

BAD LUCK, TROUBLE, DEATH, AND VAMPIRE SEX

GARTH NIX

I never thought Granny could die from the simple act of biting her own lip.

Not that it was quite as straightforward as that, of course. She would have been fine if that single drop of blood hadn't fallen in her brandy. Or to be fair, if I hadn't then jumped to attend her with a handkerchief and knocked the glass so that it flew across the room, brandy and blood entering the small open mouth of the bronze gargoyle on the corner of the mantelpiece.

All of which would have been no problem at all if it hadn't happened at the exact stroke of midnight, with the light of the moon falling just so through the dormer window.

I mean, how dumb is it to set up your immortality so that it can be rescinded as easily as that?

I looked down at the still corpse of the most powerful witch-queen in the nether-world, my own adopted grandmother, and was beset by a swirling mixture of powerful emotions, the uppermost one requiring me to vocalize it.

"Holy shit! What the fuck am I going to do now?"

The gargoyle licked its lips and answered me in a depressed monotone.

"You and me both. I'm gonna get my ass melted down for this. You, they'll probably string up by the—"

"Shut up!"

"With silver mandolin strings," concluded the gargoyle.

"They'll have to catch me first," I muttered. I bent down and took Granny's original 1911 model Colt .45 from her shoulder holster and thrust it through my belt. Then I started to go through the secret pockets of her bullet-proof cardigan. Not that I expected to get much. Granny's power had mostly been in her voice. She didn't go in much for charms and objets d'art. But there was always the chance I might find some money.

Outside, wolves began to howl and owls hoot in curious unison, soon joined by the clamor of the bells that hung at the top of the elevator shaft.

"They know," said the gargoyle. "They're coming. You're going to unscrew me or what? You don't want to leave no witness."

"I haven't got time to find a screwdriver," I muttered. There was nothing in Granny's pockets so I ducked into the fireplace and checked out the chimney. It wasn't wide enough for me to climb up unaltered, and there was a silver mesh grille across the top.

"There's a bunch of stuff in *Dextrise and Malboc*, volume four," said the gargoyle, indicating the bookshelf with its long, impressively scaly tongue. "Including a screwstone."

"Why would I want a screwstone *now*, for fuck's sake?" I hissed. There had to be another way out. The windows were barred with silvered iron rods. The fire door led not to a fire escape, but to a place no one would go without lengthy preparations, heavy-duty magical ordnance and a lot of backup. Well, no one except Granny.

"To undo me and the mesh on the chimney," said the gargoyle. "What did you think screwstones were for?"

I didn't waste time uttering a snappy retort, particularly since I'd have to think of one first. Where the hell was *Dextrise and Malboc*, volume four?

"They're all D&M on that shelf," said the gargoyle. "It's the one with the big gold '4' on the spine."

"I know," I snapped. The much heavier than expected volume slid out under my panicked fingers and fell open on the ground. A red leather bag with a gold drawstring lay inside the hollowed-out pages. I grabbed it and for a quarter of a second wondered if it would be wise to open the bag.

During this brief instant of caution, the elevator bell dinged, and the arrow above the door began to move from Z to A. The bells in the shaft ceased their jangle and the wolves and owls grew quiet. Little bastards probably didn't want to miss hearing my screams.

I opened the bag. Inside there was a rough grey stone the size of my fist, a mouldy bean that looked like it'd come off the rim of a bachelor's week-old lunch plate, and a copper coin green with verdigris. Or possibly a circular piece of verdigris that had got some copper on it.

I took out the stone and waved it in the direction of the gargoyle and the chimney, focusing what passed for my will on it to undo said items. Since I forgot to turn my head I was almost blinded by the rocketing screws that hurtled towards the stone, and one did scratch the middle knuckle of my left ring finger, which was probably a portent or an omen, or maybe both. What would I know, I failed Introductory Augury. Twice.

The gargoyle fell to the floor but managed to arrest itself with its tongue, ripping off most of the mantelpiece in the process. I hastily picked it up, shoved it in the red bag, put the bag in my mouth and transformed. I had a moment's unease as the .45 got stuck full-size in my groin for a second, before it transformed into a pistol-shaped patch of hair.

"That's your alter-form?" said a muffled voice from the bag, followed by a surprisingly girlish giggle.

"Shut the fuck up!" I snarled. Scotty dogs may not be very big and they may have curly hair but by god we can be vicious when we want to be. Just ask a rat.

