *has* to do it, he’ll *have* to take the bait.”

If he had to have either Candy or Belinda. But I wasn’t the least bit confident that Winchell wouldn’t find other victims. Unless his girl luck was as bad as mine.

I didn’t criticize. The Dead Man had scoped out this plan. He termed it his martial-arts approach. We would lay back and let the curse betray itself. I’ve already mentioned his plan’s obvious weaknesses.

“Just suppose he gives it a skip and takes second best.”

“The minute we find a body, we’re on his trail. Spike’s hired the best ratman trackers in town. They’re on call. In fact, he’s got them wandering around in case they cross Winchell’s track by chance.”

When everything you can do isn’t enough, you do whatever you can. Give Block that. This time he was giving a hundred percent.

He asked, “You identify the sorcerer responsible?”

“Only to a probability. It goes way back. Farther than we thought. There’s still some stuff I need translated before I can say for sure, though.”

“Goddamnit, say something for unsure.”

“Hey, temper. The oldest depositions, first time there were killings, mention a Drachir Nevets. I checked with a historian. He’d never heard of a Drachir Nevets but he did know about a Lopata Drachir of Nevetska, a real shadowy old-time superwizard who was always into it with a sorcerer named Lubbock Candide. Drachir’s forte seems to have been writing curses so complicated that nobody could escape them.”

Block grunted, thought a moment, amazed me by knowing the names. He was better educated than I’d suspected. “Why this particular curse? Any hints?”

“More shadowy stuff. Candide had a daughter.”

“Arachne.”

“Right. A major ass-kicker herself. Unless the translator was yanking my leg, both Drachir and Candide were out to win her favors and found a dynasty of witch-kings. Arachne decided she’d rather snuggle up with daddy, which pissed Drachir off mightily. Which, I’m guessing, led him to send a curse after her.”

“All that would have been way, way before the first killings.”

“Yeah. I’m thinking maybe that wasn’t the real first time around, only the first that got recorded.”

“Like maybe Arachne deflected the curse earlier and buried it and didn’t tell anybody.”

“Maybe.” The man could think when he wanted. “It might be useful to find out if there are any extant portraits of Drachir and the Candides. Especially Arachne.”

Block grunted. He wore a faraway look. “This just won’t be settled the easy way, will it?”

“Not hardly.” Heavens, the things I was going to have to talk over with the Dead Man. And him not in a charitable mood because the news from the Cantard had such a lull-before-the-storm feel. “Speaking of things not settling easily, without making a big to-do, catch a look at the guy watching us from up where the old ladies do their temperance thing.”

Block looked. “Chodo’s man Crask.”

“Bingo. I’m going to trust you with something.” Barking Dog had gone back to work early, not wanting to be close to a minion of his oppressors. No one would hear.

“The other girl at my place. Belinda. Her full name is Belinda Contague. As in the daughter of Chodo Contague. She’s hiding out with me because Crask and Sadler want to kill her.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because they did something to Chodo. Poisoned him or something. I’ve seen him.” What the hell? Everybody lies to the police. “He’s a vegetable. They just pretend he’s giving the orders. Belinda knows that, which is why they want to get rid of her.”

“I think I missed something, Garrett.”

“Belinda can take them down. They have to cover their scam or lose control. I got into it because they wanted to hire me to find her for them.”

“A girl who happens to be one of the main targets of our killer?”

That had been a problem for me, briefly. “I thought it was one damned long coincidence till I realized I was looking at it from the wrong end. From the end where we are, chasing Winchell. Look at it coming the other way. The thing between Belinda and Crask and them has been going on for months. The girl-killer thing is just something she stumbled into going somewhere else. She wouldn’t have been involved at all if the other thing hadn’t made her run away from home. Chance brought me into it at one point rather than another, sooner than later. The players had me chalked in for their game.”

Block looked uncomfortable. “How come you’re telling me? It ain’t healthy knowing too much about Chodo’s business.”

“Because there’s a very large and nasty man up there giving me very evil looks. He’s unhappy because I haven’t been busting my butt trying to find Belinda instead of noodling around with some who-cares serial-killing thing. As I recall, I’m supposed to call on the Watch if it can give me a hand. Not to mention that you might get a kick out of poking a stick into the eye of an evildoer of Crask’s stature, knowing he doesn’t really have Chodo behind him.”

“Tell you the truth, Garrett, I think getting Crask off the street is a grand idea.” He snarled it, setting off alarms. What had I done? “But I don’t have much confidence in it being a healthy idea. What’s he doing?”

“Glaring daggers. Probably thinking how nice it will be to drag me somewhere where he can do dental work on me.”

“Why?”

“The girl. He doesn’t know she’s staying at my place. He hasn’t seen me lift a finger to find her.

Despite my having been told very plainly that it would be in my best interest to do so.”

“You’re sure Chodo’s out of it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then maybe I’ll have some fun with Crask. But don’t expect a lot. These people always have friends in high places.”

“How well I know,” I muttered.

Block winked. “Have a nice day.” He strolled away, looking thoughtful, leaving me beached and sputtering.

I did notice that he had friends in the crowd, mostly his auxiliaries. He’d begun to enjoy his role as honest Watchman. I wondered if he’d started turning all bribes away or only the most embarrassing ones.

I hoped the New Order thing didn’t go to his head. Truly there can be such a thing as too much law and order—though I can’t foresee TunFaire ever suffering from that.

I bade a soft farewell to Barking Dog. He was on a roll, did not have time to set his brass megaphone down. He indicated his latest report on himself. I snagged it and moved away, awaited Crask.



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Crask was displeased with me. “What kind of creep are you, Garrett, hanging out with dogshit like Block?”

“He’s not so bad. We’re old pals. Didn’t you know? Sort of in business together too. The new order, like that.” I couldn’t get the caps in like Block’s creature Relway. “Got a problem with that?”

“I got a problem with you. You was hired to do something. You ain’t doing it.”

“You’re mistaken. Despite having had money forced upon me, I didn’t agree to anything. Not to say I refuse the job. But I do have a couple other things to wrap before I get to it. So flutter away.”

“No. Chodo hires you, you’re on the job now. It’s the only job on your list.”

“Aw, shucks. Here we go. How long you known me, Crask? Long enough. You know no matter how many ugly faces you pull, no matter how many muscles you flex, I’m going to do things my way. I told you, I have things to finish first. You wait in line just like you was real people.”

