

Posttime in Pink

by Mike Resnick

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A John Justin Mallory story

"So who do you like in the sixth?" asked Mallory as he stuck his feet up on the desk and began browsing through the Racing Form.

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Winnifred Carruthers, pushing a wisp of gray hair back from her pudgy face and taking a sip of her tea. She was sitting at a table in the kitchen, browsing through the memoirs of a unicorn hunter and trying not to think about what the two donuts she had just eaten would do to her already-ample midriff.

"It's a tough one to call," mused Mallory, staring aimlessly around the magician's apartment that he and Winnifred had converted into their office. Most of the mystic paraphernalia -- the magic mirror, the crystal ball, the wands and pentagrams -- had been removed. In their place were photos of Joe DiMaggio, Seattle Slew, a pair of Playboy centerspreads (on which Winnifred had meticulously drawn undergarments with a magic marker), and a team picture of the 1966 Green Bay Packers, which Mallory felt gave the place much more the feel of an office and which Winnifred thought was merely in bad taste. "Jumbo hasn't run since he sat on his trainer last fall, and Tantor ran off the course in his last two races to wallow in the infield pond."

"Don't you have anything better to do?" said Winnifred, trying to hide her irritation. "After all, we formed the Mallory and Carruthers Agency two weeks ago, and we're still waiting for our first client."

"It takes time for word to get out," replied Mallory.

"Then shouldn't we be out spreading the word -- after you shave and press your suit, of course?"

Mallory smiled at her. "Detective agencies aren't like cars. You can't advertise a sale and wait for customers to come running. Someone has to need us first."

"Then won't you at least stop betting next week's food money on the races?"

"In the absence of a desperate client, this is the only way I know of to raise money."

"But you've had six losing days in a row."

"I'm used to betting on horses in my New York," replied Mallory defensively. "Elephants take awhile to dope out. Besides, they're running at Jamaica, and they haven't done that in my New York in 35 years; I'm still working out the track bias. But," he added, "I'm starting to get the hang of it. Take Twinkle Toes, for instance. Everything I read in the Form led me to believe he could outrun Heavyweight at six furlongs."

"But he didn't," noted Winnifred.

"Outrun Heavyweight? He certainly did."

"I thought he lost."

"By a nose." Mallory grimaced. "Now, how the hell was I supposed to know that his nose was two feet shorter than Heavyweight's?" He paused. "It's just a matter of stockpiling information. Next time I'll take that into consideration."

"What I am trying to say is that we can't afford too many more next times," said Winnifred. "And since you're stranded here, in this Manhattan, it would behoove you to start trimming your -- our -- expenses."

"It's my only indulgence."

"No it's not," said Winnifred.

"It's not?" repeated Mallory, puzzled.

"What do you call that, if not an indulgence?" said Winnifred, pointing to the very humanlike but definitely feline creature perched atop the refrigerator.

Mallory shrugged. "The office cat."

"This office can't afford a cat -- at least, not this one. She's been drinking almost a gallon of milk a day, and the last time I went out shopping she phoned the local fishmonger and ordered a whale."

"Felina," said Mallory, "is that true?"

The catlike creature shook her head.

"Are you saying you didn't order it?" demanded Winnifred.

"They couldn't fit it through the doorway," answered Felina, leaping lightly to the floor, walking over to Mallory, and rubbing her hip against his shoulder. "So it doesn't count."

"You see?" said Winnifred, shrugging hopelessly. "She's quite beyond redemption."

"This city's got nine million people in it," replied Mallory. "Only two of them didn't desert me when I went up against the Grundy two weeks ago. You're one of them; she's the other. She stays."

Winnifred sighed and went back to sipping her tea, while Felina hopped onto the desk and curled her remarkably humanlike body around Mallory's feet, purring contentedly.

"Do you like the Grundy?" asked Felina after a moment's silence.

"How can one like the most evil demon on the East Coast?" replied Mallory. "Of course," he added thoughtfully, "he makes a lot more sense than most of the people I've met here, but that's a different matter."

"Too bad," purred Felina.

"What's too bad?"

"It's too bad you don't like the Grundy."

"Why?" asked Mallory suspiciously.

"Because he's on his way here."

"How do you know?"

Felina smiled a very catlike smile. "Cat people know things that humans can only guess at."

"I don't suppose you know what he wants?" continued Mallory.

Felina nodded her head. "You."

Mallory was about to reply when a strange being suddenly materialized in the middle of the room. 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 of 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.

"We need to talk, John Justin Mallory," said the Grundy, fixing the detective with a baleful glare as Felina arched her back and hissed at him and Winnifred backed away.

"Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying," answered Mallory, not bothering to take his feet off the desk.

"I am selling nothing," said the Grundy. "In fact, I have come as a supplicant."

Mallory frowned. "A supplicant?"

"A client, if you will."

"Why should I accept you as a client?" asked Mallory. "I don't even like you."

"I need a detective," said the Grundy calmly. "It is your function in life to detect."

"I thought it was my function to save people from mad dog killers like you."

"I kill no dogs," said the Grundy, taking him literally. "Only people."

"Well, that makes everything all right then," said Mallory sardonically.

"Good. Shall we get down to business?"

"You seem to forget that we're mortal enemies, sworn to bring about each other's downfall."

"Oh, that," said the Grundy with a disdainful shrug.

"Yes, that."

"The battle is all but over. I will win in the end."

"What makes you think so?" said Mallory.

