

Memoirs of the Witch Queen

by Ron Goulart

Ron Goulart has contributed a ghost story or three over the years, but when was the last time he gave us a ghost writer story? Here he brings us the tale of Paul Sanson, a scribe with a rather unenviable job.

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He didn't sneeze.

That surprised him because he always sneezed a few times on awakening. It was allergy season in this part of Connecticut.

As Paul Sanson was swinging out of bed in his small rented cottage, the phone rang. He knew who that was. They called him just about every other morning at a few minutes beyond eight.

Yawning once, he went into the small living room and picked up the phone off the rickety coffee table. "Yeah?"

"Paul Sanson, please," said a polite and unfamiliar female voice.

"Speaking."

"My name is Amy and I'm calling about your International Bank Credit Card account."

"What happened to Tom?"

The young woman sighed. "Well, I suppose I really shouldn't tell you this, Paul," she said hesitantly. "Yet, since you've been dealing with Tom for several weeks—"

"I've been harassed by Tom and his false claims that I owe—"

"I'll get to that, Paul," said Amy. "First, though, let me explain about Tom." She sighed sadly once again. "He drove his motorcycle off a bridge late yesterday afternoon and both he and the motorcycle sank in the river without a trace."

Holding back a pleased chuckle, Sanson inquired, "Which river was that?"

“Oh, I’m afraid we can’t give out specific information pertaining to our actual location. Suffice it to say that it was a very deep river.”

“During the entire time that Tom hounded me about the money that I don’t actually owe you people,” said Sanson, scratching his left ankle with his right foot, “he never once mentioned that he was a motorcycle buff.”

“He wasn’t. That’s what’s so odd, you know,” she said. “He only bought the motorcycle early yesterday afternoon. He’d never owned one before.”

“Sad,” observed Sanson, not meaning it. “So you’ve taken over his task of calling me at odd hours to demand that I pay sums which I—”

“No, Paul, that isn’t the reason I called.” Her voice brightened. “It turns out you were right about having made those arrears payments.”

“I was? I mean, I was, yes.”

“In fact, you have no back balance at all and you can start using your card again immediately. Your new credit line is fifty thousand dollars.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Fifty thousand dollars,” Amy repeated. “And since you’re on our Especially Valued Customers list, Paul, you don’t have to make any payments for eighteen months.”

Making a puzzled noise, he said, “Well, that’s ... nice,” and ended the call.

He walked barefoot over to the living room window, gazed out into the patch of woodlands that surrounded his cottage. A light rain was falling. “How did I get from deadbeat to Especially Valued?”

He was eating bran flakes and scanning the front page of the *New Beckford News-Pilot* when the phone rang again.

Sanson returned to the living room. “Hello?”

“Hey, dude. Did I wake you up?”

“No such luck, Rudy. What’s wrong now?”

“Deadline,” said his youthful editor in far-off Manhattan. “Does that word have any meaning for you?”

“Greensea Publishing hired me to *polish* Inza Warburton’s memoirs, not write them,” he reminded Rudy Korbin. “I’ve faxed you folks my revisions of every page she’s given me thus far.”

“When we hired you for such an outrageous fee, we assumed you’d be able to speed her up and—”

“Fifteen thousand dollars is not an outrageous fee. It’s actually on the modest side. The fellows who used to mow my lawn earn more than that in—”

“You know we have to have a completed manuscript in three months, dude. Certain people here at Greensea are getting—”

“Inza Warburton is aware of that, Rudy.”

“I had to fight to get them to take her book for the winter list,” said his editor. “And it was a battle to get you hired. Since I’ve worked with you before and you live just one town over from that self-styled witch, you were—”

“She’s a witch queen,” corrected Sanson. “Meaning she’s top-seeded in the quack sorcery community. You knew that, Rudy, which is why Greensea wanted her memoirs in the first place.”

“Be that as it may,” said Rudy, “we’ve got to start seeing more pages damned soon. Otherwise ... otherwise ... otherwise....”

“Rudy?”

Sanson heard a bouncing thump, followed by the sound of stacks of fat manuscripts sliding off a desk to thunk onto a thick rug.

“Rudy?”

Then a young woman said, “Paul, this is Polly.”

“What’s happened to Rudy?”

“Well, I don’t exactly know. He’s lying here on the floor of his office in some sort of coma and his feet are twitching and his face is a lobster color.

I have to go get help. We'll call you later."

"Yeah, okay."

