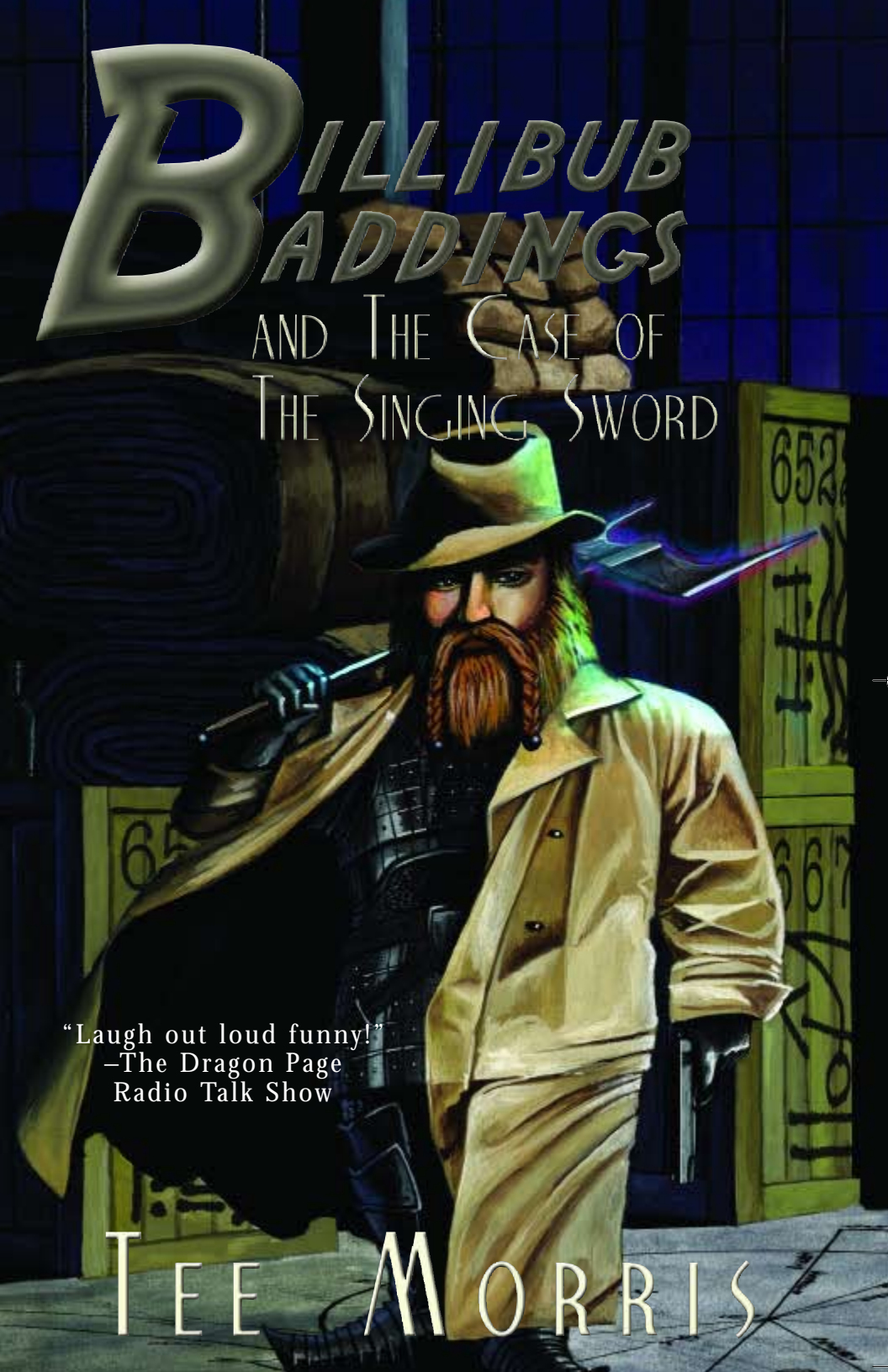


BILLIBUB BADDINGS

AND THE CASE OF
THE SINGING SWORD



"Laugh out loud funny!"
-The Dragon Page
Radio Talk Show

TEE MORRIS

WORD ON THE STREET ABOUT

BILLIBUB BADDINGS

Let me share a piece of wisdom I've picked up being the reviewer for the Dragon Page. You simply cannot go wrong reading anything Tee Morris writes. You won't find a better blend of action, humor, suspense, and romance anywhere else. Many genre authors like to mix the genres together to create a new flavor to their stories. This is the first time I've seen fantasy and mystery blended quite in this fashion. It makes for fantastic dialogue and laugh-out-loud funny narrative.

— Joe Murphy, The Dragon Page Radio Talk Show

Cynics will say that Glen Cook has already mined that concept about as deep as it can go with his Garrett P.I. stories but Morris has struck on a rich vein here. Morris cleverly plays the clichés of fantasy, detective, and gangster stories off of each other in a carefully plotted, subtly witty, action-packed thriller. I haven't enjoyed a cross-genre detective story this much since *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*

— Michael Pederson, *Nth Degree*

Billibub Baddings is the latest from Tee Morris, who turns his attention from the swashbuckling Renaissance to Gangland Chicago. Morris is a fine storyteller, and he's done his homework in this entertaining tale that moves quickly (like a good Mickey Spillane) and keeps the reader turning pages all the way through. Personally, I can't wait for Billi to take on his next case.

