

A Living Nightmare

(summary of a gaming session)

by J.W. Mangrum

At the time, I was running a fairly large party. They were investigating a haunted house (the adventure was *The Ghost of Mistmoor*, FYI), and the evil spirit who was trapped there was able to insinuate himself into the dreams of anyone who fell asleep inside. Fortunately for me, one of the PCs did just that.

This PC (named Kevin) -thought- he was just nodding off when half the party entered the room he was in via a secret door (the other players were exploring and did just that). As the secret door opened, a second secret door opened in an unusual, but not impossible spot (basically, the dream started fairly normal, but rapidly became bizarre).

While most of the party was poking around this new passage, one PC (whose player was not present) was off in another part of the house, keeping guard. The party heard this PC (Simpkin by name) shriek hideously, but by the time they reached him he was quite dead, having been aged more than a century in the blink of an eye. The so-far-simply-erie ghosts had apparently just turned lethal.

Well, Simpkin had a *Murlynd's Spoon*, which he had been quite fond of, and my greedy little PCs weren't about to let a dead man keep his magic. So Toben stole Simpkin's magic spoon. Then they all turned their attention back to the new secret passage.

Eventually, they decided to enter it (it appeared to be a spiraling staircase leading into an undiscovered cellar). Most of the party went in before the secret door suddenly and inexplicably slammed shut, cutting off Toben and Kevin. The PCs on both sides of the door tried to find some way to get it open again, but no dice. Eventually, the PCs in the staircase realized they've have go down into the depths to find a way out.

Meanwhile, Toben and Kevin were not alone. They heard a dry, rasping voice behind them: the brittle form of the 120-year old Simpkin, standing like a scarecrow in the doorway.

"You stole from me..." Simpkin lurched forward with jerking steps, clamping his fingers around Toben's throat in an iron grip, lifting the priest off his feet. "You took my spoon..." With Kevin unable to stop the shambling revenant in any way, the undead Simpkin carried Toben into a nearby room, which contained a large bathtub/small pool filled with murky water (and skeletal corpses which had nearly killed Toben earlier). Simpkin walked right into the pool, carrying his squirming cargo, dropping in like a stone. Neither Simpkin nor Toben rose to the surface again. Kevin was now alone, and I cut to the others...

...the players were a little shaky. After all, I'd just killed two PCs! But without any options, they had no choice but to keep going. On the stairs were Nash (a witch, who had earlier in the evening gained a Dark Powers point for killing a fleeing thief who herself had earlier let Nash go free), Argent (a paladin), Celia (an infected werewolf), and Walker (a ranger whose species enemy was werewolves. He was also an infected werewolf, whose trigger was killing).

They went down and down the stairs, well below the level of any cellars they knew about. Nash, being quite the coward, was in the rear. Unfortunately for her, the supposedly dead thief she'd murdered was creeping along behind them all! No one suspected the thief was there until a razor-sharp blade sliced between Nash's shoulder blades, and her body clattered down the stairs... The thief slipped into a secret door (which closed and locked behind her) before anyone could react! The players were now definitely spooked. As one of them (who always thought I was a killer DM anyway) later told me, they all thought I'd gone on some bizarre killing spree, and I was now actively out to kill the PCs.

The next calamity took place when out of nowhere, Celia started to change. Walker had just been waiting for the opportunity (maybe I should say plausible excuse) to kill Celia, so Argent found himself trying to keep these two lethal killing machines away from each other. He couldn't do it, and Walker slew Celia with a grin on his face.

Argent had a secret crush on Celia, so he really wasn't too happy about this. But, he was a paladin, so he couldn't very well just off this guy in revenge. His problem now was that it was a matter of time before Walker changed.

As each PC died, I'd been picking up the pace. This kept the players of dead PCs from sitting around too long, and increasingly heightened the tension by giving the remaining players less and less time to think. By this point in the dream, I went into full-fledged nightmare mode and stopped calling for die rolls during combat, just making up combats as I went along.

Argent and Walker thought they could see the bottom of the stairs when two things happened: they found a glass wine bottle filled with some mysterious -something-, and Walker started to change. It's a testament to Argent's player that even in these circumstances, he really tried to simply fend Walker off instead of going for a quick (and excuseable) kill.

Walker (now the only guy with a light source) attacked Argent while he was still changing. During the struggle, Walker stepped on the discarded bottle, cracking it. Instantly (well, perhaps not so instantly that he couldn't screech) Walker was sucked into the void trapped into the bottle, a 280-lb man sucked through a hairline fracture. With Walker went the last light.

Argent ran, blindly, in a panic, down the stairs, along a hall he stumbled across. As he ran the air grew warm and damp, the floor grew soft and moist under his feet. After an unknowable amount of time, sourceless light slowly brightened, showing Argent that he was now in a vast chamber apparently formed of raw, living meat. A vaguely humanoid figure rose/grew from the meat floor ahead of him. The meat figure, obviously some extension of the chamber all around him, shook its "head" sadly.

"So close, yet so far," it said through a formless mouth. Instantly, a dozen gangly arms shot from the pulpy floor under Argent's feet, clamping on to his body, and dragged him down, oblivious to his struggles.

I cut back to Kevin, picking up where we left off. Kevin's player now knew he was the last PC left. He didn't have long to think about it. Still standing over the murky pool, he had no time to react. Toben burst from beneath the depthless surface, half his face torn away.

"YOU LET ME DIE!!" Toben clasped on to Kevin's legs, pulling him off balance! Kevin was dragged into the cold, dark waters of the pool, and... woke up screaming. As did my players. No exaggeration, they all jumped out of their seats shrieking. We had to take a short break while they regained their composure.

John W. Mangrum

Juste Desserts

By John M. Baker

(Here's the summary of a session I just ran. It was quite enjoyable, and I'd never realized how much fun Scaena really is. DM's notes appear in parentheses. Spoilers: don't read this if you don't know what Scaena is or who Juste is.)

The Story So Far:

The PCs venture into the Ghastrian forest to save a group of children that got lost at dusk on a VERY stormy night. They find the children in an old, rickety windmill that had been in disuse for as long as anyone can remember. However, they find that Mad Old Tom, a hermit that lives out there, has been transporting human skeletons from the D'Polarno manor to this windmill. They plan to explore further, but they quickly leave when it becomes clear that the windmill will not survive the storm. Sure enough, it collapses, covering the bones and Mad Old Tom. The next day, when the rain stops, the PCs, with Baron D'Marosso, examine the collapsed windmill, only to find a theater. The doors open and a bunch of bewildered individuals, apparently from Port-a-Lucine, emerge.

Dramatis Personae:

Cyan, the blacksmith. His mother was killed ostensibly for crimes against the Marquis.

Viktor Zhukov, the Captain of the Noble Guard of Ghastria, made sure that the execution took place, leaving the corpse to hang in the main square of East Riding. Cyan's heart burns with vengeance against any such military men.

Nahasia D'Polarno, ward of the Marquis. She was found as an infant at the steps of the ruined cathedral, abandoned by her parents. Stezen D'Polarno took her in, despite the fears of the locals. Most of the locals fear that she is a witch, or a changeling, and has enchanted the Marquis into making her the next person in line when the Marquis dies.

Sergeant Argmoor Zhukov, Noble Guard and son of Viktor Zhukov. He was born in Falkovnia, but traveled far in his youth to search with Viktor for his mother but eventually settled in

Ghastria. Viktor explained that Argmoor's mother was sacrificed by the werewolves of Verbrek in a circle of monoliths.

(Argmoor's player could not make it this week, so I kept him in the back.)

The Baron Camar D'Marosso looked with a slightly confused yet ultimately pleased eye at the strangers. He spoke with them in his charming, cavalier tone, showing off his mastery of the language of Dementlieu, words rolling off his tongue as it wetted his lips. He dispatched two guards to fetch the D'Polarno carriages. He assured them that the Marquis would undoubtedly welcome them to his manor, and that they would luckily receive the opportunity to tour his illustrious galleries before he could arrange for them to be sent home.

The carriages arrived amid the thunder of hooves and the splatter of mud, releasing a tone not unlike the storm of last night. The flag of the main carriage flew high with a grey and red checky, the colors of Ghastria.

The strangers were hastily ushered aboard the carriages and off to East Riding; they were happy to be free of the rain-soaked paths that painted their shoes with ruddy stains.

Cyan impatiently waited as the last few people left the theater. Dashing in, he looked around the antechamber with wonder. Where had this theater come from? Why should it appear here, supplanting the decayed windmill of yesterday? He stared at the doors leading into the auditorium of the theater.

The painting was worn, but still clear. The bright colors of the top of the doors, a whitish gold reminiscent of the sun, basked the top figures of the wooden bas-relief as they reached skyward toward some wondrous, but ultimately unattainable goal. As his gaze descended the staircase of ecstatic bodies, he watched as the figures reached less and less toward the sky and more toward each other. Lower still, the figures, lost in the shadow of those above, ceased reaching out altogether, instead clutching themselves to hopefully stave off the shadow. Lower still, the figures, now stained red from their eclipse from holy power above, desperately turned on each other to steal any little hope or spark for themselves. Finally, the bottom depicted these hellish beings, attacking each other in wanton evil, fusing with each other in a brackish pool the color of dead, dried blood, being consumed by an eternal fire, faces twisted just as much in anger as in agony.

He barely noticed the chill entering the main auditorium. His eyes, his body, his ears were transfixed by the vision on stage. Tall, standing stones marked a half circle, with a stone slab, primitive yet imposing, centered on stage. The light rustle of leaves in the trees was seen and heard as the room filled with the smell of a thousand pollens and one fresh kill.

A tall, gaunt figure, lackadaisically dressed, carrying a sheaf of papers and tucking a quill behind his right ear came out on stage. He removed a gray flannel sheet from the stone altar, revealing it to be no more than a rickety wooden table. As the sounds died down, he tossed the sheet backstage, picked up a monolith, and carried it off. Now it was clear; the stage was truly a stage, and the trees and stones merely props. A bit of pine and balsa here, some painted paper there. Cyan walked toward, and in a stupor of wonder, onto the stage. (I'm not kidding. I was thinking that this guy's really bright, walking onto a clearly magical stage, but I didn't stop him.) As he looked at the paper monolith, the stage manager smiled and spoke.

"Oh, hello, I'm Lemot Sedium Juste. Quite pleased to make your acquaintance." He looked over Cyan with an excited eye. "You know, I could use a man like you. Look at that musculature! Have you ever considered a career in acting?"

Cyan responded with a wistful, "I'm Cyan. No, I hadn't." He proceeded to look backstage, desperately trying to find the wild forest of moments ago.

"Please feel free to look around," Juste responded, mildly annoyed with Cyan's inquisitiveness.

"Although, I must admit, I'm not quite ready for auditions yet. Perhaps if you came back later?"

(At this time, I didn't really want the PCs to fall prey to Juste, instead taking some time to meet the strangers beforehand. But, I was somewhat prepared for if they stayed in the theater...)

As Cyan pulled back a curtain backstage, he let out a gasp. An army of people from all walks of life stood back there, staring back at Cyan in silence. After the initial shock wore off, Cyan saw what the people really were: simple props, just like the trees and stones, simple stand-up life-size dolls, flat, made of paper and wood. One was a baker, preparing a new recipe. One was a cobbler, repairing shoes. One was a warrior, staring at his own sword in bewilderment. One was a woman, on her knees, praying to some unknown god.

All this time, Nahasia was out for a walk, discreetly following the Baron's procession up the hill. She had seen Mad Old Tom carrying skeletons out this way... what would the skeletons be doing in the manor's basement?

She had listened to the strangers discuss a play. She had watched as they were escorted to Anthrazit Hall, the D'Polarno manor. She kept herself hidden from the Baron, the man who simultaneously scared the small child and stirred the young woman that battled within her mind for control. And so she found herself at the doors of the theater, its fraying posters calling for a play called "The End of Rapture." She watched as the carriages transported the strangers down the hill toward East Riding. She knew that she would be expected at the manor soon. But still, the open doors to the theater beckoned, the ivory trim and red carpet within foretold an end to her boredom in the lonely court of Stezen D'Polarno. She wandered in.

(Her player also didn't want to see the party separated.)

Cyan listened as Juste scribbled in a book. "Blacksmith... Strong, good looking... burning with revenge against the guards..." and the vengeful blacksmith came back out to ask Juste about his work.

"Oh, it's just my next play. What? You think it's about you? Well, you would be perfect for the part. Why, look at those hands! Realistically singed in the heat of the forge! You know, if you are going to be looking around, I might as well see how good of an actor you are. Why don't you head backstage and bring out a few of those individuals out there, and we'll make you a scene?" As Cyan obeyed the request, he started to consider whom he should bring out. At that moment, his eyes fell on two figures that he had never seen backstage before. One man was tall, blond, and wearing the armor of the Noble Guard. His long mustachioed face burned with lust and anger as he raised a sword high and clutched a knotted rope. Beneath him crouched a woman, with deep brown hair and dark eyes, crying and pleading, as if she were asking for clemency, but knowing she would get none. These two were clear. They were exact replicas of Viktor Zhukov and his mother.

"Well, are you going to be a part of the audition or not? If so, I recommend you get some people out here before we all die of old age!" Juste called backstage. Hastily, Cyan placed a few flats out on the stage. The warrior went in front of the altar, as if he just picked up the sword. The woman in prayer was placed in front of one of the two remaining monoliths. The baker, a tailor, and other tradesmen were arranged around the stage.

Nahasia slipped into the auditorium with barely a shuffle and hid among the seats, the faint smell of decay and ash keeping her from going forward.

"Nice, very nice. Interesting choices. So, tell me, why did you choose this warrior? Why this woman? The warrior makes this place look like a secluded dungeon, but the woman makes it an open temple. And if that's the case, why should this baker stand here? Is he baking bread in a temple? I would guess some festival is occurring, right?" Juste pressed.

Cyan mumbled affirmative replies to Juste, not expecting this level of analysis.

"And how about these two? The soldier is poised to destroy this woman beneath him. Why should this happen? What was her crime?"

Cyan's heart skipped a beat as he looked at the two Juste was referring to.

The paper Viktor seemed to look back at Cyan with a conspiratorial smirk.

Cyan was sure he had distinctly left those two behind.

"Well, then, that sounds like the Invasion of Silluria, scene 24."

Nahasia drew in a breath of surprise as the stage came alight with sounds, smells, the midday sun on a dusty desert village and the movement of people at market. Cyan dodged just in time to avoid being run over by a cart. He stood speechless as the market buzzed with activity around him, the theater nowhere in sight.

Cyan tried to move back into the crowd, asking anyone where he was.

"Silluria," came the answer. He found himself in front of the altar again (no one had realized that it was the rickety table moments before) and watched as people prayed to the twin monoliths. He noticed that they had changed; small, hard leather shackles were placed at ground and head level on the inside side of each monolith, and a sturdy wooden bar was wedged securely between the monoliths some ten feet above the ground.

"Make way for the Grand Marquis! Make way for the Grand Marquis!" Cyan tensed as images of D'Polarno and his lackeys coursed through his mind like malicious elves through a farmer's barn. He watched as people cleared a path around the altar, and listened as a pair of black horses approached, pulling a jet carriage behind them. The denizens surrounding him sunk low to the earth, bowing down in supplication as Cyan remained standing.

The carriage approached and came to a stop, mere inches from Cyan. The hot, wet, sickening vapors being snorted from the horses' nostrils brought a frown to his face. A footman jumped off the carriage, opened the door, and placed a step on the dusty ground. The Grand Marquis stepped out of the carriage, a tall, slender figure, clad in black, form-fitting vestments, with his belt crossed by two brass sickles. Cyan visibly relaxed when the man was clearly not D'Polarno.

However, the soldiers that came up to him, clad in the umbral grey of the Noble Guard of Ghastria, gave him pause.

"You will kneel before the Grand Marquis!" The visor on his helmet up, the soldier was clearly heady with the spirit of command.

Cyan scowled defiantly. "Why should I?" "It is the law to be obeyed, you rat!"

"I prefer to stand." "Then stand and die!" The soldier drew his sword. Cyan merely grinned. The Grand Marquis barked in reply.

"Enough! His crimes shall be punished in turn.

But first there is another to destroy

For crimes against the state. Come forth, Viktor!"

Viktor strolled out of the kneeling crowd, dragging along Cyan's mother, who had a rope pulled taut across her neck. She grabbed the rope, her only way to make sure that she would not be strangled.

"If you will state the charges and show your proof The trial can be quick, the sentence sharp For now the Festival begins anew

With sacrifice demanded by the gods."

"The pris'ner is an evil, wicked witch

Who comes to bring our land into sorrow.

She speaks with enemies and tells our plans

With hope to see you crushed beneath their heel.

We have your proof, engraved by her own hand

In correspondence to our foul foes."

With a flourish, a soldier pulled out a yellowed scrolled piece of parchment, and brandishing it high above his head, he handed it to the Grand Marquis.

The Grand Marquis read the correspondence, growled menacingly, and continued.

"And so have I perused this woman's note

And so pass I the verdict: Guilty."

Cyan staggered into a kneel with the rest of the flock, as her mother screamed her innocence.

Viktor gave the woman that same lusty, predatory look that burned hot scars into Cyan's heart so long ago as he choked and end to the scream and pulled her to the monoliths.

"Interesting situation, don't you think? The woman claims innocence, but the evidence points otherwise. How does this make you feel?" Juste probed.

Cyan whirled to discover that he knelt next to the playwright, the excited look in his eyes being one that should only be reserved for gods.

"So, are you just going to sit here while they kill her? Evidence can be doctored after all. Perhaps she really is innocent, but it's not as if you'll ever know. Does it matter, though? Why should you care for her?"

Cyan grimaced at Juste in fury. He felt bad enough watching his mother die a second time, but he could not stand for this constant taunting from the sickly gentleman next to him. Memories of the first parting with his mother filled his mind, but then he remembered that he was no longer the defenseless little boy of long ago. This time, he could take a stand.

"Stop!" Cyan bellowed, standing and drawing his sword. "You will free her now, or die!"

The Grand Marquis turned like the wind on Cyan.

"Your insolence upsets me, filthy cur!

Let it be known that two must sacrifice

Their lives to please the duet gods. O Guards!

Take you this man to shackles and prepare

The Double Sacrifice! Our time is near

To start the holy war against our foes."

Guards surrounded Cyan, wrested the sword from him and prepared to bind him as his mother was spread-eagled between the monoliths and manacled to the leather straps between them. The rope was thrown up over the bar between the monoliths, and Viktor yanked hard on the rope.

Cyan's mother gasped and choked as the rope constricted her neck and stretched her body, her face little more than that of an agonized toy for cruelty. Cyan crouched, seemingly yielding to the guards, but secretly grabbing the daggers he hid in either boot. The Grand Marquis reached upon his belt, and spread his arms back, hands holding the brass sickles.

Through her haze of death and pain, fear also appeared in the woman, unable to struggle against the stones.

Cyan could wait no longer. He lurched forward, letting the two daggers fly from his hands with precision fueled by hate. The first dagger cleanly severed the rope above his mother's head, and

she gasped, bringing in much needed gulps of air. The second dagger caught the Grand Marquis by surprise, burying itself into his head. The Grand Marquis fell, blood mixing with dust.

Cyan then fought with his captors. He wrestled with them, and managed to knock one of them to the ground and procure his sword. Eyes filled with bloodlust, he moved like fire, striking down each guard that came close.

The soldiers gave little resistance to Cyan, and he proved his prowess time and time again with bloody vengeance, turning the ground beneath him dark with the blood of many.

He looked around, the crowds cowering, paralyzed by fear. He felt that he could shout victory when he looked toward the monoliths. Viktor, having held back during the fight, was now on the other side of the monoliths, the woman stretched between them as a barrier. Viktor grinned like a usurper as he pulled out a dagger, and slowly approached the woman, who was unable to see Viktor behind him, only able to view Cyan ahead.

No. Cyan could not let this happen. He called forth every bit of his reserve, banished his fear, and replaced it with fury. He launched himself forward, springboarding on the altar to sail through the air above the woman, and interposed himself between her and Viktor.

Viktor dropped the dagger and drew his sword. "Fool. What makes you think you could stop me a second time? You were but a little child then... And so little has changed..."

Cyan let his fury gush forth as a geyser and he leapt at Viktor. Viktor jumped back and parried. Viktor responded to Cyan's attacks with calculation, making up in experience what he lacked in Cyan's brute strength and agility.

As the battle waged on stage, Nahasia let out a small gasp of excitement as she watched the Grand Marquis' hand move again, reaching out and grabbing a hold of one of the sickles, still clean and gleaming with the light of the sun.

With a feint, a parry and a fall back, Viktor proved he was far more skilled and disciplined than Cyan would ever be. "Your pursuit for death makes you weak, Cyan. Let me give you the death you seek!" Cyan merely exploded in fury in response, twirling around for a final, full strength blow to Viktor's midsection. Viktor desperately tried to parry, but no simple man could contain the fury of Cyan's memory-fueled blow, slicing the soldier in twain. Cyan let out a bellow of fury and triumph as the two parts of Viktor fell.

Drip. Silence filled the auditorium except for a single, slow, steady Drip.

Cyan had turned his back on his mother during the fight. He did not see the scene behind him, only heard this quiet Drip. His eyes narrowed, refusing to turn around. He imagined the reanimated, unholy body of the Grand Marquis standing, ready to do battle with him again for the life and soul of his mother.

Drip. He relished the chance to dispatch the man a second time with a single flick of his wrist. Drip.

Cyan gathered up his energies, and in a single serpentine strike, he whirled around and threw his sword with all his might at the infernal phantom he knew to be standing behind him...

...and recoiled in horror as he watched his sword fly for his mother, cleanly slicing off her head, unable to defend herself, tied between the monoliths as before. The sword landed next to the still-dead Grand Marquis, the last of his life having been spent tossing the sickle into the forehead of Cyan's mother, now lying on the altar, with a final drop of blood giving its infernal Drip upon the altar.

Cyan stood motionless, speechless. His heart pounded with the horror of what had happened.

Finally, the air was broken by a single, "Bravo!" Juste stood and walked toward Cyan. "That was marvelous! You have such skill! Such passion! And you've got the right personality for tragedy. Why, your singlehanded desire for the death of your enemies at the expense of your friends is sheer genius!"

"No!" Cyan struck, jumping back at Juste's analysis. "That's not it at all!

She was already dead! I can't have killed her! It wasn't me!" he cried, as his mind danced and spun about him like a cruel posse of taunting children.

Argmoor had slipped his way into the auditorium, and stood near Nahasia.

"M'lady, you are requested at Anthrazit Hall. Lunch is waiting."

Juste patted Cyan on his shoulder. "There, there. You'll be fine. Ladies, Gentlemen, thanks for the audition help. Could you please clear the stage?" Sounds filled the air again as everyone stood up and started to clear the stage. The Grand Marquis stood, taking the fake head off his shoulders and picking up Cyan's sword as he sauntered backstage. The various other people gathered up the altar, swept, and removed the monoliths once Viktor, who pulled himself out of the hole in the floor he was standing in, gathered the fake legs and freed Cyan's mother. She pulled her head out of her clothing and hugged Viktor teasingly as everyone on stage, save Cyan and Juste, left backstage.

Cyan stared at disbelief at the scene. The stage had returned, and no one was around. He was no longer in the dusty village of Silluria. He ran backstage into the prop room, trying to find everyone who was there, only to find little more than the paper cutouts and all the paper people. Nahasia stood in shock as the scene reverted back to the empty stage. Juste looked out into the stands. "Oh, hello, Nahasia, Argmoor. I hope you enjoyed that little production."

The shock of Juste knowing her name was still surpassed by the transformation of the stage.

"How... How did you do that? And... you know my name..."

"What did you do to my sword?!!" Cyan called from backstage. "It's not here!"

"Don't worry about the sword, Cyan. It's back there. As for how I did this, it's really quite simple. Just a bit of illusion, and the stage is set for anything."

Nahasia visibly relaxed at the explanation. Illusions were something she had familiarity for, and she understood how convincing they may be.

"As for your name, that's simple enough. I gave it to you."

Nahasia's relief evaporated at the response. "What? You named me?"

"Yes, I created you all."

"No, you didn't."

"Really? Let's see..." Juste ruffled through his papers and pulled one rolled document out. "Cyan, blacksmith by trade. Wishes nothing more than for the death of Viktor Zhukov." Argmoor bristled in defense. "Sergeant Argmoor Zhukov, loyal son to Viktor Zhukov, of high position in the Noble Guard of Ghastria. And, finally, Nahasia D'Polarno, ward of the Marquis Stezen D'Polarno, whose past, for now, must remain a mystery."

"You don't know anything about my past."

"Really? I have it right here. Would you like to see?"

Nahasia looked suspiciously at Juste's position on stage. She grasped the plush of the row seat beside her in security. "Um, no, that's okay."

Juste looked crestfallen. "Pity. I've got the most wondrous plans for you. You're coming upon your sixteenth birthday in a couple days, true? The Marquis plans to let you view his full galleries for the first time. Your passage into womanhood will be celebrated. And, finally, the tension between you and the Baron D'Marosso will be resolved. Isn't that wonderful?"

"No. Uh, yes. Uhm, I'm not sure?"

"Come, now. The stage will be ready for you. You can return to your regular life. I'm sorry, but the last play came off as a bit of a mess, and now I'm just getting all my characters reorganized."

"WHERE THE DEVIL IS MY SWORD?!!!"

Juste rolled his eyes, smudging his forehead with ink on his hands rubbing it.

"Excuse me..."

Nahasia looked over the stage with regret and fear, but turned to Argmoor.

"I'm needed at the Hall? Let's go, then."

The two of them walked out into the antechamber, where the doors to the outside were closed and barred. Something seemed very wrong to Nahasia about the closed doors. "Sergeant, did you close the doors?"

"Yes, m'lady, there was a draft."

"All right, then. Open the doors and take me back to the Hall."

"As you wish," Argmoor replied. He opened the doors. Outside, the scene had changed. The morning slush must have cooled and risen, for the landscape replaced with a heavy, thick bank of fog. The Mists of legend. Argmoor and Nahasia paused, then, without a word between them, closed the doors, leaving them safely inside the theater.

"We shouldn't leave the blacksmith here, should we?"

"Leave me where?"

Nahasia looked to see Cyan standing behind them, with Juste. Cyan seemed oddly calm, but still upset over his empty scabbard. Juste turned a concerned visage to the three, and replied, "That's not the way out. There's nothing out there. You really should all come back on stage where I can put you where you belong. Come along, Cyan, let me take you home." Juste left the antechamber, seemingly unconcerned with where the others stood.

Cyan followed Juste back into the auditorium, and looked at the stage. The stage had turned into Cyan's blacksmith shop in East Riding, complete with his sword leaning against the wall. "See? Your sword's been at home all along.

Nothing to worry about. Now, come on back and we can continue our play."

Nahasia called out, "Blacksmith, don't go up there! That's not your shop!"

Cyan just scowled at Nahasia's orders, climbed the stage steps, and found himself once again in his own shop, back in sleepy, lonely East Riding. He picked up his sword, examined the edge, and stuck it back in his scabbard.

He stepped outside for a moment, but sure enough, the village of East Riding buzzed around him, unchanged as it had always been. He shrugged, and went back to work.

Nahasia turned with despondency to Argmoor. "Sergeant, get him down here now!" Argmoor complied with the request, and went on stage. Nahasia bit her lip as she realized her mistake. Argmoor knocked at the post beside the shop. "Cyan, are you there?" "I'm not talking to the spawn of that villain!" "Listen, Cyan, I resent your sympathies, but I have a direct order from her lady Nahasia D'Polarno. She wishes for you to meet with her." Cyan grumbled. "Very well. But I'm doing it for her, not you, understand?" Cyan gathered his things and left the shop. The two men stood around, puzzled. They were standing in East Riding, with the theater nowhere in sight.