On the other hand we can't climb as well as a cat, or I'd have been out of that chimney in half the time. Or fly like a bat, enabling an even speedier escape. Or do other cool and useful stuff that would be very helpful when trying to get the hell out of the lair of She Who Must Be Listened To Until She's Done.

I'd already been there for four hours when the brandy accident happened, and Grandma had hardly drawn breath the whole time. The key phrases in her diatribe were "Total disappointment," "I can't believe you tried to fuck a vampire" and "cancellation of contract forthwith".

That last bit wasn't going to look good when they wheeled in the guy with the Frankenstein-sewn back-to-front ears and he had a listen to Granny's last hours.

"They'll think I did it on purpose," I mumbled as I dropped the bag on the roof. Fortunately it only fell as far as the gutter. "Because she was going to cancel my deal."

"You mean you *didn't* do it on purpose?" asked the gargoyle. It had forced the top of the bag open with its tongue and I could see one baleful glowing eye peering at me. "It really was an accident?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Wow," said the gargoyle. "You been having a lot of accidents lately?"

"I don't think so—" I started to say, just as the tiles under my four little paws slipped and I flipped over and had to scabble madly to avoid going over the side.

"You need to get checked out," said the gargoyle.

"I need to get the hell out of here first."

Getting out was going to be difficult. The rooftop was only a temporary haven and as I looked around it looked more and more temporary and less and less a haven. For a start, while the sky had been clear through the window, there were low, dark clouds clustering around the roof. I mean really dark clouds, the kind that usually flickered with internal lightning as they rumbled overhead and unleashed enough rain to make Noah piss himself. Which would only make matters worse when the lightning was unleashed. Conductivity-wise that is—

"You gonna sit there all night staring at the clouds or what?"

"Can't go down," I muttered. "Too far to jump to the Boaser building, and the Allyn's roof is too sharp... what's with these clouds?"

The clouds were pushing in over the gutters, boxing me in to a space about ten feet wide. If they were clouds, which was becoming less likely with every passing second. They were clearly things that looked like clouds but were actually something else extremely horrible that I didn't know about and should never have had to even glimpse, let alone get up close and personal with.

"We'll have to translate," I said. "What are you over there?"

"You'll find out," said the gargoyle.

I did the dance as the clouds rushed in and just as their ghastly grey wispy tendrils were about to grab sensitive portions of my anatomy, I spoke the Word, and the gargoyle and I were suddenly somewhere else and I was no longer a Scotty dog and the gargoyle was no longer a small piece of gothic sculpture.

We were in a nondescript office corridor and she was a six-foot-six mahogany-skinned nightclub bouncer with a shaved head, wearing red wraparound sunglasses, a gold racing suit

unbuttoned to the mid-riff and a mayoral-style chain of tiny ceramicised advertising patches from numerous oil and tyre companies that was doing very little to conceal her rather fascinating cleavage.

I, on the other hand, was back to my normal unprepossessing human self.

"Well, hello," I smirked, turning on the charm.

She smacked the sex charm out of my hand and slapped my cheek for good measure.

"What's got into you, moron? Your life's in danger. Besides, I'm simply not attracted to little men with weak sorcery."

"You didn't have to break my charm," I complained as I picked the pieces of the charm off the floor and clicked them together. Then just to be sure she wasn't toying with me, I tried my roguish smile and added, "Maybe you'd like to handle something—"

When I picked myself up off the floor she was grinding the remains of the charm into dust under her heel.

"Now I can believe you tried to hump a vampire," she said. "You must be desperate. Whatever gave you the idea that you would enjoy cold undead flesh anyway?"

"Books," I muttered. "Lot of 'em. Vampire hunters. Sexy undead. Thought some of it must be true. Leakage of reality from the nether-world..."

"You should know better than that."

"OK, the vampire sex wasn't so pleasant," I protested. "But I'm going to try a werewolf gal next, they're warm-blooded—"

This time I lay on the ground a bit longer before I got up, while the former gargoyle stood over me, frowning.

"That's to teach you to stop dreaming with your dick. Now get up. They'll be on our trail in a minute or two."

"What do I call you?" I asked gingerly. My lower lip was already starting to swell up from the latest punch. "I can't call you gargoyle."

"Call me Gurl."