“You’re pissing me off, Garrett.”

“Eek.” That was the idea. “I have that effect on people. Especially the kind who jump lines or think they deserve special consideration.” If he was going to do anything, I wanted him to do something stupid, in public. “Look here. Look real close. I want you should see my heartfelt pain at how I’m causing you distress.”

“I come here just going to caution you gentle, Garrett. Just going to take a minute out to show you the error of your thinking, so to speak. But now I got a feeling we need to go someplace and talk.”

“You aren’t half as slick as you think, Crask.” That was Block, materializing out of nowhere. “Why don’t we all sit down on the steps here, like we was old buddies.”

“Bug off, asshole,” Crask said. “Ain’t none of your business, what we’re talking about.”

“Maybe you’re right. But maybe I’m not interested in that.” Block backed up a couple steps,

settled onto the stone wall at the edge of the Chancery steps. He waved. A man stepped out of the crowd. Even I was startled. He seemed to have come from nowhere. Block said, "Well, Blinky?"

Blinky replied, "We removed the coach. We arrested three men."

"Well. How about that?"

Crask didn't look at Block. He put it all on me. "What the hell's going on here, Garrett?"

"You know as much as I do."

Block said, "You could be going down."

"Shit. What're you pulling?"

Block smiled. "Times are changing, Crask. I been waiting for that to happen." He looked up at me, smile malicious. "Me and Crask go way back. Same neighborhood. Same outfit in the Cantard, to start. We share a lot of memories."

Crask stirred uneasily. The strain in Block's voice said this was old business coming to a head. Crask's confidence was less than complete. Things *did* seem to be changing. "You mess with me, Block, you'll think a shit avalanche fell on you."

"I doubt it. Like I said, times are changing. You're running out of friends. I been waiting. The day I made captain, I had a special cell fixed up in the Al-Khar. I'm looking for an excuse to put you in it, hoping you make me break all your bones putting you there. I don't know why it works out that way, but almost every prisoner who was on the Watch's top-fifty-assholes list seems to end up committing suicide. Maybe it's rough in there." He winked at me, said, "Thanks, Garrett. I'd almost forgotten what I owe this butthead."

At the same time, Crask put on his most menacing face. "You want to be dead, Garrett? You don't mess with me like this and get out alive."

"What do I have to lose? Weren't you going to do me and the kingpin's kid as soon as I found her?"

"Come on, Garrett!"

"You think I'm weak. By your standards. But do you really think I'm stupid?"

Crask was ready to skin people alive. My plan to drive him crazy had worked. Only . . .

One of Block's men stepped up and bopped Crask from behind, whaling on his head with a stick that was cousin to my own. Crask didn't go down first crack. The stick man stared at his tool for a moment, astonished. Then, before Crask regained his equilibrium, Block's man whacked him half a dozen times real fast, making sure he got the effect he wanted.

Traffic on the steps cleared back. Funny. Not one soul thought of hollering for the Watch.

Block asked, "What do you think? Shall I put him away? Let Sadler shit a few bricks trying to figure what happened to him?"

"You're not scared what they'll do?"

"Not anymore." Block smiled. Relway appeared. Though I had no solid reason to think so, I feared Relway was the most dangerous creature in this New Order Watch. "We'll lock him up for a few days. Just so he'll know what it can be like."

The show moved away from me then.

I worried for Block. This could cause him big trouble. He might have a cell fixed up for Crask, but I couldn't see Crask staying in it, no matter what Rupert planned. The kingpin had friends everywhere.

Once Sadler learned about Crask's predicament, heavyweight wheels would start turning.

Still . . .

I watched Relway.

Block was creating his own personal secret police force. Fast. Possibly with the best of intentions, but if he pulled many stunts like snatching Crask, he'd find himself riding a tiger.

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I reported everything to the Dead Man. He was not pleased.

"You think I am, Chuckles?"

Captain Block has grown overconfident. His act is premature. His organization, however extensive, cannot challenge the syndicate even in transition. I cannot see his men remaining loyal through a crisis. Corruption has its own historical momentum.

"Historical momentum?" He starts using terms like that, it's time to batten down. There's about to be a big, sententious blow.

In the matter of Mr. Amato, his trepidation is understandable. Next time you see him, suggest he stop in and visit.

Just a down-home good old boy, my partner. I made a rude noise. I'd spent three days burrowing through centuries past, and he showed no interest whatsoever.

He could ignore with the best of them. *In the matter of the sorcerers Candide and Drachir, it appears that we should contact appropriate experts.*

"I consulted experts already, Smiley."

Linguists and generalists. Both names excite vague resonances but no special memories. Before my time, I fear. My opinion is that Block should have saved his special cell for our special villain.

He was racketing around all over the place. "Probably. It'll take a tough lockup to keep whoever's wearing the curse."

Till we get the appropriate wizards on the case.

Suddenly the Dead Man went shy. His tenor, tentative behind a display of confidence, baffled me, if only because I couldn't conceive of any situation in which he ought to be hiding something from his senior partner.

In the matter of Miss Altmontigo . . . Pause like he was fixing to feed me a line of bull so feeble he couldn't expect a moron to buy it . . . I had a visit from her stepfather. We enjoyed a turbulent session.

"I'll bet." You know how fathers get.

He had to face facts.

"Meaning somebody who considers himself my partner outstubborned somebody who knew he was on this earth for only three score and ten and saw time slipping away?"

Meaning that relentless bombardment with fact forced him to assume a cooperative stance.

"You got to him by dropping the Prince's name." He's not so hard to figure.

Actually, the real clincher was my observation that he no longer has any legal hold on Miss Altmontigo's person, only on her property.

I frowned. Each time he mentioned "Miss Altmontigo" he sort of stumbled. But I turned to his point.

For reasons unclear to me, Karentine property law assumes women don't have the sense the gods gave a goose. The law gives husbands and fathers veto powers over all transfers—even where they have no other claim on money or property. I suppose that's meant to save those silly girls from giving everything to cults and/or con men. Only a widow can execute contracts in her own name. I guess good sense rubs off in bed.

I suggested she might get around him on the property, of which she has a great deal, inherited via his maternal grandmother, who was something of a feminist activist. He manages the property at a handsome profit to himself.

