

Alex Lee Martinez

BLACK MAGIC AND SILVER BULLETS

a fantasy novel

Copyright © 1997 by Alex Lee Martinez
All rights reserved

CHAPTER ONE

A cool breeze drifted through the office window, carrying a generous amount of
of
smog with it. A high-pitched wail echoed off the walls. I leaned back in my

chair, lit a cigarette, and tried to ignore the cry.
The wails continued, louder than before.
I opened my desk drawer and pulled out a deck of cards. With practiced ease,
I
popped open the box and laid the cards on the desktop. I carefully picked off
the top card and poised to strike. With a flick of my wrist, the card sailed
across the room. It performed an aerodynamic loop before landing in the waste
basket.
An invisible something whined miserably.
I continued flipping cards into the basket. Over the years, I'd gotten to be
an
expert at it. I never missed. I could even get the cards to perform tricks.
It
was too bad there weren't any professional card tosser tournaments, because I
could have made a fortune.
I was only one card away from a new personal best when she walked in.
"Mister Bogey?" the voice interrupted.
The seven of spades bounced off the waste basket.
Damn, but my disappointment was pushed aside by the thought of an actual
paying
client.
A mournful cry fell from the ceiling.
I turned my attention to the door. All I could see through the tinted glass
was
a silhouette, but as silhouettes went, it wasn't bad. It was curved and
definitely female. The kind of female a guy would sell his soul just to get a
good look at.
I reminded myself I was a professional and took my feet off the desk and
assumed
a respectable, business-like position.
She opened the door and walked into the light. A snug pink sweater hugged her
ample chest. Red slacks a touch too tight, not that I was complaining mind
you,
caressed her hips and long legs. Her black hair was tied back in an
unforgiving
bun. And her eyes, hidden behind thin glasses, were deep pools of green. Her
lips could only be described as perfect. She could have been a pin up girl,
but
I didn't figure she was.
I let a thin smile spread across my face and waited for her to make the first
move.
"Mister Bogey, I need your help."
"Lots of people need my help, Miss..."
"Topaz. Sharon Topaz." She glided over to the chair and sat down before I
could
offer her a seat.
"Charmed, I'm sure," I continued, trying to whip up some enthusiasm. I
pointed
to the door, where the words BOGEY INVESTIGATIONS were written in bold
backwards
letters. "My name's on the door. As I was saying, Miss Topaz, lots of people
need my help."
The was an outright lie. No one had needed my help in a long time. I was
smart
enough to keep that to myself though.
A low hissing wheeze bubbled up from under the desk.
She narrowed her eyes.
"Banshee," I explained. "It's been wallowing in my misery for a few weeks now.
I
haven't had time to call in pest control yet."

The banshee groaned softly.

I scratched the overgrown tooth protruding from my lower lip. "If you ignore it,

it usually doesn't make much noise."

Topaz nodded. "Of course" She paused to examine the office. Three layers of dust

covered everything, and a pile of cards sat around the waste basket. A rusty filing cabinet sat in one corner, a coat rack in the other. A worn trench coat

hung from the rack. I wasn't tidy by nature. If I had been, I would have become

a butler, not a P.I.

"Now what can I do for you, Miss Topaz?"

She fumbled through her purse for a photograph, which she handed to me. I scanned the photo of a small blue necklace.

"Nice trinket. The Amulet of Tepes, right?"

"How did you know?"

"It's my job to know things." I swept away the debris on my desk to reveal a week-old newspaper. "ARTIFACT STOLEN FROM MUSEUM. POLICE BAFFLED" the headline

declared. The amulet was pictured below.

"Then you know that the amulet was on loan to the museum, and if it isn't found

and returned within ten days, an international incident could be provoked."

"You'll excuse my bluntness, Miss Topaz, but what does any of this have to do with me?"

Her perfect lips turned in a curious smile. "I need you to find the amulet for

me." Her smile vanished. "For the museum. I'm the Assistant Curator, and if we

don't find it, our reputation may very well be ruined. It could be a very long

time before anything is every loaned to us again."

"Things get stolen."

"This isn't just a theft, Mister Bogey. It's a violation of the sanctity of the

museum. The police suspect museum personnel may even have been involved. And it's not just the reputation of the museum I'm worried about. It's the amulet.

It is literally priceless. To deny it to the world would be an unforgivable crime."

I guess as a lowly private eye, I didn't understand the value of old jewelry because as far as I was concerned, all the amulets in New Arcadia could drop off

the face of the planet, and I doubted life would change at all. That was just my

opinion, however, and I wisely kept it to myself.

"It's not that I'm not interested in the case, Miss Topaz, but aren't the police

still looking into this?"

"Yes, but it isn't their primary concern. That's why I've been authorized to hire a private agent, provided you make our case a priority and drop any other

current projects."

"I don't think that will be a problem. You caught me at a slow time of the month."

"Then you'll take the case?"

The thin hair on the back of my neck stood on end. This was going to be trouble.

I knew it. I could smell it in the air, thick as the fog. Part of the P.I.

business is having good instincts. The other part is learning to ignore those instincts when you can't pay the bills.

"My fee is two-hundred dollars a day plus expenses."

Topaz smiled. "Wonderful, Mister Bogey. Simply wonderful." She pulled her wallet from her purse.

"And there's no guarantee I'll find it."

"We understand," she agreed. "As long as you do your best." She pulled out a large wade of bills, none of them smaller than twenty. "Here's a week in advance. Thank you, Mister Bogey. You have no idea how much better this makes me

feel, knowing you're on the case."

I smiled, not at her, but at the cash. It was nice to be on my feet again. Well,

not entirely on my feet, but not quite flat on my financial butt anymore. She handed me a plain white business card. "You can contact me at this number if

you need any more information or if you do find the amulet. If I'm not at work,

then you can call me at home. It's on the back."

I dropped the card in my pocket as Topaz got out of her chair.

She smiled again. It was a beautiful smile. "I have a good feeling about this,

Mister Bogey. I pride myself on my intuition." And then she left. The door clicked shut behind her.

The banshee groaned from behind the coat rack.

I slipped on my trench coat, flicked my cigarette out the window, and walked out

myself, leaving the banshee to wallow in its own misery for a while.

CHAPTER TWO

On the way downstairs, I ran into the building manager.

"Bogey," Dirk growled from the foot of the stairs.

Dirk was a troll, not so much in personality, as in actual lineage. He was short

and bent and covered in shaggy, purple hair. I knew, however, that underneath that bridge-terrorizing exterior, beat the heart of a truly kind and compassionate man. If only he hadn't worn such loud ties.

"I'm trying to run a building here, Bogey. Not a charity for wayward

detectives.

If you get behind on the rent, everyone thinks they can do it. Before I know it,

everyone thinks they can stay here for free."

I flashed him my best pained smile. "I know, Dirk."

"I don't like threatening you, Bogey, but this is my job. The owner pays me to

make sure you pay him. If you don't, he'll be very unhappy. And if he gets too

unhappy, I could lose my job. I've got a wife and kids to feed."

My smile weakened. "I know."

"Besides, you don't get a free ride in life. It doesn't work that way. You have

to pay your rent. It's just the way it is."

I pulled out a few bills and waved them before the troll's eyes. They narrowed

on the green greedily. "Is that-?"

"Yes, it is," I confirmed. "I just got a new client."

"You mean, you finally got 'a client'."

That hurt, even if it was true.

Dirk grabbed for the money, but I jerked it out of reach. "Don't worry, Dirk. You'll get your share."

"I better," he grunted.

"You can trust me."

"Okay, Bogey. But I expect to be paid by the end of the week."

"No problem. And, Dirk, do something about the ties."

Dirk glanced down at the bright yellow and orange polka-dotted monstrosity around his neck and shrugged. "It's a gift. From the wife. What can I do?"

I didn't have an answer so I just walked out the front door.

Somehow, I'd managed to save my car from being sucked into the swirling void of debt most everything else I'd owned had fallen into over the past few months. Not that this was much of an accomplishment. The Wreck was rusted, held together with bubble gum, Superglue, and one rubber band. Still, she was all mine. Everything that hadn't fallen off. I struggled with the handle, and eventually forced the door open. The engine belched to life, spewing ugly, black clouds from the tailpipe. The motor begged to be shot, which I would have gladly done had I another form of transportation.

I paused to light a new cigarette. It was a bad habit. Unfortunately, like most bad habits, it was incredibly difficult to break. I had decided a long time ago just to live with it. Everyone has to have at least one bad habit and for a good P.I., a cigarette was as much a part of the uniform as the trench coat. The transmission crunched into gear, and I pulled out into traffic, pattering along as fast as the Wreck could manage, which wasn't very fast at all. The wharf was only fifteen minutes from my office. But the Wreck took twenty-five. Near the edge of the warehouse district, there was a little bar and grill called the Toothless Hydra. It was a cozy gathering place for all the worst kind of people. Thugs and murderers. Robbers and hitmen. No matter how dirty the job, you could always find someone to do it at the Hydra. The whole place was owned by a friend of mine: Reginald Charming. Reggie was in the business of buying and selling. More often than not, the things he bought and sold were either unwillingly donated or fell off the back of a convenient passing truck. But he wasn't such a bad guy, all things considered. The large brute at the door glared at me. "I thought we'd seen the last of you. We aren't looking for trouble." I blew a large cloud of smoke in the doorman's direction. "Neither am I." He looked unconvinced, but there wasn't much he could do to stop me from entering. I was friends with the boss, after all. That didn't mean he had to like it though, and he made a point of letting me know he didn't. "First sign of trouble, I'll leave." The doorman frowned deeply. "Alright. But you better be careful, Bogey. Louie is still out to get you." It had been a while since I'd heard that name. Louie was hired muscle. The type of guy who ground people to dust for money. Someone once hired him to try and grind me. It was a messy situation for both of us, but in the end, he wound up spending the night in the hospital. Ever since, he'd been out to prove something. I guess getting beat up by a four foot, ninety-seven pound goblin can be bad for your reputation in hired goon social circles. I nodded to the doorman. "I'm not looking for trouble." I pushed open the door and was subject to immediate sensory overload. Punk rock blared in my ears. A strobe light flashed in my eyes. Thick clouds of strange smelling smoke flooded my nostrils. And I could taste the trouble in the air. The patrons didn't stop their individual activities as I entered, but they did slow down for a moment. I tried to act casual as I crossed to the bar. I

caught

a few glares tossed my way but pretended not to notice and found an empty stool

at the end of the bar. As I waited for the bartender, I couldn't help but glance

up at my reflection in the mirror on the wall.

I was a mess. My gray-green skin looked unusually pale, and my large (even for a

goblin) ears drooped pathetically. Wrinkles crowded around my eyes. I looked a

lot like my car, only worse. I flashed myself a smile, revealing yellow teeth. I

made a mental note to buy some floss, mouthwash, some toothpaste, and a toothbrush. Even goblins needed proper dental care.

The bartender finally came by. She was an attractive woman, though a little too

big for my tastes. Her name was Gina, and she'd been working at the Hydra for about three years, which was considerably longer than anyone before her. But she

was as tough as any thug in the joint and considerably more ruthless when it came to a fight. We were a lot alike that way.

"Hey, Gina," a drunk sailor called. "Why don't you let me show you what it's like with a real man?" His friends laughed at his drunken humor.

Gina smiled too. Then punched the sailor hard. He fell to the floor with a spanking new black eye already developing. His friends got a good laugh out of

that too.

That business settled, she turned on me. "Joe Bogey. Long time no see. I heard

you'd been sent to debtor's prison."

"Almost," I confirmed. "How's everything?"

She wiped the counter with a greasy cloth. "Can't complain. Just making a living. You know..." She paused to lift a sleeping drunk out of her way. "You know how it is. If you can stay afloat in the pond, then you're doing fine."

"Speaking of ponds, how's Reggie?"

She shrugged. "Same as before, only worse. That witch did a nasty job on him."

"Sure he can talk. He can do everything he always could. As far as I can tell,

he just looks different. That's all. You should see his legs. Skinny little things." She chuckled. Then she looked over my shoulder and a deadly serious expression fell across her face.

A large hand enveloped my shoulder. "I've been waiting for this, Bogey. I've been waiting for this a long time."

I'd seen Louie sneaking up behind me in the mirror. He was a large man, built like an ogre. Only he wasn't an ogre. Technically, he was human.

"Hello, Louie," I greeted plainly.

His reflection grinned at me, revealing a mouth missing half its teeth. He spun

me around to face him. "You ready for payback, Bogey? Me and the boys are gonna

rip you into bloody green shreds."

Over Louie's shoulder, there were two humans and an imp. The men brandished pool

sticks, and the imp, not being big enough for a stick of his own, picked his pointed teeth with a switchblade.

"I don't want trouble, Louie."

"I thought trouble was your business."

"You're thinking of someone else."

Louie's eyes went blank for a moment. The conversation obviously slipped

through
his mental grasp. "Well, it don't matter. You're still dying, Bogey. Because paybacks are a bitch."
The Hydra became silent. Even the music died away. All eyes trained on us, eager
to see blood spilt.
"Don't be stupid, Louie," Gina said. "Why don't you just sit down and have a beer?"
He shook his head. "You're gonna die, Bogey. I'm going to kill you slow. You're
gonna beg UUUUGGNNNPHEH!"
I launched my foot into his groin. Louie hunched over, his face beet red. It was
a dirty move, but at my size, you either fight dirty or eat dirt. I hated the taste of dirt.
"Beer, Gina."
She handed me a bottle. I brought it down on Louie's head. the pile of muscle collapsed into a groaning heap on the floor.
Without their leader, the thugs backed away. They blended back into the crowd.
The music returned, and everyone went back about their business. The only sign
of the fight was the semiconscious hoodlum at my feet.
I turned back to the bar. "How much do I owe you for the beer?"
"Forget it."
"I need to talk to Reggie."
"Figures. How come you never come to see me, Bogey? Afraid I'm too much woman for you?"
I shrugged. "I value your friendship too much to ruin it with sex."
She fixed me with a friendly, yet stern, glare.
"Tell Reggie I'm here."
"Tell him yourself. He's in the back."
"Thanks." I dropped a five on the counter. "Give Louie a beer when he wakes up.
Keep the change."
Gina smiled. "You don't know what you're missing, Bogey."
"Oh, but I do. Maybe some other time."
She was about to say something else when a fight between two drunks caught her
attention. "Cut that out! No one gets beat up in here unless I'm the one who's
beating them up." She rushed over to break things up.
I stepped over Louie and walked to the back, through a door marked "PRIVATE".
Reggie sat behind the desk, talking on the phone. He waved me in without pausing
from the conversation.
Reginald had changed a lot since I'd last seen him, about a month ago. He now resembled nothing so much as a giant, humanoid toad with dry warty skin and two
bulging frog eyes. It was a big change from the good-looking, smooth-talking human I had once known.
"I'm telling you, I'm not paying that much. I've seen the merchandise. It isn't
worth the boxes you pack it in."
The person on the other end said something that roused Reggie's ire.
"Look! I don't care what you paid for it! I'm not going to give you that much!
I've got too much damn pixie dust sitting in my warehouse, taking up space. Nobody wants it. It's old news. Yeah? Well screw you too, pal!" He slammed the
the

receiver down with a loud croak.

I tried not to smile, but the sight of an angry toad in an imported suit was enough to break even my sour demeanor. The left corner of my mouth tilted ever

so slightly.

Reginald didn't seem to notice. "Hey, Joe. Heard you've been having a tough time

lately."

"I've heard you've been having trouble finding a big enough lily pad."

Reginald croaked again. "Everybody's got problems."

"I guess that should teach you not to double-cross a witch."

An innocent look spread across his toad face. "I've never double-crossed anybody. She asked for a unicorn horn. I got her a unicorn horn. It wasn't my fault the seller lied to me. How was I supposed to know it wasn't real unicorn

horn?" His tongue darted out and snagged a fly, which he gulped down. "Hell, who's really seen a unicorn horn? I made a mistake. I'm only human."

Not anymore, I silently disagreed.

"So what can I do for you, Joe?"

I pulled out the photograph and handed it over.

Reggie whistled, which was not something toad lips did easily. "Amulet of Tepes.

What do you want with it?"

"Someone wants me to find it."

"Good luck, Joe. Whoever stole the amulet isn't showing it around. Besides, it's

too hot to sell. No one in their mind would even touch it."

"I already thought of that. Just tell me what you've heard."

Reginald croaked. I could smell the fly on his breath. "I've already told you everything I know. No one's selling it. No one's buying it. No serious fence would touch it. I certainly wouldn't." He handed back the photo. "Sorry, Joe.

I

don't think I can help you on this one."

"Nothing, huh?"

"Not a thing. And if I haven't heard about it, it isn't for sale."

This was true. Anything illegal Reginald knew about. He always had his ear to the ground. At least he did, when he still had ears.

"Thanks, Reggie." I was disappointed. I'd been hoping for an easy lead, but from

the looks of things, I was going to have to dig on this case. I didn't like digging. You never knew what kind of crude was going to get under your fingernails.

I was halfway to the door when Reggie threw me a bone.

"Wait a second, Joe. Now that I think about it, there's something. Probably nothing, but it might be worth looking into. There's some chump second story man

who has been bragging someone was going to pay him a million to break into the

museum. I don't know if there's any connection, but you never know."

"What's his name?"

"Derrick. Johnny Derrick. I don't know where he lives, but he hangs out at the

Club Cockatrice."

"Thanks. I owe you one."

"No problem, Joe."

The phone rang. He picked it up and immediately began yelling at whoever was on

the other end of the line. I took the opportunity to leave the office quietly.

I was almost out of the bar when Louie stepped in front of me.

I tossed my cigarette to the floor and snuffed under my heel. "Is there something I can do for you, Louie?"

Louie smiled one of his toothless smiles and grabbed my hand, which he began to shake strongly. "Look. I'm sorry about the trouble. Anybody who buys me a beer can't be all bad. What do you say to a truce?"

I would have suspected a trick from anybody else. But Louie didn't have the I.Q. to set a mousetrap, much less formulate a clever plan. I took the offer at face value and decided Louie wasn't such a bad guy after all. Even if he did pound little old ladies for a living.

"How about you buy me another beer?" he asked.

"Sorry, but I've got an appointment to keep. Maybe next time."