"Where are we supposed to meet her?"

"Um, I left her at the theater, somewhere. She must be back up the hill." "All right, let's go back up there."

Nahasia watched with increasing fear as the two men exited stage left.

Juste applauded. "That's perfect! End scene!"

Nahasia screamed insanely as the theater returned to its old, empty, stage, no one but Juste in sight. She imagined paper cutouts and props, straw men with no more thoughts, people losing all sense of reality and identity. She rushed back to the antechamber, tugged open the doors, and left Juste calling for her as she ran into the dark fog.

Paranoia filled her thoughts as she stepped outside. She was lost, unsure where the path was, and whether it was still there in the wetness. She imagined her way back to East Riding, where the villagers lived, ready to hang her from the gallows and destroy her for being a changeling. She thought of her ghastly home, imagining the Baron trying something that her mind raced to try to comprehend, but her innocence forbade as possible.

These fears she felt, but she felt she could handle those. She ran forward, deeper into the Mists, until she heard something approaching. It sounded old, rickety, and squeaky, an old cart. She saw the cart approach, shadows of Mad Old Tom and his cart full of bones coming closer, closer to her, for her...

Nahasia broke into tears and ran back into the theater. She closed and barred the doors, and broke into a small heap, crying, fear pressing in on all sides.

Juste stood over her, reaching out to caress her chestnut hair. "See? I told you. There's nothing out there. It's all here, all for you. Everything you've waited your whole life for, I've built it up so that the climax of your joy would be so much greater. Don't you see? You belong here. Please, come back. Everyone misses you," he cajoled in a fatherly voice.

Nahasia looked up, still terrified, trying to muster up the last bit of courage in her to speak. "Uh... Excuse me... but... I seem to have forgotten my lines."

Juste stood up straighter and grinned, his mouth spreading across his face like spilled lamp oil.

He pulled out a scrolled piece of vellum and handed it out to Nahasia. "Here you are, my dear."

John M. Baker

Saga of Skullhaven

By J. Zobac

Preface: SkullHaven Founding (or A Use for the Requiem Set)

When I first wrote these stories I was upset about how some of the normally inventive people were damning the Grim Harvest (namely *Requiem*). So I felt it was necessary to attempt to redeem this boxed set to the eyes of the DMs of the Ravenloft Mailing list at least. You see the *Requiem* rules have the potential to be abused in the hands of players, but in the hand of a shrewd DM, they could be a very useful tool for horror.

Think for a second of the Paladin Class: when they see Undead they slay first and ask questions later. Now what if you had a single little town tucked away somewhere where the dead were barely but successfully fighting the downward spiral, and the dead and the living lived in peace? Would not such a town be a true test of that paladin's faith? Honestly how many DMs have had those annoying lawful-stupid beasts reeking havoc in your campaigns? How many times did you want to strip that awesome power from someone who did not truly role-play them right? This type of situation could do that, as we will see in my third story.

Now I do have to mention I did go way non-canon in my campaign but then how many decent DMs don't? But I was able to find a way to use the *Requiem* set and keep the flavor even though the final part of the adventure did bite the big one (the only Rod of Resurrection I have ever let my players have was in that accursed thing). You see folks, TSR does not make Ravenloft for us, they make the source material for us all to make our own lands in the mist. Take that to heart and you will be shocked how much your games will improve: yes Ravenloft is in the Details, not TSR but yours. Think on that, and now... ON WITH THE SHOW!

Chapter 1

Memoirs of Noriban the Blacksmith

" I remember the day of the sundering, the day some of us doomed to live forever in the shadow of death made a break for our freedom from the cruel oppressive hands of the Dustmaker. I am sure you have of the Events of Il Aluk on the Darkest Night bout ten seasons ago, how our sovren lord Azalin was conducting an experiment and This party of strangers cursed the whole

thing by Shining a light for the spirits of darkness to find us, Namely their agent of death we call the Dustmaker. I am rambling again, back to the present a group of us Cursed were able to resist the Dustmaker's control and regained our souls by doing so left Il Aluk by the light of day, We do feel regret for leaving some of the others who could not suffer the pain of the day behind, and struck out to build a new town away from the trade roads for us to live the rest of our cursed existence in peace.

" You know Before the Night of Death I was a blacksmith, the finest in all Il Aluk, I use to be able to export my wares to the farthest reaches of Darkon, heck some times I heard that my work of my works had reached far away Nova Vaasa. For the last ten seasons all I remember is going through the motions, then it happened The Dustmaker chose me for his personal little army, you know the one he sends to spy for him, well he looked into my soul and saw I was a blacksmith so he put me to making armor and weapons for his warriors, of course I have made a suit of armor or two before then even a sword mended many others but My favorite things were items you needed for common day living like nails and horseshoes, heck even wagon wheels. Well for a period of two seasons I made what the Dustmaker wanted without question, until he for some reason got agitated at someone in a far away land, Mt. Baratok or something like that, and sent me there to help his "army", it wasn't til that time I realized something was wrong, I was nothing but a puppet and a slave to the Dustmaker, the farther I got from his influence the more, how can I say this with out sounding strange, Alive I felt. I found that my soul was not lost just dimmed, it was on that day I swore to help others out of Il Aluk. In the last two turns of that ten season time I spent In Il Aluk I searched for others like me other that were still somewhat whole, others with a soul. I personally led them out of Il Aluk taking them to the South and East where we found shelter in a barn of a kind old man.

" In that barn we conversed on what to do with our selves here we were thirteen skeletons, four walking dead men who were about to fall apart, one crusty old sage, a withered priest, and five of the Dustmaker's Ex-elite Knights, and I tell you if I wasn't dead I would be shocked no more like scared to see such a sight. We came up with the Ideal of building a town but first we needed land, The one of the Warriors proposed the Ideal of taking the farm we were on form the old man and his 3 kids. I couldn't stand the thought, but then considered what about buying a portion, we all had skills and could help the old man and his kids with a better life and earn our land for out town. This went well with all but that one warrior, he was against us helping the living in any

form or way, needless to say when he can find where we buried each of his bones and get his self put back together we will let him change his mind.

" It took us a couple seasons but we did return the kindness the old man gave us, and had the land for the town, That my friends if you are reading this was the founding of SkullHaven...."

Chapter 2

The Sage of SkullHaven

The sage closed the book he was reading trying to grasp the meaning of the words he had read. His little house was filled with many books he collected or had payed the living in the town for. "What happened all those years ago?" he mumbled. As images from waking dreams Fluttered though his rotting head, the Images of a Strange fire and shattering glass, of glowing skulls, and a warrior with an Axe. Those images were all he Remembered from the time he woke at the foot of the library in A town of the Dead.

He sat back in his chair and tried to remember all that he could, but it was to no avail his life or should we say unlife began on the Steps of a Library. He knew that he was at one time a learned man maybe a Scholar or a Sage of some sort. He recognized the fact that walking dead all around the town was not the way things were suppose to be, but how were how they were. Skeletons were not suppose to show any interest in their surroundings in fact were suppose to have no minds or will of their own. This fact disturbed him deeply when he saw one sweeping a porch, and three smaller ones playing with a ball as if nothing was wrong. Those were his first memories those and the cryptic images that plagued him when ever he stopped thinking.

As he reflected more he remembered his first action after rising off the ground was entering the library, "Why is this place so familiar?" he thought at the time. Upon entering the library he proceeded to read all the books he could get his hands on. They told him nothing of who he was, only that he was in a city called Il Aluk, in a country ruled by a king who practiced magics of some sort. The referances to this king were vague but all spoke of the king being a just and fair man. He felt familiar with the stories as if some how in the back of his mind he Knew that king personally.

He spent the next few seasons in that library w/o any disturbance until one day some one came in. It was a being that must have once resembled a very muscular man and was nothing more than lose skin on a solid frame of bones. This man asked one question "Does anything seem

wrong?". To which sage replied at that time "Nope not a thing unless you count everyone being Dead, can you tell me what happened?". The man Never did give him an answer, instead babbled something about the sage being in grave danger if he were to stay in Il Aluk, that it would be better if he went with this man and some others the next day out of the town.

The Sage placed his contorted hands together and closed them as he forced his mind to remember more. He remembered the day they left the town, the mob of the dead that followed for three days and then left them alone. They traveled to the south and the east, the only thing the sage could remember of the flight was that something important to him was off to the west somewhere but what he couldn't remember.

The next thing he recalled was the night in the barn how they held a meeting of all who fled, it was there he learned everyones names everyone but his own. When they asked him what his name was before Il Aluk the only thing he could recall was Lynn. They accepted that as his name even though he knew for some reason it was not correct. The group of dead in that barn came up with the crazy Ideal to buy land from the farmer and start a town, funny now that he looked back on it, that was one of the best things that happened in his existence so far.

The group of dead turned to him for advice, their questioned were so easily answered from the supposly useless knowledge he had gathered from the books in the Library of Il Aluk.

"That was a long time ago." he sighed as a faint smile cracked on his lips as he looked back on how proud he was to have the answers, It was on his advice that they sought out other "independent" dead, and living that the thought of sharing a town with the dead was not much of a problem. The town did prosper and after the first two or three gerations of the living finally were laid to rest things calmed down. The sage was always treated with some respect and had even spent time on a panel where the living and dead handled the law.

As those fleeting memories passed he came to the most distrubing one, This one left alot of questions and gave no real answers. It all had to deal with the book that he had just closed. That book was delivered just a week ago by a person that was more shadows and mist than flesh or bone. The book was a history of a secretive group, the cover had only three words and an symbol of some sort. The symbol matched the ring he had wore ever since the day he woke on those steps. The words were "History of the Kargat".

Now that book lay closed on his desk. If only he could make sense of the book but for some reason the meaning of the words escaped him whenever he tried to grasp them. "Maybe I will

remember more tomorrow." he moaned as he returned to his seat staring at the dark with two small pen points of light reflecting back from his mirror on the wall...

Chapter 3

Life Lost, Faith found.

The Trial of the Death Knight Roland AhlaLuen.

In the court of High Magistrate Moorhousen, Order of the Shining Sword.

Darkon, Circa 770

" As you can plainly see your honor, Sir Roland is guilty of Dark dealings and deserves The Death that he should have been Given to him!" Cried Sir Arnold, pointing an accusing finger at the thing sitting On the bench in front of the Jury.

To which the magistrate replied "Sir Arnold, I will not have a lynching within my hall!, hold thy tounge until I have heard Sir Roland plead his side of the story, least I finish the Job the Gods have started and strip you of the only thing you have left, yourtitle." The knight Arnold Took his seat reluctantly, his thoughts being along the lines of Bested again by an Abomination of all that is holy.

" Lets Review the facts already stated before I call the Death Knight Roland to the Floor." The Magistrate calmly pronounced while sifting though a stack of papers.

" One, the Dishonored Knight Roland was banished from our court while he was still living, for crimes of Turning a Blind eye to those in need, and the sin of greed in the name of personal wealth. Two, the dishonored Knight Roland then Embarked on a quest to Il Aluk that was given to him by the gods in front of this very court about 21 years ago. The nature of this quest was unknown to the court at the time being that the only one to hear what the gods proclaim was Sir Roland whilst all who were in attendance did see the Holy lights of our sovren gods. Three, Sir Roland disappeared the day that the city of Il Aluk was Destroyed, and our King disappeared from the face of the earth. Four, this death knight was found 5 years ago in a town called Skullhaven, a town where the Living Dead are treated as equals to the living and where there is harmony between the living and undead. Five, Sir Arnold and Group of 4 other Knights did so attack said town after their first encounter with a Skeleton Holding a Living Human babe. Six, the Death Knight Roland did Protect the Skeleton and Babe as any Knight in this court would protect a living Mother and child. Seven, the Death knight Roland did disarm and bind, with out

harm, the five Erent Knights with rope and did travel with them to this very court. Eight, the Knights were found to have had the powers granted by the Gods striped from them. Now the knight Arnold Prolcomes that he is been the victim of some dark power that the Death Knight Roland doth have, and accuses the Death Knight of such. Knowing the plans of our Lords is not always easy to comprehend, and they have been know to do strange yet amazing miricals it is up to this court to find the Death Knight Innocent or Guilty of such Dark dealings.

" Sir Roland will you please take the floor and explain to us the reasons for your actions since Il Aluk."

The Death Knight stood with the grace of a true knight and strode forward to the center of the floor. He knelt and payed honor to the magistrate and the jury, not to mention Sir Arnold, and upon regaining his stance started to recite his tale with a voice that sounded from beyond the grave.

" As you wish your honor." Roland stated. "The gods had sent me on a quest to Il Aluk to confront death, at the time I thought that I was just going there to face a challange where I would most likely die. If I had known at the time what would happen to me I might would have defied the gods and ran Like a coward, but I went to Il Aluk to regain my faith in the gods and theirs in me." The death knight stared blankly at the holy symbol around the Magistrate's neck for a second or two and continued.

" The gods orders were to go to the prison called the grim Fastness in the center of the town, to face my fate. As I approached this building I watch the walls crumble, and this Gigantic wave of unholy Green fire spew from the location the building had stood. I stood my ground and yelled a prayer as the wave struck me full force. The wave blew me across the city and had melted the front of my armor to my flesh.

" I awoke sometime later on a pile of bodies in a grave yard. I awoke to a horror that I would never wish another living soul to see. I saw a dead man digging his own grave and trying to bury his self, as I turned my head I saw more dead trying to bury others who did not want to stay dead. I saw a funeral pyre that the dead were throwing others screaming and wailing into. I can still hear those screams." The death knight paused and some say they could see tears streaming down his face. After a sigh he continued "The last thing I saw before leaving the graveyard was a dead woman despratly digging at her husband's grave in hopes that he might have come back to life.

" I walked the streets of the ruined city and saw not just the people in the graveyard were dead but the commoners in the streets also, they were going through the motions of shopping but not paying mind to what they bought or how much they paid. Children well I can't really say children, little skeletons were playing ball in the street. As I walked I noticed the sun was rising over the horizon and as dawn came I saw some of the dead staring at the rising sun in hopes that this was all a nightmare that would be over with the rising of the sun. Some of them perished in that holy light, while others went into fits of rage. It was then I did look at myself and saw that the flesh had been burnt from my bones, I did the only thing I could do I fell to my knees and prayed. The Gods did answer, but not in a holy light, not in visions, but in the voice of a dead child who was tugging on my arm asking 'Can you help me find my mommy?'. It was then I realized I still had my soul, It was then that I understood why the gods allowed me to become undead. While I help that child find its mother I realized the error of my ways, as Knights we always kill the undead and ask questions later never knowing if that skeleton or zombie has a reason to in the world of the living." The death knight's voice quivered for a little bit the he resumed.

" I spent the next few year helping the undead, unlike I refused to help the living while I was alive, Until one day a Zombie of sorts Approached me and asked if I wanted to leave the town, I went with him and a band of undead the next day. We traveled to place where we were to eventually build the town of SkullHaven a town of peace, the day the town ideal began we were all in a barn and were talking about what to do. You see the living fear the undead for the most part, because of the destruction the undead bring, what they don't understand is the Undead fear the living for the same reason.

" We did turn on one of our fellow refugees when we found him wanting to slay all living he came across. I would not stand for it. Neither would the other three warriors that were with us. We did subdue him eventually but he was still alive after his head was severed from his body. The best plan we could come up with was to separate his body parts and bury them in many locations as to protect everyone, for we knew he would turn on us as soon as he had finished with the living.

" The next few years we worked for the man that owned the land we wanted so we would have it fair with out stealing it or any bloodshed, then we built the town." The death knight's eyes lit with a bright blue flame as he spoke his next sentence. "I swore that I would do every thing in

my power to protect the peace in that town, and had done so for a while. Then came the day Sir Arnold and his band of Knights wandered into the town, they were more corrupt than any fallen knight I have seen they were carousing and whoring, drinking and fighting anyone and anything they could. When they saw the first undead they attacked with no mercy, if I would not have been watching from the shadows I would not have been able to protect the babe that the skeleton held for the babe's mother while she was doing her daily shopping. Yes I did use a form of magic on them I Ordered them to Halt they froze long enough for me to disarm them and bind their arms, when they recovered from the Command four of them realized what they had done and asked that they be returned here, Sir Arnold didn't follow their example he struggled and cursed, and tried to rally the others against me. Needless to say I did crown him once and that made the hike back here a lot easier. That your honor is my story do as you see fit." With that the death knight bowed and returned to his seat.

The magistrate looked at the death Knight and at Sir Arnold and stated. "Never have I seen the fires of truth around an Undead nor have I ever seen a knight sink to the level of a thug, Sir Roland I find you Guilty... Guilty of being a true knight, of upholding the faith of our Gods in the face of utter doom, and so I punish you with the task of Protecting this town of SkullHaven until the gods find another use for your service. And Sir Arnold I strip you of the Titles you hold so dear, I accuse you of faulsly Accusing a fellow Knight, of Dishonoring the Knights Of the Shining blade, I grant you the title of Death Knight, And order you to be bound in black armor that is made not to be taken off, you shall be exiled from this court and word will be passed if you are ever seen to be slain on sight. That I think is a fitting punishment." With that the magistrate left the room.

Sir Arnold in a fit of rage yelled "Mark my words Death Knight I will be avenged, I will slay you!" to which Sir Roland replied "Drop dead!" and strode out of the room stepping over the dead body of Sir Arnold.

Chapter 4

Regrets

" Not all the undead who left Il Aluk on the day of the exodus of the Free want a new life, Now my friends I will tale you a sad tale of one that was lost in the past. You see not all dead can tell time, at least that is what I have heard." The bard known as William stated.

" Not to long ago there was a man who went searching for his father who had disappeared when the man was a little boy." The bard sat back and got a glassy stare in his eyes as if he were telling this story from the heart. "That man's name was Billy, his fathers name was Rohbert, that and the fact that he was a merchant that went to Il Aluk to peddle his wares was all Billy knew. Now Billy was just shy of five years older than his sister, a head strong girl of twenty seasons who also wanted to find her father. So they set out to Il Aluk to find him, neither knowing the fate of that dreadful town. On the way they pasted though this small hamlet of Skullhaven and did spend a Night in the inn. The town had a slight strange thing about it to them anyways for the dead walked the streets of the town and the living well they didn't care, in fact to the living the skeleton next door was just a fellow citizen." The bard stopped and shook his head, "I am getting away from the story ain't I?" he asked.

" Well back to it, Billy and his sister spent the Night in the Inn of Our lustrous town of Skullhaven, In fact if I remember right it was at this very table they sat to have their meal. The next day they went onward towards Il Aluk, It took them a couple of weeks before they got near the town, when they stopped, for not five feet from where they were they saw the most gruesome of specters they have ever seen, this thing was nothing but Two skeletal hands, and a floating skull with flaming Eyes connected together by a dark smoke. Now Billy's Sister she was a fiesty one she approached this Geist and started to ask for information. Billy saw what was coming but he was too late for once she was with in reach of the specter, with out a word it touched her, turning her into a pile of dust. At least Billy had the sense to run away. You know they saw he looked over his left shoulder as he ran only to see the specter not coming any closer." The bard lifted his drink which he looked at for a few seconds, deciding that taking off the cloth he had over his mouth, which he claimed was to hide the sores on his lips from kissing the wrong girl at the right time, would be too much of a hassle, set the cup back down.

He went on with his story "Billy ran for days and nights forgetting which way he was going, he ran so hard that the wind could not catch him. I remember the day he ran into the Inn all panicked and in tears, for not only did he not find his father but he had watched his sister die an unspeakable death, at the hands of a shade. Heck old Rufus the bartender knew right away to hand the boy some ale, and to sit him down at a table. While Rufus when to the back to fix the boy something to eat, a zombie, you know the dead men of this down that are almost falling apart but keep going until they have their brains smashed out, approached the table the boy was

at and asked him for two things the first was that this zombie had some items he wanted his family to have, a necklace for his wife, a wooden sword for his five year old boy, and a doll for his newborn daughter. Common enough items and the town was what a weeks walk from Skullhaven, so billy agreed to it seeing as the dead man could not get to that town himself for obvious reasons. The second was stranger my friends," the bard intoned.

With a strange look of sadness in his deep blue eyes, the only part of his face that could be seen the bard continued: "The Second was that the Zombie wanted to die and wanted some one to do him in for he could not do it himself, Billy who at that time was starting to come out of the shock of his sister's death agreed to do what the zombie asked.

" That night under the light of the full moon Billy met the zombie in a field outside of town.

Where he proceeded to take out all his anger and bitterness out on that poor zombie that wanted to die." The bard adjusted his position leaning forward as to get a better look at the inn's patrons.

"The zombie had left instructions to travel to a town that was to the east and got to the pub there and ask where he could find Bob's wife, Billy did just that, and was given directions to a house in the town. When he found the house there was a black wreath on the door, but that was not what shocked Billy what shocked him was that it was the house where his mother lived. He hastily flung open the door fearing the worst, which is what he saw his own mother laying in a coffin in the center of the room surrounded by friends of the family.

" It was then he realized who that zombie was, none other than his own father, and that his sister died for nothing. He fled the house never to be seen again, and that my friends is why you don't kill the dead even when they ask for it might be something you regret." With those final words William got up and left the inn, leaving his cup of ale completely full.

When the bard William got home he took off the veil and mask that were covering his face revealing a face with the skin drawn so taut that you could see the skull. "You still regret your decisions my friend?" a voice that sounded from beyond the grave intoned. To which William replied: "You know Roland, if I had not tried to return to Il Aluk to avenge my family I probably would be able to join them." The Death Knight shook his head and stated "Well, Billy we all have regrets, good night my friend" and the death knight walked out of the house.

Chapter 5

Do the Dead Dream?

The Dark man looked up from his easel, at a peculiar sight, in all of his years of painting the hopes and dreams of the images of people he did not know, never had he ever seen one that was not alive. This intrigued him so he grabbed his paints so to capture the disturbing images and thoughts into his newest masterpiece...

" It was in the grasp of my hands, freedom, freedom from this dread land. I did not count on those bundling idiots to actually reverse all of the work I had done, I should have killed them when I had a chance, but no I decided to use them against the one I could not kill.

" That was my greatest mistake. The fools invaded my new lair apparently sent by him to do me in, he should of learned long ago that anything he can do I can do better. It was so easy convinced them that he was the monster. If only I had paid attention to the Prophecy's of that back water gypsy a little better I would have realized, that upon his apparent Death that the Prophecy would totally unravel I wouldn't have sent them to him in.

" Now I am stuck in this land again, is this my curse never to see home again, are all my plans for naught, in my doomed existence is all I'm allowed to learn that I can not escape. I must escape. I try to learn the fleating incantations, but they are always beyond my grasp. Damn him, and damn this cursed land.

" The Soul, that is the key, for it is the one thing lack. If only I can harvest the knowledge of souls, then maybe I might learn enough to escape. Yes, that is when I need to do..."

Lynn sensed the light of the sun on his face "How can this be, the sun just went down" Lynn nervously looked down at the book, he swore he was reading not a few moments before. "I know I'm supposed to remember something, but I can't, I know it has to do with this book, this ungodly tome." Lynn picked up the book and walked to the door, thinking to himself : "I must find one of these people, I can question them later.

The man drew back from his painting, *My Best Yet*, as he admired the profile of a dead king...

Khelben H. Vasq the Lich

aka Joseph Zobac

The Adventure of the Twice-Dead Man

By Daniel Brough

Chapter 1

Perhaps one of the strangest cases ever laid before Hector Vail was the mysterious death of Geoffrey Addington. Certainly it was one of the most horrifying.

It was late on a Tuesday evening that the affair got its start. Vail had been busily engaged in another of his cases for several days, a curious affair involving a missing figurine, and had spent the balance of the evening performing tests in his laboratory on a shard of pottery which he had discovered during his investigation.

While I am always eager to help Vail in his work, in matters of chemical analysis I fear I am useless. Consequently I had spent the evening in some boredom, watching him rush about performing his experiments.

Experience has taught me that when Vail is absorbed in his work he is best left alone. He is uncommunicative and irritable at such times, and can be ill-tempered if disturbed. In light of this, I decided to go to bed early. After offering a polite 'good evening' (to which he did not reply), I retired to my room.

I was jolted awake a few hours later by the sharp clatter of someone banging on the heavy oaken door which guards our flat.

"For God's sake, open up!" cried a young man's voice, quavering with horror. "Open up, I say! I must see Mr. Vail at once!"

I shook the sleep from my eyes and rushed to the window, looking down.

I could not see much more of the fellow than the top of his hat, but the brougham he had arrived in waited in the street, the two horses prancing in place, huffing and snorting. Even by the dim light of the streetlamp I could plainly see that it was well appointed and of excellent quality, not at all like the usual Mordentshire cab.

The man resumed his pounding. "Hallo!" he cried. "For God's sake, open up!"

Hastily I threw on a robe and started for the sitting room. I was not surprised to find the lamps still lit. Vail has been known to work the night through when confronted with a challenging puzzle, forfeiting sleep altogether.

It was not at his lab that I found him, though, but at the window. He stood gazing down at the street, hands clasped behind his back.

"Well, Pendleton," he said, not turning, "it appears we have a late caller."

"But who the devil can it be at this hour?" I asked, somewhat agitated.

According to the clock above the mantle it was seventeen minutes past one, and I was irritated at this unwanted intrusion on our privacy.

"I know nothing of him whatever," said Vail, "aside from the obvious facts that he is a young country gentleman who is somewhat wealthy, carries a cane, walks with a limp, and has just come in some haste from a family estate some miles east of the city - probably within the Sedgewick or Blackhurst district, I should imagine."

I moved to the window, surprised that Vail had been able to surmise so much merely from the man's appearance, especially in the uncertain light of the streetlamp. I was astonished to discover that the caller was entirely invisible from this angle.

"You were able to tell all that from the man's carriage?" I asked.

"Hmmm." Vail nodded distractedly. "That and the use of my hearing."

The knocking abruptly subsided, to be replaced by the faint murmur of voices in the hall below.

"Ah, Miss Sherington has answered the door," said Vail. "I expect she'll have a few unkind words for him before she brings him up."

"And well-deserved, too," I added angrily. "Calling at such an hour, and in such a manner!"

Vail went to his armchair. "We shall see. I have a feeling that the intrusion may well be warranted. In any case, it will make a welcome distraction." He gestured towards his lab with disgust. "I've run into a wall with that Clayton-Adderman business. That damnable pottery shard has put my former theories to rest, and left me confounded. Perhaps by focusing my attention on another problem I may gain a fresh perspective when I return to it."

He shook his head, musing. "After several weeks of monotony during which I have had no cases at all, it now appears that I am swamped in them." He gave a half smile. "Ah well, Pendleton. Feast or famine, eh?"

I returned my gaze to the carriage below. I am familiar with my friend's methods, and usually I can trace his conclusions.

The brougham was well-appointed, indicating that its master must be somewhat wealthy. The horses were well-lathered and panting, evidence of a rushed journey. But how Vail had

determined the man had come from either Sedgewick or Blackhurst was a mystery to me, unless it had something to do with the mud spattered on the wheels and sides of the vehicle. Vail is an expert on soils of all kinds, but it seemed impossible that he could have identified this mud so precisely from this distance. Still, I reflected that the mud was at least proof that the brougham had come from outside Mordentshire, as the city's streets are cobbled.

"But Vail," I said, mystefied, "how on earth can you know that he has a limp?"

"He has a cane, hasn't he? The one implies the other."

"But how do you know he has a cane?"

Vail laughed. "You don't suppose he was banging that forcefully on our stout door with his bare knuckles, do you? He would never have raised such a clatter."

