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In Disguise

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Serge sat quietly in his room. Although the sun shone brightly outside, little of it filtered in. The boards nailed on the windows made sure of it. It was so dark within the room itself, Serge was dependent on the light from a single candle to illuminate anything. Business had been quiet lately. The trouble with peacetime is it doesn't present many opportunities for employment ... at least in Serge's line of work. During the last war, he'd had gobs of work to do. So many messages to be communicated. As he sat, musing on his lack of activity and funds, the door started to open.

The bright light from the outside flooded the interior of the room. Normally, people knock or at least announce themselves when they enter, so Serge reached for his dagger. But when he saw who it was, he placed the dagger on the desk quickly. No need to look like the visit wasn't welcome. The man closed the door, plunging the room back into its former state of gloom. "Lord Dudley, I'm honored by your presence. Please have a seat." He indicated a chair ... the one with the least amount of accumulated dust and termite holes.

Lord Dudley stood in his fine red silk robe, the gold leaf sparking even in the dim light of Serge's room. He looked around but couldn't bring himself to be seated in any of the collection of sticks he presumed to be intended to represent a chair. "I think I'll stand if you don't mind."

"Of course, my lord, how can I be of service?" He had to admit to being intrigued. Not only was Dudley a high lord and councilor to the king, but Serge couldn't recall any deaths in the Lord's immediate family, so his visit came as a true surprise.

"His Majesty believes that you speak with spirits, is that so?" Lord Dudley was a known unbeliever, that made Serge quiver, just a little. His answer to this question might determine his fate. He pondered his response carefully. It had to be the truth. Yet, if the lord was looking for a statement that could be used to accuse him of fraud or mischief, he shouldn't simply provide such. At least, not without the prerequisite amount of torture beforehand. Lord Dudley smiled politely. "If you don't mind my saying so, you haven't spoken for a full two minutes. Do you have your wits about you?"

"A thousand apologies, my lord." Serge felt a unique kinship with bears at that moment. Especially the trapped ones with a desire to gnaw off their own leg. "There are others, my lord, who make such claim that I do, that is true. Never once, my lord, have I charged others for this belief. Some leave me gifts and I do them the honor of accepting. But I ask for nothing. Surely I have broken none of his majesties decrees on this matter."

"If you were commanded to do so, however, you could make inquiries in the spirit world?" Lord Dudley seem uncomfortable with the question, he certainly didn't seem like a royal inquisitor. Such types were more demanding and less uneasy. In fact, Serge got the distinct impression that Lord Dudley was concerned that he might reply in the affirmative. "I certainly would do my utmost to perform any service that his majesty might require of me." Serge's lips curved into a slight smile. He couldn't help it. He felt like he had just avoided the headsman's ax.

Lord Dudley wasn't satisfied, "Is that a yes?"

"Well, I ..."

"Out with it man. I need to know!" The high lord was beginning to become most unpleasant.

“Yes,” Serge announced. He was almost as surprised to give the expected answer as Lord Dudley was to hear it. “Yes, the answer is yes.” Serge closed his eyes. He was preparing himself. At any moment guards would lift him from his chair and take him to the dungeons. But when he opened his eyes, Lord Dudley was holding a piece of paper.

“What is it?” Serge asked timidly.

“It is a decree and letter of authority from his majesty. It gives you the power to question anyone of your choosing ... even members of the royal family ... with his authority. You are empowered to use any means you deem necessary.” Lord Dudley’s hands trembled as he handed over the letter.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Serge’s words were as confused as his feelings.

Lord Dudley sighed. “His Majesty believes that someone is stealing people’s souls, in order to inhabit their living bodies. Once he is finished with them they remain a mindless hulk. Not dead, but not living in the traditional sense of the term. Some of these people are some of his Majesties most loyal retainers. His Majesty wishes you to find their spirits and see if they can shed any light on the identity of the person or persons responsible ... and, if at all possible, return them to their former bodies.

Serge looked quietly at the paper the high lord had handed him. Lord Dudley looked pensive. “Do you accept the king’s charge? Can I tell his majesty you will look into the matter with all due haste?”

“Naturally,” Serge replied.

“Good I will expect regular reports as to your progress,” the lord seemed pleased, but a little distressed. “However, do not come to the ministry.” Come to think of it, Serge noted, the high lord looked almost physically ill. “I will come here.” Lord Dudley took out a handkerchief and held it over his nose. “Yes, I will come here. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have important matters that require my attention.” Lord Dudley backed out of the door, allowing the door to slam shut behind him.

As soon as the door closed, Buster’s form appeared before Serge. Buster existed as if suspended, being only a disembodied spirit. He had the look of a skeleton ... one that could be seen through ... clothed in vapors and bits of formless smoke. In his lifetime, Buster had been a con man, swindler, nare-do-well, thief and rogue. Now he was Serge’s partner. What he lacked in honesty, scruples, principles, ethics and good behavior he made up for in connections.

