

The Chinese Sandman [A John Justin Mallory Story]

by Mike Resnick

Mallory put the final thumbtack into his Playmate centerspread, then stood back to admire it as it hung above his desk in all its pneumatic glory.

"Just what the Mallory and Carruthers Detective Agency needed to make me feel at home," he said at last.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, John Justin," said his partner, turning her head away in distaste.

"And I wish you wouldn't keep drawing underwear on them with your magic marker every month," replied Mallory. "We each have to learn to live with disappointment."

"It's indecent," snorted Winnifred Carruthers.

Mallory stared at the centerspread. "You know," he remarked, "I don't think it's silicon at all."

"Certainly it is," said Winnifred.

He shook his head. "Nope. I think it's helium."

He waited for her to smile at his joke. When no smile was forthcoming, he sat down at the desk and picked up a Racing Form.

"I see Flyaway is running again today," he noted.

"How many has he lost now?" asked Winnifred. "Something like 40 in a row?"

"42," said Mallory.

"43," purred a feminine voice. "You're forgetting the one at Saratoga where he refused to leave the gate."

"That doesn't count," said Mallory. "They refunded the all the bets."

"43," persisted the voice.

"Why don't you go kill a fish or something?" muttered Mallory.

A feminine figure jumped down from her perch atop a magic mirror that continually played the fourth inning of a 1932 American Association game between the Stranger City Mauve Devils and the Raddish River Geldings. She was young and slender, and looked human at first glance -- but her limbs were covered with a fine orange down faintly striped with black, while her face, neck and chest were cream-colored. Her orange irises were those of a cat, her canines were quite pronounced, and she had whiskers -- feline, not human -- growing out of her upper lip. Her ears were a little too rounded, her face a touch too oval, her nails long and lethal-looking. She wore a single garment, a short tan dress that looked like it had been rescued from a trashcan.

"Because," she said.

"Because why?"

"That's what humans are for," said Felina. "The God of the cat people put you here to feed us and keep us warm and dry and to scratch between our shoulder blades."

"Well, I'm glad we got that straight," said Mallory sardonically. "I've often wondered what I was put here for."

She lay, stomach down, on his desk. "Now you know."

He reached forward and scratched between her shoulder blades for a moment. When her purring became too loud and annoying he stopped.

Felina sat up, her legs dangling over the edge, and stared out the window into the fog.

"What do you see?" asked Mallory, also looking out.

"Nothing," she said, staring intently.

"OK, what don't you see?"

"Quiet!" said Felina. "I'm listening!"

"For what?"

"Hush!" snapped Felina, extending the claws on her right hand and taking a half-hearted swipe at Mallory's face.

Mallory's hand shot out, and he grabbed her by the nape of the neck. "You do that once more and I'll throw all 90 pounds of you out on your ass. This is a place of business and you're the office cat, who is here on sufferance. Try not to forget it."

She hissed at him, then turned her attention back to the window. Finally she relaxed.

"He's not here yet," she said to Winnifred.

"Who's not here?" demanded Mallory. "What are you talking about?"

"It's nothing, John Justin," said his partner. "Just forget it."

"How can I forget what I don't know?" said Mallory. "Are you expecting someone?"

Winnifred sighed. "No, not really."

Mallory shrugged. He was used to not understanding Felina, but Winnifred was always an open book, and her demeanor disturbed him. He decided to cheer her up.

"Why did the politician cross the street?" he asked.

Winnifred merely stared at him.

"What's a politician?" asked Felina. "Is it something to eat?"

"To get back to the middle of the road," said Mallory, laughing at his own joke.

Winnifred sighed and made no comment.

"Okay, maybe I won't become a nightclub comic after all," said Mallory.

A tear rolled down Winnifred's cheek.

"It was that bad?" asked Mallory.

"Do be quiet, John Justin," she said.

"You want to tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"This is your partner you're talking to," said Mallory. "I know better. You're 68 years old, so it can't be PMS."

"That was an uncalled-for remark!" said Winnifred heatedly.

"Okay, I apologize. Now will you tell me what's wrong?"

"No."

"Aha!" said Mallory. "A minute ago nothing was wrong. Now you simply don't want to tell me."

"There's nothing you can do about it, John Justin."

"How do you know, if you don't tell me?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

He turned to Felina. "Has this got something to do with whoever you were listening for?"

Felina smiled at him. "Yes. No. Maybe. Certainly. Perhaps."

"I see you're about as helpful as ever."

"Get me a parakeet and I'll tell you."

"You will not!" yelled Winnifred.

Felina stared at her for a moment, then turned back to Mallory. "Three parakeets. And a macaw." She lowered her head in thought, then looked up. "And a goldfish."

"Why not ask for the Robert Redford of the cat people while you're at it?"

"I never thought of it," admitted Felina, her face suddenly animated with interest.

"Don't think of it now."

"Whatever you say."

"I say our friend has a problem, and you're not helping either of us solve it."

"I am too!" Felina shot back. "I told her he probably won't be coming today. Now she doesn't have to stay here and wait for him."

"He's never coming," said Winnifred, and suddenly Mallory had the odd experience of watching his partner cry, her burly body wracked by sobs.