Louie stepped aside in eager search of someone else to buy him a drink. I walked outside into the cool night air. Clouds rumbled overhead, but it didn't smell like rain. Thunder cracked, but there wasn't any lightning. The air howled, but there any wind. I paused to light a cigarette, but there weren't any matches.

I stuck the cigarette back into my pocket and headed towards the car.

I parked across the street from the Club Cockatrice. I had to fight a Mercedes for the spot, but in the end, the Mercedes decided it had more to lose than the Wreck. I dropped a quarter in the parking meter then crossed the street. The Club Cockatrice was the heart of yuppie society. All the up-and-coming materialists frequented the place. My car looked completely out of place next to all the shiny new BMWs. In my tattered trench coat, I looked even more so among the trend-setting yuppies that headed towards the club.

The doorman was very good at his job. He didn't let anyone with out-of-fashion clothes through. Naturally, he spotted me from a mile away. "Excuse me, but this is a private club."

I grinned, straightening my tie. "I know. I'm interested in joining."

The doorman smirked. "I don't think the Club Cockatrice would be interested in having a member of your .. class."

I feigned insult. "What class might that be? Don't you allow goblins into your club? I'd hate to have to report you to the NAAGP."

The doorman was mentally staggered. "We have several goblin regulars."

"I'm sure you do, and I bet they're all busy washing the dishes right now." He reeled from the accusation. "The Club Cockatrice does not discriminate on the basis of species," he blurted out.

"Fine. Let me in." I tried to slip past, but he was faster than he looked. I pulled out my notepad and pen. "What's your name. I'm sure the Green Panthers will be interested in adding it to the list."

"List? What list?"

I snapped the notepad shut. "Look, I know you're just doing your job. I know you're not a bigot. So why don't you let me by. I'll even give you twenty bucks.

Otherwise, I'll just have to add your name to the list."

I set pen to paper, but the doorman stopped me before I could start scribbling.

"Okay. You can go in. But if anyone asks, you sneaked past me. Alright?"

I moved to go inside, but he placed a hand on my shoulder.

"You mentioned twenty bucks."

I dug into my pockets and handed over the cash.

The club was lavishly decorated. The marble floor tile was expensive. The paintings on the wall were even more expensive. Even the light fixtures were designer. I took a seat at one of the polished glass tables. The lighting was dim, but my eyes were suited to the dark. I watched the crowd for a while, trying to be inconspicuous. It was a doomed effort.

A waitress walked by. I signaled to her.

She walked over with a slight smile. "Something I can get for you, sir?" she asked almost pleasantly.

"A beer," I replied.

"What kind of beer, sir?"

"Any kind of beer."

She returned with a beer imported from some foreign dictatorship.

"That will be twelve fifty, sir."

I checked the bottle. It wasn't made of gold. The goat on the label looked as puzzled as I. I paid the ridiculous amount. After all, it wasn't my money.

This

beer was on the city museum. Despite the price, the beer was still flat.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine. His name is Johnny Derrick. Have you seen him

around?"

The waitress turned a nasty glare on me. "Have I seen him? Last night, he told

me he loved me. Then tonight, he comes in and picks up some bleached-blond slut."

"Johnny always did have a way with the ladies," I remarked.

She charged off before I could casually ask where my good friend Johnny lived.

I

took a sip of my imported, flat beer and waited for her to come around again.

Before she did, a brunette appeared. "So you know Johnny." Pure anger burned in

her eyes.

"Yeah, I know Johnny," I lied.

"Well when you see him, give him this." She splashed a drink in my face.

Something with fruit in it. "Tell Johnny that's from Tawny."

I shook my tie dry. "I'd love to, just--"

But the brunette had disappeared into the throng of socializing yuppies. A short

while later, a blonde appeared. She gave me another message for Johnny. It wasn't very nice, not to mention physically impossible. Yeah, Johnny Derrick sure had a way with the ladies.

"Excuse me," someone said from behind.

I glanced over my shoulder to see an attractive brown-haired woman, dressed in a

very nice suit. "How did you get in here?"

"I'm with the NAAGP, and I was just curious as to what kind of specist establishment you're running here."

She didn't crumple like the doorman. "Do you have any credentials?"

"I left them in my other pants."

"Sure, you did." She jerked her head towards the door. "You're out of here."

She

was nice enough to escort me.

I stopped on the way to grab a handful of matchbooks from the bowl beside the greeter's table. "I'm looking for an old friend of mine, Johnny Derrick."

"You aren't one of Johnny's friends. You're much too classy."

That was either a compliment for me or an insult for Derrick.

"Why are you looking for him?"

"I'm a private investigator. He's got a paternity suit hanging over his head."

She pushed the door open for me. "It figures. He's slept with everything with two legs within city limits."

"So I gathered."

We stepped outside. "Two-thirty-six Hobs Lane, apartment thirteen," she informed

me.

"Bad news between you?"

"And every other woman he's jumped in the sack with. When you do see Johnny, give him a kick in the groin from Carla."

"No problem."

She disappeared back into the club, leaving me alone in my thoughts. I wasn't sure if Johnny Derrick was a waste of time or not. But I was sure of one thing.

A drink in the face, an unnatural act of physical torture, and a kick in the groin all added up to one thing: one very unpopular ladies man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two-thirty-six Hobs Lane was deep in a neighborhood clawing its way to upper-class. I imagined Johnny to be much the same.

Parking was difficult. I had to settle for a spot two blocks away. Luckily, I didn't mind walking.

The building security consisted of an intercom and an electronically locked door. I ran my finger down the list of tenants and pressed the button labeled "Apartment 13". No one answered.

I pressed it three more times, but still no one answered.

I lit a fresh cigarette and considered my next option. According to the waitress

at Club Cockatrice, Derrick had left the club with a woman. Which meant Derrick was probably one of two places. Her place, wherever that was. Or his place. And they probably weren't receiving any visitors at either place. I pressed the button marked "Superintendent". A hoarse voice answered. "What do you want?" "World peace," I replied, "but I'll settle for getting inside." "Who is this?" "I seem to forgotten my key." "Who is this?" the super repeated. "Someone who has lost his keys, but still has a fistful of twenties." A few moments later, the super appeared on the other side of the door. He was wearing a greasy pair of overalls. I could tell who he was because a tag on his chest clearly announced his position. He smiled greedily, wiping some grease from his hands with an oily rag. "Always glad to help a tenant." One-hundred dollars passed hands, and I found myself on the other side of the door. Lucky for me, everyone in New Arcadia enjoyed a good bribe. "If anyone asks, the super informed me as he counted money between blackened fingertips, "you sneaked past me. And no stealing. I got a shotgun, and I'm willing to use it." I nodded with a thin smile. "We wouldn't want that to happen now, would we?" Being a professional detective, I found the apartment with negligible effort. I put my ear to the door and heard soft music. The kind of music played at intimate moments shared between consenting adults. Rudely, I knocked on the door. It creaked open. Obviously, someone had neglected to lock it, but I seriously doubted that someone was Johnny Derrick. In my experience, people didn't generally leave doors unlocked while they were busy sweating together. I pulled my piece from its holster as I pushed open the door. The pistol's cool grip felt reassuring in my hand even though I had no real reason to expect to need it. The gun was my security blanket. Only in New Arcadia, carrying a blanket was stupid. Carrying a firearm was a necessity. At least for me. I was hoping, against my instincts, that Johnny and his friend had just gotten a little overexcited and forgot to lock the door. The apartment was in perfectly normal condition. I almost expected the place to be shambled, but it was only a little messy. Carefully, I made my way through the living room and towards the music. The source of the music was an expensive stereo. Derrick's bedroom was bigger than his living room. That didn't surprise me. A shiny silver ball flashed from the ceiling. Cameras were set up to catch all the action. There was something under the blankets, but it wasn't moving. Getting a very bad feeling, I pulled off the covers. Stacked on the bedsprings, locked in a lover's embrace, were two bodies. They were little more than dried husks. It looked like they'd been here a long time. Only they couldn't have been her that long. Which could only mean one thing. "Magic." Even the word made me flinch.

A startled gasp came from behind me. I turned to see the super, pointing his fabled shotgun in my direction.

"What the hell did you do to them?"

"I found them. Put down the gun before someone gets hurt."

The sight of the bodies weakened his resolve. He lowered the shotgun.

I returned my pistol to the shoulder holster, found the phone, and dialed.

"NAPD," the voice on the other end answered. "Please hold."

I held. The stiffs weren't in any hurry.

I pulled a cigarette from my pocket and lit up to the soft sounds of makeout music.

The first wave of cops showed up pretty quickly. They asked me a few quick questions, then told me to wait for the case detective. I burned three cigarettes waiting for him to show.

An officer greeted someone at the door. "Good evening, sir."

Someone growled a reply. I recognized the growl. I'd heard it many, many times before.

Detective Brock stomped toward me. Our eyes locked. Intense dislike crackled through the hall. Everyone sensed it, at least subconsciously, and moved away to

give us some room.

"Cripes, Bogey," Brock grumbled. "Why is it every time I see you, I've got a body on my hands?"

I shrugged.

Brock and I didn't get along very well, though I never actually knew why.

There

was just something about me that ruffled his shaggy beard, and I felt pretty much the same way about him. We didn't question it. We just accepted it on faith.

Detective Brock was a dwarf. Most of his face was covered with a thick beard. Brock was one of the few people I knew shorter than me. The police detective was

also the only person I knew who smoked big, cheap cigars. The kind that made you

retch. Coming from a ten year chain smoker, that can be quite an insult.

We threw large clouds of gray mist in each other's faces. Brock had the bigger

weapon, but I had more experience.

"So you found the bodies?" he observed more than asked.

"That's right."

"How?"

"I already gave my statement."

"Well tell me again."

I let him win the stare down. Turning away, I rubbed my jaw which was sore from

telling this story so damn many times. "I knocked on the door, found it open, and walked inside. I found the bodies in the bedroom. Like any law-abiding citizen, I called you. An hour-and-a-half later, we're all still here talking about it."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"What were you doing here in the first place?"

"Derrick owed me money."

"How much money?" Brock asked, trying to trip me up. It was the little details

that separated the good liars from the bad. Give too much detail, then you were

likely to forget things. On the other hand, if you didn't have an answer prepared in advance for any question that might come up, you could fumble.

Fortunately, I was a good liar.

"A hundred," I said. It was a nice round figure."

"And how exactly did you get in the building?" Brock fired.

"I bribed the super," I dodged.

"He says you sneaked past him."

"We both know he's lying."

Brock's eyes narrowed into unblinking slits. "I should place you under arrest for suspicion of murder."

"You know I didn't do it, Brock."

"And how do I know that?"

"Simple. As much as you dislike me, you know I'm no murderer. And even if I was,

I wouldn't be stupid enough to get caught at the scene of the crime."

"Lots of smart guys get caught," he disagreed.

"True, but there is one other thing. Those two stiffes were killed by magic. I don't practice magic. Therefore, I'm not a suspect."

Brock's cigar twitched from one side of his mouth to the other. "How do you know

they were killed by magic?"

"We've both seen lots of bodies. Those two look like they've been dead a long time. Only they haven't been. Derrick was at the Club Cockatrice only a few hours before I found him. It's impossible for a body to get that dried out that

quickly. At least, it's impossible naturally."

Brock's cigar began to spew smoke angrily. "You think you've got all the answers, don't you? One of these days you're going to step over the line, and I'll be there to catch you when you do. Until then, don't leave town.

Understand?"

The dwarf always did have a way with a cliché.

"Does that mean I can go now?"

"You can go. Just remember, you're still a suspect. If we need a sacrificial lamb on this one, you'll be it."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Brock went off to question the super, and I began the walk to my car.

On the way, I considered my next possible move. Derrick had been my only lead,

and now he was dead. Whatever information he possessed died with him. but Derrick was still my only clue to the Amulet of Tepes, providing the dead yuppie

thief hadn't been lying in the first place. I decided to return to his apartment

after the police and spectators had cleared out.

I stopped at a phone booth along the way to the Wreck and dropped in a quarter.

"Reginald Charming Industries," the voice on the other end announced.

"Reggie, it's me."

He greeted me with a croak. "Hey, Joe. Have any luck with Derrick?"

"I found him. Only somebody else found him before me. They did a nasty job too.

Listen, Reggie. I need you to do something for me."

"I figured. You wouldn't have called for a friendly chat."

"Socialization isn't my business."

"Yes, I know. It's trouble, isn't it?"

"That's somebody else. My job is knowing things."

"Then why are you calling me?"

"I need you to keep your ears open for information on Derrick's killing."

"Anything specific?"

"The guy who did him was into hocus pocus."

"Magic?" Reggie's voice lowered. His experiences with the powers of beyond hadn't been much better than mine.

"Yeah, magic," I confirmed.

"You want to avoid that kind of thing. Take it from a guy who knows. First hand." He croaked loudly to illustrate the point.

"Just keep your bug-eyes peeled, Reggie. I'll worry about the curses and hexes."

"Be careful, Joe. I have a feeling this case could turn out bad."

I'd already had that feeling, and usually my feelings were dead on the money.

"Thanks, but I'll be fine. It takes more than a bit of black magic to scare me."

I hung up and tossed away my dying cigarette.

The sun poked its way over the horizon. I climbed into the Wreck through the window because the damned door refused to budge.

CHAPTER FIVE

A tapping on the window jerked me into consciousness ten minutes earlier than my alarm clock was set to. I opened my eyes and glimpsed Dirk the building manager

staring down at me through the glass.

"The owner doesn't like you sleeping in front of the building."

I rubbed my eyes and smiled. "Neither do I, but it's hard to sleep in an office

with a banshee moaning death cries in your ear." I kicked the door open and slid

out of the Wreck.

"You don't look so good, Bogey."

"That's because you aren't used to seeing me in the daylight." I wasn't too used

to being in the daylight either. The bright rays of morning were nearly blinding, but I was getting used to it.

My office looked worse in the daylight as well. Everything was so clearly defined. The rusted cabinet seemed a duller shade of red. I noticed many stains

on the walls for the first time, and the layers of dust seemed two or three layers deeper. Hell, the place even seemed to smell worse in the sunlight. The banshee whistled sadly at my return.

"Hi, honey."

"This place is disgusting," Dirk observed from the door. He was too afraid to step inside. "You can forget about getting your deposit back."

I'd actually never got around to paying it.

I pulled a spare suit out of the closet. Or to be more accurate, THE spare suit

since I only owned two suits counting the one on my back. They were both identical plain brown affairs. That way, I never had to worry about which I looked better in. Not that I would have anyway. In a matter of minutes, I'd changed and left the brightly lit dismal office. A small fountain sat in front

of the building. It was in desperate need of repairs, but still functional enough to spit out a shallow puddle of water. I dipped my hand in the pool, splashed a little on my face and gargled. Eleven minutes and I was ready to take

on a new day.

The Wreck's engine groaned loudly before finally grumbling to life.

Dirk folded his arms across his chest. "I know I've only asked you every day for

the last four months, but could you possibly look into paying your rent?"

I pulled out a handful of bills and handed them over. Then I drove away, leaving

a trail of big, black smoke in my wake.

On my way back to Derrick's apartment, I stopped at a deli and ordered a meatball hero and a cup of lukewarm coffee. Breakfast was the most important meal of the day.

Derrick's neighborhood was a fabled Shangri-La of parking spaces during the day.

All the BMWs and Mercedes had gone off with their yuppies in the eternal search

for more. I found a convenient space opposite Johnny Derrick's building.

I finished the last of the meatball hero and coffee before crossing the street

and entering the alley next to the building. I had to climb onto a dumpster to

reach the fire escape, but from there it was an easy ascent to the apartment window. I was in luck. The cops had neglected to latch it shut though they'd slapped a formidable barrier of official yellow tape to deter intruders. I pressed onward, unafraid.

In my search, I began with the obvious places, such as items hidden in the freezer, objects taped to the bottom of drawers, and things stuck to the back of

pictures. All of those spots came up empty.

I'd done this kind of work before. It wasn't all that easy because I really had

no idea what I was looking for. A big part of the detective job isn't knowing what you're looking for, but knowing when you've found it. Whatever it was, I was reasonably sure it wasn't in the living room, or if it was, I didn't know enough to find it.

I proceeded to check the bedroom. The bodies had been taken away, but I could still smell the faint stench of death. The image of the two dry corpses was still a fresh in my mind, but I pushed it aside. The bedroom was a nymphomaniac's dream. There was a mirror over the bed, plenty of video cameras,

and a bubble machine. The stereo was state-of-the-art. Out of curiosity, I put

my ear against the wall. It was pretty thin so I imagined Derrick's neighbors either complained a lot or didn't mind being kept up by all sorts of animal lust

noises. My personal curiosity satisfied, I went about looking for anything that

might appease my professional curiosity.

A lot of stuff I found in that bedroom I couldn't identify, although I was pretty sure what it was all used for. Among all the aberrant things, I finally

found something interesting in the dresser drawers.

It was a small black notebook, filled with names. Tawni, Tammy, and Theresa just

to name a few. Next to each name was a date and one to four stars. At first, I

thought it was an address book, but it wasn't. It was a list of Derrick's conquests.

Johnny Derrick had been a very busy ladies man. In the month of May alone, he had twenty-six dates. Derrick must have taken a lot of vitamins. I looked through the book, arriving at the day the Amulet of Tepes had been stolen. Next

to the day, the name "EVA MISTS" was written. Eva had done very well for herself, earning three-and-a-half stars.

I wasn't sure if this meant anything or not, but I decided to check it out for

two reasons. Firstly, my instincts told me it was important. And secondly, I didn't have anything else to go.

Finding Eva Mists wasn't hard. She was the star attraction at The Gentleman's Club, a strip joint high class enough to get away with such an unoriginal name.

It was the kind of place that had exotic dancers instead of strippers and serves

mixed drinks rather than specializing in Bring Your Own Beer. Like the Club Cockatrice, it could be very discriminating about the clientele.

Mists was a big name in New Arcadia. She was supposed to bring back the beauty

and style to stripping, or exotic dancing, or whatever else you wanted to call

dancing naked for a living. Not that I had any problems with that. I enjoyed a

good naked dancer as much as anyone. She was, by reputation, the classiest stripper in town. I wasn't all that familiar with her work, but I was willing to

take everybody's word for it.