— Walter H. Hunt, author of *The Dark Wing*,
The Dark Path and *The Dark Ascent*

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BY

TEE MORRIS



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C H A P E R O N E

TROUBLE IS A PRINCESS IN HIGH HEELS

Chicago, 1929. There are a thousand stories in the naked city. And when you're a dwarf at four-foot-one, they all look that much taller.

The name's Billibub Baddings. I'm a private eye. I know you're probably scratching your noggin right now, wondering how the hell did a dwarf of the Highlands of Gryfennos get to be a detective walking the asphalt jungles of the Windy City? It's an easy story to tell, but not one I enjoy telling again and again...and again. I won't lie to you—being a four-foot-one detective in a world of six-foot thugs, creeps, and low-lives is tough, but I manage. Just as I manage, every time, to tell the tale of how I ended up in this crazy, mixed-up world called Chicago.

Let me take you back in time, and then to the left a nudge, to the world of Acryonis. With valleys and groves greener than Hyde Park in springtime, it wasn't a bad place to hang your axe and shield at the end of a day. Where there wasn't green, there were mountainous arctic regions, rolling moors, and clear, vast lake districts. Yeah, Acryonis had it all. It could've been paradise if the noisy neighbors upstairs—Black Orcs from the North, who weren't that happy with being cold all the time—hadn't gone stirring up trouble.

The Great War of the Races began as a series of more-than-occasional village burnings along the borders of Stone Guardian Valley and the Shri-Mela Plains, and then grew hair over time...and as it was orcs who started this mess, this war grew hair in places that you wouldn't think to look for hair. This Great War (and to this day, I still don't know why they call it that, as there was nothing great about it), which started back before my great-grandfather's day, now started to pick up steam in mine. It fell upon me to uphold the great estate of Baddings—to carve

out a name for myself, my future offspring, and my ancestors on the Holy Tablets of Yearnese.

Yeah, big deal. My family name and a nickel might get me a cup of java or a taste of foam from a freshly tapped keg. The “great estate of Baddings” I was charged to uphold consisted of a couple of rickety chairs, a wobbly table, and a thatch roof that leaked on rainy days. Since I really didn’t have much to lose, I figured I would find my fortune in the heat of battle...thirst for glory, rattling sabers and all that.

Unlike my ancestors, I did all right for myself. Managed to make Captain of my unit. We dwarves were the best in the Allied Races, our sterling reputation with infiltration and search-and-destroy missions preceding us to the point that other races were willing to pay or barter only the finest goods for our services. We never disappointed. The 25th Dwarf Warriors Company went so far as to adopt the motto, “Don’t let ’em know you’re comin’, but let ’em know when you’re leavin.” At least, that’s a rough translation in Chicago’s native tongue.

It was this particular talent of getting in unannounced and leaving with a bang (and a boom, for good measure) that got the “Stormin’ Scrippies” noticed by The Council of Light. It appeared that the Black Orcs, who had fought this Great War for decades only to find themselves on the losing side, were cooking up this cockamamie scheme of taking over Acryonis by calling on the Darkness of Ish’tyis: an all-supreme evil that could make the most crooked politician look straighter than a flagpole.

I know I should be pissed beyond reason at the arrogance the orcs displayed in dabbling in dark magic, but it’s more of a pity I feel. Truth be told, orcs ain’t the brightest bulbs on the moviehouse marquee. They had their eyes on the prize, but hadn’t considered how they would control this Darkness once it was unleashed. Instead, they kept their plan to the basics: collect the ancient talismans of Acryonis and open the Portal of Kraketia, unleashing the Eternal Night of Ish’tyis in the process.

You think these names are hard to read? Try living there.

Anyway, our counterplan was to get this crossbreed blacksmith, Sirius Hawthorne, up to Death Mountain's summit so he could drive his handcrafted toothpick into the heart of the Black Orc Barbarians' top dog. Along with Sirius and his tagalong cleric came me and my boys, leading a team of representatives from every race in the Allied Forces.

We were trying to sneak in undetected, but humans are a loud and clumsy bunch. But even with the Black Orcs closing in on us, we managed to reach the Central Chamber, where the Talisman Ritual had already begun. Sirius took on the Black Orcs' Big Cheese while we fended off his thugs. I broke free of the melee and got over to the Portal of Kraketia, and from the sounds coming out of there as it opened, I had to think fast. Otherwise, a bunch of grumpy orcs would have been the least of our troubles.

I figured the best way to separate the talismans would be to toss them into the Portal, condemning them to Oblivion in the process. As I threw the last talisman into the portal and watched the rip in front of me slowly close in on itself, it looked like the plan was working.

The only problem was that I didn't know how close "*too close*" to the portal was. As the rip became smaller, I found myself getting closer to the gaping chasm without necessarily wanting to get closer. Ahead, I could see slips of dark-blue mist quickly disappearing into a black void darker than goblin's blood; the void was growing larger, but only because I kept sliding forward towards this closing maw. No doubt about it: It looked like I was to be a final dessert for this portal's nine-course dinner.