"Death always wins in the end," said the demon. "But I have need of you now."

"Well, I sure as hell don't have any need of you."

"Perhaps not -- but you have need of this, do you not?" continued the Grundy, reaching into the air and producing a thick wad of bills.

Mallory stared at the money for a moment, then sighed. "All right -- what's the deal?"

"John Justin!" said Winnifred furiously.

"You just said that we needed money," Mallory pointed out.

"Not his money. It's dirty."

"Between the rent, the phone bill, and the grocery bills, we won't have it long enough for any of the dirt to rub off," said Mallory.

"Well, I won't be a party to this," said Winnifred, turning her back and walking out the front door.

"She'll get over it," Mallory said to the Grundy. "She just has this irrational dislike of Evil Incarnate."

"You both misjudge me," said the Grundy. "I told you once: I am a fulcrum, a natural balance point between this world's best and worst tendencies. Where I find order, I create chaos, and where I find chaos..."

"I believe I've heard this song before," said Mallory. "It didn't impress me then, either. Why don't you just tell me why you're here and let it go at that?"

"You have no fear of me whatsoever, do you?" asked the Grundy.

"Let us say that I have a healthy respect for you," replied Mallory. "I've seen you in action, remember?"

"And yet you meet my gaze, and your voice does not quake."

"Why should my voice quake? I know that you didn't come here to kill me. If you had wanted to do that, you could have done it from your castle ... so let's get down to business."

The Grundy glanced at Mallory's desk. "I see that you are a student of the Racing Form. That's very good."

"It is?"

The demon nodded. "I have come to you with a serious problem."

"It involves the Racing Form?"

"It involves Ahmed of Marsabit."

"Doesn't he run a belly-dance joint over on Ninth Avenue?"

"He is an elephant, John Justin Mallory," said the Grundy sternly. "More to the point, he was my elephant until I sold him last week."

"Okay, he was your elephant until you sold him," said Mallory. "So what?"

"I sold him for two thousand dollars."

"That isn't much of a price," noted Mallory.

"He wasn't much of an elephant. He had lost all sixteen of his races while carrying my colors." The Grundy paused. "Three days ago he broke a track record and won by the entire length of the homestretch."

"Even horses improve from time to time."

"Not that much," answered the Grundy harshly, the vapor from his nostrils turning a bright blue. "I own the favorite for the upcoming Quatermaine Cup. I have just found out that Ahmed's new owner has entered him in the race." He paused, and his eyes glowed like hot coals. "Mallory, I tell you that Ahmed is incapable of the kind of performance I saw three days ago. His owner must be running a ringer -- a look-alike."

"Don't they have some kind of identification system, like the lip tattoos on race horses?" asked Mallory.

"Each racing elephant is tattooed behind the left ear."

"What's Ahmed's ID number?"

"831," said the Grundy. He paused. "I want you to expose this fraud before the race is run."

"You're the guy with all the magical powers," said Mallory. "Why don't you do it yourself?"

"My magic only works against other magic," explained the Grundy. "For a crime that was committed according to natural law, I need a detective who is forced to conform to natural law."

"Come on," said Mallory. "I've seen you wipe out hundreds of natural-law-abiding citizens who never did you any harm. Were they all practicing magic?"

"No," admitted the Grundy. "But they were under the protection of my Opponent, and he operates outside the boundaries of natural law."

"But the guy who bought Ahmed isn't protected by anyone?"

"No."

"Why don't you just kill him and the elephant and be done with it?"

"I may yet do so," said the Grundy. "But first I must know exactly what has happened, or sometime in the future it may happen again."

"All right," said Mallory. "What's the name of the guy who bought Ahmed from you?"

"Khan," said the Grundy.

"Gengis?" guessed Mallory.

"Gengis F. X. Khan, to be exact."

"He must be quite a bastard, if your Opponent doesn't feel compelled to protect him from you."

"Enough talk," said the Grundy impatiently. "John Justin Mallory, will you accept my commission?"

"Probably," said Mallory. He paused. "For anyone else, the firm of Mallory and Carruthers charges two hundred dollars a day. For you, it's a thousand."

"You are pressing your luck, Mallory," said the Grundy ominously.

"And you're pressing yours," shot back Mallory. "I was the only person in this Manhattan that could find your damned unicorn after he was stolen from you, and I'm the only one who can find out what happened to your elephant."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"The fact that _you're_ sure of it," replied Mallory with a confident grin. "We hate each other's guts, remember? You wouldn't have swallowed your pride and come to me unless you'd tried every other means of discovering what really happened first."

The Grundy nodded his approval. "I chose the right man. Sooner or later I shall kill you, slowly and painfully, but for the moment we shall be allies."

"Not a chance," Mallory contradicted him. "For the moment we're employer and employee ... and one of my conditions for remaining your employee is a nonrefundable down payment of five thousand dollars." He paused. "Another is your promise not to harass my partner while I'm working." He smiled. "She doesn't know you like I do. You scare the hell out of her."

"Winnifred Carruthers is a fat old woman with a bleak past and a bleaker future. What is she to you?"

"She's my friend."

The demon snorted his contempt.

"I haven't got so many friends that I can let you go around terrifying them," continued Mallory. "Have we got a deal?"

The Grundy stood stockstill for a moment, then nodded. "We have a deal."

"Good. Put the money on my desk before you leave."