Finding Mists wasn't very difficult, but actually talking to her was going to be

a challenge.

The valet eyed the Wreck with curious alarm. "Don't scratch the pain," I said as

I handed over the keys.

The sun was already below the skyline. The last bits of red were slowly fading

from the sky. I'd grabbed a few hours during the day, just enough to keep me going without being overindulgent.

The marquee's giant blue letters flashed out at me through the gray dusk. TONIGHT! EVA MISTS, LIVE!

I walked through the first set of wide doors without any problems, but the second set were guarded by a pair of thick-necked ogre bouncers. Both were wearing tuxedos and both looked as grim as the Reaper himself on a bad day. The bigger of the two gigantic obstacles held up a large hairy hand in my face.

"Members only."

"I'm a member," I replied as I showed each fifty bucks.

The smaller of the two ogres, the one only as large as a short skyscraper, showed a humorless grin. "We get more than that in tips."

"Leave," the tall skyscraper ordered. His protruding brow furrowed unpleasantly.

I checked my wallet. I had a bit of money, but I doubted the bouncers would risk

losing their well paying jobs for any amount of cash I could offer. I decided to

try the direct approach.

"I need to speak with Eva."

The small skyscraper chuckled without moving his lips. "Everyone needs to talk

to Eva, but nobody does."

"Yeah," the tall skyscraper agreed. "Leave now."

"It's about a mutual friend of ours."

The ogres exchanged silent glances.

"Leave now or else we'll have to hurt you." They smiled like they meant it for

the first time. "Real bad."

I could be stubborn, but I drew the line at stupid. Most of the time anyway.

The

valet fetched my car, and I drove it across the street, where I waited. It was a

long wait, but waiting was as much a part of the private detective business as

knowing things.

Six hours later, Eva Mists stepped out of the club, escorted by the short skyscraper. I almost didn't recognize her at first. Without all her makeup, and

in regular clothes, she looked normal. She was cute, sure, but if you saw her on

the street, you'd give her the once over and get on with your life. I intercepted her on the way to her car.

"Miss Mists, I need to speak with you a moment."

"Not another fan," she sighed. "I'm not in the mood for this right now."

Her escort stepped towards me, black clawed hands poised to wrap around my throat.

I help up m investigator's license. "I'm not a fan. I'm a P.I. I just need to speak with you a moment."

The skyscraper was nearly on top of me when she spoke up.

"Okay, Chuck, let him speak. What's this all about?"

"Johnny Derrick," I replied.

There was no mistaking the concern in her eyes at the name. "Johnny?"
"I'm afraid he's dead."
"D-dead? It can't be. No, he can't be dead."
"I'm afraid so."
Mists darted past me unexpectedly. I moved to follow, but Chuck hoisted me up by
the collar of my trench coat. "She doesn't want to talk to you anymore."
I slipped out of the coat and was off and running before he could catch me.
Mists jumped into her car. She fumbled with the keys. I reached into the
window
and stopped her from inserting them in the ignition.
"Hold on. We need to talk." She looked terrified so I tried to make her feel
better. "It's alright. I'm on your side."
Chuck's monstrous fingers wrapped around my shoulder and pulled me away. "I
just
need to talk to you."
"Let him go," she ordered. Tears were beginning to well in her eyes. She was
afraid. "What happened?"
"Someone killed Johnny. You could be in danger."
She nodded and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I have to talk to the
police.
Johnny said I had to talk to the police if anything happened to him.
"Fine. You do that." It occurred to me that having Mists blabbing to the cops
might not be the best thing for me, professionally or personally. Once the
authorities got hold of this, they would probably find some way to throw me
behind bars. At the very least, I was going to lose the case. The only case
I'd
had in months. But I was always a sucker for a girl with blue eyes, and Mists
had the bluest eyes I'd ever seen.
What happened next, I'll always remember but never fully understand. A bright
hole ripped open in the smog-filled sky. Chuck's mouth fell wide open. I
shielded my eyes. A blue bolt of lightning shot from the hole. It struck
Mist's
car, and the energy swirled all around the car. Little sparks danced along
the
detailing. I got a good look at Mist's face. She was petrified. I reached for
the door handle. The sparks surged forward and hit me with the force of a
hurricane. I was thrown back a good twenty feet. The landing threw me for a
loop, but somehow I managed to turn back to the car. The energy surged
brighter
with each moment. I started towards the car again even though I had no real
idea
what I could do to help her.
Not that I got the chance.
There was a blinding flash and another shockwave knocked me on my butt. When
my
eyes finally cleared, I saw what was left of the car. It was in pieces and on
fire even though I hadn't heard the terrific explosion that I should have.
I waited a few long seconds before pushing myself back to my feet. The hole
was
gone. now there was only the smog and the moon. And Eva Mist's burning
automobile.
I lit a cigarette, ignoring the pain in my tailbone. The bouncer groaned,
lying
on his back.
I could hear sirens in the distance as I put on my coat. It was singing around
the edges.
Chuck and I watched the smoke rising from the ruined car. The flames
flickered
towards the sky. As Eva Mist's last moments of life dissolved like black

smoke,
I found myself wondering.
Maybe debtor's prison deserved a second chance.
If my brain agreed with me or not, I couldn't hear its reply. The sirens of
the
arriving police cars were much too loud.

CHAPTER SIX

A small droplet of sweat made its way down my forehead. The heat of the
lights
was draining. It weighed down my limbs and made me feel sluggish. It was much
like I imagined my own personal hell would be like. Only there wasn't any
muzak
playing.
The short, shadowy figure with the smoke stack in his mouth frowned in my
direction. The taller, overweight, darkened character folded his thick arms
across his chest. The third shape hunched over his stenography machine,
typing
as the others spoke.
The short figure stepped into the light. Detective Brock chewed on his cigar
with characteristic gruffness.
"Can I have a glass of water?" I asked.
"Sure," the large shadow replied. "As soon as you tell us what's going on and
how you just happen to be around for three murders in less than twenty-four
hours."
I shrugged. "What can I say? I'm just lucky sometimes."
"Luck is your business," Brock grumbled.
"Knowing things is my business," I corrected.
The stenographer's head poked up. "I thought trouble was your business."
"Someone else entirely."
"Who cares?" the large shadow growled.
No one cared enough to explore the subject any further.
"I'm going to be honest with you, Bogey." The large shadow stepped into view.
He
was a big man. His bulk came from eating too many donuts. His name was
Mordred.
His occupation: Chief of Police. We didn't share a golden relationship, but
that
was probably my fault more than his. I didn't make friends easily.
"We've got three murders by magic with no lead," Mordred said. "The only
common
link we have is you. Just tell us why, and we'll be happy to let you go.
Being
stubborn will only get you into a whole lot of trouble. How do three counts
of

first degree murder strike you?"

"Not very well," I admitted. "But you don't have any case."

"I don't? How's this? I got a super who caught you sneaking into Johnny Derrick's apartment, standing over two corpses. And I got a pair of bouncers who

will swear you tried to bribe them to get to Eva Mists. And when that didn't work, you confronted her in the parking lot. And before it's all through, she's

dead. Sounds like a case to me."

"It'll never stick. Why would I be so stupid as to be near the car when it exploded. That doesn't make much sense."

"You'd be surprised how often helpful evidence can turn up when you really need

it." Mordred turned to the stenographer. "You aren't taking any of this down, are you?"

"Of course not," the shadowy figure replied.

I pulled out a match, putting the had between my thumb and forefinger, and snapped. Flame sprung from the small wooden shaft, and I lit up a cigarette.

"Is

that a threat or a promise?"

Mordred leaned over the table. "Consider it both."

Brock snickered, which was somewhat difficult while smoking a cigar.

"Do we understand each other?" Mordred asked.

I blew a stream of smoke up his nostrils.

The Chief of Police withdrew, coughing.

"There's just one problem with your argument, Mordred. We all know I didn't do

it."

"That's very true. You may be a lot of things, but you aren't a murderer. But that's besides the point. I don't need another unsolved. If the press or the Mayor or anybody else starts putting pressure on me to do something about that,

you're going down. Regardless of your guilt or innocence."

"I'm humbled by your sense of justice."

"I'm just looking out for myself, Bogey."

Brock chuckled, which was relatively easy with a cigar compared to snickering.

"If you don't tell me," Mordred added, "you'll just end up spending the night in

a cold, dark cell. Tomorrow, we'll try this again, and if you don't feel like talking, it'll be another night in the cell. If you still don't feel like talking..."

"I get the point."

"So what's it going to be? Your call."

I puffed thoughtfully. The interrogation room was silent except for the buzzing

of a fly attracted to the lights. As it burst into flame and spiraled earthward,

I reached my decision.

"Derrick and Mists were leads to a case I'm working on."

"Case?" Brock mumbled. "Everyone knows you couldn't get a client if your life depended on it. Unemployment is your business."

Chief Mordred glared at Brock. The dwarf's chuckle vanished instantly.

"What kind of case?"

I flicked ashes into the floor. "Sorry. Client confidentiality."

"Sorry. Solitary confinement."

I suddenly found myself envying the smoldering fly. The lucky bastard was beyond

all this.

"I've been hired by the museum to locate and recover the Amulet of Tepes."

Mordred narrowed his eyes. Brock narrowed his eyes. I narrowed my eyes to play along. The stenographer's eyes, shrouded in darkness, were probably narrowed as well. I couldn't tell.

"There's on problem with that, Bogey," Brock disagreed. "The museum already had

a gumshoe looking for the amulet."

"Stop playing games," Mordred said.

"I'm not. I was hired by Sharon Topaz to find the amulet. She said the museum had given her authorization."

"She lied."

"So much for knowing things as a vocation," Brock added.

"As long as someone's footing the bill, I don't bother asking too many questions."

"In that case, Bogey, you made a major professional mistake. Unless Miss Topaz

is willing to confirm your story, you're in for some trouble." Mordred wiped the

sweat from his brow with his meaty forearms.

"She will."

But somewhere in the back of my keen shamus mind, I knew she wouldn't.

The bright spotlight was turned off, and the track lighting was switched on. That didn't brighten up the interrogation room much. In fact, the chipped, orange pain coating the walls offended my sense of taste, such as it was, more

than the glare of the lights.

The stenographer watched my every move as if I was about to leap up and attack.

Since Mordred and Brock had left the room to check my story, he seemed to think

I would use this opportunity to jump him. But there was no escape. I knew that.

I tapped my unlit cigarette against the tables edge. The stenographer followed

my hands as I reached into my coat pocket and produced a match. The quick movement to light it caused him to flinch.

"Mind if I smoke?"

The stenographer shook his head quickly.

The door opened, and Mordred and Brock stepped back into my life. I could tell

by the looks on their faces that they were not happy public servants.

"There is a Sharon Topaz working as assistant curator at the city museum," Mordred confirmed. "She claims she's never heard of you."

I pulled Topaz's car from my pocket and tossed it across the table. "Then how did I get this?"

"It's a business card. She's probably got hundreds floating around. Just about

anyone could get their hands on one."

Brock grabbed me by the collar and pounded his chubby fist against the table.

"Now cut the bull, Bogey. Tell us the truth. Or it ain't going to be pretty."

I was unimpressed. "You've been watching too many movies, Brock."

His teeth gnashed, biting into his cigar. Half fell to the floor. The other half

was presumably swallowed. "I'm tired of playing games with you, gumshoe.

Either

tell us what we want to know, or I'm going to shoot you, stick a pocket knife in

my shoulder, and claim self-defense."

We looked into each other's eyes. Neither liked what he saw. A bulb in the track lighting burned out with a sharp crack as if trying to avoid the whole ugly scene. Finally Mordred stepped in.

"Enough, Brock."

The dwarf backed off reluctantly.

"I'm giving you one last chance. Tell us what this is all about or rot in a cell."

"Sure," I agreed. I started with the beginning and finished with the end. And I

told them everything. Almost everything. I neglected to mention Reggie's part in

the story, or my illegal excursion into Derrick's apartment. But they weren't very important to the story, and the ending was the same, regardless of the supporting characters.

"Is that it?"

"That's it."

"You don't honestly expect us to believe all this, do you, Bogey?" Brock asked.

"It's the truth. Whether you choose to believe it or not is an entirely different matter."

Brock and Mordred exchanged quick glances, then turned back on me.

"Okay, Bogey," the Chief relented. "You can go. But don't leave town. And stay

away from the amulet. Understand?"

"If I don't have a client, I don't have a reason."

"Good. Now get out of here before I change my mind."

I didn't have to be told twice.

The Wreck pulled in front of the office building. I twisted at the handle until

the door finally relented. Dirk was nowhere to be seen, which wasn't unusual. He

just managed the building. He didn't live in it.

The banshee greeted me with a deathly gurgle from a corner in the ceiling.

I sat down and started flicking cards into the waste basket. I was halfway through the deck when the phone rang. There was a familiar voice on the other end.

"Mister Bogey, I'm sorry but..."

"I'm sorry too, Miss Topaz, but I'm afraid our business together is over."

"I can explain, but not over the phone. We have to meet."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Please," she pleaded.

The banshee hissed from below my left elbow.

I'd always been a sucker for brunettes. "Alright, Miss Topaz. Where do you want

to meet?"

"There's a small cafe on the corner of Gryphon and Central. Meet me there in half-an-hour."

The banshee whined from the top desk drawer.

I was reaching for my coat when the phone rang again. One call a night was an unusual event. But two calls verged on the unnatural. It was Reggie this time.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you for an hour. Where have you been?"

"You don't want to know."

"You're right. Any luck on the case?"

"Plenty. All bad."

"Sounds typical. Anyway, I couldn't find that information you wanted, but I've

got some interesting news. You've been playing chimp to somebody's organ. The

museum already has somebody else looking for the amulet."
"Tell me something I don't know," I said bitterly. The only thing worse than bad news was bad news that came too late to be any good.
"You already know?"
"Yeah. It's my job to know. Remember?"
"How could I forget? Are you going to need anything else?"
"No thanks, Reggie."
"Good. I've got a business to run. I can't just sit around tossing cards all day like some people I know."
As I left, the banshee screeched from the filing cabinet.
"I don't know when I'll be back. Don't wait up."
The banshee gurgled appreciatively.

CHAPTER SEVEN

At first, I didn't recognize Topaz. She'd let her hair down, and she wasn't wearing her glasses. Dressed in a blouse and comfortably snug jeans, she was still beautiful, but in a much more down-to-earth way.
I put my fee on the table. "Minus two days work and expenses," I informed with a polite salute. "I believe this is the end of our professional relationship.
Good evening, Miss Topaz."
"Please, Mister Bogey, just let me explain."
I started to walk away. "Sorry, but I don't work for clients I can't trust. It's bad business."
"You don't understand. Let me explain. Please."
Then I made my mistake. I looked over my shoulder and into her sparkling green eyes. She was desperate. It was the same last look I'd seen in Eva Mists's eyes, just before her car blew up. Desperate women always made me do stupid things.
"This better be good."
I ordered a beer. Topaz ordered a soda. While we waited, she explained, and I listened.
"I suppose you know by now that I wasn't authorized to hire a private investigator."

I nodded.

"The truth is, I hired you with my own money. I thought hiring another detective would double the chances of finding it. I thought that if you found it, I could explain everything. But when the police called, I don't know.. I guess I panicked. I don't know why. I just lied without thinking. I hope it didn't cause you too much trouble."

I didn't think a reply necessary other than a cold, hard stare.

The beer and soda arrived. I took a sip from the frosty mug. It was much better

than the imported so-called beer I'd gotten at the Club Cockatrice.

"Is that it?"

"Yes. You understand now, don't you?"

I chugged the beer and got up from my chair. "Good bye, Miss Topaz."

"Wait! I'll pay more. I'll do anything. Just don't drop the case please." My vision strayed to the bills in her hand. I tried to resist, but in the end,

resistance was futile. Once again, I went against my better judgment. "One more

chance, but if I find out you've lied to me about anything else, we're through."

"Fair enough. Just as long as you respect my desire to keep this secret until you find the amulet."

She handed back the cash.

"I'll see what I can do, but the truth is, I don't have much to go on."

"I know you'll do your best, Mister Bogey."

"I'll try."

I got back in my car and drove for a while. I didn't go anywhere. I just drove.

It helped me think.

I had two very slim leads, and both of them were dead. That was sort of helpful.

It meant I was probably onto something. Unfortunately, in a more accurate sense,

I had three corpses who couldn't give me any help. Worse yet, there was the undeniable involvement of dark forces. Forces that would have sent a smart investigator packing.

I wasn't sure if I could find the amulet or not, but for two-hundred a day plus

expenses, I was willing to try. Even if black magic had reared its ugly head.

The drive helped me confirm one thing. I was out of ideas. I decided the bottle

of Jack Daniels in the bottom drawer of my desk might give me some new ones.

If

not, at least not having any would bother me less.

The whiskey was waiting for me, but it wasn't waiting alone. It was accompanied

by a pair of shot glasses, one of which rested in the left hand of a thin figure. The figure's right hand held a shiny revolver pointed right at me the moment I walked through the door.

The banshee screeched miserably.

"You could have warned me."

The invisible entity gurgled apologetically.