Buster knew everyone in the spirit world. Of course, they all hated him, but he knew everyone. In fact, Serge was one of the few people ... living or dead ... who could tolerate him. “You’ve hit the motherload,” Buster declared. “We’ll take that little letter of yours around to all the richest families. We’ll promise not to incriminate them ... for a substantial fee, of course. We’ll make a mint. We just need to figure out who to pin it on.”

“No, we don’t,” Serge exclaimed, “I have no desire to obtain goods through false means. Look how much good it did you.”

“I get it. You’re referring to the hanging.” Buster snickered. “That would have worked out fine if the hangman had just listened to me. A few appropriately placed cuts in the rope, and it would have snapped when I dropped. I’d be pardoned, and no one would have been the wiser. If he’d only done

what I asked him, I have shared the proceeds of my next job with him. Just because he didn't trust me. I ask you, what kind of excuse is that?"

"Trouble is," Serge mused, "We don't have any clues to go on. I certainly can't mosey up to the palace and ask if anyone is missing their souls. I don't even know who we are looking for."

"That's because he wants you to fail." This comment came from the disembodied voice of Lord Geoffrey Delancey. In every way possible he differed from Buster, except for the fact he was just as dead as Serge's other partner. Suddenly the room filled with disembodied voices and the sound rose to a calamitous crescendo.

"Alright, that's enough!" screamed Serge. The room went silent, but only for a moment. "How are we supposed to find a spirit that's been removed from its body?" Timothy Rawson declared. "Do you know how many spirits there are running around out here?" He would know about such things. In his lifetime, Rawson had been a shepherd, so he was well versed in finding lost sheep.

"Servants," Cicely Feversham announced in her Cockney accent, "Ask the servants. You may not be able to stroll up to the palace and just start asking questions, but not only can you talk to the servants ... they'll know exactly who's been acting strangely." Cicely was hard to distinguish from the others. Floating skulls and white mists make the idea of everyone looking alike seem almost cliché. Mostly Serge had to use their voices to distinguish them. Cicely had a quiet, mousy voice that was difficult to hear, but Serge always kept one ear out for her. What she lacked in physicality she more than made up for in intuition and common sense. He'd have preferred her as a partner, but she hadn't yet learned the skill of inhabiting a vessel.

Even so, it had taken Serge many seasons to build Buster's vessel. The panoply had been constructed of bits of rag paper, vellum, and parchment. Some bleached white in the sun, some tan, a few beige, but all pieced together to build a rather imposing shell. Perhaps the most impressive portion of the armor was the helmet. Most visors were covered in slits, to allow the wearer to see out. But Buster's faceplate was a series of solid visors that folded over his entire face like a louvered curtain. A helmet with a complete face covering, neither eyes slits to see through or place for a voice to be heard. It gave the impression of a blind knight when one looked at it. It was a masterpiece of interlocking parts and enchantments.

Serge thought back to his first efforts at the academy. He had not been a particularly good student. The academy had a remarkable library. Despite his best efforts, Serge's spells and incantations had about as much success as a line of ants climbing up an ice cliff ... in the rain. He sat for hours pouring over texts and books which were covered in more dust than ink. His candles burned to numbs and then he melted the remains down and burn those as well.

One particular tome had not been taken off the shelf for over three generations. He poured over it, slowly losing his eyesight in the process. One of the older sextons passed by and leaned over his shoulder. "I won't cast that spell. It lets you talk to the dead," he warned.

Serge looked at the sexton. Mostly because he hadn't even noticed the spell until the sexton had pointed it out. "Most spells can be removed, or counter-acted in some way, but not this one." The Sexton explained. "Once cast, it will be a part of you until you pass into the next world. Not to mention the fact that sleeping won't be the same anymore. That is if you can even manage sleep." Once, and

only once, Serge ignored the advice of those at the academy. Fortunately, for him, the spirits of the dead make terrific tutors.

“Time to mount up, Buster.” Serge declared, “It is long overdue for us to play a friendly call on Master Robert Drayton, His majesty’s dresser.” Buster’s spirit flowed into the paper armor as if it was cheesecloth. Once inside, the panoply sprang to life as it inhabited by flesh and not merely by the spirit. It began to move as if the occupant had just awaked from sleep. The arms stretched, the legs bent at the knees. As it moved the pieces seemed to flow together like wet paint. When the transformation was complete, what once had appeared as a white origami full-scale model of a knight now appeared like a shiny shell of highly polished steel.

The head turned to a jaunty angle and out of it sprang Buster’s idiosyncratic voice. “Pity he can’t buy me a drink.”