But the Grundy had anticipated him, and Mallory found that he was speaking to empty air. He reached across the desk, counted out the bills (which, he noted without surprise, came to exactly five thousand dollars), and placed them in his pocket, while Felina stared at some spot that only she could see and watched the Grundy complete his leave-taking.

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Mallory stood before the grandstand at Jamaica, watching a dozen elephants lumber through their morning workouts and trying to stifle yet another yawn, while all manner of men and vaguely humanoid creatures that had been confined to his nightmares only fifteen days ago went about their morning's chores. The track itself was on the outskirts of the city of Jamaica, which, like this particular Manhattan, was a hodgepodge of skyscrapers, Gothic castles, and odd little stores on winding streets that seemed to have no beginning and no end.

"What the hell am I doing here at five in the morning?" he muttered.

"Watching elephants run in a circle," said Felina helpfully.

"Why is it always animals?" continued Mallory, feeling his mortality as the cold morning air bit through his rumpled suit. "First a unicorn, then an elephant. Why can't it be something that keeps normal hours, like a bank robber?"

"Because the Grundy owns all the banks, and nobody would dare to rob him," answered Felina, avidly watching a small bird that circled overhead as it prepared to land on the rail just in front of the grandstand. Finally it perched about fifteen feet away, and Felina uttered an inhuman shriek and leaped nimbly toward it. The bird took flight, barely escaping her outstretched claws, but one of the elephants, startled by the sound, turned to pinpoint the source of the commotion, failed to keep a straight course,

and broke through the outer rail on the clubhouse turn. His rider went flying through the air, finally landing in the branches of a small tree, while the huge pachyderm continued lumbering through the parking lot, banging into an occasional Tucker or DeLorean.

"Bringing you along may not have been the brightest idea I ever had," said Mallory, futilely attempting to pull her off her perch atop the rail.

"But I like it here," purred Felina, rubbing her shoulder against his own. "There are so many pretty birds here. Fat pretty birds. Fat juicy pretty birds. Fat tasty juicy pretty -- "

"Enough," said Mallory.

"You never let me have any fun," pouted Felina.

"Our definitions of 'fun' vary considerably," said Mallory. He shrugged. "Oh, well, I suppose I'd better get to work." He stared at her. "I don't suppose I can leave you here and expect you to stay out of trouble?"

She grinned happily. "Of course you can, John Justin," she replied, her pupils becoming mere vertical slits.

Mallory sighed. "I didn't think so. All right, come on."

She jumped lightly to the ground and fell into step behind him, leaping over any concrete squares that bore the contractor's insignia. They walked around the track and soon reached the backstretch, more than half a mile from where they had started.

Mallory's nose told him where the barns were. The smell of elephants reached him long before he heard the contented gurgling of their stomachs. Finally he reached the stable area, a stretch of huge concrete barns with tall ceilings and a steady flow of goblins and gnomes scurrying to and fro with hay-filled wheelbarrows.

He approached the first of the barns, walked up to a man who seemed quite human, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Yes?" said the man, turning to him, and suddenly Mallory became aware of the fact that the man had three eyes.

"Can you tell me where to find Ahmed?"

"You're in the wrong place, pal. I think he's a placekicker for the Chicago Fire."

"He's an elephant."

"He is?" said the man, surprised.

Mallory nodded. "Yes."

"You're absolutely sure of that?"

Mallory nodded.

The man frowned. "Now why do you suppose the Fire would want an elephant on their team?"

"Beats the hell out of me," conceded Mallory. He decided to try a different approach. "I'm also looking for the barn where Gengis F. X. Khan stables his racing elephants."

"Well, friend, you just found it."

"You work for Khan?"

"Yep."

"Then how come you don't know who Ahmed is?"

"Hey, pal, my job is just to keep 'em cleaned and fed. I let the trainer worry about which is which."

"What's your name?"

"Jake. But everybody calls me Four-Eyes."

"Four-Eyes?" repeated Mallory.

The man nodded. "Cause I wear glasses."

"Well, I suppose it makes as much sense as anything else in this damned world," Mallory turned and looked down the shed row. "Where can I find Khan?"

"See that big guy standing by the backstretch rail, with the stopwatch in his hand?" said Four-Eyes, gesturing toward an enormous man clad in brilliantly-colored silks and satins and wearing a purple turban. "That's him. He's timing workouts."

"Shouldn't he be standing at the finish line?"

"His watch only goes up to 60 seconds, so he times 'em up to the middle of the backstretch, and then his trainer times 'em the rest of the way home."

"Seems like a lot of wasted effort to me," said Mallory.

"Yeah? Why?"

"Because each time the second hand passes 60, he just has to add a minute to the final time."

All three of Four-Eyes' eyes opened wide in amazement. "Son of a bitch!" he exclaimed. "I never thought of that!"

"Apparently no one else did, either," said Mallory caustically.

"Look, buddy," said Four-Eyes defensively, "math ain't my specialty. You wanna talk elephant shit, I can talk it with the best of 'em."

"No offense intended," said Mallory. He turned to Felina. "Let's go," he said, leading her toward the backstretch rail. Once there, he waited until Khan had finished timing one of his elephants, and then tapped the huge man on the shoulder.

"Yes?" demanded Khan, turning to him. "What do you want?"

"Excuse me, sir," said Mallory. "But I wonder if you'd mind answering some questions."

"I keep telling you reporters, Jackie Onassis and I are just good friends."

Mallory smiled. "Not that kind of question."