"But why should that mean he has a limp?" I persisted doggedly. "I have a cane, and so have you, and neither of us has a limp. It could be merely a matter of style."

Vail shook his head. "Pendleton, you surprise me. The man has obviously come in haste, on a matter of urgency. A stylish gentleman may indeed keep a cane, but he is hardly likely to snatch it up when racing out in the middle of the night on some emergency. No, the cane's purpose must be practical rather than ornamental." His eyes flickered to the door and he came to his feet. "Ah, but here is the gentleman now."

Miss Sherington stood there, scowling. "A man to see you, Mr. Vail," she said coldly. "He did not give his name."

Vail nodded. "Yes, yes. Very good of you to show him up, Miss Sherington. I appreciate your patience with the late hour."

"I hope in future, Mr. Vail," she said frostily, "that you will refrain from entertaining guests at such hours."

But our visitor had already pushed past her. He was a tall man, with a ruddy complexion and fair hair. His right leg was slightly twisted, and he leaned heavily upon a cane. He fixed his intense blue eyes on me.

"Mr. Vail?" he asked.

"Certainly not," I said, annoyed.

"I am Hector Vail," said my friend. "My companion is Colonel Oliver Pendleton."

"Yes," said the visitor, "yes, of course. I should have known you by your description, Colonel. I have followed your remarkable accounts for some time. I apologize for disturbing you, but I have come on a matter of grave urgency."

"It is no matter," Vail assured him. "Please take a seat, Mr. Addington, and tell us all."

The man gave a start. "You know me, sir?" he asked. "I was not aware we had met."

"We have not," said Vail sitting.

"But how do you know my name?"

"It is inscribed on your cane," said Vail, gesturing. "'B. Addington' The 'B' stands for Brandon?"

The man shook his head. "Beverly."

"Ah!" said Vail. "But have a seat, Mr. Addington, and tell us how we may be of assistance."

The man shook his head. "There is no time, sir. My father has been murdered this very night, and I have come to beg your help."

Vail shot to his feet. "This is serious news indeed! You are right, we must go at once." He looked to me. "You will be good enough to come, Pendleton? I realize the hour is late—"

"Of course," I assured him. "I am wide awake and would like nothing better."

"Excellent. There is no time to lose. Mr. Addington may tell us the particulars once we are underway. If we are lucky, we may even arrive before the local authorities have a chance to trample everything."

Chapter 2

I threw on some clothing, and in minutes we were in Addington's carriage, darting through the deserted streets. Vail and I sat across from him as he related the facts of the case.

"Our manor house is quite large," he began, "and also quite old. My father's room is located on the second floor, and my own chamber is just down the hall and opposite. We are the only ones who stay in the main part of the house, the servant's quarters being in the west wing. I tell you this in passing, as it may prove to have some bearing."

Vail nodded.

Addington paused. "Perhaps I should begin by telling you a little of my father, Lord Geoffrey Addington."

"He made his fortune in tobacco, I believe?"

Addington nodded, a little taken back. "I had no idea you were aware of our family, Mr. Vail."

"I assure you I am not. Forgive me for interrupting; I was merely giving voice to my thoughts."

Addington was bewildered. "Then how could you-"

Vail waved it away. "To the trained eye, the signs are there to see.

Your boots, for example, are indicative. But let us not be side-tracked by trivialities. Please continue."

"Well," said Addington, resuming, "it is just as you say. My family did indeed make its fortune in tobacco. Father inherited the estate and the title in his forty-third year. He was always a capable man, respected by those who knew him, and the estate prospered under his guidance.

"On Friday last, an unsigned letter for him arrived by post. I thought nothing of it, but when he opened it he gasped in startlement and his face whitened in shock. I was alarmed, naturally, for I have never seen him so shaken, and I asked what was wrong.

"Nothing," he said, drawing away from me. 'Some damn practical joke.'

"But when I asked to see the letter, he crumpled it and thrust it into his coat pocket. 'I said it was nothing,' he snapped at me, 'now leave me be.'

"Though he would say nothing more on the subject, over the following days my fears continued to grow. He became sullen and irritable, and took to stalking about the house at odd hours, checking to see that all the windows and doors were locked, and always armed with a small pistol.

"At last, I decided that I must see that letter. I searched his room, but found nothing, and I was on the verge of giving up when my eyes fell upon his coat, which was thrown over the back of his chair. It struck me that the letter might still be in the pocket where he had thrust it two days before."

"And was it?" I asked.

Addington nodded. "It was, though not crumpled but rather folded neatly, showing that he had removed it and re-read it in private, perhaps several times."

Vail leaned forward. "Have you the letter?"

The young man nodded somberly. A moment later he produced a scrap of paper and handed it to Vail.

"I don't know what I expected to find," said Addington as Vail scanned it. "A threat of blackmail or violence, perhaps. But I never expected anything so bizarre as that."

"Interesting," said Vail. "Most interesting indeed." He handed it to me. "What do you make of it, Pendleton?"

I took the paper and looked it over.

Seldom have the winsom days departed so darkly. Three the hours wich have been counted, as you see it. Sanguine order now rains supreme in the often ridicilous affairs of men. Therefore your trust should be put in those sublime unanswered questions. And then go boldly but do not falter when we shall meet at the mother of all hollyness. Hated silence hated darkness the very pristeen signs of peace and not betrayal.

"Why, it is a stream of nonsense!"

Vail shook his head. "On the contrary, it is of compelling importance."

Addington frowned. "Then you are able to make something of it, Mr.

Vail?" he asked. "I confess that it makes no sense to me, though it has a sinister ring."

"It is a message, and a very clear one," said Vail, "though in code.

Try reading it backwards, Pendleton, starting with 'betrayal' and omitting the following three words each time."

"'Betrayal... of... the... hated mother... shall... not go...

unanswered'," I read haltingly. "'Put... your... affairs... in order...

You have... three days... seldom.'" I finished lamely, uncertain how the last word squared with the rest.

"Not seldom, Colonel," corrected Vail. "Seldom. You misstakenly assume it is misspelled."

"Seldom?" I echoed. "But what can it mean?"

"Obviously it is a signature. But there is more to the letter than its hidden message. Does nothing else strike you?"

I looked it over again. "Aside from the errors in spelling, I see nothing."

"Ah, but you see everything, Pendleton. As you say, it is filled with errors, and there are two places where the word has been crossed out and started again - here, at 'sanguine', and again at 'betrayal'. The handwriting is rough and barely legible. The writer is clearly not a man of letters. And yet it is filled with words like 'wisome', 'sanguine', 'sublime', 'falter', and 'pristine'."

"It was dictated!" I said, understanding.

Vail nodded. "Precisely. So we see that we are dealing in a conspiracy; some secret society to which Lord Addington must once have belonged, for he was able to read the code."

"But this is terrible!" said Addington in quiet grief. "I had determined to bring the letter to you tomorrow, Mr. Vail. Had I brought it today, the tragedy might have been prevented!"

"Calm yourself," said Vail in tones of sympathy. "You did not realize the seriousness of the letter. But we have not yet heard how your father died."

Addington composed himself. "Forgive me. It has been an evening of shocks and I am afraid the strain is beginning to tell.

"I keep strange hours, Mr. Vail. I have done so since a fall from a horse left me with this weak leg. The injury restricts my movements somewhat, but I am an active man and often find myself with nervous energy at odd hours.

"This evening I was up late, reading in the library. I had thought I was the only person awake in the house, but at a quarter to twelve-

"One moment," interjected Vail. "Where does the library lay, in relation to the rest of the house?"

"On the first floor, just at the foot of the main stairwell and to the right, immediately below my father's room."

"And you are certain of the time?"

"Yes," replied Addington. "I remember glancing at the clock when father stalked in, carrying his pistol. I was surprised to find him still awake.

"His manner was distracted, and I do not believe he realized I was present until I spoke to him. When I did, he whirled on me, raising his weapon!"

Addington gave us both a sober look. "My father has never been a violent man, Mr. Vail, but I believe he would have fired on me, had I not cried out in alarm. As it was, he was furious at my presence. He demanded to know for 'what fool reason' I was 'lurking about in shadows'.

"Incensed, I told him that I had seen the mysterious letter and wanted an explanation. An argument erupted between us. He was furious that I had invaded his privacy, and I was angered by his bizarre behavior. 'I need no wetnurse, boy,' he snapped at me towards the end, 'and I have no time for your foolishness. Gods above, the very sword hangs over my head!'

"So saying, he stormed out. It was the last time I saw him alive."

Addington lapsed into silence, momentarily overcome with grief.

"He was dressed for bed?" Vail asked gently.

"Oh yes," said Addington, surprised by the question. "That is, slippers and robe."

"Indeed," murmured Vail. "Please, continue."

Addington took a moment to compose himself. "He was... he was gone for no more than five minutes when there came a jarring thump from overhead, as if a heavy chair had been violently overturned in the room above."

"You were still in the library?"

"Yes. I was... angry after he left, and though I tried to return to my reading, I was still fuming."

Vail nodded. "Go on."

"The thump was accompanied by an unnerving cry of horror. I sprang instantly to my feet and raced to the stairwell, for it was my father's voice!

"I scrambled up the stairs and rushed to his door, calling out to him as I came. From inside the room came the sounds of a terrible struggle, as if he were locked in mortal combat.

"The Hand!" he cried. 'My God! The Withered Hand!' And then there was a choking sound, as if he had been seized by the throat."

"You are certain of the words?" asked Vail.

Addington nodded. "They were spoken clearly, though I do not know their meaning. The sounds of struggle continued, now coupled with the terrible gasping of a man fighting for breath. There was a crash as the lamp was overturned, and a muffled sound like that of a body falling to the floor.

"I seized the doorhandle, but found it locked. I wrestled with it impotently, calling out to my father, when suddenly it shifted in my hands and I realized it had been grasped from the other side. It trembled for a moment, then went still. The sounds of struggle subsided. Fearing the worst, I turned for the stairs and met Hoskins coming up."

"Hoskins?" asked Vail.

"Our manservant. He told me he had been wakened by the furious ringing of father's bell-pull. 'Hoskins!' I cried, 'have you a key to father's room?' He nodded, and together we hastened to the door.

"We were both horrified by what we found once the door was opened.

There on the floor lay my father, tongue protruding grotesquely and eyes staring sightlessly. His face was contorted into a mask of fear that was terrible to behold, and there were purplish bruises at his throat.

"The room was a mess; the papers on his desk had been scattered on the floor and the lamp overturned, but of the attacker there was no sign.

My first thought was that he had fled through the window, but it was latched shut from the inside.

"But if he had not fled by the window, then where could he be? The room was empty and there were no other exits.

"I found it unfathomable, and struck with grief and horror. I did not know what I should do. I sent Brandon, our houseboy, to fetch the local constabulary, but I had little confidence in their ability to throw any light on the matter.

"Then I recalled you, Mr. Vail. I have followed with interest the remarkable exploits your friend Col. Pendleton has penned, and had planned, as I said before, to bring the letter to you. I realized the only course was to fetch you immediately. So I had Jonathan, the driver, ready the carriage, and flew to Mordentshire. You know the rest."

Vail leaned back, a troubled look on his face. "I fear we tread in deep waters." He lifted the letter. "May I keep this?"

Addington nodded. "If you wish. But tell me, Mr. Vail - can you make anything of this awful business?"

"It is very interesting," said Vail. "But I fear it is too soon to offer any theories. I shall want to examine your father's room first.

But I see we have arrived."

So absorbed had I been in Addington's story that I had hardly noticed the journey. Now I peered out and caught my first look at the manor and surrounding area. Tendrils of mist lay scattered about the grounds, making everything seem indistinct. The house was large and blocky; a square building constructed of aging stone. The windows were darkened, lending it a desolate air.

"Ah!" said Vail in disappointment as we pulled up. "It appears the local authorities have already arrived."

There was another carriage in front of the house, the sort of police wagon one is likely to encounter in the country, and a young-looking constable was stationed at the front door.

We were met on the cobbled path by a trio of men leaving the house.

The first was a uniformed constable, a young man much like the one at the door. Beside him stood a portly older man, short of stature, and also in uniform. The third man was already known to us.

"Ah, it is Inspector Lambert," said Vail as we approached. "The man is not altogether a fool; perhaps not all is lost."

"Mr. Vail!" cried Lambert, catching sight of us, "and Col. Pendleton too! Well, I'm surprised to find you here, and yet I shouldn't be. A queer business, to be sure."

The older constable ignored us and addressed our companion. "You are Beverly Addington?" He had a nasal voice which grated upon the ears.

"Yes?"

The portly man gestured, and the two younger policemen stepped forward, taking hold of Addington by the arms.

"What is the meaning of this?" cried Addington, too surprised to struggle.

"You are under arrest for the murder of your father, Lord Geoffrey Addington," said the older man.

"But this is absurd!"

"You are certain," asked Vail mildly, "that you aren't being premature, Detective?"

The stout little man looked down his nose at us. "And who might you be, sir, to tell me my business?"

"I am Hector Vail," said my friend politely, "and this is my associate, Col. Pendleton."

"Mr. Vail has helped us over in Mordentshire in a great many cases," put in Inspector Lambert. The little man sniffed. "Ah yes," he sneered, "the fellow you're always blathering about, Lambert. The 'amateur of crime'. Always sticking your nose where it isn't wanted and getting underfoot."

Vail gave a bow. "I see my reputation precedes me."

"This is Detective Claughton," said Lambert apologetically, "head of the local constabulary."

"What, sir, have you to do with this gruesome affair?" demanded the detective sharply, ignoring Lambert's introduction.

Vail was unruffled. "Mr. Addington came to me desiring help in solving his father's murder. I am here on his behalf."

"Indeed? Then you arrive too late, for I have already solved the crime. They may be foolish enough in the city to allow your interference, but I assure you that here in the province of Sedgewick we are astute enough to handle our own crimes." He motioned to the two men who held Addington. "Take him away."

Addington struggled against their grip. "Mr. Vail, I implore you! I am an innocent man!"

"I do not yet know that you are innocent," said Vail, "but if you are, rest assured I will do all in my power to free you."

Addington relaxed his struggles and allowed himself to be put into the police-wagon. "Very well, sir. I leave the matter in your capable hands."

The detective snorted derisively. "I cannot blame you for believing the young man, Mr. Vail, seeing as you are an amateur. But a real detective relies upon facts to steer his course, and does not allow fondness for the criminal to blind him."

Vail smiled politely. "I appreciate the advice, Detective. We have heard of your exacting methods even in Mordentshire, and I have no doubt that you have solved the crime in short order."

Claughton was startled by Vail's praise. For a moment he peered suspiciously at us as if fearing a trap. Then he swelled with pride.

"Well, then, I shouldn't wonder if it was so. I have solved my share of crimes, and am well-respected in the field."

"Indeed," said Vail, "I would not pass up the opportunity to see your genius at work. I wonder if you would instruct me on your deductions in this case?"

"Deductions?" asked the stout man. "What sort of nonsense are you talking? The case is simple. Lord Geoffrey was strangled, and there was only one other man present - his son, Beverly."

"Then you do not credit the young man's story?"

"Pure rot. If you ever want to become a true professional, Mr. Vail, you'll learn to tell when someone's lying to you. The case is simple: the boy murdered his father, locked the door behind him as he left, and stumbled across the manservant on the stair. He then concocted a pack of lies to cover his trail. It's the only explanation. All that remains is to wring a confession from him, and that, I warrant, we will accomplish well before dawn."

"I'm sure you are right," said Vail. "Nevertheless, may we prevail upon you to show us the room where the body was found?"

The detective sniffed. "I haven't the time or the patience for such nonsense."

"Perhaps one of your men, then?"

Claughton gave a simpering smile. "I cannot spare them. I'm sorry sir. You have come all this distance for nothing. My advice is this: go back to your city and leave police work to those who are qualified to do it."

"If you please, Detective Claughton," said Inspector Lambert. "I would be happy to guide Mr. Vail through the house."

Claughton shot him a nasty look. "You, Lambert? Well, I suppose it's your time to waste, though I warn you, I won't have the scene tampered with."

"It is not trouble," assured Lambert.

"It's a complete waste of time is what it is, Inspector, and I assure you that if you were one of my men you would never be allowed to be so lax in your duty. But you may do what you like."

He turned to Vail again. "It seems Inspector Lambert has decided to stay on as a tourist guide for amateurs. You will try to keep from destroying evidence, I trust?"

"I assure you we will do our best," said Vail.

"See that you do."

Chapter 3

"That man is an arrogant ass," I said to Vail as the police-wagon trundled away. "I don't know how you kept civil. Had he spoken to me so, I fear I would have lost my temper."

"Not at all, Pendleton," Vail said with an enigmatic smile. "Detective Claughton has been an excellent ally, and if my suspicions prove true he has made our work very much easier."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"Well, Mr. Vail," said Lambert after a moment, "I suppose you'll be wanting to see the house."

"Not just yet, Inspector," said Vail. "I think I shall have a look around the grounds first. May I borrow your lantern?"

"Surely," said Lambert, handing it over, "but Claughton and I already looked and neither of us found anything."

"Still, there are one or two things I would like to see. If you wouldn't mind waiting here? I'll only be a moment."

We watched the lantern disappear around the corner of the house.

"Think he's on to something?" asked Lambert.

I shrugged. "Perhaps. But why did you stand by and let that pompous detective put Addington under lock and key?"

"Sorry, Colonel," he said. "It wasn't my decision to make. This area is beyond my jurisdiction. Claughton is insufferable, but he is king of his bailiwick."

"The man is plainly an imbecile," I stated warmly, "and has the manners of a Borcan. I hope Vail puts him in his place."

"Here he comes again now," said Lambert a moment later, as the lantern reappeared around the far side of the house.

We waited a few minutes more. In the darkness it was difficult to see Vail himself, but we watched the progress of the lantern as it jerked and dipped, halted for a moment as Vail inspected something, and moved on. Eventually Vail's face appeared beneath it, looking slightly unearthly in the flickering light. He seemed pleased.

"Just as I thought," he said, approaching. "Interesting, very interesting."

"What have you found?" I asked.

"Why," he answered, "nothing whatever. That is what is so interesting.

But I have not yet examined the roadway."

Lambert and I watched as he moved onto the muddy road.

"Hmm," he murmured, stooping. "Yes. Here are the tracks of Addington's brougham, departing. Two horses. And here we see Claughton's wagon, arriving - see how it overlays the tracks of Addington's brougham here, and here." He spoke with certainty, but all I could make out were ruts in the thick mud. "And here, the brougham returns - two horses again - this time with you and I in it, Pendleton.

And here, Claughton departs." He scanned the surrounding roadway. "No other fresh tracks. I think we may state with certainty that no other vehicles or horses have passed this way."

"But surely that proves nothing," protested Lambert.

"On the contrary, it is telling." Vail straightened. "And now, I believe it is time we saw the house."

Chapter 4

We were met just inside the door by a tall man with a high forehead and youthful face. He had been sitting, but rose as we entered.

"This is Hoskins, the manservant," said Lambert.

"Ah," said Vail, "you are the man Addinton left in charge when he left to fetch us."

The man nodded. "Yes, sir. Master Addington gave strict orders that nothing was to be disturbed."

"And you saw that nothing was?"

He nodded again.

"And where is the rest of the household staff?"

"I sent them back to their quarters, sir, thinking that the night's interviews were over. Shall I summon them?"

"No," said Vail, "I don't think that will be necessary. Their quarters are all in the west wing?"

"Yes, sir."

"As are yours?"

"Yes, sir."

Vail nodded. "Good enough. If we are fortunate there will be no need to disturb them. Should I have further questions, where may I find you?"

The man seemed surprised. "Why, right here, sir. They will return in an hour or so for the body, and I was to wait in the hall to let them in."

"Very good," said Vail, stepping past him.

The main hall was dominated by a wide set of carpeted stairs which curved gracefully upwards. The walls and floor were wood-paneled, and a single flickering gaslight provided illumination.

"If you'll just follow me," said Lambert, heading for the stairs.

"One moment inspector," said Vail. "Let us first see the library."

Vail led the way, still holding the lantern Lambert had given him. The library was just where Addington had said it was, the door half-open.

Darkness lay beyond.

"The lamps have been extinguished?" asked Vail.

"Oh, no sir," said Lambert. "This room was dark when we arrived."

"Hmm!" said Vail. "Things begin to look grim for Addington's story then. He said he had been reading in the library when he heard his father's cry. It is very difficult to read in the dark."

"Perhaps he extinguished the lamp," I ventured.

"Ah yes, as he was charging up the stairs he paused to turn off the light," Vail hefted the lantern and entered the darkened room. "An interesting theory, colonel, but I think we may find some better explanation."

The library was a large room, lined on two walls with bookshelves.

There was a sturdy oak table in the corner, surrounded by chairs, with a lamp and several books scattered across its surface. A pair of cushioned armchairs were stationed nearby, with a smaller table and second lamp between them.

I remained at the door while Lambert followed Vail in.

"Please don't touch that, inspector," snapped Vail as Lambert started to light the lamp on the table. Vail brushed past him, leaning forward to examine it. He sniffed the wick first, then touched it gingerly with his fingers. "Cold," he muttered. "Hasn't been lit for some time.

But... yes, of course. He would have been in the armchair..."

Swiftly he crossed the room to the second lamp and bent over it.

"Yes," he said a moment later, "recently lit, not less than an hour... Hallo, what's this?"

He stooped to lift something from behind one of the armchairs. When he straightened, he was holding a book. "Vasli's 'Journeys in a Desolate Land'," he said. "A little light reading for young Addington, tossed aside at the sound of his father's cry. It seems his story has some weight after all."

"It could have been planted afterwards to support his story," said Lambert.

"Oh, yes, there is that possibility," said Vail. "But it is strange that he should take care to plant a book in just the right place to support his story, and then turn off the light, ruining the effect."

"If Addington didn't extinguish the light, who did?"

"Perhaps someone who wanted to make Addington's account appear false." Vail strode toward the door. "I think we have seen everything of interest here. Let us proceed."

Vail went to the stairs. He crouched and examined the steps, peering at them. Painstakingly he inspected each one, then gave equal attention to each of the railings.

"Useless," he muttered when he had finished. "The carpet is covered with mud from the boots of Claughton's men." He shook his head. "Very well, it was too much to hope for more. Let us go to the room."

One of the gas lamps set into the wall had been lighted earlier, but the rest of the upper hall was left in darkness. It was cold and silent as we walked towards the murdered man's room, and none of us spoke, which added to the unease. Even Vail seemed somber.

He led the way, still holding the lantern. Twice he halted, peering down at some scuff marks on the carpet, then just as quickly moved on.

The door to Lord Addington's room stood open, a flickering light coming from within.

Vail looked back at Lambert. "The door was open when you arrived?"

The Inspector nodded, and Vail stepped to it, hardly glancing at the room. "A standard handle, with keyholes on both sides. And here is the key that Hoskins used to open the door, still in the outside hole. Mark that, gentlemen. It may prove of importance." He started into the room.

I shall never forget the awful sight that greeted us as we entered.

The room was large and well appointed. There was a solid-looking window set into the far wall, and a good-sized bed dominating the right side of the room. A writing desk lay to the left, with a study chair shoved a few feet to one side. A single lighted candle stood atop it, flickering weirdly and giving the room an unearthly aspect.

Everywhere there were signs of some violent struggle. The papers atop the desk had been scattered, and several of them lay on the floor. In the far corner, a standing lamp had been toppled onto its side, smashed.

The only place which appeared undisturbed was the corner on the far side of the bed, where an ornate bell pull hung down over a small bedside table.

But what arrested our attention was the horrifying sight of Lord Addington's body. It lay stretched out on the floor in the center of the room. The arms and legs were sprawled akimbo and contorted in their final death throes, and the eyes were fixed horribly on where we stood.

His face caused a thrill of horror to shoot through me. It was fixed in an attitude of dreadful fear which was most unsettling. But fearsome as the expression was, it was made more gruesome still by the coloration, for the entire face was mottled purple and black, as if the blood had pooled just beneath the surface of the skin. It gave the dead man a ghastly and unnatural aspect, and I confess I was shaken by the sight.

Lambert gasped and started violently. "Great abyss!" he cried, "the man's face has gone black!"

"I take it from your remark, Inspector, that this is a recent development?" asked Vail.

Lambert nodded. "There was bruising about the neck, but nothing like this! I have seen nothing like it!"

Vail bent over the corpse. "Mmmm," he said. "Have you not, Inspector?"

You are forgetting that business involving the Arden corpse. Before your time, Pendleton," he explained, seeing my confused look. "A body was discovered floating in the Arden, and Inspector Lambert called me in to help."

"Yes," said Lambert, "I remember. We had some trouble identifying the victim, owing to the unnatural blackening of the face. It turned out to be due to some exotic poison."

"Aura Ichyschalus, to be exact," said Vail, removing his gloves from his coat pocket and slipping them on, "a poison extracted from certain tropical plants in Valachan."

"But Lord Addington was strangled, not poisoned," I said.

"Oh, he was definitely poisoned." Vail sniffed at the dead man's lips and drew back. "Though not with Aura Ichyschalus. Would you be good enough to put on your gloves, Colonel? I have found something which might interest you."

Quickly I obeyed.

"Put your hand here, on his arm," instructed Vail.

The flesh beneath my fingers was hard as stone. "Why, he's stiff as a board!"

Vail nodded. "The muscles are in a state of extreme contraction. The other limbs are equally rigid. It is suggestive of some alkaloid poison, though I confess it is something I am unfamiliar with."

"Then he wasn't strangled?"

"On the contrary, Colonel, he was undoubtably strangled." Vail pulled back the collar and pointed to the markings on the neck. "Observe the discolored bruises. Do they suggest nothing to you?"

There were five marks in all, four narrow blackened lines on the left side of the throat and a shorter, thicker mark on the right side. "Why, they look like the marks of fingers and a thumb. A handprint?"

"Precisely," said Vail. "Is there nothing peculiar about it, though?"

I confessed I could see nothing.

Vail shook his head. "There are two very telling clues. Would you mind placing your own hand on the victim's throat, gently, and cover the bruises?"

I did so, but no matter how I stretched my fingers, I could not cover them. "I cannot. The attacker must have had very large hands, with long fingers."

"Precisely," said Vail. "The attacker leaves a large handprint.

Incidentally, that would disqualify Beverly as a suspect; his hands are not nearly large enough.

Now we come to the second point of interest: where are the marks from the attacker's other hand?"

"There are no other marks," I answered, a little confused.

"Exactly! Does that not strike you as peculiar? If you intended to strangle someone, would you use only one hand? And yet apparently that is what our attacker did. Why?"

"Perhaps he clapped the other over Lord Addington's mouth to prevent him crying out," I suggested.

"Ah, but we know from Beverly's account that his father did cry out, quite clearly and distinctly. And there are no bruises around the mouth, which there should be if your theory held true. What then could account for this?"

"I have no idea," I said, "unless perhaps his attacker was a one-armed man, but that hardly seems likely."

"Ah!" cried Vail, pleased, "a much better theory, Colonel! Likely or not, it is certainly plausible, so let us not discard it so quickly."

I was confused. "I don't understand, Vail. Was he strangled or was he poisoned?"

Vail gave me a strange look. "Why do you assume one outrules the other? He was strangled and he was poisoned, likely in that order."

"Why would anyone want to kill a man twice?" mused Lambert, mystified.

"Poison a dead body? It makes no sense."

I was as puzzled as he, but Vail seemed to have already dismissed the matter. He searched through the dead man's clothing, then stood.

"Interesting."

He looked at me. "Now Colonel, if you would just stand in the corner there for a moment so that your footprints will not complicate matters while I examine the rest of the room. Claughton and his men have already made my task difficult enough. Inspector, please keep your place outside the door."

