

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter One

*WARLOCK [wahr*lahk] – noun – A man who practices witchcraft; a sorcerer. In Middle English, a person in league with the Devil.*

“Do you believe in Elysian Fields?” He was a tired old drunk, three stools down the bar from me. The pub minder was doing his usual duty, polishing a glass until it was so thin it could cut. He didn't look at the guy, didn't in any way register he knew the guy was in the room; the drunk might as well not have been, for all he was drinking his drink. A row of dead soldiers lined up in front of him, but the last one he was taking his time on, letting that one suffer nice and long before he finished it off.

He coughed, loud and full of phlegm, and turned his head one eighth of the way towards me. I don't think he was originally talking to me, but he was willing to pretend if I would. “I said...”

I put up two fingers from around my now-warm His Lordship and waved them just a little. “I heard.”

Dust rained down around the room for a few silent seconds as a shaft of sunlight burst in one grubby window, looked around and decided it didn't like what it saw before hitching itself back up and out of the place.

“Well?”

I took a long, last swig of my drink, the last chip of ice clinging to life in the bottom of the glass. How can a drink be that warm and still have ice in it, on a hot day like that one was? Whoever built New Victoria in the middle of a swamp was a moron; I bitterly considered believing in an afterlife just so I could think that maybe the chucklehead who picked this spot was sweating out life in Tartarus.

“Elysian Fields?” I shook my head eventually. “I'm no warrior, so it doesn't much matter whether I believe in it.” The drunk grunted something, I don't know what, and I added, “I don't guess I've done anything that would recommend Tartarus and from what I've heard of Asphodel it sounds so boring it'd bore me to death if I weren't dead already.” I lifted one shoulder, half shrug, half stretch. “I guess I don't believe in them. None of them are very interesting.”

The bar minder kept polishing up that glass shiv. Two minutes ago I might have gotten his attention, but now I'd opened my mouth so I was cut out of his personal

universe. It was just me and the drunk, now.

"I've heard it said," he garbled out around a loogie the size of the czar's spittoon, "That it doesn't much matter whether we believe in the gods – in any of that stuff – because they believe in us." He laughed at this, one guttural rasp that sounded like he had a cat for lunch and it was ready to go for a walk. Then he laughed again, a little less uncomfortably – somewhat less directly painful to hear, you understand – and then lost himself in a peal of abrasive guffaws that made me want to hide my face from the world.

I'd stopped in here, where I used to hang out a lot, because it had been a quiet week after a couple of easy days of soft money. A couple of lost kittens had found their ways home to their wives once I'd found them and washed them off in coffee and stern talk, and that meant two consecutive days of my best rates plus that feeling of doing a little good in some very localized communities. I'd figured I could take it easy for a couple of days and here it was, Friday evening and, with a couple of coins in my pocket, I'd wandered down to the old haunt in search of a quiet afternoon and a clammy Lordship to wash the weekend into session.

I flipped one of those coins onto the bar, took the pack of smokes from next to my empty cocktail and nodded at the bar minder despite his utter ignorance of my existence.

"Tell the gods I said hello when you see them," I mouthed to the drunk as I strolled by. "Ask 'em if they've got any new digs for the rest of us."

The drunk erupted in another plume of hilarity at this, making general sounds of agreement, acquiescence, he'd get right on that, and then I backed into the door to push it open and twirled out onto the sidewalk. That slant of sunlight was running off down below the horizon with the rest of its friends and the east end of the docks quarter was blushing at itself in the mirror under those pink and orange lights. I lit a smoke, took stock of what to do with the rest of the night and decided to spend it in my office. Nowhere else to go, and the bar downstairs was of a better caliber. I set off northwest, crossing behind hurrying carts and those new paneled trucks, mindful of my step, wondering if the night would give us all a chance to cool down from the August heat.

The further the sun sank in the sky, the prettier my city got. I was surprised to

find myself smiling by the time I made it through the Quarter Gate and hit the mainway northeast towards Docks Business.

I touched the brim of my hat at Tank as I pedaled through The Duck & Cover, headed for the back stairs. He nodded twice at me, meaning I had company waiting. I didn't slow my stride, but held up three fingers by my side – three minutes, then send them up – and took the steps two at a time. I got to the top, pressed a finger against my neck and measured my pulse. I wasn't going to drop of a heart tremor anytime soon, but I wasn't getting in any better shape just taking a flight of stairs a couple times a day. The blood, a sawbones had told me once, requires a regular jostle to stay free-flowing. I figured mine wouldn't win any races, but I was OK for now. I dug a small, brass key out of my pocket and twisted it back and forth in the door at the end of the hall until the door unstuck from the jam – another fact of summer in New Victoria, another shovel of ashes on that head in would-be Tartarus – and I set my hat and jacket on the stand behind my desk. One sweep of yesterday's paper across the top and I was open for business. I cracked a window to let in some sticky air, flipped on the fans and settled into my seat with a comfortable creak.

About now, the old dwarf behind the bar would have waddled around to whoever was waiting for my arrival. I should be clear about the term “dwarf,” as I understand it has a vernacular use unfamiliar to me; I mean a real dwarf, from a real mountain clan, not one of the Little Men. He was as stout as a tree stump and about as soft, last name Hardlifter. Once I'd said his name real fast, on first meeting him, and had to hold in the laugh for a good twenty minutes until he was out of the room. I don't think he knows the joke is even there, much less gets it himself. Word around the pub is that he's technically a cleric of one of the barbarian gods, but you've probably got a handle on how much that matters to me. I've never seen him put an ax through anyone and depending on the anyone in question I might not care if I did. He runs a tight bar, one where the good drunks can find a drink and the bad drunks don't come back a second time and that's the best I can ask for anywhere, much less with rent this cheap.

And about now, Tank would have bowed his deep and very naturally low bow and whoever was today's customer would have thanked him, tried to pay him and

possibly failed at it, and be on their way. I tucked a cigarette behind my ear and drummed my thumbs on the arms of my office chair for twenty seconds. Right on time I heard heavy but double-soled ka-klack ka-klack's coming down the hall to my door: a big woman or a short, fat man with risers on his heels. I bet a nickel with myself that it would be the former, because the latter is always trouble. Nothing's worse than a round guy who's got a small-dog complex. They just want to push you around and try to walk on the bill when they get what they wanted.

There was a quiet knock, and I called out for them to come in: "It's open," crisp and loud. I don't like quiet knocking in an office, business is no place for timidity. Diplomacy and a gentle hand may be necessary in business, but timidity has no place at the same table as coin.

The door crept open - I was annoyed already - and a pudgy, feminine hand peeked around the edge of the door to push it open just far enough for a woman of a certain age - in this case, mid-fifties - to step sideways through it. She stood looking around for a few moments, eyes crawling all over my small office, taking in the dented filing cabinet, the faded prints of other men's artwork, the framed diploma from a college of no consequence, the single seat on the client's side of the desk, the open windows, the ceiling fans that could use a dusting on top, the painted ceiling, the small wet bar pushed against a corner, then finally on me: middling tall, ordinary brown hair without the nicety of hair oil, the open collar, the brown suspenders, the beige pants, the shirt sleeves rolled up. She sniffed just once at me, 1895 gazing at me here, in the 20th century and deciding it didn't approve one bit.

"Hank Weaver?"

"Hank Weaver."

We looked at each other - she was doughy in a way that suggested she didn't have to worry about wondering where she'd get her next meal, dressed very properly, very conservatively. She wore a long, grey and blue skirt that ballooned slightly at the hips in a way that hadn't been in style for some time but the skirt itself was clearly new. The vest and formal blouse kept everything in check up top, a lace bracelet tied at one wrist, a lady's watch peeking out of one vest pocket, a handkerchief clutched in her right hand. Her hair was battleship grey and tortured into a bowling ball of a bun with another lace ribbon tied around it. If it was there to suggest gait, it had one hell

of a row to hoe. Her eyebrows had been plucked mostly into nothingness, then drawn back in with a grey-black eyebrow pencil, and her lips were either unpainted or painted in such a way to discourage the idea of circulation rather than add any rosy red to her face. The pudge extended to that region, as well, blowing air into any wrinkles that might have formed like exhaling into a crumpled paper bag; if she dyed her hair she'd pass for twenty years younger, but in today's society there are people – men and women – who realize the power that age extends if one learns to wield age in the right way. She clearly was someone accustomed to that mode of presenting herself. If she thought the wadded lace hanky would suggest softness, however, she was fooling herself. This was a lady who could knock as timid as she wanted on every door in town and I'd never be willing to cross her just to see what happened.

“And you are?”

“The Lady Maude Bursar-Frank,” she replied crisply. She was still standing at the door and I wasn't sure she was actually going to walk inside and sit down. “I'm given to understand that you are in the profession of finding things?”

I unclasped my hands from the arms of my chair and stood up to bow very slightly. “Things, people, if I'm lucky a quiet afternoon, Your Ladyship.”

A little of the warm butter seemed to strike her bread in the right way, and she relaxed just a smidge, but she didn't like the way I smiled a little. We don't get many posh – at least, not many who are open about it – in Docks Business. Northeast New Victoria is a lot nicer, in the minds of nice people, than Docks Portage, the southeast quarter, but that didn't mean they liked it any.

“Esquire?”

“Ah,” I said, still smiling just a little but having straightened up from my incremental bow. “No. Just plain Hank Weaver. You can call me Mr. Weaver or by the familiar; if you become my client, I prefer the familiar. A receipt is all the business formality I require.”

She sniffed again, looked as though the word “Hank” coming out of her throat might cut her voice to shreds, and took four quick steps to the client's chair. I remained standing, knuckles against the edge of the desk, as she gathered her skirt carefull and then sat, slowly and primly, on the edge of the seat. With the careful display she put on doing so I wondered if there were an audience of more than one in

the room; you'd have thought she was sitting in front of fifty of her best admirers and watching every one of them to make sure no one's tush beat hers to the padding.

I sat down heavily and informally, cracked my knuckles against the palm of each opposing hand, rapidly, and then gestured towards her with a few fingers. "Now, Your Ladyship, what brings you to my quaint abode?"

She sat for a long few seconds, staring over my left shoulder and out the open window – gas and electric lights were flickering on here and there around the streets, though doubtless fewer than she was used to seeing in her own neighborhood, and anyone can find that spectacle of a million artificial lightning bugs pretty engrossing, especially when there's a fair chunk weighing on their brain. I waited patiently, then she turned and looked at me.

"My son is missing," she said.

I flipped open a small pad of paper and nodded at her, wetting my pencil with the tip of my tongue and getting ready to write.

"Please," she did not ask, "Do not make a note of anything as we speak."

"I would assume a lady of your standing," I said, and I didn't care how she took it because she didn't pay the rent on my room, "Is accustomed to the occasional secretary."

"This matter is of the utmost confidentiality." She was full of ice, but even she couldn't beat an August night in New Victoria; the room stayed as hot as ever. "I cannot risk anyone, even a lowly cleaning woman, seeing any evidence of what I would tell you."

I slapped the book shut and set it down on the desk.

"Then let's hear it," I said.

She blinked twice at me. "Mr. Weaver," she muttered, "Do not take offense at my wishes, I am the client."

"We'll see about that," I replied.

She thought about standing up, but no dice. Finally she hrumphed in a way I imagined would one day drive Lord Bursar–Frank to murder, and started to spill.

"My son is perhaps familiar to you?"

"Your Ladyship, I'm afraid I don't follow the better class of gossip."

She sniffed again, but by now both our claws were back in. "My son, Gerald

Frank, has been missed for two days now. He has not been seen in our home, by myself, his father or the servants. It is not unusual for him to become lost in his studies and miss an evening at home by spending it at Temple, but two nights is unheard of, and my quiet inquiry among The Circle's teachers have informed me that he has not been there. His brother has not seen him. I fear for his safety, and wish him found and returned home as soon as possible." Her Ladyship pawed at the hanky in her right hand like she was thinking about daubing some part of her face with it, but the hand didn't move and, I don't mind telling you, nothing on her face needed a dry.

I nodded. "Girlfriends?"

"Perhaps you misheard me, Mr. Weaver," she coughed, "But I said I had inquired at the Temple of Jupiter. My son is a devoted student and will be a priest in their order. He does not blaspheme with consorts."

I opened my hands a little and nodded. "Worth asking, though," I replied. "Not every priest is true to his vows, and more students than that have taken it upon themselves to live it up a little before the final mysteries."

"You have a vile tongue, and I shudder at the mind that must work it."

"Only because my job sometimes requires it," I sighed. I drummed the fingers of my right hand against the knuckles of my left for a moment. "I'll need a picture, sketch or portrait or photograph, access to the servants and to his rooms in your home, an appointment with the brother and as much detail as I can get about his usual day-to-days as you can give me. I'll take it from there, assuming we agree on a rate."

Her Ladyship looked mildly insulted that money had come up already, and put the hanky near her mouth for a moment. "Surely we can satisfy the requirements of commerce once my son is safe at home?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, but such is my station in life, to insult nice noblewomen with talk of money in a time of trials." I gestured around the room, again annoyed at timidity, faux timidity worst of all. "All this ambiance isn't free."

"Whatever your rate," she said low, eyes sharp as needles, "I will pay it."

"As long as you agree that it's a verbal contract," I shrugged, "We're set."

"We are so agreed," she said quickly, then stood up rapidly - on her exit she didn't care so much about the formalities of who sat or stood as she did the same -

and she swept towards the door. "Call tomorrow after the evening meal. You shall have all you require for your work."

I touched my forehead at her back but she didn't bother to look behind her to see it. The door shut with a firm thud and she was gone again. Darkness was settling in over the city and Docks Business had lost the sound of carts and trucks and gained the voices of Friday nights, people moving to and fro in the streets in search of somewhere to wipe the dust out of their throats and gripe about going to work again on Monday morning.

I lit the cigarette I'd tucked behind my ear, kicked my chair across the wood floor along a worn rut and flicked ashes out the window onto the head of cheap revelry.

Thirty minutes later, Tank opened the door and his tromped across the floor in his metal-plated boots and took up residence in the customer's chair. "She was a real nice one," he grumbled at me, his voice throaty. The massive red beard and mustache added to the effect, fluttering slightly, the braid of his beard banging against his chest as he spoke. "Didn't even offer a tip for her wine." He did something complicated with his sinuses and then crossed one leg over the other, ankle on knee, stabbing idly with a small knife at a peanut shell caught in the studs of the sole. "Course, she barely drank the wine, so maybe she hated it. Common." He sniffed, the same way she did, and then glared at his shoe. I looked sidelong at him.

"It's a setup," I said.

"What is?"

"Her gig. She wants me to find a missing boy, gone from home for two days. She doesn't want to know what house I find him in or the name of the lady who owns it, if you catch my drift, but I think she knows where to find him and she doesn't think I'll have to try very hard." I shook my head. "She didn't want to talk money, but you know as well as I do that their class is as tight with it as any other pauper, so she must think it won't cost much." I clicked my teeth with my tongue once or twice, then sighed. "Or she doesn't think I'll find him at all, so there won't be any bill to pay."

Tank cocked one massively disproportionate eyebrow at me and laughed a little. "Ye think she done him in?"

I waved a hand. "Nah, she wouldn't want blood all over the good silver." I tossed the butt of my cigarette through the window and into the street, waited to see if anyone cursed it, and didn't hear anything so I lit another. All I wanted to do was sit there and chew smoke and think about nothing, but that one detail – that she hadn't wanted to talk money – kept chewing me instead.

"Maybe she don't know business." Tank bought the Dee & Cee from a human man about three years ago and has done nothing but rake in gold and spend as little as he could ever since. My guess was he sent a part of it back up the mountain, like dwarves do, or maybe he was giving it to his old church. Out the corner of my eye I checked him over for any holy signs, but didn't find anything that jumped out at me. I don't know much about the northern gods, but I figure their holy signs are as obvious as ours – too arcane and abstract to be anything but a symbol of something ineffable and probably horny.

"She knows business." I turned from the window, a little, shaking my head at him. "Of that there's no doubt. People with money know where every penny of it is, even the ones in the bottom of the couch. It's not just in their blood, it is their blood."

Tank waved a thick, rough hand at the bottom of his shoe, knocking off the last of the dust from the peanut shell. "Them's as true, I suppose. So what's to be done?"

"I go by tomorrow night," I sighed, "Long after the good people of her handsome street have settled in for radio or some such and they won't notice a raw bugger like me pushing down the surrounding rents. I doubt there'll be much work to it, though. I can't get by this feeling that she knows just where to find him and she just won't give."

"If ye say," Tank mumbled. "Well, back to the casks." Just like that, he was down out of the chair and on his way. I could hear his stomp all the way down the hall, down the stairs and across the floor of the bar. The bell was jangling as he got there, the evening crowd on their way in for a splash of water, and I stood up to go downstairs and join them. I didn't want to get hazy, but something with a taste to it would probably help me think.

Tank closed up the place around two of the morning and I helped him see Arty, whom I'd sobered up on more than one occasion at the request of his wife and who this night would doubtless get a lashing the second he fell inside the door, off on a

cab. The night horses were doing a dashing business up and down the streets and for a moment I let myself be snob enough to be glad that I was in Docks Business, where we had cabs, where cabs were willing to go, rather than Docks Portage. There, the horses would be too busy with sailors trying to pick fights with them for what they said about the sailors' poor, dead mothers to ever get anyone safely home.

I walked back in with Tank, who let himself into the cellar with a mumbled farewell, and I trod upstairs to the room I kept off to one side of my office. Within an hour I'd read all I needed to of the evening papers - no mention of our Gerald or any posh bodies down any storm gutters, though plenty of talk about this "Warlock of the West" we've supposedly got running around town - to make me pine for sleep and the dreams it might bring.

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Two

Saturday afternoon was spent getting one of my suits cleaned so I could appear on the front steps of the Bursar–Franks looking like I'd be worth throwing money at. Then it was off to the message office to get an address for them – posh like the Franks don't want to admit that not everyone knows who they are or where they live – and was surprised to find out it was Avery Place, one of the gated parts of Persons West best known for its very expensive gates. Their gates were so good they had gates for their gates: armed city watch on shifts at all bells, city watch who'd only speak to stop someone from going in if they didn't look like they belonged. I was glad I'd gotten the suit cleaned, and asked the kid behind the counter at the message center if he knew where Franks was bursar that he'd have an address like that.

“Hey, shyster, you think I get paid to yap?” Kid was all of ten years old, and he was already talking like an air–station drama. We all have a flair for the dramatic, so I shrugged at him like a peer and leaned my elbow against his counter to half–hide the quarter dollar I plopped out of a pocket.

“Why look at that, son,” I drawled. “There's a man on the loose and he's got silver all over his face.”

The kid swept the quarter up like dust and I didn't see it again. “Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Center Victoria.” He winked at me, clucked his tongue and then very pointedly got down off his stool, slid it sideways and stepped back up to help the next customer. I laughed up my sleeve as I walked out of the place and hailed a cab to take me to a cheap bistro just northeast of Center, where I consulted the Saturday news over a beef sandwich and fried squash. August had that produce going for it, and the laundry had been an excuse to spend the day out of my coat sleeves, so I was still feeling pretty fresh by the time the sun started to set and the street lights came on. In Center, they still use gas lamps with a paid lamplighter going from post to post with his long wick. The city considers it quaint. They say it helps the tourism industry.

I had time, over my cigarette and a cup of coffee, to read a few of the stories with headlines like WARLOCK OF THE WEST WAGES WAR IN BACK ALLEY. It seemed there was some huckster running around with a pop–gun and some fancy magic. The

paper's pencil man had done up a sketch that I quickly filed with the paper's other routine exercises of artistic license: a black kerchief around his neck to cover his mouth a nose, dark fedora, dark and dusty clothes. It was a lot of dark, and a lot of bunk to boot; they said their "sources" among "the city's laboring class," meaning kids playing hop who'd gin up a story for a nickel to split between them, had described a vigilante figure playing cowboys and indians with shadowy monsters bent on terrible mayhem. Just what our city needs, another freak to mix in with the rest. As far as I knew, it was just a lot of spilled ink; there wasn't any more mayhem on the streets than the usual pimps and their wares, and some of the pimps were better citizens than the cops busting them.

Once I'd had enough of the fictions of the news, I hopped an electric trolley from Center into Persons West's main exchange, stepping off at the station and grabbing one of the cabs that parks in the lane outside. Avery Circle wouldn't have anybody walk up to go in unless they were a resident trying to show their bond with the common man, and those would be few and far between.

The cabbie slowed as he neared the outer Avery gates, in case the guards wanted to shine a bug-light my direction, but they waved us past without a word. I chewed a peppermint while we waited for the outer gate to close before the inner gate opened. I'd been into northwest before on business, but never a neighborhood like this. I reached down to tug at my cuffs and took my hat off long enough to check the crease; if my suspicions were wrong, the job worked out and Her Ladyship didn't fuss over the bill because it was beneath her then I could count on being able to write up one hell of a receipt when this was over. I wished I'd come on trash day so I could see the folded money dumped out at the curb.

The hansom - I'd gone horses instead of tires for the simple reason I figured I should somehow dress to match Her Ladyship's preferred era, and I wasn't going to pass any costume shops on the way - pulled up to the gate and the driver got down to ring the bell. A few minutes later a man came up the walk in a vest and shirt, sleeves rolled up, tie undone. He looked like a driver himself, and he nodded at the cabbie through the bars.

"Caller for the house," the cabbie said.

"Hank Weaver," I said from the hansom. "Her Ladyship expects me."

“Aye,” the driver said, but there might have been something stuck in his cheek. “I’m sure she does.”

I stepped down and paid my driver, chucked my hat in his direction and told him not to wait. “I’m sure this gentleman can give me a ride back to my estates,” I said with a smile, and as I passed the house drive on the inside of the fence I nodded at him.

“Need help finding the door?” he asked.

“Nah,” I replied. “The big wooden rectangle with four knockers on it, each with their own man to do the knocking? I’m sure I can find it on my own.” My feet hit the walk through the front yard and I left the driver to think what he would of me, spitting out the last of my cigarette into a fake pond halfway across the ten miles of mowed lawn between the street and the house.

The house itself was a massive, 18th century affair, something handed down across generations of colonists who wanted to make the new country's money while playing the old country's caste. It was dark brown and light grey, stonework around the windows but stucco all around the walls. Ivy had grown up the southern and eastern sides of it so that half of it looked like it had crashed into a hothouse and got stuck there. The shrubs were well trimmed, some into shapes of animals, others into simple geometries meant to surprise by their cleverness and their alienation from nature. These were Jupiterians, alright: masters of all they could see, and damned sure to take every chance to prove it. I pitied the missing kid. I'd run for the hills, too, if mom and dad saw me as just another finger in their favorite god's pie.

I reached for a knocker the size of a gnome on the massive front door, but before my hand could touch it the door crept open on silent hinges and a butler with a broomstick in winter storage gazed down his nose at me. “Yes?”

I pulled my wallet from the breast pocket of my coat and flipped it open to show my buzzer. “Hank Weaver, Licensed,” I said in as crisp and professional a voice as I could muster. No reason tweaking the staff when I’m going to be asking them to play patty cake shortly, is there? “Her Ladyship requested I call after the evening meal.”

“You’re expected, Mr. Weaver,” the local flavor of Jeeves replied. “I shall inform Her Ladyship of your arrival after showing you to the parlor, where you are asked to wait.” He held out both hands, ready to take my hat and coat; it's not my habit, but

after a long glaring match I let him take them. He swiveled without moving his feet, it seemed, and motored off across an acre of front hall towards a parlor that could have hosted two tennis matches in one end and a football championship in the other. It was done in shades of gray – the current fashion is to always be ready to be in mourning with lots and lots of upbeat trim in blues and pinks and golds. The furniture was all out of date but well kept, overstuffed bits of last-century regalia and chunks of satin pillow thrown all over the place. It was of a piece with everything else I'd seen about the Bursar–Frankes, or at least Her Ladyship Herself. I bet myself that a photo of her in this room would have a hard time ending up in the right decade in any historian's files.

I leaned against one the massive oak tables set up here and there, eyeing the art on the wall and deciding most of it was reproduction being passed off as originals and had just turned my attention to the furniture to see if the same was true when the door was opened and the butler announced Her Ladyship's entrance. I turned, and The Lady Maude Bursar–Franke paused for a moment while I reached for the tip of the hat I wasn't wearing anymore. “Evening, m'am.”

She was dressed pretty much identically to yesterday – differences in trim, a different set of shoes, but in spirit the outfit was the very same – and she was a little miffed that I didn't bow or call her “Your Ladyship” this time. Like I said, we don't get many posh in Docks Business. Maybe I was rusty with my etiquette, but maybe I just didn't give a damn. “Mr. Weaver,” she replied. “Are you prepared to begin your investigations?”

I looked at my hat, spinning it around on my fingers for a second, and tried my best to appear thoughtful. “I am,” I said. I'd considered just rolling up and announcing that I didn't believe a word of what she'd said since she'd not wanted to talk money – the fastest way to get a detective to fire himself, I assure you, which might be awfully convenient for a mother who wants to appear to be looking very hard for a son she doesn't particularly care to find – but now the reproduction artwork and the furniture, which I suspected more and more to be cheap knock-offs of the good stuff of yesteryear, was making me think she simply planned to argue me down out of my profits or just skip the bill altogether. Plenty of clients go into a case thinking that, not realizing the resources available to a private dick who's feeling slighted, and so I

didn't really give it another thought. It's just one of the risks of the business, and easily dealt with; a stingy client usually finds they can suddenly pay the bill when it's explained to them how tragic it would be were the dick in question to explain to the billies downtown just what it was he was investigating and why he thinks the client didn't go to the police in the first place. The cops can make it rough for a dick, no doubt about that, but they have their uses.

She studied me, studying my hat, and then I took a breath and looked up. There's always a point at which you have to decide whether or not you trust your client enough to get mixed up in their trouble. The simple stuff is simple, but something like this doesn't come my way often. I smiled my best and said, "Mind if I start in his rooms?"

"You wish to search his private rooms?" She looked like she was about to cluck her tongue at me. If she did, I was walking.

"Naturally," I said, and I hitched up the waist of my pants.

She didn't cluck her tongue, and I stayed her client. "Very well," she sighed. "I had assumed you would have a few questions for us, for the help - you did say..."

"That, yes, but after I've looked around."

She sniffed at me. "I shall have Roger show you the way." The butler materialized at her elbow - I figure he didn't let himself get far out of earshot of Her Ladyship if he knew what was good for him - and gestured back out into the acre of front hall.

"The young master's rooms are on the second floor," he said, indicating a staircase that went up to a railed balcony overlooking the front entrance. "I have a key, so entry will not be of issue."

I nodded at Her Ladyship as we went by and she tried hard to look like she knew how she'd pass the time - her eyes flitted over the parlor and then across at the library and then fidgeted with one another as we went past. Roger led me up the stairs, around a couple of turns, down a hall and the closer we got the more it seemed like Young Master Gerald didn't so much live with his parents as share a street address. His rooms were on the middle floor, but as far from the front door as they could be and still be in the same house. He was a kid who liked his privacy - or resented the mother hen squatting on his nest - and the halls got darker and the lights less

frequent along the wall as we approached.

