

## Pale Dog

(A Marla Mason Story)

By

Tim A. Pratt

Marla carried a drawstring bag containing a dozen kidney stones recently passed by an elderly clairvoyant named Bainbridge. She swung the bag and hummed, almost dancing down the alley. She'd taken Rondeau along with her to see Bainbridge, and Rondeau had been the one to actually fish the kidney stones out of the toilet. Marla wasn't averse to doing her own dirty work, but given the choice, she'd let Rondeau do it for her every time.

Now Rondeau had his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his jacket. He wore a vintage purple zoot suit with a gold shirt -- a suit which he claimed was haunted by its former owner. Marla had yet to see any evidence of a ghostly presence, though Rondeau had been wearing the suit for a week straight, ever since he bought it.

Rondeau looked up at the looming brick walls on either side of them and sighed. "It seems like we're always skulking down alleyways. Why can't we take a nice stroll down a broad avenue, all with..." He waved his hands in a vague gesture. "With trees and shit. Happy little lampposts."

"Alleys are shortcuts," Marla said. "Shortcuts are our business."

"So me having my hands in a filthy toilet, that was in the service of the Great God Shortcut?"

"It beats cutting Bainbridge open and taking the stones out that way, doesn't it?"

"At least you would have done the cutting yourself," he muttered.

A white dog trotted into the alley. Marla didn't know much about dogs, but if pressed she would have said it was partly shepherd but mostly mutt. The dog was neither big nor small, but medium-sized -- just exactly the right size for a dog, Marla thought.

"Lovely pup," Rondeau said, squatting to pet the animal on the head. The dog panted and wagged its tail. Marla crouched and ruffled the fur behind the dog's ear. "Good boy!" It looked at her with peculiar, honey-colored eyes, and licked her hand. "It looks well fed, but it might be a stray. Do you need a home to go to, little pup? Do you? Do you need a Mama? I can --" Marla stopped the rush of baby talk she felt welling up within her. Slowly, she lifted her hand from the dog's neck. The dog didn't seem to mind the end of attention, and just kept looking at her, panting and wagging.

Marla eased away from the dog. "Rondeau," she hissed.

Rondeau looked up. "What?"

"Why are you petting that dog?"

"What do you mean? It's a nice dog. Aren't you a nice doggie? Aren't you just?"

"*Rondeau*," Marla said, in her most sandpaper-on-nerve-endings voice. When she had Rondeau's attention, she said, "Can you think of any two people *less* likely than us to stop what we're doing so we can pet a stray *dog*?"

Rondeau stopped patting, his hand hovering a few inches over the dog's head. He looked at the dog, at Marla, and back at the dog. "Ah," he said. "Right." He eased away to stand beside Marla. The dog didn't move, or seem troubled by their behavior, but kept wagging its tail, looking at them expectantly.

"I still want to pet it," Rondeau said. "And I *hate* dogs. A dog stole my dinner once when I was a kid, living under the Brandon street underpass."

"I don't hate dogs," Marla said, keeping her eyes fixed on the animal. "I don't even *think* about dogs. They're pointless. I have no opinion about them. But I want to take this one home, and give it a nest of blankets at the foot of my bed, and... and feed it *steak*."

"Do you think it's some kind of a... dog god?"

"I hope we haven't sunk that low, Rondeau, to get pushed around by a *dog* god."

"Well, what, then? Somebody's familiar?"

"Maybe, but it would have to belong to someone pretty damned powerful. Who runs a dog show? Some out-of-towner? It's nobody local; I would have heard." Marla was the head sorcerer in the city, chief of chiefs, first among equals. Not much slipped through her information network.

"And *I* would've heard if anyone of consequence came to town." Rondeau ran Juliana's Bar, and all gossip of relevance to the city's sorcerous population passed through there eventually.

"So."

"So."

"Shapeshifter?"

Marla snorted. She could tell a shapeshifter from a real animal. Only ordinaries and amateurs were fooled by shapeshifters.

"Maybe it's just a sport, a fluke." Rondeau looked down at the dog, whose tail had not slowed in its wagging. "An otherwise normal dog that was born with some psychic twist. It happens to people sometimes, so why not dogs? It makes us want to love it and take care of it... that seems like a reasonable, beneficial adaptation."

"Maybe," Marla said. "But then why is it out on the street with no collar, no tags? If this were my psychic dog, I'd take better care of it."

Rondeau shrugged. "Maybe the collar broke. Maybe --"

The dog moved, and Marla and Rondeau both stepped back warily.

The dog turned and trotted out of the alley.

"See?" Rondeau said. "Off to seek other suckers."

"I don't know..."

Rondeau shook his head. "You just don't like my theory because, if I'm right, the dog is harmless, and you don't know how to deal with anything harmless."

"Maybe that's it," Marla said. And maybe it was. But as they walked back to Marla's apartment, she kept her eye out for the white dog. She didn't see it, but she wondered if it could see her.

#

Marla set the last jar on the counter, the one holding Bainbridge's kidney stones. Another jar contained the toenail clippings of a man with amazing regenerative properties. A third (and this jar was made of cobalt glass, to mute the brightness) held a dram of the shining lymph of Mother Abbot. The remaining jar contained a goiter cut from the throat of a sacred cow.

"That stuff's nasty," Rondeau said, wrinkling his nose at the jars. He twiddled with the radio on the counter until he found some big band music. Marla didn't like that kind of music, but it was an improvement over the hard-driving dance-music Rondeau usually preferred. He hummed along with the radio for a moment, then took a sip of his gin and tonic and grimaced. "This drink is nasty, too. How can you stand this stuff? Tastes like pine needles."

"I like the taste of pine needles." Marla checked the seals on the jars. "That's it, we're set. Now we go to see Langford."

"Why can't you do a divination on your own? Why go to all this trouble?"

"The only divination I'm any good at is reading entrails, and I don't have the stomach for that anymore."

Rondeau swirled the ice in his glass. "You don't have the stomach. For reading entrails. Marla, have you just made your first joke?"

"It's my second joke at least. Don't you remember that knock-knock joke?"