Mallory walked over to where she sat and knelt down next to her, taking a gentle hold of her plump pink hand.

"What is it?" he asked gently. "You are the bravest woman -- the bravest anything -- I've ever known. You spent thirty years as a white hunter, facing gorgons and dragons and things that would have had hunters on my world running for cover. When the Grundy declared war on me, you were the only person in the whole of this Manhattan who didn't desert me."

"I didn't either," said Felina. "Exactly," she added thoughtfully.

"Shut up," said Mallory. He turned back to Winnifred. "You're not just my partner. You're my only friend in this world. If something's wrong, you've got to let me help you."

"No one can help me," said Winnifred miserably.

"Come on," urged Mallory. "My business is helping people."

She wiped her eyes and finally faced him. "Can you seize the wind? Can you catch a moment of time and put it in a box?"

"Not without a lot of special equipment," said Mallory wryly. "You're not about to tell me someone has stolen the wind?"

She shook her head. "No. Just that what's been stolen is as hard to retrieve."

"It'd help if you told me what it is."

"Do you remember a conversation we had when we first met?"

"We had a lot of conversations," said Mallory.

"This one was about my lover."

Mallory frowned. "I didn't know you had a lover."

"I didn't," said Winnifred.

"Uh ... I'm a little confused."

She closed her eyes. "I remember it as if it were yesterday," she said. "I remember silver moonlight over a tropical lagoon, and the smell of jasmine. I remember the feel of a strong hand on mine, and the whisper of words over the rippling of the water." Suddenly she opened her eyes. "Except that I'm just mouthing the words. I don't remember it at all."

"That's because you made it up," said Mallory. "It never happened."

"Maybe it did, maybe it didn't," said Winnifred. "It's harder than you think to know what's a dream and what isn't."

"I don't want to be obtuse, but I still don't understand the problem."

"Look at me, John Justin," she said. "I'm a fat, ugly old woman."

"Not to me."

"Thank you for that, but I know what I am. Well, fifty years ago I was a fat, ugly young woman. I went into the jungle to make my fortune, because I knew I could never compete with other women for a man's love. And when I came out of the jungle thirty years later, I knew I'd made the right decision." She

paused. "One thing kept me sane all those years, the same thing that kept me sane until the day I met you two years ago and you gave me a new purpose in life -- and that thing was my memory of that one romantic night. Did it really happen? It's been so long that I don't know, I can't be sure -- but whether or not the night was real, the memory was real. It was my most cherished possession." Tears welled up in her eyes again. "And now it's gone."

"But you just described it to me," said Mallory, puzzled.

"I can describe it, but I can't feel it any longer!" wept Winnifred.

"It was the old man with the horse," said Felina.

Mallory turned to her. "What old man? What are you talking about?"

"He's like the old clothes man, only different," said Felina helpfully.

"I was a fool!" whispered Winnifred.

"Tell me about this man," said Mallory.

"He's the Chinese Sandman," replied Winnifred dully.

"The Chinese Sandman?" repeated Mallory.

"Did you ever hear the Andrews Sisters sing about the Japanese Sandman?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"It's about an old second-hand man, the kind who drives his horse-drawn wagon through your alley, collecting things you don't want. In the case of the Japanese Sandman, he trades new days for old."

"It's an interesting notion, trading new days for old," remarked Mallory. "But what does he have to do with the Chinese Sandman?"

"They're cousins," said Winnifred.

"So does the Chinese Sandman trade new days for old, too?"

She shook her head. "No, John Justin. He trades new dreams for old."

"And you're saying that -- ?" began Mallory.

"That I traded him my most precious possession," said Winnifred bitterly.

"But why?"

"I didn't believe in him," she replied. "I didn't think he could do it."

"You know the kind of magic that goes on in this Manhattan. You've seen what creatures like the Grundy can do. You should have known better."

"You're right, you're right," said Winnifred miserably. "To tell you the truth, I thought that dream was getting shopworn. It comforted me like nothing else in the world, but it's been inside my head for almost half a century. I thought I might find something newer and more exciting." She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "God, what a fool I was!"

"You wouldn't believe how many regretful husbands and wives I've heard that from," said Mallory sympathetically. "They're always sorry, and they never realize what they had until it's gone."

"What makes us behave so self-destructively, John Justin?" she asked.

He sighed deeply. "You're asking a guy whose wife ran off with his partner, and whose sole possessions after 43 years of life are two beat-up suits and the office cat."

"I'm sorry," said Winnifred. "I don't want to burden you with my problem."

"It's our problem now," said Mallory, as Felina raced to the window and pushed her face up against it. "What I don't understand is this guy's racket. I mean, who the hell would want to buy your old dream?"

"That's easy," said a low voice with a strange accent, and Mallory turned to see a thin, almost emaciated Oriental man, his hair in a braid down his back, decked out in a patchwork outfit of old, unmatched silks and satins, standing in his doorway.

"It's him!" exclaimed Winnifred.

"That's figures," said Mallory. "Nothing else has gone right this month." He stood up and faced the old man. "You were about to say something?"