Lambert and I looked on as Vail continued his examination. He started first at the area surrounding the overturned lamp. "Here's a bit of luck!" he cried. "A puddle of oil has spilled, and somehow Claughton and his men have avoided trudging through it. Ah! Here is the footprint of Lord Addington. He stumbled through the spill in the struggle, and has left us all sorts of prints so that we may follow his progress through the room. But this is more interesting still..." His voice trailed off.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing," replied Vail triumphantly. "There are no footprints in the spill other than Lord Addington's"

"But why is that significant?" asked Lambert.

"Where are the marks of his attacker?" Vail shot back pointedly. "We can see clearly that he was struggling, but with who?"

Neither of us could answer. Vail seemed more and more sure of himself, but with each new revelation the mystery only became darker to me.

Vail retraced the steps of the dead man. "Here he staggers back, after overturning the lamp. Ah, here he collides with the bed, then stumbles into the chair, which you can see has skidded several feet from the desk. Now he makes for the door... he stands here a moment - grasping at the handle, no doubt. He could hear his son calling on the other side, of course, and did not expect it to be locked. He then staggers back, falling to the ground. You can see plainly that he flailed about and then lay still."

Vail turned back toward the desk. "But there are no tracks here. And yet the papers have been disturbed, dashed to the floor. Therefore-

"He must have been there before he knocked over the lamp," I put in, following his reasoning.

"Excellent, Pendleton, excellent! But wait..." Suddenly he crouched on hands and knees, studying the hardwood floor around the desk. "Ah!

Just as I expected! Come and look!"

"What is it?" I asked, peering over his shoulder.

"Look here," he said, pointing to a small gash in the floor. "Observe the splinters."

"What of it?" I asked, confused.

"Why, it is of singular importance," exclaimed Vail. "Something heavy and wooden has fallen here - there, you see some of the splinters are of a darker hue than the floor beams. Addington said that the commotion started with a dull thud, as if a heavy chair had overturned, immediately followed by his father's cry. Notice that the chair is not overturned. No other object in the room suggests itself to make such a noise. Observe the cleared section on the desk. Something was swept off the edge and down to the floor, scattering the papers. But where is it?"

"It must have been moved," I said.

"Yes, but by who? And why?" He shook his head. "But this shows that Lord Addington was at his desk when he was first attacked.

Vail next moved to the window. "Locked from the inside," he murmured, studying the mechanism. A moment later he unlatched it, opening it to examine the outer part. "Shows no signs of being forced. No marks on the upper or lower sills, and a drop of twenty feet to the ground." He leaned out and peered upwards. "No sign that anyone has climbed up toward the roof either." He closed the window. "It seems clear the attacker neither entered nor exited through here."

He strode towards us, then halted. "Hello," he murmured in surprise, glancing upwards, "what's this? A skylight? I had not anticipated this."

I followed his gaze. There was an empty well set into the ceiling which extended upwards to a skylight.

"We checked that," said Lambert. "It's latched closed from the inside."

"Nevertheless I think we should have a look," said Vail. "Pendleton, would you help me move the desk? We shall slide it beneath, in order to reach it better."

Together we managed to do so, though not without effort. After getting the desk into place, Vail placed the chair atop. Then, climbing up and balancing precariously on the it, he was able to reach the skylight.

He examined the mechanism for a moment, then opened it, propping up the glass using the little metal arm.

"What was it you said, Lambert?" he asked. "That it was latched from the inside?" He disengaged the arm and let the skylight fall shut. The latch clicked into place as the glass came down. "I think your objection is easily answered."

He propped it open again and caught hold of the edges of the hole with his fingers. A moment later his legs swung free of the chair as he hoisted himself up onto the roof.

"Vail!" I said. "What are you doing?"

"Be down in a moment, Pendleton. I just want to check something."

His face vanished into the darkness, and for several moments Lambert and I were left alone. Suddenly his legs reappeared. Nimbly he swung down, landing lightly on the seat of the chair.

"Well, that gave me quite a turn!" he said with a laugh.

"Why, what did you discover?" asked Lambert.

"Nothing," replied Vail, "but for a moment I feared I had been on the wrong track. It was as well to be certain. Now Inspector, what of the key?"

"Key?"

"Yes, the key to this room."

Lambert was confused. "Why, it is in the lock, as you yourself pointed out."

"No, no," said Vail, "that is Hoskin's key. I speak of the one which Addington must have possessed. I have searched the body and the room, but have not found it."

"Why, I know nothing of it," said Lambert. "We found no such key. But if he locked himself in, he must have had one."

"Exactly," said Vail enigmatically. "I think you will both agree that this is a strange business. We have a corpse which was both strangled and poisoned. His attacker leaves no sign that he was ever here, and there is no apparent way he could have left. What do you think, Pendleton?"

I was about to reply that I was baffled, when suddenly an idea hit me.

"Vail!" I said, "what if there never was an attacker? Suppose Lord Addington was poisoned in some way, and the intense pain and muscle contractions caused him to grasp at his own neck? Might not he have strangeld himself?"

The Case of the Vanished Woman

By Sebastian Daniel Brough

Chapter 1

Hector Vail was a man who kept odd hours, as I well knew. Over the course of our acquaintance, I had several times seen him go days without sleep, seemingly with no ill effects. When Vail got his teeth into an engaging puzzle he rarely would abandon it for anything. However, on those occasions when he had no cases or mysteries at all, he would often sink into a deep, moody melancholy, and for days at a time would do nothing at all, keeping to his chambers and sleeping the day away.

So it was with some surprise that I entered the drawing room on a chilly Saturday morning in late January and found him already awake. He was seated in his favorite armchair, pipe in hand. His posture was relaxed, but expectant.

I am by habit an early riser, but on this occasion I confess I had slept late, for it was nearly mid-morning by the time I emerged from my bedchamber.

"Good morning, Pendleton," he said brightly. "You've missed breakfast, I fear, but you may be able to convince Miss Sherington to bring up an early brunch. Sleep well?"

"Er... well yes, I suppose."

Vail gave a half smile. "What's wrong, Pendleton? Surprised to see me up and about at this hour?"

"Well... not precisely that," I stammered, not wanting to give offense, "but... yes, I suppose so. It's not your habit, I mean. At least not when you have no case."

Again that smile quirked at the corner of his mouth. "Indeed, Pendleton. I have often maintained that you yourself are a very observant fellow, though you have some difficulty attaching meanings to your observations."

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked, perplexed.

In answer, he pushed a small white envelope towards me. "I mean that your observation is correct, Pendleton, though you have not managed to make the obvious deduction. We may indeed have a case. And it is shaping up to be a very interesting one. Have a look; it arrived three days ago."

I took the envelope and turned it over, glancing at the return address.

It was blank. "Three days?" I asked, opening it. "Why the sudden excitement now?"

"Pendleton!" said Vail disapprovingly as my fingers closed on the letter within. "You have hardly examined the envelope at all. You would miss half the clues!"

Surprised I pulled my fingers away from the letter and closed the envelope. "But it is blank," I protested. "There is no return address; only our own."

"Indeed," he said, "there is more to see than that, should you use your eyes."

I looked, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. There were no smudge marks or thumbprints that I could see. The paper was white, fairly stiff and with a rough texture. I had seen envelopes like this before, though I wasn't certain exactly where. I turned it over in my hands once or twice, and glanced at Vail. "What am I supposed to see?" I asked.

"Never mind," he said. "Take a look at the letter."

I pulled the letter free. It was folded into halves, creased and lined. And yet as I unfolded it I could see it was of fine quality paper, slightly yellow and soft, of a type I was quite certain I had never seen before. The short message within was penned in a fine, flowing hand.

Dear Sir,

I am given to understand you are quite expert at puzzling out mysteries.

I am faced with an indelicate situation concerning my betrothed which requires discretion. If it pleases you, I shall call upon you Saturday the 16th, near 11:00, as it is the earliest I may arrive, to offer fuller details of my problem.

- M.

"Well, Pendleton?" he asked, when I looked up.

I looked at it again. "I confess I cannot see what has excited your interest in this," I said. "There is very little here. Perhaps when this mysterious 'M.' appears he may offer something more tangible-"

"Tut, tut, Pendleton," said Vail. "There is a great deal there to excite interest. And 'M.' is almost certainly a woman, not a man."

I was surprised. "But how can you know that?" I asked.

He sighed. "Examine the letter again. Use all your senses. Aside from the concern for the betrothed - certainly not a trait restricted solely to females, though the fair sex often expresses concern more readily - there is a subtle but distinct perfume detectable. Likewise, the letters are flowing and even, slender and well-formed. Calligraphy is an art often mastered by the gentler

sex, though I admit there are many men who write with an excellent hand as well. Still, the signs are there to see for one trained in the art of handwriting."

I lifted the letter closer, nearly brushing it against my face. Just as Vail had said there was a subtle perfume. It was so elusive that for a moment I wondered if he was wrong. I did not recognize the scent.

"Perhaps you're right," I said. "But even if it is a woman, what of it?"

"A lady of breeding, Pendleton. And not from Mordent."

"Not from Mordent?"

He shook his head. "Likely the letter comes to us from Dementlieu. The paper, you will note, is a strange yellowish variety, pliable yet sturdy. It is made from Jaundiced Spruce, a very rare type of tree which grows and is harvested in that land. The rarity of the tree makes paper of this sort very expensive; only a noble would use it."

"Surely that doesn't mean the lady herself is from there," I protested.

"There are other signs," said Vail. "The perfume, for example, is le petit-envie, unless I am much mistaken, an expensive fragrance made there as well. Too, mention is made of a long journey to get here. Travel from Dementlieu hardly takes three days, but one could imagine that the writer had some affairs to put in order before leaving; and the trip is not so short as to make it convenient to 'drop in' for afternoon tea either. And there is the phrase 'If it pleases you' in her letter - does not that strike you as curious? I believe it is used because the lady, though well educated, speaks English as a second language. In the language of Dementlieu 's'il vous plait' - translated, 'if you please' - would certainly be used in much the same place."

I considered. "Very well, Vail. It appears that we have a lady of some means writing to us from Dementlieu. You have certainly shed light on the letter - to a degree, anyway - but I still don't see what excites you so much about it."

Vail smiled. "Ah, here we come to the most interesting part. The letter was not sent to us from Dementlieu."

I was confused. "But I thought you just said-"

"The envelope, Pendleton, the envelope. Did not I say that half the clues were there? Look at it again. Is it composed of the same paper as the letter?"

I shook my head. "Obviously not. It is white."

"And familiar, yes? That is because it was printed at our very own 'Mordentshire Printshop' a few scant blocks from where we sit - you remember, it used to be called 'Duncan and Son, Printers'. Half the correspondance we tend to see, if not more, arrives enclosed in envelopes just like this one. The letter was sent to us from within this very city."

"But then why would the writer make mention of a journey?" I asked, puzzled.

"Excellent, Pendleton! I said you were observant. Two possibilities spring to mind. First, the writer wished us to believe that she was in Dementlieu for some unknown reason, though in fact she was here. I tend to dismiss this, based on the evidence that supports the second possibility. Which is that the letter was intercepted before it reached us, and re-sent from within Mordentshire."

"It certainly sounds likely," I said, staring at the letter with new respect. More and more I was beginning to understand Vail's interest.

"But what 'evidence' do you mean?"

Vail shrugged. "Examine the letter. You will see that it has been folded into quarters to fit into the envelope. Unfold it and you will find other creases which indicate it was previously folded into thirds. The standard envelope in Dementlieu, and many other lands, tends to be wider and more slender than our own envelopes. This suggests it has been refolded, which of course suggests that it has been removed from its original envelope. Also, you will note that the address on the envelope is penned in a far different hand than that in the letter."

I held the letter up again. Certainly I had noticed it was creased before, but... "Confound it Vail," I said, moving to the window. "Why on earth have you got it so dark in here?" The curtains hung all but closed, leaving only a narrow slit through which a sliver of warm sunlight spilled. It was a bright sunny day (unusual this time of year) and I wondered why Vail had pulled them.

Vail startled me by leaping from his chair. "No, Pendleton!" he said as I reached for the pull cord, and I pulled back in surprise.

"What?"

He chuckled at my expression. "Sorry, Pendleton, I didn't mean to startle you. But I'm afraid it wouldn't do at all to be seen there. Be a good fellow and come away. We don't want to frighten him off."

"Him?" I asked, taken back at Vail's sudden bizarre behavior.

"The gentleman across the street. He's been watching our window for the past three days. You may take a look, if you like, but be careful only to peer through the crack. As I said, we don't want to frighten him."

I stepped to the curtains and looked out. "We are being watched? By who? And why?"

"Excellent questions, Pendleton, and I'm afraid I have no answer for you. But it seems a strange coincidence that our apartment should be watched from the moment I received this letter, no?"

I was staring down at the street below, my eyes adjusting to the glare.

There was a light covering of snow along the walks, maybe an inch and a half-deep, and of course a blackened layer of wet snow, salt, and dirt in the cobbled roadway, churned into ruts by the wheels of passing carriages. The sun was out and the snow was slowly melting. A few pedestrians hurried past, but I saw no-one of consequence.

"I see no-one, Vail," I said.

"The gentlemen in the beggar's clothes, selling candles," said Vail.

"He will be standing near the lamppost or I am very much mistaken. You see him?"

There was an old man near the lamppost; he was holding a tray filled with cheap wax candles. Every so often a passerby would flip a copper into his box, but not many bothered to pick out a candle. "I see him." The man didn't move much, but other than that he looked like a perfectly ordinary beggar to me. And...

"Vail," I said. "I know I glanced out of this window yesterday, and I would swear that that man wasn't there."

Vail shook his head. "He wasn't, Pendleton. Or rather he was, but he didn't look the same. I first noticed we were being watched Thursday morning, and then it was by an old woman selling flowers. I thought it odd that she stood in the same place all day long, but it could have been coincidence. Then Friday it was a tall thin gentleman in a black overcoat. You will recall it snowed quite heavily on Friday. Perhaps that is why he made no attempt at the charade of selling something, considering himself masked by the falling flurries. And today it is the candle-beggar. I'll grant him this much; whoever he is, he is excellent at his disguises. Perhaps even better than I."

"Why should it be only one person?" I asked, still peering down at the fellow. "Couldn't it just as easily be three different people?"

"Observe the posture," said Vail. "He will be standing with the weight on his left leg. His right foot is tapping slowly. His shoulders are slightly hunched, no? And every so often he tilts his head to the right side, as if relieving a cramp. Yes?"

I stared. "Yes," I admitted.

"When he walks, which is about every half hour or so, he will pace back and forth in front of the lampost two or three times, working the cramps out of his legs. And when he does so, he will favor his right leg, as if it pains him to put weight on it."

"He isn't pacing," I said, turning from the window, "so it's impossible to say."

"Trust me," said Vail. "I have watched him; I know his habits. He will favor the leg. Each of the watchers has displayed these exact physical mannerisms; the lady, the gentleman in the overcoat, and the candle-maker. I submit that it is impossible for three different people to have precisely the same mannerisms."

"Strange," I said. "But you said the man in the overcoat was tall and thin. The man down there is short and stout. How do you account for the height difference, if it is the same man?"

"There are ways of standing so that the apparent height and weight may look different," said Vail, "though you have hit on an excellent point. The old lady was shorter still, and extremely obese. And the facial structure of all three was strikingly different. However he's doing it, I doubt it is solely a trick of makeup and posture. It is possible that he is changing his very form; shapeshifting."

"A doppelganger?" I asked, a thrill of horror going through me at the thought. Vail had taken his place in his chair again, but I glanced back at the window. If the man across the street was one of those unearthly creatures...

"It is possible, Pendleton. It is possible. You see why I find all of this very interesting."

"But what do we do?" I asked.

"At the moment, nothing, save exercise patience and wait for the arrival of 'M.'"

"Then you think she will come?" I asked. "Is it not possible that, like her letter, she too will be waylaid?"

Vail nodded. "If it passes the appointed hour and she has not yet arrived, we must assume that is what has happened. But let us not jump to assumptions just yet; it is scarcely an hour and a half away. Miss Sherington?" That last was directed to our housekeeper, who had appeared at the door. She had a disapproving look.

"There is a... gentleman to see you, Mr. Vail," she said tightly.

"Indeed?" I asked. "I did not hear a knock."

"Nor I," said Vail.

"Apparently the fellow let himself in," she said with a sniff. "Found him nosing about downstairs in the hall. Said he'd an appointment to see you, Mr. Vail. Said he'd sent you a letter. But he didn't have a card. If you want I'll send for a policeman to come and haul him away."

Vail considered. "An appointment? No... no I don't think that will be necessary, Miss Sherington. Show him in please."

She sniffed again, and turned to fetch the man, but he was already shouldering his way in behind her.

He was a hulking brute of a man, standing well over six feet in height with a broad chest and brawny arms. He actually had to stoop to pass under the doorframe.

He entered and stood there for a moment, his clear blue eyes going from Vail to me and back again, calmly measuring. He wore a ragged workman's clothes, dirty and soot-stained, and his hands were roughened with calluses and streaked with grime. He gave us a slight bow, hardly more than a nod. "Gentlemen," he said. Despite his appearance his voice was cultured and clear, the accent crisp.

"Come in," said Vail, "Mr... ?"

"Mardeth," said the man.

Vail gestured to the couch opposite. "Please," he said, and the man settled his huge frame into a sitting position. "You are the person who sent the letter?"

"Indeed," said the man. "I realize I am early for my appointment, but it was difficult to predict exactly how long the journey would take. I felt that my... problem was compelling enough that I should risk a breach of etiquette and call as soon as possible."

Vail and I exchanged a glance. Rarely have I seen my friend go so far wrong in his deductions. Vail reached for his snuff box, which lay atop the coffee table. "By journey, I assume you mean the one which took you from Dementlieu to our humble apartment," he said, opening the lid and offering it to the man, who refused with a tiny shake of his head.

"No?" asked Vail, then pulled the box to himself. "Well, then, as you have undertaken such a long journey to lay your problem before us, we should hardly be gentlemen if we were to turn you out only for being early. How may we help?"

The man glanced at me. "Which one of you is Hector Vail?" he asked. "My message is for him." "I hold that honor," said Vail, "though I assure you Col. Pendleton's discretion may be relied upon completely. What is your message?"

The man smiled. "Die!" he snarled, leaping up out of his chair, the blade of a dagger in his hand. He sprang for Vail's throat.

I started violently at the sight, but Vail was as calm and composed as if he had expected it. He lifted his pistol from the snuffbox (the place he usually kept it) and a single shot rang out. The big man yelped in pain, clutching his suddenly bloodied hand and reeling backwards. The dagger had gone flying, and had dropped to the floor near the fireplace.

"Pendleton," said Vail, "please retrieve your pistol and train it on our friend here. I believe my own weapon may have already given him pause." Vail hardly needed to tell me this; I was already in the process of fumbling my weapon from its place on the mantel.

The man's mouth pulled into a rictus of hate. "You dare to think your puny weapons can harm me? I came here to kill you Vail - and that is what I mean to do!" With a roar he leaped for Vail again, this time with only his bare, bloodied hands.

Vail tried to twist to the side, but the big man slammed into him, and the two went tumbling to the floor. "Pendleton!" Vail cried, struggling with the larger man. "Help!"

I raced to where they struggled. The big man was on top and though Vail fought him, he had managed to lock his bloodied hands on Vail's throat. I seized the man by the hair, pulling his head back until I could get an arm around his thick muscular neck. Then, with all my might I strained, trying to pull the man loose from his hold.

Slowly I forced him upwards, but even with all my strength I could not pry him from his grip on Vail. I could see that there was blood flowing freely from a hole in the man's left hand where Vail had wounded him. With the agony of the wound and the slipperiness of the blood, I could not see how the man could maintain his grip with that hand. And yet he did.

Vail had his own hands closed on the man's wrists, struggling wildly. His face had gone pale. I had tucked my pistol into my waistband. Now with my free hand I pulled it free, and holding it by the barrel I clubbed the man on the back of the head. He grunted under the blow but did not loose his hold. I swung again. Again the heavy pistol butt connected with the back his head. A trickle of blood oozed down the back of his neck. Again. Again.

At the fifth blow he went entirely limp, loosing his hold on Vail and collapsing into unconsciousness. Vail gave a rasping cough as he pushed the man's hands away and forced air into his lungs.

I tried to haul the man's body off him, but so large a fellow was he that I succeeded only in rocking him back a few inches before his weight defeated me and he crashed limply back atop Vail.

"Pull, Pendleton," rasped Vail, pushing at the man's limp form, and I tried again. Suddenly another pair of hands appeared, hauling at the man's shoulders. It was Miss Sherington, pulling for all she was worth. Together the three of us managed to haul the limp body off and cast it back onto the couch.

"Well, Mr. Vail," said Miss Sherington, "it appears to be a good thing I decided to investigate when I heard all the commotion. You have very interesting guests, Mr. Vail. Very interesting indeed!"

Vail was standing shakily. There were still faint blue marks on his throat where the man's fingers had tightened. For a moment he only breathed raggedly. "Thank you... Miss Sherinton," he managed after a moment. "I wonder... if you wouldn't... be good enough to fetch... a policeman." "Vail!" I said, as the woman hurried off. "What on earth possessed the man? He went mad!"

The man himself was groaning, his head lolling to one side.

Vail shook his head. "Not mad, Pendleton - desperate. Quickly now, before he regains consciousness. We must bind him." He hurried to his workdesk, rifling through the drawers. A moment later he stood, holding a length of thin white cord. Together we tied the man's hands behind his back, then used the remainder of the line to truss his feet and secure him to the couch. "Fetch me some smelling salts, Pendleton," said Vail when we were done.

"You know where they are. I would very much like to interview our attacker before the authorities arrive."

A moment later I had returned, smelling salts in hand. Vail took them from me and passed them under the man's nose. He groaned again and his head jerked away from the smell, but his eyes did not open.

"I struck him harshly," I said. "Perhaps-"

Vail only held up a finger. "Shhh. Not now, Pendleton." Again he passed the smelling salts beneath the man's nose. This time the man grunted, his eyes flickering open, blinking. He looked

hatefully from one of us to the other, then, snarling, he surged forward as if to attack. But the cords we used were tight and strong, and the man could do no more than strain against them. He fought the bonds for a moment, then relaxed, glaring balefully at us.

"Welcome back," said Vail, taking his seat across from the man again.

"You can see that you are caught."

The man smiled insolently. "Caught?" he said. "Only this pathetic body. You can never hold me."

Vail leaned forward. "Who are you? Why have you come here masquerading as the girl who sent the letter?"

"You will never find her," sneered the man. "The game I play is beyond a paltry mortal like you."

"If that is the case," said Vail, "you would never have come. You feared that I would become involved, and decided to eliminate any threat I might represent. Who is your master, and who is the girl?"

"I am the master!" shouted the man. "Fool, what you see is a shell! Do not become involved in this, Vail. Not as you value your life!"

"You have already involved me," said Vail coldly. "As for your empty threats-"

But the man had suddenly collapsed again, his eyes rolling back in their sockets and his body sagging against the bonds. His face had gone chalk white, and his breathing stopped; his brown eyes stared sightlessly at us.

Vail rushed forward, checking the man's pulse.

"Is he-?" I started to ask.

"No," said Vail, stepping back. "He lives, by the slimmest of margins. But why...?" His head jerked up. "Pendleton, the window! The window!" He was already racing in that direction, flinging back the curtains.

"Oh, fool that I am!" he said, turning away and dashing for the door.

I spared one brief glance at the street below, then sprinted to follow. The candle-seller was dashing away, his wares scattered in the street. I vaulted down the stairs, three at a time, hard on Vail's heels, and the two of us raced into the street.

I looked both ways but saw no sign of the candle-seller. Vail, however, must have caught a glimpse of the man rounding the corner at the next intersection, for he sprinted like an arrow

across the slush-filled roadway heading in that direction, dodging a passing hansom. I followed as best I could, waiting for the cart to pass, but his long-legged strides left me quickly behind, and by the time I had gained the far side of the street Vail was already vanishing to the right around the corner ahead.

I dashed forward, gaining the intersection moments later, and saw Vail standing in the middle of the lane, looking wildly about. For as far as we could see there was no sign of anyone. He muttered a brief curse, then immediately began searching the sidewalk for something.

"What are you doing, Vail?" I asked, slowing to a quick trot as I approached. "Footprints," he said. "Mind where you tread, Pendleton, this will be difficult enough. We may still track him; there are a wealth of footprints thanks to yesterday's snow. Perhaps we have not lost him yet... Ah!"

He began striding off, following a trail which must have been clear to him but which was entirely invisible to me. I followed at a few yards distance.

He wound his way down the sidewalk for some way, then veered off into the street and halted. I waited for a moment, but he did not look up.

"Clever," he said at last. "It looks as if he had his escape planned.

A two-wheeled single-horse hansom was waiting here, and our candle-beggar looks to have boarded. Likely there was a driver standing by, but he could have taken the reins himself. Either way, he's lost to us now. There are far too many other tracks from cart wheels to trace them."

For a moment he stood there on the snow, lost in thought. Abruptly he straightened. "No use crying over spilt milk, eh Pendleton? Come, let us return to our prisoner. Likely Miss Sherington has already fetched Inspector Lambert."

Chapter 2

But when we returned to our flat, we found that Miss Sherington had not yet returned from her errand. I had left the door ajar and it swung in the slight wintry breeze that played through the street.

Vail glanced at me as we approached. "You left the door open, Pendleton?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Sorry, Vail. I must have done. At the time I was busy trying to keep up with you."

We trudged up the narrow stairs, re-entering our flat. The man lay just as we had left him, his eyes still staring sightlessly. His breathing had deepened a little, and I could see the rise and fall

of his chest. Vail bent over him, checking his pulse again, then passing the smelling salts beneath the man's nose again. There was no response. "Still alive, but unresponsive," he said.

"What's going on, Vail?" I asked, closing the door behind me. "Who is this man, and what's wrong with him - and who was that man outside that we chased?"

Vail was silent a moment. "Did you notice his eyes, Pendleton?" he asked.

"Who's?" Vail pointed at the bound man. I took a look... and looked again. They were a deep brown color, undilated and staring up at the ceiling.

"Vail," I said, astonished. "I would swear that his eyes were blue when he first entered the room."

"And you would be right," said Vail. "They changed color after our interview - when the man collapsed again."

"But what does it mean?" I asked.

Vail shook his head. "It is difficult to be certain. But coupled with what the man said... I think that this body is little more than a shell. The man himself is something else..."

"A possessing spirit?" I asked, chilled at the thought. How could we fight such a being?

Vail frowned. "Perhaps," he said. "But if so, then the man should have been returned to his senses when the spirit fled him. Yet he is left virtually mindless; only the basic functions of breathing and heartbeat remain. He has not even the instinct to close his eyes." As Vail spoke he gently pressed the lids closed with a forefinger; they would not close all the way, but remained slitted. "He is a vegetable. And if it were a spirit, then how could it inhabit more than one body."

"More than one body?" I asked.

"Have you forgotten the candle-seller, Pendleton? I've little doubt it was controlled by the same creature."

"If not a spirit, what then?" I asked.

Vail said nothing for a moment. "Perhaps something even more dangerous," he said at last.

"Vail," I said. "I confess I am lost. Who was this man and why did he attack you?"

"Likely he is the creature that has abducted the woman who sent the letter," said Vail. "He came because he feared that I would interfere in his plans, whatever they may be, and the simplest solution was to eliminate me."

"But how did you know he would attack you?" I asked.

"Did you not note, Pendleton, the distinct limp the man used when he entered the room? Favoring his left leg, and using the same walk as the man in the street. At the time, I thought he was the same man, and that he had merely changed disguises. But of course it wasn't the same man at all; though the same creature controlled both. From the moment he entered I suspected his intentions; he was early for the appointment. Why? Because he had spotted you staring at him from the window, and feared that the game was up. He moved quickly, hoping to take us by surprise." Vail took on a rueful look. "And despite the precaution I took of arming myself, he was very nearly successful."

