

MIKE RESNICK

CARD SHARK

A John Justin Mallory story

Winnifred Carruthers, a frown on her pink, pudgy face, placed some cards on a table.

"The March Hare, the Mad Hatter, the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, and the Star," she announced.

Mallory, seated at his desk, his feet balanced atop a ouija board, never looked up from the Racing Form that he and the magic mirror behind him were studying intently.

"Does that mean anything to you, John Justin!" she persisted.

"It sounds like the answer to: 'Name a lousy poker hand,'" replied Mallory in a bored voice. He held up the Form. "There are more important things to consider: Flyaway's running again tomorrow."

"Hasn't he lost thirty-eight races in a row?" asked Winnifred.

"Forty-one," corrected the magic mirror.

"I'd say he's due to win one, wouldn't you?" replied Mallory.

"I'd go with the string," said the mirror.

"So would I," said Winnifred. "He's remarkably consistent."

Mallory shrugged. "It's a battle of wills. Someday that nag is going to win, and after betting him thirty-three straight races, I'm not going to be left behind when he does."

"Leaving things behind--like other racehorses--doesn't seem to be his forte," noted Winnifred.

"Oh, ye of little faith," muttered Mallory. "Here I am, trying to figure out if tomorrow is the day he turns it around, and you're nagging me about poker hands."

"Not poker hands," Winnifred corrected him. "Cards."

"Same thing."

"Not quite." She held one of the cards up. "They arrived in the mail, addressed to the Mallory & Carruthers Detective Agency. I think you'll find this one interesting."

"You're not going to leave me alone until I look at it, right?"

"Right, John Justin."

"Okay, toss it over."

Winnifred gave him a withering look and flipped the card toward him with a flick of her wrist. It was halfway across the room when a decidedly feminine figure leaped through the air and grabbed it in her mouth.

"It's only paper," complained the figure, spitting out the card disgustedly.

"Let me guess--you're hungry," said Mallory.

"She's always hungry," said Winnifred.

"Is it my fault that cat people have high metabolisms?" asked the cat person.

"Besides, I like to catch things." She purred. "Especially if they wriggle."

"You're all heart, Felina," said Mallory. "Now bring me the damned thing before I lose my patience."

"Doctors lose their patients," said Felina. "What you lose are clients."

"I'm delighted to see that no one will ever accuse you of the twin vices of loyalty and humor," said Mallory. "Now, the card, if you please?"

Felina picked it up and leaped onto the top of Mallory's chair. "Here you are," she said, leaning forward over his head and handing the card to him.

He studied it for a long moment, then looked at Winnifred. "Is this some kind of joke?" he asked.

"You tell me."

"I have no idea. What the hell is my photograph doing on a card? And how come there's no suit? And is a star higher or lower than an ace?"

"It's a tarot card, John Justin."

He frowned. "Do you believe in that mumbo-jumbo?"

"Certainly."

"Me, too," said Felina and the mirror in unison.

"Rubbish," said Mallory.

"You must remember you're not in your Manhattan any more, John Justin," said Winnifred. "In a city with gorgons, leprechauns, unicorns, chimeras, magi, and the Grundy himself, why should you disbelieve in tarot?"

Mallory shrugged. "A man's got to disbelieve in something," he said. "It gives his life meaning." He paused and smiled. "I read that in a book I no longer believe in."

"Sometimes I don't understand you at all," said Winnifred.

"My ex-wife had that same problem," replied Mallory wryly.

"I understand you," said Felina from somewhere behind his head.

"You do?"

"You're a man. The God Of All Cats put you here to feed me and scratch between my shoulder blades."

"How comforting to know I've been endowed with such a noble purpose."

"Oh, it's not noble," explained Felina. "You can't help yourself."

"So much for free will," said Mallory. He looked at the card again. "Along with wondering who made the card, what made them assume I'm a star? I'm an underpaid detective with a partner and a ninety-two-pound office cat that looks kind of like Melanie Griffith before her morning shave."

"There's a better question than that, John Justin," said Winnifred.

"I'll bet there are dozens of better questions. Which one is yours?"

"Why was it sent to us?"

"Beats the hell out of me," answered Mallory. "Maybe it's a sample, and someone will call to see if I want to pay for a whole deck."

"Maybe," said Winnifred dubiously. "But if it was an advertising solicitation, there should have been some information with it, like who to contact and how much it will cost."

"Maybe it's Hollywood calling, and they finally figured out that I could be a

star."

The mirror giggled. Then Felina started chuckling, more and more rapidly, louder and louder, until she finally fell off the chair and rolled across the floor, laughing hysterically.

"All right, all right, so maybe I'm not the next Clint Eastwood. It's not that damned funny."

"Sure it is!" gasped Felina.

"I could really get into the part of Tarzan stabbing his knife into Sabot the Lioness's ribcage a couple of dozen times," muttered Mallory bitterly.

"We're getting away from the subject, John Justin," said Winnifred.

"I wasn't aware that there was one." "The tarot card."

"I don't know anything about tarot cards. Do your"

"No, not really."

"Then let's not worry about it."

"All right," said Winnifred. "But ..."

"But what?"

"When I was a white hunter, I didn't know anything about cholera or yellow fever -- but I made sure my inoculations were up to date."

"You tell me how to inoculate myself against a tarot card and we'll talk," said Mallory, picking up the Form again. "In the meantime, let me concentrate on inoculating Flyaway against a muddy track."