He'd hung a lantern on the loophole. A woman of legal age can marry without permission. She could marry a dying (or dead) man who had no other heirs, making herself a quick widow. This doesn't happen too often, but when it does and there is a fortune at stake, the cases become public entertainments. Witnesses sell their testimony to the highest bidder. You can guess about the lawyers. Everything not nailed down. It ain't nailed down if they can get it loose with a prybar.

"You're home." Belinda invited herself in, rolled her eyes skyward. "That woman. She may work at Hullar's, but she has no concept of the real world."

I frowned a question at the Dead Man.

A juvenile female rivalry. Ignore it.

Sensible advice, maybe. Though not taking sides can be dangerous too, if they're really wound up.

Belinda asked, "Did we make any headway today?"

I told her about my day. The Dead Man didn't grouse about hearing it all again. Was my report on Drachir all that intriguing?

Belinda became preoccupied after I mentioned Crask. Twice I had to ask, "What's with him?" before I got an explanation of the Dead Man's funk.

"That friend of yours, the big one, came by."

"Saucerhead?"

"Yes. He brought some news about the Cantard. I don't think it was welcome. Excuse me." Belinda didn't like military stuff.

"Bad news, Smiley?" I asked. "Something you didn't want to hear?"

Your Marines have recaptured Full Harbor.

"I told you it would be a different story." I felt me a big surge of pride. They really do get you.

That is the least of it. Karenta has launched a general offensive on a shoestring and a prayer. Supported by morCartha auxiliaries, Karentine forces are attacking Venageti and republicans everywhere.

"Going to be a lot of regrets going out to the mothers of a lot of Karentine heroes, then."

A great many more will go to Venageti and republican mothers. The morCartha appear to be serving both loyally and with efficiency. If they persist, they will devour Glory Mooncalled's ability to gather superior intelligence, by harassing his scouts relentlessly. They are assuming all the traditional cavalry roles, including raiding and screening and holding. And they are doing it through the air, where neither Mooncalled nor the Venageti can touch them. They have wrested

air supremacy from Mooncalled's flying allies already.

“So?”

Do not be thick. It may mean the war is all but over, with Karenta the winner. Assuming the morCartha remain steadfast, we will witness a slaughter. Karentine troops will be in the right place at the right time in superior numbers, supported vigorously from aloft, every time.

“And?”

The end of Mooncalled's dream may be the beginning of Karenta's nightmare. Victory may be defeat. Our wiser leaders may have realized that long ago. That may be why the war dragged on. When the cost of victory exceeds that of continued warfare—

“Huh?” I was in one of my sharper states.

You have, on occasion, commented on conditions that could arise should all the soldiers come home.

“Oh. Sure.” After generations of warfare, the economy depends on continued conflict. Whole sectors are managed by nonhumans. Peace would bring on dislocations of vast magnitude, social stress, and strife. “Call it the war that's lost by winning.”

Exactly.

“Have we done anything to steel ourselves?”

We are nonpolitical. Our services will be in demand always. Against fate, even the gods conspire in vain.

That sounded like a bowdlerized quote. I didn't mention my suspicions. It does no good to call him on a theft. He's shameless.

Belinda came back. “I've been thinking, Garrett. I need to see Captain Block.”

A scheme worthy of your father, Miss Contague. But poorly timed. I do not think I can urge this strongly enough. This is not the moment to challenge Mr. Crask and Mr. Sadler. Their side of the ledger has all the pluses. And your few reliable friends are preoccupied with this traveling curse. Even so, let me suggest a few steps we might take when the time does come.

I groaned. When we take steps, I do the stepping.

They conversed. I waited, left out. Belinda was full of bounce when she left, having delivered a potent and promising thank-you kiss.

“What was she planning?”

Her scheme involved transporting me to Mr. Dotes's establishment . . .

“Say what? The woman is mad!” I can't move him to sweep around him, let alone push him out of the house.

There was a certain elegant evil in her plan, he sent, rather wistfully. He did not explain. We will explore elements of it in our free time these coming days. This will require visits from numerous outsiders. Apprise Dean.

Right. And have Dean blame it all on me even when it was obvious the whole thing was one of the Dead Man's chuckleheaded schemes.

So there we were, fooling around closing out one of TunFaire's worst-ever serial-killer deals, up to our ears in Watch and informants, and the Dead Man was trying to set up some scam to get Crask and Sadler off Belinda's back. I got to play gofer. Grumbling gofer. When Block didn't have anything better for me to do.

I must admit, though, that Miss Belinda Contague's gratitude stretched the limits of imagination and, almost, those of endurance.

We had so many villains in and out, I lost count. Most weren't your basic thug type, they were magistrates and military men and entrepreneurs and, yes, even Watch officers. Men whose vision defects had made Chodo powerful and them wealthier than they should have been. They all knew Belinda. Her birthday parties had been Chodo's annual excuse for gathering them together.

They came. Belinda talked about Crask and Sadler and her dad while the Dead Man poked around inside their heads. Those who would line up against Belinda left with their thoughts scrambled so they'd forget having seen her.

Saucerhead and Morley and Morley's men Puddle and Sarge hung around being insurance.

The Dead Man was sure Winchell wouldn't go after Candy again even if we threw her out naked and gave him a big head start. Belinda offered to go dangle on the hook.

Came the night. This time I was determined to stick it out till it wrapped. Block and his all-thumbs boys weren't going to screw it up again.

I wanted out. I'd done work enough for three cases. The only up side was, I hadn't gotten pounded around, which happens too often in my line.

Hullar's place was stuffed with picked Watchmen, most of them auxiliaries. More of the same were scattered around the neighborhood. The Tenderloin was lousy with law. The outside crew came and went, buying beer. We insiders bought more.

Hullar leaned against the bar, told me, "This asshole with the knife is going to make me rich, all you guys in here sucking it down. You really got to catch him?"

"We could let him do his stuff right there on your dance floor, let the mess draw the ghoul trade."

"Touchy."

"Can't help it." The hour was late. Tension was rising. The troops worked harder and harder to pretend they were ordinary slobs. I should've told them to lean back and take it easy. They were plenty ordinary and they had slob down pat.

"We shouldn't be out here, Garrett."

Hullar was right. Winchell might recognize me. Maybe the Watch was rubbing off on me instead of the other way around.

Belinda came to the back room where Hullar and Crunch and I were killing time drinking. She needed reassurance.