The door opened and Miss Sherington bustled in, an officer at her heels. Contrary to our expectations it was not Inspector Lambert she had summoned, but rather Inspector Wilkins, a short wiry fellow with a bit of a paunch and a high forehead. Wilkins was well known to both of us; he was generally a good enough fellow, but rather blunt and stubborn. I had the feeling that he disliked both of us, though he was always polite enough.

"Ah, Inspector Wilkins," said Vail. "I had rather expected Lambert."

Wilkins sniffed. "Not available, sir. Had a day off; went to see family. Is this the fellow that accosted you?"

Vail nodded. "So to speak, though he's hardly a threat now."

Wilkins eyed the fellow warily. "Looks hurt."

"Pendleton had occasion to club him with the butt of his pistol. However, the man's state is due to no fault of our own."

Wilkins nodded. "Well, no matter. I'll have some lads come down and pick him up. When he comes to, we'll give him a good grilling and get him to talk."

Vail smiled. "I hardly think that will work, inspector, but you are welcome to try. May I first inspect the body?"

Wilkins looked surprised. "What for?"

"Clues as to who might have sent him."

Wilkins shrugged. "If you think it'll do any good. Though from what Miss Sherington described, he's probably some hooligan from the street. Half-mad, you know? They're worse in the winter. Makes them desperate. They'd kill you soon as look at you. It's happened before."

"I'm certain," said Vail absently, bending over the man's body, "but if you'll indulge me I'll have a look anyway."

"Do what you like," said Wilkins, heading for the door. "I'll be back in five minutes with some of the lads to haul him off."

I watched as Vail went through the bound man's clothing, then began examining his fingernails.

"What are you searching for, Vail?"

"Hmmm? Some sign of where this man came from, of course. He must have been a normal person once, with hopes and dreams."

"How do you know? It could be that he was always this way. A mentally-catatonic person, for instance, that the... creature found and inhabited."

Vail chuckled. "Oh, I think not, Pendleton. From my own observations he was a sailor-turned-dockman who worked somewhere in the port district of Mordentshire. He worked about ten years ago aboard a vessel with a name beginning with the letter 'M'. He has a wife whose initials are either 'K.H. or J.S.' - likely 'K.H.' He also has either a son or a nephew aged between 9 and 11 years."

I was astounded. "How on earth can you know all that?"

Vail smiled. "First, he is a rather large fellow, wouldn't you agree?"

Those brawny arms and muscular chest would hardly be the result of an lifelong invalid, indeed, they are the product of years of heavy labor - lifting and hauling. So I think we may dismiss your theory of the comatose mental patient."

"And the rest?"

Vail tugged the man's sleeve back and displayed his forearm. "You will note the tattoo."

I leaned forward to look. There was a geometric design, underscored by the letters 'MSM 35 - 41'.

"A date?" I asked, confused.

"Indeed," said Vail, "and more. Vessels registered in Mordenshire are always christened 'Mordentshire Ship' before the name. And the design above is a representation of a knot used almost exclusively on sailing ships, the 'sailor's fist'. The man's roughened, callused palms also indicate a good deal of work with rope at some past date, though they have smoothed somewhat in later years. The picture that emerges is that he served aboard a Mordentshire-registered ship whose name began with the letter 'M' from 735 - 741."

"But how do you know that he turned from sailor to dockhand?" I asked.

"The tattoo itself is evidence that his term aboard ship lasted only until 741. Note the white scar on the left earlobe; it is evident that he once wore an earring there, a common practice among sailors of these waters. But what has he done during the intervening years? Obviously since his body has not turned to flab, he is still engaged in a line of work involving heavy labor. And if he once had an earring, why no longer? Might I suggest that it is because of the city ordinance which exists concerning all who work the docks, prohibiting the wearing of nose-rings, earrings, or lip rings of any kind? Such a line of work would be natural for a retired sailor. Who better knows the tying off of lines, for example?"

"But why should he retire at all, Vail?" I asked. "He is a young enough fellow; certainly he would make better wages at sea."

"Perhaps, Pendleton," he said, "but you are forgetting the influence of his wife." He lifted the man's left hand. "Note the wedding band - copper and well worn. And on the underside we have the inscription 'K.H. - J.S. 742'. Suggestive, eh? A marriage date following his discharge. Obviously his wife is a woman prone to worry, and not fond of the idea of becoming a widow to the sea. So an image forms. He is engaged, and at his fiancée's behest, retires from the sea. But still he must earn a living, eh? And perhaps he still has some fondness for the sea. So he takes employment as a dockworker, and is able to fulfill his wishes for both. There are other signs, Pendleton - for example the faded grease on the man's hands - but you see the line of my reasoning."

"And the son?" I asked.

"Why, Pendleton, that is the simplest of all. Take a look at what hangs from his neck."

There was a little wooden medallion, crudely carved in the shape of a dolphin. "And?" I asked.

"Do you really think he carved it himself?" asked Vail. "Sailors are usually renowned for their carving skills - they have months at sea to refine the art of whittling. Is it likely a career sailor would carve something as crude as that and hang it from his neck for all the world to see? No, Pendleton, it is a gift. And since carving involves knives, I think it likely that the giver is a boy. As to his age, it is a simple deduction owing to the crudeness of the work."

He lifted the man's foot, taking a look at the underside of the boot.

"Hello!" he said, in some surprise. "This is out of place."

I peered over his shoulder, but I saw nothing other than some bits of what looked like dried mud, a vague gray-green color.

He set the boot down again, moving to his laboratory and retrieving a small tray and a scraping knife. Quickly he knelt again, taking several scrapings.

"What is it, Vail?" I asked.

"Something interesting, Pendleton," he said. "Something that certainly has no place on the bottom of a dockworker's boots. Our first clue as to what our friend here has been up to since being taken over by the... creature."

There was a polite knock at the door. "Hello?" said a man's voice, and both Vail and I turned. A gentleman stood there, looking at once weary and apologetic. "Hector Vail?" he asked, his green eyes locking on Vail.

"Yes?"

The man gave an apologetic gesture towards the open door. "The front entrance was ajar," he said. "I knocked, but no-one answered, so I... showed myself in. I hope I do not offend."

"Not at all," said Vail. "We have had a somewhat... eventful morning. This is in fact the second time it has been left open. No doubt Wilkins will close it when he returns with his men. But please, come in. I perceive that you have traveled a good distance to see us."

The man nodded. "I have driven all night to reach you sir, on behalf of my master."

"From Dementlieu, I presume."

The man started to nod, then gave Vail startled look. "Mon dieu! Yes, it is true, but how could you have known?"

Vail shrugged. "The signs are there for the trained eye. Your apparel; your accent... it is a small matter. Who is your master, and why has he sent you?"

The man shook his head. "I regret that I am not at liberty to say, sir. I am only to say that my master has urgent need of your services, and as a man of substantial means, can reward you well. I am sent to fetch you back to him for a meeting. Due to... certain political constraints, he is not able to cross the border into Mordentshire."

Vail arched an eyebrow. "Indeed? And what is the nature of the problem he wishes my assistance with?"

Again the man shook his head. "I am bid only to say that it is an extremely sensitive matter, sir, and that it is urgent. A life may be at stake."

Vail glanced at me. "Well, this is an interesting turn, eh Pendleton?"

Ordinarily, of course, I would never make such a journey with so little information."

"It is striking," I said, "that Dementlieu is referenced yet again. Could this be connected?" Vail gave a half-smile. "I think there is every possibility. So now we are faced with an alternative - stay and chase down the leads we have already, or go, and risk having the leads go stale. Perhaps we may find some happy medium." He looked back at the man, who had been watching our conference in some concern. "We cannot leave just yet. There are matters which I must first attend to. In four hours time I should have set events in motion. We may accompany you then."

Chapter 3

As it happened, I was left alone in the flat for the remainder of the morning and early afternoon. Inspector Wilkins shortly returned and took the bound man into custody - though Vail warned him that the man's wounds should be tended.

"He is far more a victim than I, inspector," he had said. "There is some hope that he may yet recover his senses. In the meantime, I shall endeavor to discover his identity and locate his family. Watch him well; if he should make a sudden and miraculous recovery, or the color of his eyes should change, consult with me before releasing him."

As for the balding man from Dementlieu, he had departed as soon as Vail had assured him that we would come with him later, promising to return at the appointed hour. Vail himself had departed shortly after seeing to the fellow's needs.

"I have some errands to run, Pendleton," he had said, "tasks, I fear, for which your talents are not suited. You will wait for me here, and accompany me this evening to Dementlieu for the mysterious meeting?" I assured him I would, and he left.

The day passed slowly. I contented myself with smoking a pipe and reading the day's edition of the Times, and Miss Sherington prepared me a very late breakfast. Still, I found myself pacing the drawing room impatiently, and more than once I found myself at the window, looking to see if the candle-seller had returned. Of course he did not, and yet for some reason I left the curtains closed. The thought of being watched from the street was unnerving.

Vail returned around half past three, and shortly thereafter we set out on the road to Dementlieu.

Chapter 4

We traveled in a richly-appointed brougham pulled by four horses. The vehicle was new, and practically sped across the snowy landscape. For the the first half hour the farms, manors, and homesteads of the outlying areas and districts of Mordentshire raced by. Then civilization gave

way to wilderness, and there was only the rough dirt road lined on both sides by snow-covered fields and forests.

Try though I might, I could not draw from Vail any real description of what he had done earlier in the day. "What Pendleton? Would you have me disclose all my secrets? That would be rather like having a magician explain how he creates his illusions while he was in the act of performing them - it certainly would strip away the wonder, eh? No, no. You'll forgive my sense of drama, but it would never do." That, with an enigmatic smile, was all he would say on the subject. Vail has always had a flair for the dramatic - no less an authority than William On'Arden commented once that what the criminal profession had gained with Vail, the stage had lost.

He refused to be drawn into any conversation either, and after a time I turned to the window and fixed my attention on the scenery passing by.

The sun was dipping lower in the western sky, and its reddish rays swathed the snowy landscape in bloody twilight. I watched idly the play of reflections from the icy fields.

I did not realize I had dozed off until I was awakened by the touch of Vail's hand on my knee. Sometime while I had slept he had drawn the curtains and lit the oil lantern which swung from the roof between our seats.

"Awake, Pendleton?" he asked with a smile.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and pulled back the curtain. Outside full night darkened the land. A half moon overhead spilled silver light across the snow-covered trees that lined either side of the roadway. It was a light wood of sparse trees, each glazed with ice and snow which reflected and enhanced the moonlight. The glittering terrain and pockets of bright snow served only to enhance the pools of shadow which lay everywhere between. "Where are we?" I asked. "Nearing the border," said Vail, "if we have not passed it already. We are still miles from any civilization in either direction. And, unless I miss my guess, we are nearing our meeting." Vail was right; there was a subtle difference in the vibration of the carriage. We were slowing.

I fingered the pistol that I had pocketed before leaving Mordentshire.

"Well," I said, "at least we'll find out what this is all about, anyway."

"I hardly think you'll need that," said Vail, with a nod at the weapon, "though it is as well to be prepared. But wait! We have arrived!"

Indeed, with a sudden lurch the carriage rolled to a stop. A moment later the side door was opened by the driver, who leaned his head in.

"We have arrived, sirs," he said. "My master awaits."

And before either of us could reply he was gone. Vail and I exchanged a glance, and he reached for the door handle, climbing down out of the carriage. I followed a moment later.

As Vail had suggested, we were still miles from any civilization, surrounded on all sides by wilderness. The roadway was a little wider here, and standing not more than twenty paces off stood a second carriage, the lanterns hanging from the driver's perch glowing softly.

Our own driver waited with the vehicle we had come in. Waiting for us on the snow between the two carriages were two men, reduced to little more than silhouettes by the darkness. The closer and shorter of the men held a small lantern, and raised it as we approached.

He was a young man, probably not more than twenty-five, with dark red hair pulled back into a short ponytail. His face was... pretty, in a gentle and beatific sort of way, and he had a friendly smile. He was slightly pudgy, but not overweight. The second man was taller, and hung back a few steps. He had graying hair, also pulled back into a ponytail, and a stern, unforgiving expression.

"Ah, you have come," said the shorter man, giving a quick bow. "My master regrets the secrecy necessary in our little meeting... I assure you, were the situation not so delicate, he would not have insisted on the mystery."

Vail took in the short man with a glance. "Indeed? Then perhaps you may put some of the mystery to rest. Who is your 'master' and exactly what is it he wishes of me?"

"My master is Guy de Montierre, Marquis du Chantonly. I am merely his humble representative. He is a man with... powerful enemies. We have reason to believe one of them has kidnapped his intended, Marie d'Rougeaux. Of course he is frantic to get her back, and the moment she was taken he insisted upon seeking your services, as your reputation precedes you, even here in Dementlieu."

"Indeed?" asked Vail sardonically. "I wonder that he thinks I am capable. Certainly the fabrication you have just offered is insulting. It presumes that I have no knowledge whatever of Dementlieu politics or the noble houses of this land, and that I am as gullible as a common fool. There is no 'Marquis du Chantonly', Guy de Montierre or otherwise. If you wish to retain my services, you must at least offer a better lie."

The short man's smile wavered. He licked his lips. "I'm not sure what you mean, sir. Are you saying-"

"What I am saying, D'Honaire, is that I wonder exactly how long you intend to carry on this charade. You have summoned me; I have come. Let us not pretend you serve any 'master' other than yourself. Did you think to gull me with that ridiculous story?"

The man went silent for a moment. His eyes took on a hard look. "You know then. Good. It shows that you are capable." He raised his voice, speaking to the older man behind him without glancing back. "You may leave us, Edward. Mr. Vail and I have things to discuss in private."

The older gentleman gave a quick nod. "As you wish, lord," he said, backing off.

"Now," said Vail, "what is it you want with me?"

"Exactly what I said," said the man Vail had named as d'Honaire. "The girl was my fiancée; we were engaged to be wed. Her name is Marie d'Rougeaux - I did not lie about that. I have many enemies, Mr. Vail. If you know who I am then you must realize that."

"I have known of you for some time," said Vail coldly. "If you have enemies, it is certainly well-deserved. You have some idea, I take it, who the kidnapper may be?"

The short man nodded. "For some months now I have been engaged in a power struggle with... a powerful opponent. A mysterious underworld figure, the leader of a criminal network. Working with the proper authorities, I have been somewhat successful in curtailing the criminal efforts of his organization, but the man himself is both clever and elusive, and I confess I have never discovered his identity or description. His organization is very powerful, and extends somewhat into Mordent, Lamordia, and other neighboring lands. Were you to apprehend him, Mr. Vail, it would be a great blow in the service of Righteousness, not only for my country, but for your own as well."

"If you are suggesting, d'Honaire, that you were ever on the side of Righteousness in any matter, then you are insulting my intelligence again. Should I undertake the rescue of the girl, you may be certain it will be for her sake, not yours. I do not know what nefarious purpose her engagement to you serves, or what you hope to gain by taking her to wife, but you may be assured that I will strongly advise her against any such union."

D'Honaire was quiet a moment. "You think me a harsh man, Mr. Vail, no? Well, you are right. I am a harsh man. Some would say evil. But Marie... to her, I am not evil. She is... different. I live under a curse, Mr. Vail. You knew this?"

Vail stared at him. "I would think you labored under several. Men as evil and twisted as you often do."

D'Honaire gave a thin-lipped smile. "Perhaps. But there is only one that ever bothered me. You will think I have an attractive face, yes? Most people find it so. But my curse is that the more I should care for a woman, the less attractive she will find me - until at last, she sees me and is repulsed by my hideousness. You see?"

Vail said nothing. For my part, I felt deep pity for the fellow. Such a curse seemed a terrible burden to bear, and I wondered what he could ever possibly have done to deserve it.

"In spite of this, Mr. Vail, Marie loves me. She loves me. You will not think a man such as I could feel love, perhaps, but she has come to mean... redemption, of a sort. She knows nothing of my... my other life. I have kept it from her."

"I would not be so certain," said Vail. "She probably suspected something of your criminal ties; she was in fact coming to seek my advice when she was abducted. Nevertheless, you may be certain I will tell her, should I find her."

D'Honaire shook his head. "It does not matter. Even should she come to hate me, Mr. Vail, even then I will not stop caring for her. So long as she is delivered safe from her abductor - that is my concern."

"Then tell me more of this abductor," said Vail.

"You will help me, then?" asked d'Honaire.

"I will not stand idly by and see an innocent girl hurt simply because she is caught up in an underworld war, especially when it was I she was trying to reach when she was abducted. But do not think that I condone your own evils by any means, or that my efforts to bring you to justice will flag to any degree. You and I are necessarily enemies, d'Honaire, and that will not change until you have been brought to accountability under the law."

D'Honaire nodded. "I expected no less from you."

"Tell me of your opponent," said Vail. "Tell me what you know of him."

"He is powerful," said d'Honaire, "a very powerful man. He has the... talent of influencing minds. Perhaps he is a mesmerist, yes? His influence reaches beyond Dementlieu, this much I know. His organization has a strong foothold in your native city, though it is a new presence there."

"Indeed?" said Vail in some surprise. "I am remiss in my duty, then, for I have detected no such organization."

"It is new, as I said. And do not underestimate the man; he is clever and very resourceful. He will not hesitate to harm Marie should such an action aid him - he must be stopped, Mr. Vail." There was something in d'Honaire's eye that caught my attention and held me rapt. His voice became very gentle, and a sudden wave of dizziness washed over me. "You will find him, Mr. Vail. You will find him and destroy him. And then you will return my fiancée to me. To me."

Vail uttered a short bark of laughter which brought me back to myself.

"Will you mesmerize me, d'Honaire? I shall think you very rude if you try. Do you wish to end our interview prematurely? I suggest you restrain your natural impulse to manipulate and hold your loathsome sorceries in check. I asked a specific question regarding the man who abducted the girl; you have answered only in generalities. Do you know nothing more?"

D'Honaire's voice returned to its former level. "His power is very strong, Mr. Vail, but it has its limits. It takes time for him to dominate a mind - the stronger the will resisting him the longer it will take. But even the weakest mind may resist him for... a half hour, perhaps. And his strength fades the farther one is from him.

"The lower classes have a name for him, Mr. Vail: Du Malaise. What I know of him I have said; that and one other thing: I may say with certainty that he is not within the boundaries of my land, not at this moment."

Vail nodded. "As it happens, I have some idea where he is already. If that is all you have to offer, then I must conclude that our interview is over." He turned away. "Come Pendleton. I will return to Mordentshire and follow the leads I have developed there. And d'Honaire," he said turning back momentarily, "you may be certain that I shall bill you when the girl is found. I usually charge my clients according to their means. In your case, I will charge a little more. It should be interesting to see ill-gotten money put to good use."

"Any price for Marie is a paltry one," said d'Honaire as we boarded the brougham. "Be careful, Mr. Vail. Others have died facing the man who holds her. There is no depth he will not plumb, and he is very dangerous indeed."

Chapter 5

"The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend', eh Pendleton?" said Vail, settling into his seat as we got underway for the return trip. "But perhaps he may be a temporary ally, at least."

"Who was he?" I asked. "During much of the conversation you spoke as if you were acquainted, but I confess I do not recognize the name, though it seems faintly familiar."

"That was Dominic d'Honaire, Pendleton, one of the great criminal masterminds of our day. No, we have never before met, though I have studied the man in detail. The reason his name is familiar to you is that he is one of the five great councilors to Lord-governor Guignol. In truth, he has corrupted and subverted the government of his homeland to such a degree that he has made himself all but untouchable, though I have hopes of someday catching him in his own net."

"But you each spoke as if you knew the other."

"I do know him, Pendleton, how could I not? The man is brilliant. He lurks like a spider in a web, pulling the strings of others. Robbery, extortion, murder - all these things he is responsible for, and worse, though I cannot prove it, for no direct link to him exists. As for familiarity, well, there is bound to be some measure of it between those who are committed to preserving the law and those bound to trespass it. Make no mistake, Pendleton, he is very big game. Did I never tell you of my little list of the five most deadly men? No? Well, he is on it. Any 'opponent' who can play on d'Honaire's home territory and avoid destruction is a being to command both fear and respect."

"What was it you said to him towards the end, Vail? That he should restrain his impulse to manipulate?"

Vail gazed out the window a moment in silence. "He has a very dark power, Pendleton. His father, and his father's father, were both famed mesmerists. Dominic is more skillful than both. Given the opportunity, he will implant a suggestion within another's mind, and another, and another, until that victim becomes a devoted slave."

I was shocked. "Why, Vail! Is that not strikingly similar to the force which controlled the dockman?"

He nodded. "Excellent, Pendleton. Yes, strikingly similar... and yet not quite the same. D'Honaire's manipulations, though invasive and evil, do not destroy the victim's mind. No, we are dealing with something different - and possibly more powerful. I have been giving it some thought... Well, we shall see what may be accomplished once we return to Mordentshire."

He drifted off, and would say nothing more on the subject, only staring mournfully out at the eerie passing snowscape.

Chapter 6

By the time we reached Mordentshire, the morning sun was peeking over the distant hills, painting the land golden-red in the light of dawn. I had tried to nap on the return trip, but found I could doze only fitfully, and by the time we pulled up to our flat I was bone-weary.

Vail, on the other hand, seemed only to have gained in enthusiasm and excitement during the trip, despite the fact that he had not slept at all. He dashed energetically into his room when we returned. "I shall be out for several hours, Pendleton," he said over his shoulder. "I must follow up on a few things, and see what has happened during out absence. You will stay here?"

"If you wish it, Vail," I said tiredly, stifling a small yawn.

He grinned. "Catch up on sleep then. I have a feeling events will come to a head sometime before evening, and you will be of far greater service if you are refreshed and alert." He was bent over one of his trunks, rifling through some of the various articles of clothing within.

"For my own part, I shall be out for some hours, though I should finish my work before dark."

He held up a ratty black coat, eyeing it critically. "It will make my work very much easier if I travel under some disguise, I think."

Chapter 7

Despite Vail's advice, I determined to be ready for his return, and rather than retire to my bedroom, I rested on the couch before the fireplace, with a shawl. I remained clothed, prepared to leave on the instant, should Vail return and desire it.

I had intended only to nap, but I fell into a fitful slumber and did not awake until late in the day. The flat was still empty when I sat up again, though the fire had died down somewhat. Outside, the last grey of twilight was fading into night.

I stood and stretched, then stoked the fire up. I went to the window and looked out at the darkening street, again half-fearing I would see the same candle-seller near the streetlamp, though of course there was no-one there. I glanced at the clock over the mantle. It read twenty past six. Vail should have returned by now, and I felt a vague sense of unease. I returned to my seat before the fire, waiting, and time seemed to drag by.

At around a quarter to seven there was a sharp rap at the door, and I went to answer it. Miss Sherington, I recalled, had been given the day off by Vail earlier, and had left shortly after preparing breakfast for me. There was a disheveled gaunt fellow at the door, with sullen eyes and

an unshaven face. He wore an old cap and had a well-chewed pipe clamped between his teeth.

"Vail," he demanded in a sour half grunt. "I'm here to see Vail."

I took an immediate dislike to the fellow. "He isn't here."

The man shuffled in. "I'll wait."

I was somewhat taken back by the fellow's directness. "If you like," I said, closing the door.

"Though I do not know when to expect him." He grunted and trudged up the stairs behind me, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his ratty black coat.

He followed me into the drawing room and immediately took a seat in Vail's armchair, propping his dirty boots up on the coffee table. "Got tea?" he grunted.

"No," I said coldly. "And if you don't mind, I'd prefer if you kept your shoes off the furniture."

He made a noncommittal grunt. "Vail owes me," he said, "so don't go giving me guff. Go get me some tea."

I had already half turned away when he spoke, but now I whirled back angrily. "Now see here-!"

I started, but my jaw dropped in surprise.

Vail gave a musical laugh. Already he had removed the hat, and was pulling the flesh-colored putty from the bridge of his nose. "Ah, Pendleton, please forgive me. I simply couldn't resist. It is perhaps my dramatic nature, eh? Now now, old fellow, don't be angry with me. If you could have seen your face-

I had seen my friend's talent for disguise several times before, but he never ceased to surprise me. "Where have you been all day?" I asked, still a little annoyed.

"I have found our missing lady, or I am much mistaken," said Vail with a triumphant smile.

"Come, I will change out of this clothing and we will have a bite or two to eat; there is no hurry.

I daresay Inspector Lambert will be some little while getting his men into place."

Chapter 8

A half hour later we were winding our way down Wythe Street, near the port section of the city.

It was nearly a ten minute walk from our apartment, but Vail had insisted we go by foot. "It is a fine, bright evening, Pendleton. The crisp fresh air will do us good."

Which wasn't entirely true. Though the skies were mostly clear when we started, a light sleet began falling as we went. And the moonlight was covered by a thin haze of clouds. The air was chill enough that we had bundled up in heavy cloaks, and our breath formed little clouds each time we breathed.

Still, Vail was in bright spirits, striding along at a good pace, his cane moving in time, and I had to hurry just to keep up with him.

As we rounded the corner at the end of Wythe Street and turned onto a smaller street - Tabby Lane, the ramshackle streetsign said - I spotted a policeman standing in the road some way ahead. Vail quickly approached the man, conferring with him in half-whispers.

"-said you'd be along, Mr. Vail," the man was saying as I drew up.

"You're to follow me, sir, and I'll take you to him. Oh, and you too, colonel."

Vail nodded, and the man turned, heading into a tiny pathway which wound in darkness between two of the towering buildings. I followed as best I could, though the darkness in the little alleyway was nearly absolute. After a time it opened into a small, abandoned plaza. Vail and the policeman halted just at the mouth of the alley, keeping back in the shadows. I saw that another man was waiting there. In the darkness I could make nothing of his face beyond a vague shape, but when he spoke in a hoarse whisper, I immediately recognized the voice of Inspector Lambert.

"Well, Vail, you've dragged us all out on a dark cold night. I hope there's a reason."

But Vail was staring into the plaza beyond, a triumphant expression painted on his face. "A reason? I should think it was plain, inspector. Look for yourself."

I peered in the direction he indicated, but saw nothing. The plaza was completely empty, save for a beggar huddled on the steps of a run-down building on the far side. We were hard on the docks, here, and beyond the buildings in that direction I could see the gently-moving masts of ships riding their moorings in the harbor beyond.

Lambert must have been equally mystified. "I see nothing to arouse interest, Vail, beyond the beggar."

"Inspector, you surprise me!" said Vail. "You see everything, yet do not comprehend. Look again." Reluctantly Lambert did.

"It's only a beggar, Vail," I said.

"Only a beggar, yes. But did you ever see a more unlikely beggar? Consider your own discomfort, inspector. You complained of the dark and cold. Yet you are clothed in a heavy cloak. Compare that with the beggar, who is dressed in little more than rags, yet sits out in the open on a night such as this, begging. And can you imagine a worse place and time for him to ply his trade? It is night in an abandoned plaza in one of the poorest sections of the city - this is

the place he picks for his begging? Who, pray tell, is he hoping will drop a coin in his cup? And yet, there he sits."

I stared. Vail was right. "He must be there for another reason, Vail."

"Indeed he is Pendleton. Consider the methods of our 'opponent'. He has considerable mental power over his minions - in fact, they are reduced to mindless slaves. Would he be concerned with the well-being of a slave's health? Of course not, not when there is an infinite supply abundantly available. One contracts pneumonia, for instance, from being posted out in the cold indefinitely; he is quickly replaced by another. Yes, Pendleton, this is the lair of our enemy; we must tread very carefully here. Your men are in position, inspector?"