"And anything faster than a turtle," added Felina.

Flyaway's race was its usual model of consistency. He broke last in a field of nine, was ninth into the clubhouse turn, ninth down the backstretch, ninth going around the far turn, ninth in the homestretch, and ninth at the wire.

"I go broke betting against Seattle Slew and Swaps and Tim Tam," muttered Mallory, tearing up his tickets. "But I hear a name like Flyaway, and I just know this is a runner, this is a horse who was meant to pierce a hole in the wind." He stared balefully at the lathered animal as it was led off the track

and back to the barn. "When I catch the bastard who named you, there won't be enough of him left to bury."

He decided not to watch the remaining races, since he had no betting interests, and instead took the subway back home. The car he entered was crowded, and he found himself standing next to a pair of sailors. One of them had his eyes shut and a pained expression on his face. The other patted him on the back occasionally, as if to encourage him.

"I don't mean to intrude," said Mallory at last, "but your friend seems to be in some pain."

"No, he's just trying to remember the Maine," came the answer. "It's his patriotic nature."

"What happens when he remembers it"? asked Mallory curiously.

"Oh, then he goes to work remembering the Indianapolis and the Bismark. Of course," added the sailor, "when he remembers the Bismark, he hates the British for up to five minutes before returning to his senses. Then he goes back to hating the dirty Viet Cong-- or whoever's dirty this time."

Suddenly the first sailor opened his eyes. "Do you suppose Noah had any torpedoes on the ark?"

"Seems unlikely," offered Mallory.

"Okay, thanks," he said, and promptly closed his eyes again, lost in concentration.

"What does he do when he's not remembering sunken warships?" asked Mallory.

"Oh, he kills the enemy, and goes to the movies a lot."

"A nice parley."

"Especially propaganda movies." The sailor pointed to a poster hanging just above them. "That's where we're going tonight."

Mallory looked up. "A revival of that all-time favorite, Brazzawille, starring Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, and Claude Rains," he read.

"It's our favorite."

Mallory blinked his eyes. "How can it be? They never made it."

"What are you talking about?" demanded the sailor. "It's probably the most popular film in history."

"They wanted to make a sequel to Casablanca, but they never got an acceptable script."

"Casablanca?" repeated the sailor. "That piece of shit?"

"It's a great film," insisted Mallory.

"It might have been, ff it didn't have Ronald Reagan and Ann Sheridan in the leads," answered the sailor. "Maybe if they'd used Bogart and Bergman and the rest of the Brazzaville cast. ..."

Mallory grimaced and cursed under his breath. "Damn! Every time I think I'm getting a handle on this Manhattan, something always brings home the fact that I'm not in Kansas anymore."

The sailor chuckled. "I like your sense of humor. And I see you know your movies."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That line," continued the sailor. "A delightful inversion of the famed 'We're not in Oz anymore,' from The Wizard of Kansas."

"That's me," said Mallory. "A bundle of laughs."

"The Andrea Dorea!" cried the first sailor suddenly.

"Doesn't count," said his companion. "Not a war tragedy."

"Damn!" said the first sailor, slamming his fist against the wall of the train -- and inadvertently hitting the emergency stop cord.

The train screeched to a halt. The two sailors stumbled into Mallory, who bounced off the wall. Suddenly he looked up and saw that he had jarred the Brazzaville poster and frame loose, and that they were falling toward his head. He put up his hands at the last moment, deflecting the frame, and an instant later his head poked up through the poster, right beneath Bogart's hat.

When he related his adventure to Winnifred back at the office, he was prepared

for sympathy or even disbelief -- but not for the reaction he received.

"Now do you believe?" she demanded.

"In Brazzaville?" he asked, confused.

"In tarot cards."

"Of course not. Why?"

"Because you received a tarot with you as the star, and suddenly you were almost killed by the poster of a star."

"I'd call that line of reasoning just a bit far-fetched," replied Mallory. "It was a fluke. An accident. No one could have predicted that this guy would hit the emergency cord like that."

"Tarot predicted it."

"Bah, humbug, and rubbish," said Mallory.

"You think so?" said Winnifred. "Then look at this." She held up a small pasteboard.

"What is it?"

"A tarot card. Someone slid it under the door while you were at the races."

Mallory walked over, took the card from his gray-haired partner, and examined it.

"That's a picture of me on a gallows with a noose around my neck," he noted.

"The Hanged Man."

"The what?"

"The Hanged Man," repeated Winnifred. "It's a tarot card." She stared at him.

"Now are you going to start taking all this seriously?"

"It's some kind of prank." "It's a warning."

"From who? About what?" Mallory tossed the card down onto a table. "Flyaway will win by ten lengths before anyone ever puts a noose around my neck."

"I hope you're right, John Justin," said Winnifred dubiously.

"Of course I am," said Mallory, walking to the closet and getting his battered fedora.

"Where are you going now?"

"The Garden."

"I didn't know you'd taken up horticulture, John Justin," said Winnifred with a smile of approval.

"Madison Square Garden," said Mallory.

"A prizefight?" she asked distastefully.

"Basketball game. Gremlins versus the Goblins."

"Be careful."

"Okay, I promise not to foul anyone over seven feet tall," said Mallory, walking out the door.