"You wanted to know who would buy an old dream," said the Chinese Sandman with a smile. "The person who traded it, of course."

"Every customer wants it back?" asked Mallory.

"Of course," said the Sandman. "But they never know it until they've lost it."

"Then trade it back to her."

The Chinese Sandman chuckled. "I made a fair trade for it. I gave her a wonderful dream, full of excitement and romance, of distant and exotic terrains, of handsome men and beautiful women, and she was the most beautiful of all."

"I don't want it!" said Winnifred.

"Of course you don't want it," agreed the Sandman. "It's not yours."

"So take it back, give her her own dream, and we'll call it square," said Mallory.

"How would I stay in business if I did that?" replied the Chinese Sandman. "She traded a valueless dream to me. But now it has a value, doesn't it? Quite a high one."

"All right," said Mallory. "Name your price, and try to remember that we're not made of money."

"I'm not some nondescript huckster," said the Sandman, making a face. "I don't sell -- I trade."

"Look around the place," said Mallory. "We'll trade anything you want for it."

"Even the cat woman?"

Felina hissed at him and displayed her claws.

"No!" said Winnifred firmly.

Felina jumped lightly onto the back of Winnifred's chair, purring loudly.

"Anything but the cat," said Mallory.

The Sandman looked around the room. "No, I don't think so," he said. "There's nothing here that I want -- not even the cat woman."

"Don't be foolish," said Mallory. "No one else in the world wants Winnifred's dream. If you want to unload it, you've got to deal with us."

"Oh, I didn't say we couldn't do business," said the Sandman. "I merely remarked that there's nothing in your office that I want."

"You were here before, when you traded dreams, so you knew there was nothing in the place that you wanted," said Mallory. "So cut the crap and tell us what you do want."

"How very astute of you, Mr. Mallory," said the Chinese Sandman. "You give me hope that we may be able to reach an equitable agreement."

"You name it, and I'll tell you if we have a deal."

"Very well," said the Sandman. "I want you, Mr. Mallory."

"Me?" said Mallory, surprised.

"Well, not you personally. But I want your skill. In fact, I shall be perfectly forthright: I want an item, a trinket, a tribute if you will, that I think only you can secure for me. If you bring me what I desire, I will return Colonel Carruthers' dream to her. If not, well..." He shrugged his shoulders regretfully and let the sentence hang in mid-air, unfinished.

"Don't do it, John Justin," said Winnifred. "It was my blunder. I'll live with the consequences."

"It can't hurt to hear him out," said Mallory.

"I heard him out," Winnifred pointed out.

"He doesn't have anything I want," said Mallory.

"You'd be surprised," said the old Chinese man with a smile.

"Spare me your surprises and just tell me what you want."

"There is an amber egg," said the Sandman, outlining its size with his gnarled fingers. "Inside it is a tiny pegasus, a blood bay colt with three white feet and golden wings. I want it."

"What's the catch?" said Mallory. "Why don't you just buy it instead of having me rob whatever store is selling it?"

"It's not in a store, John Justin Mallory," said the Sandman.

"Shit!" muttered Mallory. "I don't even want to think about what you're going to say next."

"It resides on the nightstand next to the Grundy's bed."

"I knew it!"

"When you bring it to me, I will give your partner what she wants."

"Why don't you ask for something easy, like the key to Fort Knox?"

"Each dream has its own price," answered the Sandman. "For the partner of John Justin Mallory, the price is higher than most."

"Why?" demanded Mallory.

"Because no one else can retrieve it for me. You, at least, have a chance of success, however small and unlikely."

"Your optimism is heartwarming."

"Just get it, John Justin Mallory," said the Sandman, turning to leave.

"Wait a minute!" said Mallory. "Assuming that God drops everything else and I get the thing, how do we contact you?"

"I will know when you have succeeded," answered the Sandman. "I will contact you to effect the trade."

He closed the door behind him. Mallory looked out the window, but fog obscured his vision. All he could hear was the clop-clop-clop of a horse's hooves as it trudged down the street, pulling its wagonload of dreams at the behest of its Oriental master.

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The Grundy's castle seemed to rise right out of the middle of Central Park. It was a huge Gothic structure, replete with spires and turrets, hundreds of feet long on each side. A single drawbridge lay across a moat that seemed alive with the kind of things that haunted children's nightmares. The stone walls glistened in the light rain.

"Well, I guess this is it," said Mallory, hoping desperately that he was mistaken.

His companion stared at the moat. "I'm hungry."

A hideous sea creature surfaced, glared at them, bared its enormous teeth, and then vanished beneath the water.

"So is he," said Mallory.

"What good is water if you can't catch some fish in it?" asked Felina.

"This particular water has probably got some inhabitants who are wondering what good is land if you can't catch some cat people on it."

"If we're not going fishing, why are you just standing here?" asked Felina.

"I'm casing the joint."

"I thought you were trying to work up the courage to go in," said Felina.

"That, too," admitted Mallory.

"It won't be so bad, John Justin," said Felina. "There's probably nothing but goblins and gorgons and

minotaurs and medusas and maybe some yetis." She paused thoughtfully. "At least, until we get to the dangerous parts."