"Girl? What kind of name is—"

"Gurl, with a 'u'. Can't you hear the difference? Uh oh—"

Both of us turned at the same time, just as the ceiling tiles exploded and something bright and shimmering blue dropped in, cold blasting ahead of it, sucking the breath out of my lungs. I had the .45 in my hand and I just managed to squeeze off two shots before my trigger finger froze, the gunshots booming in the enclosed space.

There was a horrible, high-pressure screech and then the thing collapsed in on itself and turned into a low wave of dirty iced water that rushed past me high enough to permanently stain the crotch of my pants. Gurl, of course, had managed to jump up and hang from a light fixture, escaping the air-conditioning elemental's final act of terror.

As warmth and feeling slowly returned to my hand, I eased my finger off the trigger, groaning slightly with the pain. Inside, I was giving thanks to Granny for packing a decent pistol with a full arcane load. A lot of folk who travel between the realms go for smaller caliber stuff, easy to conceal snub-nosed .38s, or 9mm autos with a big magazine, fourteen or fifteen rounds. But when it comes to stopping power, you can't beat a good old-fashioned Colt .45 with a 230gr Federal Hi-Shok round jacketed in silver. Well, of course, you can beat it with say a 10 gauge riot gun firing solid silver slugs or just the sheer firepower of a nice automatic weapon like a MAC-10 or an MP5K PDW or if the shit is really serious and you've got the room, some sort of light anti-armor weapon, like what they used to call a LAW, or SRAW, though nowadays if you can get your hands on an AT4—

"Wipe that drool off your face and let's move!" snapped Gurl. "That elemental was only the first across. Move it!"

"Uh," I grunted. What the hell was going on? I'd never had an internal monologue about the relative stopping power of various firearms before. And come to think of it, I never used to have a sex charm. Or wanted to fuck a vampire. I mean, I had a girlfriend... or I used to. Come to think about it, I wasn't even sure what had been going on in the last few weeks...

"I've been cursed," I croaked as Gurl dragged me down the corridor and down the internal fire escape.

"No shit!" snapped Gurl. "You only just realize that?"

"Yeah. It's just not me, this fascination with firearms and sex with the undead and—"

Gurl caught me as I tripped over the landing, arresting my movement an inch before I collided head first with the wall.

"Clumsiness," I finished weakly.

Gurl pushed the door open with her little finger and caught me again as I almost fell down the stairs.

"Concentrate!" she snapped. "It's a curse, remember? It can only get you when your mind wanders."

Like after four hours of Granny lecturing me. That was enough to make my mind wander about as far as any mind could go, thus letting the curse get a really good grip.

I concentrated. Steps, I told myself. Keep the feet on the steps. But who the hell would want to curse me? What had I been doing these last few weeks? Besides jumping vampire bones? What was happening with my current case? I could lose my investigator's licence—

"I said concentrate!" said Gurl. She hauled me back and pushed me through the door to the lobby. "Do you recognize where we are?"

"The lobby of a building," I said weakly and then, "Ow! What did you do that for?"

Gurl ignored me. Lithe as a... a really lithe kind of animal that I couldn't quite think of... she ran to the revolving door and looked out. While she looked out, I looked around. It was a lobby, so I was right, there. But there was no one in it, despite the sunshine coming in through the front windows and the door. And the black-letter on white marble signboard had a lot of very strange entries. I mean the words weren't even English. Come to think about it, the letters weren't even English. Or Chinese. Or Cyrillic. This was a symbol puzzle, the kind that a top-flight private eye could solve in a few minutes, so I could do it in thirty seconds...

"Hold on," I said. "What's this private eye crap? I'm not an investigator in the alter-world! I'm a gardener. I own a company that does office plants! Green Thumb Inc., that's me! What the hell is going on?"

"Shut up!" said Gurl. "Listen."

I shut up and listened. It was quiet. Very quiet. Way too quiet for any kind of office block in the city. There should have been traffic noises. People shouting. Annoying beep-beep-beep sounds from pedestrian crossings and stupid escalating ringtones designed to deafen everyone except the owner of the phone.

"You idiot," said Gurl. "You've translated us to an ur-space."

"No I haven't," I protested. "Listen, I can hear *something*."

The something got louder and clearer. It was the distant baying of a very large number of hounds. Nasty, strangely metallic hounds. It sounded like a cross between a hundred hubcaps falling off the back of a truck on to a hard road and a similar number of dogs waiting in line to get neutered at the vet's.

"Uh, not anything normal though," I conceded. "Uh, sorry. I guess this *is* an ur-space. We must be close though, or you'd still be a gargoyle."