For several minutes he sat in his only armchair, looking out not at the damp, overcast day but at the blank tan wall behind his small sofa.

Rising slowly, he said, "I'd better go see Inza Warburton."

* * * *

The carved wooden door was yanked open with such force that the brass gargoyle knocker rattled and thumped. A large, plump arm reached out from the shadowy hallway, pulling him in out of the rainy early afternoon.

"So good to see you, hon."

Two large plump arms encircled him and, as the heavy oaken door was booted shut, he was hugged enthusiastically by the immense Inza Warburton.

She pressed him closer, engulfed him in her vast bosom, lifted him several inches up off the venerable hardwood floor.

"Oof," Sanson managed to say.

Releasing him, Inza asked, "Well, are you impressed?"

"By what? Your smothering abilities?"

In her middle thirties, she weighed about 320 pounds. She wore her black hair cut short and slicked down. As usual, she was clad in one of her dust-colored muumuus and an Egyptian Eye of Osiris medal swung from her ample neck on a silver chain.

"Tell me about your morning," the witch queen invited, taking him by the arm and leading him into the cluttered and dim-lit living room.

The beam-ceilinged room, where he usually worked with Inza, was crowded with glass-doored bookcases, dusty display cabinets, several claw-foot tables, an assortment of stuffed animals—some of which Sanson had never been able to identify—sprawls of bright colored cloth, a yellowed human skull, a large crystal ball that glowed greenly in a dark corner, and a scatter of incense sticks sending up colored smoke of various scents.

As the immense woman arranged herself in a faded purple Morris chair, he asked, "You had something to do with what's been happening?"

She grinned. "I've had the feeling of late, dear heart, that you don't actually believe in me and my powers."

Sanson sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair. "I told you when we started working on your memoirs three months ago, Inza, that I didn't believe in witchcraft. But I'm a pretty good writer and I can put stuff into satisfactory form for—"

"Every word we've written together, Paul dear, is the truth. I especially want you to accept me for what I am, since, as you ought to know by now, I've grown quite fond of you."

He moved his chair a few inches farther away from the witch queen. "It isn't really a good idea for me to get too involved with the people I work with on books."

"But I can really help you, Paul," she told him. "Look what I did this morning, for example. Cleared up your allergies, canceled your major debt, fixed it so your editor won't bother you anymore."

"You used witchcraft to—"

"Witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, a bit of Satanic help," she amplified. "Haven't you been paying attention to what we're writing? I really do possess considerable occult powers, dear."

He took a deep breath. "You're capable of killing Rudy from a distance?"

"Relax, he's not dead. Merely sidelined."

"He was in a coma and—"

"Telephone." Inza gestured at him with one fat beringed hand.

"What?" His cell phone chimed. He pulled it free of his jacket pocket, opened it. "Hello?"

"Rudy is all right, Paul," said Polly, the assistant Greensea Publishing editor, in a voice not rich with optimism. "He's not unconscious anymore

and that strange crimson color is gone.”

“I guess that’s good news. Where is he?”

“Right now, I’d estimate, he’s en route to Iowa, Wisconsin.”

“Oh, so?”

“He’s going to be recuperating at his sister’s place for a few months.”

“Didn’t know he had a sister.”

“None of us here at Greensea did. But Rudy was always sort of secretive about his personal life.”

“Will you be editing our book now?”

“Actually, no. They’re sending a new fellow over from Germany. That’s where, you know, the munitions conglomerate that owns us is based. From Munich, but I don’t know his name yet.”

“Lazlo Font,” provided Inza from her purple chair.

“Polly, if you talk to Rudy, give him my best.”

“Sure will. What a day, huh?”

Ending the call, he frowned across at the witch queen. “Who the devil is Lazlo Font?”

“Our new editor, hon,” she answered. “Much less of a martinet than dear Rudy and—”

“Rudy was a nitwit, not a martinet.”

“And despite the fact that he was schooled in a very strict military school, Lazlo is an easygoing gent. We’ll have plenty of extra time to finish up the book and ... telephone.”

His phone chimed. “Yeah?”

“Polly again. Sorry to interrupt you while you’re probably working on the book, but I forgot to tell you something.”

“Which is?”

“We’ll be cutting you the check today, mailing it out tomorrow, Paul.”

“What check?”

“It’s a special extra advance against your share of the royalties. Rudy apparently arranged that just before he was ... um ... stricken. Twenty-five thousand dollars. Well, goodbye again.”