"Oh?" said Khan, frowning. "Well, let me state for the record that all three of them told me they were eighteen, and I don't know where the dead chicken came from. I was just an innocent bystander."

"Can we talk about elephants, sir?"

Khan wrinkled his nose. "Disgusting, foul-smelling animals." He stared distastefully at Felina. "Almost as annoying as cat people." Felina sniffed once and made a production of turning her back to him. "The smartest elephant I ever owned didn't have the intelligence of a potted plant."

"Then why do you own them?"

"My good man, everyone knows that Gengis F. X. Khan is a sportsman." The hint of a smile crossed his thick lips. "Besides, if I didn't spend all this money on elephants, I'd just have to give it to the government."

"Makes sense to me," agreed Mallory.

"Is that all you wanted to know?"

"As a matter of fact, it isn't," said Mallory. "I'm not a reporter, sir; I'm a detective -- and I'd like to know a little bit about Ahmed of Marsabit."

"Hah!" said Khan. "You're working for the Grundy, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"He finally sells a good one by mistake, and now he's trying to prove that I cheated him out of it!"

"He hasn't made any accusations."

"He doesn't have to. I know the way his mind works." Khan glared at Mallory. "The only thing you have to know about Ahmed is that I'm going to win the Quatermaine Cup with him!"

"I understand that he was a pretty mediocre runner before you bought him."

"Mediocre is an understatement."

"You must have a very good eye for an elephant," suggested Mallory, "to be able to spot his potential."

"To tell you the absolute truth, I wouldn't know one from another," replied Khan. "Though Ahmed does stand out like a sore thumb around the barn."

"If you can't tell one from another, how can he stand out?"

"His color."

"His color?" repeated Mallory, puzzled.

"Didn't you know? One of the restrictions on the Quatermaine Cup is that pink is the only permitted color."

"Ahmed is a pink elephant?"

"Certainly."

Mallory shrugged. "Well, I've heard of white elephants in a somewhat different context ... so why not

pink?"

"They make the best racers," added Khan.

"Let me ask you a question," said Mallory. "If you don't know one elephant from another, and you don't trust the Grundy to begin with, why did you buy Ahmed?"

"I needed the tax writeoff."

"You mean you purposely bought an elephant you thought couldn't run worth a damn?"

Khan nodded. "And if it wasn't for the fun I'm going to have beating the Grundy's entry in the Cup, I'd be very annoyed with him. If Ahmed wins this weekend, I may actually have to dip into capital to pay my taxes."

"Aren't you afraid the Grundy might be a little upset with you if Ahmed beats his elephant?" asked Mallory.

"I've done nothing wrong," said Khan confidently. "The pure of heart have nothing to fear from demons."

"That's not the way I heard it."

"It's not the way I heard it either," admitted Khan. "But I've also written off a two million dollar donation to my local church, and if that doesn't buy me a little holy protection, I'm going to have some very harsh words to say to God's attorneys." He paused. "Perhaps you'd like to take a look at Ahmed now?"

"Very much," responded Mallory. He turned to Felina. "You wait here."

Felina purred and grinned.

"I mean it," said Mallory. "I don't want you to move from this spot. I'll just be a couple of minutes."

"Yes, John Justin," she promised.

"Come along," said Khan, as he began walking back to the barn. When they arrived Khan whistled, and a number of trunks suddenly protruded from the darkened stalls, each one begging for peanuts or some other tidbit. One of the trunks was pink, and Mallory walked over to it.

"This is Ahmed?" he asked, gesturing toward the huge pink elephant munching contentedly on a mouthful of straw.

"Impressive, isn't he?" said Khan. "As elephants go, that is."

"Do you mind if I pet him?" asked Mallory.

Khan shrugged. "As you wish."

Mallory approached Ahmed gingerly. When the long pink trunk snaked out to identify him, he held it gently in one hand and stroked it with the other, then pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and rubbed the trunk vigorously. No color came off. Then he checked the tattoo on the back of the animal's left ear: it was Number 831.

Suddenly there was a loud commotion coming from the direction of the track, and a moment later Four-Eyes came running into the barn.

"Hey, buddy," he said, panting heavily, "you'd better do something about your friend!"

"What's she done this time?" asked Mallory.

"Come see for yourself."

Four-Eyes headed back to the track, Mallory and Khan hot on his heels.

The scene that greeted them resembled a riot. Elephants were trumpeting and racing all over the track, while their riders lay sprawled in the dirt. Four of the pachyderms, including a pink one, had broken through the rail and were decimating foreign cars in the parking lot. Track officials were running the length of the homestretch, waving their hands and shouting at Felina, who seemed to be flying a few feet off the ground, just ahead of them.

"What the hell's going on?" demanded Mallory.

"You know how they use a rabbit to make the greyhounds run faster at the dog tracks?" said Four-Eyes. "Well, we use a mouse at the elephant tracks. And instead of the dogs chasing the rabbit, the mouse chases the elephants." He paused for breath. "We don't use it in workouts, but the officials always give it one test run around the track before the afternoon races, just to make sure it's in good working order. Your catgirl pounced on it when it passed by here, and her weight must have fouled up the mechanism, because it's going twice as fast as usual. Panicked every elephant on the track."

Mallory watched as Felina and the mouse hit the clubhouse turn four lengths ahead of the track officials, who soon ran out of breath and slowed down to a walk. The detective stepped under the rail and stood waiting for the catgirl, hands on hips, as she entered the backstretch. As the mouse neared him, Felina gathered herself and sprang high in the air, coming to rest in Mallory's hastily outstretched arms.