“Just you stay away from liquids,” Serge commented, “you’ve no need of them.”

“And fire,” Buster noted. He had many times felt the protection of the suit against attacks of steel and iron. All of which had no effect on the enchanted plates. But against fire, those mystical plates reacted in the same way as the paper it was made from would.

“Lord Delancey,” Serge gave the spirit his instructions, “Perhaps you and Timothy can ask around among the spirits. Seek out new arrivals, if you would.”

“Ah, I believe I can sense your stratagem,” the Lord responded in his characteristic sartorial tones, “There will be the usual disturbance caused by the appearance of others.”

“If by that you mean, the spirits will be at their complaining about having to make room, aye, there be that all right,” Timothy responded. His voice seemed to brighten up, the looming task now not seeming like the hunt for a needle in a haystack. The noise level rose once again to the point where it resembled the clattering of bells on an uncountable herd of cows. Voice upon voice clamored for attention. Only a gaggle of street urchins fighting over a coin dropped in the street would have been unrulier. Offers of help poured in until they seemed to blend into a single, screaming voice. Volunteers abounded at levels even the military couldn’t have accepted. Serge had to work hard to be heard over the din. “Geoffrey, get these people organized.” It was more of a plea than a command.

“Alright you savages,” his spirit voice screamed. But just as the noise reached new levels of commotion, Serge opened the door. Light streamed into the room and everything went silent as if a sudden wind had blown off a mist. Serge and Buster went out into the street and Serge closed the door once again. One would have expected the clamor to rise up again, but it remained silent. Serge always expected that without his presence, there was no one to hear them. Without an active audience, the spirits could be most aloof.

The street was the usual manner of bustle for the day. Tradesman going here and there, small children chasing after a chicken or two. Dust rising beneath the hooves of the passing horses. The only odd bit was Buster. Sure, the children scurried off at the sight of him, men stood back as he passed. All that was to be expected. What was odd was the silence. Buster had the annoying habit of keeping up a constant tide of chatter. “Something troubling you, my friend?” Buster wasn’t really Serge’s friend, but still, it was the more polite way to broach the subject of the armor’s silence.

“Are you sure you want to get involved in this?” he asked pensively.

“What do you mean?”

“Whoever is stealing souls from their bodies must have great powers at their command.” The armor gently put his mailed hand upon Serge’s shoulder. “What if it decides to separate *you* from *your* body. It would be an expedient way to keep people from asking any more embarrassing questions.”

“I trust,” Serge related, “That you’ll get in their way.” Buster and his armor tended to act as a sponge for any mystical forces in the vicinity. They would flow into the paper, appearing as descriptions written in blood red ink upon its surface. They would flow like dancing water into the interior of the suit and reinforce the enchantments therein.

“Let’s hope they are not too powerful.” Buster sounded genuinely concerned. But with Buster’s background it was best not to trust one’s ears ... and definitely best not to trust Buster himself. At this point, Buster still needed Serge to refresh the paper panoply so that he might inhabit it. He was prevented from entering until Serge agreed to it. Thus, he had a personal investment in Serge’s continued good health. And the only thing you could trust Buster to do was look after his own best interests. In that he was infallible.

Master Drayton’s house loomed like a clean spot on the back of a muddy pig. In one sense, it looked totally out of place in this portion of town. It was well constructed and above all, clean. But despite Drayton position with the royal family, his presence would not be welcome in the upper-class part of town. It was a three-story affair on the corner of the street. The white daub between the strapwork was brighter than bones bleaching in the sun.

Buster knocked on the door. Serge always let him because it pleased the spirit beyond all measure. When the door opened, a tall man in dark robes appeared. It was not Drayton. “What is this?” Buster demanded. “This is a cheap side of town. What’s a servant doing with a ... well, a servant.”

“I’m Mister Drayton’s butler,” he announced.

“Could we see Mister Drayton?” Buster asked in a snotty tone that he knew Serge was too polite to attempt.

“I’ll see if he’s in.”

“Show him this please.” Serge handed the butler the piece of paper. In a few moments, Robert Drayton appeared at the door, paper in hand. His face was white as a sheet. Buster looked healthier than he did. “Please,” he asked Serge, “come in.”

The first room was the long gallery which had become popular in wealthy homes. Drayton invited them to sit down as he passed the letter back to Serge. “I’m afraid I don’t understand. Am I to be accused of something?”

“We’re not here to bring accusations, we’re just here to ask a few questions,” Serge explained.

“I thought, you know, because of the armor,” Master Drayton sounded quite unnerved.

“No, we’d just like you to answer a question or two,” Serge tried to smile benignly. “Has anyone in the royal household been acting strangely lately?”