The kind of fear I was feeling at that moment can motivate you—no matter how desperate that last act may appear—to make a final stand in order to live to see another day. To that end, I turned around and shot out a hand for this cute elf in our party, just out of arm's reach. She was a pretty little creation with finely-honed muscles, the end result of disciplined training and a few too many tours of duty in that friggin' war. There was just a touch of the wild child left in her, what with the V-cut shirts

and leather armor that worked like a barmaid's bodice to push her tiny breasts up and together, giving this hardened Elvish warrior enough cleavage for a dwarf to enjoy. I looked deep into her brilliant green peepers—a pair of emeralds set in a hard, intense face framed by long, thick locks of silky fire billowing in the strong currents that pulled me ever closer to Oblivion.

Yeah, she was a cutie. Always had a soft spot for the redheads. Still do.

I remember feeling her fingertips just brushing mine...and with that, everything I knew and accepted as my world slipped away like dirty bathwater taking its time running down a slow drain. But at least I knew that pretty little thing and the rest of Acryonis would be all right. I had done my part to uphold the all-important Baddings name. I had sacrificed my life for the tranquility of my kinsmen, and of the kinsmen I would never know.

I remember the chamber disappearing from me in a blur. I remember falling. I remember seeing all kinds of stars, like on a winter night where you can see the edge of the universe and just a yard past it. I remember the wind growing louder the longer I fell.

Then everything stopped...and I mean *stopped*. I was surrounded by that silence you hear (and to an extent, feel) after you've been thrown against the nearest wall in the middle of a tavern brawl.

So, I guessed I was done. This was it. The big sleep, and it felt like being thrown against a wall in the middle of a barfight. Damn, this was going to be one hell of an eternity!

Now, here's the funny thing about Oblivion: Everyone knows *what* it is, but no one knows *where* it is. You can consult those All-Mighty Oracles, and they will describe the same thing I've just gotten through telling you about. The stars. The wind. Flashes of light. Okay, they might skip the "being thrown against the tavern wall" analogy, as the average Oracle doesn't drink, smoke, or enjoy a good woman. (If that's the price for clairvoyance, let me forever wallow in the bliss of ignorance!)

Ask the Oracles what happens *after* the silence, and suddenly the planets are out of alignment, or the cards are refusing to yield their knowledge. If ever an Oracle answered with a simple “Gee, I don’t know...” it would probably trigger some bizarre spell and make their heads explode or something. No, instead of ’fessing up that they’re about as enlightened as the darkest part of a goblin’s butt, they spew this bizarre rhetoric that makes Irving Berlin lyrics sound like Shakespeare. “*The Winds of the Future are brewing into a storm I cannot see through...*” is always an old standby of theirs.

Oblivion, as I discovered, is not the part you see, but the part where you end up. Makes sense, right? And since no one has ever come back from Oblivion, no one—not even the wizard with the biggest hat of the nine realms—knows where Oblivion is.

But now I’m here to tell you exactly where Oblivion is and where it ends. The portals of Oblivion, at least the ones I fell through, end at the Chicago Public Library on 78 East Washington Street in Chicago, Illinois, USA.

When I finally came to, my head was pounding harder than a wardrum firing up the troops before the great push. I picked myself up to make a fire and brew up a good home remedy for headaches like this one. That was when I realized I wasn’t in the Everlasting Fields of Yernase. I wasn’t in a forest. I wasn’t even outdoors. Books. I was surrounded by shelves upon shelves of books.

I’ll be the first one to tell you that I was never a bookworm. I always preferred a good battle-axe and a bad attitude over protocol and diplomacy any day. “*A good book is worth more than any treasure of a king,*” our village’s elder told me once. I was forty-two then. Thought I knew everything, so I didn’t really take that one to heart.

Once I found myself in this library, I knew I was standing in a vault of gold, platinum, rubies, and sapphires.

I understood enough to find my way through the simple books in the Children’s section, but quickly figured out I would have to wrap my brain around human tongue (the dialect of Ro’hema

in particular) because it was the prominent language here. The hard part wasn't learning the lingo (which, I found out later, was called English) so much as staying out of everyone's way during the day before coming out at night for my education.

All my previous training in getting in and out of keeps, dungeons, and fortresses without setting off traps or alerting any guards was now paying off with an intellectual interest. Here, the only thing I left in my wake were a few books out of order and some perplexed librarians wondering where their lunches had disappeared to on certain days. I noticed from the shadows that these humans were, on a whole, a bit thick in the head. I managed to work up to what they called a sixth-grade level while others continued to struggle with "See Spot Run."

Once I was done with the Children's wing of the library, I began to search for books on world culture, hoping to come across groups who practiced magic. But the only documented "magic" was hardly worth talking about. I read about something called "voodoo" that was practiced in a city called New Orleans, and newspapers often advertised traveling carnivals that featured fortunetellers and their all-knowing crystal balls alongside entertainment greats like "Alligator Boy" and "The World's Fattest Lady." And I even overheard a couple of librarians offering to read one another's tea leaves to forecast the future. These gimmicks were no better than the hocus-pocus scams in my world, pulled by failed apprentices for the out-of-towners. Not what I call magic.