"Thanks," said Mallory sardonically. "I feel all better now."

"I knew you would," replied Felina. "I have that effect on people. Scratch my back."

"Be quiet."

"Scratching cat people's backs is one of the very best things human people do," continued Felina. "You'll feel much better if you just reach over and scratch between my shoulder blades."

Mallory ignored her and continued looking at the castle. Not much had changed since he had started looking five minutes earlier: it still appeared impregnable.

"Well," he said finally, "let's get started."

"We're going fishing now?"

Mallory took a couple of tentative steps across the drawbridge. "We're going into the castle now. If you smell or sense anything approaching us, let me know."

"Anything?"

"Anything dangerous."

"Oh," said Felina. Suddenly she smiled. "There are four moat monsters swimming toward us right now."

"They're in the water. We're up here."

Felina nodded her head agreeably. "Probably only two of them can reach us."

Mallory increased his pace. Ominous swirls in the water below implied that the creatures had adjusted their routes and were tracking him. He reached the end of the drawbridge and uttered a sigh of relief. He looked around for Felina, who was nowhere to be seen.

"Who goes there?" demanded a deep, gruff voice.

"John Justin Mallory," replied the detective. "And a friend. We're here to see the Grundy."

This was met by a peal of laughter. "Mallory? To see the Grundy?" Another laugh. "Don't you know you're his greatest enemy, Mallory?"

"Just tell him I'm here and that I've got a proposition for him."

"Oh, I'd dearly love to tell him you're here," the voice assured him. "But I'm under orders to kill anyone who crosses the moat."

The owner of the voice stepped forward, and Mallory saw that it was a broad, muscular, green-skinned troll, no more than four feet tall, holding a wicked-looking battle axe.

"Just give him my message," said Mallory. "He'll want to see me."

"I can't imagine why," said the troll. "You're the ugliest human I've ever laid eyes on." He raised the axe over his head. "Prepare to die!"

"My friend won't like that."

"Hah!" said the troll. "I don't see any friend!"

At that moment Felina, who had been walking along the chain that supported the drawbridge from overhead, dropped lightly to the ground.

"Felina," said Mallory, "take that thing away from him before I lose my temper."

"Wait a minute!" said the troll, backing up a step. "She's the friend you were referring to?"

"That's right."

"But that's unfair! Trolls are afraid of cat people! Everyone knows that!"

"Too bad," said Mallory, as Felina, the moonlight glinting off her claws, slowly approached the troll.

"This is against the rules of engagement!" whined the troll. "There's nothing in my contract that says I have to fight cat people! I'm issuing a formal complaint to the union steward first thing in the morning!"

"If you live that long," said Mallory.

"What are you talking about?" shrieked the troll. "Of course I'll live that long! You wouldn't make me face her now that you know how terrified I am!"

"Why not?"

"What kind of a fiend are you, Mallory? Surely you can't be enjoying this situation! Where's your heart?"

"Between my lungs and my spleen, last time I looked," said Mallory. "Now, are you going to let us pass?"

"The Grundy says no one can enter."

"The Grundy doesn't have to fight my friend. You do."

"You're giving me a terrible headache!" whined the troll.

"Looks like you're between a rock and a hard place," said Mallory without sympathy.

"What rock?" shrieked the troll. "I'm between the Grundy and a cat person!"

"Six of one, half a dozen of the other."

"Oh my God!" said the troll, looking fearfully into the shadows. "You've got five more cat people with you?"

"One's enough," said Mallory as Felina took another step toward the troll, a hungry grin on her catlike face.

"Help!" screamed the troll. "Somebody! Anybody! I'm being threatened by a small puppy!"

"A small puppy?" repeated Mallory, puzzled.

"Well, they might not come if I said I was being threatened by something formidable," explained the troll.

"If they're all like you, I don't think they're going to be much help."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, Mallory!" said the troll. "I'm not afraid of detectives. I'll be busy disemboweling you with my axe while my comrades are turning your pet into a tennis racket."

"I don't think they string rackets with catgut any more," said Mallory.

"They do at the Grundy's castle," was the reply.

And then, suddenly, two leprechauns and an emaciated elf appeared beside the troll.

"It took you long enough to get here!" complained the troll.

"They were re-running an old Ann Rutherford movie," replied the elf. "We had to wait for the commercial." He surveyed the situation. "Now, what do you want us to do?"

"Kill the cat person while I take care of Mallory."

Felina turned to them and hissed.

"Uh ... I've got nothing against cat people," said the taller leprechaun. "How about you, Merv?"

"Not a thing," said the smaller leprechaun, staring hypnotically at Felina's glistening claws. "Some of my best friends are cat people."

"Are they really?" asked the elf.

"Well, they would be if I ever took the trouble to get to know them," said Merv. He turned to the troll. "I have a better plan. You kill the cat woman and the detective. We'll set fire to their funeral pyre."

"I can't. Trolls have an instinctive fear of cat people."

"Yeah?" replied Merv. "Well, leprechauns have an instinctive fear of dying. So there."

They all turned to the elf. "How about you?"