“The Young Master likes it dark, eh?” I tried to be casual with the question, hoping maybe Roger was one of those underpaid butlers who'll slip out of character and right into the old “cor' and yer right, guv” tarnish as soon as the paycheck is out of sight, but no dice. He didn't respond, just kept walking further and further into the gloom of the long hallway that stretched along the southeast corner of the house. The windows had thick drapes and plush curtains, worn and outdated, all in keeping with the mansion's motif of grays tinged here and there with brighter shades of color, kept pulled back but so thick and so buried in their own bunting that they'd probably still block a fair portion of the light on any given sunny day. This was also the corner of the house eaten up in that climbing vine I'd seen outside, so thick I could tell it was blocking a good bit of the light that would otherwise be streaming in the windows, even at this hour, facing as it did the center of a town that likes its gas and electric lamps.

“He's not a vampire, is he?”

The butler stopped short and gave me a daggered glance over his shoulder. “Don't be preposterous,” he blustered, a little more forcefully than was really polite. To be honest, though, that's a good sign someone's telling the truth, so I just grinned and favored him with a chuckle.

“Worth asking,” I sighed, and we kept trudging down about ten miles of hallway until we finally found the doors into Young Master Gerald's neglected boudoir. Roger produced a keyring with several large, old, brass numbers on it and spent a few seconds jangling one of them around in the lock, grunting with a touch of frustration before the lock finally gave. On shoving the door open with a grunt – stuck slightly from the humidity and the heat – we both coughed a little from the dust. In a house like this, two days takes its toll. I sniffed stale air and didn't find anything in it I was afraid I might: no death, no decay, no rot. Roger stepped into the dark and found the light switch. Electric lights flickered and buzzed into business and I blinked at the sudden change from the dark hallway.

The room itself was unremarkable for an upscale scion's bedroom at home. The bed was a double with a high canopy, blankets four feet thick and enough space under it to crawl by without disturbing the trim. It was, much to my surprise, done in blue

without a trace of gray to be found in the place. The walls were a darker blue and the bedroom suite was all cherry wood: dresser, chest of drawers and a wardrobe that could block a fat man from going through a double door. There was a bathroom the size of my office to one side, door open, light off but I could see the bedroom proper's lights reflected in the pipes and the porcelain.

"As you can see, sir," Roger harumphed after I'd spent a few seconds just looking around, taking a step or two in one direction, then another, "There is nothing amiss."

I smiled at him in a friendly way and didn't otherwise respond. Instead I walked over to the wardrobe and with a click of the latch swung it open on the right, then the left. I swept my hands over the dark, formal clothing inside, pushing each suit from left to right, one after another. Each one was the same, or very similar with only minor variations: they were formal, very proper suits, as a mother might give a son and as a son might only wear at his mother's request. Nothing else: no denims for wearing around the house, no slouchy clothes for wearing in public when a posh son doesn't want to be recognized, nothing. Not even undershirts, just suits.

I hmphed a little at the wardrobe, closed it up and stalked across the room to the bathroom door. I felt around on the inside wall and flipped on the electric lights in the bath. They, too, hummed and flickered for a moment before coming on, and I quickly pulled open the drawers and cabinet: no prescriptions, no vitamins, a toothbrush still in its paper wrap, a tube of toothpaste that had never been dented by use, no comb, a full bottle of hair wax, seal unbroken, and a tray of colognes. I sniffed the colognes: fruity, again of the sort a mother might give a son, unused, possibly never opened.

I sighed a little, turned back around and turned off the lights in the bath. "Roger," I said, "I was told by Her Ladyship that there would be a sketch or photograph of Young Master Gerald available to me, so that I'll know what he looks like. Could you help with that?"

"Of course, sir," he intoned, "We keep albums in the library."

"Nothing from younger than, say, 17." I waved a hand at him. "I need something as current as possible."

"Of course, sir," and he led me out.

Her Ladyship might like to think her son lived with her, studying hard to be a good little priest of the God-King, but I'd bet my last nickel that the son hadn't slept in his own room in six months. I'd known that from the blankets alone, in summer weather like this. The bed had been put together by someone other than a maid – who never would have put all the blankets on there to begin with – which meant it was most likely Gerald himself. He'd wanted to create the impression he was staying here, probably, and I wondered if he'd originally pulled the old gag of piling the blankets into the shape of a sleeping person, then decided it looked too corny and simply remade the bed and told the maid not to bother to keep the maid from seeing that the bed hadn't been slept in.

Roger led me out of the room, locking it behind me with more of that shake and shimmy he'd had to do to open it. “Old luck, eh?” I said conversationally to his back as he shook the key around.

“Normally it's quite cooperative.” Roger grunted with the effort of his work, and I could see he was really straining to get the thing closed. If anyone around here had done Gerald a whopper upside the head and dumped him in a storm drain, it wasn't old Rogers. “I've never seen it like this.”

“But it can be a little tricky sometimes?”

“A little, sir.” Roger groaned, then finally the lock clicked into place. “But this is quite another thing entirely. I'll have a man out to see to it tomorrow.”

“Not on my account, I hope,” and he shot me a dirty look as he walked past to show me to the library. I made a note to myself, mentally, about the state of the lock. In a big, old house, a lock that's gotten a little finicky can stay a little finicky for a long, long time before it goes. If it's been forced, though, picked by someone with less skill than enthusiasm, they're easy to mess up big time. I glanced at the lock again, over my shoulder. Once it had shut, Roger had gone right back to acting like everything was jake, but it wasn't. It wasn't jake at all.

In the library he took a few moments going through some photographic albums and finally came up with a sepia print of the Young Master. “Got anything in color? A watercolor or a portrait or anything?” The photo was clear, but I couldn't tell if the hair was blond, light brown, the eyes, anything. I didn't know if these posh folks would have gone in for a color photo at some point or whether they took theirs the old-

fashioned way, and I guessed now that it was the latter.

“Master Gerald is featured in the family portrait which hangs in the dining room, sir.” Roger wasn't impressed with the fact that I wasn't impressed with their photo collection. “It was commissioned three years ago. It is the most recent colorized representation we can offer.” He sniffed a little at the end, just in case I hadn't gotten the point that right about now I should be capering around him in circles to thank him for all the good cheer and helpful attitudes around the place.

“Well, then,” I replied, digging a toothpick from my coat pocket and horrifying Roger as I shoved it between my front left buck and the neighboring canine. “Let's go have a look at Young Master Gerald from three years back. Let's do a little chatting as we go, while we're at it. It'll help us pass the time between miles of rugs.”

Roger didn't look thrilled, but I hadn't quite worn out my welcome yet, and he gets paid to make nice to bigger snobs than me around the clock, in matched sets, so he nodded his ascent even as he denied his usefulness as a subject of questioning. “I'm quite sure I couldn't tell you anything Her Ladyship can't,” Roger said with a flutter of thin, aged fingers.

I stepped up for a second to be abreast of the butler rather than one step behind him, and spread my hands magnanimously. “Nonsense. Those in service,” and here I consciously chose to use the words that he himself might use, “Can't help but notice things in the lives of those you serve. It's your job, after all.”

“I sense,” Roger wheezed, finding the words rather dry on his tongue, “That you are hinting at something.”

“Well...” I put the toothpick back and chewed it for a few seconds, then took it out and gestured with it in my right hand. “Favorite nights of the week to go have a nip with the rest of the lads down at the temple school? Places he went? If he had any girlfriends, especially of the sort Her Ladyship wouldn't want to hear about.” I paused for a second. “Or perhaps boyfriends, instead?”

That, it turned out, was what wore out even a butler's hospitality. He shot me eyes made of ice and took a quick step to get ahead of me again. He didn't speak, and I didn't speak, and in silence we crossed the Siberian tundra or, as they called it locally, the rest of the house. Presently we came up on a set of double doors which Roger opened in silence. An enormous oil on canvas portrait hung in a gilt frame in the

center of the wall opposite the doors, over the head of the table, and Roger gestured at it without a single word, then turned around and dismissed himself.

I sighed and shook my head, watching him go, then did a quick double-take at the portrait.

There was Her Ladyship, looking positively Stygian. Sitting next to her and doing an admirable job of hiding the ravages of that frostbite was an old man who would probably recoil at being called anything other than a gentleman, and I assumed that to be Lord Bursar-Frankes, the old battleship's husband. Flanking them were two sons, or rather, one son, twice over: one of them was Gerald, and one of them was his twin brother, whose name I hadn't heard and, come to think of it, who hadn't been mentioned at all as of yet.

Just perfect, I thought. Just perfect.

I held up the photograph I'd been given and compared it to the painting. It looked like Gerald parted his hair on the left, swept sideways and back, whereas the other one parted his hair in the middle - or had three years ago, or the artist had used what license this bunch would give him so it would be possible to tell the two apart. I checked again, walking forward to hold up the photo such that perspective made its Gerald and that of the painting roughly the same size, and nodded. They had the same body language, same stance, same posture - almost perfect but not quite, the posture of a kid who got told to stand up straight all the time and got very good at holding himself up long enough to shoo her off his back. Definitely the one on the right, from my perspective, the one next to the mother, was Gerald. I wondered who the hell - and where the hell - his brother was, and turned around with some determination to find that out. I didn't shut the doors of the dining room behind me; a house like this has people for that sort of thing.

At this point, I told myself, I knew two things: mom's idea of her son's life did not reflect reality. I wondered if he'd been bothering with his classes at the temple or if he'd ditched those, too, and they were just too nice or too scared of his mother to tell her that. Odds were good she was still writing his tuition checks and that they cashed, so if I were a priest of Jupiter I'd see no margin in cheesing off the mother of my temple's bursar for daring to give me money for nothing. I also knew that Gerald had a twin - I needed to ask his name before I left - and I knew the help were likely to

keep their traps shut about any of Gerald's real habits for fear of angering a mother who refused to let go of her idea of her son. That – the fact she told me to my face without a stitch of hesitation or doubt that her son still lived with her – told me the reason she'd seemed funny this afternoon, too: she was just filtering this little adventure of his, whatever it might be, out of her personal reality because it didn't mesh with the version she preferred to tell.

I swept through the front hall and started the hike towards the door out, figuring I'd see a scurrying maid or some other tin knight along the way, but didn't see a soul. At the front door I hesitated a moment, turned around with the idea of looking until I found someone, then said to hell with it. By now Roger was probably warning the rest of the staff that I was nosy and dictating a written report to Her Ladyship so she'd know it, too. I wondered why the hell she'd hired me if she didn't want a nosy detective, and said to hell with all of them. I cracked the front door, grabbed the knocker on the front of it, banged hard five times and then shut it again, leaning up against the door jam and fondling the cigarette I intended to light on the front step.

Presently – but taking enough time to make me think I'd been right, and he'd had to adjourn his impromptu staff meeting to find out who was at the door – Roger appeared. On seeing me standing there inside the entryway he started to turn but I waved and called out to him. “Just on my way out, buck, but one last question: what's the name of the brother?”

Roger hesitated, adjusted his coat by tugging it down with both hands as though my very presence messed up his perfectly pressed presentation, then: “Master's brother is Young Master Benjamin.”

“What's he do to occupy his time?” I started poking the end of the cigarette against my lower lip to indicate I was just as ready for this to be over as he was, and stood away from the wall, my other hand on the knob of the door.

“Master Benjamin attends the Royal Institute of Business. He studies to take his father's position in the unfortunate event he shall vacate it at some future date.”

“When he drops dead, you mean,” I said with a little flourish of my cigarette. “I bet he just loves that, sitting on his can taking electives and wondering how long it'll be before he gets to use daddy's good paper and good ink. You've been a treasure, Jeeves, and I bid you adieu.” I mimed tipping my hat at him without actually removing

it at all, and Roger made a series of noises of disgust as I let myself out the front door and back into that forest of heavily mediated yard ornaments. I kicked my heels against the bottom step once, washing the place off of me, and lit the smoke. I breathed deep before taking to the path, intent to reach the street and hail a cab and get the hell out of Avery Circle and Persons West as soon as humanly possible. As I hit the drive and started for the gate, however, the driver from before called out.

“Oi, guv, need a lift?” He was in his shirtsleeves and had polish on his hands and a dirty rag over his shoulder, from where he was busy blacking the rubber along the body of the carriage.

“I’ll hail one, thanks,” I said in breezy reply, but the driver wasn’t having it.

“Nonsense, guv, they ain’t no cabs in Avery Circle. You’d be walking all the way back to Center Victoria.”

“Better that than spending another moment here,” I growled.

“Aye,” the driver laughed, unoffended. “I know whatcha mean, guv, so here, take a friendly offer.”

I grunted at the guy, but could see he didn’t share the stuffiness of the rest of the place – hadn’t been included in Roger’s little powwow with the household help, obviously – and finally sighed and nodded at him. “OK,” I said, “But no riding in the seats like that rubbish.” I chucked my thumb in the direction of the house. “I ride shotgun.”

“Suit yourself, guv,” the guy grinned. Two minutes later he had on a coat and we were sitting atop the carriage as he wheeled it out and into the streets, taking a left to ride down the long hill of Avery Circle, back to the gates with gates, towards the lights of Center Victoria.

“So what do you make of this ‘Warlock of the West’ business in the papers of late?” The driver, it turned out, was named Robert, but he pronounced it like the French. He was caramel-skinned, dark hair, built thin but tough. I figured he was probably Cajun or thereabouts. He was chatty but likeable enough anyway. I shrugged at him, working on another cigarette as he navigated the Saturday night traffic in Center. A horse can spook easy around motorcars, but Robert was an expert with the reins. I had to admire that much about him, if nothing else about his manner.

It's not like I'm big on decorum, obviously, but there was something I didn't like about the guy.

"Don't make a thing of it," I told him. "Barely even read the stories. I just see the headlines and figure that part's safe to skip."

He laughed at that like it was high hilarity and said, in a conspiratorial tone despite the volume at which he had to speak to be heard of the whinnies and neighs and honks and backfires of an urban area fully enjoying its weekend, "Well, the way I hear it, guy, there's a bunch of monsters and like creeping around in Docks Portage and Docks Business, monsters near every night, and this Warlock – Maximillian Mercer – well, the papers say he finds them and fights them, sends 'em back to wherever they come from, before they harm the populace at large. They say it's all the talk in Docks Half."

"News to me, mack," I said with a yawn and a shrug. "I live in Docks Business and haven't seen thing one."

The carriage swung around to the gates into Docks Business even as we spoke, and I gestured to stop. "No need to go all the way there, I can walk from here."

"Ah, but Her Ladyship will know that I have seen to you," Robert countered, "And be displeased if I return too soon. It cannot take but a moment by carriage, but you would walk half the night to return to your home."

I sighed, and didn't feel like fighting the guy. I had a feeling he was trying to pick me up, something that might have been OK on another night but tonight I was tired and cranky and I'd had it up to here with anyone getting their pay from Her Ladyship. "Fine," I said with another wave at the gates. "The Duck & Cover, halfway between Prince Willem Street and Arnold Avenue."

"Sandwiched between heroes," Robert said with something a little like a lascivious smirk and I tried to smile but really wasn't feeling it.

"Yeah, something like that," I said and gestured in the general direction then made myself busy – and silent – by digging around in my pockets for a pack of smokes and opening them with laborious slowness. Robert seemed to take the hint and after a few streets I poked my cigarette in the direction of the lamp that shined on the sign of the D & C at night. "There we are," I said over the noise of the street.

Robert pulled up out front and helped me down like a gentleman, then nodded

his cap at me with a smile. I was just starting to think that maybe when this was all over I'd swing back by and take a whack at being friendlier with him, so I smiled a little and tipped my own hat back for a second.

“Have a pleasant evening, guv,” he called, and then he spun the carriage and was gone from sight.

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Three

By the standards of The Duck & Cover, tonight was a pretty rowdy night: three games of cards going at various tables and two old drunks trying their best to remember the words to a marching song from a war of the nineteenth century. I couldn't even recognize which one, by their singing. All they could get was “Her Majesty's grace inspired the troops/they waxed their barge poles and let go in their sloops,” and I'm not at all sure those were the original words; insufficiently serious and insufficiently bawdy to be believable, if you asked me. Tank was pulling pints on the raised platform he'd had installed behind the bar when he bought the place, waddling back and forth and trying to keep the good drunks deep in their cups, where they felt warm and safe.

I slid onto a stool and ordered a New Amsterdam, sat and drank it in what I hoped seemed like contemplative silence rather than the sharp edge of a pissy snit, which is what it was. I didn't like a damned thing about the Frankes yet: I didn't like Her Ladyship, I didn't like that His Lordship wasn't around or, if he was, hadn't deigned to meet the guy trying to find his “missing” son. I didn't like that the mom was fooling herself with a cheap story about the kid still living there, I didn't like that they never mentioned the twin brother and I didn't like that they were as nice as knuckles when I was trying to do the job they'd hired me out for. I didn't like a bit of it, whatsoever, and the more I drank of the bourbon and bitters the more I decided the whole thing stank.

Finally I dropped some coins on the bar, tipped my hat at Tank and stood up to go for a walk. By now it was getting on towards midnight and there's no better time to clear one's head than after a stiff drink, walking the streets under a full moon. I pushed out of the sauna of a bar and into a night that seemed, by comparison, refreshingly cool. The truth was the heat hadn't lifted one bit, but the sea air was blowing in off the docks and the salt helped to scrub the stench of urban living out of the breeze and if you didn't breathe too deep it could almost seem like a pleasant night. I lit a butt and stuck it between my lips, loosened my tie, threw my jacket over my left shoulder, rolled up my sleeves, opened my collar and strolled away, northeast, further into the heart of Docks Business. Despite the name this side of town can get

pretty hopping of a Saturday night. The middle management types who run everything around here – on behalf of the beautiful residents of Persons West, who needn't sully themselves with the grimy goings on of the hoi-polloi who actually make their precious money – tend to live around here, too. Some of them live like me, in a room off their own office. Some make the relatively big bucks and rent or buy a little city house on one of the back streets, each one sandwiched against the next, narrow, long, brick-faced versions of the shotgun shacks that dot the countryside in poorer and less self-conscious regions. I strolled the main boulevard, then hung a left onto Arnold, a street wide enough for four carriages or cars to go side-by-side, and stuck to the wide sidewalk, smoking and walking, smoking and walking. Every now and again I'd see someone I knew from an old case or, some nights, someone I'd known from before the office, before this job, in other days and another life entirely.

Eventually, without paying much attention to where I was, I found myself on the northern end of Arnold where the pubs are all lined in a row for easy access when the clientele are stumbling drunks. I smiled a little, darkly, as I wondered whether it were my conscious or my subconscious that led me here. I stopped on the sidewalk and turned around to get my bearings and figure out which of these places looked like one where I might end up in a fight, glancing up and down the street.

I'd turned around just in time to catch someone flip open a newspaper in front of his face, like a cheap shadow from an even cheaper cliffhanger movie.

So, I'd picked up a friend somewhere along the way, had I? Interesting.

Rather than duck into any well-populated bars I simply turned back the way I'd been going and started to stroll with less purpose and far less speed. I pulled my hat down a little in the front and peeked out from under the brim in windows and the sides of glassed carriages as they passed. My little friend had gotten back on the trail, and he had a name: Robert.

I smiled again. He'd seemed so friendly on the ride back from the Frankes', too.

I turned abruptly down a side alley, one that cut between the bars and came out a few tens of yards away onto one of those residential streets where the managers' live behind lace curtains and under a delusion of importance. Behind a jumbo trash bin I settled up against the wall and ground out my cigarette, giving Robert time to catch up to me if he had the nerve to duck down a dark lane at night in this part of town.

Service class or no, it was possible he'd spent enough time in Persons West to decide he didn't like the look of this place anymore than his boss would, and chicken out. I was on the edge of my seat with anticipation.

About thirty seconds after I'd found my spot, I heard a few hesitant footsteps up the alley, where I'd come from. Robert didn't sound certain as to whether he was willing to take the bait I'd left out. Feet circled for a few steps, this way, then the other, and just as I figured he was about to turn tail and give me a chance to become the hound and not the fox, he found his resolve and tried his best to soft step in my direction. He couldn't see me, I was sure, but he knew I'd come this way and there was only way for me to have gone. Sure enough, a few seconds later I saw him come past, slightly crouched, a knife in one hand. Nice way to ask a gentleman out for a drink, I thought. Once he got just past me I stepped out and pressed the business end of my gat against one of his kidneys.

"Shhh," I whispered. "I wouldn't want you to wake any alley cats with a yell."

His hand tightened around the hilt of the shiv, but he didn't move. "C'mon, guv," he said, trying it on. "You wouldn't shoot a man just for sneaking up behind you with a knife, would you?"

"Beats me," I replied with a soft drawl. "Why don't we both find out?"

I heard him gulp hard, his breathing shallow and quick. I'll give him this, though, his hand never shook. "How about we chat a bit first?"

"Sounds good to me, stranger. But don't go trying to pull up a chair. I'm comfortable just as we are. I'd be even more comfortable if you tossed the slice somewhere out of reach."

Robert loosened his fingers from around the hilt, swinging his arm very slowly back and then forward, then back again as though to throw. I saw his fingers jerk back around the hilt, though, and even as he spun to try to stick me I reached out with my free hand and grabbed that wrist from behind, twisting it hard and wrenching it up behind him. He made a little squeak, the way a guy does when he runs out of all that false bravado, and I dug the gun in so hard it had to hurt at least a little.

"I'd hate to ruin my shirt with powder," I growled, "So let's keep it short and sweet. You made friendly in the car, but you parked it somewhere and came back on foot to keep an eye on me. You weren't in the butler's little huddle in the kitchens

before I left, so was it the old lady that put you to this?"

Robert had it in him to laugh a little and shook his head. "I ain't going to sing, guv, except to say you should be so lucky as to have just her after you."

"How about you give me the chorus and some of the first verse. You aren't that shy."

"The person or persons for whom I work tonight aren't the sort to like it if I do a lot of jawing about them. I'd about rather you shoot me now and get it over with." Robert managed another throaty little chuckle, but there was a shake in it. He was trying to sound tough, but he wasn't entirely lying, either.

"You here to shut me up the hard way, or just keeping an eye out."

"An eye, unless you wind up too close to something."

"What's that something?"

"We're back into non-negotiable territory, guv," he said. His voice changed tone and he started to sound more sincerely pleading. "How about you just let me go – here, I've dropped the knife." It clattered against the paving stone and I kicked it into the dark. "I'll run along back home and say I lost track of you. I'll get a tongue-lashing and you'll be free of your extra shade for the evening and you won't never see me again, I'll be a good lad."

"Ha!" I coughed that into his ear and twisted the arm again. "Not without something to remind you of a safe distance to keep," and I started to pull his arm up, in a position where I could wrench it out of the socket if I tried hard enough. Robert grunted in pain and tried to squirm, but I put the kibosh on that by pulling back the hammer on my piece. He heard the click and settled down again, trembling a little.

"You're not used to work like this, are you?"

He shook his head and laughed. "But I'm always one to try something new if the coin shines in the light, guv."

"Ambition is supposed to be a virtue, but it never seems that way to me," I said. "Now tell me something worth hearing before you lose more than the feeling in your whipping arm."

"I don't know who they are." He was quick to come out with it, once he started talking. "A visitor came by last night, showed up at the gate around midnight, just as I was about to close up and climb to my room over the garage. I couldn't see the face,

and the voice was funny. Told me if I kept an eye on you after your visit that there'd be a few dollars in it for me. Said they'd be by to collect the information, but didn't say when. It's truth, I swear it."

"And the knife was just you showing you'd taken to your work?"

"No, they told me to stick a pin in you if you caused trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"If you..." He paused, and then clammed up. "I'd rather not say, guv," and I twisted again and leaned into his ear.

"You wouldn't do something like this on a lark, and it'd take more than a few bucks to have you murder a man." I was gritting my teeth and speaking low. Robert was a hot one, I'd give him that, but nobody brings a knife to the first date and wins a second one. "My guess is you have your own reasons for taking the task, and that the shadowy figure who appeared at the gates of the Bursar-Frankes already knew you were a man who could be hired to do some light laundry. You drive the carriage, you take people where they go. So where'd you take the Young Master Gerald the last time he left the house? That's what you're here to protect, isn't it? Me finding out you drove him and you know where he went and someone either hasn't asked you or doesn't want you to tell them - or me - where that was. How's that?"

"It sounds to me like you know the words to this song. You want to make it a solo, that's fine by me. Always had a tin ear, guv." He laughed again, and relaxed a little. So, I'd figured it out; pretty good for an off the cuff try.

"I may know the tune, but I need some help. Tell me where you took him and I let you go. Refuse to tell me and you're just another bit of the better class' help they find washed up in the worse class of gutter somewhere. Try not to shake too hard, handsome, my finger's on the trigger and I wouldn't want this thing to go off too early." I pulled the gun back and dug it in again to emphasize my point.

"A warehouse," he grunted, sweat shining on his forehead in what light came leaking down the alleyway from the lamps at the far end. "1437 Whiting Wharf. I don't know who owns it, but the same guy or one a lot like them showed up at the gate three nights ago and told me to drop Gerald there at midnight on Wednesday. I knew he'd be going out because he always does."

"Always goes to where he really lives, after he kisses his mum good night, eh?"

“Yeah, yeah, you're real smart.” Robert was breathing harder now, more scared but still with enough gumption for sarcasm.

“So where did he usually go?”

“The same place.”

I paused a second, then sighed. “The warehouse?”

“Yeah,” and Robert laughed a little. “That's why I didn't mind the job so much – he was going to go there anyway, I knew, so what was the harm?”

“So why'd they pay you to make sure he got there on time? Some friends waiting for him?”

“I don't think I'd call them friends, guv, but they certainly greeted him with enthusiasm.”

“Did they rough him up or kill him on the spot?”

“Threw a sack over his head and dragged him kicking inside. That time of night, nobody good's around the docks. One of these guys in the robes, they handed off the bag of coins and waved me away. I spent most of it that night in a bar in Center. Felt guilty as soon as it was done, and then drank that away good and hard.”

“And when they showed up last night and told you to keep an eye on me or a knife in me, you took it because you were already their man in that regard.”

“Course, guv.”

“What'd they look like – the one who paid you off. Said you didn't see the face, see anything else?”

“They were all in robes, guv,” Robert said with a laugh at some joke I didn't get. “Like a priest or wizard or such. Big hood over their head, and their voice like it was being driven by a gas car: metallic, almost. Like out of a funny. The light was dim, sure, but the robe was dark. They didn't want to be recognized. I reckon in moccasins they could pass right by one of those gate guards who gets paid to look unless it's to look the other way, you know? To be honest, guv, 'e was a scary sort. I didn't rightly think of crossing him. I'd recommend the same to you. About left me clammy when he showed back up last night and sent me on this job.”

“You poor son of a bitch,” I said, and then I clocked him hard with the butt of my gun. He went down on the ground in a heap and I resisted the urge to kick him where he lay. Instead I dug around with the toe of my boot until I found the knife, picked it

up, tossed it down a storm drain and stood there thinking about what to do. Eventually Robert started to groan a little so I left him to think up his own story for his robed strangers and took off back the way I'd come to hail a cab. No time for horses and finery tonight; I flagged down a gas number and told the driver to hoof it to the 1600 block of Whiting Wharf. I'd walk the rest of the way just fine.