The papers also kept me up to speed on the dates and daily news, teeming with stories about the Prohibition Act, the Gangland Wars, and the war waged by the Treasury Department on Organized Crime. This was where I got my bearings on the concept of time—at least, how time is measured in this world. By the time I learned what a year was and that I'd arrived in the year 1927, I'd been here for roughly four months.

And just my luck—I finally figure out the year, and according to the *Tribune*, Chicago was ready to ring in the *new* year. 1927, I barely knew ye.

As I put it all together in that moment, it felt like some invisible squire had thrown a suit of armor equal to the weight of a pregnant Cerberus on top of me. The truth finally sunk in: I had been here four months, and there was no way back home.

I felt my legs give way underneath me along with the impulse to relieve the unbearable tightness in my throat with a good, old-fashioned howl. That wasn't an option, unless I wanted to be discovered by anyone working late in the stacks. So I covered my face and let it all go, sobbing into my calloused palms every emotion, regret, and memory that had been bottled up inside of me.

You would cry too if you had the same epiphany I did: my family, a collection of dwarves that could fill a small banquet hall; my friends, comrades-in-arms of both Dwarven and Human races, and maybe the odd crossbreed here and there; my home, not a great castle by any stretch, but still mine. Gone. There were issues I hadn't resolved, a few wrongs I wanted to right. I still had a lot more to do in Gryfennos, be it as Captain Baddings of the Stormin' Scrappies, or simply as landowner and faithful subject, Billibub Baddings.

Everything—*everything* I had known—was lost. I had just spent four months in a library, and the only magic in this realm existed in works of fiction. While there were some distinct advantages to a world void of necromancers, wizards, and soothsayers, it looked like I was never going to see Acryonis again unless I had the right spell and the right mage calling it. Here, in Chicago, that wasn't going to happen.

So yeah, I cried. You got a problem with that?

When I finally removed my hands from my face, the first thing my eyes focused on through their watery haze was another librarian's lunch I'd helped myself to earlier that day. *No*, I thought, *there ain't no way I'm living like some second-rate street urchin!* I couldn't, and wouldn't, spend the rest of my life hiding in the stacks and pilfering bag lunches. My Mama Baddings had brought me up better than that. So, I gave the bootstraps a yank and committed myself to finding a place in this new world.

When I wasn't searching for something I could do to make an honest living, I turned to the fiction shelves for something light. Here, I was drawn to those mysteries of Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes. Now, there was a vocation I could see myself excelling at. A detective. Why not? I could see the application of my military skills put to a daily test and kept sharp. It was, of all the different jobs I had read about, the one that I found most appealing. I remember smiling wide, content that I could find a place for myself here after all.

Then, I caught a glimpse of my transparent reflection in a window. This wasn't going to be easy.

The first thing I needed to do was to step out into this real world and get to know it better. Sure, you can learn a lot from hitting the books, but nothing beats walking your battlefield before facing the cavalry, truly knowing where you would be making your stand.

When I finally made it back to the library after that first night, I honestly considered applying for a job stacking and sorting books for the rest of my days. I'd seen a lot in Acryonis, but when you see your first skyscraper, which easily towers over the tallest keep you've seen in all your years above ground, you tend to feel a little intimidated.

Then, there were the cars. Whenever I'd overheard these humans calling this age the "Roaring Twenties," I thought in my early ignorance that this was an oblique reference to twenty-ton dragons nesting somewhere in town. No doubt, the number of these horseless coaches added to the roar of the times. Okay, so they were efficient, but they were also loud, and belched out fumes that made troll farts smell like a dozen roses! And I was going to call *this* place home?

From the shadows where I watched the humans of this world, I silently ran down the list of the Fates and tried to figure out which one I'd crossed.

I soon learned that the "Roaring Twenties" referred to the lifestyle: late-night parties at the supposedly hard-to-find speakeasies, flappers dancing the Charleston, guys trying too

hard to act like Rudolph Valentino's "Sheik," and what have you. At the same time, it was also an accurate description of this city being nothing more than a cement jungle with a pack of noisy lions, all trying to be the king. The rules of the game were "survival of the fittest"—not too different from the Acryonis days.

Accepting the fact I stood out from a crowd like a desert sphinx in a pedigree dog show, I continued to slip out of the library in my most plain clothes: a simple shirt and breeches with deerskin boots. I walked the city at night, sticking to shadows and alleyways, not only getting familiar with the mean streets but also gaining some confidence. Little by little, I started to find a common ground between some parts of Chicago and a few cursed realms I'd crossed back home.

The next step was to get a bit of the green. I cased pawnshops and antique dealers, keeping an eye out for merchants who dealt in "the unique and unusual." If I found the right trader, I figured that some of my gear would sell. I also checked out local talent agencies. There was this book called *The Wizard of Oz* that everyone was raving about. (I read it in the library because I caught the word "Wizard" in the title, and I held a glimmer of hope there really was a place in this realm called Oz and maybe there was a wizard there.)