So did Crunch. He was put out. Relway had ousted him from behind the bar. "I could handle any whipper-snapper what went to bothering the girls, Hullar. No reason me being pushed off my job."

"I'm sure you could, Crunch. But I'm not in charge."

Crunch turned his glare on me. I said, "We're talking about a psycho killer, Crunch. A total crazy. You don't know him. The man behind the bar does." I hoped Relway's disguise would hold up. "If you were out there, he could walk in and cut your throat before you knew it was him. It's for your safety."

This had played before. I was tired of it. I gave Belinda a peck on the cheek, squeezed her hand. “Getting close. Hang in there. Break a leg. All that.”

“He should’ve made some kind of move already, Garrett.”

I was afraid she was right. Somebody should’ve come to check her out, maybe tried to pick her up. I was worried too.

An hour later the consensus had spread to the street. Something had gone wrong. Our fish hadn’t bitten. Somewhere a woman was dying because . . .

But no one gave up playing his part.

I was in the shadows, looking into the dance hall, when Sadler walked in. He looked incredibly evil. His expression grew more wicked as he spotted Belinda.

She was dancing with a Watchman disguised as a sailor. She spotted Sadler. Momentary fire touched her eyes. Sadler headed toward her. Once he passed a certain point, everyone in sight moved. He realized he’d walked into something. Fur started flying. Steel lashed the air. I stepped out to remind the boys that we weren’t killing people tonight.

Barking Dog Amato waltzed into the place.

There you go. We have us a rousing brawl going, everybody closing down a setup in which everybody had a specific role, including those of Hullar’s girls who’d stuck around to make it look good. We have maybe twenty people screaming and yelling. We have bodies flying everywhere. And in walks Barking Dog Amato looking for his daughter. He spots me instead. He ignores the uproar. “Hey, Garrett! This’s luck.” A Watchman flew past him, thrown by Sadler, who was in a truly foul temper. I tried to get to Barking Dog so I could move him somewhere a little less violent. He demanded, “Where’s my girl, Garrett? I come down here and come down here and hung out till I finally got me the nerve to talk to her, and when I do, I find out this Sas ain’t my baby at all. Her name’s Sasna Progel and all she knows about Lonie Amato is she’s heard Hullar and his dwarf henchman mention the name.” Another Watchman sailed by. “What’re you trying to pull?”

“We’re in the middle of something now. Could you maybe step over there out of the way and hang on a minute?”

Sadler roared my name like he’d decided I was the root of every evil he’d ever suffered. He charged.

“Better look out, Garrett,” Amato said. He headed for a corner. “That fellow don’t look too friendly.”

That fellow didn’t at that. He trampled Watchmen. Then he tripped over one. I planted a strong right on his temple. It put him on his knees but didn’t put him out. I threw a little of everything I had while he was getting up. He got up anyway.

I bruised some knuckles on my left hand. Then Sadler hit me back. I flew off to visit Barking Dog. Sadler came after me, ignoring all those other people giving him hell. It was like he was holding me personally responsible for his pain. He bent down to pick me up.

Barking Dog let him have it. Which was like a bee stinging an elephant if the bee don’t pick his spot. Barking Dog didn’t. But he did irritate Sadler enough that he decided to hammer Amato one.

Bishoff Hullar, strongman, popped Sadler with something that looked like a fist but couldn’t have been because Sadler folded right up. Hullar breathed on his knuckles, said, “We’re supposed to be looking out for a girl, not having us a good time, Garrett.” He pointed.

“I’ll be go to hell.”

Winchell had decided to drop in after all. There he was making his way to the bandstand, overlooked in all the excitement. “Hey, we got a party now.” Belinda eyed him uncertainly, wondering if he was the one she was supposed to fear.

The whole place went silent.

Winchell started moving fast.

I yelled.

Everybody joined in.

It was the battle of Sadler all over again, only Winchell was tougher. The curse had made him a superman. He got to Belinda, hoisted her onto one shoulder, headed for the door. When I tried to talk him into changing his ways, he deposited me on the back of my lap under a table. Nobody slowed him down till Crunch decided to take matters into his own hands, brought up a pony keg, and politely tossed it across the room to meet Winchell’s surprised face. The keg was full. Not bad for an old hairbag.

Winchell never got his eyes uncrossed. The boys from the street came in and helped close him down. They tied and gagged him, and most of the excitement was over. He looked small and old now, like the curse was turning him into the old green-eye who’d started it all at Morley’s.

Then Belinda was all over me.

Past her I saw Barking Dog buttonhole Hullar.

It was a while before the excitement faded. Block arrived. He circled Winchell smugly. I told him, “You let him get away again, I’m personally going to drop you in the river with a reminder boulder tied to your toe.”

“Relway. Get him sacked up and celled up. And don’t let that gag slip.” Winchell looked spooky enough with his eyes glowing. Grinning, Block bragged, “Won’t be no mistakes this time, Garrett. This’s our future here. We’re gonna be careful. We’re gonna wall him up in the cell I let Crask stew in. Prince Rupert is gonna send for the wizard help we need soon as he knows we got him.”

I grumbled, hinting that I might be less than confident about the competence of a certain prince and his Watch.

“You got any bright ideas?”

“Yeah. I got a real special one.”

“So?”

“I go hit the sack. You want anything else, come bug the Dead Man. Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow afternoon,” Belinda said. “Garrett’s going to have to get some sleep too.”

“Huh?” Us investigators have minds like steel traps. “Too?”

She winked. “I might let you catch a nap. If you’re a good boy.”

“Oh.” Block had gotten it before I did. I was suitably chastened.

Meantime, Barking Dog was in full cry. He had Hullar and Crunch both confused and on the run.



I was further chastened by fate’s unrelenting efforts to keep me chaste.

Winchell had had a strong suspicion he was headed into a trap. The curse had compelled him to go

anyway but had permitted him some latitude in preparation. It was smart enough to allow its steed its head when that was appropriate.

I hit Macunado Street with visions of a wild night dancing in my head—and found my front door shattered. Dean lay in the hall about halfway dead, his stray curled inside the curve of what looked like a broken arm, crying. Belinda said, “I’ll look after Dean. You find out what happened.”

I opened wide but sensed nothing from the Dead Man. That scared me. Only once before had the villains gotten in, and then they’d gotten only a few feet. The Dead Man turned would-be intruders into living statues—usually while they were still in the street. Here there was no evidence he’d been able to do anything. The invader (or invaders) had hiked straight from the entrance to the stairs.