“Who wasn’t,” The chief dresser responded glibly, “First there was Lord Melton, first lord of the privy seal. He couldn’t stop talking. Most unusual for the taciturn Lord Melton. He couldn’t stop talking about his majesty’s brother. Such an odd diatribe too,” Lord Melton looked as if he was recalling a bad haircut. “He went on and on about how good his majesty’s brother was at this or that. He even carried on about how good Hugo was at cards. Which is odd, because Prince Hugo is not good at cards. In fact, he’s not good at anything. Not only that, but he’s a terrible dresser. Velvet suits? Who wears velvet suits?”

Serge looked distraught, “Is that all?”

“Well, no,” Drayton continued, “by the next day he had completely talked himself out. Now he sits in his room staring at the fireplace. In, in a dressing gown. The man has no taste.”

“Is he still sitting there?” Buster asked.

“I assume so,” Master Drayton, “But I haven’t gone back in to look.” The two looked at him oddly, “besides, If I had gone in there, he might have started talking again. Believe me, no one wants that.”

“Can you get us in there?” Buster inquired.

Drayton looked like he seen Buster, in the non-flesh so to speak. “Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry,” Serge calmed the dresser, “Just get us in. You won’t have to talk to him.”

Drayton stood up and removed a carpet from the middle of the floor. In the sunlight, you could see quite the cloud of dust rising. Under the cloud was an iron ring set in the floorboards. Drayton pulled on it, opening a trap door in the floor.

“You’re keeping the first lord of the privy seal in your basement? Respect.” Buster did, in fact, sound impressed.

Drayton cocked his head, “not exactly.” He led them down a long, steep ladder and they entered into a roughhewn passageway. “You wanted to get into the palace. We certainly can’t go waltzing in the front door. After all, you’re tradesmen.”

The passageway was long and dark. Drayton took a candle lantern from a hook on the wall. A candle burned brightly in its interior, yet it didn’t seem to make much difference in the hallway. Buster, being dead, wasn’t affected at all, but Serge found the journey rough going. The passage smelled of moisture and mildew. Every once and a while, his face ran smack dab into a clump of roots hanging from the ceiling. The light from a single candle is not very good at helping you avoid obstructions. Drayton didn’t need a butler, he needed a cleaning squad.

At last, they reached the far end where an equally steep ladder led back up to the surface. The light was quite bright on the other side of the trap door they crawled through. Once Serge’s eyes adjusted, he found himself in an ornate hall. Drayton was busying himself closing the trap door and covering it with another rug. Drayton pointed, “this way.” He directed them down the hall toward a lavishly carved teak door. The door creaked as if it had never even heard of the concept of oil. Drayton motioned them in ... and then closed the door. He wasn’t taking any chances.

True to his word, Lord Melton, sat, unmoving in a chair facing the fireplace. It had long ago burned down, and the remains were a cold ash white. Serge poked the high lord. He leaned slightly to the side and then remained, partially leaning. Buster's armor pulled up a chair beside him and sat. A tiny wisp of smoke left the armor, which turned to its paper origami appearance and the mist went right up the high lord's nose.

Suddenly Lord Melton stood up. "Yep, nobody home." It appeared to be Lord Melton, but it was unquestionably Buster's voice.

"Are you quite sure?" Serge asked.

"Absolutely," Buster replied. "I couldn't get in here if the body already had a soul. The whole thing is an empty shell. It's like a house that has been left open. Only there's nothing left to steal."

"Alright," Serge instructed his partner, "back in your shell. That body, like someone's empty house, doesn't belong to you." Buster ... or rather Lord Melton looked disappointed. "Well, pretty soon it won't belong to anyone. It's starting to rot."

"Are you sure?" Serge inquired.

Buster returned the body to its seat. "You should get a whiff of the smells in here. Then you wouldn't even have to ask the question." Buster's mist returned to his armor and Lord Melton returned to being his former unresponsive self. Since he was normally reticent, it was not surprising no one had really noticed.

"Well, at least now we know who to be looking for among the spirits." As Serge contemplated their next move, the door opened without warning. Doesn't anyone knock? Serge fully expected to see Master Drayton, but when the unholed door stopped its squeaking a rather well-dressed goblin rushed in.

"The king needs your ..." The goblin stopped in mid-sentence. Perhaps because he had noticed the extra occupants, but it was more likely because Buster was now holding him in midair by his collar. The goblin's feet kept moving, to no effect.

"Thought you'd pick up a few things, aye?" Buster looked at the squirming green goblin. "How did you get past the security? Doing a little guard bribing are we?"

"How dare you?" The Goblin announced with an imperious air.

"It might help," Serge commented, "If you told us what your business here is."

"I might ask you the same question," the goblin snapped back.