"Ah, yes. I must have repressed the memory. But really, why are we going to see Langford? There are other methods."

She waved at the jars. "This is specialized stuff, to answer a specialized question, and for that, we need a specialist. Hence, Langford. Most of the seers in this city are cryptic and obscure. They can't help it -- that's just the way the information comes to them, the way it gets filtered through their minds. I don't have time to puzzle out secret meanings, though, and Langford can give me clear, unambiguous answers."

"He's creepy," Rondeau complained.

"This from the man with the haunted zoot suit?"

Rondeau looked at his sleeves worriedly. "Shh. You'll wake him up."

"I thought the dead didn't sleep?" She put the jars into a satchel. "Or else they don't do anything *but* sleep."

"Yeah, well, he's quiet sometimes, at least." Rondeau smoothed his lapels.

"Let's go. We have to catch the 7:35 bus."

"Why do we ride the bus, when we could take the Bentley? We never take the car." His eyes became dreamy, faraway. "I like cars. I want a big one, like you see in old movies, all chrome and curves, like a torpedo, a rolling bomb..."

Marla frowned at him. He'd never rhapsodized about cars before. "Cars are for ordinaries, Rondeau. We're underground people."

"Goddamn shortcuts."

#

Langford owned lots of property, and kept his current headquarters beneath one of the city's largest medical testing facilities. The place was like a hospital, without the inconvenience of actual patients. Marla and Rondeau walked down white hallways, past gray doors. People in lab coats passed by and gave them quizzical looks -- Marla in her cream-white cloak with the silver clasp in the shape of a stag beetle, Rondeau in his gold-and-purple zoot suit. The two of them looked disreputable, fundamentally out-of-place, but people who worked for Langford doubtless became accustomed to the occasional odd coming-and-going.

Marla led Rondeau down a dim stairway to a steel door with no discernible seams or apertures. A red button set into the wall glowed faintly. Marla pushed it.

"Yes?" Langford's voice came crisp and digitally clear from a concealed speaker

"It's Marla and Rondeau."

The door buzzed and swung inward. Marla and Rondeau stepped inside. Marla had been to Langford's lab before, so she knew to breathe through her mouth. Rondeau, however, was a newcomer, and he gagged. "It smells like a barnyard in here!"

"I always thought it smelled like a yeast infection," Marla said, her voice nasal. "But I've never smelled a barnyard." They stood in a small, featureless room, with another door at the far end.

"This is the anteroom, too. It *really* stinks in the main area. Langford says you get used to it. I never have."

The inner door opened, and Langford smiled and beckoned them in. He wore a lab coat, too, but his was spattered with strange stains, yellow and green and red. His round rimless glasses seemed on the point of sliding off his nose, and his brown hair was cut short. He might have been a cute young medical student, but Marla knew he was fifty years old at least, his youthful looks just one of the consequences of his dabbling in biological esoterica. Langford was commonly known as a biomancer, and his early studies had, indeed, been almost exclusively concerned with the effect of magic on living organisms (his menagerie of "transformed" creatures was supposed to be astonishing, though Marla had never spoken to anyone who claimed to have seen it firsthand). In recent years he'd expanded his field of inquiry, however, dabbling in quantum mechanics, superconducting technology, and other endeavors, applying the torque wrench of magic whenever traditional scientific approaches proved too slow or ineffective.

"Are you ready for the divination?" he asked.

Marla nodded, holding out the satchel.

"Oh, good," Langford said. His glee for the work never seemed to fade; he was the most consistently energetic person Marla had ever met. She wondered if he'd done something to step up endorphin production in his brain.

Langford took the satchel and preceded them into his workshop. In contrast to the gleaming, humming sterility of the labs upstairs, Langford's personal workshop was a riotous mess, part junk-shop, part science lab, part *brujo's* hut. One wall was covered with a particularly virulent green mold, and the last time Marla had visited, Langford had introduced her to the mold, and told her he was experimenting with "aggregate sentience." Innumerable shelves held pickled oddities, as well as terrariums filled with all manner of live creatures, from hissing roaches to fire newts to water dragons.

Rondeau was clearly spooked by the towering proximity of so many nasty, chitinous, slithering things, but Marla chose to ignore his discomfort, and Langford was wholly oblivious. The scientist led them to a lab table (its surface remarkably clear of clutter) and put the jars down beside a large metal mixing bowl filled with a viscous black substance.

"I've been thinking about scrying bowls," Langford said. "And quantum computers. The difference, really, is only one of perspective and application --"

"I don't need to know the details," Marla interrupted. "You know this stuff is beyond me."

"Oh, only the math," Langford said. "You could understand the outlines, if you wanted."

"I'm not interested in how you get the answers, just in the answers themselves."

"Of course," he said, and started taking the jars out of the bag. "The goiter isn't bad. I'd have preferred a goiter from a white buffalo, but this will do."

Marla laughed. "If I had a white buffalo, I could work up a magic big enough to get rid of Todd Sweeney forever, and I wouldn't need this divination."

"I can make a white buffalo, of course," Langford said, gnawing his lip. "But the naturally-occurring

ones are so much more effective."

"Sweeney?" Rondeau said. "You're here to ask a question about Todd Sweeney? But he's *dead*." Marla shrugged. "He's supposed to be dead. Everyone said he was dead. But one of Hamil's spies saw him in the lobby of the Whitcroft-Ivory building, alive and well. I'm here to figure out how that happened."

"Shit," Rondeau said, with no little awe. "Todd Sweeney's alive. That's impressive. If as many people wanted me dead as want *him* dead... Well. I'd be dead."

Todd Sweeney (and the name was a pretentious affectation, one of many the man entertained) had come to town the year before. It was obvious to everyone that he was a player, and he claimed connections to heavy operators in Thailand and French Guyana. He wanted what everyone wanted -- money and power -- and he was charming enough to get both.