The crowd at the Garden was in a baleful mood. The Gremlins were down 66-37 at the half, which was hardly surprising, since some oldtimers swore the Gremlins hadn't won a game since Teddy Roosevelt charged up San Juan Hill. One historian disagreed, claiming that San Juan Hill had marked the halfway point of their current losing streak.

Mean Marvin McCoy was the Gremlins' 108th coach since the streak began, and it looked like he wasn't going to fare any better than his predecessors. Based on the record, it was hardly his fault, but the crowd had to hate someone, and since he was human and the team and most of the spectators were gremlins, it wasn't a difficult call.

Let it be said that Mean Marvin wasn't a gracious loser. He spat on his center during a time-out. He put a cigarette out on the back of his point guard's neck. He refused to let his power forward have a drink. When he saw two of his reserves looking too comfortable on the bench, he threw a chair at them. He screamed at the referee, cursed at the public address announcer, and bit a 72-year-old woman on the knee when she cheered after a Goblin basket. He set fire to a child who ran up and asked for an autograph. When one of his players was called for a careless foul, Marvin ripped off his coat, shirt and pants and began stomping on them in mute fury.

Early in the fourth quarter, the crowd began chanting, "Kill the coach! Kill the coach! Slice him and dice him, tromp him and stomp him! Kill the coach!"

Mallory decided that he might as well leave, since the Gremlins were losing 133 to 58 with less than seven minutes to play, but as he got to his feet the crowd surged forward toward the court, carrying him along with them.

Mean Marvin took one look at the mass of semi-humanity racing toward him and instantly metamorphized into Meek Marvin, high-tailing it for the locker room. A few spectators ran after him, but most filled the court.

Suddenly a life-sized dummy that looked remarkably like Marvin McCoy appeared. "Here's what we think of you, Mean Marvin!" cried a gremlin, throwing a rope over the backboard and tying it to the dummy's neck. Someone else slipped Marvin's discarded clothes onto the dummy, and set fire to it.

The crowd screamed in ecstasy as Mean Marvin was burnt in effigy. Mallory was jostled this way and that, and suddenly found himself directly beneath the dummy. Just as he looked up at it, the rope holding it burned through, and the blazing dummy began falling toward him. Only the continued jostling saved him, as the dummy hit the court less than a foot away.

Mallory ducked, threw up an arm to protect himself, bumped it against the dummy, and suddenly realized that his sleeve was about to catch fire. He brushed the sparks off his arm, flicking them onto his neighbors in the crowd, most of whom were totally oblivious to them.

As he made his way toward an exit, he overheard one youthful gremlin, armed with an AK-47 and a flame-thrower, laugh and say to his companion, "Hey, this is even more fun than a rock concert!"

"It sure is," came the reply. "I'm bringing my grenades when we play the Gorgons next week!"

"Do your mothers know what you're doing?" demanded an elderly gentleman in outraged tones.

"Sure," replied one of the gremlins. "They're right next door, sticking hatpins

into the wrestlers."

"Oh," said the gentleman, taken somewhat aback. "I guess it's okay, then,"
Make it a soccer game, and it's not all that different from my world, thought
Mallory as he walked out the front door and hailed a cab.

"Don't you understand?" demanded Winnifred in exasperation. "You were almost
killed by the Hanged Man."

"I was almost set on fire by a rag doll dressed in Marvin McCoy's pants," said
Mallory. "There's a difference."

"Damn it, John Justin!" she exploded. "You get a tarot card with your face on
the Star, and a framed poster of Humphrey Bogart almost brains you. Then you get
a card with yourself as the Hanged Man, and the dummy of a hanging man almost
sets you on fire. Don't you see that there's a connection?"

"It was a dummy, not a man," protested Mallory.

"And it was a poster of a star, not the star itself," said Winnifred. "So what?
Two cards, two attempts at murder."

"Oh, come on now," muttered Mallory. "Surely you're not suggesting that entire
riot tonight was set up with the express purpose of dropping a burning dummy on
me!"

"Tarot doesn't work that way," she replied. "It's mystical. It produced the
Hanged Man because someone/mew this was going to happen. Someone is tinkering
with your life, John Justin, and if I can't make you see it, then you're going
to be killed and there's not a thing we can do to prevent it."

"What do you propose I do about it?" demanded Mallory. "Buy a crystal ball? Rent
a magic wand? Hire the Grundy to protect me?"

She shook her head. "Stop being facetious."

"It's a ridiculous situation."

"It's a deadly situation," she corrected him. "I think you should see an
expert."

"An expert in murder?"

"Be serious, John Justin. An expert in the mystic sciences."

"Isn't that a contradiction in terms -- mystic sciences?"

"Not in this Manhattan."

"All right, all right," said Mallory with a defeated sigh. "Who should I see?"

"Well, that's a problem," admitted Winnifred. "By rights, you should see an expert on tarot."

"What's the problem?"

"There aren't any experts on tarot in Manhattan. I only recognized those as tarot cards because I saw tarot decks when I was abroad."

"Okay, there aren't any experts. Then what was all the fuss about?"

"There are no tarot experts," said Winnifred. "The greatest authority in the mystic sciences is the Queen of Diamonds." She walked to the phone. "I'll make an appointment and tell her it's urgent."

"Tell her it's idiotic."

"The most dangerous things often are," replied Winnifred seriously.

Mallory approached the small storefront with some trepidation. He couldn't help feeling that this was a colossal waste of time, time that could be better spent trying to find a horse that was moving up in class and loved the mud.