"Translate us!" demanded Gurl. The baying was getting louder, and it was coming from both outside the building and from the stairwell. It could only be a sorcerous hunting pack of firewrought hounds or maybe red iron firedogs or perhaps even brazen wolves, the kind of enemy where you wanted a nice secure pillbox with a narrow firing slit and a tripod-mounted M60 or better still a .50 cal, several boxes of silver-mercury explosive-tipped ammo, a few spare barrels—

"Concentrate! Translate us, wizard!"

"Oh yeah," I said. I'd forgotten I was a wizard too, a green wizard, not a somewhat sorcerous private eye with a proclivity for bizarre sex and firearms. "It's too soon to do the dance again. I'll have to do... uh... something else."

"Be quick," said Gurl. She took a fire extinguisher and wedged it in the revolving door, then tore off the top of the reception desk and ripped it into three pieces. She chose one length as a club and put the other two through the handles of the stair door, barring it shut.

The desk was two-inch hardwood, so I was reminded once again to treat Gurl with respect. It wasn't so difficult, not since the sex charm had been destroyed. But my mind kept up its clumsy wandering, trying to go down paths liberally strewn with lady werewolves toting firearms. The curse was fighting my efforts to shake it off, and that meant that I had to get an unusually large and powerful handgun, perhaps a S&W Model 500 .50 revolver and hunt down the perpetrator—

I shook my head. The curse was too strong. If it had been a spell it would have been weakened in the translation from the nether-world and I could defeat the residual effects by mere force of

will. That meant there was a curse locus on me somewhere, something powerful enough to stay with me through a shapechange and a translation.

I put my hand in my mouth and felt my teeth, quickly pulling each one to see if any were loose. One was. It came out with a stench of sulphurous gas that nearly choked me. Coughing and wheezing, I drop-kicked the tooth to the far side of the lobby.

Just then the first of the hounds arrived at the bottom of the stairs. The baying got a lot louder and now it was accompanied by terrible thuds and ominous cracking sounds as they threw themselves against the door.

I took stock very quickly. I had none of my usual apparatus. No trowel, no fertilizer, no seedlings, no selections of bark. Just a .45 pistol with perhaps five rounds in it which I was suddenly less interested in... and a red leather bag with a copper coin and a bean of unknown provenance. I could probably use the bean, but green magic is slow. I had to do something fast, but I didn't have anything...

Except that cursed tooth I'd just thrown away.

"Hold them off for a minute!" I shouted, as I dived across the floor and picked up the tooth again. I held it in my left hand as I took out the copper coin, holding that in my right fist as I mentally reached out to pull in whatever sorcerous power there was in this ur-space. Ivory, or ivory-equivalent, and copper were certainly not green magic, but people—particularly my enemies—often forgot that I wasn't just a green wizard.

I'd forgotten myself, but fear is a powerful mnemonic catalyst. I was also the owner of a not very successful office plant business that survived thanks to a grandmotherly subsidy in the alter-world. Not that this was relevant in the current circumstance. What was relevant was that in the nether-world I was a green wizard of the fourth circle (so only ninth-lowest of the low). But not only that, thanks to my grandmother's insistence on me signing up when I was twenty-one for three of the most miserable and toughest years of my life, I was also a duty-served Knight of the Bright Hill and so I could call upon aid from any of its outlying garrisons. Well, I could if I was prepared to pay for it in extra years of service.

Funnily enough, with imminent death by tooth and claw only the other side of a door and my only ally an admittedly extremely tough door-bitch, I was prepared to pay; and with ivory and copper, I could call in someone very heavy duty.

At least I hoped I could. I had no idea where we were, which garrison was closest, and even if anyone useful would be there. But at that point, even a knocked-kneed ancient arbalist would be better than nothing.

As my call went out, there was a particularly loud thud, a very sharp crack and the door burst open. A fire dog pushed its flat, red-hot head through the smashed timbers and looked puzzled as Gurl smashed her club on its skull. The club burst into flames. The fire dog growled, and swiped at Gurl with one very large, very hot paw. She leaped back, and it thrust itself almost through, its hindquarters stuck for the four or five seconds it would take for the door to finish burning down. At the same time, the revolving door shrieked and the top of the fire extinguisher blew off, a fountain of foam gushing towards the ceiling. Fire dogs backed away from the foam, their burning rear-ends melting holes in the glass.