"It wasn't real," she pouted.

"I thought I told you to stay where you were," he said severely, setting her down on her feet.

"They cheated," muttered Felina, glaring balefully at the artificial mouse as it continued circling the track.

Mallory looked down the stretch and saw the furious but exhausted officials slowly approaching him. Taking Felina firmly by the hand, he ran to the rail and ducked under it.

"Come on," he said, racing to the barn area. "The last thing I need is to get barred from the grounds because of you."

They zigged and zagged in amongst the buildings, finally ducked into an empty stall, and stood motionless for a few moments until the track officials lost their enthusiasm for the hunt and began slowly returning to the clubhouse.

"Well?" said a voice at his side.

Mallory turned and found himself facing the Grundy.

"Well, what?"

"What have you accomplished for my money thus far, besides causing a small riot?"

"It's early in the day yet," said Mallory defensively.

"You didn't seriously think Khan painted one of his elephants to look like Ahmed, or that I failed to

check the tattoo number before hiring you, did you?"

"No -- but I felt I ought to check, just to be on the safe side."

"It was a total waste of time."

"Perhaps -- but if you don't tell me these things, I have to find them out for myself," replied Mallory. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Only that I expect results," said the Grundy. "And soon."

"Stop looking over my shoulder and you just might get 'em."

"I have every right to see how my money is being spent."

"That wasn't part of the contract," said Mallory. "I'll let you know when the case is solved. In the meantime, if you pop up again or interfere with me in any way, the deal's off and I'm keeping the retainer. I'm not an actor, and I don't want an audience."

"All right," said the demon after a moment's consideration. "We'll try it your way for the time being."

"I'd thank you, but I don't recall wording that as a request."

"Just remember, Mallory," said the Grundy, "that my patience is not unlimited."

And then he was gone.

"Thanks for warning me that he was about to pay me a visit," said Mallory to Felina.

"They cheated," growled Felina with a single-minded intensity that Mallory had rarely encountered in her before.

"They're not the only ones," said Mallory. He grabbed her hand and began leading her down the shed row. "Let's take a little walk."

He asked a stable girl with scaly green skin and a sullen expression to point out which barn housed the Grundy's stable of elephants, then walked over to it.

Four tweed-clad leprechauns suddenly barred his way.

"No trespassers," said the nearest of them with a malicious smirk.

"I'm working for your boss," replied Mallory.

"And I'm the Sultan of Swat," came the answer.

"I'm telling you the truth," said Mallory. "Check it out."

"Sure," said another one sarcastically. "The worst enemy the Grundy has, and we're supposed to believe you're working for him."

"Believe anything you want, but I'm going into that barn."

"Not a chance, Mallory," said the first leprechaun. "I'll fight to the death to keep you out."

"Fine by me," said Mallory. He turned to Felina, who was eyeing the leprechauns eagerly. "I knew you'd

prove useful sooner or later. Felina, fight him to the death."

"Just a minute!" said the leprechaun. "I meant I'd fight you to his death." He pointed to one of his companions.

"Okay," said Mallory. "Felina, fight this other one."

"No!" screeched the leprechaun. "I mean, I'd love to fight your cat to the death, really and truly I would, but I strained my back last week and my doctor told me that I couldn't have any more duels to the death 'til a month after Christmas." He pointed to a companion. "How about him? He's a real fighter, old Jules is."

"Right!" chimed in the first leprechaun. "Go get her, Julie! We're behind you one hundred percent."

"What are you talking about?" demanded the second. "I told you: I have a bad back."

"Oh, right," replied the first. "Go get her, Julie! We're behind you almost sixty-seven percent!"

"Uh ... count me out, guys," said the fourth leprechaun. "I got a tennis appointment at nine."

"You need a doubles partner?" asked Jules, backing away from the slowly advancing catgirl.

"I thought you were fighting her to the death," said the fourth leprechaun.

"Maybe it'll just be a mild case of death," suggested the first one. "Maybe it won't prove fatal. Go get her, Julie."

The unhappy Jules reached into his pocket and withdrew a wicked-looking knife. Felina merely grinned at him, held out her hand, and displayed four wicked-looking claws, each longer than the knife's blade.

Jules stared at the catgirl's claws for just an instant, then dropped his knife on the ground, yelled "I gotta go to the bathroom!" and lit out for parts unknown at high speed.

"Can we enter the barn now," asked Mallory, "or is someone else interested in a fight to the death?"

"How about if we play checkers instead?" asked the first leprechaun.

"Or we could cut cards," suggested the fourth. "I happen to have a deck right here in my pocket."

Mallory shook his head. "Felina?"

The catgirl began approaching the remaining leprechauns.

"How about a fight to first blood instead?" suggested the nearest leprechaun.

"You and Felina?" asked Mallory.

"Actually, I was thinking more of you and Felina," answered the leprechaun.

"Right," chimed in the second one. "If you draw first blood, you get to go into the barn, and if she draws it, she gets to eat you."

"But you're bigger than her, so you gotta tie one hand behind your back," continued the first leprechaun. "After all, fair is fair."

"In fact," added the fourth, "if you could put it off for twenty or thirty minutes, we could sell tickets, and

give the winner twenty percent of the take."

"Ten percent!" snapped the first leprechaun. "We've got overhead to consider."

