

Monday and the Counterfeit Corpse

By Andrew Kirschbaum

Chapter One

My name's Zachariah Monday. I'm a detective for hire, personal investigator, occasional body guard, professional pain-in-the-ass, busybody, snoop, and accidental do-gooder. Actually I'm a world-class do-gooder, it's just that I don't get paid for it, and not getting paid is something I rarely do on purpose. Fortunately, I do mostly get paid for all the rest, so I'm getting by just fine, thanks for asking.

Detective work comes in two basic flavors, boring and deadly. Luckily for me, it changes back and forth pretty frequently so I usually don't get too bored. Or dead. The real payoff doesn't have much to do with money, though. Most cases pay, but a few precious ones are actually fun. I was about to wrap up one of the best cases I had ever had the pleasure of solving. In fact, I was actually going so far as to kill time before I ended this one.

Okay, making the bad guys a little nervous and hopefully throwing them off their game was the official reason I was stalling. That, and the fact that I was counting on one more player to show up for my little production, but if I'm to be completely honest, it was only a little bit of the former and a whole lot of the latter. I had my whole game plan worked out, all my lines carefully rehearsed, and every possible contingency covered. My partner says I love showing off. I tell him he's crazy, but man, is he going to be able to say 'I told you so' after this one.

I leaned against the mantelpiece at the head of the room. I had chosen my position and facial expression carefully. The key was to look relaxed and calm, but ready for anything. It wasn't an easy thing to do, but I think I pulled it off. I looked around the room at the collection of witnesses, suspects, victims, and innocent bystanders. I smiled, carefully showing a little bit of tooth.

In the center of the room, in an impressive high-backed chair sat Mrs. Belinda Stanhope-Crane, also known as the Widow Crane, also known as my client. Here's a hint for anyone who wants to go into the detective-for-hire business: always have a rich client if you can possibly swing it; it just makes everything easier. Mrs. Stanhope-Crane was richer than King Midas wished he had been and she was a great client. She had hired me to find out who killed her husband Malcolm Howard – her latest husband that is. Mrs. Stanhope-Crane had outlived half a dozen husbands in her time. The deceased spouse in question had been half his wife's age, at the time of death two weeks ago.

I had read about the murder in the papers before she came to me with the case. It was front-page stuff, 'Scandalous Marriage Ends in Bloody Murder.' All sorts of tawdry allegations were flying. Popular gossip had it that hubby Howard had been killed by criminals plotting to steal all of his wife's money. And of course, everyone suspected that Howard had been in on it, what with his history as a convicted felon. It had all the makings of a first-rate soap opera and I was smack dab in the middle of it all. It didn't get much better than this in the detective-for-hire business.

I asked Belinda (she insisted that I call her Belinda) if she wanted me to prove her husband innocent or if she wanted me to solve the crime. Her answer had surprised me. She said neither; she only wanted justice to be done. I may have fallen just a tiny bit in love with Belinda right then and there. Plus she offered to pay me nearly double my usual rate.

Two people sat on the couch to her left. One was Nate Crane, the oldest son from her first marriage

and heir to the bulk of the Stanhope-Crane fortune – now that Howard was dead, anyway. To Nate’s left was Margaret Stanhope-O’Shaughnessy, my client’s sister. For a while Maggie O’Shaughnessy had been my primary suspect, but I knew better now. I hadn’t revealed this publicly yet; it was better if the real bad guy didn’t suspect what I didn’t suspect until it was too late. I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my trusty notebook. It’s times like this that I’m glad I take copious notes. Also, it’s easier to ignore people nonchalantly when you have an excuse not to look at them. I checked my notes and ignored up a storm.

Sitting across from those three and staring daggers at everyone was Brigid Howard, a woman who had emerged after the murder and alternately claimed to be Malcolm Howard’s sister, secret wife, and criminal partner at various points in my investigation. She had also tried to seduce me, or possibly kill me. I’m still not sure which. I had her pegged now. She was just a gold-digger with a talent for lies. Her real name was Mildred Drood and she wasn’t directly related to the case at all, but she sure had confused me for a while.