Whereas Docks Business has a fairly thriving if low rent kind of liveliness after dark, even on a weekend, Docks Portage has absolutely nothing to recommend it outside the work week. On the sunniest day in spring it's a smelly, lousy excuse for a place to do business. The city wastes none of its precious sanitation resources down here in the southeastern quarter. After the warehouses close down for the night, the business that nobody wants to see moves in and throws open its doors: the worst kind of pimps and whores, the hop dealers, the opium dens that won't keep an eye on you to make sure you don't suffocate under the weight of your own skin. If you're a creep in the market for a arm shot full of sunshine and a kid to ride your knob, you come to Docks Portage after the last bell. The cab driver didn't like bringing me here one bit so I had to pay him triple: he wouldn't make his fare back because he didn't want to pick up the sort of trash you found down here, so I had to make up for that, plus an extra dose to soothe the pain his reputation would suffer when the general population saw him coming back from Portage without a fare in the back seat. Leastways, that's what he told me, and I didn't have much time or room to argue. If odd ducks in black robes were on my tail, I needed to make a move fast. Robert had said the robes were like a priest's or a wizard's. Priests run this city, so no use crossing them if you were smart, and warlocks, though sanctioned, are a secretive and unfriendly bunch. I didn't want either class of citizen to know I was snooping where I shouldn't be, especially if they'd already burned some paper money on keeping me out of their hair.

I crept around behind one of the even-numbered addresses in the 1500 block, sticking close to the wall and avoiding the sounds of anything moving in the streets, so I could get a shot across the way at 1437. Eventually I came up behind 1436 and stuck my peepers around the corner, no hat, to see what could be seen.

1437 was a warehouse, just as Robert had said, looking locked up tight without

a light on in the place. Of course, none of the places around here would have a light on at this hour. They would have heavy curtains over the windows and a box over the front door so their patrons could come and go without any shafts of electric light to cast their shadows into the muck. No guards, though, and that was a blessing. I didn't know what sort of thug might be lounging behind the door, of course, but from the outside I was free and clear.

Not that I was going to use the front door, mind you.

I swung back the way I'd been, crossing over to an alleyway between 1439 and 1441. Again I lucked out in finding an alleyway devoid of life or anything like it. There were rats squeaking in the corners – throaty squeaks from big rats the size of a rich lady's small dog – and that was a good sign there weren't any human inhabitants raising the tension for anything. I soft pedaled around the back of 1439 to the back of 1437. A lamp hung over the back door, but the bulb was gone – either dead, removed or shot out at some point. I pulled my pen light from the inside of my jacket and flashed it around for a second. If there were anyone in the dark they'd probably have made me by now, so no reason not to even the odds. I swept it back and forth in a quick arc, one high, one low, and didn't see anything remarkable. Still using the light step, I snuck up to the back door and pressed my ear to it.

Silence.

I covered my hand in a handkerchief and put it lightly on the latch, then turned as easily as I could. Locked. I dug back into my pocket and came up with a pick and a torque wrench. I slid them in as easy as pie, taking my time, and started caressing the teeth with the pick while I pushed just a little on the wrench. After ten agonizing seconds I felt the wrench turn the handle and a quiet pop on the inside of the door as the lock sprang. I froze, listening again for anyone's approach from the far side, but didn't hear anything. I braced my knees against the door to keep me steady and reached higher up to try the deadbolt. It took longer and I had to push harder, but eventually I felt it give and then I turned it as quiet as a clock winder in a nunnery.

The door, uneven on its hinges and wanting to hang open, pushed back against me for a second and I knew I was in.

I scooted back behind its arc and let it come open an inch or so, just to see if that got someone's attention where the locks hadn't. Still as silent as the grave in

there so I held my breath, stood up and slipped around the door and inside, pulling it shut behind me in one motion.

Pistols failed to fire from the dark, and I found myself listening to my own breath and nothing much else inside a dark room I could tell by the air was large and mostly empty.

A few agonizing seconds of strained listening confirmed what I'd figured: the place was either empty or they had a better class of thug than Docks Portage would otherwise offer. My eyes tried to adjust to the light but all I could pick up were the glows of sparse lamps in the street outside, shining up and at the ceiling through the large windows that were high on the wall. At floor level I couldn't see a godsdamned thing. Still, I seemed to be all by myself and the windows were nice and high from the outside, too, so I got out the flash again and directed it around the room for a moment. What little it showed me before getting swallowed up in the shadows was enough to surprise me: the place wasn't just mostly empty, it was entirely empty.

If it's a warehouse, I thought to myself, where'd all the wares go?

My flash cast a glint from something on the floor as I swept it around again, and I arced back to check it out. On the floor, in nowhere particular, there was a metal latch and a hook, like you'd lock on a shed door or a trunk. I walked over and checked it out further, ran my fingers around the dirt, found the edge and realized it was a trap door.

OK, so our boys in black robes grab Young Master Gerald, drag him inside his own normal hangout and... bring him down here? I used my flash to scan around and found drag marks and foot prints in the dirt and mud on the floor. So far so good, and no blood, so even better. They'd come in the front doors – ballsy, grabbing a guy on the street like that, though I had to guess that maybe in Docks Portage that wouldn't be such a big deal, especially if you ran the joint in question. OK, so they grab him outside, bring him in the front doors just as calm as you please, drag him over – dragged, so he was bound or he was sapped, likely the latter to keep him quiet, too – and throw him down the hole. No prints led away, though, so it was starting to look like they'd gone in after him. That was two days ago, so either they had a cozy spot down there and had stayed several nights or they had another exit. I clucked my tongue against my teeth, breath hissing, not liking the idea of going down there but

not seeing many other options. I got down and pressed my air against the hatch, still closed, and didn't hear anything. Time to give it a whirl, Hank.

I hooked my handkerchief through the ring on the floor and tugged. The door came up without a squeak, no light shooting out from below and no cries of surprise. After a cautious few moments I shined my flash down the hole and saw a ladder that led down into what looked and, more importantly, smelled like the city sewers.

Curiouser and curiouser, as the saying goes.

My boots found the footing a little slick, but I made due down the ladder. I wondered what poor bastard had the job of lugging a trussed up Gerald Frankes down these rungs, reached up behind me and pulled the trap door shut. I hoped to any gods who were listening that no one would come along and tidy up behind me with a lock, took a last breath of clean air and then clambered down to drop onto a cement walkway that ran parallel to the flow of last night's supper as it sludged its way by. My handkerchief was useful again, this time tied around my nose. My cigarettes stayed right where they were in my pocket, though; no amount of cash in the world could have made me light a match in that place.

Unfortunately, the foot prints were dried or gone or the boots were clean by the time they'd come down here, and I didn't have a clear indication of a way to go. I played catch a tiger with right and left, eventually settling on left and crept through the dark in that direction. All was silent in the city's sewers, and I kept my ears open for the sounds of conversation, the sound of feet, anything.

No dice on that front, either, and so I started trying to reason it out. If I were going to use the sewers as a hideout, I'd want it to be somewhere off the main drag for reasons of atmosphere if nothing else. That thinking led me to take the first left I came to, which ran something closer to dry and off to, I figured, the southwest, tangential to the circle that is Center Victoria and into a less populated part of Docks Portage. That, in turn, hit a dead-end and turned right, with a cat walk suspended over a nearly dry tunnel. I walked for a good five or ten minutes, alone with my thoughts and the occasional rat but nothing else even a little like the evidence of life. Soon I came to a part of the sewer that hadn't been moistened in some time, probably underneath a condemned block of warehouses or something, someplace people didn't much go even during the day. That sounded good to me as a place to put a hideout,

and so I shined my flash around the dark real quick, reflecting it off the slabs of concrete and occasional old marble that made up these smaller, older tunnels. Occasionally a metal sign with some civic identifier – tunnel 14F, or the like – would shine back at me, but otherwise nothing. I pressed on, well past the point that I would believe got inspected with any regularity, and was just about ready to give up the chase and decide I was off on a wild hare, in need of some serious regrouping, when I noticed a very dim but very certain glow from around a corner. Said corner had a metal grate down over it with a sign up that read: CONDEMNED TUNNEL, NO ENTRY.

If I were a storybook villain, I figured, I'd probably find that a great spot for a cabin on the water.

It was also at that point that someone cleared their throat, very softly, from about ten yards behind me.

I swung around and shined my flash where I hoped their eyes would be. The person in question was a blond elf – something we don't get much of in New Victoria, much less slouching around in the sewers – and I grit my teeth to keep from gasping aloud. He was probably tall, but crouched low, one hand on the wall and the other on the floor to steady himself. He had ratty blond hair, curly and shaggy, and he was wearing what looked like waxed canvas hunting trousers and a dingy green shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a small pack on his back. A hunting knife hung from each side of his waist and his ears came to razor points pressed close to the side of his head.

He smiled a little, like a cat who's just seen a pretty bird.

I grunted a little and frowned back at him.

He pressed one finger to his lips and pointed at the corner around which the lights shined, then ran a finger down the unnaturally ample length of one ear. I shuddered a little, but nodded at him, and he crept forward, edging around past me and closer to the corner, flexing his ears and waving them like a moth does its wings in the light. After a moment he crept back and said to me, in a thick accent from the western provinces, “There is one guards. He is asleep or close to it. We could take him with little trouble.”

“Take him?” I blinked at this elf in his safari gear and grinned despite myself. “Why?”

“I have my reasons, as do you. Let's not waste any time waving our genitals around.”

I hrmphed at him, still not liking this, and the two of us inched up to the corner. I peeked around it and spotted the guard – a human dressed in a black robe, leaned against the wall with a staff in his folded arms but otherwise sleeping like a baby. There were electric lights in the room beyond him, evidently opened into the sewer by means of a half-decayed wall that lay in a heap around the edges of the entrance. The elf gestured to me and then pulled away and was gone from sight. I wondered what the hell he'd meant with that gesture, just a point in the guard's direction, and shook my head to myself. I'd already dealt with one shadow tonight, did this mean I had another?

I crept forward, though, determined to take advantage of the situation while I still could. I pulled the sap from my back pocket and stood up, rolling my steps to keep quiet, taking my time getting up to the guard. His back was to me, breathing softly, and I lifted the sap and brought it down hard on the crown of his skull. Nothing louder than an exasperated sigh came out of him and that was that. I caught the staff he'd held before it could clatter against the concrete, then grabbed his feet and dragged him back out of the light. While he was still out I yanked back the hood over his face and shined my pen flash at it: a human, but tattoos around his throat in the style of daggers. That was interesting but not significant: I'd keep an eye out for it, but it didn't ring any bells for me in terms of gangs I knew of in Docks Portage.

As I stood up the elf emerged from the shadows and swept something sticky and gray over the guard's upper lip. “A mild inhalant,” he whispered. “Our friend will sleep well tonight.” He smiled and waggled his thin eyebrows against dark brown skin and I tried not to groan in annoyance.

“Alright, Ears McWild,” I whispered with a jab of my finger in his direction. “Spill.”

“My name is Leeritan Vaz.” He smiled a little at the jab, tucking the jar of whatever back into one of his pockets. “I am here in search of information regarding a mystery of importance to my circle.”

“Witches?”

“Druids.”

“Wood witches, then.”

“Yes,” he replied. His green, slightly almond shaped eyes ran me up and down. “You are a native of this city. I would imagine you are what they term a 'private dick' in human society. I am, for my circle, much the same: scout and spy.”

“I'm nobody's spy.”

Leeritan Vaz shrugged his narrow shoulders at me with utter nonchalance. “Shall we investigate together?”

“Depends. What are you looking for? I don't suppose a fat old dragon hired you to find her missing pup, did she?”

“Dragons have been dead for two millenia.”

“Figure of speech, smart ass.”

“Ah.” He smiled again; he'd been joking, and I'd fallen for it. “Pardon, but your sophisticated metaphors are difficult for my barbarian mind.”

I smirked at him and showed him my middle finger.

“Now we speak the same language,” he said with a wide smile. “No, no one has hired me to find their son. I come in search of information on Maximillian Mercer, the Warlock of the Wild West. There has been some mention of him in the papers, if you are familiar with their stories.”

I cocked one eyebrow at that and nodded. “I am, a little. Didn't realize it was related.”

“I do not know whether it is related. I know only that he has been seen to disappear from plain sight in this part of Docks Portage. My best guess is that he ducks down a manhole cover after throwing a smoke bomb. If I were someone with a flair for the dramatic, this is where I would make my hideout. I noticed you ahead of me but could tell from your stance that you, too, were an intruder. I thought it wise to remain hidden until matters forced us into an alliance or a confrontation.”

“Whatever.” I cleared my throat and nodded in the direction of the hole in the wall. “I came down here because the son of a client – who otherwise comes here all the time of his own free will – got dragged down here by some of these bastards the other night.” I tapped the sleeping guard on the chest as I spoke. “I'm trying to find him and figure out why they want him bad enough to hire a guy to keep me off their trail while I'm at it.”

“Most interesting. Perhaps your missing boy is a friend of Maximillian Mercer's?”

“Or maybe he is Maximillian Mercer.”

“Perhaps so.” Vaz cocked one of his own eyebrows at that, and we both sat in silence looking in the direction of that rough entryway into whatever subterranean hideout was down here. “There is, of course, only one way to find out.”

“What, you can't just... conjure up something with your wood witching and find out what you want to know?”

Vaz smirked at me and opened his mouth to lick his lips before speaking. “You have read too many newspaper stories about the secret power of magic,” he said. “Most magic is weak, and though mine can be potent it does not solve such problems so easily.”

“Fine, fine.” I didn't really understand what he was saying – everyone knows magic is restricted because it's dangerous, and despite the occasional call in the Senate to use it to fix this or that, nobody ever uses it that way. I've always figured it's a big sham, something someone can use to milk the Senate for funding. “So what do you suggest?”

“I suggest we walk in the front door and see what happens.”

I nodded at him and shrugged. “Seems like that's our only option.” I've never spent much time around elves, but I've heard the stories. I waved a hand with a flourish. “Age before beauty, long ears.”

Leeritan favored me with a winning smile and went on all fours to the edge of the opening in the wall, listening again, then peeped around, then stood and walked into the light. “All that drama for naught,” he sighed. “There is but an empty room, and a metal door set in the wall.”

I stood and came closer, then stepped around into the room myself. Sure enough, there was a small room on the other side of the wall with a couple of woven chairs who'd seen better days and a big, metal door with a grate in it set into the wall. “Looks like there was probably another door where the wall is open,” I said. “But they had to knock it down or blast it open to get in here. Probably a section of the sewers the city's forgotten exists.”

“Yes,” he agreed, and he pressed an ear against the grate in the metal door. After a moment, he pressed his index finger to his lips again, then mouthed:

“Chanting.”

I walked over and leaned in next to him. I could only barely hear it – it sounded a long way off, like in a big room at the end of a long hallway – but it was there: one voice, saying something I couldn't make out in a rhythmic way. The cadence of the voice was stilted and repetitive, building in volume then letting off, then building again to a point slightly higher.

“Warlocks? Really?” I looked at Vaz.

“Definitely. And if they have your quarry,” but here he trailed off, then drew a finger across his neck. “I believe that is how you put it.”

“Well, let's not dick around out here playing patty cake,” I said, and I grabbed the handle of the door and found it came open at a touch. “Let's go save the friggin' day.”

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Four

The door swung open on hinges that squeaked but not too loudly. I had to wonder if one of these guys in the fancy threads had spent a long afternoon standing there with an oil can and a rag, making sure it would sound just so when opened or whether that was just the way the world works sometimes: that a big, metal door into a long, dark hall with chanting at the other end squeaks a little because the universe demands that it squeak a little for the sake of melodrama.

We paused for a few seconds, Leeritan and I each straining to listen down the hall. There was a very weak electric lamp far enough up it that it didn't throw any light directly on us but close enough that we could see. The chanting had not stopped, and from this side of the door we could hear it more clearly: garbled consonants and gibberish in a tongue I'd never heard before in my life. If I had to write it down it would come out something like: "Zzth kznja eno hlai, Zzth kznja una fza," repeated in an unhurried, low and quiet tone a couple of times, then more forcefully, then more forceful still, then practically shouted, then silence for what would have been about a repetition of the phrases, then it started over again. I cut my eyes sidelong at the elf, found him looking at me. We both nodded in silence. I drew my gat from the pocket of my jacket. Vaz reached to his sides and came up with a couple of knives the size of cricket bats. I clucked my tongue at myself; it's not good to fall in with rough sorts like that.

Creeping forward, rolling my steps from heel to toe, heel to toe, to keep my balance and muffle the sound, we passed around the arc of flickering light cast by the electric lamp, then snaked around to press against the other wall to avoid another, making our way up the hallway at a snail's pace. The chanting hadn't changed from that one established pattern, but I knew that if it seemed to reach any real crescendo – blood-curdling screams, I guessed, I didn't really know what to expect of some arcane climax – then we'd probably both just blow our cover and bolt in. If my Young Master Gerald was down here with a bunch of robed freaks dancing around him, I wasn't going to spit in payday's eye by failing to bring him back.

After passing what felt like ten miles but was more like fifty yards of unmarked, uninteresting, stone and concrete hallway, we came to another door exactly like the

one at the other end. This one had the unscreened, barred grate in it, too, and the two of us each put a single eye up to opposite corners and had a peek at what might be in the room beyond, from which we could see the flickering light of fire, or candles.

Through the grate, I saw a large, round room with a circle of columns and arches in the middle. It looked like a temple or a shrine, to be honest, but one that hadn't been in use for a few dozen decades. There were great cobwebs across the space at the top, where I could easily imagine a glassed dome had once capped the room but now it was just a brick and paving stone seal, flat, probably no more than a couple of feet from the surface of the road. There weren't any obvious signs of any gods I knew anywhere in the room, no banners, no drapes, no murals of an instructional nature. The light by which I saw this was cast by a few dozen candles set up in holders and stuck to tables and the sides of support beams – wherever they would go – and they all smelled like bacon. I had to work hard not to gag when I thought of that, when my brain went chik-chik-chik-DING and came up with that word for what I smelled. There was a robed person kneeling next to a table of some sort, and on the table I could see what might have been a person, with a big tarp or blanket thrown over them with black scorch marks around the outer edge.

“Right,” I whispered to Leeritan. “Human sacrifice. Are you prepared to make a move?”

He nodded at me, and I grasped the door handle then pulled hard and swung the door open with a loud squeal of the hinges and a sound like a thunderclap when the handle struck the stonework wall and rebounded off it. My gun was already up and as the figure in the robes swung around at the waist to see who had come in I fired a shot to the side as a warning. I couldn't see the face of the person in the robes, as the cowl hung down and far in front of the face itself, locking it up in shadows.

“Hands where I can see 'em, Merlin, and the first movement that looks like an arcane sign earns you a bullet between the eyes, right?”

Vaz was crouched beside me, knives out to the sides. His teeth were clenched and he was hissing a little through them, like a beast. To be honest, I found that no less stupidly messed up than the arrangement before me, but in a tight spot it pays to have a friend and nobody said I had to psychoanalyze him before we were back at street level.

“ Zzth kznja!” He said that and I swung the gun toward him but before I could fire I saw the... thing step out of the shadows of an alcove on the far side of the round room. It was... it was like a huge dog, but with no fur, with a thick hide that hung in folds and drapes of corpulent flesh. The mouth opened in three places, unlike anything the gods put on this old Earth, and a tongue snaked out of it when it opened its face to sniff the air like a snake. I could see barbs on the tip of the tongue, something that made no sense the instant I saw it; how could it hold its tongue in its mouth if barbs were on the end? The thing turned enormous, blank white eyes with multi-faceted slits in them on us and the lids narrowed by about a foot. The thing itself was probably eight feet tall at the shoulder, hind legs shorter than the front so that it was sort of standing like a dog and sort of crouched like an ape.

I said something, though I don't remember now what it was. I probably hoped it was clever, but I'm told it came out something like, “Guh... GUH...” as I stared at the creature staring at me.

Vaz growled like a dog and hunched lower like he was going to spring. My gun hand was shaking like a leaf and I tried to take a shot at the character in the robes but he threw himself behind a table and I heard my bullet ping off a column nowhere especially close to him. The creature made a sort of snarling sound with overtones of slurping and with one shove of its forepaws against the stone floor started to run the fifty feet across the room towards us. The stench this thing gave off – of burnt meat, of death and decay, of everything wrong and unclean, slightly sweet in a way that made your stomach flip over at the first whiff – washed ahead of it like a wave at the beach. I raised the gun at it and started firing, my left hand coming up reflexively to fan the hammer. I emptied the chamber of four shots in as many seconds, smoke clouding my vision. At the same time I felt a breeze flutter the leg of my pants and Vaz was running across the room with his knives. I'm sure I must have hit the monster, or he did when he skidded up alongside it with his knives out, ready to rake them down its side and try to open its guts, and then all of a sudden it wasn't there.

Like the blink of an eye, like an electric lamp switching off, it just wasn't there anymore.

And neither was the guy in the robes.

I turned my head to one side and threw my dinner all over the floor.

Vaz was standing where he'd slid to a stop on the floor, sniffing the air, running his tongue across his lower lip. Then he bent down and actually pressed his nose to the stones where The Creature had stood, roaming back and forth on all fours.

I threw up again just watching him do that.

By the time I was done it was just dry heaves and I managed to pull myself together. I caught my breath with my back turned to the scene of Leeritan's canine behavior, reached into my left back pocket and pulled out a hip flask to wash the taste out of my mouth. I never carry good hooch in the hip flask because then I'd be tempted to drink it all the time; this stuff was strictly break in case of emergency. I braced myself for a shot of liquid pain, took it and found myself gritting my teeth and banging a fist against the wall to get it down. It made me breathe, though, and it slapped me around enough to straight up and get back to the work at hand.

Finally I turned around and Leeritan was very neatly and professionally examining the room. "Summoning," he said, with a nod of his head at the circle of candles and the raised platform – the altar, there was no other word for it – in the middle.

"Body?"

"Dead." He tapped the side of his nose, and I nodded.

"How long?"

"Not long, but it's been immolated."

"Is that the bacon smell?"

"Partly." He pointed at one of the candles. "Animal fat, might be human, elf, gnome, dwarf, not sure."

"So was he a sacrifice?" I nodded at the altar.

"Yes."

"What was the guy summoning?"

Leeritan shook his head from one side to the other, twice, then stuck his hands in his pockets. "Well, shall we see if it's your lad?"

I sighed and rubbed my jaw, slipped the flask back in my pocket after a moment's consideration and then gritted my teeth. "Yes," I mumbled. I steeled myself, however, walked over and yanked the covering – I could see now that it was a huge piece of tanned hide – back to reveal whatever poor bastard was underneath

once upon a time.

The body underneath was black and twisted, burned to a crisp but done so fast that the hide had barely been scorched and that, mostly, around the edges. There were even bits of fabric still in place on the corpse. Between them and a necklace I'd seen in a painting earlier that night I knew enough to identify the victim. I sighed again, dropped the wrap back over the body and clucked my tongue.

Leeritan shook his head at that and leaned against one of the columns to study some far corner of the dark.

"You didn't say what he was summoning." I put my gun back in my jacket pocket and stuck my hands in my pants pockets.

"A demon, though I don't know much more than that," Leeritan said quietly. "If he felt he needed to sacrifice a human life to get it here, well... a big one."

"Did we kill it?" I knew better than to believe that.

"No."

I nodded. At least this elf was honest.

"Well," I said, stretching my back and then my arms. "I've got city police to lead down here, if you don't mind. If you need to skedaddle before they get here, now's the time."

Leeritan looked at me and nodded. "I do not fear the police, but I have to notify my circle immediately."

I smiled just a little, just turning up the corners of my mouth, and nodded. "Right. I'll give you a ten minute start."

Twenty minutes later I was back street-side, tucked into a telephone booth outside the offices of Vox Victoria. Before leaving the subterranean altar I'd wiped down the handles of the doors and blown out the candles in the room. Now I stood in the shadow of the awning over the locked up telephone company's doors and murmured into the receiver: "There's a body in the sewers, somewhere under..." I did some quick estimating. "Probably the 2000 block of Whiting Wharf, or thereabouts. Big metal door behind a hole in the wall, a 'no entry' sign on it. The body is a posh young man named Gerald Frakes."

"And just who's telling me this?" asked the desk sarge on the far end, but all he got in response was a click of the receiver.

By then it was near on two in the morning, and I didn't feel like I could break the news to Mrs. Bursar-Frankes myself at that hour. It was a cowardly thing to do, I'll admit, and maybe in the end everything would have turned out different if I'd gone ahead and shown some spine, but instead I went home.

I just went right back to the office - walked to Center, caught a gas number back to the Duck & Cover, let myself in the back and climbed the stairs to the room off my office - and collapsed in the bed after a glass of Clan Tartan to wind me down. I barely even made it out of my clothes. I was exhausted, and tomorrow was going to be anything but a pleasant Sunday. The wall clock said three thirty when I fell against the pillow, and I didn't stick around to see it tick over to the next minute.

I slept long and hard that night, waking up at noon the next morning. I would have slept longer and harder, but someone was hammering against the door to my office with what sounded like the a team of Clydesdales. I rolled out of bed, pulled on yesterday's pants and yesterday's undershirt and walked over to the door. The shadow on the other side of the scalloped glass was short, so it was Tank. I cracked the door. "Morning, sunshine."

"Aye," he growled, giving me one eye and squinting with the other. "Ye've got company downstairs."

"Description?"

"Country chap, calls himself Robert."

"Not interested in what he's selling."

"I ain't the secretary," Tank growled. "You want him to shove off, you can bring your own bottle of bubbly down to the docks." Then he hrumphed and swiveled and waddled back off down the hall.

I sighed and decided to take my time with it. I grabbed a shower in the john, shaved with deliberation, washed and combed my hair, dug a clean shirt and clean pants from the closet. It was a Sunday, so no need for a jacket or tie. I grabbed a fresh pack of smokes, one that didn't have sewer stink all over it like my clothes from yesterday, and lit one as I walked down to the pub.

Robert was sitting at the bar, half a beer beside him, dressed for work. He

donned his driver's cap and rose as I walked around the corner at the bottom of the stairs.

"No need to stand on my account." I shot smoke from each nostril and waved the match out in his direction. "Here to show me more cutlery?"

Robert smiled and put on his best Cajun-among-the-posh drawl. "No, guv, just here to give you a lift. Her Ladyship the Missus Bursar-Frankes requests your attendance to a business matter."

I started to say I was taking today off and send him packing, but I did after all have news to give her, such as it was. I tested the waters, though. "So she's taking visitors today?"

"Of course, guv." Robert was all smiles and subservience. "Why wouldn't she?"

I looked him up and down - he looked smart in the driver's suit, but I remembered all too well the Robert that tracked me down an alley the night before. I glanced at Tank and he was very studiously not watching us. If it had occurred to him he'd probably have stuck cotton balls in each ear, too, just to look casual.

"No reason," I said. "Got a paper in the cab?"