"Hello, Mister Bogey." The thin man leaned into the light. His face was gaunt,

corpse-like. His right eye was covered by a black patch, and when he smiled,

a
single golden tooth glinted in the light. He wore a fedora, trench coat, and
a
purple bow tie.
I instantly realized I had no idea who this guy was.
"Care for a drink?" the thin man asked. He nodded towards the shot glass at
the
end of the desk. "No sudden moves, please."
I flipped back the shot.
His good eye glazed over. I would've sworn it was made of glass. "I suppose
it
would be only polite to introduce myself. The name is Ace, Samson Ace."
Ace said the words as if they were the answer to everything. Unfortunately, I
had a whole different set of questions.
His eyebrows raised curiously. "Strange. I would have thought you would have
heard of me. We are in the same business."
I guessed that. The fedora and trench coat were a dead giveaway, though the
bow
tie had thrown me at first.
The thin man poured himself another shot with his left hand, keeping the gun
pointed at me. "I most certainly have heard of you, Mister Bogey. You have a
reputation of sorts among your peers. Everyone agrees you're one of the best
private dicks around. Unfortunately, you're also one of the few with a code
of
ethics in this city, which severely limits your employment opportunities." He
put the glass to his lip. "And trouble *GULP* is your business."
"Actually, knowing things is my business."
"I like trouble better."
"So do I, but it was already taken." I slid my glass across the table for Ace
to
fill. "I'm not familiar with all the union rules, but I didn't think
threatening
one another was our version of the secret handshake."
Ace nodded. "Quite correct, but when making a threat, visual reinforcement
can
be very handy."
The banshee hissed from somewhere next to my left foot.
"You, Mister Bogey, are sticking your nose where it does not belong. The
Amulet
of Tepes is my case. The museum only needs one detective. Do we understand
each
other?"
Private investigators could be like rabid maw wyrms when it came to defending
their territory.
"Sure," I replied.
"Good."
"Now that we understand each other, why don't you put the gun away. My lease
prohibits gunfire."
He holstered his weapon. Without it, he seemed a lot less threatening, almost
meek. He possessed the natural ferocity of a snarling bunny rabbit, if the
bunny
was missing its teeth and feeling a bit sluggish.
I poured myself another shot. "There's three things you should know about me,
Ace. First, I don't like people breaking into my office. Second, I don't like
being threatened. And third, I don't like people drinking my whiskey without
permission."
He adjusted his bow tie as he got up to leave.
The banshee performed what could only be described as a death belch.
"Another thing," I added. "I have a tendency to shoot people who point guns
at

me."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Ace was kind enough to close the door as he left.

I screwed the cap back on the whiskey, returned it to the drawer, and watched Ace drive away from the window. It was a cloudless night. As cloudless as earlier that evening, when a bolt of pure magic had blown Eva Mists and her car

into a thousand pieces of scrap. A cold shiver ran down my spine.

The banshee whines softly.

The first rays of dawn poked their way over the skyline. I yawned and headed for

my bed, parked conveniently out front.

I'd been sleeping in my car for around three months. Ever since losing my one room apartment. It was cramped, uncomfortable, and not very private, but I'd gotten used to it. I was nothing if not adaptable. Especially when not given any other choice.

It was noon when my alarm brought me back to life. The sun seemed brighter today than yesterday. Goblins were a nocturnal species, and I was even more so than usual. But the irritants of daylight had to be braved when working on a case. Some problems just couldn't be worked out when the moon was out. I performed my usual freshening up ritual, then read the morning paper over coffee and a pastrami and ham sandwich. There was a nice big article on Eva Mists exploding car. It didn't mention me, or much of anything else that could be useful. But it did give me Mists's real name, Janet Blane. That saved me some leg work.

Using the phone book at the deli, I found Blane's home address. The Wreck was feeling quite cooperative this morning, and the engine jumped to life with hardly a choking cough. I sifted through the glove box for a pair of dark sunglasses and headed for the freeway. Before long, I parked the car in front of a small white duplex.

The neighborhood was nice and clean. The smog was a little thinner, and when the birds sang, they didn't cough all that much. It was a nice place to live and not the kind of place one would expect a stripper to live. But I'd learned a long time ago not to expect anything.

A sweaty, pudgy minotaur was busy pushing a mower back and forth over the duplex's lawn. His right horn was chipped, and his nostrils were split.

Noticing those kinds of things is what makes me a good private eye. A cassette player blasted music into his ears via headphones.

I waited to be noticed, which could take quite a while considering how much smaller I was than the manbull. Eventually, I was.

He asked me something, but I couldn't hear it over the mower.

"What?"

He repeated himself. I still couldn't make it out.

The mower sputtered to a halt. "I said, 'Is there something I can do for you?'"

"That depends. Do you live here?"

He contemplated the question. "That depends. Who are you?"

"The name's Joe Bogey," I answered as I removed my coat. I wasn't used to the heat of midday.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"Not unless you work for a debt collecting service."

The minotaur smiled unexpectedly. He extended one of his three fingered hands.

"Name's Timothy. But my friends call my 'Tiny'."

It made sense. While Tiny was large compared to your household variety goblin,

he was rather small for a minotaur.

We exchanged a friendly handshake. His grip was firm, but he refrained from crushing my tiny fingers.

I thrust my thumb in the direction of the duplex. "Is this where Janet Blane lives?"

Tiny nodded. "It was. What's it to you? You a cop or something?"

"Something. I'm a private detective. It's like a cop but without the dental

plan." I decided to play it straight with Tiny. No reason to make it more difficult than it had to be. "I was hoping to take a look around Miss Blane's home. It could help me out with a case I'm on."

Tiny shrugged. "I'd like to help, but I don't live here. The owner pays me to take care of any odd jobs that pop up." He looked me over. "So you're a private dick."

"That's right."

"Must be exciting."

"Yeah, well it's better than being a public dick."

He laughed. "I didn't think you guys actually dressed like that. Aren't you supposed to wear a fedora?"

"It's optional. How well did you know Blane?"

"We'd talked a couple of times. She seemed like a nice girl. Never caused any trouble as far as I know."

"Do you suppose the owner would let me take a look around?"

"Not unless you're looking to rent."

"You never know. My current place is a little cramped. So tell me, do you think

you'd mind showing me around? I'd be willing to pay any reasonable touring fee."

I reached for my wallet.

Tiny held up his hand. "Keep your money. Just tell me, does this have anything

to do with Janet's death?"

"I think it has everything to do with Janet's murder."

"Okay, but I don't have a key. Either the owner or Janet let me in."

"No problem."

"Are you going to pick the lock?"

"If I have to."

I performed a quick hidden key search around the porch area. I checked along the

frame and looked under the doormat. I finally found the key hidden in the potted

plant's dirt.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Tiny asked as I tapped the dirt off the key. Blane's living room was spotless. Not a single mote of dust dared sully the sparkling clean room. There were several abstract paintings hanging on the wall.

The pure pure white couch didn't even have a stain on it. And the rugs looked too expensive to even consider walking on.

I noticed a picture on the end table. It was a photo of Blane and Johnny.

They

were on the beach, and they looked very happy. Now they were both dead. Life had

a way of doing that to happy people.

"Janet's boyfriend," Tiny informed. "She was crazy about him, but I don't think

he felt quite the same. He liked her, but he liked all women. If you get my meaning."

I set the framed picture down. "I get it."

Her bookshelves were loaded with thick textbooks. Tiny enlightened me on Blane's

future plans. She was attending collage with the money from her lucrative stripping career, with plans on becoming an engineer judging from the subjects

present on the shelves. A girl with a future dies just like that, and life keeps

going on like nothing's happened. It didn't make much sense, but life rarely did.

I searched the living room carefully, making sure to put everything back where I found it. I didn't find anything that I considered noteworthy. Then I checked Blane's bedroom. Like her living room, it was as clean as a whistle, although I really had no idea how clean a whistle actually is. But if it was anywhere near as clean as Blane's bedroom, it was clean enough. I found two shoe boxes under the bed. One was filled with reviews of her stripping performances. The other held several letters. A glance at each confirmed they were all from Johnny Derrick. They possessed a certain poetic quality. Nothing too highbrow, but good enough. Besides the letters, there was a silver pendant and a scrap of paper. The pendant held Johnny's picture. The paper had three words written on it: REDRUM TWENTY THREE.

"Find anything useful?" Tiny asked.

"Maybe. Did you ever hear her talk about redrum?"

"Forget it."

All I had were two vague words: redrum twenty-three. Whatever that meant. It probably meant nothing at all. If that was the case, I'd once again hit a dead end. But my instincts told me they meant something. If I'd found them anywhere other than the shoe box dedicated to Derrick, would have passed them over without a second thought. But the location was too important for the words not to be. I had to admit it was an assumption on my part that words had anything to do with the Amulet of Tepes. But sometimes, assumptions are the only thing you have to go on.

I thanked Tiny for his help. He wished me luck in "finding the bastards who killed Janet." I told him I'd do my best.

There were six Redrums in the phone book, considerably less than twenty-three.

There was also Redrum publishing with offices located downtown. And lastly, there was Redrum Storage. I picked the last as my first choice.

Redrum Storage was guarded by high fences topped with barbed wire. The sheds on the other side of it had large red doors, each marked with a number. I only counted up to twelve as I walked through the gate and into the front office.

A bell clanged as I opened the door.

A balding man, sitting on the other side of a desk, looked up. He tried to smile but couldn't quite get it to work. "Welcome to Redrum Storage, sir. May I help you?"

"I need a place to store a few items."

He went into a rehearsed pitch, not even bothering to look me in the eyes as he said it. "You couldn't find a safer place than Redrum Storage. Since our founding six years ago, not a single break-in has occurred. An armed guard is always on duty as well as constant video surveillance-"

"Great," I interrupted, trying to sound as if I were really interested. "Are you the owner?"

"Me? No, my brother-in-law Bernie owns the place."

"I think a friend of mine rents a shed here, but I'm not sure if this is the right place. I think it's supposed to be shed twenty-three."

Bernie's brother-in-law hit a few keys on his computer and glanced at the screen. "Twenty-three is no longer under rent."
"I'm almost positive he said Redrum. If you could tell me the name, I could be sure."
"That's privileged information."
"I've got authorization right here." I placed a twenty on the desk. Bernie's brother-in-law eyed the money. "I'm afraid that isn't high enough authorization."
I pulled out another ten, upping my clearance to thirty dollars. Bernie's brother-in-law snatched it up. "The previous renter was one Jonathan Derrick. Is that the friend you're looking for?"
"How long ago did he stop renting?"
"According to the computer, four days ago."
"Did you see what he had in the shed? Was there anyone with him?"
"You ask a lot of questions," Bernie's brother-in-law observed.
"It's what I get paid for."
"What a coincidence. Answering questions is what I get paid for." He flashed a greedy smile.
Thirty bucks didn't buy what it used to. "What's the going rate on questions?"
"Lucky for you, I'm having a special today. All the who, what, where, why, and whens you can ask, only forty dollars."
I dropped a twenty. That made fifty with the other thirty. Bernie's brother-in-law pocketed the dough. "Meter's running."
"What did Derrick have in the shed?"
He shrugged. "Sorry, but I wasn't here when he unloaded."
"Who was?"
"Doyle. He works the later shift."
"Where can I find him?"
"Probably at home. One-on-nine Titanic Avenue, apartment three."
"Thanks."
"If Doyle asks," Bernie's brother-in-law said, "you didn't get his address from me."
I nodded. That went without saying.

The door to Doyle's building wasn't locked, and I found apartment three. I knocked once.
No one answered.
I got a bad feeling about this and tried knocking again. Louder this time. Still no answer.
I pounded on the door, rattling its wooden frame.
No one still answered, but there was a muffled groan on the other side, followed by some shuffling footsteps.
"Who the hell is it?" a voice grumbled from the other side.
"Mister Doyle?"
"Who the hell is it?"
"My name is Bogey. I need to speak with you for a moment."
The door cracked open ever so slightly. A single eye was visible in the darkness on the other side. "What the hell do you want?"
"I'm a private investigator, Mister Doyle."
The eye glared. "I don't need this. You can tell that hag of an ex-wife I can't afford the alimony." The door slammed shut.

"I'm not working for your wife," I told the door.
It opened a crack again. The disembodied eye reappeared again. "Then what the hell do you want? I work nights. I need my sleep."
"I understand how valuable your time is, Mister Doyle. I just need to talk to you for a moment. I'm willing to pay for the inconvenience. It won't take long."

I held up a few small bills. That was all the persuasion he needed. The door opened all the way, revealing more than just Doyle's eye. A lot more than I cared to see. The sight of a potbellied night watchman in a pair of boxers and a

stained T-shirt was enough to turn my stomach. And that wasn't easy.

"Don't just stand there," Doyle grumbled. "Come in."

Doyle's apartment looked like it had been ransacked. Pizza boxes were laying on

the floor. Clothes were strewn about. Slimy green things pulsed in the darkened corners.

"One hundred bucks," Doyle said.

"Fifty."

"Seventy-five."

"Fifty."

"Fifty," he sighed. "Now what do you want to know?"

"A couple of days ago shed twenty-three at Redrum Storage was emptied. You were

on duty at the time it was cleared. What did you see?"

Doyle to a long moment to scratch his belly. "Belonged to a good-looking guy?"

"That's right. You remember anything about him?"

"Sure. Him and his buddy dropped by, canceled the rental, and grabbed something and took off.

"What did they grab?"

"It wasn't much. Just a little wooden box. It seemed kind of odd to rent an entire shed for something like that. That's why I remember it."

"How big was the box?"

He held his hands apart as a visual aid. "About this big."

The box could easily have held a piece of stolen antique jewelry.

"What did his friend look like?"

"You'd know him if you saw him. Real skinny guy, dressed a lot like you. Only he

had an eye patch, a gold tooth, and..."

"..A purple bow tie."

"No," Doyle corrected. "Actually it was bright yellow."

I smiled. I liked it when the pieces of the puzzle began to fit together.

CHAPTER NINE

It was my turn to pay Samson Ace a visit. It wasn't very hard to look through a phone book and find his business address. The office building was in only slightly better shape than my own. It even had an elevator. The elevator didn't

work, but it still had one nonetheless.

Ace's office was locked. I knocked but no one answered. After waiting a few minutes to gauge hallway traffic, I pulled out my picks. I carried them in my wallet at all times. Part of the P.I. business is getting into places people don't want you to get into. So I'd learned how to do exactly that.

Regrettably,

I had never been very good at using the picks. But given enough time, I could open most locks eventually. In this case, enough time was roughly seven minutes.

The door creaked loudly when I finally pushed it open. The noise reminded me of

my banshee.

The office was dark, but that didn't bother me much. Long before humanoids started building cities and electric lights, my race had been underground dwellers. I didn't share much in common with my ancestors anymore, but I still

had the eyes of a goblin.

Streams of sunlight filtered through the edges of the blinds. I left them down.

In a few hours, the sun would be down, and I liked the dark.

Ace's office wasn't in the best of shape, but it certainly was better than mine

had ever been. It even had a small waiting room, big enough for a secretary and

someone else. There was an old desk covered with dust sitting there. It hadn't

been used in a long time. Obviously Ace didn't have a secretary.

I entered the inner office. Three file cabinets sat against one wall. A few chairs leaned against the other. A desk faced the door. It was pretty unremarkable except for the paintings on the walls. They were the kind with grassy meadows, winged horses, and naked fat women. There were four of them, each with a fatter woman than the next. I studied them for a while, deciding if

they were originals or reproductions. I finally decided I didn't care and moved

onto the filing cabinet. I read a couple of folders out of curiosity, but my

interest soon faded. There was a small closet with clothes hanging in it. In the back, there was a small safe. I didn't know squat about opening safes. So I let it be.

The desk was my final stop. I found some writing materials and nest of cockroaches in the open drawers. I jimmed the only unlocked drawer and found nothing worthwhile. Only a few items Ace felt needed protecting: some nudie magazines, a bottle of bourbon, and a couple of chipped glasses. Screwing the lid off the bourbon, I sniffed it before taking a big drink. Then I leaned back

in the chair, picked up the latest issue of "Naught Amazons On Wheels" and waited.

The sun had nearly set when Samson Ace finally showed. I had already gotten bored with the magazines, although there were some fascinating articles on leather straps and all the fun ways to use them. A key slid into the lock, and

the door opened. Ace's shadow reached into the office and flicked on a light switch.

We both stood there, waiting for something to happen.

He took off his hat and tossed it onto a filing cabinet. "Oh, it's you." He loosened his lime green bow tie.

"You don't seem too surprised."

"Should I be? If you're anything like your reputation, it was only a matter of

time before you figured things out. I guess I should have killed you in your office, but I never was the killer type." He pointed to the bottle. "Mind if I

have a sip?"

I handed him the bourbon.

"Take some free advice, Bogey. Stay away from this case." He laughed humorlessly.

"You know what they say about free advice."

Ace chuckled and sat down in the chair on the other side of the desk. He took another tug of the bottle. "I suppose you've figured everything out."

"Not everything, but enough."

He gave back the bottle. I took another drink and passed it back.

"I suppose you want me to fill in the details then," Ace said.

"That's the general idea."

We sat there for a moment. Since neither of us had our guns drawn, someone could

have easily walked through the office door and mistaken us for friends.

"That's too simple," Ace said. "You're supposed to be good at this. Guess."

I told him what I knew and what I thought I knew. It helped me to put my own thoughts in order.

"You tracked down Derrick on the same rumor I did. Only he was still alive when

you found him. You made a deal. Big mistake. Now he and his girlfriend are dead.

And you, quite logically, are probably on somebody's hit list too."

"You're very good at this."

"Thanks."

Ace took another big gulp. "Of course, I suppose all that was fairly obvious."

I nodded.

"But can you tell me why?"

"The amulet. Somehow Johnny got his hands on it. He probably stole it.

Must've

been a fairly talented thief. Knowing how much someone wanted it, he was hoping

to steal it before they got the chance and sell it for more than originally offered. Unfortunately, whoever wants it doesn't like playing by other people's rules. So now, he or she is getting rid of all the loose ends. And you're the third loose end I've found. I'm rather surprised you're still alive.

"I'm a little surprised about that too. When I heard the news of Derrick and Mist's untimely demise, I knew things had gone sour. That's why I'm leaving the city. Probably the country too."

"Good idea."

"I only came back for a few things." He held up the bottle. "Good bourbon is hard to find." He fiddled with the safe's tumbler. "I suppose you want me to tell you the details now."

"What have you got to lose?"

"I suppose you're right. What do you want to know?"

"What'd you do with the amulet?"

"I don't know what Derrick did with his half, but I hid mine."

"Half?"

"It comes apart into two pieces," he explained. "And neither is worth much of anything without the other. I bet you didn't know that."

"No, I didn't. Where'd you hide your half?"

Ace smiled as if knowing something I didn't meant he was a better P.I. Maybe it did. I wasn't bothering to keep score.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small key. He tossed it across the room. It landed on the desk with a soft click. "You can have it. I don't want anything more to do with this case. If you were smart, neither would you." He closed the safe, stuffing a thick envelope in his coat pocket. "I don't believe in banks. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a plane to catch." He started towards the door.

"One more thing, Ace."

"Make it quick."

"Who were you going to sell it to?"