Rising, he moved closer to Inza. “Some more of your witchcraft?”

She spread her fat hands wide, making a very unsuccessful attempt to appear guileless. “It might be if I were a true witch, one with supernatural powers. But you’ve been calling me a self-styled—”

“No, nope. That was what Rudy called you,” he told her. “Myself, I’m well on the way toward accepting your claims. And I really don’t mind your using magic to get me more dough than I got from Greensea in the first place.”

“Well, thank you, dear.”

“The thing is, Inza, this other stuff—causing my creditors to drive motorcycles off bridges, inflicting Rudy Korkein with the plague or whatever it was—that’s got to cease.”

When she sighed, her entire big body quivered and her bracelets jingled. “Very well. No more black magic or sorcery on your behalf,” she promised. “I do hope Lazlo isn’t going to upset you.”

“Christ, what’s wrong with *him*?”

“Nothing, it’s only that he’s two hundred and twenty-six years old,” she replied. “Don’t worry, though, it really doesn’t show.”

“How did he get to be two hundred and twenty-six years old?” Sanson sat down again, slumping.

“By not dying. Vampires are noted for that.”

He stood up. “Great, Inza, just fine. You replace an editor who’s a nitwit with one who’s a certified member of the undead.”

“Lazlo’s going to be a lot easier to get along with.”

Sanson began to pace, as best he could in the cluttered living room. “You’re still going to have to come up with some more pages of your memoirs.”

“Now that the pressure from dear Rudy is gone, I’m feeling inspired.”

He returned to his chair, nearly tripping over a ceramic salamander. “Fine, I’ll come by Friday afternoon and we can—”

“I’ve been thinking, hon, that we could work a lot more productively if you were on hand.”

“Meaning?”

“On hand, on deck, aboard,” she explained. “What I mean is, live here in the mansion. There are plenty of spare bedrooms and, as you know, I had that gourmet kitchen installed with all the handsome cabinets and racks for—”

“I’m a writer, not a chef,” he informed her. “I have a house. My computer is there, my files are there. My privacy is there, Inza. No, I don’t want to be moving in here.”

“Very well, dear. I won’t press you,” she said, grunting as she raised her bulk up from the chair. “You’re sure there aren’t any other little problems you’d like me to solve for you?”

“No, please. No more black magic.” He rose and headed for the way out.

“All right. I’ll be expecting you Friday, around two.” She started lumbering toward him.

“Around two, fine.” He departed before she could bestow a farewell hug.

* * * *

As the afternoon waned, the weather worsened. Driving down the winding road from Inza’s hilltop mansion, Sanson encountered not only heavy rain but crackles of bluish lightning and closer and closer rumbling booms of thunder.

The politely liberal FM station he usually listened to in the car seemed to be broadcasting nothing but static and he switched to the only jazz station in the area just in time to hear the nasal-voiced disc jockey announce that the next hour would be devoted to an uninterrupted playing of the best of the Tijuana Brass.

He turned off the radio.

The windshield wipers, which he'd been meaning to replace, were making that strange keening noise again while slapping away at the pelting rain.

A huge flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the tree-lined stretch of road and he saw the young woman.

She was standing at the side of the lane, slim in a white raincoat and green scarf and holding a small yellow polka dot umbrella over her head.

He slowed, stopped alongside her and lowered his window halfway. "Trouble?" he called out into the rain.

She came hurrying over to his car. "Nothing serious. If it wasn't for this darn storm, I could walk home."

"Car break down?" He asked, although there was no sign of an automobile.

Nodding, she pointed toward the woodlands beyond the narrow road. "Yes, it's parked up in the cemetery," she answered. "Won't start."

"The Old New Beckford Burying Ground?"

She smiled. "Sounds strange, I know," she said. "But I'm an artist and I was sitting in my car sketching some of the old eighteenth-century gravestones and crypts."

"Well, get in," he invited. "I'll drive you home."

She walked around the front of his car, folded up the umbrella and settled into the passenger seat. "I don't suppose you'd want to take a look at my car?"

"That's about all I'm capable of doing, looking," he admitted. "Repairs

are beyond me.”

She smiled again. “I’ll call my garage when I get home,” she said. “My name’s Sara Bardsley.”

“Paul Sanson.”

“Oh, the writer?”

As he commenced driving again, he glanced over at her. “You’ve actually heard of me?”