The entire serving staff was standing against the back wall: the chauffeur, three maids, a stable master, a cook, and a butler. Everyone in the room was human except for the butler. He was a goblinblood, which is to say that he was of mixed human and goblin ancestry. Accordingly, he was nearly an inch shorter than the next shortest person in the room, who was a 5 foot, 2-inch maid named Ginny. I didn’t remember Ginny’s last name, but I couldn’t be expected to remember everything, could I? I flipped several pages back in my notes. Ginny’s last name was Prescott.

The goblinblood butler made up in width what he lacked in height; he easily weighed three hundred pounds and it looked to be entirely muscle. His traditional butler’s uniform did little to hide his powerful physique. Not for the first time, I thought about being on the business end of those sledgehammer fists and, like every other time, I decided that I didn’t want to have that particular experience. He smiled at me, revealing huge slabs of teeth like pearly white tombstones.

Full-blooded goblins are like snowflakes – or they would be if snowflakes could bench-press motorcycles before a light lunch and shrug off injuries that would kill me three times over. What I meant by the snowflake thing was that no two goblins look very much alike. They were often some shade of green and they were usually about 4 or 5 feet tall. After that things got more complicated. Some goblins are hairless and scaly. Some goblins have great big pointy ears. A lot of them have long and lanky heavily-muscled limbs. But some of them had none of those qualities.

Scientists have theories on why goblins vary so widely from one to another. Wizards have theories as well. Maybe the most ancient and learned members of the goblin race know the answers. Then again, maybe they don’t. Most of the goblins that I know really didn’t care about the reasons behind why they were the way they were. Goblins are like that.

Mixed-race goblins, like the butler against the wall, were an even bigger bag of complicated. Some of them could pass for human if they wore baggy clothing; others – like the butler – could nearly pass for goblin. His head was wide and hairless and covered with tiny green scales, his ears were big and pointy and rose inches above either side of his head. And did I mention the teeth? Because the teeth looked like they could easily grind me into paste, and I like to mention things like that.

I turned to a blank page in my notebook and started sketching teeth. Again, this wasn’t relevant to the case in any way, but I was, after all, stalling for time. I snuck another quick glance around the room again. If my last invitee didn’t show up soon, someone’s temper was going to blow and then things would get harder.

“Blast it, Monday!” exclaimed Nate Crane as he burst up from the couch. “How long are you going to make us sit around here? You promised us answers!”

I sighed. Why am I always right when I least want to be?

“Mr. Crane,” I said in a soothing voice. “If you’ll just be patient for a few more minutes, I’ll be able to explain everything.”

Just then the door banged open and an enormous man stormed into the room. He was well over six

feet tall and hugely overweight. His great bald dome of a head gleamed brightly in the large room's witchlamps and a great shaggy sprawl of red beard covered the lower half of his face and spilled down his chest. He wore a New Jerusalem Police Department badge on his shirt and a tie that defied all taste and decorum.

"Lieutenant Mandrake!" I greeted him warmly, as an old friend deserves. "I'm so glad you could make it. I was just telling Mr. Crane here that you were on your way."

"Fuck you, Monday," Mandrake growled. "You asked me to be here and I'm here. Show me what you want me to see, but remember that you owe me big time for this. I don't make house calls."

I cleared my throat ostentatiously and straightened my tie. Jasper Mandrake was a real charmer, but he was also the closest thing New Jerusalem had to an honest cop. Mandrake cared and that was worth a whole lot in my book. Also with the piles of cash that Belinda was paying me, I could afford Mandrake's bribes, which was worth even more. Justice indeed, Mrs. Stanhope-Crane; justice indeed.