Had the Dead Man finally taken that long last step across to the other shore? I got no sense of his presence.

“Go on!” Belinda snapped.

“Be careful.” I edged forward, my heart in my throat. I’m not ashamed to admit I was scared. This had the same feel I recalled going into the worst raids we pulled back when I was one of Karenta’s brave young Marines. I crept along the wall to the Dead Man’s door, nudged it open.

I whirled inside, ready for anything.

Nobody there but my partner.

He looked unchanged, but there *was* a difference. I felt a tension unlike any I’d encountered before. I sensed that he was safe and awake but way too focused to spare me a thought.

Which meant the trouble was still in the house. And he was a nightmare.

Upstairs. He had to be upstairs. Candy was upstairs.

But we already had Winchell . . .

I felt for the Dead Man, seeking confirmation. He did not respond. Of course.

“Whoever did it is still here,” I told Belinda. “And he’s so strong he’s fought the Dead Man to a standstill. I think he’s after Candy. I’m going after him. But I’m afraid if I go upstairs he won’t be there. He’ll grab you and take off.”

“So check down here first.” *She* was calm and practical. Maybe it was hereditary.

“I guess Old Bones can hold out a few minutes more.”

“Nothing in here,” Belinda said, having entered the kitchen boldly. “And the cellar door is locked from this side.”

A shriek came from above, from Candy’s room in Candy’s voice. “Could be bait.” Something thumped the floor. It sounded like a body falling. Belinda grabbed my arm. I asked, “You reckon it’s a trap?”

“Garrett!”

“Right. This is no time to make light.” Tell me a better time.

I told me to pretend I was Morley Dotes. This might be a job that called for Morley’s legendary cool. If my honey didn’t just have a guy up to play . . . Morley’s cool. I was tempted to send out for it. Only . . .

Only what the hell was going on here? I did my part. I got Winchell sewn up and delivered. It was time to collect my reward and ride off into the sunset. What was all this mess?

My office was clean. I traded looks with Eleanor. That calmed me. It reminded me that I’d gotten

through bad times before, that calm was my most potent weapon. “A little reason would help too, sweetheart.”

The small front room contained nothing but an odor cat haters know well. “You little shit. You blew it.”

I jammed my rain hat onto my head, set course for the kitchen. I banged around in there till I found the cheesecloth Dean bought the time he had a blue-sky idea about saving money by making his own cheese. I told him: did I want to cut financial corners, I’d do without a housekeeper. Anyway, to date we were out the cost of cheesecloth without no cheese to show. I hacked off a few yards, folded the cloth over my rain hat, and tucked the edges under my collar, front and back.

“What in the world are you doing?”

“Beekeeper trick. You might want to try it yourself.”

“You’re insane, Garrett.” But she followed my example. She even made herself crude mittens.

I dug through drawers and poked into closets till I found my sulfur candles. “Try not to breathe the fumes once I light these things. They’ll knock you on your ass.”

Belinda shook her head, muttered obscenities, but went along. “You’re completely paranoid. You know that, don’t you?”

“I have been ever since I found out they were out to get me. Anyway, I couldn’t stand it if you was to get butchered now.”

“You’re a born romantic too.”

“That’s me. The man of a thousand faces.” All this was punctuated by repeated thumps and yells from above. Then the yelling stopped. The silence seemed particularly ominous.

“I think you better get on your horse, Garrett.”

“Yeah.” I checked Dean. He was doing as well as could be hoped. He had his hairball buddy to look out for him. I wished we had time to send out for reinforcements, but the silence upstairs told me I was all out of time. “White knight to the rescue. Well, it was white back before the rust set in.”

“Let’s do it, Garrett.”

No style, this one. But one hell of a set of legs.

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“I knew it!” I moaned. “It had to be something impossible.” There were butterflies on the second floor. They were big and green and unpleasantly carnivorous but blessedly few and stupid. “Watch those things. I got a feeling if they nip at you it could spread the curse the way mosquitoes spread yellow fever.” People in TunFaire didn’t generally know that, but in the islands you learned from the natives. If you were smart enough to listen when they told you something.

“So light some candles.”

Belinda wasn’t exactly supportive. Pushy, even. It wasn’t time to light candles.

First I visited my goody closet, dug out a nasty knife, offered it to her. “Whoever he is comes near you, carve your initials on him with that.” For myself I chose a knife with a blade nearly long enough to qualify it as a shortsword. I used it to point toward Candy’s room.

I went first, macho clown that I am. And there was our interloper, a monster of a man, moving

almost imperceptibly as he hoisted Candy toward the ceiling. He had rigged a block and tackle on a beam we'd exposed while rehabbing. He was ruled by the curse and he was going to do a girl on the spot.

"It really is multiplying," Belinda whispered.

I kept my mouth shut. My throat was too dry for chatter.

The man kept moving against all the Dead Man's power. What incredible strength the curse gave!

Why hadn't Candy run out on him? With the Dead Man slowing him down, he couldn't hardly keep up with her.

"Huh! Belinda. Don't look this clown in the eye. I have a feeling that if he lays the green eye on you you're a goner."

"Right." She wasn't nervous. Not my gal Belinda. She was as cold as her daddy. "You want to do some candles before the bugs carry me off?" They tended to leak from the corners of the villain's mouth.

I lighted a sulfur candle off the tallow candle Belinda had thought to bring, set it on the floor just inside the doorway to Candy's room. As I set out the second candle, the bad boy realized he had company.

Gods, he was huge! He looked like Saucerhead Tharpe's big brother. Where did Winchell find him? Nothing that big should have been running loose. He turned his head slowly.

"Why don't you stick him, Garrett? You want to make a career of farting around, don't you?"

I do. It's because I have this hyperactive conscience. In this case it was also because I was completely lost. This wasn't suppose to be happening. The girl-killer problem was supposed to have been solved at Hullar's place. I was supposed to be in bed now, if not asleep.

The big guy had Candy hoisted up till only her head was touching the floor. He let go the rope. It squealed through the block. Down she crashed. She started making noises behind her gag like she was trying out my name.

I really hoped she wasn't trying to relay a warning. I didn't have time to fish it out of her. The big guy had begun to get him a case of the green eye. He was barfing butterflies. Most of those were green too. Old Drachir had had a thing about green.