“Sure, I have eclectic tastes,” Sara answered. “I read the children’s book you did and—”

“I wrote that six years ago, when I was married and in a better mood,” he said. “I do mostly nonfiction now.”

“That’s a shame.”

“True, but what I write now helps me handle alimony and household expenses better. Where do you live?”

“I didn’t think I’d want to live on a street with a spooky name,” the young woman said. “But when I saw this cottage on Gallows Hill Road, I really loved it. So I bought it.”

“Bought it?”

“With my inheritance,” she explained. “I was working in commercial art for a few years and then when my Aunt Theresa left me some money, I decided to do what I wanted to do. That was painting. Trite maybe, but gratifying. At least for the five months I’ve been at it.”

“I could use an inheritance about now.” He spotted Gallows Hill Road on the right and guided the car onto it.

“My number is 303. For some reason 303 comes *after* 305. Just around the next bend,” said Sara. “What are you working on now, Paul?”

“Nothing much, a sort of ghostwriting job.” He located a silvery mailbox with the numbers 303 neatly painted on its side and turned on to a rain-drenched driveway.

The cottage was small, built to resemble something from an England of two or three centuries earlier. Tudor-style with a simulated thatch roof, small stained glass windows, and considerable ivy.

“Good thing,” remarked Sara as he parked near the red front door, “you aren’t here on a sunny day. You’d probably find the place too cozy.”

“Looks pretty cozy even in a thunderstorm.”

“Since you’ve been so helpful, can I offer you a cup of coffee?”

“Sure, fine.”

The young woman ran to the door, unlocked it.

The parlor was uncluttered and had beamed ceilings and sturdy old furniture.

“Hold on a minute,” she said as she left the room. “I’ll call the garage and make some coffee.”

Wandering around the warm, cozy room, Sanson noticed several framed watercolors on the off-white walls. All depicted ruined tombstones, decaying crypts, or bleak autumnal landscapes.

From the kitchen she called, “Decaf?”

“Sure.”

When she returned a few moments later with the two coffee cups and a small plate of scones on a tray, he realized that without her coat and scarf, Sara was a very pretty young woman. Slim, about twenty-five and with auburn-colored hair. She was extremely pale.

“You feeling okay?” he asked as he took a cup of coffee from the tray she’d placed on an end table.

“Certainly. Why?” She sat on the arm of the sofa.

He touched at his own cheek. “You seem pale.”

“You’ll have to get used to that.” She stirred two spoons of real sugar into her cup. “I’m just naturally pale. And sometimes wan.”

He said, "In order to get used to that, I'd have to see you again."

"Obviously," she said.

* * * *

Friday was yet another day that started off wet and gray. But despite the gloomy weather and the fact that he'd be spending the afternoon with the witch queen, Sanson was in a splendid mood as he shaved.

"I'm feeling chipper," he decided while studying himself in the mildly warped medicine cabinet mirror. "Although most people don't use that word anymore."

The cause for his good mood was the fact that he had a dinner date tonight with Sara Bardsley. When he'd suggested they eat at his favorite steak house, The Meat Department, over in South Norwalk, she explained that she was a vegetarian. So they were going to dine at a new place called Viva Las Veggies in Westport.

"I can eat nothing but vegetables once a week," he said as he finished shaving and slapped on an aftershave that smelled like a pine forest on a windy day. "Twice or three times probably if it's with her."

The wall phone in his modest kitchen sounded. He hurried to answer. Now that Inza Warburton had used sorcery to improve his financial status, he knew that early morning calls probably wouldn't be from creditors.

"Hello."

"Perhaps you can help me, sir," said a breathy female voice. "I'm just awfully eager to locate that loathsome scoundrel named Paul Sanson. He is once more terribly, terribly late with his alimony payment."

Sanson sighed. "Three days isn't even terribly late, Mindy, let alone terribly, terribly," he told his former spouse. "A tiny bit overdue is the correct legal term. How are things out there in Santa Monica?"

"Lousy," answered Mindy Boon. "It's been raining torrentially for days on end."

"Build an ark."

"If you're through your smartass phase, Paul," she said, "let's talk

about the money you owe me. What, precisely, does three days late mean?”

“It means I mailed your blasted check to you three days after the deadline. The outrageous sum is winging its way to you even as we speak. I swear, as God is my witness.”

“Which god would that be, an Egyptian jackal god?” inquired Mindy. “Or maybe a snake god from a primitive cannibal tribe?”