But Sweeney had no qualms, no scruples, and no manners. He'd connived, cheated, and screwed-over everyone in the city to get what he wanted. *Everyone*, even dangerous men like Gregor and Hamil. Marla was the only one who hadn't done any business with him. When the council of sorcerers decided something had to be done about Sweeney, that a message had to be sent, Marla was the obvious choice to carry out the sentence. She was the only one who didn't have a personal stake in Sweeney's downfall.

But now, somehow, Sweeney had survived Marla's efforts.

That was a mistake on Sweeney's part. His survival made things between him and Marla a personal matter. "Yeah," Marla said. "I take his continued life as a personal affront. He tricked us somehow, or else tricked death itself. Langford's going to tell me what's what."

"Wow." Rondeau said, shaking his head. He walked over to one of the shelves, scowling at insects in a terrarium, then wandered toward a shelf of books.

"You have the question all worked out?" Langford said, opening the jars. "My, this is exceptional lymph!"

"Yes," Marla said. "Nailed-down and unambiguous. I went over the wording about a hundred times. It's airtight."

"Good. Because you only get one chance to ask, and --"

"I know, Langford," she said, not without affection. She liked the biomancer. His ambitions were incomprehensible to her, but they were also completely tangential to her own. That meant he was no threat. That meant they could be friends.

Langford added the contents of the jars, one by one, to the bowl of blackness on the table, stirring with a wooden spoon. The toenail clippings swirled away, as did the kidney stones, and the goiter appeared to actually *dissolve*. "It's like programming a computer," Langford said. "Inputting the parameters. If you assume that everything physical has a spiritual analogue --" He glanced at Marla, who had her arms crossed with impatience. "Ah. Sorry." He held the blue jar of lymph in his hand, light shining from the jar's open mouth. "After I add this, ask the question. Don't take any unnaturally long pauses, or the scrying bowl will think -- well, not *think*, I don't mean *think* exactly -- that you've finished. It's fascinating, really -- as near as I can tell, the vibrations your voice cause in the air are transmitted to the scrying fluid, which then performs some operation which is at bottom mysterious to me, and the answer *emerges*... I don't think the bowl is at all concerned with the *content*, it's like the thought experiment about the Chinese Room..." He glanced at Marla.

"Well. Anyway. Onward." He tipped the jar of shining lymph into the bowl, where it disappeared, not even changing the substance's color.

Marla drew breath to ask her question.

"What the hell is this dog doing here?" Rondeau shouted.

Marla's mouth fell open in shock and dismay. She looked at Langford, who stared fixedly at the bowl. "That's it," Langford said. "That's the question it's going to answer. I'm sorry, Marla." He slumped his shoulders for a moment, then stiffened. "*What* dog?"

Rondeau hurried back to the table... followed by the white dog they'd seen in the alleyway. "Marla, it's that dog again, I don't know what --"

"Rondeau," she said, her voice full of ice and spines. "You ruined the divination. Why can't you keep your mouth shut?"

"It's impossible," Langford said. "How did this dog -- nice doggie -- get in here? There's no possible entrance, no conceivable way, unless it came in with you two, but it couldn't have -- oh, good dog! -- it couldn't have, because I let you out of the anteroom myself..." He frowned. "Why do I want to name this animal 'Snowflake' and take it home with me?"

The scrying bowl spoke, then, in Rondeau's voice:

"The dog is here to guide the undying spirit to its final rest," it said.

Marla, Rondeau, and Langford all looked at the bowl.

Then they looked at the dog. Which was wagging its tail.

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"So," Marla said, feeding the dog a huge hunk of rare steak. "Do you think it's come to get Sweeney? That he managed to fool death somehow, and now the dog is on his trail?" The dog sat on a chair beside her, eating happily off his own china plate.

"It's possible," Hamil said, looking at the animal thoughtfully. Hamil was Marla's consigliere. An older sorcerer, and a man of considerable *gravitas* (as well as considerable physical bulk), he had the experience to temper Marla's sheer-power approach to problem-solving.

"Then why's it keep following us?" Rondeau asked from the other side of Hamil's table. He'd been sitting beside the dog at first, but it kept sniffing at his armpits, which made Rondeau nervous, mostly because he found the dog's behavior adorable, which was a wholly unnatural response for him.

"Perhaps it recognizes you as allies. It is surely a creature of great wisdom and perception..."

Hamil trailed off as the dog began licking its own testicles, with evident pleasure.

"That's so cute," Marla said, and then scowled.

"That dog is too creepy," Rondeau said. "Mostly because I don't find it creepy at *all*, when I know I should. What do we do now?"

"We go see Todd Sweeney, and let the dog get a whiff of him, and drag his ass to hell." Marla patted the dog. "I always thought hellhounds were black and breathed fire and such."

"Death rides a pale horse," Rondeau said. "Maybe this is Death's pale best friend."

Hamil chuckled. "Psychopomps -- beings that guide the dead from earth to the afterlife -- come in a number of guises. They appear as birds, quite often. Why not a dog?" Hamil took a bite of a chicken leg, then offered the drumstick to the dog.

Rondeau reached across the table and slapped Hamil's hand away, though under normal circumstances he never would have struck a sorcerer of such power. Rondeau's only strength lay in his ownership of Juliana's Bar and his friendship with Marla, and those could only offer so much protection.

Hamil looked at Rondeau with the implacable patience of a glacier.

"I'm sorry," Rondeau said, looking down at the table. "Really. But you can't give chicken bones to the dog. It might choke."

"We've got to find Sweeney," Marla said.

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Marla and Rondeau went to Sweeney's old place, a Victorian townhouse in a nice neighborhood. The house had been ritually defiled, the walls covered with lethally mis-drawn spray-painted runes, the corners filled with sea salt, the mirrors all shattered. Bird-shit covered the floor from the flock of pigeons that had been released inside, that now lived raucously in the living room chandelier. The house had been turned into one huge bad-luck death-omen. That had been Sweeney's first warning, which he had disregarded. As if he had nothing to fear from threats of death.

"I don't think he's been back," Rondeau said, noting the undisturbed dust. The dog sat down by his feet and scratched behind its ear. The pigeons twittered, and the dog barked. It was an adorable bark, a bark that would never annoy neighbors or frighten children.