Between its popularity and Semon and Hardy's moving picture from 1925, really short people were in demand for high-priced birthday parties and special events. So I showed up on the front doorstep of the Harvey Showenstein Talent Agency one morning and became their golden boy for a couple of months. While I'm sure my ancestors weren't entirely happy with my antics as "Waldorf, the Protector of Munchkinland," it did get me those first Hamiltons and Franklins. I'm still on Harv's calling list, as a matter of fact. When business is slow, I do an occasional job for him, provided the pay is good and I'm allowed a lot of stage make-up to keep my identity in the anonymous category.

In between my numerous "Waldorf" appearances, I started looking around for two things every detective needs to begin a

career in the city: office space and suits. Before too long, I found a perfect corner office overlooking the library, where it had all begun for me. When I added up the cash to see what I could start, I was more than impressed by what a novelty act could make in less than six months' time. It also helped that I wasn't already paying for a flop, thanks to the library's boiler room.

After putting cash down for the office space, furnishings, and even a secretary, I still had a nice bundle left over. While being four-foot-one meant wearing custom-made suits, at least I didn't have to worry about paying for a lot of material. I kept it simple, with pinstripes being my only luxury. According to the library's newspapers and from what I saw on my nights on the town, brown and navy blue seemed to be the fashion.

Hey, just because I'm a dwarf doesn't mean I can't take steps to look good.

So, I bit the bullet and hocked a few tools of the soldier's trade, along with the deerskin boots and leather armor. It wasn't like I was parting with any treasured heirlooms. This was who I was back in Acryonis. Wearing the suits and paying the landlord for the first month's rent was my big goodbye to the past. So began the career of Billibub Baddings, private eye.

I still had, mounted proudly on the walls of my office, my "survival gear." There was a charmed battle-axe and war hammer crisscrossed over a two-handed broadsword that, if you stood it on its tip, nearly matched me in height. I also had a reliable mace and a ball-and-chain that countered the display on the opposite wall. I'm not the sentimental type, but I did want to hang on a couple of things, just to remind me of the good times. And let's face it—these were reminders that still mattered. In a pinch, I could dust off the axe and hammer and do damage, if need be. I hadn't found a use for these weapons in this world. Yet. For now, I defended myself just fine with my modest collection of boom daggers.

"Boom daggers." Yeah, I remember calling "guns" that in my first few weeks in town. Looking back on it now, I can't help

but laugh, but now and again I still like to remind myself of my origins to keep me right with this world.

Now, you might think throwing daggers and axes in battles involves nothing more than muttering a quick prayer to the Fates, closing your eyes, and throwing a blade in the general direction of a bloodlust-filled scream. I don't *think* so. You got to know how to throw, how hard to throw, and how to *aim*. Without aiming properly, throwing your weapon is just plain stupid. It leaves you unarmed, for one thing.

I was really good when it came to accuracy. (Won a couple of axe-throws in my Gryfennos days.) Turns out that my natural ability also extended to boom daggers. Not too long after I bought my first gun, I set aside cash to pay some country bumpkin for a few pointers on how to shoot. By the end of the day, I was teaching old Farmer Brown how to draw a better bead on moving targets.

In one desk drawer was a spare Roscoe, and in another drawer, a hogleg with a .38 that only came out to play if I expected too much trouble for Beatrice. Beatrice was my first gun, a .45 automatic in its shoulder holster, draped on the coat rack. The weapons of this time were pretty impressive, and if you knew how to use them, they could be lethal. Even if you didn't, you could still do enough damage to make a guy think twice about looking at your wench in an ungentlemanly way.

Ever since Chicago was dubbed "Gangland" by some bureaucrats far off in Washington, D.C. who wouldn't know bathtub gin from seltzer water, everyone needed something done on the Q.T. Cops were either on the take, or too busy playing it safe so as not to turn their wives into widows. I took all this to mean that I had chosen wisely to pursue the career of a private investigator.

Once I got my name on the door, the clients were steady. This month, though, had been slow. I could hear Miranda outside my office door, filing her nails. Obviously finished with the paper-pushing and bill-paying duties, she was now counting the minutes to the weekend.

She was a cute, bosomy brunette from Leonard, Missouri, who had stepped off the bus with a meager life savings and a smile, determined to make it big in modeling. Her plan was to make connections here and follow the catwalk all the way to New York. The kid had potential, with legs that went up to her neck, a waist that an elf would kill for, and a good, healthy chest blessed with God-gifted buoyancy. She was almost the perfect woman in her five-foot-eight stature, but she was a bird who had brains, and that made her a dangerous combination.

I still thank the Fates that she answered my ad in the *Chicago Chronicle*. She was the fourth applicant who was easy on the eyes, but Miranda's predecessors lacked something that she had in abundance: a command of basic grammar. She not only had a way with a Smith & Corona, but could also write with a flair that would make Fitzgerald green with envy. I hired her right away. She immediately put the office to order, keeping my books balanced and the place looking tidy and nice. Even brought in a few plants to liven up the surroundings, although the modest rubber tree by my desk was silently turning a depressing shade of brown and black. Guess my thumb wasn't green enough for its liking.