"I'm not afraid of either of them," said the elf.

"Good," said Merv. "_You_ kill them."

"I'd love to," said the elf. "But I'm just an accountant. You want my roommate. He specializes in maiming and pillaging."

"So get him down here!" demanded the troll.

"I wish I could, but he ran off to California and joined a cult that worships rutabagas." The elf grimaced. "I think they eat them, too. Raw."

"I'd like to spend all night listening to you explain why none of you are going to stop us from entering," said Mallory. "But since none of you _are_ going to stop us from entering..."

He took a step forward. The troll, the leprechauns and the elf practically fell over each other while retreating.

"Come on, Felina."

"Don't I get to kill even one of them?" she asked unhappily.

"Maybe later."

The troll looked down at his wrist. "Hey, my shift's almost over!" He turned to Felina. "You can kill the next troll on duty. I give you my blessing."

"How do you know it's over?" asked Merv. "You're not even wearing a watch."

"I lost it in a strip poker game three years ago," answered the troll, "but if I had one, I'm sure it would say that my shift's over." And with that he turned and headed to the interior of the castle at breakneck speed.

"Some security team," snorted Mallory contemptuously.

"So we're not the Pretorian guard," replied the elf. "You're not Sherlock Holmes, either."

He raced off into the darkness, accompanied by the two leprechauns, before Mallory could reply.

Mallory looked into the interior of the castle. It seemed empty and foreboding.

"Felina, can you smell anyone?" he asked.

There was no response.

He turned, and saw Feline lying on her belly, reaching a clawed hand into the water, trying to snare a fish.

"Get up!" he yelled, rushing over to her and lifting her to her feet.

"You're mean to me," sniffed Felina.

"Not as mean as he would have been," said the detective, pointing to a moat monster that surfaced exactly where her hand had been.

She stared at the monster, then at Mallory, then back at the monster, which was just disappearing beneath the surface.

"I forgive you," she said. "This one time."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," said Mallory. "Now, can you sense anyone else?"

"Just the Grundy."

"He's here now?" said Mallory.

"Kind of."

"Does he know we're here?"

She nodded her head. "He's the Grundy," she said, as if that explained everything. "He wants to see you."

"How do you know that?"

She smiled. "Cat people know things that human people can never know."

"Do they know enough not to get eaten by moat monsters while I go speak to the Grundy?" asked Mallory.

"Probably."

"I haven't got time to argue," said Mallory. "I can always handcuff you to the castle gate."

She leaped to the chain that held the drawbridge. "You'd have to catch me first."

"I don't want to catch you. Just see to it that no one else does, either."

He turned and entered the castle. He looked around, trying to figure out what to do next, when a liveried goblin approached him.

"Please follow me, Mr. Mallory," said the goblin with a thick Cockney accent.

"You know me?"

"You was expected."

Mallory followed him up a flight of stone stairs and down a long corridor that displayed with various torture devices.

"Interesting decor," he remarked.

"The master likes it well enough."

"I assume they're just for show."

"When they ain't in use," answered the goblin.

They came to a large pentagonal room, and the goblin came to a stop.

"I'll leave you here, Mr. Mallory, sir," he said. "Just walk right in and make yourself to home." He paused. "Oh -- and don't go feedin' the pets."

He turned and began walking back the way they had come, and Mallory entered the room. There was a huge bed against the back wall, covered with sheets of red satin. On a nightstand embossed with gargoyles was the amber egg he sought. There were four windows, all barred. A golden bookcase held various grimoires and books of spells, all leatherbound and embossed.

There were six spherical cages suspended from the high ceiling by golden chains. Inside one was a gremlin, in another was a small sphinx. A third held a small nude gold-skinned woman, no more than three feet tall but in perfect proportion, who was weeping copiously. A winged warrior in medieval armor was in a fourth. The final two held creatures Mallory had never seen, except perhaps during those nightmares that visited him when he'd mixed too many drinks in his youth.

"What do you think of my pets, John Justin Mallory?" said a deep voice.

Mallory looked around but couldn't see anything. Then, suddenly, the Grundy 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 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.

"They're impressive," admitted Mallory.

"Perhaps you would like to join them," suggested the Grundy ominously.

"I'll take a raincheck."

"You still don't fear me," noted the demon, frowning in puzzlement. "Why not? You know what damage I can do."

"I know you're a rational creature," responded Mallory. "Perhaps the only one in this Manhattan besides me. You know I wouldn't come here without a reason, and I know you won't kill me without a reason."

"Ah, but I have a reason," said the Grundy. "It is my nature to kill, to bring chaos out of order, to destroy that which is beautiful."

"No one ever called me beautiful before."

"I was generalizing."

"I know. But you're not going to kill me before you hear me out."

"No, I'm not, though I'm not quite sure why." The Grundy stared at him. "You are the first man ever to willingly enter my domicile."

"It wasn't all that difficult," replied Mallory. "On a 10 scale, I give your security team a minus 3."

"They're here only to make a commotion."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You don't really think that I need protection?"

"No, I suppose not."

"They're here to make noise. I heard them all the way over in Queens."

"I thought you just controlled Manhattan."