The sign above the door said it all:

The Queen of Diamonds

Palms Red, Futures Told

Mallory entered the office and instantly heard a hissing sound. He looked down and saw a snake chasing a terrified mongoose around the office.

Sitting at a circular table was a harsh-looking woman with biceps that would have done a prizefighter proud. She had the body of a linebacker, and the pound of makeup and lipstick that she had applied merely emphasized her lack of femininity. Her dress was black, with hundreds of little red hearts on it, and her rouge hadn't quite hidden a heart on each cheek.

A small man in a business suit sat next to her, a notepad in front of him, a

quill pen in his hand.

"You ought to give serious consideration to firing your sign painter," said

Mallory by way of introduction.

"Why?" asked the Queen of Diamonds, in a voice that matched her physique. At the sound of it both the snake and the mongoose began trembling uncontrollably.

"It says R-E-D."

"So?"

"You want R-E-A-D," continued Mallory.

"Silliest thing I ever heard," said the Queen, holding up her hands, and Mallory could see that the palms were bright red.

"My mistake. You're the Queen of Diamonds?"

"At your service."

"My name is John Justin Mallory. I'm a detective. My partner, Winnifred Carruthers, suggested I see you."

"Winnie? How is the dear old buzzard?"

"Worried."

"Don't tell me," said the Queen of Diamonds, placing a hand on a crystal ball and closing her eyes. "It's a goiter. Definitely benign. Causing momentary distress, but surgery isn't indicated at this moment."

"Actually, she's worried that someone is trying to kill me," said Mallory.

"Well," replied the Queen with a shrug@ "it had to be one or the other."

"She also thought that maybe you could tell me who wants to kill me, and why."

"If anyone can do it, the Queen of Diamonds can," she replied.

"Actually, you look a lot more like the Queen of Hearts to me," noted Mallory.

"Off with his --" began the Queen.

The little man next to her placed a restraining hand on her arm. "Tut-tut," he said.

"-- fingernails," she concluded weakly.

"Much better, my dear," he said. The little man turned to Mallory. "She used to

be the Queen of Hearts," he explained. "I've been hired to change her image."

"Why?"

"She made too many enemies."

"I thought most of them didn't live long enough to do her any damage," said Mallory.

"That was in the old days," said the Queen's publicist. "Last year was the final straw. Electricians Local 708 went on strike because of all the beheadings -- they had invested their pension funds in an electric chair manufacturer--and the kingdom was without power for months."

"Off with all their --" began the Queen.

"Tut-tut, my dear."

"--mustaches," she finished lamely.

"Look," said Mallory. "Maybe we should just forget the whole thing."

"NONSENSE!" bellowed the Queen as three windows shattered and the mongoose fainted dead away.

"Well, as long as you feel that way about it ..." said Mallory.

"Details," said the Queen. "I need details."

"I keep receiving tarot cards with my image on them, and it's remotely possible that someone is trying to kill me in ways that are suggested by the cards."

"Ah," said the Queen with a look of grim satisfaction. "We'll soon get to the bottom of this."

"What do you know about tarot cards?" asked Mallory.

"Absolutely nothing," she admitted. "But I know almost everything there is to know about murder. Let me see your hand." Mallory stretched his hand out, and the Queen scrutinized it closely. "Yes," she muttered. "Absolutely. No question about it. It's here, and here, and over here too." Finally she looked up. "I find it difficult to believe."

"What are you seeing?" asked Mallory.

She tried to suppress an amused smirk. "You've actually bet on Flyaway

thirty-three times in a row!"

"That's all you see"

"Well, I also see that you don't wash your hands after every meal. I shudder to think of the way your elbows must look."

"What about the tarot cards?"

"I've never seen one. We don't have them in Manhattan."

"Why not?" asked Mallory curiously.

"Because the only possible illustration for the Death card would be the image of the Grundy, and since he demands an exorbitant royalty for the use of it, the manufacturers simply don't distribute their cards in Manhattan."

"Surely they could use a different symbol for Death," said Mallory.

"Name a better one."

Mallory considered the question and finally shrugged. "You have a point." He began to get to his feet. "Thank you for your time. I think I'd better be getting back to the office now."

"I'M NOT DONE WITH YOU YET!" said the Queen at a decibel level that flattened the snake and caused a crack to form on the wall behind her. "SIT!"

Mallory sat back down.

"Take off that ridiculous hat."

Mallory removed the fedora. "Now lean over."

He leaned across the table, and she began feeling his head with long, incredibly strong fingers.

"Ah!" she said. "This is more like it. This is something I can get my teeth into!"

Mallory flinched at the thought of the Queen's teeth digging into his skull, but finally decided that it was merely a figure of speech, since she kept probing his head with her fingers.

"Yes, I see it all clearly now," said the Queen. "The fog is lifting, and what remains is the truth."

"Good," said Mallory. "What do you see?"

"Neil Armstrong will be the first man to set foot on the moon," she intoned as if in a trance. "Seattle Slew will beat Affirmed by three lengths in the Marlboro Cup. Lincoln will free the slaves."

"I guess the only difference between my head and the World Almanac is that the World Almanac isn't losing its hair," remarked Mallory dryly.

"DON'T INTERRUPT!"

"Sorry," said Mallory meekly.