"Derrick never told me. He always called the guy 'The Buyer'. Either he didn't trust me, or he didn't know."

I dropped the key in my pocket.

Glass shattered behind me. I turned to the window broken and a small black rock laying a few feet away.

"What the hell?" Ace asked.

We both pulled our guns. I didn't know about Ace, but I'd already seen enough weird stuff to be edgy. Even if the rock did look harmless enough.

Then I realized it wasn't a rock.

It began to grow and change, rippling like water as five black tendrils snaked out of its surface. A knob forced its way through the top. It grew larger until it was only a little larger than me. And uglier than anything I'd ever seen or would ever expect to see.

The creature had two legs, three arms (two on the right, one on the left) and a vicious horse's head. If anything in this world deserved to be called a monstrosity, this was it. It growled, slime dripping from its razor sharp teeth.

The entire transformation, from rock to whatever-the-hell-this-was, had taken less than a second.

It took a step forward.

Ace and I emptied our guns into the thing. My piece carried a fifteen round magazine, and Ace's gun held six. Twenty-one bullets in all. The thing's chest

exploded with each bullet. By the time we were finished, only a few seconds, the

thing was filled with holes. It staggered and fell.

My heart raced. I was scared. I don't have a problem admitting that. Who wouldn't be scared by something like that?

Ace asked the question we were both thinking. "Is it dead?"

"I don't know. Was it even alive?"

"Good question." He began reloading. I followed his example and inserted a fresh clip.

"Are you packing silver?" he asked.

I nodded. "Are you?"

He nodded.

"It doesn't always work on unnaturals," I observed skeptically. I've always been

a pessimist.

"It isn't breathing," Ace observed.

"I'm not sure it was breathing before."

Ace lowered his revolver a little. I wasn't feeling so reckless. I kept my gun

trained on the creature. It didn't help me.

Before I knew it, the thing jumped forward and knocked me aside with the subtly

of a freight train. The whole world spun around, and I lost all my bearings. When the world finally stopped spinning, I glimpsed the thing standing over Ace.

Ace's mouth was open, and he was screaming silently.

My gun. I needed my gun. Where the hell was it? My hand fell across something cold and hard. I recognized the feel of it.

"Hey, fuggly!"

The creature turned its horse head completely around. I freaked out and started

shooting. I fired five shots and missed every time. The thing's black body twisted impossibly, avoiding the bullets. It was like the thing was made of smoke. For all I knew, it could have been.

It was on top of me before I knew it. It's breath smelled like the stink of the

grave. I tried to keep myself from looking at those teeth. I was sure it was going to rip out my throat. Instead, it flung me across the room again. I hit my

head against something hard.

Everything went black.

When the clouds were finally finished rolling through my head, and I came too. I

realized I was probably better off unconscious. It felt like a grand marching band was rehearsing in my skull. They were having a good time too. But I wasn't.

Reluctantly, with a great deal of effort, I got to my feet. I resisted the urge

to lay back down. As far as I knew, the thing was still around. Just waiting for

me to regain consciousness so I could feel whatever slow death it had planned for me. I had no idea how long I'd been out. Seconds? Minutes? Hours? Judging from the way things looked, it couldn't have been more than a few minutes.

Otherwise, the cops would have been here by now. You couldn't fire as many gunshots as Ace and I had without attracting some attention. I must have hit my head on the desk. The wood was cheap and soft, but I'd hit hard enough to be conked out by a pillow. I was lucky my skull hadn't been caved in.

My head was throbbing, and I wasn't thinking too clearly. But I was clear enough to pick up my gun. I looked around the room. The monster was gone, but there was something lying in the corner. Something that had once been Samson Ace. He was dead now, lying on his back but looking at the floor. I didn't need a medical degree to know a broken neck had killed him. Ugly way to go. I checked my pocket. The key was still there. I guess the creature had killed Ace, either mistaken me for dead or figured I wasn't worth killing, and left. I didn't pretend to understand why it would leave me alive. I didn't know a damned thing about magic. I only knew it was a very good at killing people. I didn't mourn Ace too long. It wasn't that I didn't feel for the guy. From the little I knew of him, I didn't think he deserved to die like that. But the sounds of police sirens reminded me I didn't want to be found with the body. Another visit with Mordred might very well end with me in the electric chair. A quick glance at the hall confirmed it was empty. I holstered my pistol, adjusted my coat, and tried to look like nothing was wrong. Then I walked out of the office and to my car as calmly and unassuming as I could. I made it two blocks before a pair of patrol cars sped past, lights flashing and sirens blaring. I just kept driving.

CHAPTER TEN

In three days, I had four bodies on my hands and all of them had died horrible, unnatural deaths. Twice I'd been close enough to get a good look at the victim's faces before they died. And from what I could tell, it was only luck that kept me from joining them. It didn't need to be said that I was feeling a tad nervous. I kept expecting to see phantom lightning bolts or horse-headed demons jumping from the shadows. Hired killers I could handle. The dark forces of black magic were something else entirely. If I had a brain in my head, I would have left New Arcadia and never come back. But I didn't do that. Instead, I drove a few miles further from the scene of Samson Ace's murder and pulled the Wreck over. The key in my pocket, the key that Ace had given me as one of his last acts on this world, was completely ordinary. "Stay away from this case," he'd said as he gave it. He was right. I should have stayed away. I should have stayed away from the

beginning. Now I was in too deep. Whoever had killed Derrick and his lover, Eva Mists, and Samson Ace had made this personal. None of them deserved to die like they had, and one way or another, I was going to get to the bottom of this. Or die trying.

One of the first things you learn in this business is that it's just that: business. You can't make it personal. You can't get involved in people's lives. It only makes things messy. But I couldn't just walk away now. It was a stupid thing to do, but a few hundred years before, I would have made a hell of a knight. If they let goblins be knights back then. The key belonged to a locker. The rented kind of locker were people hid things they didn't want other people to find. There were hundreds of those kinds of lockers in the city. But the key had a nice engraving and tag. The engraving was the number forty-one. The tag marked it as belonging to the Speedy Pete Bus Terminal.

My stomach grumbled. The fight with the thing in Ace's office had taken a lot out of me. On the way to Speedy Pete's I stopped off for a cheeseburger and a jumbo cola. The caffeine kept me going even though my head kept telling me to stop. It didn't take long to locate the locker. It also didn't take me very long to notice I was being followed by someone in a very bad disguise. The tail was wearing a thick fake beard and mustache, a pair of sunglasses, a dark raincoat with the collar turned up, and a hat pulled low over his face. He also wore a pair of steel-tipped boots which clicked loudly with every step. The only way he could have been more obvious was by carrying a large neon red sign that read "I AM FOLLOWING YOU." Something about him seemed familiar. I had two choices: confront my escort, or go onto the locker and wait for him to make the first move. I went with the latter. Instead of opening locker forty-one, I avoided it all together and went to the restroom. The facilities were almost clean but not quite dirty. The only occupant was leaving. I washed my hands. There were no towels, so I had to dry them on my coat. Then I calmly entered a stall, closed the door, and waited. Ten minutes passed before the sound of steel-tipped boots was heard. I listened as they made their way down the stalls, opening each in turn. When they finally opened my stall, they found me along with my gun. The tail backed away nervously. "Keep your hands where I can see them and step away. Slowly." I jumped off the porcelain bowl, careful to keep a safe distance between us. "Why are you following me?" He replied with a deep voice as phony as his beard. "I wasn't following you." "You weren't? Then I guess you like opening stall doors for personal reasons?" The tail didn't answer. "Take off that shag rug," I ordered as we stepped out of the stall. He hesitated.

"Do it."

He pulled off the beard.

I'm not surprised by much. In fact, I wasn't really surprised by what happened

next. But it did catch me off guard. Underneath the fake beard was a handsome young face I recognized instantly. I'd only seen it twice, in the framed photo

and locket I'd found in Eva Mist's apartment. It was the face of a dead man named Johnny Derrick.

Derrick took advantage of my almost-surprise. He jumped forward and grabbed my

gun. We both fell on the floor, wrestling with the firearm. Derrick outweighed

me by a good fifty pounds, so I was quickly on the losing end of the match. My

hand slammed into the floor, and the piece slid across the smooth tile. He punched me in the jaw, loosening a few teeth. In the moment of blurred perceptions, Derrick slipped free. I felt something sharp and hard slam into my

ribs. Then I felt it three more times. Now I understood why he wore those steel-tipped boots. They hurt like hell.

I heard Johnny running out the out the restroom, but all I saw was dark red pain. It kept me on the floor way too long. I crawled around, looking for my gun, cursing. By the time I found it, Derrick was long gone, and I was in no condition to chase him anyway. The bump on my head turned every thought into dull agony.

"Oh my..Are you alright, pal?"

A good question. My side ached. Every breath hurt more than the last. I felt like throwing up, but I didn't. I'd shelled out goon money for a cheeseburger and soda, and I wasn't going to waste it.

"Pal?"

I tried to answer, but ended up coughing and tasting my own blood.

You'd be surprised how much damage a few kicks from steel-tipped boots can do.

I

was. According to the doctor, I had four badly bruised ribs. And the crack on my

head, while not a concussion the doctor was kind enough to inform, was still terribly unpleasant. The doc taped my up, bandaging my side, and gave me some little blue pills for the pain.

"How much do I owe you?" I asked as I buttoned up my shirt.

"The bus station is taking care of the bill. They're hoping you won't sue."

I wouldn't have sued Speedy Pete over something that was my own damned fault, but I wasn't going to argue over the bill.

I was still trying to figure exactly how Johnny had gotten the jump on me.

There

was no way he should have been able to do that. The bump on my head must've slowed my reflexes. Either that or I was just getting old.

"There's someone from the police here to see you," the doctor said.

I hopped off the examination when I should have gingerly lowered myself. My side

made a point of blasting me with a stitch of agony. Every step was an effort.

I

didn't see how an injury to my ribs could affect my legs, but it did. I decided

to seriously look into buying a couple of steel-tipped boots. They were damned

effective. Too damned effective.

Brock was waiting for me outside the hospital because it was against the rules

to smoke inside. He was puffing on a half-smoked cigar. Big, black clouds hung over his head. I wasn't in a mood to deal with him, but I really didn't have much choice.

"Brock," I greeted. I couldn't muster the effort to put a "hello" in front of it.

"Bogey," he returned.

I downed my dose of pain pills.

"Heard you got busted up pretty bad," Brock said.

"I've had worse."

Brock nodded to himself, flicked a few ashes from his cigar, and began to puff again. "This hasn't been your week, has it?"

"Not by a long shot."

"Did you hear about Samson Ace?"

"Who?"

Brock wasn't fooled, but he didn't push me. Maybe he felt bad for me because if I looked as bad as I felt, I must have been a pathetic sight.

"Samson Ace was the dick the museum hired to find the amulet."

He waited for me to slip up and say something that would have revealed I knew more than I was telling. I wasn't feeling lousy enough to do that.

"What about him?"

"He's dead. They found him in his office only about an hour ago. Coroner says it's a broken neck. I haven't seen the body, but I heard his neck was twisted completely around. Can you imagine that?"

I didn't have to. "No, I can't. And I wouldn't want to either."

"Anyway, his office was pretty shot up. Just out of curiosity, what caliber do you carry, Bogey?"

I didn't bother lying. That would have been stupid.

Brock snuffed his cigar on the sidewalk. "I suppose I could ask for a description of the mugger, but that would be a waste of time, wouldn't it?"

"He was tall."

"That it?"

"Yeah. That's all I remember."

"Tall. Got it. Thanks." He smiled. "I'll see you later, Bogey." Then he walked away.

When Brock smiled, it always meant bad news for me. Obviously the police already had suspicions about my involvement in Samson Ace's death. I hadn't killed him, but that didn't mean I wouldn't go away for it. The police in New Arcadia weren't always as concerned with finding the right man as finding the right patsy.

Trouble wasn't my business, but I certainly should have kept it in mind as a second job.

I decided to leave Ace's half of the amulet where it was. Locker forty-one had been a good enough hiding place so far. I hadn't gone near the locker while being tailed, so I doubted anyone suspected it was there. I was feeling like something the sphinx coughed up, so I spent the rest of the night huddled in a ball in the Wreck's front seat, snoozing. Sometime in the middle of the night, I had a really strange dream about a giant pair of steel-tipped boots chasing me through the city. It wasn't scary. Just weird. The next morning, my side was killing me. Apparently my doctor had forgotten to tell me sleeping in a cramped automobile wasn't the best thing for a goblin in my condition. I popped a few pain pills, and *POOF*, nothing happened. My ribs still hurt like hell, but I decided to live with it. What other choice did I have? I didn't bother to freshen up this morning. I felt like crap, and I decided if I didn't look like crap, something was wrong. Traffic was light today. My car sputtered to a halt in front of a small red house with a large sign posted on the lawn. MORGANA STEVENS, PROFESSIONAL PSYCHIC. A professional gumshoe like me going to ask a psychic for help seemed a lot like cheating. Especially since everybody knows psychics, even the best of them, can be fairly unreliable. But I was out of leads, and sometimes, you just got to swallow your pride and ask for help. The door opened before I could ring the doorbell. Morgana smiled. "Hello, Joe. I've been expecting you." Psychics, I mused. "Negative thoughts can lead to bad karma," Morgana observed. "Please, come in." She waved me inside. She was a tall woman with a plump figure, neither fat nor thin. Her braided gray hair hung to her waist. She was an elf and had the pointed ears to prove it. And although she looked to be about fifty, she was actually several hundred years old. I didn't know the exact number. A gentlemen never asks a lady her age. I'd met Morgana a long time ago when I was barely a kid starting out in the business. She had already established a booming prognostication practice, but even seers need help sometimes. I'd helped her solve her own murder before it could actually happen, and we'd remained friends. Morgana was upper class and highly respected by lots of people, most of whom were rich and willing to pay large amounts of cash just to hear what she thought their future might hold. "What happened to you?" she asked. "You don't look so good." "You should see the other guy," I replied. It didn't make much sense considering Johnny Derrick was in much better shape than I. Especially for a dead man. "Maybe you should change your business to getting beaten." "Maybe I should." She smiled tenderly. Underneath the patter, I could tell she was really concerned. I liked her a lot too. In a lot of ways, she reminded me of the mother I'd never had. "So what can I do for you, Joe?" "I thought you were supposed to be psychic." I held up the phony beard, my

souvenir from the men's room scuffle. "I need you to read this for me."

"Cute, Joe. What's next, Groucho glasses?"

"Can you read it?"

"I can try. Let's go to the sitting room. It'll be easier there. Less negative energy."

"I'll take your word for it."

Morgana earned money hand over fist as a professional psychic, but she gave most

of her earnings to charity. Her home, while nicely decorated, wasn't garish. It

was rather pleasant, almost like I imagined a grandmother's house should look like.

The sitting room was set up more like a den than a seance chamber. A large, overstuffed couch sat against one corner. Rugs and weavings hung all along the

walls. A stereo system played soft, soothing music. The morning rays shone through a large window and softly lit the room.

Morgana sat on the couch. "Now remember, Joe, I'm not sure exactly how much I'll

be able to get."

"Just give it your best shot."

"Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"I'm looking for lots of things. Just tell me what you get."

Morgana closed her eyes and concentrated. Within a few minutes, she was deep into a meditative trance. I waited patiently.

"I see..someone. Someone tall. Good looking. Very popular with the women."

"Go on," I spurred softly so as to not disturb her concentration.

"This beard was involved in violence recently. Perhaps only a day ago.

Perhaps

less. In a place surrounded by water."

"A bathroom."

"Yes, a bathroom. The man who wore this beard is worried. Very worried. He's scared. Terrified.

"I think I can see where he is. Bright red letters flashing in the darkness. Off

and on, very rhythmic. H. O. L. I smell the stench of decaying garbage, and I hear the roar of giant birds passing overhead.

"I see death connected with this beard. Death is coming to the man who wears this beard. Soon."

"How soon?"

"I don't know. Soon."

"Are you sure?"

Morgana nodded. "Very. I also see another man who is very close to this beard.

Two glowing eyes rushing from the darkness. They will try to kill him, and they

will succeed. But they will also fail."

I began writing this down.

Morgana opened her eyes and leaned back in her chair. She put the beard on the

coffee table. She looked a little tired. "That's all I can see, Joe."

"Thanks, Morgana." I got up to leave.

"Be careful, Joe. I sense a lot of bad things happening to whoever owns that beard."

"It isn't mine."

"That doesn't necessarily matter. The metaphysical connections among all things

can be unclear at times."

"I'll get rid of it then."

"It may not be that simple."

"What is? Remember, Morgana. You aren't always right. Besides, you know I don't

believe in all that hocus pocus."

Her eyes softened, but I could see she was still worried. "Okay, Joe. Just take

care of yourself."

"I'll keep an eye out for glowing eyes."

"You do that, Joe."

On the way back to my office, I considered getting rid of the beard. I decided

not to. It was a possibility that someone else might pick it up and then they could become the victim of Morgana's vision. I didn't want to leave a loaded beard lying around.

At my office, I grabbed my spare suit. Then I drove to Jack's Twenty-four Hour

Dry Cleaners. Jack wasn't there, but his brother was. He commented on how bad I

looked. I thanked him for his input and handed over the suit.

My second stop was the Country Cauldron Truck Stop at the edge of town. I paid a

few dollars for a quick shower and ordered the dragon slayer breakfast special.

The waitress brought forth a plate of runny eggs, three strips of burnt bacon,

and a week-old muffin. Slaying dragons didn't get what it used to.

While I ate, I pulled my notepad and read what I'd scribbled down. H-O-L. The letters were too vague to be of much use, even for a smart guy like me. The stink of garbage wasn't too helpful either. New Arcadia was crammed with garbage. It was everything, and while some places smelled worse than others, there were too many to be narrowed to anything specific. The giant birds held some promise. There was a touring roc exhibit at the zoo. I finished off the last piece of burnt bacon and went on my way. The Wreck's engine wheezed desperately then started with a bang.

I was about to drop a few dimes into the parking meter outside the zoo when the

roar of an airplane grabbed my attention. I discarded the rocs as a clue and headed for the airport.