"Now that we're all assembled," I said in my best public-speaking voice. "Let's begin. As you all know, Mrs. Stanhope-Crane hired me to determine who was behind the murder of her husband, Malcolm Howard, and why he was murdered. I have asked you all to be here today because I have the answers to those questions and more."

I paused and let my gaze travel slowly across the large room, resting my eyes briefly on each of the assembled. Some of them looked me in the eyes, but others glanced away. Nervously, shyly, guiltily? I let the moment linger. The butler shifted slightly, moving into a stance that would allow him to move quickly, or possibly start a fight. I noted that and moved on.

"Mrs. St – I'm sorry – Belinda," I began in what I hoped was a comforting tone of voice. "Your husband was not involved in a scheme to steal all your money. All of the evidence that I've found shows nothing but honest motivations. I believe that your husband truly loved you and wanted to spend the rest of his life with you. I am truly sorry."

I paced back and forth a little bit before going on, partly because it makes me look thoughtful, but also because it provided a nice dramatic pause.

"Malcolm wasn't killed by your sister or your son," I continued. "In fact, no member of your family was involved in the crime at all. The true killer planted all of that evidence to throw investigators off the track. And it worked, at least for a little while."

"The handgun in Nathan's room?" asked Margaret Stanhope-O'Shaughnessy.

"The plans to the family safe in Margaret's room?" asked Nathan Crane simultaneously.

"All put there by the true killer," I assured them both. "To set you against each other and to stall for time. Sort of like I've been doing for some time now. Jasper, have your men found it yet?"

"Of course they have," Lt. Mandrake replied testily. "What do you think took me so long?"

"All right then," I smiled. "Bring it in, please."

"Bring it in!" bawled Mandrake in a huge ear-splitting voice.

The door opened once again and a uniformed police officer came in carrying a two-foot tall statuette of a crying woman. It was nicely sculpted and looked pretty valuable. It was also the motive for Malcolm Howard's murder.

"The Weeping Lady?" asked Belinda Stanhope-Crane in disbelief. "What about it?"

"Not the Weeping Lady," I replied. "This is a counterfeit. In fact, it's one of nearly a dozen counterfeits which have been moving through New Jerusalem for the last month."

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the butler edging slowly backwards. Unless I missed my guess – and I didn't – he was about to make his move. So it was time for me to make mine.

"Belinda," I said. "A trusted member of your staff has betrayed you, stolen from you, and most tragically of all, when your husband discovered their crimes, committed cold-blooded murder."

"But who?" cried Belinda. "Who did it?"

"Perdition take you all! I'm not going back to jail!" snarled a voice.

Twelve sets of eyes swept the room, looking for the source of the snarl. It was the cook, and he had

produced a handgun from somewhere and he was pointing it right at Belinda Stanhope-Crane. Both Lt. Mandrake and the uniformed officer were too far away to do anything, I was even further away and if I moved at all the crooked cook would surely shoot. Fortunately, I had planned ahead and had a skill in the crowd.

From behind the cook and well out of his field of view, a massive sledgehammer of a fist crashed into his head. The gun dropped from his suddenly slackened fist and clunked to the floor loudly, followed by the cook's unconscious body a moment later. I definitely never wanted to be on the business end of those enormous mitts.

"I got him, Boss," said the butler who wasn't a butler. His voice was so deep I could feel it in my chest; no fully human throat would ever produce a voice like that.

"Good job, Baxter," I replied with a grin.

Baxter Kline was my partner. Technically he was my employee, but that only went so far as me paying him. He was a great partner and he added a lot of value to the firm. When it came to actually following orders, he wasn't so great. But that's okay as he frequently tells me that I'm not so great as a boss either. We had infiltrated Baxter into the household a few weeks ago and today it had paid off.

"Wait," began Nathan Crane. "The butler is working for you?"

"Yep," I replied with a grin. "He's my partner, Baxter Kline."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Belinda. "He was an awful butler. When all of this was over, I was going to have to let him go."