Serge held up the letter so that the goblin could read it. "I see." The little green creature coughed, "I am Lord Alphonso Del La Habersham Del La Rowen, Count von Rittsendorf, Lord Master of the Treasury."

"If you wrote that name down," Buster suggested, "it would be longer than you are tall."

Serge smiled, "Perhaps it would be better if we called you Al."

"Fell free," the goblin sounded disappointed, "everyone else does."

“So, Al,” Serge folded up the letter, “If you don’t mind, perhaps we could return to the topic of what you are doing in here. If that’s not too much trouble.”

“Wait a minute,” Buster asserted himself as he put the fancy-dressed goblin down, “how does a goblin become master of the treasury?”

“Look, iron brain,” the goblin started poking Buster’s armor in the knee, “let me give you some advice. Not that you’ll ever have a chance to act on it. When you hire someone, you can hire two types of people for any job. You can hire the respectable, capable type who can do the job, or you can hire the one who can rob the respectable one blind. If you’re smart, you’ll pick the second one.”

Serge smiled, “I take it this is why you are never seen in public?”

“Well, it wouldn’t look appropriate for a goblin to appear with the royal court, now would it?” the goblin snapped back.

“Can we get back to the subject at hand?” Serge suggested.

“Well, I heard rumors that some undead wizard is stealing the bodies of the living,” the goblin looked genuinely distressed.

“Take it from me,” Buster declared, “It’s not someone who is dead.” Revelations can have an astounding effect on people. Beyond a state of surprise, or of astonishment, it covers a gambit of emotions all overshadowed by raw confusion. “What?” both Serge and the goblin snapped at once.

“Believe me, if you were dead and you got back into a living body, you wouldn’t leave on your own,” Buster announced with certainty.

The goblin casually walked over to Lord Melton and poked him, “Louisa, do you think that’s true?” Lord Melton fell off his chair with a loud crash. “I guess you do,” Al proclaimed.

“Louisa? Melton’s first name is Louisa?” Buster sounded more amazed than the other two had been about his revelation of the dead. “Boy, his parents never even gave him a chance, did they?”

“You’ll find,” Alphonso explained calmly, “That the reason most nobility don’t use their first names is because ... they’re STUPID.” The goblin screamed, “get over it.” The goblin sat down with a look of, well you wouldn’t say anguish, because it was past that.

“A friend of yours?” Buster suggested.

“Of course, he was a friend of mine, you moron.” The goblin declared. “But I felt much safer before, thinking this was being perpetrated by the undead.”

“Strange conjecture,” Serge replied suspiciously. “Why would a live wizard be more of a threat?”

“Wake up will you,” the goblin snorted, “If you were dead, would you want to be reincarnated as a goblin.”

“He has a point,” Buster claimed.

Things were starting to look more complicated to Serge. If the perpetrator was not among the dead, then he would be among the living. Serge had far fewer agents among the living. The living also tended to be much more dangerous. This one had a certain amount of power, and that too was dangerous. Serge could easily end up in the same state as Lord Melton. After being around Buster, Serge had a special understanding of the desires of the dead. They all tended to be single-minded, like a starving man looking for a meal. The living had far more potential motives than the dead.

“Don’t worry about it,” Buster harangued, as if he was reading Serge’s thoughts, “Anyone trying to mess with you has to go through me first.” He sounded as determined as a sunrise.

“How did you know I was thinking about that?” Serge asked pensively.

“Are you kidding?” The goblin spoke up, “even I could tell what you were thinking. It doesn’t take a mind reader.” He mumbled the last little bit.

“So,” Buster sat, crossing his legs on the chair once occupied by the master of the privy seal, “What do we do now?”

“I have no idea,” Serge seemed equally at odds as to how to proceed. “Maybe we should flip a coin.”

“Oh, gods,” the goblin swore, “Don’t do that. Coins hate me.”

“You sure your fit to be the treasurer?” Buster added snidely.

“Look,” the goblin began expounding, using hand gestures to illustrate his points, “Why don’t you start a chart of the evidence, write down who been affected? How many bodies have been stolen? Once you have all the information about the victims, maybe a pattern will emerge.”

“What good will a pattern do,” Buster remarked, pushing Lord Melton’s body across the floor with his foot, “If everyone winds up like our friend here.”

“Once you find a pattern,” the goblin explained, “maybe you can find a motive.”

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Serge commented, “Why did you come to Lord Melton’s room to discuss the rumor of bodies being snatched?”

“Have you ever met Lord Melton?” The goblin asked. “I mean before now? Nobody liked him. I mean nobody. The man was a complete suck up. And boring ... you wouldn’t believe. When I first heard the rumors, I thought ... who would be the last person to be affected by someone who wanted to steal other people’s lives. So, now you know why I’m here.”