I drove my care through the back streets around the airport. I wasn't sure if I

would find what I was looking for, but I was willing to bet I would. Unless Morgana had been wrong, which was always a possibility. Still, as psychics went,

she had one of the better reputations. It was a bad neighborhood, home to the dregs of the city. even the little old ladies carried large caliber handguns. When I finally got tired of looking, I pulled the car over and waited to be noticed.

"Hey, shugah," a petite goblin in a short skirt and too much makeup greeted, "wanna date?"

I lit a cigarette. "No thanks." I pulled out two twenties. "I'm looking for some letters."

She pulled herself halfway into the car. "Sorry, shugah. Try the post office."

She smiled through bright red, five cents a stick, lipstick.

"Thanks for the advice." I stuffed the bills into my wallet.

Her ears sprang up like antennae. "Wait. What letter you looking for?"

"Three letters actually: H-O-L."

"Sure, shugah. I know that place. Just down the street, take a left at

Lilly's

House of Massage, can't miss it."

"Thanks."

"No problem." She stuffed the money into her leather purse. "For only sixty more, shugah, we could have a real god time."

"Maybe some other time."

She winked and went about her business.

I followed the directions and before long, I came upon my goal. I parked in a spot where the parking meter had been ripped from the concrete. Across the street, a glowing red sign blinked off and on. It was supposed to spell "HOTEL"

but the T and E had burnt out, and only three letters flashed: H-O-L. An airplane passed overhead, it's engines roaring. Just to be sure, I checked the

alley behind the hotel. The dumpster looked as if it hadn't been emptied in months. The odor was horrible. For once I was glad years of smoking had ruined

my sense of smell.

All the clues were here.

The hotel lobby smelled almost as bad as the alley. Bums lay against the walls,

sleeping off their cheap liquor. Hookers pranced around, showing their wares. Half of the tile floor was missing. The other half was chipped and decaying. Most of the furniture stuffing lay on the floor. I hadn't seen many dives worse than this.

A lamp jumped across the room all by itself and slammed into a wall. A table followed the lamp's example and flipped over without the slightest physical assistance. I didn't let the dancing furniture distract me.

The front desk was shielded by a chain link cage. There was a decaying wooden door in the back of the cage and a small hole cut in the front so people could

exchange money with the clerk, who wasn't there just right now. I pushed the buzzer. It didn't work very well, producing a soft grinding noise that no one seemed to notice. I pushed it once again before deciding to be patient.

Something invisible tugged on my coat. I ignored it. The invisible something knocked my cigarette to the floor. I snuffed it out with my toe. The entity got

bored and went off in search of someone more interesting.

Five minutes later, my patience broke. I held the buzzer down until the door opened and a clerk appeared. She was a heavysset woman, with stringy, blonde hair

and too much rouge. She wore a smudged circus tent and a scowl that came from years of practice.

"Something I can do for you?" she growled more than asked.

A pen behind the cage jumped up and smacked her in the face.

She snatched it up and snapped it in two. "Damned poltergeists. Try to run a respectable business, and the damned things just won't leave you alone."

"I know what you mean," I sympathized, trying to draw her attention away from the pen. "I've got a banshee at home."

The clerk glared at me as if I'd committed a mortal sin. "What the hell does a

banshee do? Hiss and scream. That's all. 'Geists are a pain in the ass.

Always

throwing things and breaking furniture."

An entire couch jumped into the air on cue, hung there a few moments, then slammed into the ceiling. It fell to the floor in several places.

"That's poltergeists," she observed, almost proud to have a bigger problem than

me. "And not just one either. It takes at least four to move something that

big." She folded her meaty arms across her chest.
"That definitely is a problem."
She seemed pleased by my admission. Her scowl softened into an unfriendly frown.
"Rooms are fifteen a night. Our boiler's busted, so we ain't got no not water,
but the furnace still kinda works. You alone?"
"I am, but I'm not looking for a room."
The clerk moved in a blur. She produced a shotgun from under the desk and leveled the barrel at the bridge of my nose. "Nobody robs Big Annie. Put your hands up."
"I'm not here to rob you."
"You wanna tell me you're carrying that piece?" Big Annie asked through clenched teeth.
"I'm a private detective."
She lowered her gun. "Is that so?"
"Do you want to see my I.D.?"
She shoved the shotgun back under the desk. "Nope. Who else but a private dick would dress like that? Nice coat, but there's the fedora?"
"It's in the shop."
A few floor tiles hovered in the air, spinning slowly.
"I'm looking for someone. Goes by the name of Johnny Derrick."
"Ain't never heard of him."
I smiled thinly. "I doubt he's registered under that name."
"Ain't got no register. Ain't got no Derrick either."
"He's a tall guy. Wears a phony beard and steel-tipped boots."
"Does he wear an overcoat?"
"That's him."
"Ain't never seen him." Big Annie smiled wryly.
There was a loud squeak as a brass coat rack twisted into a U shape.
I reached into my wallet and removed some memory restorers. Fifty dollars later,
Big Annie was more cooperative.
"I've seen him. Worse looking disguise I ever seen. He's in room ten. That's the deluxe suite. He ain't in right now. Left a couple of hours ago."
"Have any idea when he'll be back?"
"How in the name of Asgard should I know? I ain't his secretary."
"What would it take to let me look around his room?" I outright asked. Some situations called for subtlety. This was not one of them.
"Sixty bucks, and if anyone catches you..."
"I know. I know."
Most the rooms had long ago lost their numbers, I could count. I didn't even have to pick the lock. Big Annie was nice enough to lend me a key.
The deluxe suite wasn't much better than a roomy cardboard box. An old brass bed sat in the corner. Dresser drawers sat in another. When I flicked on the lights,
roaches scattered to the seven winds. The window of suite ten was right next to the hotel sign. The H-O-L blinked hypnotically. I could hear the pop of bugs getting fried as they flew into the neon.
A quick search of the room found nothing I hadn't expected to find. There was an unpacked suitcase under the bed. Inside the case were some dirty clothes and a spare beard. There were a few matchbooks and two packs of cigarettes on the dresser. And the tiny bathroom had a tube of toothpaste. I checked my teeth

in
the dirt encrusted mirror. They were still disgusting. I pocketed the
toothpaste
and toothbrush. I would never get around to buying them anyway. Other than
these
ordinary odds and ends, there was nothing out of the ordinary in the room.
I lit a cigarette, watched the sign blink outside the window, and made myself
comfortable.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was getting late when the door to suite ten finally opened. Johnny Derrick quickly closed it behind him and flicked on the lights. He pulled off his beard.
It must have itched like crazy because he began to claw at his face like a man possessed. He was studying his raw, red jaw when he noticed my reflection in the mirror.
"Hello, Johnny." I'd positioned myself between Derrick and the door. "We need

to

talk."

Derrick's hand strayed to the back of his belt.

I waved my own piece, already in hand. "Don't try it. You aren't fast enough."

His hand agreed with me. It moved away from the belt.

"Slowly, with two fingers, take your gun and drop it over here."

Derrick followed the orders to the letter, tossing the weapon at my feet. I kicked it under the bed, where it wouldn't be easy to get to.

"How did you find me?"

"That's what I do," I replied, taking the credit for Morgana's vision. I pointed

to the bed. "Sit."

Derrick sat. I leaned against the dresser, gun still ready to put a hole through

him and his steel-tipped death boots. My aching side kept me from getting too relaxed.

"Now, Johnny. You and I are going to have ourselves a conversation."

"Stuff it. I'm not telling you anything. He'll kill me if I do."

"Who'll kill you?"

Derrick lit a butt. "Sorry. I can't tell you."

"Fine. I've got fifteen bullets in this pistol. Assuming I'm careful, I can shoot every one into you without killing you. But if you're lucky, I'll only get

to five or six before I get sloppy."

"You won't shoot. You're not the type."

"I've got a couple of aching ribs that say I am."

"Your gun doesn't have a silencer."

"In this neighborhood, who cares. It could be twenty minutes before anyone bothers to call the cops. It'll take another ten for them to show up.

Probably

longer." I aimed at Derrick's leg. "I usually like to start with the kneecaps."

There was a long moment of unbroken silence as Johnny sized me up. His eyes fell

upon the pistol pointed to put a bullet in his left knee. They followed up the

arm and ended on my face. I grinned ever so slightly and narrowed my eyes.

The

red light from the H-O-L sign added a sinister glow to my face, and goblins have

fiendish qualities to begin with. I wouldn't have done it, though I was tempted

just a little, but Johnny didn't know me well enough to know that. I could tell

from the look in his eyes he was ready to talk.

"Here's how it's going to work," I explained. "I tell you what I think I know,

and you tell me if I'm right. Understand?"

I continued without waiting for a reply.

"Someone approached you a few weeks ago, Johnny, and asked you to steal the Amulet of Tepes from the city museum. He or she probably offered a lot of money.

But you turned him down. Maybe because you didn't like the risks. Then you started thinking about all that money and got greedy. You decided to steal the

amulet yourself, then sell it to the buyer for more money than he originally offered. Am I right?"

Derrick nodded silently.

"I'm impressed, Johnny. I didn't think a two-bit second story man like

yourself

could actually penetrate museum security."

"It wasn't easy."

"I'm sure it wasn't. The night of the theft, you stopped by Eva Mists's home to

celebrate your new soon-to-be fortune. After which, you told her that if anything happened to your, she should contact the police and give them information as to the whereabouts of a certain amulet."

Derrick nodded again.

"Then Samson Ace, who was hired by the museum to find the amulet, tracked you down. Only instead of turning you in, he got greedy too. You agreed to split the

money with him, once it came. But Ace didn't trust you, so you each took half of

the amulet and hit it from the other to insure against a double-cross. How's that so far?"

Derrick simply nodded once again.

"Then things started going wrong. Whoever wants the amulet doesn't like being jerked around. So he's been killing anyone who knows too much. First, there was

you. Then Mists. Then Ace. The only problem, Johnny, is you're still alive, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

"You're right," he agreed, "but I won't be alive much longer. He's going to kill

me now that I'm no more use."

"Who?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. His cigarette was burnt down to a nub. "I don't know his name. He never told me. The guy approached me and offered me a million to steal the amulet. Said he'd even help me do it. But, like you said, I

got greedy. I stole the amulet myself and told him if he wanted it, he'd have to

pay me six mil. It was a big mistake. He doesn't like being played with."

"So why are you still breathing? And who is the stiff taking your place in the

freezer?"

"I don't know. One second, I was unlocking the door to my apartment, about to score, when someone cold cocked me from behind. When I woke up, I was here with

the buyer. He just stood there, right where you're standing, staring at me with

those weird eyes of his. Then he told me he'd kill me if I didn't give him the

amulet. I gave him my piece, but I couldn't get Ace's. He didn't like that. He

said he would take care of Ace personally."

"He did," I confirmed. "What were you doing following me? Did this guy tell you to?"

"No, he told me to follow Ace. That's what I was doing, when I heard all the gunshots. Then you came out and a voice in my head told me to follow you. So I

did."

"Any voices in there now?"

"No."

"Good. Then you'll be able to hear what I'm going to say clearly. I've got the

amulet."

"You? You killed Ace?"

"No, he killed Ace." I put away my pistol. "And tell him if he tries anything

like that, he'll never find the amulet. If he wants it, my name's Joe Bogey.
I'm
in the book."
"You don't know what you're dealing with."
"That's my problem, Johnny. Just deliver the message."
Derrick sighed. "You're a dead man."
"Sooner or later, aren't we all?" I replied as I left, closing the door
behind
me.

Giving Johnny my name meant now the Buyer would know how I was. Logically, I
was
safe from the dark powers as long as only I knew where the amulet was hidden,
but
that sort of logic hadn't saved Samson Ace.
Dealing with magicians was a risky affair at best. Ace, Janet Blane, and
Reggie
all illustrated that point perfectly. Practitioners of the arcane had a
tendency
to do irrational, illogical things. You had to be at least a little crazy to
fool with powers best left alone.
But I didn't have much choice. Johnny didn't know how he worked for. I
believe
that. So my only other option was to use him as a messenger service and hope
for
the best.
I'm much too cynical to ever hope for the best.
I remembered the two mummies in Johnny's bedroom and the terrified look in
Janet
Blane's eyes as she was blown to pieces. I remembered the way Samson Ace
looked,
his neck completely twisted around. Then I shuddered and tried to forget.
I tried.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I spent the next few hours waiting for the Buyer to make contact. I hoped it
would be by phone, but a talking raven wouldn't have surprised me. I kept an
eye
on the office window, watching the birds fly by, waiting for one to stop on
the
sill and start a conversation. I also kept a look out for any phantom
lightning
bolts.
The phone rang.
"Yeah?" I answered.

"Hello, Mister Bogey, or should I call you Joe?"
I didn't recognize the voice, but I didn't have to be told who it was. The voice was cold as ice. It was the voice that should have belonged to the Prince of Darkness himself. I'd expected no less.
"Mister Bogey will do just fine."
"Very well." There was pause as the Buyer formed his next sentence carefully in his head. "I believe you possess an item of mine. I assume it is up for purchase."
"That's right."
"How much?" he asked quietly. His tone was razor sharp in its unpleasantness. "I don't like discussing business over the phone. There's too many risks."
"Agreed."
"Tomorrow. Noon. Elysium Park. There's a bench on the corner of Argo and Main. Be there. No lackeys."
The line went dead. I replaced the receiver and choked down a few pain pills. The phone sizzled and popped, melting into a twisted plastic sculpture. Magic. Gods, I hated it.

The bouncer at the Toothless Hydra wasn't happy to see me again. He never was. But he let me in because he didn't have much choice. Inside, I stopped moving long enough to light up, but I needn't have bothered. The Hydra was already filled with a monstrous cloud of thick, gray smoke. The Swamp Hags were playing tonight. Despite the name, the Hags were all lookers in black leather miniskirts and fishnet stockings. They were playing one of their more mellow acid rock tunes. I believe it was called "Stab 'em till they die." That was the only lyric anyway. It seemed a little highbrow for the crowd.

I made my way through the throng and to the bar. Gina wasn't there tonight. It was her night off. In her place, there was a bruiser with an arms bigger than me. He had a shiny bald head, and an overgrown mustache. His hands were busy cleaning out beer mugs.
"Hey, Tad," I greeted.
Tad scowled. He always scowled. It was the one-tenth cyclops's blood in his veins. I didn't take it personally.
"Bogey," he replied, looking up from his work with his single red eye.
"Reggie's in back."
"I'm not looking for Reggie."
Tad set down his current mug and went to work on another. "That so?"
He wasn't stupid. He just didn't talk much.
"Have you seen Louie?"
"He hasn't been in tonight. Should be coming in sometime though. Usually does."
"Thanks."
I had time to wait. I ordered a beer and enjoyed the screeching wails the Hags called music. They were hot tonight, playing with inspired demented fever. They played "Smooth and wet", then "Disco massacre", then "Bullwhip and leather blues". The audience thrashed along.
Louie appeared within an hour. He smiled one of his friendlier toothless smiles.

"Hey, Bogey. Buy me a beer?"

"I'll do better than that, Louie. I've got a job for you. If you're interested."

Louie sat down, folding his arms across the bar. "Who do you want broken?" We discussed business while the Hags played a "Disco massacre" encore.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I stayed the night at the Hydra. The more people around the better, I figured.

Reggie let me use one of the cots in the back room. It wasn't much, but it was

better than the Wreck's backseat.

Night faded, and dawn rolled around. It was a cold morning. Clouds covered the

sun, and it smelled like rain. Since the weather was beyond my control, I chose

not to worry about it.

I had a few hours to kill before the meeting, so I dropped by Jack's Twenty-four

Hour Dry Cleaners and picked up my spare suit. Jack was there this morning to tell me how bad I looked. The suit came wrapped in plastic and looked as clean

and new as the day I'd bought it. Cleaner actually. I changed in the car and stopped off for breakfast. I purchased a hot dog and cup of coffee from one of

New Arcadia's many fine convenience stores. The place earned three stars. The service could have been better, but the food was about as good as you can get from a ten year old microwave.

The weather got worse the closer noon got. Biting cold winds and howling gusts

swept through the city. It didn't stop me from keeping my appointment, but it did keep a lot of people from going to the park. I wondered if the Buyer had somehow influenced the weather, but I quickly discarded that notion. I had enough problems without reading dark sorceries into everything that happened. I was waiting on the bench when twelve rolled around. A man walked up and sat beside me. I decided to let him make the first move.

"Mister Bogey, I presume."

I nodded.

He grinned thinly. "Nice weather for a picnic."

I examined him through the corner of my eye, not daring to look directly at him.

The guy was a practitioner, and that made me understandably nervous. He was human, white, medium build, medium height, expensive suit and coat. His hair was

long, but styled and combed with care. Sunglasses hid his eyes. The weather didn't seem to bother him at all, although his nose and ears were a little pinker than the rest of him.

We sat in silence.

"Well, you wanted his meeting," he finally spoke up.

Louie was running late. And he was supposed to be a professional too. I had to stall.

"I want three million."

"Three," he repeated softly.

"That's right. Three. That's three less than what Derrick wanted. I'm not a greedy man. I just want what's coming to me."

The Buyer's smile faded. "You'll get that, Mister Bogey. You'll certainly get that."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"How do I know you have what I want?" he asked.

"You'll have to trust me."

"An interesting suggestion."

"Not really. We aren't going to get anywhere if we don't trust each other a little. You'll trust me to hand over the amulet when I get the money. I'll trust

you not to anything stupid."

"Infallible logic."

"How soon can you get the money?" I resisted the urge to look around for that van Louie guaranteed would be here by now.

"I can have it all by tonight."

"Good. The sooner we get this done with, the better." I pulled out a business card and scribbled a made up number on the back. "Call this number at ten tonight. I'll give you more instructions then."

The Buyer took the number. "You hold your cards very close to your chest."

"Let's just my head facing the way it is."

"Perfectly understandable. But you need not worry. Derrick and the others had to

be made examples of."

"And me?"

"Well, let's hope you're smarter than they were." He got up to leave but didn't make it far.

The black van finally roared out of nowhere two minutes later than it should have. It came to a screeching halt next to the curb. Two big guys jumped out and

snatched up the Buyer, forcing him into the van, which sped away. The entire process took less than ten seconds. Less time than I would have thought.

Louie

was a professional after all.