The big man was aging before my eyes. He'd put on a year or two in the past few minutes. He'd gotten shorter, too, though I wasn't ready to jump in for fifteen rounds.

He got a good look at Belinda.

He charged like he was headed into a hundred-mile-an-hour wind. He puffed and snorted. Moths leaked from his nostrils. They were pretty stupid moths—or the curse controlling them was pretty dumb. They mostly went after him.

I held a lighted sulfur candle in front of him. He roared out butterflies that couldn't get me because of the cheesecloth. He didn't seem to care, though. He had eyes only for Belinda.

"Don't look the bastard in the eyes," I reminded her, sliding to one side. I dropped to hands and knees, scooted forward while the villain continued his glacial charge. I cut the tendons behind his right knee and left ankle. It took a while for his brain to get the word, but he fell. Then he started to lift himself up again. I drove my knife through his right hand, pinning it to the floor.

Belinda did his other hand. "You might try to get a gag on him, Garrett." She did have the Contague flair.

The cumulative pain and damage shocked the man enough that the curse slipped control. The Dead

Man jumped on that. The villain became as rigid as stone.

Like a far, far whisper on a contrary wind, came, *You took your sweet time.*

I got Candy loose. “How come you keep fooling around with these perverts?” I asked. “What’s wrong with a nice straight guy like me?”

She threw her arms around me. She didn’t say anything, even when Belinda cracked, “Maybe she figured you were taken.” She just clung like she didn’t plan to let go during this lifetime.

Butterflies zoomed around drunkenly. The sulfur fumes were getting to me too. The bugs discovered bare areas on Candy. They called their friends. I didn’t know but what the curse could be carried by the little devils. “Let’s get out of here. Lock them in with the candles.” I considered sliding a few candles into the Dead Man’s room while he was preoccupied, just for effect.

Belinda helped with Candy, though with poor grace.

I glanced at my unwanted guest. Butterflies still crawled out of his open mouth. Belinda said, “We can’t leave him here.”

“Why not?”

“He’ll croak.”

“Ask me if I care.”

“Think, genius.”

Indeed. Boggle us with a first.

“You keep out of this.” I grunted, disgusted. If the villain died, I’d be the only place for the curse to migrate. I didn’t think that was such a great idea. “We do need to keep him unconscious. He might commit suicide.” I had a sudden conviction that the curse had driven Winchell into Hullar’s place to provide a diversion from the attack here.

The Dead Man sent, *I can keep the man under control.*

“Like you were doing when I got here?”

Bind him if that makes you more comfortable.

“Right.” I peeked inside Candy’s room. The big guy’s breath problem had improved. The floor was covered with fallen butterflies. Only a few showed any life. I said, “I’ve got an idea. Get the curse to jump to the Dead Man. Then it wouldn’t—”

“Then it would be able to talk to you direct.”

“Miss Practical.” I rounded up a ball of linen cord and went to work on our villain. I used it all, then gagged him good. Then I saved him from the fumes. I gave Belinda my nightstick. “Bop him if he even twitches.”

“Where are you going?”

“To get Block. To get this character out of here.”

I didn’t get that far. Not right away.

I might have known. I should have expected it. Hell, I should have counted on it. It had to be in the stars. It started out being about Barking Dog Amato, and no matter how I wriggled, Amato kept getting

in the way. So why on earth should I have been surprised to find Barking Dog camped out in my hallway with Sas and Dean, Sas looking mightily distressed while Amato fussed over Dean and Dean groggily insisted there was nothing wrong. Dean was so woozy he didn't know he was hurt.

"How do I get around this?" I muttered before anyone spotted me. At the moment I didn't much care about Barking Dog's troubles.

"Garrett!"

I'd been spotted. "Don't start. I've got problems of my own and it's going to be real hard to give a rat's ass about whatever is bugging you."

"Hey, yo, no problem. I kind of figured you'd be distracted when I saw this mess."

"The curse managed to split somehow. I've got another killer upstairs." Damn. That put a sparkle in his eye. What now? "I'm going to get Captain Block."

"That's all right. I understand. I'll hang out here, keep an eye on things."

"You don't need to. Go on home. Get some shut-eye. The Dead Man can be pretty handy when he wants."

I got a smug snicker from the other side of the wall and a denial from Amato. "I wouldn't feel right, Garrett. After everything you done for me. Anyway, I got to talk to you about my girl. This here Sas ain't my girl."

So I'd gathered earlier. I didn't stay around to find out anything more. I nurtured some small, vain hope that the Dead Man would pity me and run him off before I got back.

The only good thing about finding Block was I got to wake him up. Again. I never had a big case before where I got to wake other people up. It was always somebody coming around wanting me to be bright-eyed at some absurd hour of the morning.

"Yes!" I insisted, after getting through to his quarters. "You get off your fat political butt and come on over, you can see for yourself. The curse has spawned. You don't grab this guy, it keeps right on going like we never met anybody called Winchell. I guarantee. You think I'm running around at this hour because I'm nursing a grudge? You know me better."

Block grunted. "Unfortunately. You can't just bring him in tomorrow?"

"I'm going home. When I get there I'm handing this guy over to whoever's around. If that's nobody, he walks. And I don't have nothing more to do with unraveling curses by old-time lunatic wizards. You really want to give me a thrill, come up with some excuse for arresting Barking Dog Amato. Material witness, maybe. He's set to drive me crazy."

Block observed me under his brows briefly, maybe wondering if he ought to jump on such a great straight line. A nasty smile crawled around on his lips. I said, "Don't go getting any ideas about doing something I'm going to regret."

"Me? Forsooth. Maybe even more sooth than that. Echavar!" A servile type materialized as though he'd been lurking outside, just hoping Block would holler. "Inform Relway that I need a squad to accompany me when I arrest another curse carrier. Or, failing that, a leading public nuisance."

I got the impression he wasn't talking about Barking Dog.

Block didn't recognize the man who'd invaded my place. Neither did his troops. After checking him over and taking statements from Candy and the Dead Man, Block grudgingly admitted, "It looks like you did the right thing, Garrett."

"I always do the right thing."

“Tell it to your smelly buddy downstairs.”

Barking Dog hadn't gone home. The girl called Sas had, but only because Block's men had pried her loose from Amato. Block and Barking Dog still weren't wasting any love on one another.