There was a lot of smoke, a lot of baying and quite a lot of screaming. Mostly that was Gurl's battlecry but I suspect some of it was more the pathetic scared kind coming out of my own throat.

There was also the shimmering sound of distant cymbals being struck with feathered hammers, and the floor shook as something very heavy arrived.

"Sir Gardner," said a voice behind me. "You beseech my aid?"

I didn't so much turn as revolve on the spot.

"Yes!" I said. There was so much smoke that it was hard to see our reinforcement. But as she took up so much of the lobby it was kind of hard to come to grips with the totality of her anyway. There was the sheen of bright scales, the glitter of a line of diamond teeth, the sudden sweep of a surprisingly prehensile tail about the size of a dozen fire hoses braided together, a couple of talons the size of the fire dogs... and then there weren't any fire dogs. Just distant yelping that rapidly got more distant, and a nasty crunching sound, which would be the two or three of the pack that didn't turn tail fast enough.

I lay on the floor where the air was kind of OK and gasped. Gurl leopard-crawled across to me and propped nearby.

"It knows I'm with you, right?"

"She," I whispered. "Lady Alyss of the Corben Ravelin."

I raised my head a little and peered into the smoke.

"Gramercy, Lady Alyss," I said.

"A trifle," replied the dragon. "Have you the tokens?"

I threw the coin and the tooth up to where I thought her head was. Smoke swirled and parted, and I caught a glimpse of Alyss's serpentine head, dark as gunmetal, in stark contrast to her shining wings and body.

"Ach," grunted the dragon. There was a ghastly hawking sound and then the tooth shot past me like a stone from a slingshot and shattered on the floor. "A most disagreeable curse lay on that tooth, Sir Gardner."

"I regret that I was forced to rely upon such a token, and I apologise unreservedly for its use," I said. Possibly I had just got myself out of the skillet and onto the stove. Alyss was notoriously touchy about her honor, and I would have no chance fighting a duel with her. Even with all my stuff, and all my wits about me.

"Indeed," sniffed Alyss, her intake of breath clearing out most of the smoke. "I shall let the matter pass, as you were clearly in extremis, Sir Gardner. Till we meet again, at the Ebb Muster."

"Till we meet again, Lady Alyss," I said, standing up to bow. I'd just scored another obligation. Calling one of the Order's dragons was worth at least two years' service from the likes of me, and Lady Alyss had just made it official. Come the Ebb Muster, I had to report or be forsworn.

Of course, I'd be well dead by then, because Grandma's folk would catch up with me long before then. Or whoever put the curse on me in the first place.

Lady Alyss vanished, taking the remainder of the smoke with her, except for a little bit in my lungs that I had to cough out. Gurl clapped me on the back so hard I thought one of my natural teeth might fly out.

"The bastards got me at the dentist," I said, once I'd stopped coughing. "Or one of them was the dentist. I never should have let them give me the gas; they must have translated me while I was under, implanted the cursed tooth and then sent me back."

"Afraid of the pain, were you?" said Gurl. "Somehow I'm not surprised."

"Come on, it was a crown replacement," I said. "But I could have taken the pain, I just enjoy the gas... oh shit. *A crown replacement*. That is fiendishly clever. A cursed tooth for a crown replacement... Granny the witch-queen... they made me into an assassin that would kill with bad luck!"

"Got to give them points for that," said Gurl. "Has to be the new queen that set it up, I guess, and we get offed by the either the old queen's guards *or* the new queen's friends."

"I'm sure that's their plan," I said. My brain was finally getting itself into thinking order. "But if we can survive Granny's guards, we might have a chance."

"Why?"

"Because no one can guarantee who the new witch-queen will be. It's not something you can plan on, or subvert. I mean there's at least a hundred and one heirs of the blood, by birth or adoption. Each heir gets to hold the old witch-queen's knife, and put on the necklace and the stupid hat, and those three things *choose*... or not. The consequences of them not choosing are severe, so most potential heirs don't even try. Besides, who would actually want the job?"

"Whoever it is, we'd better find somewhere to hide out right *now*," said Gurl. "It'll be bats next. Or the Inner Coven. We'll have the best chance in the alter-world. Can you get us there yet?"

"Hang on a minute," I said. "I'm thinking."

"We have to—"

"Shhh!"