“It’ll be there today or tomorrow.”

“We’ll see,” she said. “So, tell me, what do you think of my show?”

“Which feeble sitcom are you alluding to?” he asked the actress.

“Geez, you’re even worse now than you were during our dumb marriage,” she complained. “I happen to be starring in *Lethal Injection: Texas*, the highly successful spinoff of *Lethal Injection*. Last week we were third in the ratings, just below *I Married a Fat Girl* and just above *So You Want To Have Elective Surgery*.”

“Congratulations,” he said. “But, Mindy, while our divorce settlement obliges me to send you immense amounts of alimony, it doesn’t say anything about my having to suffer through whatever piece of tripe you and that halfwit TV writer you’re shackled up with are currently foisting on—”

“I am *not* living with anybody,” she insisted. “And I wish that you’d...”

“That I’d what?”

“Hush. The house is starting to make some very funny noises.”

“Okay, I’ll sign off and let you listen.”

“Oh, my God!” cried Mindy. “It’s a mudslide! The whole entire house is starting to slide downhill toward the frigging Pacific Ocean. I’ll have to call you back.”

Paul took a deep breath and called Inza.

“Yes, Paul dear?” she answered.

“I thought we agreed on no more witchcraft and black magic,” he told her. “Don’t work any more tricks on anyone associated with me. Assassinating my dippy former wife by causing—”

“What happened to her house is entirely due to natural causes. You build on the side of a hill in LA and then it rains a lot and—woosh!—Down you go.”

“So what am I now? An accessory to murder?”

“The lady ain’t dead,” the witch assured him. “She has, as a result of her bumpy descent to the sea, suffered a concussion. When she comes to, she will have no memory of the fact that you owe her money. In fact, her memory will tell her that you paid her one large settlement and don’t owe her diddly.”

“Her lawyer will remember the alimony.”

“Now, talk about coincidences. Her shyster is going to trip—on the Walk of the Stars, as a matter of fact, right on top of Marilyn Monroe’s star—and suffer a substantial conk on the noggin. He, too, will have a slight shifting of memories,” Inza told him. “Ouch. I’m monitoring this on one of my crystal balls and he just took his nosedive. Painful to watch.”

“All right, Inza,” he said. “I’ll accept your interference this time, but don’t do me any more favors. Okay?”

“As you wish,” promised the witch queen. “What say you come over early and have lunch before we get to work on the memoirs? I’ll be fixing shark tartare and—”

“Thanks, but I have a lunch date,” he lied.

“Actually, you don’t have a lunch date, Paul. But far be it from me to force myself on anyone. I’m content to bide my time.”

“Fine.”

“Yellow roses.”

“What?”

“That little cutie pie you plan to see tonight,” she said. “Yellow roses are her favorite. Since you intend to buy her a bouquet, make it yellow

roses.”

“Inza, my private life is separate from my business life,” he said, annoyed. “Don’t go poking into any more—”

“Hey, hon, I wouldn’t dream of interfering,” said the witch. “Not yet, anyway.”

“I’ll be over at two.” He ended the call.

* * * *

Unexpectedly, there were several cars parked in the driveway of Inza Warburton’s slightly ramshackle mansion. Sanson parked his car behind a gray Mercedes. Nearer the house he passed a lemon yellow VW bug and a dusty Saab. Leaning against a yellowing hedge was a ten-speed bicycle.

The massive oaken front door hung half open. As he stepped into the hallway, a plump young woman holding a can of diet soda smiled at him. “Are you joining the coven?”

“Not immediately, no.” He made his way farther into the house.

In the cluttered living room a bearded man was looking critically at the plate of sandwiches perched on a claw-footed table. “Pretty spartan fare for a cocktail party,” he remarked to the gaunt woman beside him.

Inza emerged from the shadow at the foot of the staircase leading up to the second floor of the mansion. “I have a big surprise for you, hon.” Before he could dodge, the immense woman grabbed him, hugged him enthusiastically, and kissed him warmly on the cheek.

Pulling free, he inquired, “Aren’t we going to be working on your book?”

She took hold of his arm. “I’m throwing an impromptu party for Lazlo,” she explained as she urged him upwards. “I invited the members of my coven over to meet the old boy. But I’d like to introduce you to him first.”

“Isn’t he still in Europe?” he asked, following her up into the shadows above.