She kept probing his scalp with her fingers. "Solomon will have seven hundred wives, but he'll have a special spot in his heart for number four hundred ninety-three. Saint Augustine's boasting of his debaucheries will be misinterpreted as contrition. Babe Ruth will call his shot against the Chicago Cubs in the 1932 World Series." She pressed her fingers against his head even harder. "Here it is! Someone's trying to kill you, Mallory!"

"That's it?" demanded Mallory. "That's the sum total of everything you've learned from reading my skull and my palm and looking into your crystal ball?"

"Not entirely," she replied defensively. "I also know you have dandruff and that your fingernails are filthy."

"Thanks a heap," said Mallory, getting to his feet again.

"I can tell you one more thing, Mr. Mallory," said the Queen of Diamonds.

He stopped at the door and turned back to her.

"What is it?"

"Something's fishy."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"You said something's fishy."

"Right."

"And I said, what does it mean when you say something's fishy?"

"You want interpretations, go see an oracle," answered the Queen of Diamonds. "I

deal in facts. And it's a fact that something's fishy."

Mallory left even more confused than when he had entered.

"Well, John Justin," said Winnifred when he returned to the office, "how did it go?"

"About as I expected."

"That bad?"

He lit a bent Camel and didn't answer.

"Are you at least convinced that the danger is real?" persisted Winnifred.

"Everyone seems to think so," said Mallory noncommittally. "Well, almost everyone. Maybe I ought to go to the source."

"The source of the threats?"

"The source of all magic and all evil, so I can find out if these damned cards are actually predicting what's happening."

"The Grundy?" gasped Winnifred. "The Grundy."

"But he's the most powerful demon on the East Coast!"

"Outside of you, he's also the only person in this world who's never lied to me."

"Well, I won't have any part of it," said Winnifred. "I'm going out for a walk. I'll be back after he's gone."

She walked out and slammed the door behind her.

Mallory looked around the office, and finally found what he was looking for, lying languorously atop the refrigerator.

"What about you?" he asked.

"I'm not afraid of the Grundy," said Felina.

"It's nice to have one loyal friend," said Mallory.

"Oh, I'm not loyal and I'm not really your friend," she corrected him. "I'll desert you in the end. But I'm not afraid of the Grundy."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, John Justin."

"Oh well, we might as well get this show on the road," said Mallory, walking over to the phone. He picked it up and dialed G- R-U-N-D-Y, then waited. But instead of summoning the demon, as it had in the past, the only thing that happened this time was the receiver was filled with maniacal laughter.

"Maybe he changed his number," muttered Mallory.

"Maybe he doesn't want to talk to you," offered Felina.

"There must be some way to attract his attention," said Mallory, looking around the office. Finally his gaze fell upon the morning paper, which, as usual, featured a drawing of the Grundy. (Photographs of him turned out blank.)

Mallory cut out the drawing, taped it to a wall, then took out his personal set of darts from a desk drawer. He withdrew a dart, took careful aim, and hurled it at the demon's left eye.

Suddenly a clawed hand materialized out of thin air, just in time to catch the dart before it reached its target. The hand was attached to a strange being that appeared an instant later. He was tall, a few inches over six feet, with two prominent horns protruding from his hairless head. His eyes were a burning yellow, his nose sharp and aquiline, his teeth white and gleaming, his skin a bright red. His shirt and pants were crushed velvet, his cloak satin, his collar and cuffs made of the fur of some white polar animal. He wore gleaming black gloves and boots, and he had two mystic rubies suspended from his neck on a golden chain. When he exhaled, small clouds of vapor emanated from his mouth and nostrils.

"I thought that might bring you here," said Mallory.

"Permit me to say that I have even less admiration for your sense of humor than your ethics," replied the Grundy coldly. "What is it that you want from me, John Justin Mallory?"

"Tell me about tarot cards."

"They are exactly like playing cards, only different."

"You're not being very helpful," noted Mallory.

"It is not my function to be helpful," answered the Grundy.

"Don't explain your function to me again," said Mallory. "I'm in a hurry.

Someone is trying to kill me."

"That pleasure is reserved for me."

"Good," said Mallory. "Then you stop him."

"I cannot," said the Grundy with honest regret. "My nature forbids me from interfering with acts of violence."

"Then tell me who's trying to kill me and where I can find him, and maybe, as the bride-to-be said to her fiance, I can save myself for you."

The Grundy shook his head. "I cannot."

"Against your religion, huh?"

"You think I have free will," said the Grundy, "but in truth, my actions are as constricted as your own. Perhaps even more so."

"You're saying that you're like a blackjack dealer who wants to hit on 17?" suggested Mallory.

"An infantile analogy, but not without an element of truth."

"Then can you just tell me if these damned tarot cards are influencing events, or if they're just my would-be killer's way of teasing me?"

"Yes."

"Yes, they're influencing events, or yes, they're simply his calling cards?"

"Yes, I can tell you."

Mallory sighed. "But no, you won't?"

"That is correct."

"Is there anything you can tell me?"

"There is one thing," said the Grundy.

"What?"

"You had better solve this puzzle quickly, for your opponent is not likely to make too many more mistakes."

"Who is my opponent?"

"That," said the Grundy, starting to fade from view, "would be telling."

"That's the general idea," said Mallory, but he was talking to an empty space where the demon formerly stood. Suddenly he noticed Felina sniffing the air. "Is he still around?"

"No. He's vanished to wherever he vanishes to," said the cat girl. "And he took your dart with him."

"What were you smelling, then?"