I was thinking. Very hard. The central part of it being my own question: *Who would want the job? Even Granny used to talk about giving it up.*

This was closely followed by another thought. What if someone just took Granny's place, without undergoing the test of the knife, the necklace and the hat? Sure, they'd lack the secret powers, but given enough front they could at least command the Inner and Outer Covens, the Familiar Circus and so on. If that's what they wanted to do, all that "say unto him go and he goeth" stuff.

"I think I've worked out what's going on," I said. "Part of it, anyway. We have to go back to the nether-world."

"Are you fucking crazy?" hissed Gurl. "Soon as we cross, they'll be on to us. And I'll be a

gargoyle again, which let me tell you is not something—”

“I’ve got a plan,” I said. I did too, or at least I had the seed of a plan. Hopefully it was going to grow into something. “Uh, why *are* you a gargoyle there by the way, and... uh... human here and in the alter-world? I mean, a gargoyle in the nether-world should just translate across as an ugly desk ornament or a novelty USB flash disk or something—”

“Thanks,” snarled Gurl. “I’m not permanently a gargoyle in the nether-world. Your grandma turned me into one, because I wouldn’t let her into a party.”

“That’s all? Seems a bit harsh, even for her.”

“I did try to throw her down the steps,” said Gurl.

“Well, you got off lightly,” I said. “She must have liked you. But you won’t be a gargoyle in the nether-world now. You translated out, which would break the initial working, and now Granny’s dead the spell won’t reattach.”

“Oh yeah,” said Gurl. Her face, which had been pretty much scowfied since we’d crossed over, suddenly brightened. “I forgot about that. It’s hard to imagine her gone. I was kind of... kind of getting used to hanging out with her, if you know what I mean.”

I did know what she meant and I realized in retrospect I should have wondered about it a lot more on my previous visits. Granny was the last person who’d let anything sentient hang out in her office. Which begged the question of why she’d stuck Gurl on the mantelpiece of that particular fireplace. It wasn’t as if she’d been short of fireplaces. Or gutters, which is where you would expect her to put a once-human gargoyle as a punishment, out in the snow and rain for the owls to crap on.

It was another piece of the puzzle and though I now knew I wasn’t and never had been a private detective, my brain had finally kicked into feverish activity and was sorting everything out.

Step one, of course, was to survive long enough to find out whether I was right or not.

“If we head a couple of blocks west in this ur-space, to the point that correlates with the Solomon Piazza in the nether-world, we can translate straight through. There’ll be a crowd there for sure, waiting for news. We can give it to them.”

“What?” snorted Gurl. “Like, ‘Hi, Gardner here. I’m the guy who killed the queen, only it wasn’t my fault’?”

“No,” I said. My mind was really firing now. “What I’ll do—”

“Explain as we run,” said Gurl. Her head tilted to one side, and one of her pointy ears twitched. “Something else just came through up above.”

I couldn’t hear anything, but I didn’t hang around to listen. We quickly climbed out through the broken revolving door and hot-footed it down the street—quite literally as there were hot... let’s call them coals... all over the place from the frightened passage of the firedogs.

“Tell me,” I panted. “How did you know the bag with the screwstone and stuff was in Dextrise and Malboc, volume four?”

“Granny talks... talked to herself a lot,” said Gurl. “She was muttering to herself the other day about the screwstone, she kept on repeating it, ‘The screwstone is in Dextrise and Malboc, volume four’.”

“Right at the next avenue,” I interrupted. “The cunning old madam.”

“What?” asked Gurl as we sprinted around the corner and both slowed at the same time. Third Avenue looked mostly like it would look in the alter-world, minus cars and people, except that about half a mile ahead it curved sharply upwards, as if someone had peeled the road back and let it curl. I allowed my gaze to follow the arching road up into a drearily blank sky of photographically neutral grey sky and wished I hadn’t. That absence of color always makes me feel nauseous.

“Shit!” exclaimed Gurl. “Not even a stable ur-space!”

She started running even faster, with me following as best I could. Unless this ur-space was completely whacked-out of alignment, the Solomon Piazza was contiguous with the weird little gothic shrine traffic island at the intersection a block ahead. All we had to do was get there before the whole avenue curled back on itself and disappeared into nothingsville.

Oh yeah, we also had to do it before the dozen witches on the heavy broom I could hear snorting overhead caught up with us. From the sound of it they’d stuffed at least a score of pegasi spirits into a serious lumberjack-territory pine pole to create a big, fast broom that could carry them and all their hardware.

Not that they’d need to actually catch up to us, though it is much harder to hit a running target

from even a big broom than you'd think, either with a wand or a firearm.