“Would I be throwing a party for him if he were?” She was guiding him along the upstairs corridor. “Now, that door on your left is to the spare

bedroom you'll be occupying once you move in. Care to take a quick look around before—"

"I'm *not* moving in," he reminded her. "Let's just meet this Font guy."

"As you will. This is his room over on the right." She reached out to open a dark wooden door. "Lazlo, are you decent?"

On the aged Persian carpet, resting directly in front of the canopy bed, was a very handsome ebony coffin rich with silver trim.

Sanson halted just across the threshold. "How'd you get that here? Doesn't customs have to—"

"Teleportation, dear." Inza made a sweeping motion with her left hand while producing a whooshing sound. "Lazlo's even better at that than I am."

"He teleported his coffin all the way from Europe?"

"The coffin with me in it, my boy." The lid of the coffin swung open with a faint creak, and a broad-shouldered man sat up in it. "Myself plus a generous smattering of my native Hungarian soil. Pleased to be working with you at Greensea, Paul. I really think you and Inza here have got a terrific book in the works. It's going to be on the *New York Times* list if I'm any judge." Hopping free of the coffin, the wide, tall man held out his hand.

"I thought," said Sanson, shaking hands, very gingerly, with his new editor, "that vampires slept by day."

Both Font and Inza laughed and the witch queen said, "An old wives' tale, hon."

"I do nap in my coffin," admitted the vampire editor. "I spent quite a few years in Spain in the 1890s and picked up the siesta habit."

"Lazlo, I have a dozen people downstairs who are very eager to meet you."

"We'll talk about this potential blockbuster of yours after I meet everybody in the coven, Paul." Brushing some Hungarian dust from his dark trousers, he went striding toward the doorway.

"Now, isn't he a much nicer editor than that ninny Rudy Korbin?" asked the witch queen, nudging Sanson affectionately.

“Oh, yes, definitely,” he replied. “And he sure doesn’t look his age.”

* * * *

In spite of the uneasiness he felt about having an undead editor, Sanson grew increasingly happy in the week following the witch queen’s welcoming party. His upbeat mood was due entirely to Sara Bardsley.

As Inza had predicted, the young artist’s favorite flowers were yellow roses. The dinner at Viva Las Veggies went very well and he found that he actually enjoyed his meatless meal. That night, she kissed him when he brought her back to her faux rustic cottage. And that Saturday, after they’d gone to the New Beckford multiplex to see the Puppetoon version of Philip K. Dick’s *Eye in the Sky*, he spent the night with her.

Sara was the first woman he’d felt any real enthusiasm about since his divorce. She was attractive, bright, and affectionate and she’d actually read several of his books and could discuss them intelligently. She even urged him to start a new children’s book so that she could illustrate it. Sunday, he did something he hadn’t done in over two years: took her dancing at the SoNo Retro Disco Club in South Norwalk.

Even though he was working with a witch and being edited by a vampire, Sanson felt that the quality of his life was pretty good.

* * * *

It was while browsing among the soy burger selections at the Eden, Inc. Organic Market in Norwalk early in the afternoon of the following Monday that he encountered the International Occult Police Organization agent.

Sanson had promised Sara that he’d modify his eating habits, which was why he’d driven over here. Wanting to make a modest start, he hadn’t taken a shopping cart but only one of the small handbaskets.

He was leaning forward studying the packages through the glass windows, when a modest-sized, mostly bald man of about forty-five stumbled over the wheel of an abandoned shopping cart and bumped into him.

“Terribly sorry,” the man apologized, disentangling himself.

“That’s okay. Probably my fault,” said Sanson. “I was comparing and contrasting the vegan soy burger with the veggie salsa burger and didn’t notice your approach.”

Smoothing the front of his tweedy sport coat, the small bald man said, “Actually, Sanson, it was entirely my fault and merely a subterfuge.”

“Oh, so?”

Gesturing at the nearby dining area of the large organic supermarket, he suggested, “Might I buy you a cup of herb tea? I’m most anxious to have a chat with you.”

“About what exactly? And oh, yeah, who are you?”

“My name is Victor Truex. I’m a roving operative for the International Occult Police Organization.” He took hold of Sanson’s arm and led him along a supplement aisle to one of the small empty tables.

“I’ve never heard of your organization.”

“Yes, we strive for a very low profile. Extremely low,” explained Truex. “Wouldn’t have approached you now except for the fact that you’re involved with Count Lazlo Font.”

“He’s a count?”