“Now there’s a pattern for you,” Buster responded in a mischievous tone. “We need to look for someone with no taste.”

“We’re in the palace, you idiot,” the goblin retorted with a fair amount on indignation, “You just described everyone.”

“Look on the bright side,” Serge responded, “It limits our search area to the palace.”

The trio spent the next several hours locating the rest of the victims. Buster wanted to ditch the goblin, but the treasurer refused to go. Apparently, he found the panoply’s company comforting. In the end, it

turned out for the best. After searching the palace, neither Buster or Serge could remember which passage had the secret trap door hidden under the rug. After some time lost looking under carpets, the goblin led them out through the front door.

The guards stopped them as soon as they arrived in the antechamber. "How did you get in here," they demanded.

"That's the wrong question," Alphonso declared, giving the guard a good dressing down, "the right question is how they got in here without *you* noticing? I'm sure the king would be most interested to hear about how you allowed these two to simply wander in here."

The guard looked flustered ... and distressed.

"Of course," the goblin explained, "you could let us out and then no one ever has to mention this again."

"Did you see anyone?" The guards exchanged glances.

"Not a one," the second replied, "besides, we do have standing orders not to notice the goblin."

"Agreed." He turned to motion the treasurer and his associates out the door, but the room was already empty.

The din in Serge's little room was almost deafening. There was a large parchment roll on one wall, illuminated by a set of candle sconces. There were lines connecting all thirty-nine of the victims, who like Lord Melton, were little more than vegetables. The lines all pointed to a series of exceptional sketches. A piece of charcoal was moving, apparently on its own, finishing the sketch of the thirty-ninth. Serge's assistants in the netherworld had found over half of the spirits of the victims and they were now adding to the noise in the room. Demands to be returned to their bodies filled the room, but Serge had yet to find the appropriate spell. His first attempt had placed Lord Melton's soul into a rat that just happened to be wandering by. It took everyone some time for them to notice and once reversed, Lord Melton was not pleased.

Serge continued his research. How he managed this with all the noise was beyond anyone's comprehension. Experience had imparted him with the ability to concentrate even in the loudest environments. Either that or he'd simply gone mad and hadn't noticed. Buster had brought him more books from the academy library. Serge would have gotten them himself, but he wasn't allowed in the stacks anymore. Something to do with his mistreatment of the books. In reality, the spirits had taught him Hamelin's enchantment of ultimate absorption. He opened one manuscript on the relation of the spirit to the physical body. It was a mind-numbingly boring work which would have put even the most devout scholar to sleep.

Serge opened the book and sat it down on the table. The pages turned by themselves, as the leaves turned from side to side, the ink of the text went from dark to gray. Moving on to a light tan before disappearing altogether once the paper settled on the left. The pages turned more slowly as he reached the center of the work and after passing it, Serge was required to turn the pages personally. About three-quarters of the way through the tome, the pages stopped turning altogether. They simply crumbled into dust as the text left the paper. In the end, Serge closed the book, where the bindings and

desiccated covers collapsed into a pile of dry powder as if they were the exposed remains of a long-dead mummy.

When he looked up from his reading, Lord Geoffrey Delancey was busy trying to give Serge a report on the status of the search for the remaining spirits. Serge would have given the spirit his undivided attention, except that Timothy Rawson kept interrupting Geoffrey with the same report.

"If you don't mind," Lord Geoffrey declared, "I'm respectfully relating information of value here."

"Expect," Timothy interrupted again with a fair amount of annoyance, "you keep forgetting to include the detail that I was the bloke who bloody found them."

"In that case," Lord Geoffrey replied snidely, "maybe you can leave us alone and go and find the others."

Several of the other disembodied courtiers returned to their demands to be reunited with their former bodies. The noise level was reaching whole new levels. "All right you savages," Lord Geoffrey yelled, "That *will* be enough!"

"You let him interrupt you," a spirit indicated Timothy.

"Yes, but I know him!" Delancey declared, "You people are a sad waste of time."

"Thanks," Timothy replied, "I didn't think you cared."

"I don't. I just wanted to shut them up."

Buster was busy studying the images. They were mostly the usual nobles of the court. Although the presence of the head gardener was a bit confusing. Even more confusing was that even after he lost his spirit, his body had continued to remove weeds from between the rhododendrons. No one would have even known, except that Timothy had run across his spirit trying to squat with the other dead palace gardeners.

"You have representatives from every department and chamber," Lord Geoffrey declared, "Secretaries, generals, clerks, and court doctors."

"I don't get it," Buster mumbled, "What's the connection?"

"Well for one," Cicely Feversham commented, "They're all men."

"Hardly surprising for the palace," Buster remarked.

"Except for one that you missed," Cicely sounded immensely pleased with herself. "Let me introduce you to Miss Emily West."