Baxter actually looked contrite. "Sorry, Ma'am. I was so busy running Zack's errands, I barely had any time for you at all."

"Lt. Mandrake," I called. "If you and your associate would be so kind as to drag the cook away in manacles I can get back to explaining what exactly has been going on here for the last three weeks."

"I ain't your errand boy, Monday," Mandrake growled, a dangerous edge to his voice. "But seein' as this jerkhole pulled a deadly weapon on an upstanding citizen, I guess it's my civic duty to haul him in."

Mandrake turned towards the uniform and jerked a thumb towards the groaning cook, "Kovacks? Haul the jerkhole in."

"Yes, sir!" Kovacks replied smartly before busying himself with the aforementioned task.

Right about then the room exploded into a dozen different voices asking a hundred different questions. I flipped my notebook open nonchalantly and smiled.

"Let me start at the beginning," I said.

About an hour later everyone was finally satisfied with my answers, or at the very least they were as satisfied as they were ever likely to get. Mrs. Stanhope-Crane and I shook hands, she gave me a fat bonus check – which I had totally earned, thank you very much – and we said our good-byes. Lt. Mandrake and Officer Kovacks had long since left with their collar, and everyone else had something important or at least distracting that needed doing.

Baxter and I left together in a shared cab. Sure we had made a good profit on this case, but there was no sense in throwing away perfectly good money. We rode in silence for a time while I deconstructed recent events. I had expected things to go worse, frankly. The cook was a career criminal; he had been part of an underground fighting ring years ago before graduating to more sophisticated things like counterfeiting rings. I had expected him to give Bax a run for his money in the thug department. Which is not to say that Baxter Kline wasn't a damn fine thug, because he was. He was also a true gentleman, and quite possibly the heir to the Goblin Throne.

I realized Baxter was staring at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Why'd you lie to her?" he rumbled.

"I didn't!" I protested.

"Howard the hubby was in it up to his neck and you know it!" Baxter rumbled.

“At the beginning, sure!” I replied easily. “But he really did fall in love with Belinda and his partner killed him for it. Can you tell me what purpose would be served by hurting her with a meaningless truth?”

“You could argue that it would be doing the job she paid us to do,” Baxter suggested.

“She paid us for justice,” I said. “Justice is exactly what she got. It’s bad enough she lost her husband. I’m not going to be the one to take away his memory as well.”

“Boss, you are even more of a romantic sap than you are unabashed hambone.” Baxter grumbled, but his smile softened the words and made a lie of the grumble.

“I thought I did quite well in there,” I observed, changing the subject to an area in which I was more comfortable.

“Yeah, yeah,” Baxter admitted. “You did just fine.”

“Ahem,” I said, holding out my hand.

Baxter glowered at me, but he shoved one of his massive paws into a jacket pocket and pulled out a money clip. He peeled off a twenty and laid it in my hand. I made a show of examining it, holding it up to the light to look at the paper and such.

“I didn’t actually think you’d blow it, Boss,” Baxter rumbled. “I just think you’ve gotten too reliant on your pocket watch lately, and with it in the shop for repairs....”

“I’m more than my tools,” I sniffed in a fair approximation of Nathan Crane’s voice.

As much as I refused to admit it, Baxter had a point. My charmed pocket watch was a powerful tool, and it helped me out quite a lot. A few seconds warning right before any physical danger threatened my person was a pretty handy thing to have around. I patted the jacket pocket I usually kept the thing in to remind myself that it wasn’t there. I was operating without a net until the danger charm got out of the shop. And that was okay. Sometimes it was good to leave the safety nets behind.

“This was a damn good case,” I said. “And the perfect end to a perfect day.”

“Not quite,” Baxter said. “We still don’t have any idea what’s going on with the counterfeit statuette. Why are they smuggling art into the city? And where is it coming from? We don’t know any of that stuff.”