“Oh, yes, has been for close to two centuries. Ever since he impaled the three relatives who were ahead of him on the succession list.” He sat in one of the blond wooden chairs, nodded at the empty one across the table. “Peppermint tea’s my favorite, but you might prefer—”

“Peppermint’s as good as any. Why’re you guys interested in Font?”

“Tell you soon as I fetch our tea.” Truex rose and hurried to the counter.

Sanson sat his basket on the tiled floor next to his chair. All it contained so far was a jar of organic peanut butter and two cans of green tea soda.

When Truex returned with the cups of peppermint tea, he explained, “The specialty of my particular department of IOPO ... that stands for International Occult—”

“I figured as much. So why?”

“My department is involved with wiping out vampires worldwide,” the bald agent told him. “We lost track of Font for several months until he turned up here as an editor for Greensea Publications.”

“It was written up in *Publishers Weekly*.”

“That’s how we found out.”

“How do I fit in?”

From the breast pocket of his jacket, Truex extracted a postcard-size photo. It looked old and had a brownish tinge. “Let’s confirm that you’re involved with the man we’re hunting for. Is this Count Font?”

Sanson took the photo and studied it for a few seconds. “Sure, although he looks younger here.”

“That was taken in Budapest in 1907 when he was about a hundred years younger than he is now.”

Handing back the picture of his editor, Sanson inquired, “If you know where he is, why do you need my help?”

“What I must find out is where exactly he keeps his coffin,” answered the IOPO operative. “When I destroy that and the sample of his native soil, I’ll have destroyed Count Font as well.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“It’s proven extremely difficult ever since IOPO was formed nearly a half-century ago,” said Truex. “But if we have an inside man, things will go better.” Removing the stringless teabag from his cup with his spoon, he dropped it on a napkin. “You’re intimate with Inza Warburton and—”

“Wait now. Intimate isn’t exactly the term I’d use,” he explained. “I’m helping Inza write her memoirs. Font is now my editor. Basically a business relationship.”

“As I understand it, Inza has been using her paranormal powers to help you considerably.” Truex sipped his peppermint tea. “Myself, I wouldn’t accept favors from the likes of her.”

“She’s straightened out my finances some, admittedly using witchcraft,” he admitted. “Nobody was actually hurt and—”

“They never found the body of the credit agency man who rode his brand new motorcycle into a river,” Truex pointed out. “Your former spouse is in a Santa Monica hospital with a broken leg and three fractured ribs.”

Leaning forward, Sanson said, “Inza told me that eventually they’d pulled Tom out of the water and he survived the plunge. Marny wasn’t hurt at all, outside of a few bruises from riding the house downhill.”

“Rather naïve to expect a witch, a witch queen actually, to be trustworthy.” The operative took another sip of his tea. “I don’t imagine she mentioned Mr. Henkel at all.”

“Who’s Henkel?”

“He was bicycling along the Pacific Coast Highway when your ex-wife’s house made its run to the sea and sideswiped him. He’s still in a coma in that same Santa Monica hospital.”

“Even so.” Sanson circled his cup with his right hand. “I don’t think I want to get involved with your outfit.”

Truex lowered his voice. “Are you afraid that Inza is aware of this conversation we’re having? Is that why you’re—”

“Well, she does have that crystal ball and she is able to eavesdrop on just about—”

“Put your left hand in your coat pocket.”

Frowning, he did that. He extracted a round silver medallion about three inches in diameter. “What’s this thing?”

“A St. Norbert’s medal,” answered Truex. “Very effective in preventing sorcerers and witches from keeping track of you *and* from harming you. This one, and the one I’m using, was blessed by the Pope and six cardinals. Plus which, it contains a powerful anti-black magic chip developed by our lab in Zurich.”

He dropped the medallion back into his pocket. “I guess I don’t feel especially guilty about what Inza’s done for me,” he said finally. “My

financial state is much better than it was. And within a few weeks I'll be finished with this assignment."

"So you believe."

"With the money I'll get when the book's turned in plus what I already have, I can take it easy," he explained to the IOPO agent. "No more scuffling, no more dodging creditors or worrying about how I'm going to come up with another alimony payment." Sanson leaned back in his chair. "As you may know, I've met a terrific woman and once I'm clear of Inza, I'll be settling down with her. Probably somewhere far from Connecticut."

Making a sympathetic sound, Truex said, "You must be aware of how fond Inza is of you. She wants you to move into her mansion and eventually become a member of her coven. You're never going to get clear."

