

A FALL IN AUTUMN

by Michael G. Williams

To Josh and to Kat for always being up for adventure.

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Chapter One

I had a glass of air-reactive sake in one hand and a bean pastry I could have used to club an alligator to death in the other when the big lug I'd been tracking for an hour finally made me, right there in the middle of Lower Market Market. Yes, that's its name, it isn't *my* fault the Empire breeds creativity out of the bureaucratic class. Buttercup – the big lug - gave me a look from under the brim of his hat that said in no uncertain terms he would very much be looking forward to my funeral.

I don't know why I named him "Buttercup," but I had and it had stuck. I'd bestowed that moniker on him a couple of days before when the client showed me a likeness of him and told me where to find him on Saturday afternoons. The client wanted him tailed to see how he was passing his time. I figured she was a jilted girlfriend or maybe a wannabe with a little cash to burn throwing detectives down the wishing well: find out where he hangs out, what he does, and *just happen* to be there herself next time.

Buttercup was at least eight hundred kilograms of beef and not all of it the lean stuff but, as they say, it takes all kinds. The client was a Woman Plus, with the iridescent eyes and the peaked, glinting, halfway to talons fingernails to prove it. She was made for detailed work in the dark, but Buttercup was all fisticuffs and heavy lifting. Opposites attract, right? You never know, in my business, just trying to find out, and the funny thing is half the time when it works out – when we answer the client's question, when we reach wrist-deep into the muck and pull out the truth with a stream running off it of something that smells bad – we wish we didn't know anymore.

Knowing – knowing a thing, knowing a person, knowing a secret – can hurt worse than any patch of briars you have to wade through on the way there.

Not a lot of detectives will take a Mannie as a client, but not a lot of Mannies were interested in hiring an Artie so I figured we were even on that score. I'm not picky about my clients, personally, and not just because I'm by nature such a big hearted

egalitarian guy, either, though I like to think I take people as I meet them rather than trying to shove them into the nearest box. Mainly I'm not picky about clients because I can't afford to be. Here I am, born the old fashioned way from people too nice or too dumb – to be honest, a little of both – to know better but I live in the city of Autumn anyway. By that fact alone I was already kind of a freak. I would always look different, sound different and think different from the rest of the people who'd been built for a place like this and no one in either end of the social spectrum would quite know what to do with me.

Sometimes, when I stare into the reflecting pool that is every single bottle of hooch ever made, through the whole history of life on Earth deciding to bottle up a way to get stinko, I know in my heart I like it that way. The city of Autumn is a freak show, through and through: antiquated, idolized, hated, mocked, resented for its wealth and for the disparities of wealth and power evident at even a cursory glance, international, cosmopolitan and suffused with a certain kind of *knowing* the city itself could surely never last forever. The whole place is just waiting some other shoe to drop, a shoe it can't describe, can't name, can't explain, but it knows that shoe is out there all the same and the city hopes to the gods that shoe is not the city itself. So here we all are, every last one of us feeling like the rat with the nicest cage and every last one of us wishing he had it to himself. I figured out a long time ago the biggest freak in the whole show gets two things: spit on, and space. I could handle one if it got me the other, no problem, thank you kindly.

Buttercup's demeanor went from grim to worse and he turned away from the market stall where he had been looking over bales of hay like he might take one home for supper. He started making his way – slowly, at first, but he was picking up steam as he went – towards the Pearl Street exit and was looking to his left so he could turn right out onto the sidewalk which would put him going in the direction of the downtown steerless. It was a smart move: the carriages are too small for a tail to jump on without being in fairly close proximity. If I jumped on with him, he'd know for sure I was a tail. If he wanted to question me in a public place, he'd have his chance. If I didn't jump on, he could lose me at any stop from here to Autumn Center.

I decided to let him think he'd gotten the best of me for now. When I reached Pearl Street I turned left and crossed instead of following him but I let him see me looking back over my shoulder. Might as well feed the myth of being a shaken tail, right? Let him think I was grumbling to myself over his clever escape, let him get a little room to loosen the belt on his confidence so his guard could sag. Once I was across the street I fell in behind a troupe of Sisters of Sincerity and let my own peaked cap give me a little cover. I walked thirty meters right behind them, then forty, then turned at a lamp post and made my way back across. There was a short row of dingy yellow mag cabs lined up near the Lower Market Market and I hopped into one near the back with a rat for a driver.

"Hey, buddy," the guy chattered at me, "Front of the line, right? We got rules!" I ignored him and pointed at the bus up ahead, the one Buttercup was about to board.

"You can make it up to the rest of the guild next time," I said. "I need you to tail that bus and I need it discreet."

Ratface looked at me in the rear view mirror, twisted his whiskered cheeks this way and that in consternation and said, "Forty on top."

I shook my head but I didn't laugh. "Twenty. That's more than the going rate and it's plenty to split with the other guys. Five will still get you plenty of orange rind to stuff in your cheeks."