"A visitor," she answered. "A tasty visitor." She paused thoughtfully. "A scrumptious visitor." Suddenly she frowned. "A huge, tasty, scrumptious visitor."

"Open the door for him," said Mallory.

Felina did as she was told, then backed away, hissing. The visitor entered the office, and Mallory found himself confronting a huge blueskinned man in a purple sharkskin suit, light blue shirt, violet tie, and navy blue shoes and socks. He stood just under seven feet tall, and weighed in the vicinity of five hundred pounds.

"What are you doing here?" asked Mallory.

"I need a detective," said the Prince of Whales. "You did me a good turn a few months back, and I heard on the grapevine that you could use the business."

"What seems to be the problem?"

"Someone's got a hit out on me."

"A nine-million-pounder like you comes to me for protection?" asked Mallory.

"There's got to be more to it than that."

The Prince of Whales pulled a card out of his pocket and tossed it onto Mallory's desk.

"There have been four attempts on my life already," he said, "and they're always preceded by one of these."

Mallory turned the card face up. It was a tarot card of a shark, with the Prince's face superimposed on it.

"I didn't know tarot cards had sharks."

"They didn't ... until now."

"Is that legal?" asked Mallory. "I mean, can you just make up a new tarot card whenever you feel like it?"

"How the hell do I know?" demanded the Prince of Whales. "I just want this nut caught."

"You're the proprietor of the Old Abandoned Warehouse, and the biggest fence in the city," noted Mallory. "Surely you've got a bunch of muscle on your payroll."

"Yeah," acknowledged the Prince. "But they can't think." He tapped his massive head with a finger. "I need someone with your brains for this, Mallory. After all, you're the one who broke up that Blue-Nosed Reindeer scare[1] -- and you uncovered the plot to fix the elephant races.[2] And the first time we met, you'd found a missing unicorn." [3]

"It's always animals," grumbled Mallory. He glared balefully at the card. "And this time it's a shark."

"So will you take the job?"

"Of course I will. The son of a bitch is after me, too."

"You?" repeated the Prince of Whales. "Why?"

"I wish I knew. What does he have against you?"

"I don't even know who he is," said the Prince. "That's why I came to you."

Just then Winnifred entered the office, a look of concern on her pudgy face and a card in her hand.

"I found this sticking out from under the welcome mat, John Justin," she said.

"It's a new one: the Killer Fish."

Mallory took the card from her. It was identical to the Prince of Whales's card, except that this time Mallory's face was the one superimposed over the shark.

"What does it all mean, John Justin?" asked Winnifred.

"It means I'm not going to see the Racing Form today," intoned the mirror mournfully.

"All this fish and nothing to eat," sulked Felina.

Mallory stared at the card for another moment, then laid it down on his desk next to the Prince's card.

"Okay," he said. "It's starting to come together."

"It is?" said Winnifred.

"I knew I chose the right man for the job!" said the Prince of Whales.

Mallory lit another Camel, and coughed heavily.

"Why do you smoke those things?" asked Winnifred. "You know you hate them."

"Detectives wear trenchcoats and battered fedoras and smoke bent Camels," answered Mallory. He decided to leave out the part about having oversexed secretaries called Velma. "And I'm feeling Like a detective right now."

"So who's trying to kill me?" asked the Prince.

"That's what we're about to find out," said Mallory. He handed the two tarot cards across the desk to the Prince of Whales. "And it shouldn't be that hard, because whoever it is wants me dead too."

"But who--?"

"Think," said Mallory. "The first time I met you was two years ago, and we probably didn't spend half a minute in each other's company. The only other time we were together was when I found out you had stolen the Blue-Nosed Reindeer from Nick the Saint."

"Right," agreed the Prince. "But where does that lead us?"

"You're still not thinking," said Mallory. "I had the goods on you. I could have sent you away for five years. Instead, I arranged a deal between you and Nick. You each got something you wanted, and you walked away clean."

"So?"

"So whoever's sending the cards obviously has a grudge against both of us -- me for setting up the deal, and you for taking it and not going to jail. So it's time to ask yourself: who stood to take over the Old Abandoned Warehouse and the fence business if you'd taken the fall?"

Suddenly the Prince's blue eyes opened wide. "That scheming little bastard" he yelled.

Mallory shot a triumphant smile at Winnifred, then turned back to the Prince.

"Who is it?"

"I have a twin brother," he said. "An evil twin, even by the standards of our family. His harem's Skippy. He would have taken over."

"Then he's our man." Mallory frowned. "At least, I think he is."

"What's wrong?" asked the Prince. "You look troubled."

"Well, if he's your twin, the tarot card should show a whale, not a shark."

"We're identical twins," explained the Prince. "But I'm a lot more identical than Skippy. He's a shark, all right."

"Then all we have to do is send the cops to his place and lock him away."

"It's not that easy," said the Prince of Whales.

"Somehow it never is."

"He's from the West Coast. I don't know where he is, or who he's staying with."

"Then we're going to have to lure him out," said Mallory.

"What kind of bait did you have in mind?" interjected Winnifred.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Mallory. "But if he's a shark, we need something that can attract him." He paused thoughtfully. "Maybe half a ton of whale blubber and a worn-out detective who's seen better days."

"I don't know about this," said the Prince of Whales uncomfortably. "Back when we were just minnows, he always used to kick the shit out of me. Probably he still can."