Block and I observed while Relway and crew bagged my villain. Block asked, “You want me to vag him?”

“Say what?”

“Vag Amato. Oh. Sorry. You haven't been in on discussions of the tools we're getting to attack crime. Vagrancy laws. Relway's idea. Came out of the research on those old wizards. Had those kinds of laws in imperial times. You can't show you're gainfully employed or have money in your pocket, bam! You got a sudden choice of getting into a cell or getting out of town. Amato would be had if we went after him. He never has had a job.”

“Don't do that.” This was some scary shit. “Since when do you go around nailing people because one of your guys has an idea?”

“Since Rupert liked it so much he got it decreed as law. Applies to anybody inside the walls. Race don't matter. There's enough slack in the treaties to let us handle layabouts and social parasites as criminals—if we treat everybody the way we treat humans.” Nasty smile.

We might have us some unpleasant times ahead. I hadn't a doubt that the law-and-order gang would deal with human undesirables more nastily than they would others.

“Meantime, my pals Crask and Sadler are out at the kingpin's place scheming up some special way to pay me back for whatever they think I did.” That irked me. Block and his boys were panting with law and order, but Crask and Sadler had walked away because of their connections.

“Way it goes, Garrett. I could've let Relway deal with them, but you'da bitched about that too.”

“Huh?”

“Crask coulda hanged hisself while he was inside. Out of remorse, maybe.” He grinned. Remorse? That was a good one. “Somebody coulda stuck Sadler tonight. But if that'd happened, you'da pissed and moaned until we was all ready to help you swallow a chicken bone.”

He was right. Morley was right. I really did have to hone me up a more practical set of ethics. It's a proved fact, fanatic adherence to ideals can be fatal in the real world. Especially in TunFaïre, where ethics and ideals are mystic words in a tongue unknown to ninety-nine percent of the population.

I admitted he was right, possibly. “But pretend I'm your conscience sometimes. Don't get so eager taking back the streets that you forget why we have laws in the first place.”

“Thanks, Garrett. Any day now I figure to see you in a long gray robe, howling on the steps of the Chancery.”

I had to get away. He might brainwash me. I was that tired. He had me halfway gone already. That was scary, agreeing with the Watch about anything.

Going home wasn't much improvement. I got rid of the worst of my uninvited guests, but then there was still Barking Dog. I wasn't especially kind. “I've been awake more hours than I know how to count. During that time three different people tried to kill me.” Maybe I exaggerated. Who knows what might have happened had certain parties had their way? “They tried to kill friends of mine. The state I'm in, I'm not going to listen to much complaining. You got a bitch, bring it around in a few days.” I didn't remind him that I wasn't on his payroll and he had no bitch coming.

So much for restraint. My remarks won me all kinds of points with the ladies. Belinda opened her trick bag and discovered she had eleventeen varieties of hell she could give me for mistreating my elders.

Candy got thoroughly huffy and completely forgot who'd just saved her delicate posterior. She took Barking Dog home and didn't return.

She is his real daughter, the Dead Man told me.

"I figured that out. Didn't even have to count on my fingers."

It is a long story.

"Then don't waste your time telling it. I'm going to bed." I sped Belinda a meaningful look. It didn't have any meaning for her. She fussed over Dean, who had set up in the small front room again. Things she told him suggested she wouldn't be following through on earlier threats.

Her mother entered a liaison with a man Candy truly believed to be her father till quite recently.

"Must we? Now?" I eyed the front door. The door that wasn't anymore. Could I trust the Dead Man to stay awake while I got some rest?

He indicated he could be trusted. Amidst his tear-jerker story, in which our beautiful young heroine overcame all obstacles to be reunited with her real father.

"Right, Chuckles. We all saw how she was just foaming at the mouth to be reunited."

I figured she'd be sick of him in about two days. In fact, she already knew enough that she hadn't wanted anything direct to do with him till tonight. Maybe never forever after once she got a look at the dump where he lived.

The Dead Man went on but I was stubborn. I shut him out. I shut out all their demands and went up to bed. During the several seconds it took me to fall asleep, I waxed nostalgic about the good old days when I lived alone and sometimes got to do things the way *I* wanted.

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Dean let me in through the new door. His arm wasn't broken after all, and our disaster hit the spot for a busybody like him. He'd had workmen in, and was nagging them green, as soon as the sun rose. When I'd been able to sleep through the end-of-the-world racket no longer, I'd gotten up and gotten out, pursuing the Dead Man's suggestion that I double-check on Block and his boys.

"What they did," I told the Dead Man when I got back, "was stuff them in cells while they were unconscious. Then they bricked up the doors. The cells don't have windows. There's a slot in the door so food can be passed through."

That may be enough. Or a sewage chute . . .

I jumped in smugly. "All taken care of, Smiley. Taken care of. I noticed the business about the rope belts."

The what?

"Rope belts. All our villains wore them. And then Winchell turned up at Hullar's with his belt partly unbraided. The guy that tore up our place had on what looked like it was what was missing from Winchell's rope. I knew what was happening, then. The rope carries the curse."

You failed to mention that.

I snickered. "So I cheated a little so I wouldn't get all the glory hogged away."

What glory? There will be none for you. The public is going to believe that the triumph over

the curse is all Captain Block's fault. He will see to it.

Killjoy. "Block has the ropes locked up in a box stashed inside a sealed coffin in another bricked-up cell."

The Dead Man remained dubious, given the ineptitude of the Watch. I was worried too. I concealed it. "Got some final translations on my research. I was right. The whole thing started over a woman. They even found me a portrait of Drachir . . ."

Who was a ringer for the old man in the coach, I presume.

"Yeah." You can't hold out on a determined mind reader. "And he wore butterfly earrings."

He had a strong interest in butterflies.

"Apparently."

And a stronger interest in outliving his rival.

He was stealing my thunder. Here I'd come home chock-full of news and he was stealing it out of my head or he'd figured it out already. "Yeah. He'd figured out how to become immortal the hard way. When he set up the curse thing, he put an extra twist on it so the Candide woman, who'd spurned him, would be sure to get got. Then he let himself get killed. Didn't matter to him. He would come back to life through his curse. Except his curse always gets stopped just before it finishes recreating the man who created it."