Lambert gave a nod. "Very nearly. We have surrounded the building, as you requested. This girl, the kidnap victim you spoke of, she is inside?"

"Yes. As is our opponent, no doubt. Now remember what I told you of him, Lambert. When the men are in place and the signal is given, be very careful entering the building. You will undoubtedly meet with resistance. His minions fear nothing and will go to any lengths to protect their master. I cannot give you a physical description of him.

Indeed, I do not have one to give. But I believe he will be neatly groomed and clothed - he may suffer his slaves to wear rags, but he will hardly keep himself in that condition. In any case he will not fight you himself; he will try to flee. So if you find yourself engaged in combat, it will be with his minions. And as far as the girl is concerned, he will destroy her if he believes she will escape him. This entire affair must be approached very cautiously. As I told you, there is reason to believe that his mental powers take some little time before they overwhelm an unwilling mind, and they of course are stronger the closer one is to the man. None of your men should succumb to his will, not if you hurry. But keep a sharp eye out - if one of your men shows signs of being subverted immediately have him taken as far from this area as you can."

Lambert gave a nod. "Very well, Vail. My men have been briefed; we will do our best, though as you say it is likely to be tricky. As you requested, I will be going thought the front; Wilkins and his men are stationed in the rear. Where will you be?"

"I think it best if I joined Wilkins. Pendleton?"

"Right behind you, Vail," I assured him. Lambert was still staring at the beggar across the way.

"Don't know how you found this place, Vail, but it looks like you were right. Sometimes I think you're a psychic."

Vail smiled. "Ah, inspector, I fear it is a trade secret. Let us say that sometimes it is who you know rather than what you know. Come Pendleton, we must get into position."

But rather than going forward, Vail turned and threaded his way back down the twisting alleyway through which we had come. I followed at his heels, and once we reached Tabby Lane, we turned left and continued some ways in that direction before turning sharply left again, on an unnamed street which led directly to the docks.

Vail led me down to the wooden walkway which lined the harbor. At this hour it was abandoned, of course and the tide was out, so looking over the railing there was a twenty-foot drop to the water below. At various points along its length piers jutted out at right angles to it, connected by walkways to floating docks which rode low on the water.

There were a few smaller vessels - dories and sloops mostly, tied up to the floating docks. Out further were moored the larger ships. Vail slowed for a moment to speak with me. "Softly, Pendleton," he said in a whisper. "We must be very careful to avoid being seen from here on out."

We continued for some distance, halting in the shadows behind one of the buildings.

"Evening, guvner," came a whisper to the right, and I confess I was startled by it, though Vail was not.

"Ah, Williams," said Vail, "you and the lads have done excellent work tonight."

A boy, not more than twelve years old, stepped into sight. "Found 'em, just like you said. Been watching all night but no-one's come or gone." He pointed down the way. "Cops showed about a half-hour ago, trying to sneak up on the place. They ain't so good at hiding, but I don't think they've been spotted neither. Course, they ain't spotted me either."

Vail flipped a coin to him; it glittered silver in the moonlight. The boy caught it deftly. "For your efforts," he said. "You've certainly earned it. Now make yourself scarce; things will get dangerous soon and this is no place for a boy your age."

The boy grinned. "Pleasure doin' business with you, Mr. Vail," he said, and melted off into the night.

Vail nodded in the direction the boy had pointed. "I see Wilkins is in place. Any moment now... Ah!"

The sound of a distant pistol shot rang out, shattering the stillness of the night. Instantly a lantern flared to light some distance ahead of us, and I saw Wilkins and three other policeman

illuminated in the glow. They dashed up the rickety steps leading to the back porch of the building, and with a crash, kicked open the back door. A moment later they disappeared inside, and almost at the same instant there was the sound of shattering glass and a muffled cry, as if two people were struggling.

"Hold steady, Pendleton," said Vail, taking my arm as I started forward. "Wilkins and his men can hold their own. This drama is not yet played out, I suspect."

After several moments, the commotion within died down somewhat, and the flickering glow of the lantern from within the doorway darkened, as if the policemen had moved into another room further into the building.

Minutes passed in silence, then Vail's hand tightened on my arm. "You see them, Pendleton?" he whispered excitedly.

Indeed, the black shapes of three or four men had appeared at the darkened doorway. They paused for a moment there, then headed down the steps towards the docks.

"Just as I thought," said Vail. "He hopes to elude capture by water - likely he has a ship standing by; it is the reason he chose this place. Come!" We hurried stealthily up the dock, closing on the moving men, Vail leading.

We had approached to within a few yards of the small group, at the foot of one of the many piers jutting out into the water, when some noise gave us away, and they whirled to face us.

I was brought up short by the face of the first man. "Wilkins!" I said, shocked. He held something box-shaped in his hands, and he recoiled from me as if struck. Another man stood behind him; the candle-seller. Farther back a dark-haired girl struggled weakly in the grasp of yet third man - a young looking fellow, well dressed and handsome.

"Don't be fooled, Pendleton!" cried Vail, leaping forward. "It is him!"

The candle-seller sprang between Wilkins and I with a snarl, and the inspector backed off a half-step, looking about wildly. The third man snatched the dark-haired girl up, throwing her over his shoulder as if she weighed no more than a bundle of rags, and began sprinting down the pier.

Vail rushed after him.

I already had my pistol in hand - had I not, I believe I would have been lost. For the candle-seller sprang upon me so quickly that I fired only reflexively, and I was thrown backwards under the weight of his attack to land hard on my back, the air driven from my lungs.

The man's strength was unearthly. Though I fought him his fingers were like iron, and they closed on my throat in a crushing grip that I am certain would have meant the end of me - except that even as his fingers closed on me his eyes glazed over with death. My shot had been true, and the ball had pierced the man's heart, slaying him almost instantly.

Still, his death grasp was locked in place, and I was forced to bend all my strength to the task of prying his hands from their hold. While I wrestled, helplessly pinned, I was peripherally aware that Wilkins rushed past me, heading in the opposite direction from that which the other policeman had taken, away from the dock.

Farther down the pier I heard a shrill scream and the sound of a pistol shot. I managed to pull the body of the candle-seller off of me, and rolled onto my side. I saw that the other third man had nearly reached the midpoint of the pier (there was a sleek-looking sailing sloop tied up to the floating dock at the end - no doubt that had been his objective) before Vail had caught up with him. What had happened in the exchange that followed I could not guess, but the policeman lay slumped face down on the dock and Vail was stretched over the railing, grasping desperately at the dark-haired girl's hand.

She dangled precariously in open space, a sharp drop to the rocks below. She screamed again as I rose, and I could see the Vail was close to losing his grip.

"Hurry Pendleton!" he cried. "I am overbalancing!"

I rushed down the pier towards him. Behind me, nearer the building, I heard the whinny and galloping of horses as a carriage rolled away and charged into the night.

I reached Vail just in time, grasping his waist and hauling him back to safety. Together the two of us managed to pull the dark-haired woman over the railing. She was exhausted from her ordeal, and did little more than slump against Vail, thanking him over and over again with a thick Dementlieu accent.

Bearing lanterns, Inspector Lambert and his men appeared on the pier, coming in response to the two pistol shots.

Chapter 9

"What a bloody fool I was," said Vail again. We were back in our rooms on High Street, the evening's excitement over. Vail was in a foul mood, owing to the escape of 'Du Malaise'. "I had him, Pendleton! I had him in my grasp and lost him!"

"The girl was rescued, at least," I pointed out. "In that much you succeeded. Besides, you can hardly claim that his escape was your fault."

"But it was, Pendleton, it was! He had two separate escape plans. Had I taken that possibility into account... And the girl was saved, yes, though it may be weeks before she recovers fully. But four of Lambert's men are either dead or missing - including Inspector Wilkins. I assumed - wrongly - that what we faced was a man. A man with dangerous powers, but a man nonetheless. Thus when I recognized Wilkins and the candle-seller, I was certain that the third man was the mentalist, and I pursued him accordingly. But it wasn't him, Pendleton - it wasn't him!"

"But how can you be certain?"

"Because when I shot the man, none of the other minions ceased to struggle. Cut off the head, Pendleton, and the body is useless. It was quite plain that I had not cut off the head. No, 'Du Malaise', whoever or whatever he is, fled in the opposite direction - with Inspector Wilkins."

"Wilkins?" I asked, surprised. "But Wilkins was alone."

"Have you forgotten the object Wilkins was carrying, Pendleton? It was boxlike, and covered, around the same general size as a birdcage."

"Surely you are not suggesting that the mentalist was within that!" I said, my skin crawling at the thought. What manner of horror could this 'Du Malaise' be?

"That is exactly what I am suggesting, Pendleton. Indeed, there can be no other explanation. As to what manner of creature it was... Perhaps even the reknowned Dr. Van Richten would have trouble putting a name to it. Certainly it is nothing I have ever before encountered."

"Poor Wilkins," I said. "Stripped of his will; a slave to that... thing. Will we never see him again?"

Vail was silent a moment. "I cannot say. As for the thing we faced... yes, I think I may say with some certainty that our paths will cross again. And gods help us if I fail again."

The End

Author's note:

This is the longest Hector Vail story so far, and though it is not so long as to constitute a novelette by any means, it is a fair sized short story. I had not planned for it to run so long and did my best to shorten it, but the subject demanded some amount of detail.

This is also a different kind of story than the first two. By no means is it a 'locked room - figure-it-out' type scenario. I imagine most readers familiar with Ravenloft would have guessed who the

principle villains were by the halfway point, if not sooner. But Vail and Pendleton did not know - could not know, so the journey had to be made.

This is the first time 'famous' people have been introduced into a Vail story. Of course 90% of the people who seek Vail's help are going to be regular folks, but sometimes even famous people will cross his path, and it makes for an interesting dynamic. Most Vail stories will involve ordinary 'non-famous' people, but there will be a few... look for people like Jander Sunstar, Alanik Ray, Van Richten, etc to at least get mentioned in future stories. Also, there were a few things/references in this one to different interesting items I picked up from the listserv. I hope nobody gets angry about me including them; I only meant to compliment the extremely good ideas I saw. 'Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery' or something like that. :) By the by, someone way back when mentioned an absolutely great alternative name for the Living Brain that I really wanted to use, but I lost the post and forgot the name (so I used du Malaise instead, because I know it was something similar) If you know what that name was, let me know, and I'll change the story, cause it was a great name...

The Keepers Of The Coil

(an Order of the Guardians)

By J.W. Mangrum

With thanks to Elaine Bergstrom, Jeff Grubb, and Steven Miller for their creations.

A midday sun did little to brighten the gloom of the Sithican woods. A scant few shafts of golden light pierced the canopy, achieving little more than to deepen the shadows surrounding them. A sullen, lifeless grey permeated the scene, in the stones which littered the forest floor, in the moss which clung to those boulders and made the ground spongy underfoot, and in the charcoal bark of the ancient trees. The thousand shadows of the Sithican woods hid as many secrets. One of those secrets shifted its weight.

The man rested on one knee, tucked between a boulder and a patch of underbrush which somehow had wrested some life from the somber trees around it. His name was Enrik; he had been a member of the Gundrakan militia fifteen years ago, before the assassination of Duke Gundar. In the chaos which followed his leader's death, Enrik decided to strike out on his own, and had found a talent for hunting men. Some called him bounty hunter, some mercenary, some hired killer. Enrik wasn't concerned with what he was called, or what men he hunted, or why. He cared only for the gold. And now, he needed that gold. His muscles were beginning to soften, his back to ache. He had been at this too long; he needed one last, sizable bounty so he could retire before he finally met the man who could best him.

Enrik had found the bounty he needed in Sithicus, offered by the fallen knight who ruled that region, Soth. Soth was convinced that a small group of rebels hid somewhere in his lands, harboring fugitives from his justice and stockpiling weapons against him. To receive the bounty, all Enrik had to do was discover their haven and report back to Soth with their location. With the money, he'd have enough perhaps to buy a tavern, or... who was he kidding. With that kind of money, Enrik could surround himself with servants and never have to deal with the rabble again. Soth could, or would, offer no clues to aid Enrik in his hunt. Enrik had sniffed around the cities, trying to find a connection to his prey; surely they could not exist totally cut off from society. Unfortunately, Enrik found the damned hissing elves most uncooperative. So total had been their

rebuffing of his requests for information, Enrik couldn't tell if it was caused by spite for their rightful ruler, or their hatred for anyone unlike themselves.

But Enrik was no dim-witted thug, scarce more intelligent than the blade he wielded. Nor was he apt to give up the hunt until his prey was captured or dead, whichever his employer required.

And after extensive searching, he had found a connection to his prey. The elves were protected by warriors who rode huge, horrid insects. These elven warriors guarded the cities and patrolled the wilds as well. Enrik's keen eyes had found one of these warriors, "rangers" as Soth's freakish emissary Azrael had called them. This elf was sneaking supplies out of Har-Thelen on the back of his riding-beast. Keeping to the shadows, creeping through the bushes, Enrik had managed to follow this elf for days through the boulder-strewn woods. And the elf had led Enrik right to his prey. Personally, Enrik was glad the rebels were elven; he had no love for the creatures, and would have happily slaughtered them there and then had Soth demanded it.

But Soth didn't want that; apparently he savored the thought of destroying them himself. Soth simply wanted to know what hole they were hiding in. Enrik, crouched in his hiding place, now looked upon that hole. Or tree, as the case may be. The rebels' hideaway was constructed overhead in the intertwining branches of several massive trees, and well disguised. A traveler could easily pass directly under the stronghold and never notice it.

Enrik silently watched the stronghold for several hours, counting faces whenever someone would appear, walking along the rope bridges from one tree-hut to another. Over the course of several hours, Enrik made mental notes of all he saw, until he was sure he had a firm grip on the rebels numbers. Their numbers were tiny at best. They couldn't possibly pose any real threat to Soth, Enrik was sure of that. Nor were they well defended; the elven ranger had the only weapons Enrik had seen, and none of them had seen him hiding in the gloom.

The thousand shadows of the Sithican woods held a thousand secrets. Enrik was one of those secrets, and he was not alone. Behind him, unseen, unheard, something crawled on its belly through the underbrush. A small figure, the size of a child. At a painfully slow, cautious rate, it crept up directly behind Enrik. After lingering for several moments, it began to crawl away again, backwards, as quietly and cautiously as it came. In time, it was gone. Enrik, studying the arboreal hideaway, never noticed it.

The distant, barely seen sun slid to the horizon. The scant beams of daylight slithered across the forest floor, creeping up the moss-speckled bark of the tree trunks, then died out. Enrik crept

away from his spot, hiking west back towards Har-Thelen. He wanted to put several miles between himself and the rebels before he made camp. The gloom intensified; the shadows slid from their places, starting to devour the woods around them.

Enrik was having difficulty making his way in the twilight; light and dark were blending into an all-pervasive murk. His skin tightened, his breath grew shallow. Enrik knew he was being foolish, but the moonless Sithican night worked at his nerves. Enrik had heard the tales of the restless spirits which haunted the elven forest. Although he'd never encountered such a spirit, he knew he'd never be able to rest easily under a Sithican sky. Instinctually, Enrik's hand went for his lucky piece, a simple pin he'd taken off some traitorous scum back in Gundarak, more than twenty years ago. It was a symbol of his happier days. Enrik's fingers slid into a belt pouch to retrieve this token -and poked through the slit cut into the pouch's stitching.

"Pazitor sever!" The old oath escaped his lips in his old tongue. How could it be? Robbed? In the deepest forest? By who? Enrik's blood ran cold as he realized the rebels must have seen him. But why steal from him? Why not kill him? Enrik drew his sword, expecting the elves to burst out at him at any moment. Four, maybe five against one; he could handle such a fight. Enrik started formulating a battle plan, his wide eyes bright in the gloom as he searched for signs of attackers. Something moved in the shadows. But it wasn't an elf; the movement had been... strange... more like a ripple on a nighttime lake than the movement of anything solid. There! The movement again! It was as if the shadows themselves were moving, circling him like vultures. A rapid, metallic ticking noise reached his ears, then stopped; it had sounded like daggers being quickly tapped against a metal shield. Enrik had no idea what caused the sound; but there it was again, still circling him!

Enrik spun about, following the sound as it moved. Now he saw the moving darkness as well, and was able to follow it with his eyes. The sound and the movement had the same source. It detached itself from the surrounding gloom and slithered up to him. The long, sinuous shape reared up before him and grew solid. Enrik could scarce believe what he saw before him. A serpent, huge, black, and unnatural; for it was made of a dull, black metal. Its jointed body was poised to strike, its head as high as his chest.

The serpent opened its hinged, hissing maw and the rapid ticking was repeated; Enrik now saw the source of that noise. Several sets of fangs popped into position and retracted again faster than his eye could follow. Each time a set of fangs popped into place, they would make a metallic

tick. The serpent appeared to be choosing which set of teeth would have the honor of piercing Enrik's flesh.

Enrik knew he had at last met his match. Victory would come to he who struck first- but before Enrik could even complete the thought, the serpent struck, a black blur against the dim surroundings. Pain exploded in Enrik's wrist and he cried out. The metal serpent slithered back, but did not vacate the scene, as if it wished to watch the effects of its bite.

Enrik looked to his wounded arm, his weapon arm. A network of ebon veins spread along his skin, stretching from the twin puncture marks. As the black veins raced through his flesh, the arm grew cold.

"Damn you!" Enrik spat at the night serpent. The thing may have killed him, but it would not survive to enjoy its victory! Striding forward, he raised his sword high to strike the unnatural creature...

...but the sword fell to the soft ground. Enrik heard it hit the ground and stopped short; he had not let go of the blade; his hand was still clenched in a fist. Enrik looked at his hand in horror; it had become entirely black, the edges becoming indistinct. His hand was cold as ice, and that chill was spreading throughout his entire body. Enrik tried to grip his wounded hand with the good one; he found the midnight limb as insubstantial as air. Now, his other hand also grew dark and blurred, and the freezing chill grew too intense to bear. Shrieking in anguish, he dropped to his knees.

Enrik looked to the serpent. It seemed pleased with its deed, and slithered away, merging with the shadows once more. Alone, Enrik emptied his lungs with his cries of suffering. His body became a silhouette; his lasting screams faded until they couldn't be distinguished from the sound of leaves blowing across a courtyard.

Enrik's clothing, no longer supported by substantial flesh, slumped to the ground. Enrik was gone, and night overtook the forest. The woods of Sithicus had lost one of their thousand secrets. But they had gained a shadow.

John W. Mangrum

The Mystery of the Scornful Lover

By Daniel Brough

Chapter 1

"You are familiar with Cora DeComfette, Pendleton?"

I was surprised by the question. Vail had been distracted all morning, and had avoided all attempts at conversation, responding to my morning greeting at breakfast with a monosyllable grunt and lapsing into moody silence. "The celebrated performer?" I asked.

"The diva, yes."

"Well, no more familiar than anyone else, I suppose. She is quite famed for her voice." I shook my head. "But I don't think I have ever seen her perform, and I am quite certain I have never met her."

"You may get your chance," said Vail. He held up a small white letter and passed it to me. "This arrived by morning post, before you woke. What do you make of it?"

I took the letter and scanned it.

Mr. Vail,

I would not impose upon your kindness, sir, but I am desperate and have nowhere else to turn. You are known as much for your discretion as for solving puzzles, and I am confronted with a delicate problem. I fear my sister may be losing her mind. I shall call on you at 2:00 this afternoon in the hope that you may be able to offer some advice on what is, for me, a dreadful and enigmatic situation.

Yours Truly,

Mlle Charlotte DeComfette

"Interesting, eh?" said Vail when I looked up.

"Mysterious, certainly," I said. "What can it mean?"

"It means that Charlotte DeComfette will be paying us a visit this afternoon," said Vail wryly.

"Though if her sister has become deranged, I am at a loss as to what she expects me to do. I am hardly a doctor, to treat mental illness."

"Then you think there may be something to what she says? That Cora DeComfette may be losing her mind?"

Vail gave a slight shrug. "She is a brilliantly talented performer, by all accounts. It is not unknown for those cursed with brilliance to have certain... eccentricities. Such people are driven to excel, and often lose themselves in their work. It is not such a long step to madness."

It struck me that Vail might well be describing himself, but wisely I did not voice my thought. "Cora DeComfette is a darling of society," I pointed out. "Hardly a reclusive madman, I should think."

Vail shrugged again. "Ah, well, it is useless to speculate. Charlotte DeComfette will arrive at the appointed hour, and no doubt her enigmatic missive will be explained. Until then, let us put the matter from our minds."

Chapter 2

The day seemed to last forever. I found myself glancing continually at the clock above the mantle, impatient at the slow progress of the hands.

Occasionally I paced the length of the study, pausing by the window to glance out at the foggy street below. I could think of nothing other than the mysterious letter, and what it might mean. Vail, however, seemed to have taken his own advice and put the matter completely out of mind. He spent the remainder of the morning and early afternoon in bright spirits, busily engaged in cleaning and ordering his makeshift laboratory.

At last the appointed hour arrived, and a small but ornate hansom pulled up in front of our flat. I watched at the window as a woman exited it and made her way to our door. A moment later a knock followed.

"Our guest has arrived," said Vail. "Miss Sherington will bring her up."

A moment later and Charlotte DeComfette stood at our door.

She was a tall woman, with handsome and angular features and fair auburn hair which flowed past her shoulders. Her eyes were a startling shade of blue, and there was something in her manner which spoke of quiet determination.

"Ah, Mlle DeComfette," said Vail. "Please, come in, come in. Have a seat. May I offer you tea?"

"Thank you, no." Her voice betrayed a hint of the soft, lazy accent so common to the people of Richemulot. I had read somewhere that her family hailed from that land, as might be expected by her name.

Vail nodded. "We recieved your letter this morning," he said. "Please tell us how we may be of service."

She glanced uncertainly at me. "Mr. Vail, this is a... delicate matter."

"Should I go?" I asked.

"I assure you," said Vail, "my associate is a trustworthy man. Pendleton is a splendid fellow, and I often find his aid indispensable. You may rely upon his complete discretion."

I gave her my solemn assurance that whatever she had to say would be held in utmost confidence, and she nodded slowly.

"Now," said Vail. "Please tell us how we may aid you."

The woman collected her thoughts. "Mr. Vail, it is my sister."

"So we were given to understand in your letter."

She shook her head, and for the first time I saw that she was under an enormous strain. "I am not at all certain that you can help me, Mr.

Vail. This sort of thing hardly seems your province, but I have nowhere else to turn."

Vail nodded. "Perhaps we would be best served, Mlle. DeComfette, if you would tell us exactly what is wrong."

She visibly collected herself. "I am sorry, Mr. Vail. These last few days have been... very upsetting. Cora was always such a friendly and generous person, and now..."

"When did you begin to notice changes in her?" asked Vail.

"I... I am not certain. Perhaps a week ago. I was away, visiting friends in Blackhurst. It is when I returned that I learned she was having bad dreams."

"Bad dreams?"

She nodded. "Yes. Poor Cora had awoken from her sleep screaming as if she were being attacked. The servants told me of it. By the time I had returned, she had already taken to locking herself in her room. At first, I thought it was only a part of her mourning."

"Her mourning?" asked Vail.

She saw our confused expressions. "I'm sorry, I should explain. Cora was engaged to marry Hilary Tilbrook. He is... was a young man from the Willoughby district. A month ago he was involved in a terrible accident and died as a result of his injuries. Of course, Cora was destroyed."

"Quite understandable," said Vail.

"Yes," said Mlle DeComfette, "and for some time after the accident, she was in grieving. I had thought she was coming out of it... she's always been a strong person..." She shook her head.

"But when I returned home from my visit, it was like she was someone else. Someone I didn't know. She was pale, like she hadn't gone out in the sun in weeks, and she looked as if she hadn't eaten in days. Her eyes... Mr. Vail, her eyes were haunted, there is no other word. And her temper...

"She didn't tell me of the dreams, I learned of them from the servants. But it is more than bad dreams. She wanders the house like a ghost, and shuts herself in her room for hours at a time. She never lets anyone else in, and I hear strange noises from it at night. I think... I think she has taken to sleeping during the day, though I don't know why.

"And there is something else, something worse." She lowered her voice.

"Cora believes she has seen Hilary."

"A ghost?" asked Vail, sitting up in his chair.

Mlle DeComfette shook her head. "She claims he comes to her in her dreams. If it is a ghost or not... I do not know. She only spoke of it once, when I first returned. She asked me if I believed in life after death. I told her I didn't know.

"He comes to me in my sleep,' she said. 'I fear for my sanity.' She wouldn't speak of it further, but since then... Mr. Vail, last night I saw her in the graveyard after dark, visiting his grave. At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks. She stood there, like a ghost in the mist, wearing only her nightgown."

"The graveyard?"

"Yes, we have a small family cemetery on the grounds. Cora requested that Hilary be buried on it, even though they were never married. Hilary's family agreed to it, feeling it was what he would have wanted."

"I see," said Vail. "Please, go on."

"I confronted her about it when she returned to the house and she flew into a rage, accusing me of spying on her. 'You were always jealous of me,' she said, 'You hated Hilary because you couldn't have him!'"

Tears formed in the poor woman's eyes. "I was shocked, Mr. Vail. Cora has never spoken to me like that, never. It isn't like her. I love my sister, Mr. Vail, but I have no idea what I should do. So I came to you, in hope that... in hope that you might have some advice for me."

My heart went out to the poor lady, for I could see the pain in her eyes. I felt pity, too, for from her description it did not sound like the sort of case Vail would take.

"I fear," said Vail, "that I have no advice to offer. While there are certain points of interest in your narrative, it is impossible to make any conclusion based solely on the little you have said. More first-hand evidence is required."

Her face fell. "Then you can do nothing, Mr. Vail?"

Vail's next words astonished me. "On the contrary, we will do everything in our power. I believe that your sister is in greater peril than you know. It may be her soul, and not merely her mind, that is in danger."

Relief flooded the woman's face. "You will help me, then?"

Vail nodded, rising. "We will do what we can. However, that may be precious little." He moved to his desk and rifled through his papers.

"There are striking similarities..." he muttered, then looked up. "I must ask for specific details on Hilary Tilbrook's death."

Mlle DeComfette's face paled. "You think then, that there may be some unnatural agency at work?"

"It is impossible to be certain, but I very much suspect it," said Vail. "But please, how did he die?"

"Hilary was an active young man, almost... reckless. He had many passions, all of which were dangerous to one degree or another. Two months ago an expedition to scale Mt. Gries was organized - an expedition of ten men. He volunteered to join it. They did practice runs on the Briaden Ledges - you know, outside Sedgewick. It was during one of these routine climbs that tragedy struck. Hilary... lost his hold, slipped and fell."

"Surely he was tethered to the other members of the expedition?" asked Vail, surprised.

She nodded. "He was, but the knot was poorly tied, and the rope parted. He only fell about forty feet before striking an outlying ledge, but it was enough."

"You said he died as a result of his injuries," said Vail. "He was not dead, then, by the time they reached him?"

Again the woman nodded. "He was alive, and conscious, though he knew he was dying. In fact, he dictated a letter to Cora."

"Indeed?" Vail seemed to take this as a particular point of interest.

"Yes, it was delivered to her after the tragedy, and read later, at the funeral."

"Hum! I don't suppose there is any chance I might see it?"

Mlle DeComfette looked taken aback by the question. "Cora has it, of course. She guards it jealously. If you can talk her into surrendering it to you... It is simply a letter, much what one would expect from a dying man. He wanted her to know that he loved her, and would always love her; that he was sorrowful that he would not live to see their wedding day."

"Never mind, never mind," said Vail. "Please continue. You were saying that Tilbrook was alive when they found him."