"Come on," said Mallory. "You're two fullbacks and three defensive tackles all rolled into one, with a couple of jockeys left over."

"I'm strong, but I'm slow," said the Prince.

"We complement each other perfectly," retorted Mallory. "I'm weak but I'm slow."

"I don't like the feel of this," said the Prince.

"We may not get another opportunity," said Mallory. "Look, I don't know from

taro, cards, but somehow they told him we'd be together right now, since we both got the same one. And since they're the Killer Fish, he's not trying to keep his identity a secret anymore. He plans to kill us both together, so now's the best time to set him up."

"Makes sense to me," said the magic mirror.

"It does?" replied Mallory half-seriously. "Then I must have made a mistake somewhere along the way."

"Well, I like that!" said the mirror.

"You liked Screaming Mimi in the 4th at Jamaica last week," said Mallory. "Last I heard, she was still running -- and was such a traffic hazard that all the tortoises had to go around her."

"That's it," said the mirror. "I don't have to take any more of this crap! I'm going on strike!"

It went dark, and a moment later began displaying an endless rerun of the 3rd inning of a scoreless 1963 American Association baseball game between El Paso and Tucson. Felina watched in rapt fascination, trying to claw the ball every time it left the pitcher's hand.

"I still don't like the thought of playing bait for Skippy," complained the Prince of Whales. "You've got a magic mirror. Can't it do something?"

"Not all dogs are watchdogs," said Mallory. "Not all seven-footers can play basketball. And, especially, not all magic mirrors are worth the powder to blow 'em to hell."

"Well, think of something else, because I'm not going to be bait and wait for Skippy to attack me."

"All right," said Mallory. "There's another way."

"Good."

He walked over to Winnifred and whispered something in her ear, then returned to the Prince.

"What was that all about?" asked the Prince suspiciously.

"Just some last-minute instructions in case Skippy shows up here. In the meantime, you're going to move in with me at my apartment, just in case he's staking out your digs. Also, this way we can take turns keeping watch."

The Prince of Whales nodded his massive head. "I approve."

Mallory studied him for a long moment. "I've barely got enough food for me. Maybe we'd better pick up some cold cuts and a few gallons of beer on the way home."

He and the Prince walked to the door.

"Good-night, John Justin," said Winnifred.

"See you in the morning," said Mallory.

"If you live that long," said Felina, never taking her orange eyes off the magic mirror.

Noodnik's market was just around the corner from Mallory's apartment. If it had a second advantage, Mallory hadn't discovered it in the eighteen months he'd lived in this Manhattan.

He and the Prince of Whales entered the store just after midnight. Seymour Noodnik himself was on duty, and instantly approached the detective.

"How's tricks, Mallory? he asked, and then lowered his voice to a whisper: "You here on a case?"

"I'm here to pick up some dinner."

"No serial killers? No lewd lady exhibitionists? No -- ?"

"Just dinner."

Noodnik shrugged, "Got a specialty on robins' teeth."

"Robins' teeth?"

"Well, they might be sparrows'. But I'll make you a good price."

"What the hell do I want with birds' teeth?" asked Mallory.

"That's not my business," said Noodnik. "I just sell 'era. How about an Upside-Down Nightcrawler?"

"Never heard of it."

"Of course not," said Noodnik. "They're new on the market. You know how your typical nightcrawler has a head at one end and a tail at the other?"

"So?"

Noodnik reached into a shirt pocket and withdrew a large worm, holding it up by its tail. "Well, these babies have got their tails on top and their heads down at the other end. Neat, huh?"

"Why would I want a nightcrawler no matter which end the head was on?" asked Mallory.

"Cheap source of protein," answered Noodnik. "And look at the little bastard.

Friendly, affable, laughs at your jokes. You could establish a lasting friendship with him -- at least until your hunger got the better of you."

"We'll just look around," said Mallory.

"How about minotaur steak!" cried Noodnik. "Flown in fresh from Hialeah. You can still see the jockey's whip marks."

"Some other time."

"You're a hard man to sell, Mallory."

"Don't try to sell me what I don't want."

"But selling you what you do want takes all the challenge out of it!" complained Noodnik. "Look, the pants I'm wearing are made of unborn denim. I'll sell 'em to you at cost, and toss in the shirt off my back."

"Later, maybe."

"Mallory, you drive me crazy!"

"I think somebody beat me to it," said Mallory.

A small woman with a bloody ax entered just then, and asked to be shown to the casket department. Noodnik immediately began trying to sell her a meat grinder, and Mallory quickly walked down an empty aisle, followed by the Prince of Whales.

"Is he always like that?" asked the Prince.

"Only when he's awake," said Mallory. "Now let's start looking for something to

eat."

They walked past a number of canned items -- the store was having a sale on harpy wings and jellied pegasus hooves -- and finally wound up by the meat counter.

"Cold cuts, cold cuts ..." murmured Mallory, looking into the various glass cases. "This stuff doesn't look so fresh. Maybe we'll buy some fish or lobster instead."

"Sounds fine by me," said the Prince.

They walked a little farther until they came to a huge tank filled with perhaps two hundred lobsters.

"Choose one," suggested Mallory.

"That one," said the Prince of Whales, indicating a large lobster in the middle of the tank.

"Okay," said Mallory. "The butcher doesn't seem to be around, so pull it out yourself."

The Prince of Whales rolled up his sleeve and stuck his hand into the tank -- and suddenly froze.