"I control all the five boroughs." The Grundy pointed to a wicked-looking shears hanging on the wall over his bed. "It used to be Kings before I became annoyed with my last surrogate."

"Remind me never to become your surrogate."

"It seems unlikely. We are mortal enemies, after all."

"I'm not here as your enemy," said Mallory. "At least, not this time."

"Of course you are," said the Grundy. "You're here on an errand for the Chinese Sandman."

"You're pretty good, I'll give you that," said Mallory. "I wasn't sure you'd know about him."

"I know everything that goes on in my domain."

"Then you know I'm not here to steal anything on his behalf."

"Only because you know you can't," said the Grundy. He held his hand out, and the amber egg seemed to leap to it from the nightstand. "This is why you're here, is it not?"

"Indirectly."

"Explain."

"Actually, I'm here as a supplicant," said Mallory.

The Grundy laughed a harsh, grating laugh as blue vapor almost obscured his features. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Why not?" said Mallory. "You run New York City as surely as Tammany Hall ran it in _my_ Manhattan a century ago. I live in New York City. I'm here to file a complaint about the Chinese Sandman."

"You, who have opposed and hindered me in the past, dare to ask for my intervention!" bellowed the Grundy, and the volume of his voice made all his caged beings tremble with fear.

"He's poaching on your territory."

"I do not steal dreams."

"So you're telling me that it's okay for anyone to steal from your subjects, as long as they steal things you don't want?"

The Grundy stared at him for a long moment. "There may be something to what you say."

"He's made my partner miserable," continued Mallory. "I thought making people miserable was _your_ function."

"It's possible," mused the Grundy. "Not likely, but possible."

"It's more than possible," said Mallory. "He's out there right now, stealing dreams."

The Grundy shook his head irritably. "You do not understand."

"Enlighten me."

"It's possible that he's in the employ of my Opponent."

"I thought your Opponent worked for Good, just as you work for Evil."

"That is because you never listen to me. Good and Evil are relative terms; what is Good one century may be evil in another." He paused. "My opponent represents Order; I represent Chaos."

"How does stealing a sweet old lady's only romantic dream lead to order?" asked Mallory.

"Dreams are irrational. I realize that it gave her comfort, but it was not an orderly comfort."

"That seems like an awfully convoluted chain of reasoning."

"Nothing is as simple as it seems," answered the Grundy. "When you are a mere mortal, you cannot begin to realize the complexity of the universe."

"Okay, maybe he works for your Opponent," said Mallory. "That makes it even more imperative that we get rid of him."

"I can reach out and choke the life from him this instant," agreed the Grundy, flexing his long, lean fingers.

"No!" _shouted Mallory.

The Grundy stared at him silently.

"He's still got Winnifred's dream! I've got to get it back before you do anything to him."

"What do I care about an old woman's dream?"

"You said it yourself: her mind, her whole world, is more orderly without it. We've got to make the Sandman return it."

"I could torture it out of him," said the Grundy. "He could provide me with an entire evening's amusement before he finally succumbs."

Mallory stared at the demon for a long moment. "I don't think you want to get anywhere near him."

"Why not?"

"What if he stole your dream of empire?" suggested Mallory. "What if you no longer dreamed of defeating your Opponent?"

"I am supreme in my domain," answered the Grundy. "He can do nothing to me here."

"Maybe so, maybe not, but are you willing to bet everything you have on it?" asked Mallory. "Why expose yourself, when you don't know _how_ he steals dreams?"

"Why do you think I don't know?"

"Because if you did, you'd have been stealing them for years."

"True," admitted the Grundy. "I have more effective ways of destroying dreams."

"I've seen you kill dozens of men in an instant. I've seen you destroy whole city blocks. I've seen you make the stock market crash. But I've never seen you steal a dream, or have to protect yourself from a dream thief. I think we'd better do this my way."

"What _is_ your way, John Justin Mallory?"

Mallory held his hand out. "May I see that amber egg, please?"

The Grundy handed it to him, and Mallory held it up to the dim light.

"That pegasus looks very real," he noted.

"It _is_ real."

"I didn't know they came that small."

"They don't -- unless someone puts a curse of them and _makes_ them that small."

"Why did you do it?"

"He was beautiful. He was innocent. He was filled with love. What better reasons could I want?"

"And he belonged to the Sandman?"

"Once upon a time. Before he escaped. I found him in a stable at the north end of Central Park."

"I believe I know the place," said Mallory.*

"And once you trade this to the Sandman for your partner's dream, when then?"

"I'll think of something."

"See that you do," said the Grundy, handing him the amber egg and somehow becoming less substantial. "You are all that stands between him and a death so hideous that I hope you cannot even imagine it."

The Grundy continued fading from sight, until nothing was left but his face.

"Once again we find ourselves on the same side, John Justin Mallory," he said.** "I am beginning to wonder if you are my successor rather than my antagonist."

And then he was gone.

"Mr. Mallory, sir?" said a Cockney voice, and Mallory turned to find himself facing the liveried goblin. "Come this way, please, and I'll see you to the front door."

"I can find it myself," said Mallory.