“True,” I agreed. “But none of that stuff is our problem. It’s Jasper’s job not ours, not until someone pays us to do it.”

Baxter revealed a flask from within the folds of his trench coat.

“I’ll drink to that,” Baxter said.

And that is exactly what we did.

Chapter Two

I work and live in the city of New Jerusalem. If you ask me there isn't a better burg in all the worlds. My city has everything: art, culture, great food, and where else can you find so much magic? There's wonder around every corner if you know where and how to look. And if there's one thing that I know it's knowing where and how to look for things. There are more witches and warlocks per square mile in New Jeru than anywhere else I know.

And where else could you brush shoulders with this many faeries? Outside of Faerie proper, or the Mists, there's maybe one full-blooded fae royal for every twenty-thousand humans, and most of those who choose to live in the solid world live right here in New Jerusalem. The city boasts thousands of commoner fae and faerieblooded humans, and at least a hundred thousand goblins and their kin. Sadly, most of those goblins live in overcrowded ghettos. All cities have problems and my city is no exception.

I can't work magic myself; I don't have the right kind of smarts for that business. Don't get me wrong, I've got plenty of street smarts, and I know my times tables, but magic relies on following very specific instructions very specifically. There are a thousand different schools of magic, but they all boil down to two very basic sorts. There's witchcraft which uses spells, rituals, and tools passed down from one witch to another for millennia.

Some witches take on a single apprentice, while others run entire schools for hundreds of students. The specifics are all different, but the point is the same: get the recipe wrong and boom! And no one is writing new recipes, what the previous generation of witches passes on is all there is, so every scrap is precious.

The other sort of magic is warlockery. Warlocks are the bad boys and girls of magic and definitely aren't the studious types. They dig up, piece together, or out and out steal their spells from wherever they can find them. Warlocks frequently get together at trade conventions where they trade, sell – and yes, steal – spells with, to, and from each other. And according to what my buddy Tim the Warlock tells me, it isn't always in that order either. My point is, both approaches require doing something in exactly the same precise way again and again and again. The very idea of that makes me literally nauseous.

Even though I can't do magic myself, I can still use other people's magic, and I absolutely do. I like to keep a collection of useful items around at all times. Sadly, my pockets are only so deep – both metaphorically and physically – so I could neither afford nor carry as much of a toolbox or arsenal as I might prefer. I intended to take the bonus money Belinda had paid me to go shopping for a few new toys. I love going shopping, but I love it even more when I can actually afford to buy things. There was a new shop I had heard about over in Houdiniville and I was itching to check it out. Sadly, the Houdiniville neighborhood was very much out of my way and I hadn't had an excuse to get out there yet.

Houdiniville is the part of New Jerusalem that the wireless networks use when they want to set a motion picture in New Jerusalem. It's the part of town that still looks like the old post cards. It's a fun neighborhood, what with all the tower observatories, transplanted castle sections, and at least one genuine decaying Edwardian manse; it also garners a lot of tourist trade and therefore some very cool shops have sprung up.

But shopping is pleasure and even on the day after I closed a big case, business still came first.

There were more than a few bills that I had let slide over the last couple of weeks and what with actually having some money and all, I thought now would be a good time to catch up. So I had enjoyed a quiet morning of solitude and paperwork. Baxter somehow manages to be real busy anytime there's a lot of filing or bill paying to do. In what passes for his defense, Baxter really is terrible at most office work. I've thought about hiring another employee to help me with the fiddly bits, but I'm actually pretty good at the boring stuff and it probably isn't worth the money it would cost to get somebody better than me.

The suite of offices I rent included a waiting area and three offices. The offices were mine, Baxter's, and the big one we used for impressing clients and having meals in, respectively. Those offices were located on the 23rd floor of the Flood Building and while they weren't exactly palatial, they served my purposes well enough.