I glanced around without getting up. The weather had kept potential witnesses

away. There was a mother too busy scolding her daughter to notice, and a wino passed out from too much cheap wine. I would have smiled, but that would have implied I liked what I had just done. I didn't.

As I headed back to my car, heavy rain splattered the sidewalk. I buttoned up my

coat and tried not to think about it.

The van was waiting in the alley where it was supposed to be. I parked the Wreck

beside it and knocked. The side opened cautiously at first. I stepped inside and

out of the rain.

It was dark inside. Louie nodded to me. He wore a ski mask, but I could tell it

was him. There were two other ski masks in the van as well, one in the front, one in the back. The one in back with us was all muscle, though not as much muscle as Louie. The one in front was smaller, but he was big enough. Neither one paid my much attention. In the back of the van, blindfolded and hog-tied, lay the Buyer.

I was liking this less and less. I hadn't like it much when I'd thought of it in

the first place.

Louie handed me a wallet. There was cash, lots of cash, and an out-of-state driver's license inside. According to the license, the Buyer's name was Robert

Mitchell, and he was thirty-four years old. It was probably a fake.

"Ungag him."

Louie's partner pulled out the white handkerchief stuffed in his mouth.

"Ah, Mister Bogey," Mitchell said with unnerving calm, "all this talk of trust,

and suddenly, I find myself a prisoner."

"I lied, but go ahead and tell me you weren't planning on killing me once you got the amulet."

"What I would do is irrelevant now. I must say, I didn't think you were the type

to call upon brute tactics."

"I'm not. Normally. But there are always exceptions."

"I suppose."

"Where's the other amulet half?"

"Amulet? What amulet?" A smile spread across his face. I didn't like it one bit.

I didn't know much about magic. Mitchell might be forming some sort of horrible

hex at the very moment.

"Gag him."

I could only hope being tied, blinded, and gagged would be enough to keep him from summoning up the powers of Hell. I decided not to take any chances.

"Plug his ears."

Louie didn't question. He tore a rag in half and jammed the halves into Mitchell's ears. I still didn't feel safe, but what else could I do to incapacitate him other than pump a few silver bullets into his corpse.

"Do you want us to lean on him?" Louie asked.

I considered the question. I didn't like the idea, but I'd already gone this far. I hadn't expected Mitchell to talk. So why had I hired Louie and his friends in the first place? I knew why. The question was, was willing to do it?

How far was too far? I took the final step.

I nodded because I couldn't speak.

Louie and his large friend began to knock Mitchell around. I made myself watch

every single punch while reminding myself that Mitchell was responsible for four deaths that I knew of. Probably a lot more that I didn't know anything about. It helped a little. But just a little.

"That's enough," I said.

Louie pulled back his last punch.

"Ungag him." I felt sick, and I couldn't blame it on my ribs or head this time.

Mitchell smiled. Blood tricked from the corner of his mouth. I wondered what it would take to wipe the smile from his face. I wondered if I was willing to go that far.

"Where is it?"

He just kept smiling.

The ski mask in the front pulled out a long, thin knife. "I can get him to talk."

"No," I growled. "None of that."

"You're the boss, but I can tell this guy ain't going to break easy."

He was right. Mitchell wasn't going to tell me anything. This had been a stupid move. Now there was no turning place and no place to go.

Mitchell coughed painfully. "Let me ask you something, Mister Bogey. Did you really think I would walk into the open without taking precautions?"

It was right then that I realized how badly I'd screwed up.

Something hit the roof hard. It wasn't rain.

"What the hell?" Louie said.

I pulled my gun. Things were about to go bad.

Mitchell started laughing.

The thing on the roof moved around. No one said a word as it paced back and forth. The ceiling pressed in with each footstep.

Thunder cracked as the front windshield shattered and a long, black something reached out and grabbed the ski mask in front. Before any of us could even think about doing something, it wrenched him through the broken glass and out of sight. He started screaming and pleading. But I couldn't hear that. All I could hear was Mitchell laughing. There was the horrible sounds of ripping and tearing and a loud crack. The ski mask fell onto the hood, gurgling, blood pouring out of his missing throat.

"Mack!" the big mask screamed.

"Shut up!" Louie shouted. "He's still out there."

The big ski mask whimpered like a baby.

I strained my giant goblin ears, listening for the creature. All I could hear was rain and laughter.

"Shut up!" I yelled. "Stop laughing!"

I whirled around, and I swear to the hallowed steps of Valhalla, I was going to pistol whip the son of a bitch until his head caved in if I had to. Anything to make him shut up.

I turned just in time to see a ghostly tendril snaking towards the ski mask. It was too late to warn him.

It jumped from the shadows and wrapped around him in the shape of a huge, jet black snake. He screamed. Louie reached to help him and got a flailing elbow in the face for his trouble. He went down like a ton of bricks.

"Get it off! Get it off!" He twisted around in a panic. I caught a glimpse of a the snake's head. It looked like the horseheaded thing that had killed Samson Ace. I wasn't thinking clearly, but I knew enough not to try shooting while in the van. Ricochets would just add to a bad situation. The thing hissed. The ski mask raised an arm to defend himself. The monster buried its teeth into his forearm. He yelped and jerked open the van door. He jumped out, screaming and thrashing. He only made it six steps before staggering and falling, his body twitching. The snake rose like smoke in the air and reformed over the corpse in the three-armed form I'd seen before. Our eyes met. I fired my gun. The silver bullets ripped through the thing's body. It swayed a bit, but not much. Survival instincts took over. My only choice, slight as it was, was to kill Mitchell. Maybe his death would destroy the creature. The thing was on me before I could pull the trigger. It pinned me against the van's interior, smiling with its razor sharp teeth. My heart pounded out of control in my chest. "Careful now," Mitchell said. "We don't want any unfortunate mistakes like last time." The creature hissed as it slammed me against the wall. My vision blurred. Three times more, and I was out like a light.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Drip. Drip. Drip.
That's all I heard during those first few moments that came between darkness and consciousness. I groaned softly as I raised my head.
Drip. Drip. Drip.
I was somewhere dark. Dark enough even I had trouble seeing things. I was sitting, and there was no way I was going to stand up. My hands were tied

behind
the back of a chair, and my ankles were bound to the chair's legs. Rope had
been
wrapped rough and tight around my midsection, keeping me firmly pinned. It was
a
thorough job. My skull throbbed. My ribs hurt. And to top it off, my legs
were
asleep below the knees.

All in all, this had not been one of my better weeks.
I couldn't see much, but I could hear plenty. Radar dish ears had their
advantages. Rain drizzled faintly. It sounded metallic, maybe a gutter
collecting water. A little louder than the rain, there was soft, classical
music. Thunder roared from somewhere.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I wiggled my chair a little. It wasn't easy. My feet didn't even touch the
ground. The scraping noise produced made me think of concrete. Wherever the
water was leaking from, it was nearby, but I was still nice and dry.

My gun and wallet were missing. No surprise there.

A blinding light from above cut through the darkness. I could make out two
vague

figures, a tall one and a short one. The music grew much louder.

A cold, familiar voice pierced the darkness and sent a chill through the
room.

"Ah Mister Bogey, it's so good to see you awake and relatively unharmed."

He flicked a switch, and the room became a little brighter, but not much.

There

was only a single lamp hanging from the ceiling, and it was using low watt
bulbs.

"For a moment, I was worried Leon might have done more damage than necessary.

He

does have trouble understanding the fragility of flesh-and-blood beings."

The black, horse headed thing hissed in my direction.

"Now, now, Leon. You must remember your manners." Mitchell sounded like a
father

scolding a child.

They descended the short flight of stairs. Mitchell looked exactly how he had
the first time I saw him, except now he was wearing a robe instead of suit.

He

still had his sunglasses on. There wasn't a mark on him. It was as if all the
damage Louie and his pals had done had never happened.

I really hated magic.

Leon looked just like I remembered him, only about ten times uglier. He
shambled

down the stairs behind his master, never once taking his eyes off me.

"I suppose, being a private investigator, you already know why you aren't
dead."

"You want my half of the amulet, and I'm the only one who knows where it is."

Fortunately for me, I'd been smart enough to hide the locker key before
meeting

Mitchell. It was the only thing keeping me alive.

Mitchell nodded. "Why don't you save me a lot of time and trouble and just
tell

me what I want to know?"

"And you'll let me go unharmed, right?" I asked skeptically.

"Don't be ridiculous. But I can guarantee a quick and relatively painless
death.

Or if you insist on being stubborn, I could let Leon amuse himself for a few
hours. I shall carefully supervise him to insure he exercises restraint. He
might kill you eventually, but I can promise it will not be pleasant."

A growl rolled out of Leon's throat. He stepped forward. Mitchell held up his hand. "Not yet, Leon." The monster backed away, looking much too disappointed. "If you kill me, you'll never get the amulet." Mitchell chuckled. "Oh I'll get it. Eventually, one way or another, I'll get it. Perhaps someone you know will be able to help me." I was hoping he didn't mean what I knew he meant. Too many people had died already, and the thought of more dying made my stomach twist into knots. "They don't know anything about this, you bastard." "Oh I believe you, Mister Bogey. But I'll have to question them myself. Just to be sure." "You bastard!" "Yes, I believe you've already covered that." He pulled his sunglasses down to the end of his nose and for the first time I got a clear look in his eyes. They were light blue in color, but they held something more. An evil that couldn't be quantified, a darkness that shone from his blackened heart. A piece of my soul was lost just looking onto those eyes, but I didn't turn away. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "Do we understand each other?" he asked. I understood very well. "I'll give you the amulet. On one condition." "I don't think you're in much of a position to bargain." "I think I am. Kill me, and you'll never get it. No matter who else you torture." "Very well," he sighed. "What is your condition?" "You have to untie me, and I'll take you to the amulet myself." "And I suppose you would have me believe you won't try to escape?" "It's up to you. You either trust me, or you don't get the amulet." I sounded more confident than I was. Mitchell ascended the stairs. "I don't trust you, Mister Bogey. I've seen your kind before. Survivors of the worst kind, always managing to come out of any situation in one piece, more or less. However, I'll play your game with a few rules of my own." He laughed, and it echoed through the room like a voice from the pit of Hades. "Watch him, Leon." He turned off the lights and closed the door. Leon was invisible in the darkness. He didn't even breathe, so for all I knew, he was hovering right over my shoulder. But I wasn't scared for myself. I was scared for my friends, and Mitchell damn well knew it. Drip. Drip. Drip. *** The rain had stopped by the time Mitchell returned. It seemed like forever. He was dressed in a suit again, wearing the same sunglasses that hid the corruption in his soul. When the lights came on, Leon was nowhere to be seen. Mitchell gestured, and the ropes fell to the floor. More magic. "Are you ready to leave, Mister Bogey?" I massaged my raw wrists. "I'm ready." "Good." He straightened his already perfectly straight tie. "Before we begin, I

feel you should know something. I've dispatched Leon to the side of one of your associates. Should you try anything stupid, and I know you are already scheming to do so, Leon will kill that person. I've given him permission to play with his prey. Do we understand each other?"

"Perfectly," I replied through clenched teeth.

"Excellent."

The Wreck was waiting for us outside. Mitchell handed me the keys and informed

me I was driving. The engine wheezed and choked before finally turning over. The night sky was clear once again. As clear as it ever was in New Arcadia's smog infested sky. It was early evening already. Where had the time gone? I drove in silence for a few miles.

"Why?" I asked. "Why all the trouble for one amulet?"

Mitchell laughed. "I suppose curiosity is a hazard of your profession."

I was really beginning to hate his laugh. "You can't sell it. It's too hot."

He laughed again. "You're quite incorrect there. There's a man willing to pay exorbitant amounts of cash simply to add it to his collection."

"So it's money."

"No, it's not just money. It's lots of money. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"Almost. Why hire Johnny Derrick to steal it for you? Why didn't you just take

it yourself?"

"With magic, You mean? Your perception of the arcane is most amusing. Despite what you might think, magic is not an easy way to do things. It's quite the opposite in fact. Magic, while effective, is best used sparingly."

"And what about Leon? I wouldn't imagine he'd have too much trouble penetrating

museum security."

"He wouldn't. But Leon, for all his help to me, does have certain limitations. A

lack of self control for one."

That wasn't something I wanted to hear. Especially with Leon stalking one of my friends.

"He wasn't supposed to kill Ace."

"Quite correct. I wanted Mister Ace brought to me alive. Unfortunately, Leon does not always follow orders to the letter. I imagine he was quite upset about

being shot and lost his cool, such as it is. He doesn't understand the frailty

of mortal live very well and was actually quite embarrassed by the mistake. But

these things happen."

Something about Mitchell's story didn't wash. I didn't know much about magic, and I certainly didn't understand the shadow creature. But he still should have

been able to steal the amulet without any problems. The worst that might happen

would be the death of a few security guards. From what I'd seen, killing people

didn't bother Mitchell.

"And what about Derrick?"

"I don't think that need concern you. Mister Derrick has outlived his usefulness. I think I'll give him to Leon."

I got the distinct impression Mitchell looked at Leon like a son. A son with

three arms, a horse's head, and a mouth full of sharp teeth, but a son nonetheless.

When we got to Speedy Pets's, I reached way in the back of the glove compartment

and pulled out the hidden locker key.

"A bus station locker," Mitchell observed. "How very traditional. In case you're

getting any ideas, Mister Bogey, I should remind you..."

"I know."

There were a lot of people in the station, but I didn't want to try anything yet. First, I wanted to get the amulet half. I opened the locker and found a plain brown bag inside. And something else. I took the bag and the other thing

Samson Ace must have left there just in case.

Mitchell held out his hand. "I'll take that, Mister Bogey."

I flashed the gun Ace had stashed in the locker. It was a small caliber pistol,

but I wasn't feeling picky. I held it close to my body, so that only Mitchell would see. No reason to cause a panic.

"Don't be stupid, Bogey."

"If I give this to you, then I'm stupid. Now get moving."

Mitchell smiled vaguely. "This is a big mistake."

"Shut up. Just shut up. We're going for a ride. And if anything happens to anyone I care about, you'll wish I killed you right here, you son of a bitch."

"Listen to reason."

"Listen to this, Mitchell. Six people are dead, and I'm tempted to make it seven. So call off Leon, or I'll pop you right here."

"I can't call him off."

"Bull! I figure you've got some sort of telepathic link. So you tell him to back

off, and you do it now."

"It only works when we're close. You must believe me."

"I don't have much choice, do I?" I stuck the gun in my coat pocket and jerked

my head towards the door. "Get moving."

"I was hoping you'd be smarter than this."

"Shut up." I dropped the bag into my other pocket.

I kept a close eye on Mitchell as we walked. As far as I could tell, he could only perform small magic tricks on the spur of the moment. Or that's what I was

hoping. I tossed him the keys and told him to start the car.

"You don't want to do this."

"Drive."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll find out. Drive."

The Wreck chugged and coughed, and we were on our way. I gave directions, and Mitchell followed them because I had the gun. And we both knew I was more than

willing to use it.

"You know I can't allow this, Bogey."

"You don't have much choice," I disagreed.

"You intend to hand me over to the authorities, don't you?"

"Just shut up and drive."

"You're wasting your time. The police can't touch me. They have no way of connecting me with any of the murders. Magic doesn't leave evidence. The worst

that will happen to me is a few hours of questioning. A minor inconvenience." He was right. Magic was a rare and obscure art. The cops wouldn't have enough to

build a case, and he'd walk. he'd walk right out of the station, and I'd end up taking the heat.

"Reconsider, Mister Bogey. If you put the gun away now, I'll forget this ever happened."

"Take a left here."

He didn't turn. "I'm afraid you've forced my hand."

Something growled from the back seat. I glanced in the rear view mirror and saw a pair of beady yellow eyes staring back at me. In the briefest of instants, I wondered if the creature had been in the back seat all along, or if Mitchell had called him after I'd found the gun. It really didn't matter. Either way, Leon was there now, and I was dead.

I jerked the door open and, ignoring every bit of common sense I had, jumped out of the moving automobile. The Wreck must've been doing at least thirty. I hit the pavement hard and tried to roll with the momentum. With all the grace of a runaway barrel, I bounced several feet before crashing into a trio of garbage cans. And they always made it look so easy in the movies.

Disoriented, I jumped to my feet even as I heard the screech of slamming brakes.

A couple of cars sounded their horns as the Wreck cut in front of them and turned around. he tires squealed as my once loyal car now came bearing down on me in the middle of a crowded street with plenty of witnesses. Not that the driver seemed to care.

My first thought was to find my gun.

My second thought was to get the hell out of the way. Raw instinct took over and tried to get me to dive out of the way. Raw instinct wasn't enough.

I bounced off the grill and was sucked under the car. The right front tire rolled over my chest. And then, Mitchell was gone, speeding away in my Wreck. I lay there in the street a while, a circle of witnesses crowded around.

"Oh my! Are you okay, Mister?"

I suddenly realized I was feeling a lot better than I should have been. Experimentally, I sat up. Nothing felt broken except my ribs, and they'd been aching before I'd been run down.

"Mister?"

"Somebody should call an ambulance."

I stood and didn't feel the slightest twinge of pain. I wasn't expecting the worst, but I was expecting something. But there was nothing. No pain at all.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. I'm fine."

The weird thing was, I was.

"Are you sure? That guy hit you dead center. Are you sure nothing's broken?"

I was as surprised as anyone around me. The garbage cans were all dented and mangled, but I wasn't. That didn't make much sense. I remembered how it felt when I'd jumped from the car. I hadn't felt as much pain as I would have expected. And what little I had felt was a disembodied sort. Almost like feeling it happen to another person. It was the same with the collision. Almost as if none of it had happened. If I hadn't been surrounded by a dozen concerned people, I'd almost believe it hadn't.

"We should call the cops."

"No. I'm fine. Really. No harm done." It must have sounded funny from a guy with tire treads across his tie.