"Let's check the bedroom," Marla said, and went upstairs. She opened the closet, which was empty but for a few wire hangers. "He came back for his suits. He was always vain about his suits." She glanced at Rondeau. "You're vain, too, but he had good taste. Has, I guess."

Rondeau tugged at his purple cuffs. "My taste is unimpeachable. How do you know it was Sweeney, and not some looter, who took the suits?"

She pointed to the carved designs over the closet door. "If anybody else passed so much as a finger through this doorway, zap! They'd be burned."

"That's pretty extreme wardrobe protection."

"I told you he was vain."

The dog trotted toward the closet door.

"No!" Marla and Rondeau shouted simultaneously. But the dog passed through the doorway without visible harm; the runes over the door didn't even glow. It was as if the dog wasn't even

there. It trotted back out, whining, seeming unhappy for the first time since they'd met it.

"So where do we go next?"

"Sweeney doesn't seem to be covering his tracks," Marla said. "He doesn't seem worried that we'll find him. Where would you stay, if you wanted to thumb your nose at every sorcerer in the city?"

"Heaven forbid I should do such a thing..." Rondeau considered, then snapped his fingers.

"Sauvage's place."

Marla blinked. "Oh, he wouldn't." Sauvage had been the chief sorcerer in the city, before Marla. He had been murdered, and he was a heroic, almost totemic figure in the city's history, its most accomplished and well-loved secret ruler. His former residence, a lavish apartment above the nightclub he'd owned, was practically a museum piece, preserved and untouched, the nightclub closed, the property owned by the council of sorcerers.

"Sure he would," Rondeau said. "Sweeney's an asshole."

The dog barked again, as if in agreement, though it might have been barking at a stray pigeon that had made its way upstairs.

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"I haven't been in here since the day Sauvage died," Marla said, pausing with her hand on the door handle. "It's been a long time."

"He was a hell of a guy," Rondeau said, tugging at his shirt collar. "My goddamn ghost is waking up."

"So long as it wakes up quietly."

"Like that's up to me. I'd rather it never woke up at all."

The dog scratched curiously at the door. Marla pressed her hand against the metal, closed her eyes for a moment, and nodded. "No traps. Not magical ones, anyway. I guess Sweeney could have a shotgun in there, with a string tied from the trigger to the doorknob."

"Cheerful thought."

Marla took a big, old-fashioned keyring from her pocket and unlocked the door. She eased it open and stepped into the dimness, her eyes quickly adjusting to the lack of light. Rondeau and the dog followed, the one muttering and tugging at his lapels, the other wagging its tail. They went past the shrouded jukebox, dusty chairs, and covered pool tables. "The stairway to the apartment is through the curtain, in the back." Marla led them through the curtain and up the stairs, ghosting silently. Rondeau followed, still fidgeting as if his suit itched, but doing so quietly. Only the dog made a sound, a low growl that Marla took as an encouraging sign. Sweeney must be upstairs. With luck, Marla wouldn't have to do anything to him herself -- the dog would do its otherworldly messenger thing and drag Sweeney's spirit away.

Marla paused outside the apartment door. Inside, someone walked around, singing to himself.

Marla touched the knob, found it unlocked, and shoved it open.

Sweeney stood in the middle of Sauvage's living room, wearing one of the dead sorcerer's oversized flannel robes. He held a glass of something amber and probably alcoholic in his hand. Sweeney raised a bushy eyebrow at Marla and lifted his glass in salute. "Ah, you tracked me down." His voice rolled majestically; that was half his charm.

Rondeau stood beside Marla, taking no notice of Sweeney. "Fucking ghost," he muttered. "It's all... fluttery."

Marla ignored him, stepping toward Sweeney. "This is the end."

"You've come to kill me, then? Really kill me? Not like your bully-boys did? You think you'll have more luck?" Sweeney didn't seem to be blustering. The whole situation appeared to amuse him mightily, which only incensed Marla further.

Marla touched the dagger at her belt, its hilt wound with bands of white and purple electrical tape. It was her dagger of office, symbol of her position as chief sorcerer, custodian of the city.

The dagger was very sharp.

"What I kill, stays dead," she said.

Sweeney sipped his drink, then belched softly.

The dog trotted around Marla's legs, cocked its head, and looked at Sweeney.

Marla grinned. "Have you met this nice pooch, Sweeney?"

The dog sprang.

But it didn't jump at Sweeney -- it jumped at Rondeau, a shocking lateral move that caught Marla by surprise. The dog hit Rondeau in the chest, and despite its relatively small size, managed to

drive him to the ground. The dog snapped its teeth near Rondeau's throat -- and, abruptly, Marla's could see the ghost that haunted the zoot suit. Rondeau *wasn't* paranoid or full of shit -- there was a paranormal infestation. The ghost flickered and shimmered in her vision, like a black-and-white film projected on a billowing curtain, but it was undeniably there, black hair slicked back, dimpled chin, desperate eyes.

The dog dug its claws into Rondeau's stomach and pulled, holding the ghost by the throat. Rondeau was quiet, perhaps knocked unconscious by the fall, perhaps simply shocked into silence.

"That's unusual," Sweeney said. "And it looks like such a nice dog."

Marla glanced at Sweeney, then back at the dog. They'd been wrong, she realized -- the dog wasn't here for Sweeney. It was here for the ghost in Rondeau's suit. The ghost must have been sleeping before, or dormant, or *something*, somehow beneath the dog's awareness, but now it had awakened, and the dog was on it. No wonder the dog had sniffed at Rondeau so intently; it must have sensed the ghost.

Well, this was unexpected, but it wasn't really her problem. Let the dog have the ghost. She'd take care of Sweeney. Since the dog wasn't after him, perhaps Sweeney hadn't worked some dark magic to cheat death. Maybe Marla's bully-boys had simply made an error, and believed Sweeney dead when he wasn't. Maybe they'd even killed the wrong man by mistake. She would make no such error now. She unsheathed her dagger.

Then Rondeau screamed. Marla whipped her head around and gasped in horror.