"Odd," remarked the goblin, "Don't recall a Miss West as part of the court."

"She's not," Cicely explained in a knowing voice, "She's Lord Melton's personal executive assistant."

"There no West on the payroll," the goblin sounded annoyed, "if there was, then I would know about it!"

“Not in this case. Emily specific responsibility was to keep Lord Melton ... content,” Cicely explained. If she’d had lips, you would have seen a sly smile.

“Louisa, you dog.” The goblin snickered.

“Some of her other clients include Lord Fog. Emily has been explaining to me that Lord Fog has been bragging that all of his majesty’s improvements have been his ideas.” Al tried to cover his laugh by placing his fist over his mouth. It didn’t work. “He also explained to her that he was planning, with others, to have his majesty assassinated.”

“OK, well problem solved,” Buster snorted delighted. “We just tell Lord Dudley and our job is done.” Buster’s aversion to work was almost as intense as his present aversion to life. But much better known.

“It would turn out to shorten our problem,” Serge commented. “We inform his majesty this afternoon. He orders me executed for not having any proof ... or a suspect for that matter. He looks in your suit and finds it empty and has it burned as a witch’s familiar. My head is rolling around on the ground by dinnertime. Yea, I’d say all our problems would be solved. I just not too keen on the ending.”

“Subtle,” Buster mused, “OK, so there are a few insignificant details missing. I think I get it. We need a suspect.”

“And proof,” Serge added correcting his partner.

Buster went back to reviewing the images on the wall.

“Interesting,” Alphonso said, joining Buster looking at the assortment of images, “It’s like a collection of sycophants, bootlickers and yes men. The only one missing is Hugo.”

“Hugo?” Buster sounded shocked, “As in Prince Hugo?”

“The very one.” The goblin snorted. “He’s always had his own ideas, but whenever his majesty looked at him, well, he agreed with whatever the old boy was saying without reservations.”

“I think you are overlooking the obvious,” Lord Delancey commented while looking over Buster’s shoulder. Well, what would have been Buster’s shoulder, if he’d still had one. “These men are all the king’s loyal supporters. Someone is taking out the king’s loyal supporters, one by one.”

Buster turned to Geoffrey. If he still had eyes they would have been bulging out of his head in annoyance. “as if the two items were at all related. Why doesn’t the guilty party simply take over his majesty and be done with it.”

Now it was Timothy Rawson’s turn to look incredulous. “Whatever the incantation is, it only lasts about 24 hours. Why go through the trouble to only be king for 24 hours?”

Alphonso smiled, “And after that, there’s no dead body. The king wouldn’t technically be dead.” He paused to see if anyone else was going to say it first, but there were no takers. “On most days,” he announced flatly, “I suppose most people wouldn’t even notice.”

“So,” Serge suggested, “If the king was dead, who would inherit?”

“Hugo.” Everyone said at once.

“OK,” Buster sounded contented, “Now we have our suspect.” Floating skulls usually don’t smile, but Buster was making a serious exception in this case.

“Buster,” Serge looked like death eating a cracker. “We still need proof. Otherwise, I’m just temporally a walking around stand for the headsmen’s ax blade.”

“It’s not going to be easy to prove to the king his brother is out to replace him,” Alphonso sneered.

“Close family?” Buster asked.

“No, mindless moron on the throne,” the goblin explained.

“As my esteemed associate, Geoffrey has already said, you’re overlooking the obvious,” Timothy Rawson stated with all the certainty of rain clouds over a picnic. “Gab this Lord Fog and torture him until he breaks.”

“Precisely,” Lord Delancey agreed, “and who said you could call me Geoffrey?”

“Who said you could call me Timothy?” Rawson snapped.

Lord Fox was bound to a chair. Not surprisingly, he didn’t look too happy about it. Buster had already been hard at work providing ... incentive. Blood was slowly dripping out of Lord Fox’s nose and from about two dozen paper cuts. Buster drew the sharp, pointed end of his gauntlet enclosed finger across Fox’s cheek to make it 25. Fox wasn’t a particularly stoic character, but he had no intention of giving any information to lower class thugs.

Buster stood before the bound noblemen, standing like a pugilist. “Maybe I should start pulling out your fingers.”

“I think you meant to say you’ll start pulling out his fingernails.” Serge corrected him.

Buster looked at him coyly, “not the way I do it.”

Buster picked up the chair, with the noblemen still tied to it. He gradually rotated the chair until the man’s head was now pointed at the ground. “Of course,” he snickered, “I also like hanging people upside down, because it’s slower. The way it starts out isn’t even that bad, but towards the end ... wow. Because it’s not actually life-threatening, it can last and last.” He gave the lord a long pause to let the thought sink in, as the blood rushed to his head. “You see, with regular torture, the victim knows there will be a point where he will pass out and the pain will go away. At least for a little bit. The body simply shuts down. But when you’re hanging upside down, the victim is aware the whole time he won’t pass out from the torment.”