"Split the difference," said the second. "Eleven percent, and let's get this show on the road."

"I'm afraid you guys are missing the point," said Mallory. "If you try to stop us from entering the barn, the only blood that's going to be spilled is leprechaun blood."

"Leprechaun blood?" cried the first one. "That's the most disgusting thought I've ever heard! You have a warped, twisted mind, Mallory!"

"Besides, whoever heard of the combatants attacking the spectators?" demanded the second.

"I'm not a combatant," said Mallory.

"Of course you are," insisted the second leprechaun. "I thought it was all settled: you're fighting her."

"Felina," said Mallory, "I'm walking into the barn now. Do whatever you like to anyone that tries to stop me."

Felina grinned and purred.

The first leprechaun turned to his companions. "Are you gonna let him talk to you like that?"

"What do you mean, us?" replied the second one, backing away from Felina. "He was looking at you when he said it."

"That's only because I'm so handsome that I just naturally attract the eye. He was definitely addressing you."

"Where's Julie when we need him?" said the fourth. "I'd better go find him." He headed off at a run.

"Wait!" said the second, racing after him. "I'll go with you. Julie wouldn't want to miss the chance to put these interlopers in their place."

"Well?" said Mallory, taking a step toward the one remaining leprechaun.

"The Grundy will kill me if I let anyone in," he said nervously.

"And Felina will kill you if you try to stop me," said Mallory, taking another step. "It's a difficult choice. You'd better consider your options very carefully."

The catgirl licked her lips.

"Well, I don't actually work for the Grundy," said the leprechaun hastily. "I mean, he underpays us and we don't even have a union or anything, to say nothing of sick leave and other fringes." He retreated a step. "Who does that Grundy think he is, anyway?" he continued in outraged tones. "How dare he demand that we stop an honest citizen from admiring his elephants. After all, the public supports racing doesn't it? And you're part of the public, aren't you? These elephants are as much yours as his. The nerve of that Grundy! You go right on in," he concluded, putting even more distance between himself and Felina. "If the Grundy tries to stop you, I'll fight him to the death."

"That's very considerate of you," said Mallory, walking past the trembling leprechaun and entering the barn. "Felina!"

The catgirl reluctantly fell into step behind him.

Mallory walked down the shed row, peering into each stall. When he came to a stall housing a pink elephant, he entered it, checked the tattoo behind its left ear -- the ID number was 384 -- and then left the stall and carefully closed the door behind him. When he finished checking the remainder of the stalls, he walked back outside and then turned to Felina.

"How many pink ones did you see?"

"One," she replied.

"Good. Then I didn't miss any."

Felina searched the sky for birds, but saw nothing but airplanes and an occasional harpy.

"It's cloudy," she noted.

"Yes," said Mallory, "but it's getting clearer every minute."

The catgirl shook her head. "It's going to rain."

"I'm not talking about the weather," answered Mallory.

* * * *

Mallory dropped Felina off with Winnifred, then paid a visit to Joe the Goniff, his personal bookie.

The Goniff's office was housed in a decrepit apartment building, just far enough from the local police station so that they didn't feel obligated to close him up, and just close enough so that the cops could lay their bets on their lunch breaks.

The Goniff himself looked like something by Lovecraft out of Runyon, a purple-skinned, ill-shapen creature who nonetheless felt compelled to dress the part of his profession, and had somehow, somewhere found a tailor who had managed to create a plaid suit, black shirt, and metallic silver tie that actually fit his grotesque body. He wore a matching plaid visor, and had a pencil tucked behind each of his four ears.

"Hi, John Justin," he hissed in a sibilant voice as Mallory entered the office, which was empty now but would be bustling with activity in another two hours. "Too bad about Twinkle Toes."

"Can't win 'em all," said Mallory with a shrug.

"But you don't seem to win any of 'em," replied Joe the Goniff. "I keep thinking I should give you a discount, like maybe selling you a two-dollar ticket for a buck and a half."

"A big-hearted bookie," said Mallory in bemused tones. "Now I know I'm not in my Manhattan."

The Goniff chuckled, expelling little puffs of green vapor. "So, John Justin, who do you like today?"

"What's the line on the Quatermaine Cup?"

"Leviathan -- that's the Grundy's unbeaten elephant -- is the favorite at three-to-five. There's been a lot of play on Ahmed of Marsabit since that last race of his, but you can still get four-to-one on him. Hot Lips is eight-to-one, and I'll give you twenty-to-one on any of the others."

"What was Ahmed before his last race?" asked Mallory.

"Eighty-to-one."

"How much money would it take to bring him down to four-to-one?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the Goniff. "Maybe ten grand."

"Can you do me a couple of favors?"

"I love you like a brother, John Justin," said the Goniff. "There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. Just the thought of helping our city's most famous detective is -- "

"How much?" interrupted Mallory wearily.

"I would never charge you for a favor, John Justin," replied the Goniff. "However," he added with a grin, "a thousand-dollar bet could buy my kid a new set of braces -- if he ever needs them."

"I didn't know you had a kid."

"I don't -- but who knows what the future holds?"

"A thousand dollars?"

"Right."

"Okay," said Mallory, pulling out his wallet and counting out ten of the hundred-dollar bills the Grundy had given him. "Put it all on Ahmed of Marsabit in the Cup."

The Goniff shook his massive head sadly. "Ahmed ran a big race the other day, I know -- but you're making a mistake, John Justin. Leviathan's unbeaten and unextended. He's got a lock on the race."