The ghost wasn't the only thing being pulled away by the dog's relentless tugging. A flickering image of Rondeau himself was coming out, too, tangled up with the ghost. At first Marla thought the ghost was holding on to -- to what? Rondeau's spirit? The ghost seemed to have its arms wrapped around Rondeau's spirit-self, like a shipwreck victim clinging to a piece of flotsam. But then Marla saw that the ghost's arms *disappeared* into Rondeau's spirit, that she couldn't tell where one left off and the other began. They were joined like Siamese twins, the ghost and Rondeau's spirit somehow *grown together*.

The dog was pulling out the ghost, and in the process ripping Rondeau's spirit from his body. Marla didn't think. She took a few short running steps and kicked the pale dog in the head as hard as she could. The moment her foot connected, she was wracked by remorse -- how could she have done such a thing, kicked a sweet little dog? The intensity of her guilt made her double over, gasping.

The dog spun off Rondeau from the force of Marla's kick, releasing the entwined spirits, which snapped back into Rondeau's body. The dog hit the carpet, rolled, then gained its feet. Marla expected it to growl and snarl, but it only lolled its tongue, wagged its tail, and raced off down the stairs.

But it would be back. Supernatural messengers weren't the quitting kind.

Sweeney could have escaped at any time during the confusion, but he was still there, half-smiling.

"Damnedest thing I've seen all week," he said. "Wish you hadn't kicked the dog, though. I liked it."

Marla drew her dagger, bared her teeth, and rushed at Sweeney.

He died like anyone. Nothing special. But she had Rondeau (who was sweating, shaking, and clearly frightened by his ordeal) wrap the body in a blanket. They would hold onto Sweeney's corpse for a while, to make sure it didn't stand up and walk away.

Marla called Hamil, and told him to send a car. She sat on the couch smoking a clove cigarette, looking at the wrapped bundle on the living room floor. Trying not to look at Rondeau. He didn't speak, either, just sat shivering in a chair.

Marla's cell phone rang, once. The driver was here. She picked up the wrapped corpse and slung it over her shoulder. "Let's go."

"Marla," Rondeau said, voice trembling. "That thing... what happened with the dog..."

"We'll talk about it later," she said, more disturbed by the whole thing than she wanted to admit.

Marla wasn't particularly good when it came to seeing around corners, and she didn't see a clear-cut way to solve this. That made her nervous.

And, somewhere out there, the dog was waiting. Wagging its tail.

#

"He's quite dead," Hamil said, tugging the blanket back over Sweeney's face. He frowned at Marla.

"You executed him rather... enthusiastically, didn't you?"

Marla sighed. "I wasn't in a very businesslike frame of mind. But he's dead, really dead, and that's

what matters."

"Yeah, all our problems are solved," Rondeau said morosely. "Except for the dog that's after me."

"The dog is only a symptom of your larger problem," Hamil said. "From what Marla described, this is more than a simple haunting- - this ghost is parasitic. This is a possession-in-progress. The ghost is devouring your spirit, fusing with it... and once the process is finished, you will be gone. Only the ghost will remain, in your body. Every minute you wear the suit, the possession progresses a little farther. I'm sure it's very difficult work for the ghost, taking you over this way... that probably explains the periods of dormancy. It needs psychic recuperation time."

*It also explains Rondeau's recent fascination with flashy cars and big band music*, Marla thought. The ghost was already partly assimilated, its personality bleeding into Rondeau's own.

"Already the ghost is so entwined with you that the dog cannot drag one away without taking the other," Hamil said.

"I should've never bought this suit," Rondeau said. "But it was only *four dollars*! And once I put it on... hell, I could tell it was haunted, but I looked so sharp! I figured, it's just a ghost, it's harmless, it's a psychic burp, an aftertaste, an echo. Nothing to worry about. I mean..." He looked at his shoes, frowning. "I haven't taken this suit off since I got it. I haven't showered in a week. I thought I just... liked the suit a lot. But now I think I was compelled to keep wearing it, just like I was compelled to be nice to that dog."

"So take the suit off now," Marla said. "Arrest the process."

"I doubt it will come off so easily," Hamil said.

Rondeau nodded. "It's like its part of my skin."

Marla touched her dagger's hilt. "So we cut the suit off."

Hamil shook his head. "Won't work. Unless you're prepared to take the skin with it."

Marla considered that. "Last resort," she said finally. "Other options?"

"I'm looking into it," Hamil said. The expression on his face told Marla that he had ideas -- just nothing he wanted to mention in front of Rondeau.

"Go lie down in the spare bedroom, Rondeau," Marla said. "Get some rest. We'll keep an eye out for the dog."

"Go away and let the grown-ups discuss things," he said, with just a trace of bitterness. "Got it."

"So," Marla said once Rondeau was gone. "Give me the bad news."

"Your knife," Hamil said. "It's... special, as you know. I realize you largely limit its usage to assaults on the material, but under the right circumstances, the knife can also be used to cut the *immaterial*... even the flesh of the soul."

"So you're saying..."

"You can cut the ghost out of Rondeau."

Marla stood up. "Hell, let's do it!" Seeing his dour expression, she sat back down. "What's the catch?"

"Think of the ghost as a cancer, and of Rondeau's spirit as healthy tissue. It's an imperfect analogy, but it will do. Imagine trying to cut away the cancer. Part of the tumor is easy to excise, and comes away cleanly. Sometimes, though, you have to cut away some healthy tissue along with the cancer. And sometimes..." He shook his head. "Sometimes, there's no way to cut out the cancer, because it's spread too far, and can't be removed without destroying vital parts of the healthy tissue. Without killing the patient."

Marla nodded. "So I can cut away some of the ghost, but not all?"

"Yes. Fortunately, unlike a cancer, the remaining parts of the ghost-- those you can't cut away -- will not continue to grow or spread. But those parts left behind *will* have an effect. A few of the ghost's memories, perhaps, or the ghost's taste in food, or movies, or sex. Or larger personality traits may carry over. And in the course of cutting away the ghost, you may unavoidably remove pieces of Rondeau's spirit, slice away sections of his memory or personality..." Hamil shook his head again. "It's an ugly business."