"No, guv, but I have our paper in the carriage already."

I nodded, mashed my cigarette to death in an ashtray on the bar, and tipped my hat at Tank. "Back in a while, friend."

"Hrmpf."

I followed Robert outside - he held the door - and he had the hansom waiting for us. The curtains were still red, not black, and no lace had been pinned to anything; not a sign of mourning anywhere on the thing. Robert opened the door for me like I was His Lordship himself, and I stepped up into it. "Why the kid gloves?"

Robert just smiled and shut the door. I reached over to the other seat and helped myself to the Bursar-Frankes Sunday morning paper, flipping it open. The headline shouted: WILD WEST WARLOCK WINS AGAIN, with a story long on adventure and short on first-hand descriptions. Maximillian Mercer, whoever that shyster might be, had been spotted in Docks Portage around four of the morning, chasing and/or being chased by some kind of horrible monster.

Hmph. I wondered how many horrible monsters it was possible for there to be in Docks Portage in one night, anyway? I flicked the story with my index finger and

didn't at all like the easy explanation that popped into my head.

I kept scanning, seeing nothing about the discovery of Gerald Frankes' body in the sewers. I flipped pages – 2, 3, 4, 5, 17... nothing. Finally I found one tiny entry on the back page of the Victoria News section, just as we were rounding the last curve before the Bursar–Frankes' ridiculous mansion. The headline was barely larger than the print, and it read, very simply: False Call Distracts Police.

Oh, shit.

“Victoria Police reported this morning that a prank caller at two of the morning Saturday night, or Sunday morning, had sent them on a fool's errand in the sewers underneath Whiting Wharf, Docks Portage, New Victoria Southeast. A location was described to the police by an anonymous caller, including the identity of a bright young scion of Victoria wealth, unidentified by police. The city's defenders were able to find the location described, but not the grisly scene detailed to them on the telephone. Police wish the public to know that such pranks may delay their response to legitimate emergencies and to remind their mischievous caller that such calls are a crime and, if he is caught, he shall be punished to the greatest extent allowed by the law.”

I folded the paper and stared at the front lawn of the Bursar–Frankes' house through the now–open door of the hansom, Robert stand there waiting to help me down. “Guv?” He smiled as he asked. “A hand down?”

“No thanks,” I mumbled, shoving his hand away and jumping down on my own. “I can find the way from here.”

I lit another cigarette and started off across that expanse of lawn, needing a few moments alone with my thoughts.

What I hadn't wanted was to be the guy who dropped the bomb on Her Ladyship. I'll be honest about that. The city police get paid to do that dirty work, and I was happy to leave it to the professionals. Now, though, someone had cleaned the place out after my departure. Maybe the chap in the robes stuck around in the shadows, somewhere. Maybe he'd come back later. Maybe he had an in with the cops. Maybe it wasn't what it had seemed. I knew for a fact there had been a body down there, though, and from what was left of the clothes and the hair and the jewelry, though, I felt certain it had been Gerald Frankes. Now I had to tell Her Ladyship that – it's my

job to tell my clients what I see, after all – and I had to do it with no evidence whatsoever that I wasn't just selling her a bunch of bad grapes.

I stepped up to the barn door and pulled the knocker back, then let it fall. A few moments later, Roger, the butler, pulled the door back and nodded at me. “Mr. Weaver,” he intoned. “To see Her Ladyship, I assume?”

“Yep.” I tapped ash onto the stone of the front stoop and waved the cigarette at the butler. “Are these forbidden?”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Great,” I said, then I tucked the butt between my lips and made to step inside. “Lead the way.”

Roger took me through the house and back to that sitting room all in grey and highlights, the same one where I'd cooled my heels the night before. Now, in the sun, I was surprised to see how dark it still was, even after my meditations on the drapes my first time here. They had to have the electrics on in the middle of the afternoon if they wanted to be able to read. Weird birds, people with money. They'll do the dumbest things to spend more of it.

After a few moments, the door opened and Lady Bursar–Frankes swept in. Today she was wearing grey, not black, with some white here and there. She smiled at me in a polite, perfunctory way, the same way she probably smiled at the people who came to pick up the laundry if she happened to see them at the other end of the hall. “Good afternoon, Mr. Weaver.”

“Your Ladyship.” I doffed my hat at her for a second, then held it in my hand behind me. “I've got some news.” I drew a breath; nothing to do with a bomb but set it off and see what's left standing.

“As do I,” the old battleship intoned, with that same little smile. “Gerald returned home this morning. I no longer require your services. If you will take the time to prepare your itemized expenses, Roger will see to having a check cut for you.”

I blinked at her. I'll admit it, I blinked. “Gerald's here?”

“Yes.”

“Walking around?”

She looked at me oddly, like I'd just put a duck on my head, and then laughed once: ha. “Of course.”

I took a long pull off my cigarette and then walked to the side table to tap ash into an ashtray that probably hadn't ever been used. Her Ladyship wasn't thrilled with me using the good china, but in its own way I found that reassuring – she had time to be annoyed over something minor. “So where's he been?”

“A trip to the beachfront with friends from school,” she said crisply. “I believe he called it 'a lark.'”

“A lark.” I smiled a little, right back. “Well then, that's all settled. Mind if I speak to him before I go?”

Lady Bursar–Franke didn't look so sure of that, to be honest, and that got me worried again. She wrinkled up her brow and her eyes set hard for a breath and then she smiled again. “I'll have Roger see if he's free, but I understand he's quite tired. We'll see. Now, please, that list of expenses? While Roger sees to Gerald?”

I nodded and pulled my receipt book from my back pocket. “Sure thing,” I mumbled, and pulled out a pen from my shirt pocket, and I started writing down things here and there – dinner at the bistro, the cab ride to Avery Circle, two days of work, the quarter I'd paid the kid at the directory office. I labeled them truthfully or not, depending on how much haggling I thought they'd produce. If it was going to go all cocked right now, I was at least going to get my paycheck out of it.

Five minutes later, Roger opened the door and came in with a large checkbook, like a business' check register. Two steps behind him was Gerald Bursar–Frankes, alive and well, unmistakably the man from the portrait in the dining room. He had sandy hair, a good, posh, aquiline nose, a pointed chin and a jaw you could use to sharpen steel. He was a handsome young man of money and manners, when necessary, wearing dark grey trousers and a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up like he was planning on spending a Sunday afternoon practicing croquet on the lawn. His eyes were blue and hard as diamonds, though, and he spent two seconds diving inside my head with them before he smiled the smallest smile in recorded history and walked over, a hand extended. “Mr. Weaver?”

I stood just a moment, shook his hand, then we both sat. I held the receipt out to Roger without looking at him; he took it and started making notes in a small leather-bound book he produced from his jacket pocket. “That's me,” I said to Gerald.

“Mother says you wished to speak with me. I understand I've put you and her to

some trouble, and wish to apologize.”

“She hired me to find you because you'd gone missing,” I said, flat. “It's no trouble to me, it's what I do.”

Gerald smiled again, that same molecular twist at the corners of his mouth. “Well, yes, I suppose so. I appreciate your time and effort, but as you can see, I am plainly well and accounted for. I would, however, like to pay you a gratuity above and beyond your simple fees, for the effort you have put forth. It was, after all, a weekend.”

I lifted one shoulder and shrugged, reached in my coat pocket to produce my smokes, offered him one, which he refused. I lit one for myself, then blew smoke through my nose at the floor. “If you wish, I won't turn it down. Still, it's what I do. I hear you were at the waterfront?”

“Yes,” Gerald smiled, more widely. “Some mates and I went to the sea for a couple of nights. We were playing hooky.”

I nodded at him. “Which beach?”

Gerald's smile stayed very still. “I don't recall the name,” he said after a moment. “North Fork, perhaps? I can't recall. We stayed in a little bungalow down there. One of my chums from temple school has family who own vacation rentals there. It was, oh, an hour or so from the city.”

“Very pretty there this time of year,” I said, between drags. “Busy, in August.”

“Yes,” Gerald said, warming up to it. “Quite busy.”

“Lucky the rental wasn't taken,” I said. “This being the high season.”

Gerald lifted both shoulders and spread his hands from one another just a little, then put them back together on one knee. “When one owns the place...” He smiled again. He showed his teeth.

“True enough,” I said with a grin of my own. “Well then, that about wraps it up.”

“Indeed.” Gerald started to rise and then, for no reason at all that I could think of in a rational way, I said, “What do you make of this Maximillian Mercer character?”

Gerald favored me with that glance the posh have of having no idea what we rabble are going on about. “Whom?”

“Maximillian Mercer?” I took one last drag and crushed the butt out in a different ashtray, rising as he did. Ma Frankes was going to have a busy evening

scrubbing the place down of any evidence I was ever there, I was sure. “Warlock of the Wild West?”

Gerald smiled and laughed. “Ah, yes, the man in the paper. I think it's ridiculous. Urban legend, they call it.”

“Of course,” I said, and laughed back at him. I tried picturing him with a black hat and a black handkerchief over his mouth, and it didn't quite fit. “Give my regards to Her Ladyship, and to your brother.”

Gerald shook my hand again and gave me a little bow. “Naturally, and good afternoon.” I pulled my hand away and found a bill in it, folded small.

I stood there with my hat in my hands, Gerald's money cupped under the brim. “Good afternoon.” He walked out of the room at an easy pace, and as soon as the door clicked the butler rose and held out a check. “With Her Ladyship's gratitude,” he said. “You know the way out, I'm sure.” With nothing else like a goodbye, he walked out, straight backed, and left me standing there in the sitting room. The check was for every penny I'd listed on the receipt, and the bill Gerald had slipped me was a cool hundred.

Not bad for a day's work being lied to.

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Five

I walked back down the front walk after letting myself out the front door. Robert was waiting by the hansom, the horses brushed and ready to go, smiling like he'd swallowed a songbird. "You are ready to return to your offices?"

I stopped and produced a cigarette and stared at him. He kept smiling. I kept staring. Eventually his smile started to look forced. I tapped the butt of the cigarette against my lighter, over and over, staring at him from under the brim of my hat.

"So, Gerald's home, safe and sound."

"Yes, guv."

"You bring him here?"

"No, he showed up this morning in a gas cab. I'm sure the neighbors will complain at the noise." His smile stopped looking so strained for a moment – he genuinely found that idea funny.

"Uh-huh."

Robert kept grinning.

"So tell me about Benjamin."

"Young Master Gerald's elder brother?"

"Elder? They're twins."

"Elder by five minutes, guv." Robert closed the door to the hansom, figuring out we weren't going anywhere anytime soon. He stood at parade rest, all business.

"Well, that's one thing." I lit the cigarette, finally, and took a couple of quick puffs. "What else?"

Robert shrugged a little, not moving his hands from where they were clasped behind his back. "I don't know what else to tell, guv."

"I hear he's studying to take over His Lordship's business, keeping the books at Jupiter's main digs."

"Yes." Robert wasn't going to be as talkative today as he'd been last night. I nodded at his head.

"You seem to be holding up pretty well."

"The swelling went down quickly with some ice on it, guv. My apologies if you were... inconvenienced."

I clucked my tongue at him and then shook my head and took a step closer. I caught him lift one foot to step back, then he held his ground. "Listen," I whispered, "You're no good at the hired tough game, we both know that. You sang like a bird last night, so either they upped your pay or they scared the spine out of you. So which is it? And who the hell is that inside? Gerald? Or Benjamin?"

Robert studied me for a long moment and then the smile returned. "Shall I give you that ride now, guv?" He reached up and opened the door, and I spat out the rest of my cigarette and sighed at him.

"I'll walk, thanks." I turned around and set off down the driveway, walked out the open gate and turned to take the sidewalk towards Victoria Center. To hell with these people and that driver and the brothers and the dead body in the sewers and demons and everything. To hell with all of it. A hundred smackers could buy a lot of pickled forgetfulness, and I planned to see how far I could stretch it on the day of the sun.

At Center I caught a cab around to Docks Business, right up to the front door of the Duck & Cover. I tipped well – that day, I could afford it – and strolled inside to find the usual games of cards I'd find on any Sunday afternoon. Tank nodded twice and winked, and I walked over to the bar to lean in and order a beer. "I'll take it upstairs," I said. "Got somebody waiting, I take it?"

"Elf," Tank growled. "Says his name is Vaz."

I sighed and nodded. "Fair enough. Thanks for the tip."

"He insisted on going up and waiting for you."

I nodded and took the mug, sipping the top off of it to get it ready for a walk. Then I took a fifty from the change on that c-note and laid it folded small on the bar. "Rent for the next couple of months," I said. Tank picked it up, unfolded it under the bar, out of sight, then bent down and sniffed it, stuck one corner in his mouth to have a good, long taste.

"Aye," he said, but before the word was even finished the bill was out of sight. "Thank ye." I knew it was a special day because I saw Tank smile from underneath his beard.

"Sure thing," I said, clicked my cheeks and off I went up the back steps with my

beer. I rounded the corner at the top and the elf was standing against the wall by the door to my office. He had a shiner the size of a dinner plate and black as a funeral coach. Half his face looked like it was trying to go for a walk in the opposite direction.

He was chanting, eyes closed, hands folded over something he held cupped between them. As I watched, I swore I could see the swelling decreasing ever so slightly. At that rate, he'd have to be at it a while before it all went away – and if he already had been at it a while, I was glad I hadn't seen what they'd done to him when it was fresh. I cleared my throat and his eyes popped open, the chant frozen where it was.

“Afternoon,” I said, holding up the beer. “You want I should send up one for you?”

Leeritan smiled a little, then winced when his lips got too far apart. “No,” he said quietly, voice thick. “Do you mind if I continue to heal?”

“Don't stop on my account,” I said, the keys to my office coming out of a pocket as I approached. “Who backed up to see what they'd hit?”

“Our friends in the robes.”

I unlocked the door to my office, walked across and threw open a window, came back to the middle to turn on the fan by its pull-string. Leeritan stepped inside slowly, his posture slightly off, and eased into the customer's chair. His eyes closed again, hands folded back up around what looked to me like a figurine of a deer, and the chanting started again, barely whispered. I settled into my seat behind the desk, watching him and sipping from the beer.

Slowly, yes, I could definitely see it, the wounds started to heal at an accelerated rate. The bruise around his eye went from black to purple to blue over the course of five minutes or so. The swelling on the other side of his face decreased, passed through its own rapid-fire sequence of bruises, then settled into place. The blood at his lips dried, faded out of existence. The shiner had turned green and then yellow and then was just a bit of puffiness and then was gone altogether. In ten minutes he'd healed what would take a man a solid week if he was lucky and treated it right.

I whistled long and low. “That's a neat trick.”

“The ways of the druid,” he said simply, crossing his legs, his posture back to normal. “It can be quite draining when the wounds are more serious.”

"I'd bet." I drained the last of the mug, set it on the window sill, pulled a cigarette from the pack in my pocket and lit it with the desk lighter I only use in front of company: a big brass and marble number that weighs a ton. I got it as a gift when I graduated from my no-account college and I've always wanted an excuse to clobber someone with it. Not that day, though. That day I wanted to know what the hell was going on and why Vaz was here to see me.

"So how'd you find the place?"

"You are a detective; so am I, of sorts. You were not that difficult to track down. I paid a small child a few coins at a directory office."

I laughed, and he smiled at me. "That kid's going to be rich by next week," I said. Vaz was too polite to ask what I meant. "Anyway, you read the paper today?"

"I have, yes." Vaz didn't look happy about it, either, and he reached out to brush something from the knee of his safari pants. He was wearing a green canvas shirt to go with the green canvas pants, his sack on the floor beside him, a walking stick propped up against the back of his chair. His hair was a wreck, but it had been last night, too. All told, he looked like he'd had nothing worse than a dusty day. "Did you remove the body?"

I frowned and shook my head, taking a long drag and then turning to look Vaz right in the eye. "No. You?"

He met my gaze steadily and replied. "No. So our friend in the robes?"

"That's my guess."

"Why?"

"I'm not completely sure of the answer to that, Mr. Vaz, but" and here he lifted a hand to cut me off.

"Lee."

I nodded. "Lee it is. Hank."

Lee leaned forward and held out a hand to shake, like a human would. "It is a pleasure."

"All mine."

We settled back into our spots. "Anyway, I went by the kid's parents' place today to drop the bomb on them myself when I saw the cops hadn't found anything to tell them about and..." I sighed and smiled. "And Gerald Frankes was there with them.

Back home again.”

Lee lifted one thin eyebrow at me.

“So you misidentified the body?”

“No. The body was either his, or was made up to look like him.”

“So the one at the house...”

“Gerald has a twin brother.”

Lee lifted the other eyebrow this time. “I wonder if his closet has some robes in it?”

“I don't know,” I shrugged. “Could be. The thing is, his mother introduced him as Gerald, and she'd know, wouldn't she?”

Lee reached up and ran a finger along the flesh between his upper lip and the tip of his thin nose. “Interesting.”

“And now,” I said, sitting back and kicking my feet up onto the desk. “How about you tell me why you were down there, and what it is you want to learn about Maximillian Mercer, and what made you come here today?”

Vaz studied me for a few moments, adjusted his position in the seat and then cleared his throat. “This is fair,” he said. His voice was a quiet tenor, an elf's voice to match an elf's fine features, but I remembered plenty well the noise he'd made in the back of his throat when The Thing stepped out of the shadows the night before. Elves are delicate creatures, yes, but so are spiders.

“I have told you that I am a druid.”

I nodded.

“My circle was engaged by...” He paused and smiled, licking his lips for a moment. “Well, to be honest we engaged ourselves. Are you familiar with warlocks and how their magic works?”

I knew a little here and there, but I'm no student of the arcane. I separated my hands a couple of inches apart and then laced my fingers back together in front of me to indicate I didn't.

Vaz relaxed a little and shifted into a slightly more slumped posture in the seat. “Warlocks,” he began, one hand out like a professor gesturing to a chalk board that wasn't there, “Derive their magic – directly fuel their spells – from the power of demons. They summon and enslave small demonic spirits from the Tartarian realms

and then draw on the energies of those beings to drive their own rituals. These spirits are small and not terribly dangerous, but the process itself is very..." He paused again, and smiled slightly. "Taxing." He considered that word and evidently decided he liked it before going on. "This is sanctioned in the Empire by consent of the Senate, the Empress and the Divine Council. They don't like it, but each of them has their own reasons for allowing it to continue."

"And that's why warlocks are heavily regulated? Because by 'not terribly dangerous' you mean dangerous but not world-endingly dangerous."

"Exactly." Vaz lowered his head a little in approval, the elven equivalent of a gold star for a good student. "Warlocks' magic is not incredibly reliable, but when it works, it works big. It is also, always, destructive. Pulp stories about wizards summoning up armies or mountains of gold, these are fantasy. There is no such magic. Warlocks are useful in war and in getting rid of trash and making things in general simply go away, but not much else. Like any weapon, however, once drawn they are hard to sheathe again. Your society allows them to exist for this reason. Now, Maximillian Mercer, if the stories told in the newspapers and among the children of the poorer quarters of the city are at all to be believed, is a warlock. He fights terrible monsters - monsters which, I should note, sound rather a lot like the larger kin of the more pedestrian warlock's unliving battery - with more controlled magics. This itself is worth note."

"And as druids," I jumped in, finishing the thought, "It concerns you because these powers are unnatural by your standards and any change in them - say, a refined ability to control them - gets you interested and a little worried."

"There is that, yes." Vaz smiled, scratched one elbow and then folded his arms over his lap. "However, there is more. It is said that Mercer does not have a demon to power his spells. It is said - not in the paper, because the papers are not allowed to print such things, but it is said by the witnesses to his activities - that he uses a normal living thing in place of a demon."

I wrinkled my brow at this, waiting for him to go on.

"It is said that he uses a cat - draws on its life force as any other warlock would do a demon's - but that he suffers no ill effects, none of the taxation of normal warlocks' work, and that the cat is itself none the worse for wear. As guardians of the

natural and animal realms, it is deeply troubling to us that this would be the case. If he has learned how to harness the power of Diana for the work of a warlock then all bets are off. Warlocks could become a grave danger to the rest of us. The burden of drawing the life force of a demon through their own bodies and out into the world keeps their destructive power in check. Unfettered, they could do anything. They could lay waste to the barbarian nations. They could destroy the Empire itself. They could destroy themselves and all of us with them simply by having an experiment go awry. They could be drawing on the life force of the world, via that one small animal, and without realizing it be undoing the delicate balances of Nature herself.” Vax leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. For such heady topics he wasn't getting very worked up; he was casual, through and through. “My circle intends to find out whether this is true of Maximillian Mercer. I suspect, to be frank, that it is not. Until I can prove that, however, we must assume the worst and prepare for the day when a warlock or many warlocks gather for some potentially even innocuous purpose and in the process manage to wreck everything.” He looked coolly at me across the desk to gauge my reaction.

I'll be honest, I laughed at him.

I put my hands on my knees and threw my head back and laughed until it hurt to laugh any more.

“Magic users,” I said, finally, through tears, with Vaz still watching me with those icy blue eyes. “You people are crazy.”

Five minutes later I'd smoked a cigarette and taken a glass of bourbon and dried my eyes and generally gotten my act together. Leeritan had taken the laughter in stride, as I've found elves usually do. They're going to outlive all of us and our kids and their great-great-grandkids, so what do they care? We can yuk it up all we want for the five minutes we're going to be around.

“So you really think that Mercer – this Wild West Warlock guy – if he exists and if he's for real might be using the life force of a common house cat to fuel his magic?”

Vaz nodded, smiling very slightly in that way I've learned elves do.

“Alright. So how did that lead to you being in the sewers?”

“As I said, he disappears from the scenes of his encounters in a flash of smoke.

This is not warlock magic – they cannot teleport or whathaveyou, so this must be a ruse. Considering he makes his appearances in the Docks quarters and most often in Portage, not Business, I consider it likely that he's throwing down a smoke bomb and dropping into a manhole and escaping that way. I came into the sewers to find any sign of this being the case. I've done some asking around and the people in the dark robes are also associated with his appearances. I do not know if they are his helpers or his foes or merely another band of spiritual experimenters who want to confirm this rumor. When I saw the guard in the sewers I felt it safe to just follow the thread as far as it would take me. And it led me to here.”

I sighed and rubbed my hand over my face, up and down. “OK,” I said. “So I'm looking for a guy who may or may not already be dead, who's easy to find if it's him but not if he's dead, if that made any sense. And you're looking for Maximillian Mercer. And we know they both run with or run into these cats in the fancy robes, who cleaned your clock this morning.” I waited a moment, one hand out, palm up, waiting for a correction that didn't come. “So where'd they jump you, and why?”

“I am staying at a rooming inn in Docks Business, on the outer northeastern edge of the city.”

“Cheap unless you want them discreet, as well.”

Lee nodded at me and smiled more openly. “Yes. The robed ones came out of the alley between the inn and the shop next door, dragging me into it. This was shortly before dawn. I do not know how they tracked me there so quickly, but they did not want to kill me. They merely wanted to scare me off my investigation, I think. 'Forget all about what brought you to The Sanctum,' they said. They would say only this, repeating it into my ear between kicks to the face.” He shrugged at that. I took another moment to be amazed at his recovery. If he could bottle that stuff he'd live like a hundred kinds put together. “So I came here.”

“Well,” I said, reaching up and scratching the back of my head with one hand and stubbing out the cigarette with the other. “Let's go make some trouble. I don't know whether Gerald Frankes is dead or alive, or his brother is dead or alive, or it was all a trick. That's going to be a non-starter until I can let that one simmer for a while. So let's go see what we can find out about Maximillian Mercer.” I stood up, put on my hat, took my coat off the rack and draped it over my left arm.

Lee stood and slipped his canvas pack over one shoulder. "Let us, yes." He walked out ahead of me and I locked up behind him. I let him go in front down the narrow hall, down the stairs and around the corner into the pub. Lee wouldn't know to notice, but I stopped short when I saw Robert, the Frankes' driver, standing at the bar again with his hat in his hand, still very dapper, still smiling. He didn't smile like he'd swallowed the canary, he smiled like he'd swallowed the canary's wife.

"Afternoon, guv." He grinned in a way that made me want to see a lot more and then a lot less of him, and I clucked my tongue and touched the edge of my hat. "Hope I'm not bothering, only Her Ladyship asked me to deliver a note for you."

I arched one eyebrow – Lee had by now stopped and turned around and was crawling around Robert with his elf's eyes in a way humans will always find disturbing. I stuck both hands in pockets and straightened up a little. "That so? I hope it's not written on anything too small to read, like a knife's edge." Robert thought that was just fine, looking down as he reached inside his jacket and then pulled out an envelope I was certain, at first, wasn't going to turn out to be an envelope. It was, though, rich hemp paper and just a touch of the smell of lavender. I didn't think she'd spritzed on my behalf, but instead that it had picked up a bit of the aroma just being in whatever writing desk she'd have in her almost certainly gray and purple boudoir, an old married lady's perfume getting sprayed into the air ten times a day in its general vicinity. He held it out and I took it from him with one hand, then started to reach for my wallet. "Oh, say," I said, looking as innocent as I could. "Is it rude or just right for me to offer you a tip?"

Robert's smile slipped a little, but I had the numbers advantage and so he kept his mouth shut while he slipped the little cheauffer's cap back on his head, tightened it down in front and back, and then straightened his jacket. "No need, guv," he muttered, touched the brim of the hat at me and then turned on a smart heel and went out the front door.

I watched him go and hated myself for being such a cock to him. I'm not much of one for concerns of class, and I didn't like holding that one over him in even the smallest of ways. Whatever. It'd been a long night, and I was shaping up to have a long day.

Tank hrumphed under his beard and went back to working behind the bar. Lee

took his eyes off the front door after a few seconds and walked over to where Robert had been standing long enough to sniff it once or twice, then lean down and practically press his nose against the bar to snuffle around. Tank was peeking up from under bushy eyebrows to watch this with clear disapproval. I snickered quietly and tore the envelope open with one finger, shaking out the folded note inside.

It was short and simple, but very pointed: "My thanks for your efforts on behalf of my request. As it has now been rendered moot and you have been compensated amply, I ask that you maintain the confidence you promised in our initial conversations and that you end any investigation you might consider taking up of your own accord."

No salutation and no signature; if Robert had died in the street outside the bar, no one would have ever known to whom she wrote. Interesting. I folded the note back using the same perfect, neat crease Her Ladyship had made in it, and held it out to Lee. "Take a gander at this," I said. He took it, sniffed it once and then wrinkled his nose unpleasantly, then read it quickly and returned it.

"What do you make of that?"

He pondered for a moment – Tank standing there twitching his eyes back and forth at us as we spoke in turn – and lifted one shoulder. "She knows there is more to be found out and doesn't wish it to be discovered and revealed."

"So... blackmail or guilt?"

"Why limit such questions to 'or' when they could be 'and?'"

I grinned broadly at him and reached out to chuck him on the shoulder. "Good answer. You are a detective after all."

"So where now?"

I slipped the note back into its envelope and then tucked that into my shirt pocket. "Well, from the sounds of this, where we're supposed to go is the nearest incinerator so we can cast ourselves in after it. But I say we head back to this 'Sanctum' joint and see if they left anything interesting behind."