"Yes, that's right. His injuries were very serious, but not mortal. Unfortunately, by the time the team managed to get him off the mountain, his condition had worsened. He died before they reached medical help."

Vail nodded distractedly. I saw that he had found what he was looking for, a small leatherbound notebook. I recognized it as one of Dr. Van Richten's treatises, though I could not tell which it was. He opened it and began turning pages, looking for something.

Mlle DeComfette glanced at me, surprised by Vail's sudden silence. I gave her a reassuring look.

"Vail does this from time to time," I murmured in quiet explanation.

She looked back at him, and nodded slowly.

"Hmm," he said, his expression grim. "Yes... striking." Abruptly he looked up, slamming the notebook closed. "You live in the Blackhurst district, of course."

She was surprised at the statement. "The family estate is there, yes... but how could you know that?"

"It was the return address on the letter you sent," said Vail. "That would be an hour's ride from here by carriage, yes?" She nodded.

"Good. You will return immediately, and Pendleton and I will follow. There are a few things I must collect before we set out, but we will arrive before dark."

"You will come to the manor then? Will you be staying the night?"

"Indeed," said Vail, "though there is no need to prepare a guest room. Rather, you should prepare your sister for our coming, for I must speak with her. Most likely she will refuse to see us, but you must try."

"I will do what I can," said Mlle DeComfette, "though after our argument last night, I cannot think that she will listen to me."

"You must try," said Vail. "If this is as serious as I think, it may mean the difference between life and death for her. And only she can save herself."

"I must confess, Vail," I admitted after the woman left, "that I am surprised."

Vail gave me a wry grin. "At what, Pendleton? That I would take a case such as this, which appears, on the surface at least, to be wholly unsuitable for my methods?"

"Well, yes, quite frankly. It hardly seems in your line."

He had been reading through the treatise again, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace. He closed it now, and tucked it under one arm. "We shall see, Pendleton, we shall see. It may be that you are right. There is too little data yet to be certain, but I have a suspicion..." He shook his head. "We must pay a visit to the eminent Dr. Kaufen, and retrieve a very special item he has procured in his collection. He owes a favor, and is a good enough fellow, so I have no doubt that he will loan it for our use in this good cause."

He took his cloak from the coatstand, and turned to me. "Well Pendleton, are you game?"

"Of course," I said, reaching for my own coat and cane, invigorated by his sudden energy. "I should like nothing better."

Chapter 3

It was late afternoon when our hansom pulled up in front of the DeComfette estate, and lazy red sunlight stretched across the drive, making the shadows of the stately house and surrounding trees twist in an unsettling way. I had never seen a sunset in this part of the country before, and I was struck by how breathtaking it was, and yet sinister at the same time. The rich light played across the golden-brown leaves of the trees (the season was autumn) and a light breeze stirred the branches.

The house itself was elegant and maintained; a white-washed three-story structure with a grand set of steps leading up to a spacious portico supported by four white pillars. It looked very much the sort of place one would expect a social darling to dwell, and I could easily imagine lines of carriages pulling up in front, discharging finely-dressed gentlemen and ladies for elegant parties and gatherings.

Vail stepped out and looked about as if he hardly noticed the grandness of the house. "Ah, there it is," he said, and my eyes followed his gaze.

Half hidden behind the corner of the manse, and some distance away, was a small family cemetery. There were a smattering of tombstones and monuments, surrounded by a square irongrill fence.

Mlle DeComfette had apparently been anxiously awaiting our arrival, for no sooner had we emerged from the carriage than she came hurrying down the steps to meet us. From her drawn expression I could tell that she bore no good news.

"Mr. Vail, she has shut herself in her room," she said as she drew near. "She refuses even to answer my knock, though I have tried to get some response all afternoon. I do not know what to do, or how to coax her from her chamber."

Vail nodded as if this was expected. "I had hoped against hope... Never mind; we shall coax her forth. Pendleton, you have the box?"

I nodded. In my hands I held a small flat wooden box, ten inches long, four inches wide, and no more than three inches thick. It was the thing which Vail had taken from Dr. Kaufen, and it had ridden on the seat between us all the way from Mordentshire. I did not know what was inside it, but it was heavy for something so small, and I handled it carefully. Dr. Kaufen had an extensive collection of exotic, valuable, and - in some cases - magical items, and I knew that whatever it was, it would be priceless and irreplaceable.

"Good. I have the feeling that before the evening is done, we will have pressing need of its contents." Vail was again looking towards the small graveyard.

"Shall I take you to her chamber, Mr. Vail?" asked Mlle DeComfette.

"Not just yet, Mlle," said Vail. "I think it best if I had a look at that cemetery first."

"The... cemetery?" The woman was taken aback, and glanced at me in confusion, as if to gain some explanation. I shrugged helplessly. Vail's actions were often dark to me.

"Yes," said Vail. "It may well accomplish two tasks at once." He looked back to Mlle DeComfette. "You need not accompany us, Mlle. We will find our own way."

"But-"

"It would be best if you were not present," said Vail decisively. "You must trust me on that. We will rejoin you after our visit."

"Of course, Mr. Vail," she said faintly, backing off a step. "I shall await you in the house."

"Come Pendleton," said Vail, striding off, "don't dawdle."

I hastened to keep abreast of him. "Vail," I said, once the woman was out of earshot, "what purpose did you have in speaking to that poor woman so?"

A smile quirked at his lips. "You will think me rude, no doubt. I have my reasons. Has it not occurred to you that she stands to gain if her sister is driven mad?"

"That lovely creature?" I asked, taken back.

He glanced at me in surprise. "It is not my experience that 'loveliness' is a sign of virtue. Indeed, some of the most diabolical minds I have encountered during my career were attached to an attractive face."

"But surely you cannot believe-"

"Actually, Pendleton, since you mention it, I do not believe she has anything to do with her sister's madness. But that is for reasons unrelated to her comeliness. Ah!"

He was standing at the wrought-iron gate leading into the cemetery.

"Just as I thought." In a moment he had worked the mechanism and swung the knee-high gate wide. I stepped through after him.

Within were a few small plots and gravestones. It was to one of these that Vail had directed his attention.

It was a rectangular plot, a marble stone laid flat into the ground so that it stood only a few inches above the soil. It was three and a half feet in width and six feet in length. There was no headstone, but carved into the marble was the inscription:

Hilary Tilbrook 737 - 761

"Farewell, Noble Friend"

Honor in Life and Death

That it was a recent addition to the cemetery was evidenced by the whiteness of the marble, and the fact that the surrounding grass and soil had not encroached upon it. And laid carefully across it in different places were several curious items. At the head of the marble had been placed a small mirror, and an identical mirror had been laid at the foot. There were three different bundles of some sort of vegetable... garlic, I realized, leaning forward to look closer, wreaths of garlic. And scattered over the rest of the marble surface were shiny metal objects of different shapes, two of which I recognized as holy symbols.

"What do you make of it, Pendleton?" asked Vail. "Not the sort of things one would expect to be laid on a grave, eh?"

"Strange," I admitted. "Holy symbols, garlic... mirrors?"

"All items commonly held to possess warding powers over the undead," said Vail. "But, of course, this would not have been effective..."

"But why should she have laid these items over the grave of a loved one?" I asked.

"Plainly she fears something. Perhaps that an unclean spirit has gained possession of his body." I glanced over my shoulder towards the house and started. In one of the upper windows, a pale oval face was framed, staring malevolently out at us. The ghostly visage was gone in an instant, leaving me wondering if my eyes were playing tricks. "Vail!"

"Yes, Pendleton," he said, unperterbed. "I saw. No doubt she will be down in a moment. There is nothing so offensive as seeing a stranger violate a loved one's resting place." He was bending over the marble, carefully running his fingers along its edges, looking for cracks or hinges. After a moment's examination, he stood. "No levers or hinges, or any other way of lifting the marble, and the soil around the grave has not been disturbed. And there are no cracks in the marble, no sign that anything has forced its way through from below."

"You thought that perhaps Tilbrook was able to rise from the grave, then?"

"I would not have discounted it," said Vail, "though I admit I had not expected it. It was as well to be certain."

"You!" a woman's voice cried from behind us, and I whirled. A woman had appeared at the rear entrance to the house, and was storming down the path towards us, outraged. "Who are you? What are you doing here? Come away from there! This is private property!"

I had never before met Cora DeComfette, and I was struck immediately by her great beauty. Unlike her sister, she had raven black hair which swept past her shoulders, accompanied by piercing emerald eyes. Her face was classically beautiful, and she was taller than I had expected. At the best of times she must have been a magnificent beauty, but it was plain that she had recently been under some great stress, for there were dark circles under her eyes, which were also red-rimmed, and she was pale as a ghost, with blue veins showing through the skin in some places. She looked as if she had neither eaten nor slept in several days.

"Mlle Cora DeComfette, I presume?" said Vail calmly. "I am Hector Vail, and this is my associate, Col. Oliver Pendleton. We are here at your sister's behest."

"My sister is a fool," she said coldly. "And if you allowed her to bring you here, the you are fools as well. I'll thank you to leave our cemetery in peace, and be on your way."

Vail bowed. "Come along, Pendleton. We've seen all we need to see here."

I followed him out of the graveyard and onto the little path, where we stood facing the furious woman.

"I apologize," said Vail. "We did not wish to cause you distress. I assure you we had no intention of disturbing your fiancée's grave. By all accounts he was a noble young man, and I am sorry for his loss."

For a moment she was silent, a mixture of anger and grief playing across her features. "You know nothing of him," she said at last.

"I know that he comes to visit you in the night," said Vail.

She stared at him. "My sister told you," she said at last. "She thinks I am going mad."

Vail nodded. "But I do not. I fear there is an evil and dangerous agency at work. It is why I have come, in hopes of giving aid."

She shook her head, a haunted look coming into her eyes. "There is nothing you can do... nothing anyone can do."

"Let me try," said Vail. "I have some experience in these matters. I beg of you, do not turn us away."

She stared from one of us to the other, her eyes measuring. "I am tired... so tired. Yes... yes, if you can help me..." a desperate tone crept into her voice. "I don't know what to do."

Chapter 4

"It began two weeks after Hilary's accident," began Cora. The words came slowly, haltingly, as if she were unsure how to begin.

We were in the sitting room, a small fire blazing on the hearth. Cora was sitting on a plushly-appointed armchair, her slender white knuckles gripping the chair's arms. Across from her, Vail leaned forward on a settee, listening attentively. Her sister stood nearby, wringing her hands worriedly and uncertain whether she should be present. I had taken up position next to Vail and listened as Cora shared her story.

"I was... grieved by his passing. I loved him, of course, and it seemed so unfair that he was torn from me so suddenly..." she shook her head. "But then, he came to me..."

"Yes," said Vail. "You must tell us."

Her eyes filled with tears. "At first, I thought it was only a dream... Hilary came to me, you see. He was alive, in my dream, and... he said he wanted to talk to me. I thought he might have come from the other side, just to be near me..." A single tear crept down her cheek, and she brushed it away. "I was so lonely, I missed him so much."

Vail nodded sympathetically. "And he appeared to comfort you."

She shook her head. "No! He appeared to torment me. His words... Mr. Vail, I cannot describe them. They were filthy; obscene. And he accused me, accused me of his death! He said he blamed me; that it was my fault, and that he had nothing but hatred and scorn for me."

She gave a little half-sob. "Hilary was a good man. I loved him, Mr. Vail, I loved him with all my heart - you must believe that. I don't understand what could make him hate me so."

"Calm yourself," said Vail gently. "I assure you, it is not your fiancée that visits you, but a foul creature that seeks to feed upon your weakness. Please, go on."

She gave a small nod, wiping at her tears, and regained some of her composure. "I thought it was only a nightmare, that first time... a horrible nightmare. But then he came again... and again...

And the dreams became more and more real, until they did not seem like dreams at all. He would suddenly appear at my bedside, bending over me, whispering those horrible words... and he seemed to take utter delight in causing me pain!" She shook her head. "I tried to stay awake, after that third night. But it was as if an evil spell overcame me, and I dreamed again.

"When I woke, I found that I was more desperately tired than when I went to sleep - these nightmares afforded me no rest, and each day it seemed a little more of my vitality was drained away." She shot us an uncertain look. "I... checked myself, Mr. Vail. For puncture wounds."

Vail nodded. "You thought perhaps it was a vampire."

"Yes. But I found nothing, no sign. Still, I had become convinced that Hilary had somehow managed to come back from the dead. I... I tried to take steps to keep him in his grave."

Again Vail nodded. "We saw the garlic and mirrors. Such things would not have affected the creature that haunts you, not if it is what I think."

She paused a moment before going on. "I... I could not rest. I desperately needed sleep. I began to have hallucinations. I lashed out at the servants, at my family." She glanced at her sister, sorrow etched in her eyes. "I began sleeping during the day. Hilary... the creature, it would only visit me at night."

"Yes, of course," said Vail.

"I would sleep during the day, snatching what rest I could, but at night I would try to maintain a vigil; to keep myself awake. Sometimes I succeeded. Other times exhaustion overcame me... and he would visit again."

Vail shook his head. "I do not believe that he came only in your dreams, not this creature. No, it would take physical form. What does he look like when he visits?"

Cora thought about the question. "Exactly as Hilary did in life. Perhaps... perhaps even better, for he is healthy and strikingly attractive, at least in the dreams. But his eyes... his eyes are hard and cruel, and his lips are twisted into an evil smile."

"Does he wear gloves? Boots? Is there any part of his body he tries to hide from you?"

"No," she said after a pause, "no, I don't think so. Though I don't really pay attention - his face draws all my attention. Gloves? No, no gloves. But boots... perhaps. Yes, perhaps he does wear boots, at that."

Vail nodded, a thoughtful look in his eye. I know Vail rather well, and it seemed to me that her answer was not what he had expected. "He always visits you in your chamber?"

She started to nod, then checked herself. "Once, when I was trying to remain awake, I fell asleep in this very room, and he visited me here."

"Strange," said Vail, almost to himself. It seemed to me that again he had received an answer he had not expected.

There was a pause, and Cora spoke again. "What is it that plagues me, Mr. Vail? How can I stop these terrible nightmares?"

Vail shook himself from his reverie. "We shall sit vigil with you this very night, in your chambers. If I am correct, it will manifest itself again, and, with luck, we shall destroy it. Make no mistake, you are in great peril. The thing that plagues you is a powerful creature, and seeks nothing less than the consumption of your very soul."

Chapter 5

Cora DeComfette's chamber was grand and spacious, with a high ceiling and a broad window which faced out towards the graveyard. There was a gigantic four-poster bed, and two different armchairs to either side of the fireplace, each tall-backed and grand. An elegant writing desk stood near the window, and not far off stood a small piano, with some papers scattered across its top. Hanging from the walls were an assortment of paintings, all excellent, interspersed with various exotic objects, some of which I recognized as musical instruments from far-off lands. As for the fireplace, it was a large marble affair, a mantel and mirror hanging over, and a stand of ornate pokers and bellows standing next to it. It was unlit, and the room was quite chilly when we entered.

Vail entered first, and bid the rest of us stay back. After a few minutes of examining the room, during which he checked the window, floors, fireplace, and even the space under the bed and piano, he stood with a sigh.

"Come in," he said at length. "I can find no sign that anyone other than Mlle Cora has been here. I had not really expected there would be, but..." His voice had held a puzzled note to it, I thought. He rubbed his arms. "It is quite brisk in here. We could do with some warmth. Pendleton, would you be so good?"

At Vail's instruction, I left to gather firewood from where it was stacked outside the house. As I stepped outside, I found it was later than I had thought. The sun had vanished, and the last stages of twilight were giving way to night. The sky was cold and clear, with stars twinkling faintly, and a half moon had already appeared. A chill took me, for the temperature had dropped somewhat, and I bundled my coat around me as I went for the firewood.

Upon returning to Cora's chamber, I found that her sister had vanished. When I asked, Vail explained that he had sent her away. "If I am right, the creature we face is very dangerous," he said. "Bad enough that we must expose Cora to risk; there is no need for her sister to be put in danger as well."

At Vail's hinting of danger, I checked the pistol I had brought, making certain it was loaded and in good order, ready for action.

"You have your pistol, I see," said Vail. "Good. Likely it will afford us no protection against the creature we face, but it is best to be prepared."

"Mr. Vail," asked Cora. "What do we do now?"

"We wait," said Vail, moving to the window and looking out. "Full dark is almost upon us. The creature may appear at any hour after it falls. We shall have to exercise patience. Pendleton, you have the box?"

I told him that I did, and at his request, I turned it over to him.

"What is that?" asked Cora, as Vail nimbly undid the clasp.

He folded back the top to reveal an obsidian-black stone dagger, worked with strange markings and runes. He removed it from its resting place in the box, hefting the weight in his hands. "It is a very special weapon," he said. "It even has a name; Nythic-senshai, though that probably means nothing to you. It has a history... a very long history. It is imbued with terrible power... some might even call it evil. But it will aid us in the slaying of this creature."

Gently Vail placed it back in its box, and closed the lid.

Cora took a seat in one of the armchairs, while I busied myself with starting the fire. "Should I... Do I have to sleep?" she asked.

Vail shook his head. "Better if you do not," he said. "It should make no difference. The creature will appear either way."

She nodded, relieved.

Chapter 6

It was a long evening we spent that night. Hour after hour dragged on in silence. I had taken up position on the second armchair, and Vail stood by the window, occasionally glancing out in the direction of the cemetery.

Hardly a word was spoken between us, and for the most part the only sound was the light crackling from the fireplace as the logs were consumed, mixed with the eery sound of the wind playing across the window panes, making the branches of a nearby tree scabble against the side of the house.

There was a small clock mounted on the far wall, and it ticked off the seconds somberly, making a soft chime whenever the half-hour or hour mark was passed.

The quiet did little to put me at ease. Indeed, as the evening stretched on, I found myself nervously eyeing the shadows, half-expecting them to materialize into some fiend. I did not know what manner of creature we faced, but if Vail thought it dangerous enough to warrant such a weapon as that black dagger, I was not anxious to face it. Occasionally I would rise from the chair, and make a quick circuit of the room, as much to relieve my nervousness by pacing as to check the shadows for hidden dangers.

For his part, Vail seemed calmly patient. Occasionally he would move from his place at the window, but never far, and from time to time he would glance at the clock. He had the box tucked under one arm, and I held my pistol in my lap.

Cora seemed to lose herself in the dancing flames of the fireplace. Her haunted gaze seemed to look far beyond the fire, though, as if she were lost in another world. More than once I wondered whether she would respond if I spoke. But I thought better of trying. For some reason the silence seemed threatening, as if something malevolent being would appear if I broke it.

The hours dragged by.

Vail expression darkened as the time passed, until eventually he began showing signs of impatience. He began to pace the room, glancing at the clock from time to time, and halting at the window, looking up towards the nighttime sky. Twice he removed the black dagger from its case, handling it carefully before placing it back. "Should have appeared by now," I overheard him mutter once, as he glanced towards the clock.

"Something is wrong."

But the night dragged on without incident, and the darkness outside the window began to lighten with the coming dawn.

A quiet snore drew my attention to Cora, and I realized she had dozed off. I reached out a hand to wake her, but Vail shook his head.

"Let her sleep, Pendleton," he said, his voice tinged with disappointment. "It is nearly dawn. She is in no danger."

"You think then, that the creature will not appear?"

His voice was tired. "No. Not tonight."

There was a timid knock at the door. Vail didn't stir from his place at the window, and Cora was still asleep, so I got up to answer it.

It was her sister, dressed in nightgown and robe. She peered in warily. "Is everyone alright?" she asked. "I couldn't sleep a wink for worry. I kept waiting to hear the sounds of struggle."

"There was no manifestation," I said quietly.

"No manifestation?" she asked. "Then-"

"It was an uneventful evening," said Vail, still staring out the window. His back was to me, but I could hear the disappointment in his voice, and plainly see his despondancy in the set of his shoulders.

"Apparently... I was incorrect in my assumptions. I do not know how I could have been so wrong." He lapsed into silence again.

Charlotte looked at him, then back to me, a worried look in her eyes.

"Then... what of my sister's nightmares?"

I stood aside so that she could see her sister. "She had none," I said. "Not last night, anyway."

She entered and went to her sister, laying a hand on her forehead.

Cora's eyes fluttered open at the touch. "It's morning," she said, looking about the room confused. "I don't remember... is it over?"

Vail shook his head grimly. "Your ghostly fiancée did not appear."

"Then... then I am not rid of these nightmares?" she sounded on the verge of sobbing.

"I fear," said Vail, still not turning from his place, "that I may have been wrong. The very real possibility exists that I cannot help you."

Charlotte enfolded her sister in her arms as Cora began to weep.

Chapter 7

We did not leave the DeComfette residence. Instead, at the older sister's request, we stayed.

Vail assured them both that he would stay until he had exhausted every possibility of giving aid.

But I knew from his tone of voice that he was not hopeful.

He was distant and despondent all morning, refusing breakfast and sulking quietly in the sitting room, spending hours staring into the fire.

Around midday he roused himself, and without a word went outside. I watched from the window as he re-examined the graveyard, slowly and carefully looking for anything he might have missed. He then made his way around the yard, searching every foot around the house. I could tell by his expression that his search was fruitless.

Towards evening, he made his way back into the house, and, with the sisters' permission, began a careful examination of every room, starting with Cora's. For several hours he moved through the house like a ghost, scrutinizing every corner.

"What is he doing, Col. Pendleton?" Charlotte asked me.

I was forced to shrug. "He's looking for something... anything."

At last Vail returned to the sitting room. "Nothing," he said sourly, staring into the flames again.

"Not one clue. Pendleton, I am helpless. I came here with certainty that I knew what was plaguing her and how to fight it... but there is nothing."

"Mr. Vail," said Charlotte, appearing at the doorway, "Cora has fallen asleep in the study. Should I wake her? Will you be keeping vigil again tonight?"

Vail was silent for a moment. "We will stand vigil," he said at last.

"Leave her where she is for now; let her slumber. I cannot see that it will harm her, and she needs the rest. Later we will move her up to her chamber."

She nodded, and left us alone.

"Perhaps," I said, trying to cheer him, "it will appear tonight, this creature you speak of. It may be that it only comes every other night."

Vail shook his head. "Did her nightmares come every other night? Did her visitations come every other night? No, it would have appeared. It is part of its nature. All the signs seemed to point towards it... How could I have been so wrong?"

"Perhaps," I said hesitantly, "perhaps there is no outside force at work here at all. As you said before, brilliant people are often under tremendous strain. It could be that she is losing her grip on reality. Perhaps the explanation is as simple as that. There is a saying in the medical profession, I am told. 'When first you see hoofprints, think horses; not zebras.'"

Vail had been listening in silence, but suddenly he shot up from his chair as if struck by lightning. "Pendleton!" he cried, clapping a hand to his head. "My god, what a fool I have been! What time is it?" He was already racing towards the window.

"Perhaps a half-hour past dark," I stammered, surprised by his sudden excitement. "Why?"

"Quickly!" he shouted, racing for the hall. "The gods send we are not too late! Oh, I am a fool, a fool!"

I leaped to my feet, racing after him. The urgency of his voice compelled me to fumble my pistol from my coat.

The hall bent at a right angle into darkness, and dim light spilled from the doorway which led to the study. Vail dashed through it and into the room beyond with me hard on his heels.

"There!" he cried, pointing across the room. "You see it, Pendleton? You see it!"

Across the room, slumped backwards in an armchair, was Cora DeComfette, eyes closed in sleep, but beads of sweat on her brow. Her lips writhed, and her body jerked and twisted as if she were in great pain. Above her, leaning down over the chair from behind, was a... thing. Roughly humanoid in shape, it appeared in form to be constructed entirely of shadow. Indeed, the corner of the room where it lurked was noticeably dimmer than the rest, as if it somehow absorbed the light.

One shadowy 'hand' was laid atop the woman's brow, and the creature had its own head thrown back in an expression of ecstasy.

"My God Vail!" I cried as I stared at the scene with a mixture of horror and disbelief. "What is it?" Instinctively I raised my pistol and fired.

My aim was true, but the bullet passed through the creature without effect and with a crack struck the wall behind it, scoring a deep mark in the wood.

"Stay back Pendleton!" ordered Vail, leaping forward. The black dagger had appeared in his hands. "Don't let it touch you!"

The creature appeared to have taken no notice of us, so absorbed was it in its horrifying feeding. Vail reached Cora in two bounds, and swung the dagger in an arc that connected with the creature's body just where its heart would have been (if such a thing could have a heart).

There was a terrible grating shriek that blasted the room, and I was forced to clap my hands to my ears or be deafened.

The black dagger slammed home as if it had struck solid flesh, and the creature spasmed, shrieking in agony and letting go its hold on Cora. It leaped backwards, away from Vail, nearly tearing the dagger from his grip. Vail maintained his hold, though, and the dagger pulled free from the shadow monster's flesh. It backed swiftly away from Vail, moving like an injured animal.

At that moment, Charlotte appeared in the second doorway, which connected the study to the kitchens.

"Back!" cried Vail in warning, but the poor woman could only gape in horror. The creature darted forward, speeding towards her. Vail tried to leap into its path, but it was too quick. In an instant it had reached Charlotte.

The woman reflexively took a step backwards, as if to flee, but the creature was upon her. It spread its arms as it dove down on her, and I expected her to be bowled to the ground from the fierceness of its attack.

Instead, the shadow thing passed completely through her, emerging on the other side. For her part, Charlotte's mouth opened in a silent scream as it passed through, and her muscles stiffened as if she had been doused in icewater. Her eyes rolled wildly in their sockets, and for a moment she stood quaking. Then, with a snarl, she leaped towards me.

Utterly surprised by her actions, I scarcely had a moment to throw up my hands defensively before she was on me, clawing and grasping for my throat with fingers filled with mad purpose and supernatural strength. I fell to the floor before her unexpected and furious attack, the pistol slipping from my hands.

"Hold her, Pendleton!" cried Vail. "Don't allow her to hurt herself!"

His advice was all very well, but at the moment I was hard pressed to keep her from hurting me, much less herself. Spittle leaked from the corner of her lips and a wild light lit her eyes. She snarled and grunted gutterally as she clawed deep scores in my throat.

Fighting wildly, I seized her wrists and, using all my strength, managed to force her hands from my face and throat. She squirmed in my grip, and I felt a dull rush of pain as she kned me in the abdomen. I fought to keep my breath and my hold on her.

Occupied as I was, I lost all sight of what the creature was doing. From my peripheral vision I saw motion and heard the sounds of furniture being thrown aside, but I could not tell whether it was the creature's actions or Vail's.

There was an unearthly, deafening roar of hate and rage. So horrifying was it that my skin was prickled. It was a sound that no human throat could ever create.

Then, abruptly, there was silence. At the same moment, Charlotte went limp in my arms, collapsing against me as if she were dead. Quickly I rolled her off of me and lay her to the side. Vail stood panting near an overturned bookshelf, a cut on his forehead leaking blood. In his hands was clutched the black dagger. Of the creature there was no sign.

"You are alright, Pendleton?" he asked.

I took stock of myself. I was bruised and scratched, but unhurt. I nodded. "The... creature?" I asked.

"Destroyed," said Vail.

I bent over Charlotte DeComfette, concerned. She was breathing lightly, but her eyes were closed.

"She will recover momentarily," said Vail, seeing my worry. He moved quickly to Cora's side.

"It is Cora who is in real peril. The creature was draining her life force. If we cannot wake her, she may well be lost to us."

I sat up. Indeed, it did appear that something was terribly wrong with her. She lay slumped on her side, utterly still, her eyes closed. From where I was I could not tell whether she was even breathing. "Does she live?" I asked.

Vail put a pair of fingers to her throat, a worried frown on his face.

"She has a pulse," he said. "And she is breathing. Perhaps there is some hope that I have not botched this case beyond repair."