"What do we need to get started?"

Hamil waved his hand. "Herbs, oils, tinctures. We must create a charged atmosphere, one in which you can see and interact with the spirits. I'll get you a list of what we need."

"Do it. I'll go get the ingredients. You keep an eye out for the dog." She looked toward the spare bedroom, her gaze softening. "And try to make Rondeau comfortable, as best you can."

#

The best *brujeria* in the city had no fixed address. Hypotheses and explanations for that fact



abounded -- some speculated that the owner suffered under a curse that made her endlessly restless. Others said the owner was pursued by one of the infamous slow assassins, and moved every few days to stay one step ahead of the killer. Marla suspected there was some magic involved -- that the *brujeria's* impermanence added to its potency. In those stories about magic shops, weren't they always changing locations, appearing and disappearing without warning? There had to be something to that. Old stories almost always began in the mud of truth.

Today the *brujeria* was located in one of the huge old sewer pipes by the bay. The tunnel was big enough to ride a horse or motorcycle through, but as usual, Marla walked. It didn't take her very long to reach the shop, even though she was traveling by foot; she knew all the shortcuts.

Her boots squished in a trickle of water as she walked down the dark sewer pipe. When the river flooded, this pipe carried the overflow off into the bay, but it was relatively dry, now. Marla approached the light at the end of the tunnel, where the *brujeria* was.

Wind chimes tinkled in the breeze, dangling from the roof of the pipe over the *brujeria's* wooden shelves and tables. A man poked through the leaves and fronds piled on one of the tables, his back turned to Marla. The owner of the shop, a woman called Cecily, bowed slightly when Marla approached her. Cecily's face was painted kabuki white, the lips sharply outlined in red. She wore a sky-blue silk robe. Cecily did not speak. She never did.

Marla reached into her pocket and took out the list Hamil had made. She passed it to Cecily, who looked at it thoughtfully, then nodded and turned to a shelf filled with jars.

Marla looked at the other customer's back. She wondered if it was anyone she knew. There were plenty of apprentices, amateurs, and cantrip-throwers in the city that she didn't recognize; probably it was no one she knew, though even the lowest of the sorcerous kind would recognize her.

This guy had a nice suit, at least --

Marla narrowed her eyes. She tapped the man on the shoulder.

He turned, holding a bundle of herbs in one hand. When he saw Marla, he stumbled back against the table.

It was Sweeney. Here. Alive and well, even though Marla had left his body at Hamil's an hour ago.

Marla grabbed him by the throat, choking off his smile. "Cecily," she said. "Get me rope."

Sweeney's eyes widened.

"I'm not going to kill you this time," Marla said. "Not right away. I'm going to figure out what the hell your game is first. I might *hurt* you, to make you talk, but it'll be a while before I open your throat again. It never seems to work anyway."

Cecily brought her a coil of rope that, upon closer examination, proved to be a supple vine. "Tie his hands behind him," Marla said, and Cecily complied, then bound his feet as Marla instructed. Marla shoved Sweeney down, leaving him to lie on his side by the trickling water, wetness staining his suit. He whimpered. She kicked him, rather gently, all things considered, and his noise subsided.

"Get that stuff together," Marla said to Cecily, and she did so, her face completely serene, though that may have been an effect brought on by the white makeup. Marla poked through the jars on the shelves until Cecily tapped her on the shoulder. She handed Marla a brown bag with the top rolled down, and a piece of paper -- a neatly itemized bill. She'd even charged Marla for the vine used to bind Sweeney, but it was a reasonable price, so Marla didn't complain.

Marla tucked the bag under her arm and bent to pick up Sweeney.

That's when she noticed he was dead. Sweeney was face-down in the trickle. Somehow, he'd managed to drown in an inch of running water. He'd rolled over onto his stomach and stuck his face in the flow. That couldn't have happened by accident. That took *effort*. Marla said she wasn't going to kill him, so he'd killed himself.

He still clutched the bundle of herbs in his bound hands. Marla checked her bill, and saw that Cecily had charged her for those, too. Fair enough. Let Hamil have a look at the herbs. Maybe they were a clue.

#

The two dead bodies of Todd Sweeney lay together on Hamil's long library table, one wrapped in a sheet, the other still bound with vines.

"Most odd," Hamil said finally. He took the herbs from the second Sweeney's hands. "I'll find out what these are." He nodded to the bodies. "And I'll find out what those are, too. I'll get Langford to do an autopsy."

"And in the meantime..." Marla said.

"Yes. Rondeau. I've set up the ritual space, the circle is primed. Once Rondeau enters the perimeter, you'll be able to see his spirit, and the ghost's. Cut carefully."

"Will there be... I don't know... any mess?"

Hamil smiled grimly. "Not even ectoplasm. Though if the knife slips, and you cut his body, Rondeau will certainly bleed."

"What will happen to the ghost, once I slice it out?"

"It should stay with the suit. You're only cutting it away from Rondeau, not out of the place of its original haunting. Be sure to strip the suit off Rondeau right away. The ghost will begin re-attaching itself to his spirit very quickly."

"Okay. I'll get started."

"Watch out for the dog, Marla. Your cutting will almost certainly excite the ghost, and that could draw the dog's attention. Can you handle it?"

"As long as I can kick it before I start wanting to snuggle it."

Hamil stood. "I suggest drugging Rondeau, knocking him out. Having someone carve on your soul is probably quite unpleasant, if you're conscious to experience it."

#

Rondeau rested on the library table, his suit wrinkled and more than a little rank from constant wear.

Marla lit the candles and the bowls of herbs and whispered the incantations, words that seemed to twist in her mouth and wriggle off her tongue. Marla washed her hands in a bowl of wood alcohol and spring water, reminded of the scrying bowl at Langford's. She'd intended to ask for a way to effectively kill Todd Sweeney, but she hadn't gotten the opportunity. She still had to figure out how to get rid of Sweeney permanently, but saving Rondeau was more important.