So there I was putting papers into alphabetical order, then wrapping them into bundles, putting the bundles into folders, and then putting the folders inside filing cabinets. The reasons for doing all of this escapes me, but it's the way things are done, so I do it. I closed the drawer on the last folder of the day, the drawer made a satisfying sound as it clicked shut, and I allowed myself the happy smile of a man who doesn't have any more filing to do.

My thoughts began to fill with visions of quaint little shops (possibly even shoppes) where I would be offered an espresso while I browsed happily. And that's when there was a knock on the front door to my offices. I wasn't startled. I am a man of action, a man who's always aware of his surroundings and such a man can never be taken by surprise, let alone startled. Therefore, the high-pitched squeak I made and the little jump in the air were not the signs of startlement; they were merely side effects of a man who is preparing for action.

No one was supposed to be able to knock on my door without passing through my security system. I have a very good security system; it cost me a lot of money and it very rarely fails. The fact that my visitor had gotten past it with nary a squawk (other than the one I made) told me quite a bit. It told me that my mystery visitor had enough magical mojo to fool, shut down, or overpower my defenses. It told me that he, she, or it, didn't want me to have any warning. The fact that they had then knocked politely instead of simply barging in told me that they had enough confidence to throw that advantage away. The odds are good that they wanted me to know all of these things and that is why they were patiently waiting outside my door while I worked it out in my head. All of this led to one inescapable conclusion: I was not going to get any espresso today.

I went out to the waiting area. I could see the general shape of a woman through the translucent glass that made up the top third of my door. I could also see the reversed letters that spelled out Monday Investigations. Below that in a smaller font, there was the jumble of letters and numbers that made up my private investigator's license number.

"Come in," I said in as calmly as possible. It was possible that my squeak had gone unheard and if there was any chance at salvaging my precious ego, I was going to take it.

The door opened and my visitor glided in. She was a tall woman with an elegant sweep of raven-black hair lightly accented with silver. Her dark eyes sparkled with intelligence over a strikingly aquiline nose graced with a slight bend at the bridge. All her clothing was black from the tip of her pointy black hat to the equally pointy tips of her low-heeled black shoes. Her name was Adriana Gray, and she was probably the most powerful wizard I had ever met.

Remember all that stuff I said about witches and warlocks? Forget it. Throw it all out the window. Witches and warlocks are craft workers, laborers, people who work a trade. Wizards are artists, geniuses, explorers of the unknown. The average wizard was as far beyond the average warlock as a Dutch Master was beyond a marginally-talented house painter. I had met Ms. Gray last year on an inadvertant expedition to a place called the Old City. The Old City was – quite literally – a whole other world so I was quite naturally surprised to see her here.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Monday," said the wizard in her clear contralto voice. "I have a case for you."

“You want to hire me?” I asked, sounding a bit stupid even to my own ears.

“Isn’t that what most visitors to your offices desire?” Gray replied archly.

“Well, yes,” I admitted. “But most visitors to my offices aren’t Adriana Gray.”

She laughed at that. She had a rich and wholly-unselfconscious laugh. I liked it and I liked her as well. My affection for her was due in part to her having helped me out of a serious jam last year. She had charged me a small fortune for the help, but I still felt like I owed her one.

I offered her a cup of coffee and she declined, explaining that she had picked up a cup on the way. That was fortunate for me, actually, since making coffee for clients was one of Baxter’s jobs. No one liked coffee the way I made it, so in a small and quiet retaliation upon an uncaring world, I only ever made enough for myself. We went into the big meeting room and we each sat in one of the nice high-backed leather chairs that surrounded the big impressive table. I had spent a pile of money on both the chairs and the table, but it made me feel like I was running a real business whenever I got to use them, which on slow days amounted to having lunch. We got settled; I opened up a case file, wrote ‘Adriana Gray’ on the tab and looked at my prospective client in a sensitive and open-minded way. I practiced that look in the mirror, and believe me when I tell you it’s a good one.