Lee didn't object, and we walked out into the sweltering hot afternoon. I stopped and undid my tie and the top button, fanning my shirt out a little at the neck and then puffing it back and forth by one of the buttons to try to get some air circulating. Leeritan didn't look any the worse for wear from the heat – didn't even seem to have sweat on his forehead, whereas I and everyone else on the street looked

ready to die of heat exhaustion. He stepped to the curb and lifted an arm to hail a cab and I stood about five feet back, glancing around for a little shade, maybe, to stand in.

A distant twang was quickly followed by the unmistakable whistle of a crossbow bolt sailing between us. With a thunk it planted itself neatly in the wood frame around the door to the Duck & Cover. Lee and I had each dove in opposite directions; he rolled to a crouch like a professional acrobat or a Hollywood stuntman. Me, I wound up on my ass on the curb, propped up on one hand, the other cupped around the brim of my hat to block the sun as I looked up in the direction the bolt must have been fired from to shoot it between us like that. I could just make out the rounded cowl of a robed figure atop one of the storefronts across the avenue. It was looking at us and I had started to choke out a strangled warning to move before he could get a clean shot on either of us when the figure ducked back out of sight and was gone. A sidelong glance told me Lee was staring the same direction and – of course – sniffing the air a little as he did. I flicked my eyes back but still didn't see anyone or hear anything. A few pedestrians had stopped on either side of us to stare at the two guys doing an acrobatics demonstration in the middle of the street. I grunted at them to get the hell on and then stood up to dust myself off.

Lee rose, too, stepped over to the bolt sticking out of the door frame and pulled the piece of paper from it. “Another note,” he murmured.

“Jeez,” I grouched, “Doesn't anyone buy stamps anymore?” He looked the note over and then handed it to me to read:

DO NOT RETURN TO THE SANCTUM THE ORDER BROOKS NO INTERFERENCE YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

The “ER B” had been mangled when the note was stuck to the bolt to be fired, but it was legible enough. The letters were big, blocky, hand-drawn things like a child's way of writing before he's been taught proper penmanship. I couldn't tell whether that was to disguise someone's handwriting or a sign of their educational or mental history. I started to crumple it up and toss it away but Lee shot a hand out and took it from me, holding it up to his nose and smelling it all over, then poking his tongue out from between his lips and actually running it around one corner.

Then he crumpled it up and tossed it aside.

“Same scent as last night: the area of the Sanctum. It's legitimately from

whoever the gentlemen in robes might be.”

I looked at the hole the bolt had made, dead middle of the wood around the door, shot there as neatly as if the architect had meant it all along. “So why didn't he shoot us instead of the building?”

“We were being warned, as it quite plainly says.”

“Dead men,” I opined after a moment, “Are remarkably good at heeding warnings to keep their heads down.” I grunted and sucked my cheeks in for a moment, hands in my pockets to dig out a cigarette and light it. I took a long drag and then shot smoke in huge jets from each nose. “Nope, I don't like it. I don't like it at all. Too many people telling us to keep our hands out of whatever the hell's gone on but not so enthusiastic they'll actually see to it themselves. That bastard up there could have shot us both through the skull before we'd known what was happening and Her Ladyship could have sent Robert – or some other punk if he wasn't up to the task – with a gat the size of a cannon and had him clean both our cabinets out once the smoke cleared. Tank, too, for that matter. These are people who are in something, but they're not sure what to do now that they're there.” I sucked my cheeks in again and shook my head, drew more smoke, exhaled. “Nope, I certainly don't the hell like it at all. A thug or a crook will beat you or rob you, sure, but they'll do it and then go about the rest of their day because they're just doing a job and you just happen to be their corner of the market yard. An amateur, though, somebody who thinks they know what they're doing but hasn't ever descended to the level of actual crime? They're the ones who make mistakes, get nervous, do stupid junk to try to cover their tracks. They don't know how the game is played so they break every rule it has. Those are the dangerous ones.” I stuck the cigarette out between my index and middle fingers, pointing it at Lee. “Mark my words, elf, if we've got two amateur organizations wrapped up in this then we're just twice as likely to lose a finger in the works.”

Leeritan listened to all this patiently, then stepped to the curb and held an arm up and this time got his cab. “So noted,” he replied, “Which gives us impetus to work rather than speak.”

I raised both eyebrows and laughed. “Did I just get told to hurry the hell up by an elf?”

Lee smirked a little. I got in the cab after him and kept laughing.

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Six

I hadn't at all made up my mind on where we should go, but apparently Leeritan had. He gave the cabbie an address in Docks Portage a few blocks down Whiting Wharf from where I'd gone, myself, and then turned to face me again. "So what makes you convinced that they are amateurs?"

I shrugged. "They wouldn't pussyfoot around and play the 'we warned you' game like this. Like I said, a pro is either going to kill us or ignore us and keep his nose clean. It takes a rank amateur to think they can scare a detective off a case. What kind of detective would be worth hiring if they were that easy to shake?" I kicked back in the seat and crossed my legs, smoking another cigarette and flicking ash out the open window as I spoke. The heat of the city wasn't any less in the cab, but the windows created an artificial breeze that I could pretend was refreshing.

Lee nodded and considered this, but after a moment crossed his arms over his chest and looked at me again. "But what if they are not amateurs. What if they merely wish to make certain that we keep looking?"

I sucked smoke and then chewed my thumbnail while blowing the smoke back out my nose as I considered this. "OK, let's think this through. They kill the guy – Gerald – or someone done up like him. We see the body. They get rid of the body so the actual police don't have a case to follow. Then they leave their calling card," and I fingered the note, folded in my shirt pocket. "To make sure we continue playing chase the rabbit. So what's their angle on it? Why keep us at the table? Do we have something they want, or are they drawing us into a trap?"

Lee smiled a very little and looked out the windows, off into the distance, as the cab rolled through the gates of Docks Business and out into the wide, multi-lane avenue that bands Center Victoria, clockwise, towards the gates into Docks Portage. "Or there is something they wish us to see. In stage illusions, from the lowly three-card player on the street to the best of stage magicians, there is a draw, something that keeps the eye occupied while the trick is pulled. Perhaps they merely wish to keep our eye drawn elsewhere while they do whatever it is they are really up to. Perhaps they are not amateurs at all, they are merely professionals in a field other than the one to which you would naturally assign them."

I clucked my tongue and took the last drag off my coffin nail before flicking it out the window and down between paving stones. "Maybe so," I mumbled, more to myself than anyone else. "Maybe so."

Neither of us spoke the rest of the way, until about twenty minutes later the hansom pulled up outside one of the largely anonymous warehouses in Docks Portage and Lee paid our tab. The two of us climbed down and after the cab was gone around the corner he spent a couple of minutes listening intently – those elf ears twitching this way and that – before leaning down over a manhole and lifting it like it was made of pressed paper. Then he stepped out over the open space and simply dropped. I heard a soft thump below, looked down, and could see him crouched on the cement of a dry sewer tunnel.

"I'll take the ladder if you don't mind," I said, climbing down after him. I just barely managed to lever the cover back into place behind me with a crowbar he handed up to me.

Druids are good with finding tracks and finding their own way somewhere, and we set off in silence as he sniffed here and there and then listened at some corners, but not others, and after five or ten minutes of easy walking we turned the corner that led to the Sanctum, as these robed guys apparently referred to the place we'd been the night before. There was no sign of habitation now – the electric lamps didn't even have bulbs in them – and I had my pen flash out to light the way for us. Lee sniffed around the door handle and nodded to himself, saying nothing, then opened it and we set off down the hallway. Again, pitch dark, even the bulbs stripped from the walls. We went to the far end where Lee repeated his inspection before opening the door and the two of us walked into a room that the night before had been dedicated to sacrificial ritual, decked out in what had to be dozens if not hundreds of candles, an altar, a portal through which came a terrible, summoned beast, and now was just a blank brick-and-stone room with some unusual columns in the center.

It was completely empty of any sign that it was ever anything but an empty room.

Lee put up a hand when I started to speak, bent low and started snuffling around the room on hands and knees. I found it kind of disgusting to watch a man act

like an animal that way, so occupied myself by shining my flash into the arches on the far side of the room. A hallway led back a little ways but ended in rubble. There was no escape there for anyone at all; at least, not anyone restricted to the normal means of movement available to us mere mortals. I clucked my tongue again, reached into my jacket and produced another cigarette, lit it. The air didn't stink too bad now, late in the weekend, and I figured it was safe to have a smoke to at least try to clear things up a bit. When I walked back out of the arch, Lee was standing in the middle of the room without a flashlight but evidently perfectly capable of seeing in the dark.

"Yes, it was here," he said, slowly, looking around and sniffing the air again between syllables. "I smell a dead body, and a man. The Thing smelled, too, of magic and Tartarus. Demon, no doubt. I'm not convinced it was real, though – more an image or..." He paused and licked his lips again, the way he does. "A reflection. A suggestion of something that is real in that realm but not in this one." He knit his brows together and shook his head. "It's hard to describe. At any rate, I have the scent of the man who was chanting when we arrived. I would recognize him again."

I nodded. "Mercer or Frankes?"

"We have no real way to reach Mercer," Leeritan said after a moment's consideration. "I suggest we start with Frankes. Is there any way you could find an excuse to see him?"

I pondered that, dragging on my cigarette, and hmphed with thought. "Well," I finally said, "We could go the old-fashioned route and stake the place out. Gerald was, before he disappeared, coming to a warehouse top-side pretty regularly without telling his mother where to find him, if you catch my drift. I don't know to what purpose, but I say we keep an eye on the house and see if the Gerald who's there now keeps the same hours."

With that, we packed up and left. It took us a long time to find a cab in Docks Portage on a Sunday afternoon. At this point, though, I figured we'd need our own wheels if we were going to be able to move fast, especially if we were going to stake out a joint like the Frankes' place. There weren't exactly a lot of cabs to be had in that part of town and so I had us stop at a car hire in Center Victoria. We rented out a Model T for the night with some of the remainder of Gerald Frankes' c-note tip and I drove us out of downtown and bribed our way through the double-gates of Avery

Circle. That had practically tapped the folding currency I had on me, but that's the cost of doing business. As they say, you have to spend money to make money.

I parked us around a corner from the Bursar–Frankes' ridiculous mansion and we waited in silence for night to fall. As the sun set off to our left the heat of the day started, ever so slowly to dissipate. Rather than beating down on us from above it started to bake out of the paving stones and concrete, going back where it came. You could practically hear the street sizzling underneath us, releasing another hot August swelter back into the sky to toast the stars above us.

Once night fell I crept the car forward on the clutch, just easing us up to the corner, lights out. I'm sure there were busy–bodies looking out their windows at the ruffians who'd dared park a motor car on their high rent street, but they weren't the Bursar–Frankes and people in neighborhoods like this don't like to talk to one another any more than they have to, convinced as they already are that each other are driving down their own property values. I sat with my arm cocked out the driver's side window, a cigarette in the left corner of my mouth, with my eyes on the house and the front yard. Lee was leaning back in his seat, head turned towards his own window, sniffing the air here and there for whatever he could find in it. The patience of an elf was on full display; he hadn't spoken for an hour or more and didn't seem to be in any hurry to chat it up. We both had things to keep our minds on without trying to play any get to know you games with each other in the meantime. For me, this was just business as usual. Detecting is a mug's game; every kid on every street corner will tell you it's all chases and gun shots that always miss the hero, but largely it's a lot of sitting around waiting to catch someone making a mistake.

Finally the very last of the sun was gone and even the glow around the horizon was gone. A few lamps came on up and down the street but not so many as to look flashy in a good part of town. Down the hill, across the valley created when they drained the swamps that used to be where New Victoria is now, Center was lit back up like New Year's Eve. Lights buzzed by one another, just pinpoints in the distance, as motor cars and hansoms competed for the best spots on the road. Lee seemed to be watching that, not the house, but I had my attention almost entirely on the mansion itself. Lights came on here and there inside, the home hiding them politely behind Her

Ladyship's favorite kind of bland curtain and window shade combination. We'd see the silhouettes of a servant or a resident here and there, but nothing terribly interesting.

That is, until around ten of the clock that night – the bells had just rung very tidily in the high tower of some other house, though they'd run somewhat unevenly which made me wonder whether said house kept a man just to ring the bells on the hour and maybe he'd had a stiff one after his basement dinner – when that barn door on the front of their house came open and one figure stepped out of it. Lit from behind I could only guess at their identity, but then they turned as Her Ladyship spoke to someone inside, and I could see it was the old battleship herself. She was dressed like she was going to the opera, a great, black gown with a ritzy vest and a hat that probably had real birds' eggs in it and a thief could hock to live for the whole winter. Gerald stepped out of the door after her, his hair was done up the same way it was in the family portrait I'd seen in the dining room. They were talking and then he took her hand and kissed her on the cheek like a good little boy and went back inside, closing the door after him. As far as I could tell, that was Gerald, no doubt about it.

“We must get closer,” Leeritan whispered. His head was still turned to face the lights of Center Victoria, but his eyes were very clear and bright and his pupils very wide and they were turned towards the house, watching it sidelong.

“That'll take some fancy steps,” I said in reply.

“I am unafraid to creep through shadows,” he said, and then he slipped right out the door – through the window, not even opening the latch on the door and silent as a church mouse at a funeral – to crouch beside the car.

I went out my door the more conventional method, though I held the handle up when I pushed it shut and closed it so that it wouldn't make much noise. The two of us stuck to pools of darkness between the sparse lamps on the main lane of Avery Circle, darting across and up against the fence that ran around the property. By that point I could make out Robert holding a lantern and going up the front walk to meet Her Ladyship, turning around and lighting the path for their feet. They made a little quiet small talk that I couldn't hear from here as they went down the walk to the carriage house near the front gate. Leeritan crept right up to the brick column on either side of the gate and I scrambled forward to join him. He had his face pressed against the bricks and was shooting his nostrils wide as he tried to catch scents and

study them. I made do with listening to them as they got close, but this was all I could hear:

“...another society meeting. I shall require you to wait nearby, Robert.” She said his name the wrong way, the English way, with a hard 't' on the end. People like her, they don't like it when their servants have an identity. They have to remake them into something of their own, something to own and control. I felt a little more guilty about being such a dick earlier that afternoon. Still, he'd chosen this life, not me.

“Ya don't want me to wait with the other drivers, m'lady?”

“Ah, no,” she said with a pause. Whatever came out of her mouth next was going to be a lie. “This is a new club and I don't wish to disgrace any members of more modest means by flaunting my advantages. Do be a dear and return two hours after you have dropped me off, however.” Two hours, depending on where she was going in town and assuming it was somewhere she wouldn't mind being seen going in her own carriage, would put her meeting as getting out anytime between half past midnight and one in the morning. I arched my eyebrows. Quite a club to hold its meetings in secret on a Sunday night at the witching hour.

Robert helped her up into the hansom and then went to light the lamps. As he did, we heard footsteps come down the walk again and this time Gerald approached the carriage. I didn't hear him speak, I merely heard Robert call out, “Sir?” Then they spoke very low:

“I will require a ride when my mother has returned.”

“It might be quite late, sir,” Robert drawled.

“That is quite alright. But mother mustn't know of it. I shall be awaiting your return; I will be at the carriage house within fifteen minutes of it. Is that clear?”

“Aye, sir,” Robert said, then, “To where shall I be taking you?”

There was another pause, and then: “The usual place, I expect.”

Robert took his time responding to that, and simply said: “Of course, sir, as you wish. I'll see to it that Her Ladyship is unaware.”

Her Ladyship took that moment to notice Gerald's presence in the drive and called out to him from the carriage. I can't even remember now what he said, he made up some piss poor excuse for being there about his mother's gloves, or something, and then off he went back up into the house. Robert evidently watched him go, then

climbed atop the hansom and picked up the reins at a bark from Her Ladyship. Leeritan and I beat a hasty path back across the street and practically dove into the hired car. I didn't gun the engine until I felt sure that they were out of hearing range, down the street, and even then I left the lights off and just cruised down the street to follow after them. Tailing a carriage with a carriage is easy; tailing a carriage with a motor car is another thing entirely. It's easy to get too close. It's like trying to play catch with a water balloon, all light touches and nerves.

The carriage took its time, as carriages often do, getting down to Center Victoria. Along the way, Leeritan was silent. Finally, after we were through the gate and of course while I was trying to navigate the car into the traffic of Center without losing the carriage ahead of us, he spoke up:

“The man who appears to be Gerald is not the man who was in robes, in the Sanctum, last night.”

“That's great,” I said. “How so?”

“His scent. It is similar, but not the same. And it is not the man who was murdered on the altar, by whatever means caused him to be mostly burned in such a fashion.”

“OK, so either that's not Gerald, or that is Gerald and the body was made up to look like Gerald.”

“Correct,” he said after a long pause. “But he is very similar.”

“Hmmp. Similar to the guy in the robes, or similar to the dead body?” I shifted down a gear and shot into a lane only to bow up in front of the car behind me, earning a honk of a very angry horn, to position myself without getting too close to the carriage.

“Yes,” Leeritan said, and then he fell silent again.

Eventually it wound around Center Victoria's main outer ring – a couple of miles of road – and back around to a region I hadn't expected: Ecclesiaste West, known jokingly as Parsons West. Parsons West is that part of town where the smaller temples and the business operations of the rich are found. It's where the money operate their storefronts and the temples operate their non-temple businesses and the satellite

campuses for their schools. If you're a kid going to a temple primary school or a supplier for a temple's wares, you go to Ecclesiaste every morning. It's where the banks and a lot of offices and a lot of paperwork can be found. At eleven at night on a Sunday it's not exactly a hopping part of the city. At its outer extremities it opens into the suburbs of Virginia and Land o'Mary, where you can find those whose business is in the city but not their homes. I turned off the headlamps again as soon as we were through the gates. Very few cars or carriages would be in this part of town at this hour and I didn't want to give us away if at all possible. I shifted down into second gear and barely touched the accelerator. I needed to keep the engine quiet if at all possible. The general hubbub of the city would give us a lot of cover, but it's always best to play it safe. I let the carriage get about three blocks ahead, too far for comfort but far enough to play it even safer. Leeritan was sniffing the air out the window, like a dog, and I was sweating bullets trying not to lose the carriage. Eventually it turned off to the right and I pulled to a stop across the intersection, seeing if they were still moving at speed or slowing down.

They slowed, then stopped, and I pulled the car forward half a block and parked it. "We're going to have to move fast and on foot," I said. Leeritan nodded and slipped out of the car the same way he had before, skipping all that jazz with latches and locks and just sliding out the window. I didn't lock the car, didn't roll up the windows, I just left it on the street and the two of us beat a hasty creep up the sidewalk to peek around the corner.

Her Ladyship was standing in front of a blank door into a blank building and Robert was driving away in the hansom, as per her instructions. I took out my pen flash but didn't turn it on. Lee and I both held our breath. After a few moments the door opened, warm light like from oil lamps or candles spilling out of it, and Her Ladyship strode inside with a smile on her face for whoever had opened the joint up to her.

As soon as she was through the door, and it closed behind her, Lee and I moved forward and walked down the street on the opposite side, watching the building for any sign of guards or thugs or a door man or a sign or anything.

Nothing, the place was as anonymous as an opium den in an alleyway.

I started across the street and the elf followed me. An alley ran down either side

of the building but I couldn't see lights to indicate that it ran straight through the block to the other side. It was dark, so I flicked my pen flash just once or twice to give myself an idea of where we were going: clean, kept neat, but very dark and very empty. There were trash bins but I couldn't even hear the squeak of a rat. It was like the place didn't radiate life so it didn't attract any, either, the way a rowdy bar or a restaurant or a lively temple might do. Whoever these people were, they were running dark.

Leeritan took the lead going down the alleyway, given his ability to see better than me in such situations, and soon he put a hand back to catch me in the middle of the chest and stop me. We'd reached a turn in the alley, snaking left to run behind the building and down between the other buildings that backed onto this alley from either side. Here there was an open window in the building – a kitchen, from the sound and smell of it, working on some sort of savories. I could smell meat – good deer and some beef, and I could hear a soup boiling in an enormous pot. Lee put a finger to his lips to call for further quiet and then we crept forward and pulled ourselves up to peek in the window.

Two cooks were going to town on what looked like trays of appetizers, nothing very filling but enough to make the guests feel welcome. They were loud and busy and had better things to do than notice a couple of peeping toms. At one point the one in charge realized they were missing something important and slapped the other around the back of the head so many times I thought he'd be serving chunks of his assistant before he was through. Then they bustled off into a pantry, down some stairs, and I tugged Lee's sleeve. "Now's our chance." I reached up and tried the knob of the back door, which turned, and the two of us were inside in as many seconds as it takes to say the word. Lee shut the door without a sound and twitched an ear at the door out of the kitchen, further into the house. I could hear conversation, but he held up both hands and, between them, seven fingers. "Far," he mouthed, and then pushed the swinging door open just a hair, nodded his head, and we stepped into a hallway that ran the length of the long building. I guessed this was an office or a townhouse or something, one where they cooked lunch on the spot for the staff. Maybe a small, very private school, so private it didn't need a sign out front. That seemed the most likely explanation.

The hallway was paneled in fine old cherry and teak, very expensive and very lavishly stained and then slapped around the walls to make sure you didn't miss that it was there. The very dark burgundy carpet wasn't especially plush but there was a fine cream rug on top of it, running the length of the hall, a pattern of dark vines and roses woven into it to obscure any dirt that had the poor judgement to wind up on the floor. A couple of doors to either side were closed, a twist of the knobs telling me they were locked. The third door along the hall, to which we crept even though it seemed to get us closer to the party going on elsewhere in the house, was unlocked. I pushed it open just a bit and saw a dark room beyond. Lee pointed with one finger at the double doors a good bit down the hall, then mimed a moving mouth with his other hand. That's where the conversation was coming from. I nodded, ducked my head towards the open door we'd found, he glanced in and then went ahead of me. I followed him and shut the door as soon as I was through, feeling along the door to find the turn for the lock and clicking it shut very softly once the door was closed.

We could still hear the conversation, but the walls in this place were by no means thin. It had a vaguely tinny noise to it, like I was hearing a conversation inside a can of beans. Lee glanced around with those elven eyes of his and then pulled the chain on a small electric lamp. By its weak light – brilliant in comparison to the utter darkness of the moment before – we could see that we were in a private office, like a doctor's or a lawyer's. There were diplomas and certificates of thanks in frames on the wall, a couple of bad paintings of fruit sitting in bowls, trying hard not to offend anybody, and an enormous oil portrait of a dashing young man in a bad cowboy costume, grinning like he's just done your daughter and then your son, a six-shooter in each hand and his arms crossed over his knee, his left foot up on a saw horse with a wild west town like there's never really been in the background. It was a portrait that might as well have been titled “Just Leave the Cash on the Night Stand.” I had to slap a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing out loud at it.

Leeritan looked over a couple of the framed letters and diplomas, and turned to face me. “Mercer,” he mouthed, and then he smiled very slowly. I stepped over, eyebrows raised, and looked at one myself.

“To Maximillian Mercer,” it said in gold leaf, “With the Tremendous Gratitude of the People of Wichita.” It had a fancy signature on it that might have been the mayor's

if the mayor was paying someone to forge signatures so he wouldn't have to schedule it into his day: to curvy and florid to be signed by anyone who could get elected mayor in Wichita.

Leeritan nodded upwards, pointing at a vent grate high on the wall, near the ceiling. That's where the sound was coming from, through from the next room, and he very lightly spun the over-sized leather chair behind the desk, stepped into it, then climbed up onto the long table behind the desk to press his ear to the grate. I looked around, not sure it would be wise for me to do the same, then said to hell with it and climbed up beside him. The table held both of us just fine, and Lee scooted to one side very neatly so that I could have an ear against one end and he against the other.

It sounded to me like a meeting on the other side of the wall was just coming to order. Our timing was perfect.

“Ladies and Gents,” a rough, cigars and coffee with whiskey in it sort of voice had announced. It cleared its throat and the room fell silent instantly. “Why, thank you kindly.” The drawl was fake. I could tell. I could taste that it was fake. I could feel deep down in my bones that it was every bit as fake as that thank you poster from Wichita. It wasn't done, though. “As I'm sure you all have read in the fancy newspapers, I done gone and made something of a scene from time to time. Each of you has been asked here because you are among the city's very highest elites and I feel it necessary to explain myself to those bright lights who drive Victoria's progress. I wouldn't want to leave as exemplary a lot as you all in the dark about something important. I hope you won't mind my asking you here through...” He paused, a practiced pause. I could practically hear him counting to three in his head. “Discreet channels. I have no problem explaining myself to you but I do not wish to do so in a way that could endanger my very important work in your city. To explain myself on the record, as it were,” and I had to grit my teeth to stop from yelling out 'He's a fake!' through the grate. No real cowboy has ever heard of the subjunctive. “Well, to do so would run the risk of exposing my work when it's in its most important, most... delicate early stages. It might also cause panic amongst your fair city's less educated and enlightened classes, and that would only harm such simple folk and their daily business.”

I smiled darkly to myself. He was buttering the bread with a very sharp knife. It's how every grift like this goes, isn't it? I could practically have mapped out every word he was going to say: he was softening them up, but sooner or later he had to threaten them. If he was very good, he'd do it in a way that made them grateful for the threat. In some ways the best blackmail artist in town is your simple insurance salesman.

There was a low murmur around the room when he said that last bit, and I could just see him holding up his hands to calm their fears. He was probably leaning against a desk or table, one foot cocked over the other. He was probably wearing side arms.

"Now, now," Mercer said. "No need to be concerned. As I said, I wish to explain myself in the strictest of confidence. If you'll notice, I've offered each of you the chance to go disguised within my home and offices, but I myself am without a mask. I want each of you to know that you can trust me and that I give my trust freely. I do not need to know who you are, I merely need to know that you've heard my message. And now, with this ample preamble," and he chuckled, like the slanted rhyme was his own personal invention, "I am ready to tell you the business on which I have asked you here." He paused again; I could hear him draw a long breath, a great, calming breath meant to give his audience the impression that even now, standing before them, he was hesitant to let them in on his great secret.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is simple. There are monsters which threaten this city. I know not whence they come, but they are quite dangerous. I have traveled all over the lands of the Empire and I have seen many things in my... unorthodox career as a warlock." I heard a gasp, and he paused. "I know, madam, that this might seem scandalous to you, or difficult to believe, but I assure you it is quite true. I am a warlock, and I travel without the robes or the badge of an Imperial Warlock. I am no rogue element, however, I assure you. If I were, I might as well have delivered myself handcuffed to the city police as stand before you now without the mask the newspapers have seen fit to describe. No, I am on a legitimate mission, but one of utmost secrecy. Monsters from realms other than our own – akin to Tartarus, but not Tartarus itself, I assure you, as any warlock could – have in recent years been made manifest by a mechanism the Empire does not yet understand or control and thus does not allow to be known by the simple masses. These manifestations take the form of

outbreaks, like any illness, any disease, generally localized to a city or large town. If left unchecked, panic and unproductive superstition start to hold sway. These beings do not threaten the city as a whole but they present a grave danger to the confidence of the worker classes on whom that city relies. They are, after all, the least informed, the last to understand, the most unclever of all. Their children are taken, then their men at the dock or their delivery drivers, then their servants, and... well, you can imagine what happens: suspicion; fear; strife. Sometimes along ethnic lines. Sometimes..." He cleared his throat, so delicate with the indelicate topic. "Sometimes, to be frank, along lines of class, of station."