"Are you sure?"
"I'm fine."
That was the truth.
"He never touched me."
That wasn't.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Eventually I did convince everyone they hadn't seen what they had. It was easier than one might expect since no one could believe I'd been run over and left unhurt. I took a walk and tried to understand what had happened. I'd been run over. I'd seen the headlights bearing down on me. I'd felt the grill ram me, and the tire roll over me. But I was okay. At the same time, I still had my bruised ribs. It was a mystery, but then again, I was supposed to be a detective. The answer hit me like a well-thrown rock. I opened the plain brown bag in my pocket. There was a small half-circle of shiny blue jewelry inside. One half of the Amulet of Tepes. The thing that must have saved my life. It made sense. When I'd gotten my bruised ribs and a cracked skull, I hadn't had the amulet. When I'd been run over, I had. Somehow the amulet had protected me. Maybe this magic stuff wasn't so bad after all. It did explain a lot. Why someone would go to the trouble of stealing a priceless artifact that they could never sell. You wouldn't want to sell it. Not if you knew its true power. And this was only half of it. Maybe the other half

granted some other power. Maybe the two combined formed an even more powerful magical charm. That was a lot of maybes.

I slipped the amulet into my pants pocket, where it would be safe, and where it

would guarantee my safety. I was invulnerable, and that made me feel better about things. Not that I planned on taking unnecessary chances. For all I knew

the amulet's power only worked once per customer. I could be on my own again the

next time someone tried to kill me. Something that seemed to be happening an awful lot lately.

A taxi ride took me back to my office. I was feeling pretty good considering I'd

been run over only thirty minutes earlier. The way I saw things, I had half of

the amulet, better than none, and I was protected. Hopefully. I'd lost Mitchell

and my car, but I'd gained something too. Something more valuable.

Mitchell was probably busy trying to make a plan to take the amulet away from someone he couldn't hurt. He might even solve that little problem. I was too pleased with myself to worry about that. Mitchell wouldn't return to his house,

which was no doubt rented under an alias and paid with untraceable cash. I'd check it out tomorrow and see what I could find. I didn't have the drive tonight. Being run over can take a lot out of a guy.

Dirk wasn't in his office. Unusual considering it was twenty minutes before he

normally left. I didn't give it much thought.

As soon as I walked into my office, I knew something was wrong. The banshee didn't utter a peep. Not a single, solitary screech. It always greeted me with a

moan when I arrived, and always said good-bye with a shriek when I left. Not this time.

"Honey?" I asked the air.

The banshee whined softly from the far corner. It was really quite pathetic.

"What's wrong?"

The banshee moaned meekly.

There was nothing unusual in the room. Not even a suspicious shadow. I moved towards where I heard the banshee last.

"I've been having one of those days too."

The banshee didn't reply. It always moaned back when I talked to it.

A hiss escaped from the other side of the office.

An idea struck me. I got up and started walking towards the hiss. It stopped immediately.

"Yoo hoo."

The banshee gurgled from the ceiling as far from me as it could get without leaving the room.

The cool presence of the amulet-half in my pocket had to be the key. It repelled

the entity. Maybe all magical creatures and even all magical forces as well. It

was only a theory, but it fit what I knew. Mitchell had had to use a mortal thief. Leon, with his ability to meld into shadows, invulnerability, and deadly

claws, couldn't have stolen it. He probably couldn't even touch it. The banshee

couldn't even get near it. What's more, I wondered if it was possible for him to

even touch me now. Had Mitchell been bluffing in the car? If I hadn't

listened

to my instincts and stayed inside, would Leon have had to hiss and spit at me because he couldn't do anything else? If that was true then both Johnny and Ace

had made a big mistake by not keeping the amulet on them. But neither of them knew anything of its power.

A knock on the office door interrupted my thoughts. A familiar curved outline waited for me to answer.

"It's open."

Sharon Topaz stepped inside. "Hell, Mister Bogey."

"Hello." I lit up a cigarette and offered her one. She turned it down.

"I happened to be passing through downtown and thought I'd see if you'd made any

progress," she explained almost apologetically.

I leaned back in the chair and put my feet on the desk. "It's alright, Miss Topaz. You're the client. You have a right to ask. I'm close."

Her eyes lit up. "How close?"

"Really close. If things go well, I should get the amulet soon."

"That's wonderful."

"I'm not making any promises."

"I'm sure you'll get it," she said with a wide smile. "I have a great deal of faith in you."

I was comforted that somebody did.

"I'll leave you to your work." She got up to leave.

The melted phone jingled. I knew who had to be on the other end. I answered it,

and Mitchell's voice cut into my like a serrated knife.

"Hell, Mister Bogey."

"Hello, Mitch."

"Bogey?" a new voice asked. I recognized it.

"Dirk?"

"That's right, Mister Bogey," Mitchell replied. "If you don't want anything bad

to happen to your friend, I suggest you listen very closely."

"I'm listening."

A sick feeling churned in the pit of my guts.

"There's a construction sight on Palm Avenue. Do you know it?"

"I know it."

"Good. Be there in fifteen minutes, or I'm afraid I'll have to let Leon play.

I

understand Dirk is a family man, and it would be such a shame for anything to happen to him."

Leon growled and laughed in the background. Then Mitchell hung up.

"Is something wrong?"

I'd forgotten she was still standing there. "Everything's fine," I lied. "Do you

have a car?" It was a stupid question. Under the circumstances, I forgave myself.

"Yes."

"I need a lift. Would you mind?"

"Not at all, but what happened to your car?"

"Stolen."

I reached for my coat and the spare gun I kept hidden in the bottom desk drawer.

I was in such a rush to leave, I nearly collided with the two boys in blue on the other side.

Brock stepped from behind them, wearing the widest grin I'd ever seen. His entourage pushed me back through the doorway.

"Hello, Brock. Is there something I can do for you?"

He removed the stinking cigar from his lips and blew a large gray cloud into

my

face. "Who's the dame?"

I was about to make up a clever lie to cover Topaz when she did it herself.

"I'm Emily Smith. I was just here to hire Mister Bogey to check on my husband.

I

think he's having an affair."

"That so?" Brock puffed on his cigar. "Well, Mrs. Smith, I don't think Mister Bogey will be able to help you. He's going to be busy for a while."

"I see."

"What's this all about, Brock?" I asked.

"I'm asking the questions. I noticed your car isn't parked out front. What happened to it?"

"Somebody stole it."

"Somebody stole that piece of crap?"

"I guess even thieves lower their standards occasionally."

Brock chuckled. He produced three photographs from his pocket. "Recognize any of

these guys?"

I recognized the mugshot of Louie. I could guess who the other two were even if

they weren't wearing ski masks in the snaps. There wasn't much point lying about

Louie. "This one and I have had a couple of run ins."

Brock returned the snaps to his pocket. "His real name is Louis Archer. The other two were William Davis and Samuel Peterson. They're both dead now?"

"What about the third guy?"

"He was knocked around, but the docs say he'll be okay."

I was glad to hear it. Louie had tried to help me out. I felt responsible for his condition.

"Cut the crap, Brock. What's all this got to do with me?"

"Louie has a real interesting story about some sort of unnatural demon spawn. Since it seems like you're one of the few people in town having regular encounters with that sort of thing, the Chief thought we should pay you a visit."

"You've paid your visit."

"There's one more thing, Bogey." His already impossibly wide smile widened even

more. "You're under arrest."

"On what charge?" Topaz asked.

"Suspicion of murder."

"Whose?" I asked, pretty sure of the answer already.

"We found Johnny Derrick. I guess it wasn't his corpse in the bed after all.

In

fact, he was alive and well until somebody pumped six silver slugs into him. Whoever did was real stupid too."

The clock was ticking. Dirk didn't have time for this conversation.

"They found his body in the trunk of an abandoned car. Guess who's car?"

I didn't have to guess.

"And they found the murder weapon jammed under the driver's seat. Guess who that

gun was registered to."

I didn't have to guess that one either.

"Give me a break. What possible motive could I have for killing Derrick? And even if I had, I wouldn't be stupid enough to use my own gun and leave the body

in the trunk of my own car. This is a frame up, and you know it."

"That's for the courts to decide. I'm just here to escort you downtown."

The two officers behind him moved forward.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It wasn't that I minded being arrested. It would have been the highlight of my day. But Mitchell had Dirk, and if I wasn't there in ten minutes, Leon would have Dirk. I couldn't let that happen.

I drew my gun.

Brock backed off, genuinely surprised. "What are you going, Bogey?"

"I can't be arrested, Brock. Not right now. One at a time, drop your weapons on

the floor."

They did.

"You'll never get away with this. You're just making things worse."

"I know, Brock, but I don't have any choice. Believe me. Now move away from the

door." I leaned over and picked up the guns, never taking my eyes off the three

of them. After stuffing all the guns in my coat, I motioned to the door.

"Come

on, Mrs. Smith. We're leaving."

She didn't argue. Whether she was playing along or actually thought I was dangerous, I didn't know.

"Don't be stupid enough to follow."

"You won't shoot."

"Don't try it," I warned. "I wouldn't shoot to kill but it would be someplace unpleasant just the same."

Topaz and I walked out of the office. I kept my gun trained on the office door

until we reached the stairs, then I grabbed her hand and ran out the building.

There was a nice shiny red sportscar waiting out front.

"The keys," I ordered. I still hadn't holstered my gun, so Topaz might have still thought I was dangerous. She handed over the keys. I jumped in and started

the engine. It purred like a contented kitten.

I had no intention of taking her along and was pulling away from the curb when

she jumped in the passenger side.

"I'm going with you."

I shoved my gun back in the holster. "Fine." I didn't have time to argue as I swerved in and out of traffic.

"Where are we going?"

I didn't explain. I was too busy hoping I wasn't going to be too late to keep Dirk from paying for my mistakes. I reached the meeting point with thirty seconds to spare.

"I want you to find a payphone and call the police. Tell them I'm here. Understand?"

She nodded. "Does this have anything to do with the amulet?"

"I don't have time for explanation. Just do it!"

"Yes, Mister Bogey, of course. Are you going to be okay?"

"No, Miss Topaz. I'm not."

I got out, and she drove away.

The construction site was surrounded by a makeshift wooden fence. The gate was

open. The thick padlock lay on the ground, sheared in two by incredibly strong

jaws. I reassured myself with thoughts of the amulet and went inside.

The site reminded me of a graveyard. Quiet, unmoving, without a trace of life.

Just stacks of building materials and still heavy machinery.

I ran into Mitchell near the cement mixer. His voice chilled the air. "Hello, Mister Bogey. Right on time, I see." He was still wearing sunglasses even though

it was night.

"Where's Dirk?" I resisted the urge to pull my gun and shoot him.

He snapped his fingers, and Dirk stepped from the shadows, tape covering his mouth. His eyes said more than enough. He was terrified, and I was terrified for

him. I could barely make out Leon's shape behind him.

"If he's hurt, I'll..."

"I assure you, he's quite unharmed. The amulet please."

"You killed Derrick with my gun."

"I had no more use for him. And since your weapon presented itself..lets just say I've always been an opportunist. Now give me the amulet before Leon becomes

careless."

"All this for a lousy piece of jewelry, Mitchell?"

He smiled weakly. "If I don't know better, I'd think you were trying to stall me. But you wouldn't be so foolish as to try anything like calling the police now would you, Mister Bogey?"

"I'm not stalling. I just want to know."

"The answer should be quite obvious to you. Immortality. One half of the amulet,

your half, protects against all forms of physical harm. The other half resists

the rigors of aging, disease, and starvation. Together, the two halves joined bring about the ultimate desire of my employer. Everlasting life." His smile disappeared. "Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"Yes, it does." I pulled my piece and aimed for his heart. "Let him go."

Mitchell laughed. "If you kill me, your friend will die. You may be invincible,

but your friend is most vulnerable."

"If Dirk dies, you die. Either way, it ends here."

There was a dead silence for what seemed like forever.

"Enough of this," Mitchell growled. For the first time, I saw him lose his composure. "Hurt him, Leon. Just so Mister Bogey understands the situation."

Leon traced a black finger along Dirk's cheek.

Gunshot rang out. First one, then another, then a third.

Mitchell clutched the three ugly holes punched through his chest. Blood soaked

his shirt. He gurgled, fell over, a look of complete disbelief on his face.

Leon screamed. His black form swirled and spun into madness. Chaos took control

and with one final death shriek, his body dissolved into the smoke it had always

seemed to be.

I hadn't fired as hot.

Sharon Topaz stepped from behind a mountain of steel beams, holding a smoking gun in her hands. A sinister scowl spread across her pretty lips.

I should have known.

"Drop the gun, Bogey."

All I could think was, I should have known.

"You were Johnny's silent partner," I thought aloud. "So silent no one but Johnny knew about it."

"That's right," she confirmed. "You didn't think Johnny could have gotten past

security without some help, did you?"

"Put the gun down before someone gets hurt."

She glowered. "You're in no position to be giving orders."

"That's where you're wrong." I held up the amulet-half.

Her eyes glazed over. She wanted it, and she wanted it bad. "Throw it over here.

Now!"

"Whose idea was it to steal the amulet? Yours? Johnny's?"

"It was his, but he need me. He made me love him, said we'd sell the amulet and

share the money. We were going to spend the rest of our lives together on a tropical island."

"But he lied," I said. "He used you to get into the museum and disappeared with

the amulet, leaving you with nothing. No amulet. No money. Just a broken heart."

"That's right. That's why I hired you, Mister Bogey. I needed a good P.I. to find him."

"But even more importantly, you need someone with an honest reputation.

Someone

you knew wouldn't double-cross you if he found the amulet. What were you planning to do, kill me once I gave it to you?"

"Only if I had to, and it looks like I have to because you know too much.

Then

I'm going to sell it to the highest bidder and retire. I've already got an island picked out."

"Nice plan. There's only two problems. Who are you going to sell it to now that

you killed the guy who wanted to buy it?"

"I'll find someone."

"Maybe, but there's your second problem. I'm invincible."

She laughed. "You're trying to bluff your way out of this, but it won't work.

Good-by, Bogey." The gun's hammer pulled back.

I took a step forward.

BANG!

Something hit me in the chest. I was staggered, but unhurt. I took another step

forward.

BANG! BANG!

A bullet ricocheted off my forehead and against my stomach. The force of their

impact pushed me back, but I kept walking.

"Damn you, Bogey!" Topaz growled. "Die, you son of a bitch!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Three new holes were punched into my suit.

"You can't do this to me. I've worked too hard for this! You can't!"

Click. Click. Click. Click.

I took the empty gun. "It's over, Topaz."

Sirens approached, drawn by the gunfire.

"It's finally over."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The cops zipped Mitchell into a bodybag. He'd died as easy as anybody else for all his unnatural power. Apparently Leon had died with him. Sharon Topaz stared daggers at me from the backseat of a squad car. I watched the car drive away, lighting up my third cigarette since the cops had first shown. I spent the next half-hour contemplating the blinking police lights and was on the verge of discovering the secret of life when Mordred made his appearance. He wore a snug tuxedo I figured to be rented. "You look nice, Mo, but you didn't have to dress up for me." Mordred smiled without humor. I has at the opera. My wife isn't going to speak to me for weeks."

"Then I guess you owe me one."

"Yeah. Guess I do. Okay, Bogey, why don't you tell me what 's gong on here. And it better be a damn good story."

I'd already told Brock everything, but I told it all to Mordred as well. I told him just about everything from beginning to end, and I didn't give a damn if it got me into trouble or not. I only left out one important part of the story: the amulet's power. Too many people had died over it already, and I figured if the whole world knew its real value, a lot more would. "Dirk heard everything that was said. You can ask him yourself."

"I intend to."

Brock appeared, carrying a plastic bag with Topaz's revolver sealed inside. "Are you through yet, Chief? I'd like to run him in now."

Mordred glanced at Brock then back at me. "Forget it. We don't need the paperwork."

Brock's cigar went limp. "You can't be serious, Chief. He's a murder suspect. He threatened three officers at gun point and resisted arrest."

"I told you to forget about it, Brock. That's an order."

"But..."

Mordred cut the air with his hand. The discussion was over. The dwarf shrugged and walked away, mumbling and spewing a trail of black clouds. The Chief held up the whole Amulet of Tepes. The other half had been on

Mitchell's body. "Doesn't look like something worth killing for, does it?"
"No. It doesn't. Are we through yet?"
"We're through. Just don't leave town."
"Wouldn't dream of it."
"By the way, Bogey. Your car is in impound. We're holding it for evidence. If all goes well, you should get it in six months."
"Keep it."
The paramedics were busy bandaging up Dirk's small scrapes and bruises. He was shaking pretty badly, but there was nothing serious. Just a lot of adrenaline coursing through his vein. That would pass, along with everything else that had happened tonight. I imagined he was going to have nightmares for a while.
"How are you doing, Dirk?"
He looked up. His eyes were bloodshot, but other than that, he seemed normal. Semi-normal at least. His shaggy hair was more frazzled than usual. "They say I'll be fine." His voice wavered.
I awkwardly stuck my hands in my pockets, then even more awkwardly pulled them out.
"I'm sorry, Dirk. This never should have happened."
"It wasn't your fault."
"Maybe. Maybe not." Silence fell from the sky. "I'll move out of the building next week if you want."
"Don't worry about it, Joe. You can stay. Just as long as you pay your rent on time." He smiled as well as he could manage in his condition, and that told me that everything was okay in my world once again.
At least as okay as it had ever been.
I didn't have a car, so I walked. The damp night air helped me think things through.
I wondered how Mordred would handle the situation. One thing was certain. My name wouldn't come up anywhere. The NAPD would probably get the credit for the amulet's recovery. That didn't bother me. I wasn't in this business for the glory.
I wondered how Louie was doing and decided I'd find out where he was staying and pay a visit. I owed him that much. I didn't know how responsible he held me for the death of his two thugs-in-arms. Professionals in Louie's line of work knew the risks of the job. That didn't mean they didn't hold grudges.
I remembered all the people who had died because someone wanted to live forever.
Even if it meant cutting short the lives of others. Would the cops ever trace Mitchell's employer? Probably not, now that Mitchell was dead. It seemed a terribly wrong that whoever had set this all in motion would probably get away with it. Then again, who said life was fair?
And I thought about how this case was finally over, and I was so damn glad it was.
I'd never been so happy to see my dingy little office in all my life. It was an island of sanity in this insane city I called home. Without the amulet, the banshee greeted me with a hearty gurgling hiss.
I opened the bottom drawer and pulled out my bottle of whiskey, taking a big gulp as I leaned back in my chair.
The banshee screamed.

And I began to hum along.

THE END