"Put it on Ahmed anyway."

"You got inside information?" asked the Goniff, his eyes suddenly narrowing.

"I thought I was buying inside information from _you_," answered Mallory. "Remember?"

"Oh, yeah -- right. So what can I do for you?"

"I want to know if anyone made a killing on Ahmed's last race."

"Everyone who bet on him made a killing," replied Joe the Goniff. "He paid better than a hundred-to-one."

"Find out if anyone had more than a hundred dollars on him."

"It may take a day or two," said the Goniff. "I'll have to check with the track and all the O.T.B. offices as well as all the other bookies in town."

"Forget the track and the Off Track Betting offices," said Mallory. "Whoever made the killing wouldn't want to leave a record of it."

"Then what makes you think the bookies will tell you who it was?"

"They won't -- but they'll tell _you_."

"Okay, will do."

"I need to know before they run the Cup."

"Right." The Goniff paused. "You said you needed a couple of favors. What's the other one?"

"If someone plunked down a couple of grand on Ahmed when he was still eighty-to-one for the Cup, would that be the payoff if he won, or would they get the four-to-one you're offering now?"

"If they came to a regular handbook like myself, they'd get the posttime odds."

"How could they get eighty-to-one?"

"They'd have to go to a futures book like Crazy Conrad, over on the corner of Hope and Despair."

"What's a futures book?" asked Mallory.

"You get the odds that are on the board that day ... but you're stuck with the bet, even if the odds go up, even if he's scratched, even if the damned elephant breaks a leg and they have to shoot him a month before the race. Usually a futures book will close on a race a couple of months before its run."

"How many futures books are there in town?"

"Three."

"For my second favor, I want you to get in touch with all three, see if any serious money was placed on Ahmed when he was still more than fifty-to-one, and find out who made the bets."

"Can't do it, John Justin."

"Why not?"

"One of those books is run by my brother-in-law, and we haven't spoken to each other since I caught him cheating at Friday night poker. I have my pride, you know."

"How much will it take to soothe your pride?" asked Mallory with a sigh.

"Another five hundred ought to do it."

Mallory withdrew five more bills. "Put four hundred ninety-eight on Ahmed, and give me a two-dollar ticket on Leviathan." He paused. "And when you get my information, call Winnifred Carruthers at my office and give it to her."

"You on drugs or something, John Justin?" demanded the Goniff. "I keep telling you Ahmed can't win. You must be snorting nose candy."

"Just do what I said."

"Okay," said the Goniff. "But I got a funny notion that you're a head."

"Not yet," replied Mallory with a sudden burst of confidence. "But I'm catching up."

* * * *

"Well?" demanded the Grundy.

It was Cup day at Jamaica, and the grandstand and clubhouse were filled to overflowing. The sun had finally managed to break through the cover of clouds and smog, and although it had rained the previous night, the maintenance crew had managed to dry out the track, upgrading it from "muddy" in the first race to "good" in the third, and finally to "fast" as post time approached for the Quatermaine Cup.

Mallory was sitting in the Grundy's private box in the clubhouse, sipping an Old Peculiar, and enjoying the awe which the spectators seemed to hold for anyone who was willing to remain in such close proximity to the notorious Grundy.

"I told you," said Mallory. "The case is solved."

"But you haven't told me anything else, and I am fast losing my patience with you."

"I'm just waiting for one piece of information."

"Then the case isn't solved, and Khan's elephant might win the cup."

"Relax," said Mallory. "All I'm waiting for is the name of the guilty party. I guarantee you that the real Ahmed will be running in the Cup."

"You're absolutely sure?" demanded the Grundy.

Mallory withdrew his two-dollar win ticket on Leviathan and held it up for the Grundy to see. "I wouldn't be betting on your entry if I wasn't sure."

The Grundy looked out across the track, where eight pink elephants were walking in front of the stands in the post parade.

"It's time for me to lay my bets," he said. "If you have lied to me, John Justin Mallory..."

"As God is my witness, I haven't lied."

"I am considerably more vindictive than God," the Grundy assured him. "You would do well to remember that."

"You'd do well to remember that it's only six minutes to posttime, and you haven't gotten your bets down yet," responded Mallory.

"Ahmed is definitely on the track right now?" insisted the Grundy.

"For the fifth time, Ahmed is definitely on the track right now."

"You had better be right," said the Grundy, vanishing.

Suddenly Winnifred Carruthers approached the box.

"I've been wondering what happened to you," said Mallory.

"Your bookie just called the office an hour ago, and traffic was dreadful," she said.

"He gave you a name?"

"Yes," said Winnifred. "I wrote it down." She handed the detective a slip of paper. He looked at it, nodded, and then ripped it into tiny pieces. "By the way," added Winnifred with obvious distaste, "where's your client?"

"Laying his bets," said Mallory.

A sudden murmur ran through the crowd, and Mallory looked up at the tote board. Leviathan had gone down from even money to one-to-five, and the other prices had all shot up. Ahmed of Marsabit was now fifteen-to-one.

"That's it," said Mallory with satisfaction. "All the pieces are in place."

"I hope you know what you're doing, John Justin."

"I hope so too," he said earnestly. He smiled reassuringly at her. "Not to worry. If everything works out the way I have it planned, I'll buy you a new hunting rifle."

"And if it doesn't?"

"We'll worry about that eventuality if and when it comes to pass," said Mallory. He paused. "You'd better be going now. The Grundy is due back any second."