When Miranda and I first laid eyes on each other, it wasn't the best of beginnings because we both couldn't stop staring. She was staring at me because—well, hell—look at me! I'm a dwarf! A four-foot-one Casanova with a thirty-something-inch waist, long red beard and braided hair in a custom-made blue pinstripe is going to catch your attention! As for me, I kept staring at her chest on account of the low-cut blouse that provided a sneak peek at what the Good Lord had graced her with. Now, I'd seen my fair share of racks strapped in chain mail, leather armor, and a wide assortment of fashion that gives the term "breast plate" a whole new spin, but there was just something about the clothing of this realm and what it left to the imagination.

Miranda finally quipped, "*Take a picture and the memory's yours forever...*" to which I replied, "*Yeah, well, not only am I a private dick, I'm also a great footstool in a pinch!*"

We had a good laugh, and the interview finally made it to Mick's, where we enjoyed java and chili together. (You got to love a girl who appreciates fine cuisine.) There, I fed her a story about parents who didn't love me, my days with the circus, and finally jumping ship to find myself a home here in Chicago. (The circus idea worked really well because I would sometimes get the odd phone call from the agent asking for the "Waldorf" routine.) She never knew the real story because, quite honestly, I didn't think she needed to know. Even though being my right arm for these many moons now (and coming up on a year...damn, I'd better think of something special to do for her!), I just don't think she needed that kind of a burden. Some secrets are best kept to yourself.

The rapid *scritch-scritch-scritch* of Miranda's nail-sculpting broke the stillness in the air. A stillness like that before a storm conjured by a necromancer's hand. My eyes stared at the words spelling out "Baddings Investigations" in reverse, gracefully arched across the smoky glass of the doorway's pane. The frosted glass caught the glow of the hallway lights, but no silhouettes of approaching customers.

The quiet times were when I grew the most anxious. I hopped down from my chair and paced the office floor, slowly stroking my long, red beard. It had been a really dry month, and my brain started to ponder, plan, and worry. I picked up my mitt and bounced a worn-in baseball against a blank spot on the wall between the baseball pictures I'd hung in my office for personality.

Of all the things in this strange world, I found a natural attraction to baseball. Don't know if it was just the spirit of competition nurtured in the sport, or the carefree attitudes of the pastime's finest. I suppose you could say that the sport had a magic all its own, and I fell victim to its spell.

I couldn't help but smile whenever I cast a glance on my prized possession: an autographed picture of Babe Ruth, posing with yours truly. It was one of those "right places at the right times" kind of photographs. Me being a dwarf, he thought I was

a bit of a laugh. Imagine his surprise when this dwarf gave the attitude right back at him. That gave way to the picture of Babe, enjoying a big guffaw while shaking my little hand. He respected attitude. I like that.

The ball I now tossed was a pop fly I'd caught while in the cheap seats at a Cubs-Phillies game. Sometimes it pays to be the "odd man out."

"Billi!" Miranda snapped while continuing to file her nails. "You keep that up, and you're going to knock a hole in the wall. Landlord will have your ass on a plate."

"Eh, come on, Miranda, you know I do this when I get restless."

"I know that. *You* know that." Miranda paused in her chiding to pop her chewing gum. "The landlord looks at it as property damage, not therapy."

She had a point, but I couldn't shake this restless feeling. It was that same uneasiness I always knew before a charge against enemy ranks, battle-axe in my grasp with my fingers splaying slowly around the handle. If I were pacing the office with my axe in hand, it would have probably made Miranda's chestnut-brown mane turn white. I figured the pitching practice was a nicer alternative.

The ball bounced back from the plaster wall and returned to the form-fitting mitt with a satisfying *snap*.

"Fine, then," Miranda shrugged. "Just don't take it out of my paycheck."

"You got nothing to worry about, sweets. If anything, you deserve a raise."

I could hear the creak of Miranda's chair as she stood up and crossed the room to my own office. A second later, she was leaning against the open door frame and smiling, lightly blowing her nails clean. In the blouse she wore, her voluptuous beauties presented themselves proudly. Yeah, that's what I really love about Miranda. She knows what she's got, and isn't shy about showing it off. To that end, I did take her under my wing (a short wing to say the

least) and gave her a few quick pointers on how to protect herself if any mook wanted to give her a reason. She's a good girl.

"What's that about a raise?" she pressed.

"Now, come on, Miranda." I smiled, defiantly throwing the ball back against the wall. "You know as well as anybody the book's been a little tight lately. What we need is a case that'll set us up better than some of these nickel-and-dime divorce jobs. Then, I can finally give you that raise I've been promising. The Fates know you've earned it, keeping a dwarf like me in line."

Miranda gave a heavy sigh. "You're just like all the other men in my life."

I raised a bushy eyebrow. "Four-foot-one with scraggly beards, fiery-red hair, and devilishly handsome good looks?"

"No, just telling me what I deserve but not delivering," she smiled with a mischievous wink.

"Miranda, honey." I snapped the glove tight around the ball and turned to face her. "Now, you know I don't want to mix the business life with the personal one. I wouldn't want to hurt you emotionally..." I returned her the same kind of wink. "...or physically."