This didn't stop them from trying. I wondered how they'd managed to get an antique punt gun aboard even a super-broom, as the hundreds of silvered pellets it fired bounced all over the road a few steps behind me and the bang echoed inside my ear-drums and a good proportion of the rest of my head.

"At least it'll take them five minutes to reload," I shouted. "Unless, they've got two, which is highly un—"

The boom of the second punt gun or rebored nineteenth century swivel gun or whatever the hell it was made us both leap rather than run the last five paces. As we landed, I immediately went into the dance, which strangely enough is much more difficult to do as a human than it is to do in dog-shape. Particularly the bit where you wag your tail widdershins in decreasing circles.

At the last moment, Gurl grabbed my hand and we translated, a microsecond ahead of some kind of hex that I saw as a horribly tusked boar of glowing red light racing towards us.

We landed in the middle of the piazza, which as I'd predicted, was full of nether-worlders of all shapes and sorceries. All of them craning their necks to look up at the perpetually dry fountain statue of Simon the Magus, upon whose broad shoulders the candidates for the succession would stand and try the knife, the necklace and the hat.

As I'd also expected, my no-good cousin J'nelle was rapidly taking the steps carved into Magus Simon's outstretched arm, jumping them three at a time. She had a broad-brimmed black hat on her head, a stone knife in her hand, and a necklace of gold and amber around her neck that went very nicely with her Dolce & Gabbana new season dress.

There was also a pack of ridiculously oversized timber wolves patrolling a nice clear circle around the statue, keeping everyone at a suitable distance, and overhead three score and seven traditional Athenian-style owls were doing the same service in the air. For all I knew, there were ninety-nine magical moles beneath the paving stones too, making sure all was hunky-dory underneath.

The wolves spotted us first. In the second before they started baying for blood, specifically mine, I ripped out the gold drawstring from the red velvet bag and flung it over Gurl's head. I managed that, but before I could get the bag on her head, she'd locked my arm behind my back and pushed me into a very uncomfortable position, one with which I had some familiarity from my student days when frequenting a particular pub.

Over on the statue, J'nelle pointed at me and hissed and the crowd went "oh!" as Grimmaur, the leader of the wolves (yeah, well his name was Cedric in the alter-world and he was a seeing-eye dog) growled out, "Get the assassin!"

Wolves leaped, wizards, witches and various beasties and denizens ran in all directions, owls hooted and began to dive, and the big broom with the punt guns translated through overhead and cleaned up the owls before scraping the side of the statue and crash-landing into the bowl of the fountain, where its dozen witches fell off. Through it all J'nelle was screaming something about claiming the throne.

"Put on the hat," I shouted to Gurl. "Put on the damn hat and take the .45! You're it, stupid! Granny wanted you to take over!"

The arm-lock tightened with a vengeance and for a second I thought I was done for. The wolves were mere yards away, J'nelle had drawn a wand from her sleeve. It was all over, I'd made a stupid gamble and I was going to pay for it with my life.

Then I was twisted around and thrown to the ground. Gurl leant over me. The velvet bag was on her head, only it didn't look like a bag anymore. It had grown a tall crown and a stiff brim and turned the color and texture of a very sleek black cat. The cord was around her neck, but it had also transformed into a narrow torc of reddish gold set with amber.

She slid the .45 out of my waistband, her finger around the trigger curling to match her smile. I heard the safety catch... catch on my belt and I shut my eyes. That pistol needed only the lightest trigger pull...

"Hold!" roared Gurl and I opened my eyes just in time to cop a face-full of wolf saliva as Grimmaur's jaws set open an inch away from my face with a very loud click. Gurl stood above me, looking taller and tougher than ever, with the hat and the necklace and a knife the color of gunmetal with a cross-hatched grip.

"Get to your kennels," said Gurl quietly. She looked up and added to the owls, "And you to your roost."

J'nelle squeaked something, possibly a protest, which was a mistake on both counts.

"Take her with you," added Gurl to the wolves and the owls. "Half each, mind."

I shut my eyes again, purely from exhaustion and a sudden failure of the massive amounts of adrenaline that must have been previously pumping through my system. I had no problem with watching cousin J'nelle get dismembered. The crowd liked it too. I could hardly hear anything over the applause and the shouts of "Bravo!"

A sudden pressure on my chest made me open my eyes again. Gurl had set her boot on my sternum and was pressing quite hard.