“Tell me more about this case,” I said. “I’ll help if I can.”

“An associate of mine has been murdered,” she said, matter-of-factly. “I’d like you to find out who did it and why, and if possible, help me bring them to justice.”

I nodded; this was familiar ground to me. With very few notable exceptions, the law wasn’t much interested in solving murder cases. They were certainly interested in making it look like they were interested, but violence is a part of life in New Jerusalem. The government was mostly about making money and keeping the peace and that involved working hand in hand with organized crime whenever and wherever necessary. In the cloudy space between peace and justice, I manage to make my living.

“Have you informed the authorities?” I asked.

“This case is,” she paused as if deciding on the proper turn of phrase, “... outside of the jurisdiction of the authorities.”

“How far outside?” I asked.

“From our past encounter, I know you’ve done some traveling,” she began by way of reply. “How much do you know about the Soft Realms?”

“Not as much as I’d like,” I admitted.

Already I wasn’t liking this case so much. Creation was an awfully big place, but only a relatively small part of it was solid and defined. The world was a tiny little blue ball floating in a great big ocean of cold, dark mystery. There were places out there, goblinside, faerieside and other even scarier places.

“I am one of the custodians of a small holdfast deep in the Mists,” Adriana Gray continued. “It is a small realm and a fragile one. The man who has been murdered was another of the custodians. I need to know whether this is a plot to destabilize and destroy the realm, or if it was a different matter entirely. I need someone to dig deep into the entrenched secrets and politics. And I need an outsider to do it.”

I breathed in deeply. How big a favor did I owe her? I wasn’t looking for work right now and this case sounded like an awful lot of trouble. I’d be outside my area of knowledge and expertise, and the thing about murderers is that they’re generally willing to kill people who bother them.

The last time I had been out there, I ran into all sorts of strange and powerful things. In addition to the wizardly Ms. Gray, I’d met and dealt with a genuine fire-breathing dragon, an angel of salvation, and an enterprising devil called the Duke of Sorrows. Everything had worked out relatively well in the end, but I was in no rush to repeat the experience.

“I’ll pay you \$1,000 a day no matter how long it takes, minimum of \$5,000, half of which I am willing to pay up front. Right now, if you accept the case, which I very much hope you will.”

My train of thought spontaneously derailed. That was about twice as much as I usually got in exchange for risking life and limb. And \$2,500 would pay for some very nice toys. Actually, come to think of it, I could do better than the quaint little magic shop in Houdiniville and make the deal a little

bit easier for Ms. Gray in the process.

“How about \$2,500 worth of goods from your shop in the Old City as a down payment instead?” I asked.

A dark eyebrow arched elegantly over an equally-dark eye. “Did you have something particular in mind?” she asked, a smile playing about her thin lips.

“In fact I do,” I replied. “But we can discuss that later. If you agree, the terms are acceptable to me as well.”

“The terms are acceptable,” she said. “How shall you proceed?”

“I’ll have plenty of questions for you before we’re done. You’ve hired yourself a private detective. I’ll give you a full report once a week. We’ll pick a time that’s convenient for you. When the job’s done, you’ll get an itemized list of everything I’ve done and everywhere I’ve gone and exactly how I’ve spent your money. Results are guaranteed. I never back off, and I’m good at my job. When you hire Zachariah Monday, you get the truth, whether you like it or not.”

“Oh my,” Ms. Gray chuckled indulgently. “Do you practice that speech very often?”

In fact, I did, but it seemed to lessen the effect when I admitted it, so I just grunted and made a few notes. My notebook is an invaluable conversational tool.

“Let’s begin,” I said after a moment. “What can you tell me about the victim?”

“His name was Peter Starbourne and he was an artist and a Pillar of Patchwork.”

“Patchwork?” I asked.

“That is what we call our holdfast,” she replied.

“Okay,” I said, making a few notes. “Please go on.”