She rolled her eyes and popped her gum again. "If I were given a buck every time a guy told me *that*, I wouldn't *need* a raise." Miranda measured with her thumb and index finger a space in the air about the length of a yeoman's arrowhead as I wound up on my imaginary pitcher's mound, with the Sultan of Swat threatening to send my next pitch into the Acryonis Highlands. "I ask you, Billi, since when is *this* eight inches?"

And this is yet another charming aspect of Miranda's personality. She is every inch of a woman—sultry and hot as a dragon's den, where the humid air collects against rock walls and coats the floor with a silvery sheen, one drop at a time. She also has the edge of an enchanted blade, an attitude absent from the stereotypical "small-town girl" found in the farmlands of El Hanor Durea or in Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers. Miranda can talk like one of the guys, smoke a stogie with a twinkle in her eye, kick back a shot of Jack Daniels, and

still keep her elegance while sinking an eight ball in the corner pocket. It is something I do love about her, and something about her that continuously catches me off guard.

I gave my next pitch to Babe a bit too much pepper. The ball impacted at a high speed, sending a few chips of paint behind the file cabinets and covering my mitt in plaster powder with a leather-kissed *snap*.

"I'm not gonna say it, Billi," Miranda said with a shrug.

"That's good, since I know you're already thinking it," I scoffed. "How about you take the rest of the day off? It's Friday. Find a nice book or bachelor to curl up with tonight, why don't ya?"

She smiled. "Sounds like a plan, Billi."

It was Friday and the clock was at three-thirty. I couldn't justify keeping Miranda in the office simply out of spite. She *had* warned me about the wall, and I'd chosen not to listen. The phone rarely jingled between now and five o'clock, anyway. Far be it from me to keep the little minx imprisoned in this cage of stone, paint, and office supplies.

She was out the door faster than her shadow could keep up.

I always enjoyed this time alone in my office—even now, with my anxiety hitting unusual levels—because this was when I sorted out the thoughts of the week. My usual ritual between five and six: across the street to Mickey's for a chili dinner special, and then a couple of blocks home to a modest one-bedroom flop. I was starting the weekend a little early myself, albeit not an exciting one by the looks of things. Eh, I never hit the town unless the mood suited me, and even then, I needed the right company. Seeing as I didn't have either, I was looking at a quiet weekend, and that suited me just fine. Maybe a couple days on my own was just what the apothecary ordered.

The tink of the bottle's lip sounded like it hit the glass hard, but it was merely the quiet of the room. It was a city kind of quiet, peppered with the soft rumble of traffic, the occasional car horn or siren, and the newsboy shouting out the headline of the *Chicago Defender* or the *Tribune*. I poured a healthy dose of Canadian whiskey and raised the glass to my lips. That warm

nectar blessed my body like an old friend, sending a shudder that ale, mead, or my family's home recipe couldn't match.

Yeah, another love of mine in this world—the alcohol. Sweet Ambrosia. Sure, we were in the middle of the Prohibition, but in Chicago, it wasn't a question of how you got the alcohol, but *where*. This little vice's hiding place was a small compartment behind the team picture of the '28 Cubs. (My first season with the guys! What an arm on that Sheriff Blade!) I couldn't take the chance of any surprise visits from the local precinct. Nowadays, you needed the talents of a seer to tell who in the police was crooked and who was straight. Besides, I needed a drink. I didn't particularly like the financial alternatives facing me. Calling up Harv and dusting off the “Waldorf” routine kept reappearing as the only solution. If I had to tell one more high-society dink the way to the can was to “*Follow the Yellow Brick Road...*”

But a dwarf's got to do what a dwarf's got to do. I got responsibilities to Miranda, the business, and myself. My fingers gripped the receiver, and even the slight chill of its surface didn't sober me up enough to stop me from placing this call. I dialed the number and waited. One ring. Two rings.

Her voice made my blood go ice-cold. “Showenstein Talent Agency.” It was Mabel. It was always Mabel. The woman was older than some mountains in my valley.

My mouth moved to say, “*Hello, Mabel, it's Billi Baddings...*” but I paused.

“Hello? Hel-lo?!” the voice crackled angrily. “I know someone's there. I can hear you breathing!”

The doorknob was turning. At first I thought Miranda had forgotten her compact, or something. Then I saw the silhouette through the window, and that was when I hung up on Mabel.

The silhouette wasn't Miranda. The silhouette was an opportunity.

She was a tall, cool woman, and through her veil I could still see, set in a pale canvas of smooth, supple skin, eyes as dark as a man's intentions on that first meeting. The perfume she wore carried a bouquet of lilacs, rose, musk, and a touch of sandalwood.

In a single word: expensive. She wore her hat at a tilt to block out the slanting rays of the early-evening sun, giving her angular face an even more exotic look. Her body held every curve in just the right place, giving her frame a profile that would make a Highland Elf long for the rolling hills and valleys of home. She was tall to begin with, but the designer heels she wore made her a six-foot mountain I would take delight in climbing sometime. The dying sunlight streaming through my office window caught the cascade of hair spilling from her wide-brimmed hat for only a moment, a blanket of raven-dark hair falling to the small of her back. Her lips matched the hue of a fine Italian red wine, and in that moment, I couldn't help but feel a bit parched.