When Marla said the last words, the light in the library changed, became crystalline; light with edges, with texture. As though Marla were looking at the world through a sheet of slightly prismatic glass.

And she could see spirits.

Her own, clinging to her skin like a pale aura. Rondeau's, which hovered a few inches above his body, drawn out because he rested at the focal point of the spell. And the ghost, all tangled up with Rondeau's spirit, melted into his chest.

The plants had spirits, too, and a few of the books on the shelves. Marla wondered if Hamil knew about those.

She washed her dagger in the bowl, then held up the blade and tilted it. The knife didn't have a spirit. It only glistened, wet and sharp.

The ghost muttered and shifted, then melted into Rondeau's spirit a bit more deeply.

Marla put the knife against the ghost's neck and felt resistance. She grinned. This would work. With a steady pressure, she bore down on the blade. It was like cutting through a stomach, the resistance of muscle, but nothing bone-hard, nothing too unyielding.

The ghost's eyes sprang open. It scabbled at the knife, and its fingers sheared away when they touched the blade. The severed fingers fell on the suit and melted into the fabric. The ghost swung its other hand at Marla, but she felt nothing -- the hand just passed through her. For the ghost, only the knife was tangible. Still, it writhed, distracting her. She bit her lip and cut slowly, carefully slicing at the place where Rondeau's spirit and the ghost were joined. At least she couldn't *hear* the ghost, and Rondeau was unconscious, unaware of what she was doing to him. Fifteen minutes later, perhaps halfway through the surgery, Marla heard the "tick-tick" of claws on the wooden floor.

She turned. The white dog stood on the floor, tail wagging, exuding benevolence and adorability. But now, for the first time, Marla could see the dog's spirit.

Dark and looming, the dog's spirit was a vaguely defined manlike shape with eyes like distant stars and long, multi-jointed arms that terminated in grasping fingers, the digits sprouting a profusion of hooks and barbs. Its squat, powerful legs ended in blunt feet with toes like ice-axes, feet that would dig in and not be moved. That was the essence of this creature, then -- a beast of function, something made to grasp things and drag them away.

The dog filled Marla's head with summertime and protective love -- she couldn't hurt it. Even the memory of kicking the dog oppressed her, filled her with twisting snakes of guilt.

But the dog's spirit -- that was monstrous and terrifying, and Marla could focus on it, the claws,

the feet, the squat body. Never mind that it was *part* of the dog, the *essence* of the dog. She could keep them separate in her mind.

She could attack the dog's *spirit*.

Marla rushed the dark thing, lashing out with her dagger.

The dog howled as a great rip appeared in its spirit, spilling darkness like a cloud of ink expelled into water. The dog turned around quickly, snapping at its own flanks -- and disappeared, with no fanfare.

Marla had wounded it, and driven it away.

She had little doubt that it would return, and that it would be angry.

Marla finished cutting the ghost off Rondeau intently, quickly. She felt certain she was being watched.

#

Rondeau wore a bathrobe and sat sipping tea from a white porcelain cup. He'd been in the shower for nearly an hour, cleaning away the stink from his body. "I feel normal," he said. "But then, I felt normal when I had the suit on, too, so who knows? But I feel like *me*." The suit was on the floor in the corner, a wrinkled pile of purple and gold.

"Good," Marla said. They would have to wait to see how much of the ghost was left, and how much of Rondeau she might have accidentally cut away.

The door opened and Hamil rushed in. "Homunculi!" he said triumphantly. "Duplicate bodies, grown in great yeasty vats of meat!"

"No shit?" Marla said. "So those bodies weren't Sweeney at all? Just decoys, copies?"

Hamil shook his head. "Copies, yes, but not the usual sort, not just stupid doppelgangers.

Sweeney's been moving his mind, his *soul*, from one body to another."

Marla whistled. "That's insane."

"There are dangers and repercussions, yes. The soul can be lost in transit. But even if the transfer goes perfectly, there's *wear*. Attrition of the soul. The edges get ground away, the substance of the spirit thins out. Every time Sweeney switches bodies, he loses a little of his humanity. He'll become more and more monstrous, until one day the thing looking out of Sweeney's eyes isn't really Sweeney at all -- isn't even *human*. But it's one of the paths to immortality, if you're stupid enough to follow it."

"Doesn't he need a charm, something to loosen his mind from his body? I didn't see anything like that on him..."

Hamil cleared his throat. "Well, yes. The herbs he bought at the *brujeria* are used to make that charm, actually. To be effective, the charm must touch skin. Normally such a thing would be worn as a medallion, against the chest, but that's risky, of course -- the medallion can be snatched away, torn off. Sweeney found a more clever place to put his. He wore the charm on the *inside*."

Marla looked at Hamil blankly. "He ate it? Aren't those herbs poisonous?"

Rondeau laughed. "I think what Hamil means is, Sweeney shoved the charm up his ass, like a mule taking cocaine across the border."

Marla shook her head. "The things people do to live forever. So. He has a freely migrating spirit. But he can't just hop from body to body at will, can he?"

"His current body has to die, before he can relocate. But he doesn't seem to have much trouble dying at will. He probably has poison and razor blades secreted on his person, things he can use to kill himself, in a pinch."

"So we knock him out, get the herbs out of him, and cut his throat, right?"

Hamil nodded. "Hardly glamorous work, but that seems to be the only course of action."

"Okay," Marla said. "Let's find him. I bet he's at the best table in the best restaurant in town."

"Bastard's probably a terrible tipper, too," Rondeau said.

#

"Todd Sweeney, sleeping the sleep of the wicked," Rondeau said. He wore a powder-blue tuxedo jacket over a black t-shirt and faded corduroy jeans. Marla almost found his attire refreshing, after the horrible monotony of the zoot suit.

Sweeney lolled in a wingback chair, his hair disarrayed, his jaw agape, quite unconscious. "What did you give him?" Marla asked.

"Some cocktail of Hamil's. One whiff of a soaked handkerchief, and he passed out. Hamil says he'll be down for hours yet." Rondeau grinned. "You should have seen me. I crept up behind him in the men's room at the Chatterly Club, and I dragged him out the *window*. Slick as can be.