"Sure, I am. Sara and I—"

"Here's another photo." He extracted a brown-tinted picture from his breast pocket. "This one was taken in Vienna in 1917." He passed the photograph across the table.

Sanson picked it up, then dropped it. "It looks like Sara, but...."

"Her real name is Emily Westerland. She was born in Somerset, England, in 1897 and was recruited by Count Font when she was seventeen and working in a music hall in London."

Sanson turned the picture face down and pushed it, slowly, back toward the agent. "I don't understand."

"They've used her to keep you pacified," Truex told him. "Inza hasn't been able to woo you into her circle. They're convinced, however, that eventually Sara will be able to accomplish that."

"You want me to help you get Font," he said, standing. "For all I know that picture's a fake you're using to con me into working for you guys."

"Ask Sara," Truex suggested, handing him a gray business card. "Then contact me and we'll get to work on a plan to defeat this whole bunch."

Sanson turned away, abandoning his hand basket, and hurried out of there.

* * * *

Sara, wearing jeans and a pullover, opened the door while he was still hurrying across the afternoon lawn toward her cottage. "Coffee'll be ready in a few minutes," she said, stepping forward to hug him.

He disentangled himself. "You knew I was coming here?"

She smiled, hugged him again and retreated inside to her parlor. "Come on in, darling."

He stopped in the center of the cozy room, glancing at the bright fire in the small brick fireplace. "There's something I want to talk to you about, Sara."

Settling into an armchair, legs tucked under her, she said, "Want to wait until we've had our coffee?"

"No, I...." He paused, took a slow deep breath in and out. "Look, Sara, how old are you?"

She looked up at the beamed ceiling, forehead wrinkling slightly. "Let's see, I was born in 1897," she said after a moment. "So that'd make me.... Darn, I've never been that good at math. Why don't you do the figuring and—"

"Never mind." He dropped down on the sofa. "The point is that you are in cahoots with Font and Inza. Our whole damn relationship is—"

"I wouldn't say cahoots, Paul," Sara told him. "My situation is that I pretty much have to do what Lazlo tells me. It's, you know, part of the vampire deal. Since he's the one who initiated me into—"

"Christ, I've been sleeping with a vampire." He stood up, abruptly. "Sounds like the title of some lousy B-movie on Turner Classics. *I Slept with a Vampire.*"

"You're upset, darling," Sara said with sympathy. "But, really, I am fond of you. And, so I've been told more than once, there's very little difference between sleeping with one of the undead and with a contemporary female. Really."

"That's comforting." He sat back down on the sofa. Then popped

upright again. "How many guys have you slept with since 1897?"

Sara shrugged. "I told you I'm not very good at math."

He commenced, in a sort of jagged way, pacing the cozy parlor. "Why did they set me up with you?"

"Inza, as you well know, Paul, is very fond of you," she explained. "She was hoping she could persuade you to move into the mansion and join her coven without any help from outside."

"She couldn't have done that."

"When she realized it, she consulted with Lazlo and he sent me here to see what I could do about persuading you."

He nodded. "So you're a recruiter. You didn't really give a damn about me. Hell, you probably never even really read any of my books."

"No, dear, I did read one of them. It wasn't as good as I pretended, but really not too terrible." She rose to her feet. "I do like you, although you have to realize that I've known a lot of other interesting men. In over a century, one is bound to encounter—"

"Okay." He moved toward the door. "I know what I have to do and it's get rid of Count Font and the whole witch coven."

"Simpler to join them," advised Sara. "I'd be willing to continue our friendship if you did that. You really don't want to annoy Lazlo or Inza."

He yanked the door open, went running to his car.

He started the engine, gunned it, and swung out onto Gallows Hill Road and away from Sara's cottage.

As the car rushed along the tree-lined road, he reached into the coat pocket where he'd put the protective medallion.

"Damn." The St. Norbert's medallion was gone. "She picked my pocket while she was hugging me."

Didn't matter. He grabbed his cell phone up off the passenger seat. He'd call Truex, tell him the location of the count's coffin. That would start the process.

He started to dig the IOPO agent's card out of another pocket. He stopped, slowed his car, grew thoughtful.

Dropping the phone down on the seat cushion, he said aloud, "Hey, plenty of time to contact. But it just occurred to me that now that I have quite a bit of money, I ought to start buying a few things for myself." He nodded, smiling. "And I've always wanted a motorcycle."