She nodded. "But I'll be standing about thirty rows behind you. If the Grundy tries anything..." She opened her purse, and Mallory could see a revolver glinting inside it.

"Whatever you do, don't shoot him."

"Why not? I'm a crack shot."

"Yeah, but I have a feeling that shooting him would just annoy him," said Mallory. "Besides, you're not going to need the gun. Believe me, everything is under control."

She looked doubtful, but sighed and began walking up the aisle to her chosen vantage point. The Grundy reappeared a few seconds later, just as the elephants were being loaded into the oversized starting gate.

"Well?" demanded the demon.

"What now?"

"I know she talked to you."

"She's my friend and my partner. She's allowed to talk to me."

"Don't be obtuse," said the Grundy coldly. "Did she give you the information you needed?"

"Yes."

"Let me have it."

"As soon as the race is over."

"Now."

"I guarantee the culprit won't get away," said Mallory. "And telling you his name won't affect the outcome of the race."

"You're sure?"

"I may not like you, but I've never lied to you."

The Grundy stared at him. "That is true," he admitted.

"Good. Now sit down and enjoy the race."

Six elephants were already standing in the gate, and the assistant starters soon loaded the last two. Then a bell rang, the doors sprang open, the electric mouse loomed up on the rail, and eight squealing pink elephants pounded down the homestretch.

"And it's Hot Lips taking the early lead," called the track announcer. "Ahmed of Marsabit is laying second, two lengths off the pace, Beer Belly is third, Leviathan broke sluggishly and has moved up to fourth, Kenya Express is fifth, Dumbo is sixth, Babar is seventh..."

"He's never broken badly before," muttered the Grundy. "When I get my hands on that jockey..."

"Around the clubhouse turn, and it's still Hot Lips and Ahmed of Marsabit showing the way," said the announcer. "Leviathan is now third, Kenya Express is fourth..."

The order remained unchanged as the pink pachyderms raced down the backstretch, their ears flapping wildly as they tried to listen for signs that the mouse was gaining on them. Then, as they were midway around the far turn, Ahmed's jockey went to the whip -- a six-foot wooden club with a spike embedded at the end of it -- and Ahmed immediately overtook Hot Lips and opened up a three-length lead by the head of the homestretch.

"Now!" cried the Grundy. "Make your move now!"

But Leviathan began losing ground, his huge sides rising and falling as he labored for breath, and a moment later Ahmed crossed the finish line twelve lengths in front. Leviathan came in dead last, as the lightly-raced Beer Belly caught him in the fifth fifty yards.

"Mallory!" thundered the Grundy, rising to his feet and glaring balefully at the detective. "You lied to me! Your life is forfeit!" He reached into the air and withdrew a huge fireball. "Your bones shall melt within your body, your flesh shall be charred beyond all -- "

"I told you the truth!" said Mallory, holding up a hand. "Ahmed lost!"

The Grundy frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Leviathan won the race."

"I just saw Ahmed win the Cup."

Mallory shook his head. "You just saw Leviathan win the Cup."

"Explain yourself," said the Grundy, still holding his fireball at the ready.

"Leviathan's ID number is 384, and Ahmed's is 831. It didn't take much to change them. Then, when Khan came to pick up Ahmed, someone gave him Leviathan instead."

"Then Khan isn't responsible?"

"He's furious. He needed a loser for tax purposes."

"Then who is responsible for this?" demanded the Grundy.

"Someone who had access to both animals, had the time to work on the tattoos, and bet heavily on

Leviathan both times he started in Khan's colors."

"Who?" repeated the Grundy.

"A leprechaun named Jules."

"I've never heard of him."

"That's the problem with having your fingers in too many pies, so to speak," said Mallory. "He works for you."

"At the barn?"

"Yes ... though he's probably at Creepy Conrad's handbook right now, cashing his ticket."

"I may never have heard of him," said the Grundy, "but he will curse the day he heard of _me_."

"I never doubted it for a minute," replied Mallory.

The Grundy glared at Mallory. "You did not lie, but you purposely deceived me. I will expect my retainer to be returned, and I will not reimburse you for your time. I suspect you made a handsome profit on the race."

"I'll get by okay," answered the detective. "I'll send your money over tomorrow morning."

"See to it that you do," said the Grundy, his fireball finally vanishing. "And now I must take my leave of you, John Justin Mallory. I have urgent business at Creepy Conrad's."

The Grundy vanished, and Mallory walked over to join Winnifred.

"Is it all over?" she asked.

"It will be, as soon as we pick up my winnings from the Goniff. Then I think I'll treat us to dinner and a night on the town."

"Where shall we eat?" asked Winnifred.

"Any place that doesn't serve elephant," replied Mallory. "I've seen quite enough of Ahmed for one day."

"Oh, that poor animal!" said Winnifred. "You don't think the Grundy would -- ?"

"He hasn't got much use for losers," said Mallory.

"But that's terrible!"

"He's just an elephant."

"We've got to do something, John Justin."

"We've got to collect my money and have dinner."

"We've got to collect your money, yes," said Winnifred. "But forget about dinner. We have more important things to do."

"We have?" asked Mallory resignedly.

"Definitely."

That evening Felina had a new toy. It weighed six tons, and held a very special place in the Guinness Book of World Records for running the slowest mile in the history of Jamaica.

(For Mallory's classiest admirer, Barb Delaplace)

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