Another murmur broke out and I heard a voice I didn't recognize, some man's. "Come now, if this has been true in other cities, in other regions, we would have heard."

I could hear Mercer smile. "No, no, my good sir. I myself thought the same, when tasked with my work, but the Empire is very effective at clamping down on such stories, counteracting them in the local media, that sort of thing. No, what happens is that I get sent in to clean it up. I am, as I said, a warlock, yes. I am not, however, your typical warlock. My powers are derived from the natural world, Diana's realm, and so they are all the more effective against these alien entities that impinge on our sovereign reality."

This time there was no murmur, there was only silence.

"I don't quite follow." It was the same man again, and he didn't sound like a ringer. He sounded like he honestly didn't get it, or didn't want to. Beside me I could hear Lee's ear brushing against the metal of the grate as he flexed to press it closer.

"Most warlocks draw on... Well, let's be frank. They draw on demons. Small ones, yes, but demons nonetheless. And, as anyone in a position to interact with them knows, over time, it becomes draining. It taxes them heavily. It leaves them wan, sallow, weak, prematurely aged. It steals the youthful enthusiasm that drew them to that study and leaves behind, in a few short years – half the time that age alone would require – a shell of a man. Do you know there are homes for them?" Silence again. "It's quite true. Never spoken of, but there are homes where they are allowed to live out what few days remain to them, when they become too weak to work their hexes, and there they are cared for like kings. At any rate, I am not such a warlock. As you

can see, I am fit, hale, hearty.” The drawl was still there, but it was a lot more faint than it had been when he started. He knew how to talk up to an audience of posh bastards with money falling out of their wallets. “I am also in my sixth decade of professional work.”

Now there were gasps.

“I have documentation to prove it, of course, if any of you wish. Now, to the task at hand: I have been sent here because Victoria is suffering such an outbreak at this time. It is yet small. Fortunately, it was noticed very early. I have much work to do, mind, but I can handle it. You are lucky, to be honest. Wichita was not so lucky.”

“I was in Wichita,” said the male again. Either he was the ringer after all, or he was a persistent skeptic. “I was there just six months ago to oversee some business. There were no problems in the city.”

“My good man,” and again Mercer's smile was practically echoing off the walls, “Their trouble was nearly four decades ago. They have long since recovered. Perhaps you recall the fire of 1891, in that city?” I imagine there were a few nods and a few blank expressions behind whatever disguises he'd given them. “That was started by such a rogue spirit. It was only through some luck, some quick wits and the strength of my totem that I was able to persevere. The good people of Wichita put out the fire, but if they hadn't – and if I hadn't stopped the demon that started it the very same night – Wichita might only be spoken of in the past tense.”

There was now a very long pause as he let it all sink in on them. Then:

“This is the work I do in the city, in your fine metropolis. This is why I brought you here, so that some portion of the city's elite could know that there was no cause for alarm and, most particularly, no cause for gossip or speculation or investigation.” I could hear Mercer take a few steps in some direction or another, then the creak of a chair. “Do you have questions?”

A throat cleared, then a woman spoke: “So what do you want from us?”

Mercer stood again and, I thought, probably put his hands behind his back, the humble servant. “I wish to have your confidence, your trust. I also hope that should rumor spring up in any place over which you wield influence that you do what you can to quash this rumor. My work must be in absolute secret.”

“Hasn't the newspaper taken away that possibility?”

“Ah, madam, not quite. The rabble read the paper and believe it, yes, but not you, the decision makers of the city. You see and believe, not read and believe.” That twang in his voice was getting so small I wondered if it was going to turn around and wave before it disappeared over the horizon.

“What else?” That was a different man from before, and for a moment I had to wonder whether Mercer had picked the wrong gift or simply the wrong audience, too metropolitan, too self-assured from years of living in New Victoria, heartbeat of the colonies. “You still want something.”

Mercer wasn't going to back down this far into his song and dance, though. “Madam, you wound me with suspicion, but in truth there is a small matter. Allowances of access to some of your properties, should the need ever arise to go there and deal with a manifestation. And, to be frank, the Imperial coffers are not as full as they once were. Should an emergency arise – unforeseen as of now, I assure you, but one never knows what the future might hold – I may require temporary financial partnership in order to continue my work.”

And with that, he'd laid the last card on the table. He hadn't made them grateful for the threat – not all of them, anyway – but he had made the threat anyway. He'd finished his song and dance.

Silence reigned for a long few seconds, and then someone began to clap excitedly. Slowly, someone else joined in. Then another. Soon I could hear several sets of hands applauding, some much more enthusiastically than others, but probably all of them. Then the doors opened and closed, and I prayed to all the gods that Mercer wasn't ducking out to hide in his office while they left and was relieved to find that, instead, it was the kitchen help bringing in the post-meeting appetizers and prepping the wet bar to lubricate any donations that might need help coming out. The small talk started with a few fits and then picked right back up. People like Her Ladyship, ultimately they're bred to be other people's guests. In the absence of any idea what to do, they just slipped into that easy routine and that was that. It was over.

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Seven

While the kitchen staff were in the room – library, dining room, whatever was on the other side of that grate from Mercer's office – Leeritan and I beat a hasty retreat out the back door, back up the alley and through the intersection to the car. I jumped in the driver's seat and he slid through the window to land lightly in the passenger's seat. I cranked the engine and pulled a U-turn in the middle of the street to get the hell out of Dodge before Robert came back around with the carriage. By my watch we had a good long while before he'd return, but there was no reason to hang around and every reason to leave. Neither of us spoke until we were through the gate and into Center Victoria, working back around to Persons West.

“Well,” I finally said, then laughed, laughed so hard I had to cover my face with one hand and drive with the other. “Maximillian Mercer, Warlock of the Wild West and blackmailer of the city's rich and famous. Wow. That's balls. That's huge, brass balls laid on the table, spikes driven in, then put back in his pants and shown around town. I'm surprised he can walk with those things.” I laughed again. Lee was silent, then chuckled at me.

“And the mother of your quarry,” he said finally, “Is the newest recruit into his rather obscure scheme.” Lee considered again, and then asked, “So how does Mercer pull this off?”

“He shows up, blasts some baddies, then tells everyone in town that has a spare fortune sitting at the bottom of their wallet that the Senate's not funding him properly. A 'friendly donation' here, another there, pretty soon it adds up to real money.”

“Do you think any part of what he told them was legitimate?”

“Good gods no,” I laughed. “You said yourself, that's not how warlocks work. Warlocks use demons to do magic. He doesn't have a demon. Ergo, he's not a warlock.” I shrugged. Two plus two wasn't hard any day of the week, even for me.

Lee sucked his lower lip for a minute and then said, “But these beings he fights. Perhaps they are his demon? Perhaps it is a charade?”

I wrinkled up my forehead and finally shook a no at Leeritan. “Nah. Doesn't make enough sense. He's a fake through and through. That's the only way it feels right.”

Leeritan shrugged, still not sure. "So where now?"

"Now," I said, signaling my intent out the window, "We go back to Avery Circle, wait for Her Ladyship to get back and see where Gerald has Robert take him. If Gerald was ducking out every other night for a little shindig, well, it would be just too funny if he was going to one of Mercer's recruitment drives, wouldn't it? A nice job for Mercer, though, double dipping that family's ample fortune." I chuckled again, clucked my tongue at the thought. "A nice job indeed. A gig I'd be loathe to let go once I had my hooks in both of them."

"But he doesn't know who's there, he gives them disguises of some sort." Leeritan asked this, but we both knew the answer; he just wanted, I think, to make sure I hadn't missed it.

"Somebody had to open that door for Her Ladyship, before she was wearing any masks or fancy veils or fake moustache or whatever. He's got someone in the house who can tell him who everyone was. If nothing else, he knows who got invited, doesn't he?"

Leeritan nodded at this, and I drove through the gates into Persons West. We were both silent again until we pulled up to the gates to Avery Circle and bought the fare inside. I drove back up the street, past the Frankes' mansion, and took up the same spot as before, one eye on the house, one eye on the street leading up to it. Lee settled back in his chair and again seemed to lose himself in the lights of the city, way the hell down the hill, a snow globe of urban hubbub even in the middle of a Sunday night.

Around half past one I'd worked my way through more than a couple of cigarettes and Leeritan was, as far as I knew, fast asleep. I was wondering where the hell Her Ladyship and Robert had gotten to and I'd just started to open my mouth to ask Lee what he figured His Lordship made of Her Ladyship's ducking out like this when the lights of the carriage came into view down the hill. Lee and I both sat up straighter at the same time and I slid out of the car and crouched beside it. Lee hunched down in the seat and seemed to be peeking over the lip of the window on his side. The carriage didn't seem like it was in any special hurry, stopped at the gate, Robert got down and opened them so the carriage could pull into the drive. As it

pulled into the carriage house, I took to getting across the street in the shadows. Lee was out of his side of the car and right behind me in a flash.

We sidled up to our old posts at the big, brick columns on either side of the gates to the property. We could hear Her Ladyship making her polite goodnight to Robert, then off she went up the walk and into the house. She didn't turn on a single light, once inside, lest some of the house help talk about her late return. I tried to breathe quietly and Lee was like a statue beside me. We waited ten incredibly long minutes, minutes in which I wanted nothing so much as another cigarette, and then the front door opened again and I could hear a man's slightly hurried walk coming down.

“Evening, Young Master,” Robert drawled.

“Yes, Robert,” said 'Gerald.' I tried to close my eyes and just listen to the voice. I'd have given anything to have met Gerald before he was missing, so I'd have a comparison, but no dice. Instead I just had to listen for the hint of a lie. “Shall we?”

“Aye, sir. Same as usual?”

A pause.

“Yes, Robert. Same as usual, as you say.”

There were the noises of the doors to the carriage house being opened a little quietly, and when I turned around to get back to the car I realized Lee was already halfway there. I caught up and we both got in. I pulled the hand brake and pushed in the clutch, rolling the car silently forward, steering it around the corner and past the house with the engine off.

“Conserving petrol?” Lee smirked a little.

“No, getting ahead of them. The guards will notice them being followed out twice, and might talk. I don't want to take any chances.” I got a good hundred yards past the mansion and popped the clutch with the car in motion to turn the engine over without using the key. It gunned to life and I eased it into gear and gained speed, getting past the guards and out into Center Victoria before pulling over to one side. By now the traffic was almost gone and we had the place mostly to ourselves. I got into a parking spot and killed the lights, clutch in, car in gear, ready to go as soon as they were past.

Five minutes later the Franks' tasteful horse-and-four clattered by and I

counted to ten before pulling out behind them. More water balloon catch, but by now I was getting used to the feeling.

The carriage went around Center Victoria, skipping the side streets into downtown proper and sticking to the outer edge, making for one or another of the gates into other parts of town. I kept a safe distance, let a car or two get between us here and there. Soon I saw the electric lamp mounted on the back flicker and they signaled to go into Docks Portage. I looked over at Lee and leered a little at him, but he was keeping his eyes on the carriage itself. I followed it through the gates, gave them more distance now that we were going to be largely by ourselves on the mean streets of the docks. They took a turn I expected them to, then another, and grinned to myself.

“Whiting Wharf,” I said under my breath. “The usual, indeed.”

The carriage pulled up in front of 1437 and came to a stop. Robert stayed in the driver's seat up top. After a few long moments the door opened and “Gerald” let himself down, looking up and down the street as though he had no idea where he was. I'd pulled to the side and killed the lights in the dark. If he could see us then we were nothing more special than a car on the street in the middle of the night.

“Now,” I said to no one, “Show us that you aren't who you say you are.”

Gerald stood there, put his hands in his pockets, glanced once at the door to the warehouse, then again up and down the street. Robert evidently called something down to him from the carriage; Gerald looked uncertain for a moment, then nodded and waved as he gave some order or another. Robert put the reins down and clambered from the top of the hansom to walk the horses over to a trough, undoing them from the carriage to let them wet their whistles, a brush coming out of the box under his seat so he could brush them down. Gerald kept watching him, looking around. He had no clue what the hell to do now that he was in “the usual place.” Finally Robert, ever the gentleman, helped him out. He walked over to Gerald, pointed right at the door to the warehouse, and then went back to his work.

Gerald, turning to study the door, finally walked up to it. His hand went to the knob, evidently it turned and then he walked inside.

“He's not even getting paid for this one,” I said to Lee. “Who knew our friends in

the robes would get two Gerald's for the price of one?" I chuckled, and then climbed out of the driver's side of the car. Lee followed, shooting me a look over the top of the car.

"What are we doing?"

"We're going in the back door of the warehouse. Don't worry, I've been that way before."

Lee nodded, and together we melted off down an alleyway and around the back of the warehouses to approach 1437 from behind.

I slipped up to the back door, unattended as it was the night before. At this hour on a Sunday – or rather, a Monday morning – even the pimps and whores of Docks Portage had packed it in for the night. I was a little surprised at that, but figured everyone got at least one day of the week off from whatever work they did; well, everyone but me.

I listened at the door for a moment, but didn't hear anything. I tried the knob and it opened up just fine. Lee and I slipped inside, then I shut it very quietly behind me, one hand on the inside knob to keep it turned then let it go softly when it closed against the jamb. Lee was sniffing the air again and twitching his ears. I strained to listen, too, and could just barely hear someone rifling through something – it sounded like papers, maybe – somewhere fairly nearby. We both crouched low and crept forward into the warehouse proper, looking for lights coming from somewhere. They weren't on in the main storeroom, but Lee picked out just before me the tell-tale shine against the ceiling of a light on an upper floor – a balcony that overlooked the storeroom itself. There were blinds down, and a door closed, but there was definitely a light on behind the two and we could hear someone making a mess of the place up there. I motioned in Lee's direction – I couldn't see a damn thing without my pen flash, but he could see me just fine – and started towards the wall, where I hoped to find some stairs up. Sure enough, they were there – wood, a little creaky, but "Gerald" up there was making more than enough noise to cover for Lee's and my approach.

We skulked up the steps and then stopped outside the window. I put one eye up and tried to find a gap in the blinds. All I could see were feet, but they were Gerald's, no doubt, and he was standing in front of what looked like a filing cabinet, the papers

spread everywhere around him. He was reading, I imagine, because every now and then more paper would float down and land on the floor. He didn't care how the boss man found the place in a few hours, I guessed. He was sure there was something here to find and he was willing to do anything to find it.

Lee was a few feet past me, sniffing around the door, then crouching low to listen through the crack. I'd had just about enough and was ready to go ahead and open the door, walk into the office and ask Benjamin Frakes why the hell he was impersonating his dead brother when I heard the front door of the warehouse open and several sets of boots walk inside.

I wondered what had happened to Robert, looked down there, and saw four figures in robes standing down there with their cowls turned up, in my direction.

Well, hell. This was going to be interesting.

Lee had seen them, too, I imagined, because all of a sudden I couldn't see him at all. I did, however, hear two rapid knocks against the door of the office, then a thin hand grabbed my shoulder and with tremendous strength dragged me back into the shadows. A hand closed around my mouth and I heard Lee whisper: "Let us watch and see what happens."

I didn't appreciate his means of getting me out of the way, but I stayed quiet and, to be honest, wanted to see myself.

At the knock on the door, Benjamin had stopped going through papers and walked over. Even as the robed figures disappeared from the light of the door – headed towards the stairs up to the office – Benjamin turned the knob of the door and pulled it open, standing there in the light of the office.

"Who goes?" he called.

Boots hit the bottom of the stairs, utterly unconcerned with subtlety, and started to climb.

"I say, who goes there? Identify yourself!" Benjamin balled up one hand in a fist, then unclenched that fist to throw a hand over his own face as a tremendously powerful electric lantern was shined right in his face.

"Ah, Benjamin." The voice was the same as Benjamin's, but... different. Gerald, without a doubt. The lantern swung up to illuminate the face under the cowl and confirmed my suspicion: Gerald Frakes, standing there in one of the robes worn by

the same cult or whatever that had killed "Gerald" the night before.

"Good gods!" Benjamin's exclamation was clear and the honest shock on his face was plain even from our hiding place in the dark, several yards away. "But..."

"So you received the note? I noted no obituary in the papers, my brother. Don't tell me you've tried to keep my untimely death a secret. Are you playing at some game?"

Benjamin's hand clenched into a fist again, even as he smiled a little. His eyes were hard little emeralds. "As are you, it would seem."

"Yes, of course." Gerald laughed a little, an ugly little laugh from an ugly little heart. "But I'm the bad son. It's expected."

"And now you can explain this game to me, I hope."

"Oh, brother," Gerald sighed, stepping forward, still holding the lantern up so that it shine right in Benjamin's eyes. "I'll do better than that. I'll include you in it." His hand came up fast and he shoved something cloth over Benjamin's mouth and nose. The two struggled for a moment but the other cats in the fancy threads were at Gerald's side in a flash, helping to restrain Benjamin. I knew I should do something, but Lee wasn't moving his hand from my shoulder and I couldn't take four of these guys on my own any old day of the week, even with the element of surprise. Benjamin tried to fight back for a few long seconds, then fumbled, then sagged in a great heap to the floor. Gerald crouched low and lifted the handkerchief from Benjamin's face, leaned his head down against his brother's chest and listened, then stood and smiled in the light of the office door. "Quite satisfactory. Yes, indeed. Come, brothers, we still have an appointment to keep with the master." Gerald seemed to wield authority over the other three robed figures and at his command they bent over Benjamin's body and lifted it, carried it over and down the stairs, with Gerald following after them. He left the door to the office hanging open, light on, papers everywhere - whatever was in there didn't concern him, apparently - and they all went out into the middle of the floor. I heard a creak and a clank and knew they had pulled back the trap door into the sewers. There were some grunts as they manhandled Benjamin - or his body, I didn't know which - down the ladder between them, and then the door was pulled shut with a soft thump.

Finally, I let out that breath I felt I'd been holding for an hour.

“He was alive,” Lee whispered in my ear. “I could hear his breath. I could smell the ether on the handkerchief when they came in.”

Druids. Gods bless 'em.

“Wait a minute,” I whispered as we stood and started for the stairs. “He brought a handkerchief already dipped in ether?”

“You forget.” Lee was clambering down the steps, light as a cat, with me behind him doing my best. “There is a driver outside.”

We skipped the trap door down – if they were on their way to an appointment with “the master,” that just meant more guys in robes and element of surprise or no we would be truly outnumbered. Instead we both beat a quick path across the floor to the front door. Lee cracked it open just a hair, nodded to himself, and walked outside. I followed, and saw what he'd seen: Robert, slumped over the tie post to which the horses' harnesses were fastened. Lee didn't seem in any great hurry but I wanted to check for myself, so I jogged over and put my fingers to his throat. A steady pulse beat; they'd ethered him, then gotten lucky when they came inside and found Benjamin there, too.

“Well, what now? Into the sewers to keep tracking?” I turned around and addressed Lee at the end of the question, but he had his back to me and his ears were twitching. “Hell,” I said, “What now?”

“There are people coming,” he whispered. “They are hesitant. Many of them. In the shadows.”

I gulped hard and looked around. Sure enough, slowly I saw bums and hookers and drunks and kids start to take form in the shadows at the ends of the alleys. “What the hell?”

“I do not know, but they look like they are waiting for something to happen in the street. They are watching up and down it. They are excited...” Lee was smelling the air in great gulps, eyes darting from alley to alley and back again. “We should find someplace to watch.”

I wrestled Robert off the post and put him up in the carriage, at least, where he would be out of sight. Lee was already stepping off to the corner of 1437, standing against the corner and watching up and down Whiting Wharf. I shut the door of the

carriage and then stepped quickly after him, taking up station on the wall on the other side of the same alley. He looked to the left, I watched to the right. His ears were going again and I was listening as hard as I could, too. It was a long couple of minutes, during which I thought nothing would happen, but soon I heard a low chant start.

“Zzth kznja eno hlai, Zzth kznja una fza,” I could hear, very far up the street from us. The voices weren't straining to be heard, but neither were they entirely trying to hide, either. In a quarter like Docks Portage, though, a lot of noise can happen in the middle of the night without the law ever noticing. I could see lights coming, and Lee moved over to stand beside me.

“A procession,” he said, nodding his head in the direction he'd locked his crystal eyes. He smiled, very slowly. “Fascinating.”

I shuddered a little and looked back up that way. There were robed figures carrying torches coming in our direction, lined up three across, with five or six in each column. Their torches were the magical kind that never go out and never burn anything – not with real fire, anyway. You can wrap your fist around the head of such a torch without harming your hand. Useful on a hike or a very old-fashioned house, but they'd long gone out of style.

The robes were the same as those worn in the sewers the night before and by Gerald and his henchmen in the warehouse a few minutes before.

The chant was the same as that done over the dead body in the Sanctum.

The bums and whores and urchins in the alleys started to move forward, taking the sidewalks, stepping into the light in little clusters of two or three, or by themselves, digging in pockets and between socks and ankles and into cheap handbags made of canvas painted and waxed to look like leather.

Behind the column of fifteen or so robed figures was Maximillian Mercer. He was walking on foot. It was unmistakably the same man as was in the portrait in his office, believably the same one in the artists' renderings in the newspapers. He walked with his hands at his sides, resting on the out-turned butts of the six-shooters he wore in side holsters, the cross the body kind where the guns point backwards while they're holstered. Flashy but you've got to have good hands to draw with any speed and without bruising each hand with the gun in the other one every time you do it. He

was smiling.

Behind him, on a small palanquin being carried by four of the robed figures, cowls drawn even lower than those on the marchers at the front, sat a slightly fat calico cat, resting on its haunches, head held high, tail wrapped around his feet, the portrait of feline dignity.

“The animal!” Lee's voice was breathy and he never took his eyes from the cat the entire time.

As Mercer drew near, each individual or pair or trio or whatever of street people would kneel or curtsy as appropriate, hats off and held in hands, each of them favoring him as they would a king who passed in a parade. Mercer would blush and look down and gesture for them to rise as he passed, letting each of them feel that, individually, they were too kind, that Mercer was unworthy of this sort of treatment. Then they'd drop again as the cat was carried by – completely oblivious to their obeisances – and then they would rise again and rush forward towards the last figure in the parade: a trio of robed figures carrying great, canvas sacks.

Into these, the street characters would cast a little paper money, maybe a few coins, one hooker taking a ring from a finger and throwing it in with tears in her eyes.

“Holy shit,” I said to Lee, partly, but mostly because I was so stunned I couldn't just think it, I had to say it out loud, “He's milking everyone in town. Look at them, like he's their savior.”

Lee's eyes were locked on the cat, a few words being chanted by him and his eyes squinted as he studied the cat from afar.

“Unless I am mistaken,” he finally said, but he was interrupted when one of the little clusters at the end of an alleyway gave out a cry and all eyes – including Mercer's – turned to look in that direction.

One of the Frankes' brothers, dressed in Benjamin's clothes from half an hour before, had walked out of an alleyway and raised a gun – a great big .44 with a barrel and chambers the size of a cannon – in the direction of Mercer.

“Enough!” he called out, gun steady. The procession came to a confused halt and Mercer's hands went up – not to his guns like a real gunfighter's would. The Frankes brother, whichever one it was, kept speaking. “Maximillian Mercer, the better class of Victorian has had enough of you! Pray quickly to whatever gods you worship,

for I, Benjamin Frankes, have come to liberate the ruling class from your proletarian rabble-rousing!" Then he pulled back the hammer and the gun cocked with a sound like lightning.

Mercer worked his jaw once, then twice.

Then the gun went off.

The back of Mercer's head blew open at the same time as a small hole was opened in the middle of his forehead, and he fell backwards like he'd been hit by a gas truck.

Screams went up all up and down the street and torches fell from the hands of robed marchers.

Everyone was frozen for a moment and the Frankes brother standing there laughed long and hard before firing once more into the air and then turning to dash between a couple of panhandlers and down the alleyway.

Marchers tore off after him, in hot pursuit, and the crowd surged in the direction of Maximillian Mercer's corpse where it lay in the street.

The cat hadn't moved the entire time.

"It's a fake," Lee finally said. "It's dead. Stuffed. A fine bit of taxidermy, but that cat is no more real than Mercer's certificate of gratitude from the city of Wichita."

I whistled, long and low, and looked at him. "I wonder which Frankes brother that was."

"I suggest we pursue and find out, though it seems rather obvious that it was Gerald," Lee said, shifting his pack around on his back. Without another word the two of us were down our own alleyway and hanging a left to go up the backsides of unmarked warehouses, chasing robed figures as they, themselves, ran the direction they thought "Benjamin" Frankes had gone.

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Eight

Lee and I were running full-speed down the alleys, the robed figures ahead of us by about thirty yards. I could barely make out the top of Benjamin/Gerald's head about thirty yards ahead of them. A glance down a side alley told us the street people of Docks Portage were gathered around the corpse of Maximillian Mercer, just standing there. I wondered if they were waiting for a miracle; probably they were. The mark always waits around after the con is over, thinking maybe something will happen to tell them they're wrong, that it wasn't all a big fake, that their messiah or new best friend or whoever isn't really gone in a puff of smoke like that.

Benjamin spun around a corner to the right, further from Whiting Wharf, and the crowd of robed figures dove after him. I heard a loud POUF from around the corner, saw a flash of light, and when Lee and I skidded around the same corner a few seconds later the crowd of guys in robes were standing there around a manhole, the cover to which was nowhere in sight, the last of a smoke bomb just wafting past their heads and up, into the night sky. Between the heat and the run I was sweating like a pig. Lee's breath was even and quiet, and we both stopped short.

The guys in robes turned around and looked at us, as of one mind. I smiled, lifted one hand, waved. "Evening, guys," I said. They didn't stop to wonder whether we were friend or foe. They simply started running at us, and Lee and I spun and started back the way we'd come. I wet back up one of the alleys, towards Whiting, and Lee followed after. The human form isn't built for it – or the elven, for that matter – but Lee was kind of hunched, running on his feet and his hands, head tossing back to keep an eye on our pursuers. I could hear a dozen or more pairs of boots stamping against the paving stones and blocks of concrete that made up the surface of the ground, chasing after us. There were no screams, no cries to stop, no shouts, no grunts, just boots and boots and boots.

One thing you have to give your average cultist: they are uniformly of a single mind and unusual dedication when they have a purpose.

I skidded, arms out, into the street of Whiting Wharf and grabbed a lamp post to try to steady myself as I turned. We'd come out way up the street from where we'd been when the parade started, and now the street people and the body of Maximillian

Mercer and the four guys still standing there holding up the palanquin with the stuffed cat on it were all milling around, hodge podge, between us and the car. That was just fine, though. I'd figured two of us could navigate the crowd a lot faster than a dozen angry guys in flapping robes.