Buster had a set of vocal tones which would have terrorized the king’s torturer. But the rare moments of silence were even worse. It gave the victim time to imagine what Buster was thinking and it wasn’t a pretty sight. “Hanging upside down also gives you time to do some soul searching. Although in your case, you can search as *much* as you want, you’re still not going to find anything.”

Lord Fox squirmed slightly but made no indication that he was about to crack. His cold stone face was solid and indifferent, resembling the sphinx. All except for the purple color.

It was Lord Alphonso who finally provided the key. "If you don't tell us what we want to know, I'll tell everyone ..." the goblin stood on his tiptoes and whispered something in his ear.

"Right," Lord Fox declared, "What do you want to know?"

Buster lowered the chair to put it back down on the floor. He was tempted to simply put Fox down on his head. But, in the end, he settled on the chair legs.

"You had plans to assassinate the king?" Serge interrogated him, "Who else was involved?"

"It wasn't my idea," Fox spat a tiny amount of blood from between his teeth, "I didn't come up with it. The whole thing was ..." Lord Fox went silent. But not only silent, his face when completely blank. His eyes had a stare spanning a thousand leagues. Without changing his expression one iota, he spat out, "Did you think I was really going to let him tell you? Go ahead and go back to torturing him. I'll watch."

"Hugo," the goblin uttered in disbelief, "is that you?"

"Who were you expecting?" The face was still Lord Fox's but the voice was undeniably Prince Hugo's. "I had plans to keep you on as treasurer, but now that I see you with these two reprobates, you better start planning your retirement. On second thought," Hugo's voice snickered, "I'll plan your retirement."

Serge didn't appear to be listening. He was busy writing down a set of arcane symbols on a piece of paper. When he was finished, he rolled up the results and placed it in a small tube with a screw top that was attached to a fine chain. He placed it over Lord Fox's head and tucked it under the man's shirt.

"What's this? Planning on buying your way out of your execution?" Prince Hugo's voice seemed strained.

"No," Serge explained, "it an enchantment of permanence. Feel free to put it through the test. I think you find you're not going anywhere."

"What?" the prince screamed. The eyes on Fox's head closed so had it appeared as if they were closing in on themselves ... or he was having a truly good bowel movement. But nothing happened. Nothing at all. "You moron, when I get out of this I'll simply remove this stupid thing."

"You won't be able," Serge explained, "It's permanent in more ways than one." Serge had a slight smile on his face, an unusual moment of honest expression. "I'm afraid that you will not be inheriting the throne. You'd have to kill off every noble in the kingdom for you to even be in line for the succession. I also cut the astral bond between you and your old body. That will stop your heart. If it helps, Hugo, I'll be glad to send flowers to the funeral."

Fox/Hugo's face turned purple again, even though he was now right-side up. "I'll get you for this," he screamed. He struggled intensely, but there was still no result.

"Please do," Buster announced, "Right now I no longer have a reason to torture you. But if you drop by, at any time, I'll be happy to pick it up again." He punctuated his remarks with the 26th cut. Blood slowly dripped down Fox/Hugo's forehead and he screamed ... since now he was feeling everything that Buster

was doing to him. The treasurer explained later that Hugo never had much tolerance for pain. A hangnail would make him scream like a girl.

Serge pulled out a knife and Fox/Hugo shrank back. He cut the nobleman's bonds and the bleeding fellow ran off without a second thought. All over the palace, people were waking up. Lord Melton, like the others, was rather frustrated with his dress sense. With Hugo soul trapped in Fox's body the effects of the spell was broken.

Alphonso smiled. There's something wrong with a goblin smile. Too many teeth. "Somewhere there is a zookeeper with a huge net searching for that man."

Buster looked at Serge. Ok, it wasn't really a look, more of a jaunty head turn in the mystic's direction. "Well, problem solved. Now all you have to do is explain it to Lord Dudley and his majesty." The two walked out together through the door the fleeing attempted king assassin had left open.

"Actually," Serge explained, "I was planning on letting you do the explanation. I was going to stand there holding a match ... in case something goes wrong."

The two started heading off down the road and into the sunset. Well, it would have been the sunset if it hadn't been 11:30 in the morning. "Well," Buster put his armored limb around the other man, "you're the one with the letter. By the way, do we have to return that?"

"You can ask that when you explain it all to the king." Serge joked.

"But it was all your idea, let's not forget that ..." Buster lamented.

The goblin watched the withdrawing men. There was a misty look in his eyes, "Those two have serious problems..."