You have to wonder about people like Drachir, who are willing to sacrifice hundreds on the off chance they might whip death for a while themselves. There are people out there, masquerading as human beings, who never see you and me as having any more value than a beetle. It's a pity they aren't content to devour each other.

I expected either prisoner to kill himself at the curse's behest. The Dead Man disagreed. *That would serve no purpose now. Suppose one of them did bite through the veins in his wrists? What then? Not even Block is stupid enough to enter the cell without a first-line wizard backing him up.*

"Assuming any ever shows up."

Indeed. They may never. They may never leave the Cantard.

"And meantime we got a corpse rotting. Someday somebody gets sick of the stink, opens the cell . . ." The Dead Man had stopped listening. Vaguely, he admitted there might be something to my concern. But I'd made the mistake of nudging his thoughts toward the Cantard. Suddenly he was preoccupied by the south.

There'd been a flood of news. I'd been picking it up all morning, but he'd gotten a big dose from Saucerhead already. That was my buddy Tharpe, rush right in with anything newsworthy—if it was going to make Garrett's life a little more miserable. I love the guy, but he doesn't know from consequences. If brains were glazier's putty, he couldn't weatherproof a windowless room.

Word out of the Cantard made it look like we were in for a Karentine triumph. We could look forward to endless parades and countless mind-numbing speeches.

Karentine losses were as heavy as I'd predicted, but the morCartha had rewritten the Cantard equation completely. The Venageti were done for. They'd collapsed. Quarache was their northernmost outpost now. That was so far to the south, even our long-range commandos hadn't reached it till recently.

And Glory Mooncalled's republican armies, while still motivated and courageous, couldn't overcome the combination of numbers, sorcery, and vastly superior intelligence now ranged against them. These days our commanders knew what the republicans planned before they started doing it.

Didn't take any military genius to see that they'd soon be on the run and the morCartha would be employed to hunt them down.

Hardly anyone believed the news. Many didn't want to believe it. But it was hard to deny evidence that said three generations of warfare would end within a year, that all-out peace might erupt at any time. And all because of some flying things that everybody considered vermin when they were visiting TunFaire.

Goes to show you, as Saucerhead says. You never know. A real philosopher of the street, Saucerhead Tharpe.

The future was becoming scary territory.

Belinda never got the Dead Man down to Morley's place. She did manage to see all the underworld heavyweights and most of her father's nominally legitimate associates. First thing I knew, she was headed home.

Crask and Sadler had slipped away from Chodo's place. But they were still around somewhere, biding their time.

Candy faded from my life. She returned to the Hill, probably to escape Barking Dog, who was not welcome up there. Amato kept making a pest of himself, wanting things from me that were beyond my capacity to provide. I could not force open a door into a family that did not want to let him in. I could feel sorry for the guy, maybe, but not much more. I could continue delivering periodic reports to Hullar, without telling Barking Dog, so Candy could keep track. But I couldn't give him what he thought he wanted. I wouldn't give him Candy's adopted family name.

Belinda sent a letter inviting me out. I rented a buggy from Playmate and dragged my bones out to see her. She knew me better than I thought. She waited till after playtime to roll her dad out.

Same old Chodo. Frisky as a wedge, alert as a potato. She was using him exactly the way Crask and Sadler had. I was repelled. I left as soon as I could without leaving anyone angry.

I was disappointed. Belinda was no better than the men she'd ousted. She'd become the new kingpin by climbing over her father's still-warm flesh.

Must you? the Dead Man whined. I was about to doze off. About to abandon this vale of sorrow for the land of sweet dreams.

"Come on! That's really laying it on thick."

Report, then. Get it over. I need my sleep.

He couldn't have been too depressed, regardless of the war situation. He didn't threaten to close up shop for good.

I have suffered countless disappointments at the hands of your feckless race. One more will not nudge me over the edge. Get on with the report.

I described my visit to the Contague establishment. Most of it. Being a gentleman, I did employ some discretion.

Just to drive me crazy, he observed, *It might be interesting to have Mr. Contague visit sometime. I suspect that all may not be what it seems there.*

"What do you mean by . . . ? Hey!" He'd drifted off. At a very fast drift. And wasn't interested in awaking to explain himself.

Leaving me hanging was the root of his plan, of course.

No more Belinda, no more Candy, and Tinnie still hadn't come around to tell me I didn't need to

apologize for what I hadn't done. "You and me again, lady," I told Eleanor. "'Alone at last. Maybe. Fingers crossed?'" The Dead Man was really working out on his napping, and there was a chance Dean would be getting back out of the house—for a while, anyway. One of his horde of ugly nieces had sold her soul or something and found a blind man to propose. Though I'm not religious, I was praying. No atheists on the battlefield. I wanted the engagement to take. I wanted Dean to travel to the wedding, which would take place out of town if it happened at all. I would get rid of the cat. I would burn a thousand sulfur candles. Or I might sell the place and contents and disappear before the one woke up and the other returned. Simplify my life. Move across town and change my name and get me an honest job.

I did learn that I have the second sight. My prophecy was correct. The next fad was revolution. It stumbled out of the cafes and failed abysmally. Peopled by the very young, the revolution neither asked nor accepted anything from the old and experienced and wise. Westman Block and his secret police, directed by Relway Sencer, ate them alive. The rebellion collapsed without having stirred any dust. Afterward, Block bragged that five members of the seven-man Joint Revolutionary Direction had been Relway's agents.

Need any more convincing that those fools were fools of the first water? In the real world Block had to pay me to save his bacon when he ran into real troubles.

He hasn't been around lately. Happily. Word is, a whole cabal of wizards has agreed to research and unravel the Candide Curse (how come it isn't called the Drachir Curse?) and keep their eyes on one another so nobody gets any advantage from the spell. Just as soon as they catch Glory Mooncalled.

Might be a while.

The Dead Man's hero hasn't given up. Neither the morCartha overhead nor the Venageti proposal of an armistice has daunted him.

Life was good. Life was normal. I could sit back and do some serious thinking and beer tasting.

Then Morley's nephew Spud showed up with the parrot. Supposedly a present from my leg-breaker friend. The parrot could talk. Morley figured I could use it to drive Dean crazy and get rid of his cat. The bird hated cats. It swooped on them, clawed at their ears and eyes.

Word of advice. Word to the wise. Voice of experience. Don't *tever* bring a talking parrot within thinking range of a dead Loghyr. *Notever*.