"Car!" I grunted, and Lee made a noise in his throat like a growl, bounding forward like a jungle cat. I took off at top speed, too, and the two of us flowed between shocked, mourning winos and street orphans and hookers like the world's worst economically disadvantaged obstacle course. A leap over a kid down on hands and knees, sobbing, here, a quick shimmy between a whore and a bum there. The cultists did more impacting than avoiding, and sure enough the crowd – confused and scared and angry – proved a greater obstacle to them than to us. We cleared the crowd at about the same time and I had the car keys in my hands. Lee dove through the passenger's window and I was yanking the door open – and practically free of its mounting, I was in such a hurry – when a great shout brought the cult up short. Out of nowhere, Gerald Frankes – dressed in one of the robes of the cult – had appeared in the middle of the street.

"Brothers!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, hands up, arms spread at forty five degree angles from his body. The pursuing guys in robes all stopped short in front of him. I climbed into the car and cranked the engine, but before I did I heard him go on: "Patience! Show the decorum our master would require!" He was still speaking, but I was trying to crank the engine. Lee stuck his head out the window of his door and his ears folded forward in an indescribably unnatural way and he listened intently as I got the engine to turn over, gunned it hard and pulled a screeching roundabout in the middle of the street, flooring it in the other direction.

We shot around a corner and towards the gate and I wasn't even watching behind us because Lee was still sticking his head out the window, looking behind us as we went. As I got near the gate out of Docks Portage, a few blocks later, he climbed back in and settled into the seat, crossing his arms and making a little grunt of thoughtfulness.

"So?" I asked, grinning for no good reason. "What gives?"

"They are not pursuing," he said. Then he licked his lips. "However, the Frankes brother in the robe was telling them, before we got around the corner, to remember

that the attacker had to be tracked down and punished. 'In our way,' he said to them. I am quite certain of that."

"What way is that?" I said, barely watching for traffic as I pounced from the gates of Docks Portage and into the main avenue around Center Victoria. The guards on the gate might have started from their naps as I went by, but they didn't give any chase and I didn't see any sirens in the mirrors.

"Well," Lee said, finally, "We saw the body in the Sanctum. I think we know 'their way.'" He made air quotes with his index and middle fingers as he said it, then crossed his arms again.

"And I'd bet a shiny fifty dollar bill that they're going to find Benjamin Frankes a lot sooner than they think they will because Gerald still has him gassed somewhere down in those sewers." I nodded and slapped the steering wheel. "Did we just watch a coup?"

"Yes. And now we know where Gerald was going all those nights - he's been part of Mercer's cabal the entire time and decided to take the show over for himself." Lee punched the dash with both fists. "A fake cat! Blast! I cannot believe my circle was even willing to entertain the possibility that Mercer was not a con artist."

I shrugged and then laughed again. "We're all a sucker sometime," I said, and with that we fell back into silence, me driving a little more calmly now that we were out of that quarter and into well-lit streets. I cruised around to Docks Business and made for the Duck & Cover. Tank would be closed up by now, but I needed a drink anyway.

I let us into the bar and went behind it to pull myself a pint from the keg. Lee nodded that he would have one as well, so I made it two. I dug a couple of coins out of my pocket and tossed them down where Tank would see them, then came back around and joined Lee on the client's side of the bar with an empty stool between us. I took a long drink, then another, draining half the glass in a go. It's not often I watch a man die from a bullet to the brain. It wasn't the first time, though, either.

We both drank in silence, breathed, sat, drank more. I finished my beer, leaned across the bar, refilled it, dropped another coin on the counter.

"So," I finally said. "Where are we?"

"It is all a show," Lee said softly, studying the bottom of his glass. I was just

starting to relax, working on my second pint. He wasn't showing any effects at all, just studiously quiet. He looked up and pushed the glass aside. "It is entirely for someone else's benefit, and I do not know if it is ours or someone else's."

"OK," I said, nodding and finishing my second glass in a long slug. I set it down and smacked my lips and lit a cigarette. "Let's start from the beginning. Ma Frankes comes by and hires me to find her missing son."

"When you - we - find him, he appears to have been ritually murdered in the sewers of Docks Portage, in a Sanctum devoted to the worship of a cult."

I nodded. "I report the murder to the police after a fake demon attacks us, or a real demon fakes attacking us, to slow us down and let someone - presumably Gerald himself - make his escape."

Lee picked it back up. "The police find nothing. The scene is scrubbed when they get there. You go to the Frankes' the next morning and find 'Gerald,' who it appears is Benjamin masquerading as his brother. This is later confirmed when Gerald shows back up and they speak in the warehouse."

"And in the meantime," I said, "We find out that Her Ladyship is the newest dupe in a scheme by Maximillian Mercer, Wild West Warlock, to fake a bunch of fights with demons around town and then milk the rich and infamous for a taste of their cash."

"Benjamin is kidnapped by Gerald, who appears to be one of the cult of Mercer's followers and accomplices, but wields some authority within their organization as the other cultists will follow his orders."

"Then, 'Benjamin' shows up ten minutes after getting ethered out of his mind right in front of us, and shoots Maximillian Mercer through the head and takes off running."

"Disappearing," Lee said with a nod to either side, "In the very manner reportedly employed by Mercer himself."

"Then reappearing long enough to stop the enraged followers from chasing us down and killing us in the street."

Lee nodded, and drew his finger aimlessly on the table. "He faked his own death for some reason - not for our benefit, I suspect. And he overthrew Mercer. My suspicion is that he needed to remove himself from society so that he could cleanly and invisibly move to the top of Mercer's organization."

“But why murder Mercer, then?” I shook my head at Lee. “It doesn't make any sense. Without Mercer, there's no scam.”

“Mercer appears in public with a mask. He could dye his hair and play the part.”

“But when he spoke to his newest contributors, tonight, he wasn't masked. We'd have heard it muffling his voice. And mom is in the pool of pockets waiting to get picked, now. He can't appear in front of her.”

“Perhaps he does not know this,” Lee said. He thought in silence for a moment, then shook his head. “How did Benjamin know that Gerald was out of the picture? Otherwise he never would have taken up impersonating Gerald.”

“And surely their mother would have known, right?”

Lee nodded. “I can smell the differences, yes, but a mother would know innately. He never would have fooled her.”

“So she's in on it?”

“You did say you were convinced early on that she did not expect you to find her son.”

“So,” I said, nodding and then rubbing my chin. I was in need of a shower, a shave and a long sleep. “She hires me to make a show of trying to find him. She was helping him get away.”

“And she played along when Benjamin took over his spot in the family picture, as you might say.” Lee knit his thin blond eyebrows together, his thin face resting on the backs of his hands, against the bar, hunched over. “Is Benjamin in on it?”

“Nah,” I said, “They were still playing the game at home.”

“In front of the help,” Lee said, lifting one finger. “Perhaps that explains it?”

I shook my head again. I still didn't like it. “Her being in on it would explain the letter, but not the double-whammy of no trespassing signs. One warning could be sincere. Two, well... I think you were right this afternoon. I think the second, at least, was meant to keep us interested, not off the trail but on it.”

Lee nodded awkwardly, sitting as he was, and lifting a hand to ruffle his already scruffy blond hair. “I agree.”

“No, my gut tells me Benjamin isn't in on the game. But mom and Gerald are. But why would mom go along with the overthrow of a scam and then become a victim of the scam?”

Tank cleared his throat from the dark in a far corner of the bar. I had to guess he'd been sitting there the entire time. "Aye, lad, why?" He stood and waddled around, shot Lee the evil eye – dwarves and elves, what can you say? – and climbed up behind the tender's side of the bar. "Because she needs to know if her son has been successful. If she's helped him fake his own death so he can get deep inside the organization, she can't exactly meet him for lunch and talk over his progress. She gets an invite lined up and goes to see if Mercer's still breathing." Tank produced yesterday's paper from behind the bar and flicked the front page with one fat finger. "Every drunk in town is talking about this guy. I can't help but know the story."

"Well, he's dead now," I said, and pushed my glass forward. Tank filled it with a practiced hand and pushed it back. "We watched Gerald – dressed as Benjamin – blow his brains out in the middle of the street, along with a few helpers and dozens of New Victoria's finest gutter scum."

Tank grunted, reached up and scratched under his chin, made some indefinite noises, drummed his fingers on the edge of the bar, scratched again.

"Why're ye involved?" He gestured at Lee with a thumb.

"I am a druid. My circle was curious as to Mercer's claim that he used a cat to fuel warlock magic, not a demon."

"Aye. So who else would be curious?"

I arched an eyebrow, and then the quarter dropped. "Warlocks," I said.

"Aye. Her Ladyship's husband is bursar for the temple of Jupiter in Center Victoria, which is good cash, yes, but they're richer than that. I saw that driver's outfit, and even a very good accountant would be stingy enough to complain about that get-up." Tank hrumphed amusedly at himself and me.

"She's a warlock," I said, and I smiled. "She's a warlock, and she sent her son deep undercover. And when the 'evidence' of his death arrived – I think we've just found out where our body went, Lee – it was Benjamin who received it, not her, and he bought it and took up the part of playing his 'dead' brother."

Lee nodded, sat up straight, pushed the empty glass away from himself. "And she couldn't call him out on it because she would show their hand."

I smiled again, even more broadly. "Gentlemen, we might make detectives yet." I raised my glass to toast no one, and drained it down.

Tidy as all that was, it left us with a couple of major problems: first, what to do about Benjamin, now kidnapped by his brother Gerald, and what to do about Her Ladyship, who of course wouldn't want us to have figured any of this out. Another cigarette and some quick talk put us at the following: we were going to have to go back to Docks Portage and try to track down where the Mercer cult was hiding out so we could try to spring Benjamin. No matter what he'd done, no matter how many dead brothers he'd pretended to be, no matter how many murders had happened right under my nose before I'd had a chance to stop them, I couldn't just walk away from another one that I could stop. I'm no knight in shining armor, but every man has to sleep next to his conscience at night and I know where my limits are on that front.

Lee and I saddled back up in the jalopy I'd hired for the night and the two of us motored right back out of Docks Business and down to the gates of Docks Portage. If the guards on shift were awake, they didn't remember my hasty exit from that quarter a couple of hours before. If they did remember me, they didn't care.

The thing that occupied my mind the whole way there was this: Maximillian Mercer had a cult. It had to come from somewhere. He was busily and successfully putting the bite on New Victoria's poshest of the posh and he was hustling the street people, the far end of the economic curve, for what little they could give, too. That couldn't amount to much in the way of folding money, obviously, because that's not what anybody who's sane would go to that stratum of society to try to pinch. What he was getting, however, was adoration. Maybe he did it for the ego jolt, maybe he did it because it made him laugh, maybe he did it as insurance against the people who are everywhere because they've got nowhere giving too much attention to what he's doing and talking to too many nice ladies at soup kitchens about what they'd seen.

But maybe what he was getting from them was the one thing they had in spades and the one thing no one else would mind seeing them give up: people. Those people might be themselves, might be their kids, might be a pimp who's been goofed to the stars by his whores and shoved down a sewer so Mercer can take him off their hands. I didn't know. Still, the fact remains that followers had to come from somewhere. He'd probably ditch them all the second the wind turned on his little operation, but for now they likely had a roof of some sort, clean robes and a steady supply of food and

that's quite a benefits package to your average wino.

I clucked my tongue in thought as I drove. If that was the case, then why take on Gerald Frankes as a disciple? The rich son of a respected family would be too easily missed. There was an obvious answer, but I didn't like it because I didn't like what it said about what was going on right now, with Benjamin held by Gerald and nobody knowing the status of either one.

Another bothersome idea I had was that if he's getting his minions from the streets, and they're people who see this as a real step up on the survival ladder, they're loyal. That much had been amply displayed when they moved with a single purpose to chase down 'Benjamin' after Mercer had been shot. The flip side of the coin that consoled me, however, was this: the object of their loyalty was gone, and Gerald was going to have to do some serious legwork to get anything like that out of them anytime soon. They could only transfer their loyalty so much and so fast, and I hoped to the gods that I could use that to my favor if I needed to.

The whole drive there, I smoked and thought these things over, around and around, in small circles that made my head hurt.

Leeritan was silent, staring forward, lost in thoughts of his own.

By now it was nigh on three of the morning, and in Docks Portage that's truly the dead hours. Nothing much should stir in that district until about six of the morning, when the first early birds start to come in to get warehouses opened and prepare for early ships and early pick-ups. That gave us a scant handful of hours to move freely before we'd have to wait a whole business day – and then some – to be able to get access again. I was determined to make the most of it, and Lee and I ditched much in the way of subtlety at the street level when we simply pulled the car right up behind the Frankes' horse and four, which was still sitting in the street.

I opened the door of the carriage and found that Robert was inside, yes, but he hadn't breathed in a while. The dagger sticking out of the back of his neck probably had something to do with that.

Tsk. He'd been a handsome devil, too.

Lee leaned in, past me, and pressed the back of his hand to Robert's forehead and cheeks, then sniffed at the body for a moment. "He was murdered no more than

ten minutes after we escaped from the mob of Mercer's agents.” He spoke low, even as brazen as we were being walking around in the street, then he leaned back out of the carriage and swept up and down the street with his eyes. He drew in a long breath, nose held up and out, first looking one way and then looking another. “Yes, they are gone, but not for long. They were here very recently.” Then he spat on the ground and made a motion with one of his hands. I didn't ask. It could have been either a prayer or a curse and I didn't really care one way or the other.

“Well, I guess we go down the sewers.” I took a cigarette out of my pocket and lit it, breathed a big gulp of smoke and the damp air of August nights. It tasted mucky and bad, so I took another drag to try to burn it away. “No other way I can think of to find them.”

As I said it, I turned around and saw the cultist standing about fifteen feet behind us, in the shadow of the warehouse. He had a gun in his hand and his cowl up, and he said in a thick drawl and a gruff voice, “The New Master wishes to save you the trouble of seeking him out. Time is short for his Great Work.”

I raised both hands, cigarette dangling from the middle of my mouth. “Oh, great,” I said around it. “I was just wishing we could get an invitation.”

Leeritan moved only his head, but when the growl started deep in his throat the gun twitched and he fell silent. He didn't put up his hands, but he did stay very still.

“Less talking, more walking,” the funny man said. He motioned with the gun and Lee and I backed around towards a corner of the warehouse. With another gesture the robed figure pointed to a manhole with the lid off. “Down there. You two first.” I spat my cigarette out onto the ground, stepped on it with my right foot and started to climb slowly down the ladder and into the sewers. Most people are terrible shots, to be honest with you, and once you get a few feet away from them the odds are very high that they're going to miss. Still, a guy with a gun is a guy with a gun. It's generally smarter to do what he says as long as it's not “climb into the trunk of this car,” or “don't shout, there are police nearby.”

I was first down the ladder and thought about making some trouble once I got to the bottom but, down there, I found another two guys in the same robes. They were waiting for us. I figured at that point that the carriage and the body of Robert must have been a trap. They knew we'd be back, and they wanted to use it to lure us

into a specific spot so they could come out of the dark and have the drop on us. Smart bastards; they're the worst kind of bastards.

"Morning, gents," I said to the two who were down there. One held a crossbow, the other a pistol. Neither of them looked chatty. "Nice frocks." Still nothing.

Leeritan clambered down the ladder after me. He still wouldn't raise his hands into the air, but he hadn't killed any of them yet and I think they knew enough about druids or about elves or about both to know that meant that he had accepted them having the drop on him. He did study each of them closely, however, with those elven eyes of his; I wondered for more than a couple of seconds whether he could see well enough in the dark to see the faces under those cowls. If so, he was doing his darnedest to memorize them while he had a chance, and I didn't like the chill that sent up my spine.

The one from up top came down the ladder last, levering the manhole shut behind him with a great big iron bar made for the purpose. Finally, down in the dry tunnel, he tucked the iron under his arm and gestured with the gun again. "This way, lads." His voice was made even more gruff down there, echoing as it did off the concrete walls and rendered slightly more ominous, somehow, by the fear of detection he gave away by dropping the volume slightly. He dug the gun into the small of my back and then pointed off down the tunnel. "That way. There. We're right behind you the whole way, too, so no funny dance steps."

"I've got three left feet, mister." I was trying to stay conversational. Sometimes, style is all you have left. "Don't you worry."

"And keep your mouth shut," he growled. I took his advice.

We walked for what seemed like five days. In truth it was, I guessed later, about thirty minutes. New Victoria's a big town, but in thirty minutes you can cover a lot of it. By the time we got where we were going, I had no idea where we were relative to anywhere we'd been. I was as thoroughly lost as I could be in my own city. I was hoping that Lee, being the druid he is, would fare better than I would at finding our way back out. I knew that, if nothing else, we could always go straight up and come out somewhere in New Victoria. We might not like the neighborhood, but it would at least be above ground.

The further we got, the dryer and more isolated the sewers seemed, though. In any city of any age, the sewers get less used and become more a city under the city the further you get from the centers of life and commerce. Eventually we were in very old tunnels – stone walls with crumbling grout between them, huge blocks of granite starting to be shoved out like snaggy teeth in an old man's mouth. Our captors had been marching us with electric lamps to guide our way but eventually we could make out that there were sources of light somewhere ahead. In the twists and turns of the tunnels it was possible to hide lights from detection even pretty close to the source, the walls setting up blinds and double-blinds all over the place as old tunnels ran into older tunnels which ran into still more ancient architecture. The place had lost that septic stink of your average sewer, too, and I figured that by now we were either right under the docks themselves or possibly backed up into some corner of Docks Portage where there once were docks but now none. Wherever we were saw little traffic above or below, and these people in the robes were taking the best advantage of that. No sooner had I determined that I could see a soft glow around a corner somewhere ahead than we had turned that corner and three others in rapid succession – a step here, three there, five paces ahead and bam, we were standing in the entrance to a large, artificial cavern lit all around with candles and oil lamps. There were no electrics here, probably because this part of the under-city was so old it had never had the lines run to it. There were a few more cultists – three or four or five, the shadows and the sudden relative brightness of the room made it hard to tell them apart as distinct from one another as they moved around the room – and in the center, standing on the raised step behind a further raised and ornately if crudely decorated altar fashioned from a huge steel shutter door and some blocks of concrete with steel rebar jutting from the rough edges, was Gerald Frankes decked out in a robe identical to those worn by his compatriots except for the fancy gold stitching and trim around the sleeves and shoulders. I wondered if it had even gotten a chance to cool off from the last time Maximillian Mercer had worn it before Gerald had it on. It was just slightly too large for him and it gave him the look of a kid playing dress-up in his parents' closets. Just, you know, one with a parent who's a member of an evil cult.

“Oh, good,” Gerald said. The voice was unmistakably the same as the one which had chanted in the Sanctum the night before. Benjamin had sounded similar but not

the same. I should have been certain from the get-go, but you win some, you lose some. "I was starting to get concerned you wouldn't make it." He smiled at us and I glanced over at Lee. Lee's pupils were the size of coffee saucers and his nostrils wide. If he'd had a tail he'd have been wagging it and not in the friendly way of your average mutt; it would have been the way a mistreated Doberman wags its stub when it sees a fresh meal walk into its too-small pen.

Gerald didn't have his cowl up, but the others in the room did. The three who had escorted us here split up, one going off to either side and around the large, oval walls to join their brothers in whatever they were doing. One remained behind us, a gun in each hand, no more than two or three feet away. At that range, even a lousy shot can plug you dead as a carved ham.

Gerald strode down off the dais and towards us, folding his arms over his chest and stopping to look us up and down. "Yes, yes," he said, as though deciding whether he liked our price better by the pound or as whole sides. "Mother did make an excellent choice. You're just smart enough to wind up in trouble but just dumb enough to fall for everything else."

"So you wanted us to get this far," I said, getting tired of this rich kid's bullshit already. "Well, here we are. Make with the apocalyptic summoning ritual or whatever else you've got up your sleeve. It's getting late and I'd like to be home before sunrise."

Lee was very, very silent.

Gerald smiled at that – the broad, patrician smile of a gentleman whose maid just messed up the ironing for the last time – then turned and walked away from us. I didn't like that, either, but before I could come up with anything clever to say he'd reached the dais and turned back to us again. "My work here is nothing apocalyptic, I assure you, Mr. Weaver." Gerald chuckled the easy chuckle of a man who knows he's going to win this game of croquet. "I'm here to save the world, not destroy it. If you've come this far I assume you know by now that Maximillian Mercer was, at very best, a moderately inventive charlatan."

"Greedy, too," I said. I worked up some wet and spit on the floor. A flicker of Gerald's face told me he didn't like the way I did it but didn't want to show his plumage so soon. "He was pinching the rich and the poor. That takes gumption, I'll grant you."

"And what would you – or your druid friend – say if I told you that underneath

his lies and chicanery, underneath the cheap tales he told those rich and those poor about his ability to fight monsters and save the day!” He ended the phrase with an up-tick in his voice and a swing of a fist that was hokey and he knew it, then went on, “There was a hidden truth that Mercer was too blinded by greed or too lacking in ambition and dedication to tease out from amongst the lies, a hidden truth that could change the very foundation of the world we live in for the better? Not just the better for me, or for him, or for you, but for everyone?” He smiled again and looked intently at Leeritan for a moment. Lee was, in turn, studying Gerald like a bug under glass. “What if I told you that his non-demonic magic was quite real, quite possible, and by my calculations could, if properly applicable on larger scales, replace warlocks' function in our society altogether?”

I cocked an eyebrow at this, then caught Lee in the corner of my eye. Lee's pupils had shrunk back down to something like normal, yes, but his ears were involuntarily twitching as he flexed them forward in interest. Gerald could see it, too, and took it as the twinge of enthusiasm, a kernel of hope and maybe even belief in something that crazy.

“Anyone who studies magic knows that warlocks draw on the energies of demons to fuel their spells and that their spells are good only for destruction – never divination, never construction, never enchantment, only pain and suffering. This is the nature of their magic, through and through.” Lee spoke softly, but he and Gerald had one another's full attention.

“Yes, that is quite true. But I do not believe that demons are precisely what fuel their magic; well, to be more exact, I do not believe it must be a demon which fuels their magic. It is my belief, based on some of Mercer's statements and some of what I have observed in the time I have spent as his apprentice, that the specific fuel is the act of tapping the life force of another being and not the nature of that being itself. If I am correct, then warlocks can set aside the painful associations and hardships of magic which afflict them, mentally or spiritually – or, in the case of the truly unlucky or unwisely ambitious – both mentally and spiritually.” Gerald was treading back and forth, pacing atop the dais now, addressing us like students in a lecture at some warlocks' school. Lee was very intent. I was quickly losing my footing in terms of knowledge and, frankly, interest. Gerald was a madman if he thought there was

anything more to Maximillian Mercer's operation than a tidy and illegal profit margin.

"Explain," Lee said. It was one very quiet word, but it carried a lot of heavy bags on its shoulders.

"The channeling technique employed by warlocks involves the transfer of otherworldly energies from the Tartarian realms of the demons they summon and enslave into this realm. As all know, the energies of one realm cannot mix productively with another. They are like oil and water; perhaps more accurately and appropriately, they are like petrol and strike-anywhere matches, all of which have been struck. The energy, once introduced, wreaks tremendous destruction. This is the purpose to which warlocks are ultimately dedicated; we all know that they could be used in a war and, if they were employed in sufficient numbers, it would be a war like none other had ever seen. History provides us with a few examples of single sorcerers or even very small bands being used in military campaigns and the results are still evident today. None dare go to Nairobi, East Africa, even today, thirty years after three warlocks were loosed on the field of battle against native uprising." Gerald stopped and seemed to consider his next words carefully, addressing Lee directly. "But what if it wasn't the demon itself fueling the magic? What if the energy is merely a placeholder in that process? What if the real magic, the real source, is in the simple act of channeling? By passing one being's energy through another, a sort of transmutation of that energy takes place. Because of the inherently hostile and inhospitable nature of Tartarian energies, the transmutation renders that energy volatile and destructive. What if a human were to try to channel the energy of another human? Like begets like. The transmutation would be positive, genitive, rather than destructive and dangerous." There was a gleam in David's eye I didn't like one bit.

Lee didn't like it, either.

"Maximillian Mercer," Gerald went on, gesturing wide, arms outstretched, revealing The Truth to the doubting masses, lifting the veil from over their eyes, "Claimed that this was possible so that he could drum money out of the rich and the easily frightened. But I believe it is true. I have already experimented with it." Gerald smiled at Lee, then.

"The body in the Sanctum." Lee didn't speak, he intoned. He said it as flatly and as darkly as any being ever could. "You tried to channel energy through another

human being and it destroyed him so you dressed up the corpse as yourself to hide the deed.”

Gerald wagged a finger and smirked slightly. “No. I was going to need a corpse, yes, but I had assumed I would have to get one via more conventional means. No, this was an accident, but an accident in the name of progress is still progress. I had that man dress in my clothes, yes, but because I thought it would make the energy channeling easier. A sympathetic link between myself and him.” Gerald shrugged, now, completely detached from the life he had taken. “I think the bond simply was of insufficient strength. Now, of course, I have available to me what may be the most sympathetic bond possible. I intend to use it to demonstrate my theories. Unfortunately, you gentlemen have become nosy and bothersome.”

“Is this where you explain you have to kill us to preserve the forward march of progress?”

Gerald smiled and folded his hands together in front of him, the patient teacher. “No. I merely need to detain you to make certain you do not interfere.”

At this, the guard behind us cleared his throat and dug the guns into our backs again and marched us forward and through an archway to the side. Another cultist was there, waiting, a door open in the wall. We were shoved roughly through the doors and into what appeared to have once been some sort of administrative office or maybe just a very large janitor's closet: gray stone walls and gray stone floor, but no beds windows or bars on the door, just a door that locked on the outside. There were two cots set up and a couple of blankets and a couple of tattered pillows. I turned to the robed figure in the door as he was closing it: “So now you just put us on ice while the new leader of your little lodge fiddles around with magic?”

The cultist shut the door without a word and shut the door.

We were left in utter darkness. It was so late by that point, and I was so tired, that I actually laid down on a cot and went the hell to sleep.

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Nine

At some indeterminate later point, sometime Monday but not so late on Monday morning that I'd had enough time to sleep to the point of feeling rested, I awoke abruptly to the glare of an electric lamp being shined on me in the little room where Lee and I had been stashed by Gerald while he began whatever the hell his 'great work' would be. I rolled off the cot and stood, a little groggy and a lot pissed, and lit a cigarette I'd tugged out of the smashed pack in my shirt pocket.

“Morning, sunshine,” I said to the cultist standing there shining the beam in my face. “Mind if we didn't have quite so much morning at this hour?”

Lee was awake – I'm not convinced elves actually sleep – but hadn't risen from sitting cross-legged in a corner of the room, hands on his knees, looking for all the world like a skinny Buddha with pointed ears.

The cultist didn't say a word. He just turned and started off back up the hall, towards the large, cavernous room where Gerald or Mercer had set up a huge, makeshift altar. If we were going to have the advantage of a better light than my pen flash, we needed to hustle and follow him, and so I did. Lee was up and behind me without making a sound or saying a word. We trudged up the hall behind our silent captor and stepped out into the again relatively too bright glare of the hall, filled with fresh candles though, I noticed, not as many as they had last night. Gerald was nowhere in sight, but Benjamin was standing there, not on but off to one side of the dais, in the same clothes – now wrinkled – as he'd been wearing the night before when he got Robert to take him to the warehouse.