"What's the problem?" asked Mallory. "Pull it out."

"It's pulling back!" gasped the Prince.

"Come on -- you're stronger than a lobster."

"I would have agreed with you until about ten seconds ago," grated the Prince, struggling to avoid being pulled into the tank.

"All right, then, let go of it."

"It won't let go of me!" cried the Prince.

Mallory threw his arms around the Prince's arm -- trying to encircle his waist was an impossibility -- and pulled.

Suddenly he and the Prince of Whales were falling backward, and standing before them, dripping wet, was a scaly creature, half-man and half-fish, with a huge fin extending from his back. He pulled his bloodless lips back into a nasty

grin, revealing a sharp set of oversized teeth.

"You!" exclaimed the Prince.

"Yes, me," said Skippy. "I've been waiting for this moment, dreaming of it and planning for it, ever since that day when you robbed me of my rightful inheritance!"

"If you want a fortune, go work for it like your brother did," said Mallory, getting to his feet and brushing off his trenchcoat.

"And you," said Skippy, turning to the detective. "You're the reason he didn't go to jail! What kind of scumbucket detective gets the goods on someone and then doesn't turn him over to the cops?"

"The kind who isn't working for the cops in the first place," said Mallory. "I was hired to solve a problem. I solved it."

"And it'll cost you your life, bite by bite!" hissed Skippy.

"Don't be too sure of that," said Mallory calmly. "I was hired to solve you, too."

"What are you talking about."

"I'm talking about the lady with the rifle who's standing fifteen feet behind you."

"You think I'll fall for that old gag?" demanded Skippy with a contemptuous laugh.

"No, I think you'll fall when I drill you with a couple of shots from this .550 Nitro Express," said Winnifred Carruthers, training the gun on Skippy's head. Skippy spun around and faced her. "How the hell did you get here?"

"We're detectives, remember?" said Winnifred with a smile.

"We didn't know much about sharks," said Mallory, "but we know they like to hang around in water." He paused. "I'm a creature of habit. This is the only food store I shop at and the only water I'm ever near. I was sure you'd been studying me, so this figured to be where you'd make your move, if not tonight, then tomorrow or the next day. So I had my partner stake it out."

Skippy looked from Winnifred to Mallory. "She's just a fat old woman," he said at last. "What makes you think she can hit a moving target? If she fires that gun, the bullet'll more likely hit you or my brother."

"Skippy, I'm going to do you a favor," said Mallory. "A bigger favor than you deserve." He pulled a coin out of his pocket. "Watch closely now," he said, tossing it into the air.

Winnifred took aim and fired. The coin fell to the floor, a hole in the center of it.

"She's got a black belt in karate, too," said Mallory with a smile. As he spoke, Seymour Noodnik approached them, butcher knife in hand, attracted by the commotion. "Now you serve your time, or Noodnik will be serving you tomorrow morning."

"Is there a problem?" asked Noodnik. "Or is there just another fish to be ... processed?"

Skippy quickly assessed the situation and walked over to Winnifred, hands clasped behind his massive head.

"I'm your prisoner," he said. "If you let him touch me, you'll be breaking the law."

"Who would ever know?" asked the Prince of Whales.

"How can you say that to me, your own loving brother?" demanded Skippy.

"You just tried to kill me."

"That was business. This is family?"

"No," interjected Noodnik, brandishing his knife. "That was murder. This is business."

Skippy turned to Winnifred. "I appeal to you. Would you want my death on your conscience?"

"I would," said a familiar voice as a grinning Felina stepped out from behind another tank, each hand holding a writhing fish.

"I'll just bet you would," said Mallory.

"It'll be the only bet you win all month," purred Felina, biting the head off each fish in turn.

After they turned Skippy over to the police and the Prince of Whales paid them their fee, the two detectives decided to celebrate by going out for a very late dinner. Felina, after promising not to misbehave until sunrise (or at least to try very hard not to), was allowed to accompany them.

The only place open was Ming Toy Epstein's Kosher Chinese Noodle Factory, and the only item still available at that hour was shark's fin soup.

Felina consumed hers with a passion.

"I still don't know why he chose tarot cards," said Winnifred.

"He was a card shark. It's a small step from passing marked cards to using cards as threats."

"But we don't have any tarot cards in Manhattan."

"That's why he used them. This wasn't some psycho who secretly wanted to be caught -- and if you don't want to be caught, it makes more sense to taunt your potential victim with something he's never seen before."

"Why did he send four non-tarot cards along with that first one?"

"His notion of misdirection." Mallory smiled. "Sharks aren't the brightest fish in the sea."

Mallory and Winnifred tentatively sipped their soup.

"You know, it's not bad," remarked Mallory, surprised. "Maybe we should have left Skippy to Noodnik's tender mercies."

"It would have saved the city a lot of money," acknowledged Winnifred. "There'll be a trial, and then the expense of keeping him -- and he'll probably go free in two years and come right after you again."

Mallory cracked open his fortune cookie.

"Oh, I doubt it," he said.

"Why?"

He laid the fortune slip down in front of her.

"Good fortune is in the cards," she read.

"So much for Death By Card Shark," said Mallory. He stared at the fortune again.

"Do you suppose this also means Flyaway has a chance tomorrow?"

Winnifred wondered if a sharp blow to the head might cure her partner's obsession, but decided it would probably just be a waste of good pottery.