"No doubt you can, sir," replied the goblin, "but if you're with me, the gorgon and the banshees will leave you alone. A roar and a trio of high-pitched shrieks punctuated his statement, and Mallory dutifully followed him. When they reached the front door, Mallory took a single step outside and heard the portal slam into place behind him.

"Felina?"

"Up here," said a familiar voice.

Mallory looked up, and found the cat woman perched on a window ledge, chewing on the last bite of something with feathers.

"Come on," he said, trying not to show his disgust for her dietary practices. "We're leaving."

She dropped lightly to the ground beside him.

"I don't know why fish like worms so much," she said as they began walking across the drawbridge.

"You ate a worm?"

"Just one."

"Tasted pretty bad, did it?"

"Oh, it tasted fine," said Felina. "But it whined and pleaded all the way down." She looked at him, an annoyed expression on her face. "I just hate it when they do that."

Mallory sighed. Every time he thought he was getting used to his new Manhattan, something like that came from out of left field and made the Grundy seem normal by comparison.

* * * *

"You're back!" exclaimed Winnifred as Mallory entered the office.

"You didn't expect me to survive?"

"With the Grundy?" She shuddered. "You never know." She paused. "Still, the Grundy does seem to spend more time talking to you than to anyone else."

"Maybe that's because I'm the only one who ever tells him the truth."

"Did you...?" began Winnifred hesitantly. "I mean..."

Mallory reached into his pocket, withdrew the amber egg, and held it up for her to see. "I got it."

She walked over and peered into it. "It really does have a pegasus in it, doesn't it? A blood-bay colt with golden wings."

"Same color as Citation, except for the wings," replied Mallory. "And Citation didn't need them."

"What did you have to give him for it?"

"A favor."

"What kind of favor?" Winnifred asked suspiciously. "If you have to break any laws..."

"Relax," said Mallory. "It's the same favor I'm doing for you."

"I don't understand. Surely the Grundy isn't afraid of the Chinese Sandman!"

"I don't think he's afraid of anything," agreed Mallory. "But he is cautious. Why should he dirty his hands if I'll do it for him?"

"So what we do now?"

"We wait. The Sandman has to show up sooner or later." Mallory walked to an easy chair in front of the magic mirror. "Let's have a movie."

"What will it be today?" asked the mirror, which was still showing the ancient baseball game.

"A nice adventure film, I think."

"How about The Man Who Would Be King?"

"I've seen it."

"Not this version."

"Connery and Caine, right?"

"No."

"You also showed me the Gable and Bogart version that John Huston tried to make in the 1940s, before he ran out of money," said the detective.

"This is the one he tried to make in the early 1960s, with Marlon Brando and Richard Burton."

"Okay, that sounds good," said Mallory. "Let me get a beer and we're in business."

"You don't have time for a beer," said the mirror.

"You're starting that soon?"

"You are about to have a visitor."

"If she comes in with a dead squirrel in her mouth, I'm throwing her right back out."

"Not Felina," said the mirror. "Well," it corrected itself, "Felina too."

"All right," said Mallory. "Take a break."

"Thank you," said the mirror, suddenly displaying Tuffy Bresheen scattering her opponents to the four winds in a 1949 roller derby.

"Come on," said Mallory to Winnifred.

"Where are we going?"

"If it's who I think it is, and he does what I think he's going to do, we don't want to be inside."

"But the back yard is so small," complained Winnifred.

"True," said Mallory. "But it has one definite advantage."

"What's that?"

"No roof."

They went outside and walked around to the yard.

"Hi, John Justin," said Felina, perched on a branch on the only tree. She wiped some feathers from her mouth and emitted a small, ladylike burp. "I've been waiting for you."

"Have you really?"

"No," she admitted. "But it sounded good."

"I've been waiting for _you_," said Mallory.

"Oh?" She leaped into space, did a double somersault, and landed lightly on her feet right next to the detective.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm going to need your help in a couple of minutes."

"Do you want me to scare another troll?"

"No."

"More leprechauns?"

"Shut up and listen!" snapped Mallory. He handed her a small object and spent the next thirty seconds giving her instructions. "Now do you think you can do it?"

"Not until you apologize for yelling at me."

"I didn't yell."

"Did too."

"All right -- I apologize."

"And you'll never yell at me again, and you'll buy me my very own fish pond, and -- "

"Don't push it."

At that moment the Chinese Sandman joined them, decked out in a new outfit that was even more patchwork than the last.

"You have it," he announced. "I could sense it all the way from Gramercy Park."

"I've got it," confirmed Mallory, withdrawing the egg from a pocket and holding it up for the Sandman to see. "Where's your horse and wagon?"

"I don't need them any longer. I will give your partner her dream and you will give me my horse."

"I don't think so," said Mallory.

"What are you talking about?"

"I think the egg's worth more than that."

"John Justin!" cried Winnifred.

"Not to worry," he assured her. "Our friend knows it's worth more than one dream."

"We had a deal!" growled the Sandman.

"We still do," said Mallory. "I have something you want. You have something I want. Only the conditions have changed."

"How many dreams do you want?" demanded the Sandman.