Gently he placed a palm to her cheek and gave her a light shake. She didn't stir.

He tried again, and this time her eyes fluttered open. "What... ?" she muttered, looking around the room through bleary eyes. "How-?"

"Shhh," said Vail gently. "It's over. You need fear your dreams no longer."

But her eyes had closed already, and her breathing became steady and even.

Vail gave me a triumphant smile. "Ah, Pendleton, we are very fortunate," he said, immensely relieved. "My stupidity did not result in tragedy."

Chapter 8

"A bastellus, Pendleton," said Vail. "It was a bastellus. A creature half of this world and half of another." He gave a rueful shake of his head. "What a fool I was to overlook the possibility."

We were back in our flat in Mordentshire. I was stretched out in the armchair, sipping a cup of hot tea that Miss Sherington had made. Vail was standing at his desk, surveying the papers and treatises scattered across it, scowling. A small bandage was wound around his head. "It was your remark that put me back on track, Pendleton."

"What remark was that?" I asked.

"The one about hoofprints. You see, I was so busy looking for a zebra, I forgot to consider the possibility of a horse."

"I don't understand."

Vail waved it away. "I fell prey to pride, Pendleton. When Charlotte DeComfette told us of her sister's problem, I immediately formed a conclusion as to what type of monster was plaguing her. And then, when conflicting evidence appeared, I was so set in my conclusion that I did not consider it. When Cora said that her fiancée tormented her rather than comforted her, I should have recognized immediately that I was on the wrong track."

"But what do you mean, Vail?"

Vail smiled, and lifted one of the leatherbound notebooks from the desk. "Dr. Van Richten's Treatise on Ghosts," he said. "The bastellus is mentioned herein, though it is a matter of some debate whether it should technically be classified as a ghost. Also mentioned herein is the 'Phantom Lover', a unique spirit of incredible power."

"The 'Phantom Lover'?" I asked. "I have never heard of it."

"It is a spirit that appears to the recently bereaved wearing the form of their lost loved one. Often, it makes its home in a nearby graveyard. You see the similarity?"

"It is striking," I admitted.

"Yes, but the Phantom Lover would never accuse a victim of betrayal, or try to torment her. The Phantom Lover is a very powerful spirit, but it has no power that the victim does not give to it. The victim must receive it with open arms. The Phantom Lover will comfort the victim, pretending to be her lost love. Night by night he will return to her, slowly draining her life essence and vitality away. Eventually she will so fall under his spell that she will follow him into his realm, into the graveyard. Once she does this, she is lost forever. Truly a horrifying creature. It preys upon the weakness and beauty of the human heart."

I nodded. "Striking similarities to the DeComfette case," I said.

"You can hardly be blamed for confusing the two."

"Can't I?" There was a bitter twist to Vail's lips. "The evidence was there; it was I who refused to see it, blinded by my pride. If not for your comment, Mlle DeComfette could have been slain. The *bastellus* is a dangerous creature in its own right - a thing composed of living shadow that feeds upon the nightmares of its victims. The Phantom is a physical creature. I assumed, in my pride, that Cora DeComfette had blurred the line between reality and dreams; that she was being physically visited by her dead lover. But in truth, her dead lover was the product of nightmares forced on her by the *bastellus*.

"There were many times when I should have been alerted to my folly. The Phantom Lover has one small defect - no matter how much he may resemble her lover, one hand or foot will be misshapen and deformed, blackened and lizardlike. Yet Cora described no such deformity. I assumed perhaps the lover had hidden it with a boot or glove. But Cora recalled specifically that he wore no gloves, and did not remember boots. Again I assumed the fault was in her recollection, rather than taking it as evidence that my conclusion was wrong.

"Also, the Phantom Lover can manifest for only an hour at most, but must come every night. The *bastellus* can only feed on unconscious victims, and will never manifest if there are other conscious beings present. So of course it didn't appear the night we kept vigil.

"And the ultimate clue was simply the nightmares themselves. The Phantom Lover doesn't cause nightmares. Quite the contrary, he engenders a feeling of love and security in his victims - often, they will not admit his existence, and will protect him at all costs."

Vail shook his head. "No, Pendleton, this was not one of my triumphs. If there is a hero to this story, it is you. Your innocent comment struck me like a thunderclap. Here I had been looking

for a unique apparition, when all the time it was something far more common. The bastellus, incidentally, is a very rare creature, but not unique by any stretch."

"Ah well," I said, trying to cheer him. "After all, the creature is destroyed, and Cora DeComfette is free of its curse, safe once more."

Vail sighed, lighting his pipe. "Yes, thank heaven for that. Pendleton, the next time I get arrogant and condescending, kindly remind me of this case. It will do wonders for my humility."

Sebastian Brough

The Thief And The Gunners

(or how to handle a nasty petty DC thief)

by R. Sweeney

Talis looks across the tavern at his brother, Turmeric 'working the crowd.' Anger wells up in Talis as he plays his mandolin, but he buries his emotion deep. Customers don't pay well to an angry, grouchy, bard. They also don't pay well if some bloody Thief-Monk is stealing what little they have to give.

Sighing, Talis turns a blind eye to his brother's larceny for several moments before setting down his instrument. "That's enough for tonight folks, I think perhaps I'll be needing some supper before the kitchen closes."

The crowd grows in dissatisfaction at this, but soon everyone is talking among themselves, providing their own amusement with Ale and other drink.

Talis slowly crosses the floor to join his brother at a table.

"Turmeric" he whispers, "I see no need for you to steal from these poor folk."

"A little louder, Talis. Why don't you just announce it."

"I had considered that."

"Grow up. Talis, you make money your way. I'll make it mine."

Talis motions the barmaid for a drink and returns to his conversation with his brother, Turmeric.

"I'm making enough to meet our expenses. We have no need to break the law here. You could get us in trouble."

"Bah, trouble. Stop whining you baby." Turmeric leans closer to his brother and speaks in elven.

"You know I can take out any one of these pathetic guards." He sneers as he speaks the last words.

"You are inviting trouble which we don't need here..."

The elven Monk turns away and stops listening to his brother. Talis tries to speak a few moments longer, but Turmeric starts up a conversation with a drunk man at the next table.

Talis controls his anger, silently 'counting to ten' as he has learned to do so often when dealing with elves. The half-elven bard reaches with his legs under the table. Wrapping his legs around his brother's chair, Talis pulls him back to the table roughly.

Turmeric shoots a pissy glare at his brother.

"You are free to do as you choose, elf ... as you always are. I just want you to know that if you are

caught, *I will not help you!* If you want to invite trouble, you can deal with it on your own."

Getting up, it is now Talis' turn to ignore his brother.

Picking up his mandolin, Talis plays again. This time completely ignoring his brother's actions.

Turmeric sees the opportunity to ply his trade again, but few targets worthy his attention.

Shrugging, he decides that perhaps some breaking and entering would be more worthwhile.

Smiling to himself, he sees that most of the patrons of the Inn have returned to listen to Talis play again. Smirking, he slides quietly and discreetly upstairs...

... Later...

"I'm afraid you'll have to come with me, son."

Turmeric looks up and grins. "Why officer?"

"You are wanted for questioning concerning some effects found in your room."

"And, pray tell, what were you doing in my room?"

"We had a warrant..."

"Tough piddle, I ain't going anywhere with you. If you'd like to make me, I invite you to try."

Looking around the Inn. "Well, if you want to be that way, I guess we'll have to do it your way."

<Insert monk knocking crap out of Guard who runs for cover.>

... Later ...

"Psst" says the little halfling.

"What," barks the Elf.

"Drop something?" The halfling smirks as he dashes away with Turmeric's belt pouch.

"You little shit!" Turmeric runs after the soon-to-be-sorry smartass thief. He bolts out the front door to be confronted by:

A line of fifteen men with strange mechanical contraptions in their arms.

<Insert Loud Noises>

Robert M. Sweeney

Wish A Little Wish

(a.k.a. The Wishing Imp Curse)

by J.W. Mangrum

PART 1: The Stranger

The PCs never knew who the Stranger was. He first appeared in the middle of the night in an inn in Ilvin. He was dressed head to toe in fine violet and blue silken robes, and he kept his face hidden under the hood of his cloak. Although his clothes were obviously fine and expensive, they were also tattered and frayed.

Knocking on the door, he roused the party's dwarven warrior. The dwarf's player was a power gamer who I thought might want the imp's power and wouldn't care about "side-effects". The dwarf (Drixil) wouldn't open the door for the visitor (I think he believed he was up against some sort of vampire; in other words, if I don't let him in, he can't come in), so the Stranger delivered his pitch through the door:

"...with each new dawn, the imp offers another wish, but every wish comes with a terrible price. But the imp will be yours alone; this power can not be stolen from you, used against you. The only way you can shed the imp is to give it to someone who knows the truth of its power, and then takes it willingly."

I don't remember how, but Drixil got pretty abusive at this point (then again, Drixil usually was pretty abusive). Part of it was that the Stranger, although trying to be as good a salesman as possible, was a little too desperate, a little too cynical to really come off as comforting. Feeling cocky behind his inch-thick wooden door, Drixil called the Stranger a coward! The Stranger immediately stepped -through- the door! The Stranger held the imp up in Drixil's face and asked him to reconsider. Drixil panicked, and when Drixil was afraid, Drixil got violent. He slashed at the Stranger with a +2 sword, which went right through the Stranger as if he wasn't even there. Drixil was obviously agitated, and the Stranger frustratedly realized he was wasting his time. The Stranger left the way he came. He few hours later he came back, and spoke to Toben the priest. He wasn't successful there, either.

I never put a lot of thought into the Stranger's background, since I knew the PCs would never encounter him more than once or twice, and then for only a few minutes. All I needed to know was that this was someone who had at one point accepted the imp, and might even have enjoyed

its power for a while. Then things started to sour. (The tattered silken robes were my symbol of riches-to-rags.)

How did he walk through the door? I pictured some past scene where the Stranger was hiding in an alley while someone (creditors, the law, someone he'd hurt with the imp, whatever you want) was hot on his heels. Desperate to avoid discovery, he wished that his pursuers would not find him. To his pleasure, he faded into the shadows, and his pursuers went right past him. Later, when he left his hiding place, he learned the wretched truth: the imp had changed his flesh into insubstantial shadow; he was a living ghost. No, actually he really was a living shadow: his touch drained strength.

Part 2: The New Owner

The campaign continued on for a while, and after a while the party split up. Toben went to Darkon, and during his adventures there (he was trying to find someone to cast Regeneration on him to heal a severed arm), he joined forces with Taermon Gideon and Julianna Cromwell (as well as some other PCs who aren't important here). Taermon was a PC priest of Mystra run by Drixil's player, which means that he too was mainly interested in his own well-being, and was a towering thug to boot. Julianna was also a PC, although she was secretly a low-rung Kargat sent to keep tabs on the party.

For his part, Toben was notoriously weak-willed and self-obsessed, known and feared for his abilities to whine endlessly. I knew I could get him to take the Imp; I just needed a good opportunity, and eventually I got it. After being in Darkon for a month, Toben started to lose his memories. A bad day for the weaselly little priest, to be sure, especially since his "friends" Taermon and Julianna abandoned him, leaving him in Il Aluk. (Taermon fled for the border, and Julianna followed him.)

Toben was only an hour or so from completely forgetting himself when there was a knock at the door of his room. When Toben answered it, he saw the Stranger standing in the hall. The Stranger offered the Imp once more. This time, Toben really wanted it; although he'd already sent off a letter asking his companions in Mordentshire he of course had no faith in them. This time, I watched as Toben's player starting wildly rationalizing the decision to take the imp. He started making up rules (and immediately convincing himself of their validity) that I had never implied.

"Hmm... Well, if every wish has a price, then the bigger the wish, the bigger the price. I just want a little wish, so the price won't be too bad."

Toben wished that he and all of his belongings be taken to Mordent... First of all, he had a few items in his possession which weren't technically -his- belongings; items other PCs had lent him for various reasons.

Toben's player, convinced the Imp's "twisting" of his wishes would take the form of a nitpicking attention to detail, actually mentioned to me that some of his belongings might not make the trip. Therefore, I did indeed leave them behind. When he suddenly found himself in Mordent, surrounded by his meager gear, it was the middle of the night (as it had been in Darkon), and he was standing at the front doors of Gryphon Manor. He immediately fled, and found somewhere to stay in Mordentshire. He thought he'd gotten away easily this time, and in a manner he had. But the two "bugs" in the wish I just mentioned were simply red herrings.

The real twisting of the wish hit one of his companions. At the moment Toben escaped Darkon, the mystic quill in Avernus immediately stopped scribing his history -and with the next line, started in on Azura (another PC who wasn't due to be claimed for another month or two). This was my main rule for the Imp: it didn't remove maladies, it simply transferred them to someone else the Imp's master cared about.

Part 3: Something happened on the way to Mordentshire

Toben thought he had the imp figured out. Keep the wishes simple, and the price is a pushover. He made another wish the next day, to recover the belongings left behind in Darkon. One of these items was a magic dagger. What Toben didn't know was that Julianna (the PC kargat spy) had stolen this dagger from him while his mind was unraveling. As Toben slept that night, the imp gathered the missing belongings itself. Julianna (in Lamordia by this time) was woken by the sharp sensation of the imp stabbing her with her stolen dagger! She barely fended the thing off, and it flew out the window into the night. She had no idea what she had encountered.

The next morning, Toben woke up and found the missing items laid out on the bed next to him. The imp figurine was right where he had left it on the nightstand.

Now, at this point, the Imp really had been letting Toben off easy, but in another way I was demonstrating (in ways that the players wouldn't realize until the very last sessions of the campaign) that although the side-effects of the Imp's wishes could be disastrous, they weren't

always immediately apparent to the imp's master. Remember, the imp's goal is to addict its master to the power it provides.

Right here, Toben showed a little good sense. He put the Imp on a shelf and swore never to use it again. This good sense lasted nearly a week. Of course, during that week, the Imp would telepathically serenade Toben to sleep each night with promises of all he could accomplish with these wishes, if he would only ask.

Toben lost all common sense and decided he had the power of the Imp in the palm of his hand. After the week of serenades, he decided that, yes, he could do some real good with this power. This is where the story turns ugly.

Months earlier, a PC witch (Nashadoe, aka "Nash") had failed a madness check and had been paranoid ever since. Well, not really any more paranoid than usual, but Nash's "usual" the everyone else's "dementia". Specifically, Nash was convinced that she was being hunted by Akriel Lukas, daughter of the lord of Kartakass. This insistence was a constant annoyance to the rest of the party, so much so that they had her committed to Saulbridge Sanitarium.

Unfortunately, the other PCs had her released less than a week later (for questionable reasons). At the time, she was traveling in Nova Vaasa with the rest of the party.

Toben wished that Nash would no longer be insane. And he put the imp down for the day, happy with his work. Meanwhile, as she hiked along a Nova Vaasan road, Nash's mind started to take a little journey of its own. The paranoia dissolved (as far as the rules were concerned), but Nash started to come to certain... conclusions.

Nash was an exiled Drow (although this wasn't immediately apparent to an onlooker: for arcane reasons, she had pasty white skin and jet black hair). What was important was that she was Neutral: although she cared about nothing and no one but herself, she lacked the cruel, bloodthirsty, anything-to-get-my-way motivations of her CE brethren. Those other Drow would certainly see her Neutral alignment as weak at best, madness at worst. In other words, "sane" for Nash, a Drow, was to be Chaotic Evil. By the end of the day, that's exactly what she was.

I'll compress events a bit. What's important is that while staying at an inn in Egertus with the rest of the party, she murdered another guest (a total stranger) as he lay in his bed, all for his coin purse. She then made no attempt to cover up her crime, and when the militia came around asking questions the next morning, she used spells and illusions to present herself as some sort of bat-winged, undead horror, and fled through a window, using more spells to escape the law. Which

left her traveling companions, the rest of the party, to face the brunt of the law. The PCs were told to drop their weapons, and that they would be taken to militia HQ for questioning.

Now, the sensible members of the party complied. After all, they hadn't done anything!

Unfortunately, "the sensible members of the party" never included Drixil, the twitchy dwarven warrior. Drixil had a +2 short sword of Quickness he'd gotten in *Hour of the Knife*. In Drixil's (and his player's) mind, Drixil was "a cool character" because he had the most powerful magical weapon in the party. Put bluntly, he would rather die than relinquish his treasure for even so much as a second.

Drixil fought the law, and the law won -with help from the other PCs, who assisted the militia in his capture while pleading with the dwarf to regain some sense of sanity. Drixil was put in the town jail. Charges: resisting arrest, and three counts of attempted murder of a law enforcement officer. Drixil was facing the hangman. One of his friends, Kevin, came back to Drixil's cell to comfort him and tell him that the party would do everything it could to-

Drixil cut Kevin off with a passionate string of "salty language", capping it off with the promise that if Drixil ever saw Kevin again, he'd cut his heart out. The party immediately left Drixil to rot in his cell (and he drops out of our story).

A few more days went by, and the party stopped in Kantora. Meanwhile, Nash kept up her "foolishness." Her most painful act towards the party was a theft. Celia, another party member, was infected with lycanthropy, but had actually obtained a magical object which gave her a way to control her curse. This object was an unbreakable, 5' silver jewelry chain.

Nash stole this chain from Celia's pack (for no particular reason). Nash hid this chain in her saddlebag, which she of course left in the inn's stable.

Well, as we all know, what with Kantora being a large, impoverished city, is it highly recommended that travelers keep their valuables unattended in the stables. Recommended by thieves guilds, pick-pockets, and the various other street rats. One of these street rats stole the saddlebag, and Celia never got her chain back.

Meanwhile, in Mordent, Toben hadn't made a wish in a week, and the Imp was getting antsy again. To spur the rather pathetic priest into action, the imp "hinted" at what fate had befallen Nash. Toben was aghast and made another wish immediately. He wished that Nash was as she had been before he made his wish. The imp graciously complied; it's just that Toben didn't really specify what he meant by "before." That could mean different things, depending on what

timeframe you set "before" in. At one point, Nash had been a zombie (thanks to Azalin), her mind slowly rotting as each day went by.

The next morning, Nash woke up back to normal. Except that she was dead, of course, but it took her about an hour to discover this. This sent a shockwave through the party; first to have Nash (always the bizarre troublemaker) suddenly, inexplicably undead; second, to hear her confessions ("yes, I killed the merchant. Yes, I stole Celia's chain. What do you want me to do about it?") I dare say it's only because the PCs were such a bunch of pushovers that Nash didn't receive a sound thrashing. (Celia, the NPC, later left the group, insisting that she couldn't bear to travel with the witch, a sentiment shared by all the players but voiced by none.)

What made it worse for Nash was that sure, she was dead, but this was Nova Vaasa in the middle of summer, and the horseflies were swarming around her like the spoiled meat she was.

That night, Toben found out what he had done (the Imp was really putting the hooks in Toben now), so he basically rephrased his last wish a bit.

In Nova Vaasa, Nash woke up the next day quite alive, and apparently back to normal (paranoia and all). Of course, Argent (the paladin) had to help her out by laying hands on her, in order to remove the hundreds of fly eggs deposited under her skin of course. But after that, she seemed right as rain.

Except that, unbeknownst to everyone, the Imp had twisted another wish. Toben had basically wished for her to be like she was before his wishes, and she was -more so every day. She was growing younger at the rate of a year a day. (As an elf, this wasn't easy to spot.)

Nash had the Astrology NWP, and that night she looked to the stars for an answer for her bizarre predicament. I gave her an obvious clue as to who was responsible; I think I said Nash and Toben's stars were in the same House, or some such. But Nash's player always equated "bad things happen to PC" with "the DM is evil and trying to kill my character." In short, Nash asked the stars who was doing this to her, and they gave her an unusually clear and direct answer. And she decided that the stars were lying to her. From that point on, the stars would reveal nothing to her; it seemed as though she had no future.

Then the party chose to split up for many personal reasons, and they took different ways, agreeing to meet again in Mordentshire after some weeks.

PART 4: The Curse Discovered

At the expected time of the reunion, the situation is as follows: Toben (the priest) is in Mordentshire. Julianna (the Kargat) and Taermon (another priest) are hiking overland towards Mordentshire to find Toben's friends. Meanwhile, the rest of the party has suffered greatly due to Toben's wishing. Drixil's gone, presumed hanged, Celia's lost her means of containing her lycanthropy, and Nash now has the sheriff of Egertus hiring bounty hunters to bring her in. (And Nash never put much effort into covering her tracks.)

All these people eventually converge on Mordentshire, each at their own speed. Nash has grown about 30 years younger, but since she's an elf, no one else has noticed. Nash has noticed something amiss; her clothes are starting to hang a little loose. In her inestimable wisdom, Nash has chosen not to mention this to anyone else, nor has she tried to do anything to remedy it herself. (The player spent all three years of the campaign believing I was an "evil" DM, and therefore this "curse" simply couldn't be fixed.)

Anyway, the party encounters Toben at home, and he and the others trade tales of their adventures. Two people in the party announce that they are leaving the party, at least temporarily: Kevin, the PC priest of Tempus, and Celia, the NPC. Celia simply couldn't stand Nash's actions, or the way the party hadn't done anything about them.

The party had pressing business in Sithicus, and went off (to eventually play through *When the Black Roses Bloom*). On the morning they left, the party consisted of Argent the paladin, Toben, Taermon, Julianna, Nash, and 2 other PCs inconsequential to this tale. Nash asked Toben for help; perhaps he could ask his god what was happening to her? Toben confessed that he was responsible, and produced the Imp from his pack. This shocked everyone else to the core. (Julianna had been nearly slain by the little bugger, and Nash's player was surprised that I really hadn't been just maliciously messing with him.) Argent insisted that the damned thing be destroyed at once! Taermon (played by Drixil's player) steps forward, eager to put his magical mace (another Azalin tale there) to good use. He delivered a mighty blow, which did not so much as chip the finish on the little statuette. Somehow, Argent got the inspiration to smash the Imp against a rock- it cracked! Of course, it also immediately came to infuriated life in his hand, but Argent managed to smash it to pieces before it could sting him with its tail. (I picture the scene as similar to someone holding a facehugger in his hand.)

The party was sure to throw the stone chunks of the Imp into the sea before they rode south. Somehow, they all knew this wasn't over...

It's also important to note that no one thought to go tell Celia or Kevin that the mystery of Nash's unnatural problems in Nova Vaasa had been solved. A day after Argent smashed the Imp to pieces, Toben once again found the accursed figurine in his pack. (The Imp can only be harmed by stone weapons. If it is destroyed in this manner, it reforms in one day, back in the possession of its master. The party had yet to discover the one true way to put an end to the imp's evil wishes...)

PART 5: Who is the Master?

About halfway to Sithicus, while riding through Arkandale, Nash and Toben decided they had the perfect wish to solve Nash's problem. In fact, Toben and Nash's players worked out a wish in secret between sessions. They worded it like lawyers, hoping to give me no loopholes, and by not letting me know what they were up to, they were convinced I wouldn't have a chance to come up with a way to abuse them.

Toben and Nash called a halt to the party, and Toben pulled out the imp (and the two players pulled out their wish, written like a speech). The gist of it was "I wish all the wishes I made for Nash would be undone." Oboy. They just weren't getting it, they still thought they could control the imp, mistaking it being evil for the DM being evil. That, and I'd let Toben live a good two or three times when any sane DM would have offed him, and I was still being treated as a "killer DM". So I went with the first idea that popped in my head.

Five, six wishes had been cast on Nash. That's a lot of magical power, and the Imp wasn't just about to snap its fingers and negate all the damage it had done. Using my own rule, the imp took the effects of those wishes and "undid" them by transferring them to someone else. In this case, Toben himself. Nash had shed about 40 years; the Imp gave them back, immediately, by taking them from its master. Toben was only 20, so ended up with about 20 years' worth of never born. In an instant Toben, his gear, even his horse were just plain gone. Even the memories of Toben in the others' minds were strangely dulled. All that was left was the Imp, sitting in the grass. Toben had undone himself.

At this instant, the Imp was like a ticking bomb. Having destroyed its master, it had none and would thus bond to the first person to take it into his possession. Unfortunately, Argent did just this, innocently picking up the Imp to ask the others what they should do with it. Nash yelled at him to drop the damned thing, and he threw it into the underbrush.

A day later, Argent found the Imp in his pack. However, Argent was made of sterner stuff than Toben had been, and for a long time it seemed like he might just be the master who had the strength to resist the Imp's power, despite the Imp's quiet promises. But it didn't last.

PART 6: The Last Wish

The party played through *When Black Roses Bloom*, during which Julianna was killed. At the very end, the party is presented with a way to escape Sithicus, and possibly escape the lands of mist altogether: a portal which appeared in Soth's armor (actually, his armor WAS the portal). Those PCs who did not escape through the portal would be doomed to serve Soth for the rest of their lives, searching in vain for the fragments of a gem which would at last bring Kitiara to Soth's side.

All the PCs went through the portal. (Nash only because she was thrown through.) All but two, that is. Taermon Gideon stayed behind, mainly because he didn't have the guts to face the dreadful unknown of what lay beyond that portal. Argent stayed behind because he didn't want to abandon his family or his unspoken sweetie, Celia, both back in Mordent. These two fled into the pitch-black night. The next morning, at dawn, Soth found them and declared their fate. The two men lost all hope, and Argent pulled out the trusty Imp.

Basically, they wished for another chance, to go back to the night before. It took some wrangling, but they got the Imp to deliver. Argent and Taermon went through the portal, and escaped into Ansalon.

Quickly, some additional info:

1. The Imp cannot leave the mists of Ravenloft. Should its master escape, the Imp stays behind. But it will always seek to be reunited with its master, and will do all it can to bring him back.
 2. Celia is an infected lycanthrope. Her trigger is the nights of the new moon. Her bloodline actually goes back to Vorostokov, although she didn't know this.
 3. On the night the party escaped Sithicus, the Sithican moon (Nuitari) was new. No matter what its phase, the Sithican moon can only be seen by evil creatures.
 4. From the time Celia had joined the party, it had fallen to Kevin to guard over her lycanthropic changes. He had the stamina, the heavy armor, the magic weapon, and the spells to do it.
- Argent and Taermon escaped Sithicus. So the imp replaced them with Celia and Kevin. At the moment Argent and Taermon escaped, Celia and Kevin were both relaxing in Celia's home in Mordentshire. Both were in their "civvies", so when they suddenly found themselves in a pitch-

black forest, surrounded by eerie, shadow-cloaked figures, Kevin had neither armor, nor weapons, nor useful spells ready. Celia had a silver locket on a silver chain, and a knife on her belt, only because she always wore these items. After much ado, Kevin and Celia fled into the dark forest, eventually hiding somewhere quiet. They had no idea what was going to happen two hours later when the moon rose. Worst of all, Kevin decided Celia should take the first watch. Celia's pained screams woke him up. Kevin had no way of defending himself from the creature Celia was rapidly changing into, so he fled. He tried to climb trees, but everytime he did so, some horrid, barely seen little monkey-like creature (the Imp) would slash at his hands! After two or three tries at this, the werewolf pounced on Kevin and started tearing into him. He survived only through some quick thinking: he managed to tear the silver necklace from the werewolf's throat, wrap it tightly around his fingers, and then use it (like brass knuckles) to beat the monster into submission. It saved his life. Unfortunately, he was badly mauled, and although he didn't know it, he was infected.

The PC's stories went on, but that's the last direct effect the Imp had on their lives before the campaign stopped. Except one.

Argent was beyond the Imp's grasp, but the Imp knew where Argent was. Azalin had an interest in Argent, Nash, and Taermon, but had no idea where they were. So the Imp told Azalin where they could be found.

And no one is beyond His grasp.

John W. Mangrum