“Well, well,” I drawled, taking a big drag from my cigarette and shooting twin streams of smoke out my nose, annoyed. “Looks like you survived the night after all.”

“Yes,” Benjamin said. “I mistook my brother's intentions.”

“Apparently, so did I.”

“I'll be returning home shortly, but I wanted to make sure you knew I was unharmed. Whatever my brother's ridiculous ideas are, they do not require you monitoring them. Good day.” He turned, very abruptly, and went out an archway other than the one we'd come in when brought here ourselves.

There were only a couple of cultists around, mostly sweeping up and keeping an

eye on us. The one who'd opened our haphazard cell, the one with the lantern, gestured with it towards the door we did use and started off for it.

"Is that Benjamin?" I asked Lee, not especially quietly. To hell with these bastards and to hell with what they thought of what I thought of them. I finished my cigarette, flicked it absently off to the side, towards their precious altar and their damned candles, and lit another.

"No," Leeritan said, quite matter of factly. "It is Gerald. He is disguised as Benjamin."

"So they've traded off trading off?"

"Yes, in a way of speaking."

I took a drag and laughed, a dark and guttural laugh, not a laugh of amusement but a laugh of desperation and depression, a laugh that sees the end of the movie and thinks it stinks and knows it can never get back the price of the ticket.

We otherwise let the cultists lead us out in perfect silence. The guy in the robe never spoke and we never spoke, either, except for those few words. It was a long walk and eventually we came back to the same ladder we'd come down.

"So what now?" I looked at Leeritan when I said it. The cultist gestured at the ladder with his lamp. Leeritan looked at me but didn't say anything.

The cultist gestured again.

I swung a punch up and so hard that I knocked him out cold in one go. The guy's robes fluttered down around him dramatically once he hit the cement.

Leeritan reached down and picked up the electric lantern. "Shall we?"

"After you." I made an elaborate flourish in the direction we'd just come, and together we turned and walked back toward the cultists' shrine. "I assume you know the way?"

"I am following my own scent. Of course I know the way."

I smiled at the back of Leeritan's head and we walked back still in silence.

The altar room only had one cultist in it at that point, a guy who didn't even bother to have his cowl up since he didn't think anybody else was around. He was a scraggly bum, probably living off the streets and anything he could forage there a week ago; now here he was, another productive member of an insane conspiracy.

Work rehabilitation programs really are something to behold.

I stayed back around the corner and Lee moved ahead through the shadows. I didn't hear him attack but I heard the guy drop in a heap, just like his compatriot had done back at the manhole, and I stepped around the corner to see Leeritan slinging the blood from a dagger. He would wobble it back and forth between his fingers, very quickly, letting centrifugal forces gather the blood together at the very edge, and then he would flick the tip downwards with a flutter of the handle so that the blood shot off in a clean, even stream. It was beautifully ugly.

“There is a dead body nearby,” Leeritan said softly.

“Yeah, right by your feet.”

He didn't laugh, he just looked at me. “One that has been burned. It smells charred in the same way the one did Saturday night in the Sanctum.”

“Oh, boy.” I groaned. First we'd thought we had a dead Frakes brother on our hands and now we really had a dead Frakes brother on our hands. Leeritan was sniffing the air pointedly and then he nodded in the direction of the arch that 'Benjamin' had gone through. We walked over there as quiet as possible and listened at the darkened portal. Nothing. I started to move inside but Lee shot a hand out and just touched me on the upper arm.

“Wait,” he whispered, and then we both stood back flat against the wall, in the shadow of one of the supporting beams that ran around the room. Soon I heard what I hadn't a few moments before: scuffing feet, a quiet grunt here and there, the sounds of more than one person carrying something heavy but trying not to speak.

Two more of the cultists came out of the archway carrying what was obviously a body, wrapped in white linens, and laid it out on the altar. It stank to high heaven of burned hair and flesh, the sickly sweet smell of human bacon. It's not a smell that gets your stomach rumbling in any way that's right or good. Way deep down in the back of inherited memory we recognize that smell from the funeral pyres of the ancients and we know to keep away. Even the cultists were victims of it, because when they turned I could see the heavy bandanas that were tied around their mouths and noses. It was a stylistic nod to Maximillian Mercer's black half-mask, perhaps, but it was also a matter of necessity. The body was fresh in a way the other hadn't been in the Sanctum. It smelled like there might still be some smoke curling from it if it

weren't wrapped up tight.

Leeritan detached from the wall and went to the left; I stayed put and went to the right. When he came up behind one of them, I heard nothing except a slight groan and the sound of metal on flesh. His went down in a sagging heap, the other turned at the noise and I took that opportunity to hit him on the back of the head with the base of one of the candlesticks. I might have killed him or I might not; at this point there was so much blood on their hands and I was so high strung from letting the murder I'd come here to prevent happen anyway that I didn't give much of a damn.

Lee stepped up to the altar, sliced open the linens without even doing his fancy blood-slinging dance with the knife and pulled back the shroud. He looked, nodded, then did the blood thing with the dagger so that the stream hit it in the face. He wrapped the shroud back over it, placed his hand there and said a few quiet words in a language I couldn't understand – not just didn't know, but didn't sound anything like any language I'd ever heard.

I let him pray, even though I don't have much use for it myself, and then he turned back to look at me again. “Benjamin Frankes. Same cause of death. We must stop Gerald immediately.”

“Couldn't agree more,” I grumbled. The two of us didn't bother to ditch the bodies, hide them, anything. We just turned on our heels and stomped out of that place and didn't look back. Lee led us right back to the manhole where we'd left the first cultist; he was up and gone by that point, but I didn't care. We climbed in silence, Lee shoved the manhole out of the way, we left it off when we got up top. Let some idiot not look where he was going and fall down there. Maybe he'd get lucky and be so fat he got stuck. I didn't care about that, either. I didn't care about anything. I just wanted to see Gerald Frankes one more time, and then maybe discuss him with his mother.

The Bursar-Frankes' carriage was gone and, with it, we assumed, the body of Robert. I had to guess that his murder hadn't been called into the police, either, and after the weekend I was having I wasn't interested in calling in anymore murders until I had a body on my hands and could make sure it didn't go for a walk. I clucked my tongue, felt in my pockets for my keys, pulled them out just in time to also see that

the hired car was still there, undisturbed. A few people in the street looked once or twice at us – a human in a sloppy suit and an elf dressed for a long mountain hike, climbing out of the sewers in Docks Portage, sure, that's weird. I touched the brim of my hat at them, no smile on my face, I hope no expression at all, and unlocked the car.

We each slid into it on our respective sides. Lee didn't look tired whatsoever, but I felt like I'd been hit by a truck carrying heavy water. I sighed, rubbed my face, flicked a cigarette out the window of the car door.

“What now?”

“To the home of the Bursar–Frankes, to speak with Gerald.”

“After a shower and a breakfast,” I growled. The car cranked when I turned the key, so no one had siphoned the tank in the night, which was nice. I pulled it in a sharp U in the street and went the hell home.

Two hours later, Lee and I had both cleaned up and changed clothes at the Duck & Cover. I was wearing one of my better suits, the one I wear when I think a case is finally about to be over. It's a good idea to look sharp when they're about to write you a check, but in this case I doubted there was going to be a payoff beyond being able to lay down next to my conscience that night. I will also admit that “finally” was stretching it given it had been, what, three days since Her Ladyship had walked into my office? It felt like ten years, though. It felt like two lifetimes and an unpleasant afterlife between them, and maybe a hard labor on the second birthing.

Leeritan changed into an outfit more or less exactly like his old one, but even more plain: beige canvas pants instead of green, a beige shirt. Upon reflection I wasn't convinced it wasn't what he'd worn two days ago when I'd first seen him in the sewers. They didn't stink, though, and I didn't really care. I like a blond as much as the next guy, but elves aren't really my scene. We stopped in at the bar long enough to get a pub breakfast – three kinds of sausage, a slice of bread and a sliver of tomato that looked like it was trying to make a break for the edge of the plate before its arteries hardened. Lee ate heartily, with his hands, no utensils in sight. He tucked the napkin into the front of his shirt and dug in like he'd never seen food before. He didn't speak, didn't comment on the food, didn't compliment Tank, didn't return the

glares of any of the patrons who, even in a bar and even in a bar in Docks Business, had never seen someone eat like that before. He slurped his beer and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his beige, canvas shirt, and belched like an emir when he was done.

I ate in silence and then smoked a cigarette, drank a cup of weak coffee with a shot of rye in it.

I tossed some money on the table, doffed my hat at Tank on the way to the door and the two of us got in the car and drove without a word between us straight to the home of the Bursar–Frankes.

When we got there, the gate was open. That was the first sign of real trouble.

The second sign was that the carriage was parked outside the carriage house, and a glance in the window of the passenger door showed that Robert's corpse was still in there, slumped over, face the ghastly gray of someone who's been dead a few hours. His eyes were open with that blank, dull look that tells you instantly that there's no spark in there anymore and never will be again. The knife was even still in his neck.

I clucked my tongue. "It's a shame when a good family like this leaves their dead servants just piled up around the place."

"Mmm." That was all Lee could work up in terms of caring about it. No, scratch that. He cared, but his care was all eaten up paying attention to his anger.

The third sign that things were bad was that the front door was hanging open on and there weren't a small army of butlers or maids lined up drawing straws to see who got the honor of opening it.

We didn't knock, we just walked inside. I figured sooner or later we'd hear shouting or crying – one or the other, or both – and be able to follow the sound. What we heard, it turned out, was shouting. We recognized the voice of Gerald Frankes and I recognized, instantly, the haughty, imperious tone of Her Ladyship. The two of them were going at it like the chicken and the hawk. I couldn't make out the words, but I could guess from the angry tones that someone's mother hadn't been willing to go along with it when a son showed up dressed as another son for the second time in as many days.

We approached the library door, where they were talking, and I swung it open and strode into the room without any sort of preamble. Leeritan walked in behind me and closed the door with an audible click.

The two Frankes barely even slowed down at our entrance.

“I demand!” Her Ladyship was angry, her face purple, ugly, more wrinkled and more strained than it had been at any time she'd been talking to me about her “missing” son Gerald. “I demand to know what has happened to Benjamin! What have the two of you done with your stupid games!” They were questions, yes, but she wasn't using question marks on the end of them. A lord doesn't ask his serfs to obey, he orders them.

Gerald was still dressed like Benjamin, but he wasn't bothering to keep up the masquerade anymore. “And I demand,” he countered, voice rising in register as it rose in volume, “To know why you're even pretending to care, mother!” He spat the word, like it was a grub he'd found in the middle of an otherwise acceptable apple. “Now give me your grimmery and you'll have your answers in due time!” He lifted one fist, then extended the index finger to turn it from a threat to an emphasis; the threat was still out there, of course. “I've had it with being your mole and I've had it with supporting your ridiculous stranglehold on the rest of us. I'm going to use your precious knowledge to prove to you that it's no longer needed, that the likes of you,” another grub, this one possibly making a rude gesture at him – “Aren't needed anymore by our society. The twentieth century is going to leave you and your kind in the dust and I am going to be the one who paves the way to the future!”

I grimaced at that, wrinkled up my brow, creased my forehead. I dug a cigarette out of my shirt pocket, lit it by striking a match against an expensive tabletop, cleared my throat. Leeritan was standing there with his hands on the butts of his knives.

The two of them turned to look at the two of us for just a moment, and a grin – a manic, worrisome grin, a grin that only fades with another person's last breath – spread out on Gerald's face. “You know I'm right,” he said, pointing that finger at Lee. “You know it's possible. That's why you were here in the first place, isn't it? You knew that Mercer's magic was probably fake, but you knew it was possible that it was real and that's why you're here, just in case. You know that there's some truth to what I said. You know I can do it!” He laughed, but you can probably figure out the

description of the laugh all on your own. You've heard the wireless dramas. You know when the organ hits those big, minor chords. I don't have to do it for you.

Then he turned back to his mother, his arm held rigidly forward, finger out towards her face. "And so did you, or you never would have sent me. So did you and all the rest of your kind." He even made "kind" an ugly word, the way a bigot says it when they describe a dwarf or a gnome or an elf with "their kind" and "kind" is turned down a little at the end because you know what they want to say is "knee-high turnip-eating whiskey-drinking sons of whores come to steal our jobs and our women."

She glared at him with rock-hard eyes, black as coals, and then she turned to look at Lee and me, and then she turned back to him. "You may not have my workbook. Now tell me what has happened to my son." To be honest, I wasn't sure which one she meant.

"He's dead," Gerald finally said. He said it like it was choking him to say it, like it had nothing but sharp corners and razor edges and it was two sizes too big to fit in his throat. He said it with a depth of grief and regret and sorrow that I honestly didn't think anyone in this house could ever show. "And so is Robert. And so are a lot of people." He grit his teeth on the last part, and the way he said it, he sounded like maybe he was trying to get over that part. "But I can undo it. I can bring them all bad. I just need something enough like me. I need something akin to me so that I can channel the energy the right way."

I think I've established that I'm not a magician, and every time he talked like that it was pretty much gibberish to me. Leeritan's eyes had gotten hard and so narrow he was practically squinting by this point, and he finally spoke. "What you say is madness, Gerald." His voice was calm and cool and low and delicate, and again I was reminded that many creatures are delicate, as I've said, even spiders. "The magic of warlocks is destructive, and only destructive, because they shred a little bit of reality every time they use it. The walls between this world and Tartarus are left a little tattered. They draw through these demons and they use them as pipelines and each time they do something they have to try to patch the walls back up and it never quite works completely. Magic is an unstable thing, a dangerous thing. When we draw solely on ourselves, yes, perhaps we can do things - small things - without damaging that fabric of the world. But any time you draw on the energy of another being - no

matter how similar they are, even if they are your own twin as it appears you have discovered – you brush up against those walls. Just because you do not break through the wall, just because the energy does not come through it from another realm, does not mean that you do not hurt the wall on this side of it. I do not understand all the why's and how's of your magic, but what you are doing is impossible, forbidden. It would be as damaging as any other warlock's works. There will never be a way for you to do what you seek to do, and if you have killed your brother with your experimentations and your blind belief that there was some kernel of truth hidden behind the charlatany of one very sophisticated confidence man then I am terribly sorry but I assure you that he is going to stay dead, ever and always, and the more you try to fix it the more you will hurt others and yourself.”

I stared at him – this had to be the longest series of continuous words Leeritan had spoken since we'd met. Hell, I'd have bet it was the longest in his entire life. Gerald stared, too, wild-eyed, the grin gone but the freakish look in his eyes still firmly planted deep in his sorrow and his guilt. “No,” he said, finally. “You're wrong. You're just a part of the system, as much as they are.” He hitched a thumb at his mother, who was standing there in perfect silence, arms crossed. “I'll prove it. Just wait and see.”

Then he drew the gun from under his jacket and shot his mother in the left knee. She went down with an agonized cry and even Gerald seemed to recoil in shock from what he had done. “I'm sorry, mother!” He cried out in anguish as she writhed on the floor, teeth bared, foam flecked at the corners of her mouth. “You'll see that I'm right! You'll be the first in a long line of warlocks that I promise will give up their secrets to make a better world!”

I'd made to go after him, get the gun away, clock him, anything, and Lee had drawn his daggers and dropped to a crouch from which, I imagine, he would have sprung directly at Gerald and gotten there in the time it would have taken me to get my first two steps. Her Ladyship was quicker than all of us, though. She shouted a word in a language that dragged across our brains with bare nails as she said it and in a flash there was – well, there's no other word for it, there was a demon standing in the room, next to Her Ladyship. It was huge, the size of an overfed mastiff, and it had too many legs and too many eyes and too many horns. She shouted another mind-

searingly painful word and Lee and I both cried out. The demon, itself, lunged at Gerald and he fired at it with his gun – bang, bang, bang, smoke puffing out the barrel and out of the chamber, plates and lamps shattering around the room. The demon didn't seem affected, sailing forward through the air. Its feet hit Gerald in the chest and its teeth sank into his shoulder and the gun went flying out of his hand as he was slammed against a wall.

Lee and I were standing there in shock. It's not often I see an otherworldly being summoned and sent to attack its summoner's son. It had released his shoulder, from which blood was pouring, and opened its mouths over his face. Her Ladyship had staggered up onto her good leg and her face as ashen and the wrinkles stood out. Later, when talking it over with Lee, I decided that I believed the stories about warlocks aging rapidly from the magic they do, from the strain of tapping and controlling the energies they access. I was watching it happen right in front of me.

“Benjamin was to be the good one, you imbecile,” she growled. She was like a different person, like Her Ladyship was gone and now it was just Maude Bursar-Franke, warlock, wielder of powers beyond the ken or control of priests, druids or Senators alike, the violent cousin of the respectable classes they rush to invite to the supper table for fear of what will happen if they don't. “Oh, that fool.” Her voice wasn't even the same. It wasn't just the pain or the anger, it was a different person in those clothes, a different mind. I wondered if anyone but another warlock had ever seen that person, heard that voice. “The body arrived Sunday morning. I had such a speech prepared – the loss of a second son, woe, woe.” She cackled – I mean it, she cackled, straight out of Hollyrood – and then frowned, then grimaced. Her eyes were like fire. “But Benjamin got to the door before I did. He was suspicious of your absence. He got the body and then... well, I don't know what he did with it, but he disappeared and came back a couple of hours later claiming to be you. I knew it was him, I am his mother and yours, but what could I say? I'd sent you to fake your own death in the first place. I'd sent you to a false grave to win the confidence of that shyster, that insane actor, that greed-riddled heretic. No, I couldn't say a thing.”

“Told you so,” I mumbled at Lee. He grunted.

“And then he went looking for you. I don't know how he knew, but he knew you were wrapped up with Mercer's organization somehow. He went looking to find out

where you'd been off to of nights, where you'd been hiding out, what you'd been doing when you weren't at Temple school.” She spat on the floor, then, and sagged a little from the exertion of speaking.

“And then you found him hot on your trail,” I said to Gerald, whose eyes were locked in wild agony on the mouths of the beast that still straddled his chest, pressing him against the wall. “And you thought you'd found the perfect catalyst for your magic, a perfect double of yourself. What could be more like you than your twin brother? But whatever you tried, it backfired. It backfired the same way it did in the Sanctum the night before, and you thought maybe if you could get hold of the work of a real warlock you could figure out what you were missing and maybe you could defeat death, bring him back, fix it all.”

Her Ladyship screwed up her face and straightened her posture, her leg making a sick cracking sound as she forced it into place and put some weight on it. “Oh, you idiot,” she said to no one and everyone. “Bad enough that my own child should learn what I am, but two strangers, too. So many bodies to dispose of.” She opened her mouth to say something, clearing her throat, and I knew it was going to be one of those words that made our brains hurt just to hear them, words that made us want to run just by being in the same room with them, alien words, words that shouldn't be spoken by mortal mouths, but Gerald was faster than she was, even with a lame shoulder and no gun. He wrapped his arms around the throat of the demon and squeezed and it had an effect on Her Ladyship like the same thing had happened to her. Her voice seized and her hands went up to her neck and she gagged on the word before she could even say it. Gerald wrestled the thing she'd called forth over to a window, banged it against the glass until the panes shattered and fell out of the way – sending Her Ladyship into screaming fits of rage and pain – and then clambered out clumsily, running down the yard with that thing clutched in his arms. I heard a wet smack as he beat it against something and then Her Ladyship went down cold on the floor, her breathing ragged and shallow.

We heard a horse neigh in protest, then a shout, and then galloping hooves. Gerald had gotten one of the horses from the carriage in the drive and ridden away with his mother's pet demon unconscious in his arms.

It was going to be an interesting edition of the paper that night.

The Palanquin Cat – Chapter Ten

Leeritan and I didn't even stop to check on Her Ladyship. We just ran out of the room, out the front door and down the front walk as fast as we could. I cursed the rich, yet again, for their expanses of front yard. We couldn't even hear the horse anymore and the car looked like it was parked a million miles away. We dove in, I cranked the engine too hard and we tore off down the street. The gates were just starting to close after Gerald's exit when we hit the gates of Persons West, but I laid on the horn and the guards – obviously bewildered by the sight of a scion of the rich riding past them with a nameless thing thrown over the front of the saddle like a sick child or a recent kill – cranked them back open just in the nick of time. I lost a mirror on the edge of one of the gates but didn't care.

Horns blew in front of me and behind me. I could have used the angry drivers as a guide to following Gerald Franke in his hopeless mission, but I didn't need to. I knew exactly where he was going. It was in the sewers and the corpse of his twin brother was already laid out on the altar, waiting for him.

“What's he going to do when he gets there?” I shouted this in Lee's general direction over the sounds of screeching tires, horns, whinnies, shouted opinions of my parentage. There were coppers waving batons and blowing whistles, some looking ahead of me, some looking at me. I didn't slow down for any of them.

“He's going to try to use the demon to bring his brother back to life – transfer the life energy, I don't know, he's insane, his understanding of magic is officially so off-kilter and so wrong that I do not know precisely what he thinks is possible – and probably kill his mother in the process.” Lee had one arm outside the window of the car, clinging to the edge of the roof for stability, the other braced against the dash. There was wind whipping as I geared up to the top of the transmission and put the pedal against the floor. I'd go around a curve in neutral, shift down a gear halfway through, punch the accelerator for a boost of force, gear back up with the throttle wide open.

“So warlocks summon these demon things and control them and use them like batteries, right?” I wanted a cigarette so bad it hurt, but no time.

“Yes.”

“So why does she get choked when he wraps his hands around the demon?”

“The ways of warlock magic are closely guarded secrets – we are not meant to know even the identities of individual warlocks, remember what she said about her own son and two strangers learning what she is – and so I do not know. From the look of things, though, I would say that the sympathetic bond between them is stronger than they might like to admit. They channel some of the demon's life force, yes, but they give it some of their own, perhaps. They are bound up. Eventually, they are one and the same.”

“So warlocks become demons?”

“I think it's academic,” Lee simply said. His face was hard and he was still braced against the rough ride I was giving us, but he was coolly casual given the circumstance. “I do not know and do not wish to know.”

“Ignorance just perpetuates a problem,” I shouted over the whine of the engine as I took it around another turn. Eventually I skidded to a halt outside our favorite old warehouse and left the door hanging open as I ran for the still-uncovered manhole. The horse was wandering aimlessly in the area, tired, desperate for a drink, too stupid and too coddled to find a trough on its own. “That's no way to live, if you ask me.”

And then I grabbed both sides of the ladder down and slid until I hit the floor of the sewer.

I could, just barely, hear pounding footsteps and shouts from ahead of us.

We reached the altar room probably thirty seconds behind Gerald Frankes. The cultists were standing around of two minds about whatever was happening. Some were just standing there, cowl up, not doing a thing to help him. Now was when they were making up their minds about him versus their old master, Maximillian Mercer. Others were running around lighting candles in some predetermined order. One was worrying him with his special robe, but he hit the poor sap so hard he went down on the edge of the dais and split his head open. The blood sizzled as it struck the stones of the altar.

“Magic,” Lee hissed.

I pulled the gun from my shoulder holster and pointed it at Gerald Frankes. “Stop whatever you're doing, Gerald. It's just going to kill your mother.”

“A fair trade,” he said, voice too soft, the demon prostrate on the altar, perpendicular atop the corpse of Benjamin. “One terrible mother for one good brother? She's right, you know. He was meant to be the good one. He was meant to be the pride of the family, the proof of her goodness. He came to Whiting Wharf to try to protect me. I can't help what I am, Mr. Weaver, I can't change my role in the world. But I can end the reliance of us all on the magic of warlocks, I can take their hands from around the throats of our society and replace it with something better, and if I can bring back my good brother in the process, all the better.”

Then he held up a dagger, poised over the demon, and I fired my gun. The bullet found its home in the middle of his chest and he shrieked, but the hand came down anyway.

The knife plunged straight into the demon's forehead. Ichor spilled out in all directions, like a fountain, and the candles all, en masse, flickered and nearly guttered out.

With his last, gurgled breath, Gerald Frankes spat a word that tore through my psyche. I can't describe it. I can't even try to remember it very hard or my head hurts for the rest of the afternoon. I went down on my knees and Lee, to be honest, passed out cold. The cultists cried in agony and then their wails turned to ululations, the brainwashing and indoctrination of cult life kicking in somehow at that word. They writhed in ecstatic suffering. Light spilled out of the middle of the room, or into it, or across it, and I heard a second shout join that of Gerald's. For a moment, Benjamin's eyes snapped open in terrible consciousness and the demon's corpse slid to one side as he raised himself up on his hands and blood flowed from his eyes and his ears and his nose and his mouth. We were all locked in writhing torment.

I passed out.

I awoke sometime later.

Leeritan was standing there, shaking me, holding a snapped twig under my nose. It smelled sharp and savory. I had an almost uncontrollable urge to snatch it out of his hands and chew on it, and he smiled very slightly and stuck one rough edge in my mouth. “You will feel better if you chew this for five minutes.”

I stood up slowly, holding it between my teeth like a cigarette. The room

bucked and rolled in my vision and I had to lean against one of the columns around the center.

Benjamin Frankes was laying on the altar, dead. Again.

When I tried to focus my vision, I thought I saw two stab wounds in the middle of his chest, so I didn't try to focus my vision anymore. I didn't want to know. I just wanted it to be over.

And, it was over. Her Ladyship Maude Bursar-Frankes was found dead of a heart attack in the library of her room. One window had been broken out and it was reported that she must have reeled when she died, causing it to be broken. Her husband, His Lordship, was in official mourning.

Benjamin and Gerald Frankes, twin sons of the late Maude and her widower, were declared missing and presumed dead.

Maximillian Mercer's disappearance was a passing fancy in the newspaper and quickly replaced by talk of other things.

I did some quiet asking around among the street people of Docks Portage. There were a few cultists who'd gone back to that life, just showed back up and kicked anybody new out of their old crates and their old hovels and moved right back into that life. Ordinarity reasserted itself in a hurry but a bottle of cheap hooch here and there got people to talk. Gerald Frankes had faked his death to prove to Maximillian Mercer that he was for real with his apprenticeship. It was also to be his signal to his mother, who had sent him so far undercover, that he was committed.

The way I figure it, his mother hired me to make it look to her husband and anybody else who might notice him gone that she was doing something about it. He kept me interested in order to have someone to witness his great defeat of warlock magic by inventing a new kind of conjuring.

Whatever. It was all crazy. I don't have any truck with that kind of stuff. None for me, thanks. It's just a good way to mess up a pleasant day.

A week after it was all said and done, two checks showed up at the Duck and Cover. One was made out to me, for two hundred dollars. It was drawn on the accounts of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. The other was made out to

Leeritan Vaz, Order of Diana of the Western Expanses.

Leeritan showed up a couple of days later, took the check, shook my hand without a word and walked back out the door.

Me, I had a drink and a cigarette, and when his taxi was gone I looked at the check, looked at Tank, clucked my tongue and went upstairs to sit by the open window and wait for September to get there.

I could do with some cooler weather and some fresh air around the place.