"I don't need CPR," I croaked.

"Not yet," said Gurl. "You've got some questions to answer first. Like when did you figure it out, and what did you mean when you said 'cunning old madam'? And how come I'm eligible to be her heir?"

Gurl didn't need the wolves to keep a nice clear space about her, and everyone wisely had their backs to us, but I could see a lot of mostly pointy ears tilted in our direction. They all wanted to know the answers too.

"After the curse lifted, I could think a bit straighter," I said. "Eventually I realized that unlike me, Granny had passed portents and auguries with flying colors. I mean she *lectured* in prophecy and that thing they do with cold spaghetti to see potential futures... she must have always known when she was going to die, and of course she'd never just leave the choice of her successor to that stupid..."

I paused for a moment. Two slitted eyes had appeared in the crown of the hat, two baleful yellow eyes...

"She'd never leave it to chance, I mean," I babbled. "I figured it had to be you because she'd kept you in the office. So you could learn stuff from her, and overhear her talking to herself, and so you'd be there when the time came. Then you got adopted, in the classic way, by drinking her blood. One drop's enough to do the job."

"I don't really want to be queen. I just want to run my club, do some time on the door—"

The "really" was a giveaway. She was already into it. I could tell. Or I thought I could, which meant I probably couldn't. I opened my mouth anyway.

"The nether-city's just like a club really. Let some in, kick some out, take their money, entertain them, serve them expensive drinks . . ."

"Technically you're still her assassin," said Gurl, getting back to the primary subject.

"Ah, can I get up now please?" I asked. "So I can grovel properly? And wipe some of this wolf snot off my face?"

Gurl lifted her boot. I staggered to my knees, palmed the old bean that I'd been lying on after it fell out of the hat, and wiped my face with my sleeve.

"I suppose it could be worse," she said thoughtfully. "It beats being a gargoyle. I have to thank you for that, anyway."

"You do?" I asked. I was more than a little bit nervous about what Gurl was going to do with me. The bit about "technically an assassin" hadn't helped.

"But I seem to remember that immediate execution is the normal punishment for regicide."

"I was set up!" I exclaimed. "J'nelle cursed me. I was only the assassination weapon, not the perpetrator."

I didn't mention the small fact that I now had a deep suspicion that Granny wasn't quite as dead as everyone thought—that J'nelle was almost certainly as much a patsy in the whole affair as I was—and that the whole thing wasn't so much a regicide as an abdication, with a little clearing up done for Granny's chosen heir.

"I guess you were just an unwitting pawn," said Gurl.

I bit back a retort. The old cursed me would have said something, but there is value in strategic silence. Not to mention bowing one's head lower and generally trying to be submissive. I even thought about whimpering but decided it wouldn't help.

"Don't plan on me supporting your stupid plant business in the alter-world though," said Gurl.

"Doesn't matter," I sighed. "I'll have to sell the company or shut it down anyway. Presuming you don't execute me, I'll be reporting to the Bright Hill soon enough and they only give us two weeks off a year."

"Yes, I suppose I owe you for the dragon's intervention too," said Gurl thoughtfully. "Under the circumstances, a pardon should be more than enough."

She touched my shoulder with the knife and I felt a chill strike through to the very marrow of my bones, and I have to tell you that is way colder than you ever want to get and it also greatly increases the chances of getting the flu somewhere down the track.

Gurl raised her voice and said, "You are pardoned, Wizard Gardner, and commended for all you have done for Us!"

There was a sprinkling of applause, and just about everyone turned around to watch me creakily rise to my feet, which just goes to show they were all listening like rabid keyhole eavesdroppers anyway.

I bowed and when Gurl offered her hand, air-kissed a point about six inches above the back of it. No point taking too many risks in one day.

"Come and see me when you're on furlough," said Gurl quietly, for my ears alone. "I am curious to see who you are actually, when not under a curse. And I still have a few questions—"

"As you command, ma'am," I said hastily, and backed away. When I'd done the obligatory thirteen steps, I bowed again, did my most courtly pirouette and resisted the temptation to run like the clappers for the nearest assisted exit to the alter-world.

I couldn't help but glance at the bean I had tightly clutched in my hand, noting the discolored patches that with every second were looking eerily like a familiar face. I wanted to plant it in a good self-watering pot and report early to the Hill before Granny grew herself a new body and once again engaged in the business of haranguing her descendents, particularly me.

I just knew the old bat wouldn't die as easily as that....

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