"All of them."

"What?"

"Give back every dream you've stolen or it's no deal." He smiled. "Why not admit that you want this pegasus every bit as much as the people you cheated want their dreams?"

"You go to hell, Mallory!" yelled the Sandman. "I'll trade you Colonel Carruthers' dream for the egg. That's the only deal I'll make! Take it or leave it!"

"Good-bye, Sandman," said Mallory calmly.

"I'll be back for it!" promised the Sandman ominously.

"It won't do you much good," said Mallory. "As soon as you leave the yard, I'm throwing it against the brick wall of the house as hard as I can."

"You can't! It has mystic powers that only I can tap!"

"Sure I can," said Mallory with a shrug. "Its powers are no use to me."

The Sandman looked like he was about to explode. Then, suddenly, his whole body relaxed, as if all the air had gone out of it. "All right, it's a deal."

"Fine. Give them back."

The Sandman muttered something in Chinese, made a strange gesture in the air, and bowed. "It is done."

"Winnifred?" said Mallory, turning to her.

A blissful smile crossed her face. "It's back!"

"Grundy!" yelled Mallory. "Is he telling the truth?"

A cloud suddenly took on the features of the Grundy's face. "He's telling the truth," it said in the Grundy's voice. "He has returned all the dreams."

"I don't suppose you'd like to tell me exactly what powers your pegasus has?" said Mallory.

"As you yourself said, they're of no use to you," replied the Sandman. "Only I can tap them, and I have no intention of sharing my knowledge with you, now or ever." He held out his hand. "My egg?"

Mallory handed it over to him.

The Sandman murmured another chant over it, then placed it on the ground. The amber egg seemed to glow with power, then began to shake. A moment later the amber shattered, leaving a tiny pegasus standing in the yard. Gradually it began to grow, and within ninety seconds it was full-sized. It stared curiously at the three humans and the cat girl, then lowered its head and began nibbling on the grass.

"That's it?" said Mallory. "The deal's done?"

"The deal's done," acknowledged the Sandman.

"Then I've got something to say to you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," said Mallory angrily, pushing the Sandman in the chest. "I don't like your business, I don't like your attitude, I don't like anything about you." He pushed him again, harder this time. "I don't ever want to see you in this neighborhood again, understand?"

Suddenly the Sandman reached out to Mallory's wrist, and an instant later the detective found himself flying through the air. He landed with a loud _thud!_

"How dare you lay your hands on my person!" raged the Sandman. "I am the Chinese Sandman! Who are you to tell _me_ where I can and can't go!"

He walked to the pegasus, grabbed its mane, and swung himself up to its back -- and yelped in surprise.

"What's going on?" he demanded, trying without success to free his hands from the blood bay colt's black mane.

"Wrong question," said Mallory, getting to his feet and approaching horse and rider. "It's 'What's going away?'"

"What have you done to me?" cried the Sandman. He lifted a leg preparatory to jumping off, and found that he was stuck to the colt's back as well.

"While you were busy demonstrating your martial arts on me, Felina covered your horse's mane and

back with glue." Felina proudly held up the paint brush and the empty bucket of glue for the Sandman to see.

"Fool!" grated the Sandman. "It will wear off in five minutes, and when it does..."

"Oh, I think it will last a little longer than that," said Mallory with a smile. He looked up to the heavens. "What do _you_ think?"

"With the spell I put on it, it will outlive the pegasus," said the Grundy's stern voice.

Mallory raised his hand and brought down with a resounding _smack!_ on the colt's rump. It whistled in surprise, then began flapping its golden wings. A moment later it was almost 50 feet above them.

"You can't get away with this, John Justin Mallory!" bellowed the Chinese Sandman. "I'll be back!"

"I don't think so," said Mallory. "In fact, I can almost visualize a strong wind blowing you all the way to Mongolia, and blowing you right back there every time you try to leave."

The largest cloud in the sky suddenly took on the Grundy's features and, pursing its lips, blew the pegasus so fast and so far that in a handful of seconds it was totally out of sight.

Mallory turned to Winnifred, a triumphant smile on his face, only to discover that his partner was crying.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Did that bastard manage to steal it again?"

"No, John Justin," she sobbed. "It's mine."

"Then why -- ?"

"It's so _beautiful!_" she explained.

"But you cried when he took it away from you. Why are you crying now?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Mallory sighed. "I guess not." He walked over to Felina. "Come on," he said. "I'll buy you a fish sandwich."

"Not now, John Justin," said Felina, leaping up to a branch of the tree.

"Why not?"

"I'm having a conversation."

"With who?"

"With the snake I just ate, of course."

Mallory walked around to the front of the office. Just before he entered, he looked up at the cloud that had so recently possessed the Grundy's features.

"Don't go too far away," he muttered. "You just may be the only sensible person I can talk with."

He sighed deeply and entered the office.

"Okay," he said to the magic mirror. "Let's get on with the movie."

"I'm not in the mood any more."

"All right," said Mallory. "What _do_ you want to show me?"

He spent the next two hours watching Tuffy Bresheen turn the 1949 roller derby into a preview of World War III.

-end-