“Mr. Starbourne was one of our leading citizens,” she continued. “His sculptures and paintings are famous throughout Creation.”

The name Peter Starbourne sounded familiar to me now that I thought about it, “Has his art made it to the solid world?” I asked.

“Very much so,” she replied. “His work is bought and sold extensively in your world.”

“He had enemies, I assume?”

“Not enemies as such, no,” she answered. “All famous and important men have those who disagree with them. But he didn’t have as many as some, or even most. He was an artist, not a politician.”

“He had at least one enemy,” I said grimly.

That eyebrow expressed itself again as she said, “Aren’t you leaping to conclusions, Investigator? Mightn’t it have been a crime of passion or opportunity?”

I gave her my very best charming grin.

“I went to detective school, Ms. Gray,” I said. “So, yeah, it could have been any of those or a dozen more. It could even be an accident that just looks murderous. It happens. But there are two rules I follow. The first one is called the Zebra Rule. If you hear hoof beats in the distance, think horses, not zebras, unless you’re in Africa.”

Gray smiled, “And the second rule?”

“That one’s called the Spenser Rule,” I said. “And it goes like this: We can assume a thing or not, but if not assuming it gets us nowhere and the other way gets us somewhere, we’re better off if we assume the way that gets us somewhere.”

“And all of that means?” Gray asked, a hint of laughter in her voice.

“Until we know better,” I said, the smile falling away from my face. “Peter Starbourne had enemies and they murdered him.”

I would have loved to end the interview there; a dramatic note is a nice way to wrap up an interview, but I had more questions and not even my love of drama took precedence over my curiosity. Working together with Ms. Gray, I assembled a list of people to interview. Some of them were on hand or nearby when the body had been discovered; others were local experts that might provide me information and context about recent events. I would be taking a look at Starbourne’s home, his studio, and his business

office, and almost certainly other locations would pop up that needed snooping into. Before we were done, I had scheduled significantly more than a week's worth of investigating.

"Well," I said, glancing up from my notes. "I think that's enough to start with. Maybe we'll get lucky and one or more of these leads will pan out. I need to make some arrangements, pack my things and make a few surprise preparations."

I tore a page out of my trusty notebook and handed her the list I had compiled.

"Can you get me these things from your shop?" I asked. "And do they amount to less than \$2,500 worth of supplies?"

She glanced at the page very briefly before nodding, "All of this looks acceptable."

"How long do I have before you can make the crossing back to the Mists?" I asked. "And where do we need to be? I know where a few ley lines cross near here."

She gave me that thin smile of hers again as she rose from the chair.

"There are certain spots where it is easier to cross over," she said. "But to a wizard of my experience such things are not necessary. When and where would it be convenient for you to embark? We shall meet there and then."

"Are you saying you could leave right here and now?"

"Certainly, if that was what you wished," she replied.

"Huh," I said intelligently.

My buddy Tim is a damn good warlock. He told me once that moving from world to world was the very hardest thing any magic practitioner ever attempted. The fact that the ley lines crisscrossing New Jerusalem made it a whole lot easier to perform this herculean feat was a big part of the reason the city even existed. New Jerusalem had been founded because of the ley lines and the power they represented. And here was Adriana Gray, wizard of the Old City, telling me that she didn't need the lines, that even being in the same city with the biggest concentration of lines anywhere on the continent, she didn't even need to go a few blocks out of her way to use one. Was she showing off to impress me? Maybe. Was I impressed anyway? You'd better believe I was.

Adriana Gray and I wished each other a good day and she went off to do whatever it is wizards do when they're not being cryptic and scary.

Why did a wizard as powerful as Adriana Gray need me to poke my nose into a whodunit? Didn't she have other resources? What else was going on here? And how badly was I going to regret taking this case? The answers to those questions lay on the other side of the answer to another question: Who murdered Peter Starbourne? Any way you looked at it, it was going to be a busy week.