Nobody saw a thing."

"I don't suppose you, ah, removed his talisman, did you?"

Rondeau wrinkled his nose. "Look, I fetched kidney stones out of a toilet, yes, but I have my limits. I'm not going butt-fishing in Todd Sweeney."

Marla sighed and pulled on a latex glove. "This is what being chief-of-chiefs leads to, Rondeau. The dirtiest of dirty work. But once we get that charm out of his bottom, he'll be as mortal as you and me. Assuming we can get every sprig of leaf out of there. I don't look forward to the process." She took a step toward Sweeney, then paused. Slowly, she smiled. "But then again, maybe there's another way... Strip him for me."

Rondeau began to protest.

"No, no," Marla said. "I just need you to make sure he doesn't have poison, or anything he can kill himself with."

Rondeau stripped the body, finding a vial of blue liquid and numerous razor blades. "Now get some rope," Marla said. "We're taking him to Langford's clinic. There are observation rooms there, places where we can keep Sweeney, where he won't do any harm to himself."

#

"You're a fiendish bitch," Rondeau said with admiration. He leaned against the unbreakable glass, watching Sweeney begin to stir. Sweeney had been in the bare white cell for several hours already, his hands cuffed behind him, lying unconscious on his side. "But what if the dog doesn't come?"

"It'll come," Marla said. "It's been to Langford's clinic before. It knows the way."

Sweeney opened his eyes, blinking stupidly at the light. He squinted toward the wide window, then nodded. "Hello, Marla," he said, his voice transmitted to a speaker on Marla's side of the glass.

"You've caught me again. You're certainly persistent." He looked down at himself, frowning, then lifted his gaze to Marla, somehow meeting her eyes through the one-way glass. "Imprisonment is one thing. But why have you dressed me in this hideous gold and purple suit?"

"Is it a good fit?" Marla asked.

Sweeney glanced up at the speaker in the ceiling, where Marla's voice emerged. "It fits all right, yes. But it smells terribly of body odor. And it's... *itchy*. Almost as if the suit is moving against me."

"That's how it starts," Rondeau said with authority.

"There's been enough time for the ghost to get its hooks into him, don't you think?" Marla said.

Rondeau shrugged. "Hamil said it doesn't take long to get started. So now... we wait for the dog." Sweeney struggled to his feet, leaning against and sliding up the wall. "Well," he said. "It's been a pleasure. But I have other engagements." Sweeney lowered his head and ran toward the far wall, hitting his head with such force that the *crack* of collision was transmitted clearly through the speaker.

"Shit!" Marla shouted, and ran for the door. "Why didn't we tie his feet?"

"We were too busy being pleased with ourselves," Rondeau said.

Marla wrenched open the door while Sweeney sat, dazed, on the floor. "Bugger," he muttered, and tried to stand up so he could make another suicidal run. Marla reached for him -- then stopped at the sound of claws on tile behind her.

She turned. The dog stood in the doorway, its tail wagging like a metronome. Curls of blackness wisped away from its pale back. Its eyes were as dark and unreflective as lumps of coal. Its adorable form was coming apart at the edges.

Marla backed away, holding her hands before her, palms out. "Nice doggie," she said softly.

Rondeau was backed all the way up against the window, flattened out, unmoving, his eyes fixed on the dog. "I should be terrified," he said, hardly moving his mouth. "But it's still *cute*, black eyes and all."

"I know," Marla said.

The dog sniffed the air, its head swinging toward Sweeney.

Sweeney blinked at it, still dazed from his collision with the wall. "Dog," he said. "White dog. Care to sic me, doggie? Put those pretty teeth of yours in my throat, so I can get on with my evening?"

He laughed. "But you're a nice doggie, aren't you? You wouldn't kill me, no matter how I --"

The dog jumped, landing on Sweeney's chest, driving him to the ground. It snapped its jaws at his throat and began pulling.

The ghost in the suit came out, eyes wide and empty of intelligence. The traumas the ghost had

recently experienced -- the first assault by the dog, the sharpness of Marla's dagger -- had ruined its vestige of a mind.

But even with its senses wholly removed, the ghost had tried to take over Sweeney's body. Its hands disappeared into Sweeney's chest, as if gripping his ethereal heart. As the dog dragged the ghost out, Sweeney's spirit came with it. The spirit-Sweeney looked around, bewildered, the face of a man who has been living high, unable to comprehend that the good life has come to an end. That life *period* has come to an end.

The spirit-Sweeney mouthed a single word -- "Bugger" -- and then both of them, the ghost and Sweeney's spirit, were torn from the body and the suit.

Marla expected the dog to drag them away. Instead, it began to *gobble* the ghost, taking great bites and swallowing the spiritual substance. It swallowed Sweeney, too, unable to -- or uninterested in -- telling the difference between the two. Marla and Rondeau watched in sick fascination as the spirits were consumed.

The dog finished eating and licked its chops. It trotted toward the door, and Marla and Rondeau both relaxed.

Then the dog stopped. It turned its head to look at Marla, its black eyes terribly intent. It trotted toward her, and Marla swallowed. She wanted to whimper, but if this was the end, she wanted to go with some dignity. "I'm sorry I kicked you --" she began.

The dog growled, and Marla stopped talking.

With great deliberation, the dog lifted its leg and pissed all over Marla's boots. It pissed for a very long time, looking at Marla all the while, as if daring her to move, daring her to kick. Marla simply stood, glad the boots were waterproof.

When the dog finished, it walked out of the room without another glance.

Rondeau exhaled. "I thought you were dead for sure."

"I am dead for sure." She gestured toward the puddle around her feet. "Dogs piss to mark their territory. I've been marked."

Rondeau's eyes widened. "Oh, shit."

Marla shrugged. "I didn't expect to live forever." Then she smiled. "But I kicked the hell out of that dog once already, and I'm not afraid to do it again. No matter how cute it is."

Rondeau laughed. He went to Sweeney's body and crouched. "I wonder how much I can get for this zoot suit at the vintage clothing store?" he asked.

-End

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