The guy didn't even bother to negotiate further. I was right, and he knew it, and anyway the other guys ahead of him had started to notice he was picking up a fare out of turn and raising a ruckus. The driver checked his side mirror, twisted the steerer and the mag car shot away from the sidewalk and around the rest of the queue. The cabbie in front actually tried to step into the way, bringing my driver to a sudden stop. I bounced off the smoked glass partition, covered as it was in stick-on advertisements of interest to libertines and last year's chewing gum, crying out in pain, but the rat in front ignored me. He had his window down to yell at his guild brother.

"What, you trying to get run over?" The tone in his voice was that of annoyed family: concern and anger in equal measure and well adjusted to one another through long affiliation.

“Whatchoo doin’ grabbin’ a fare out of sequence? You know the rules, Fay. You know I get first crack, then Scram, then Langley *then* you.” The other rat hitched his pants up in the back like he was getting ready to do some sort of manual labor and by the sound of his voice it was going to be on my driver’s face.

The driver hitched a thumb at me. “I’ll split the fare later,” he said, “This guy’s a religious devotion. Take a walk, bro. You need to cool off.” I could hear the wheel in his head squeaking as he thought while talking nonsense. “Says he always takes the fourth of anything.”

The “bro” looked in the window at me, squinted his big round eyes and then leaned back. “Hey, you didn’t say it was an Artie,” then to me, through the walls of the car, “No offense meant, you know, just what they call the vernacular on the street, you know?” He doffed his big straw hat and said, “Fourth of everything? Learn something new every day. What’s the word? Numeralolology?” He slaughtered the pronunciation, running the syllables together languidly across the top of his palate like they were pushing to get out of his mouth.

I looked at the rat in the front. “Unless I’m mistaken,” I said, “I paid you to drive the car?”

“Easy!” they both said at the same time, but the driver shot forward again, joining the flow of traffic at the tail end of a light and maybe running it just a little bit. Buttercup’s steerless had pulled away from the raised platform but the driver told me it wouldn’t be a problem to catch up.

“That’s the 9,” he said to me. “I know its route like the back of my own paw.”

He probably did, too. After all, learning his way around the city of Autumn was what he’d been designed to do.

The Route 9 steerless autobus went downtown but Buttercup was off it before it got there, jumped the line for the 27 and rode it away on a tangent, headed sidewise for the Down Preserves and a bit of fresh air. He was good at getting away from people, I could tell that: he knew to get in a crowd and then to get out of the crowd so he could

stay clear on who was around for a little while. Unlucky for him, I was better at my job than he was at his. The cabbie wanted to cut a corner here and there, take a shortcut, jump the walls of the maze Buttercup was trying to run, but I wouldn't let him. I needed eyes on that steerless at every stop in case Buttercup did another jump and swap.

He didn't. Twenty five minutes after he'd jumped the platform at Pearl Street, I saw him duck out the back of the steerless right before it pulled away from a stop just past the entrance to the park. That put him walking back this way, able to watch to see if anything was still following him – such as the bright yellow mag cab in which I was sitting. I dropped flat across the back seat and told the rat to keep driving. “Turn down a side street,” I barked, my voice muffled by the coat half thrown over my own head after I crumpled against the slightly sticky upholstery. I tried not to think about what might have been there to make it sticky in the first place, since that was no on my face and the palms of my hands.

I felt the mag cab twist a neat little turn and the shadows of a narrow street fell over us. I counted to five, then to ten, then lifted up in the seat to peek out the back screen. Buttercup was just walking in the entrance to Down Preserves, his horns barely missing the old arched sign over the entrance. It was old, wrought iron, painted black and draped in antioxidant smart moss. Nobody knew who had put it there. Some people believed that very kind of moss – common as dirt – was one of the first of the Protean plants. Seemed like a stretch to me, but then, everything's a stretch in a place like Autumn.

I had Ratface pull over and I threw cash through the slot even as he started up the sputtering patter of hostage negotiations cabbies the world over would sometimes use once they got their fare where they were going. He'd gone out of his way, he'd lost a lot of fares at the Lower Market Market, he might not be able to find his way back – at that I yanked some cash back out of his own hand. “Argue all you like,” I said, “Do your job like you were made to do, sure, but don't insult my intelligence, Mannie.” He didn't like me using that word, and neither did I, but it got his attention. The doors unlocked and I slid out and took off down the sidewalk towards that same wrought iron and moss-

covered entryway.

My hat cleared the sign with a good three feet to spare and I rounded the corner to see a group of people loitering in the small gravel parking area, either just about to go in or just coming out. They looked at me and then looked away, some of them a little sheepish – not literally, mind you; that’s another word I should have felt bad about – though the kids stared at me in earnest and simple curiosity. I winked at one of them. I didn’t blame them for being curious. Arties like me are easy to spot, what with the old scar down the right side of my face, the nose I broke years ago, the ear half-chewed off from that time in Sunrise, the receding hair. I’m not just subtly imperfect the way some artisanal humans are: I’m beaten up, dented and scratched, worn halfway out and showing it. Everything about my face screams non-designed. Even if I’d been a cheap Man Plus I at least wouldn’t have the scars or the bags under my eyes. That stuff is foundational for designed humanoids.

Not me, though. Mom and dad got me the old-fashioned way and I’ve been fending off insults and adulation ever since.