Oh yeah, the weekend was off to a good start.

"Excuse me." It was a voice that spoke to me in a dream once. She had a polished, refined tone, sounding close to the "British" dialect of this world. "I'm looking for Mr. Billy Baddings of Baddings Investigations."

"That's me."

"*You're* Billy Baddings?"

And you just asked the prize-winning question—give this girl a Cupie doll! The question never came as a shock to me, because I knew a dwarf in this realm tended to turn a few heads wherever he went. Face it: Would *you* really expect a Scroppie like me as a private dick? Ringling Brothers, sure. Party entertainer, absolutely. But a gumshoe? So yeah, this was a familiar routine to me. Familiar, and annoying as hell, but I always have to handle this routine like a pro. All I need to do is get a client in the door, and the rest is up to me to sell them on my talents in discretion.

But first, the floor show. "Yeah, I know I don't look like a Billy. I'm more of a Todd, or maybe a Brian."

Ten minutes. Ten minutes is the average time a client's shock at seeing that Billy Baddings is a dwarf glues their feet to my office floor. If I could keep her on my side of the threshold, I knew the case was mine.

“It’s all right, ma’am. I know I’m probably not what you expected. You probably expected someone less handsome, less dashing, and not so much in the facial hair department. I can only say this: It ain’t easy being this good-looking.”

When I got the laugh, I knew we were getting somewhere. Humor was the best way to get over the whole dwarf issue. Now, it came down to the credentials.

“I know you may think a dwarf stands out in a crowd, and perhaps I do. But I can also get in and out of many places without being noticed. My specialty. It’s this specialty that has built me a reputation for being discreet. I’d love to give you a list of references, but how ‘private’ of a private investigator would that make me? And, being a dwarf, I tend to be left alone, and being left alone tends to keep my investigations all the more private. The proof of the pudding with me is my work, and let me tell you something: I make *great* pudding.”

I got the impression she was impressed.

“I’m impressed, Mr. Baddings,” she nodded.

Back in Acryonis, no dwarf read the dames better than me. Yeah, I still got the magic.

“You appear to have overcome your—” And her voice ceased abruptly.

“Shortcomings?” I smirked.

She grinned with a reluctant nod. Obviously, that had been the next word on her lips. “There’s more to you than meets the eye, Mr. Baddings.”

“You can keep it formal if you like.” I gave her that million-dollar smile that made all the barmaids of Acryonis swoon. “You can also call me ‘Billi’ with an ‘i.’ Short for Billibub.”

“I hope my instinct was right in choosing you to handle this delicate matter. I need someone unshakable, someone who is a master of discretion. I cannot afford to go to the police concerning this matter. My family earns enough attention as it is.”

“Do they, now? Mind if I ask who your family is?”

As her head tipped back lightly, the scarlet sunset creeping through a forest of buildings created a delicate lace-checker

pattern across her face. Her posture wasn't revealing anything to me (although her blouse had a tough time concealing a tavern wench's bounty of a chest! If I weren't smiling, I would probably be staring!), and I still couldn't make out what she was thinking from either her eyes or her scent.

Part of being a dwarf involves having an uncanny ability to understand scent. It isn't magic, just a discipline that you develop the older you get. We dwarves trained ourselves to "sniff out" metals, ores, and minerals, because the more precious ones were in caverns that never knew daylight of any kind. Imagine our surprise when we found out that our heightened olfactories worked on people as well as rock. A nervous disposition gives off a bitter, harsh scent. If someone's in a happy, pleasant mood, it's sweet, like cinnamon. If someone's in that *particular* mood when the lights are dim and the skin warm to the touch...well, you get the picture.

Problem with this dame's scent was the designer perfume she wore, so expensive it cost you a buck just to utter its name out loud. Because her bottled fragrance masked her scent, I couldn't tell if she was upset, nervous, or all of the above.

Her voice didn't help matters much. "I thought you were a discreet private investigator, Mr. Baddings." As calm and even as a millpond on a cold winter's morning. Whoever she was, she was very good at this game.

"Now hold on a minute there, sweets," I said, hopping up into my office chair and positioning myself on the elevated cushion so I could appear as normal as a dwarf could behind a second-hand, human-sized desk. "Just because the door says 'Private Investigator' doesn't mean 'Blind to Trust Investigator.' There are always need-to-know facts between investigator and client, and those facts *stay* between investigator and client. It's a matter of protection for you, protection for me, and assurance of trust for both."

She paused, her eyes studying me through the veil. If this princess was coming in here in search of some bizarre entertainment from the commoners, she was starting to wear

thin with me. I was about to tell her to buzz off when she finally spoke.

“I’m Julia Lesinger, the youngest daughter of Henry and Wilma Lesinger.”

While she waited for my response, I tried not to suddenly break into a Sornomian jig. A job for the Lesinger family would not only make up for a slow week, but also set the office up for a few months and even score Miranda that raise she was fishing for! The Lesingers were the established money of the town; if it existed in Chicago, there was a good chance they owned it. Why one of the Lesingers wanted a two-bit private investigator instead of the cops was beyond me.

Then again, when you’re only four-foot-one, a lot of things tend to go flying over your head.

By the time I managed to find my voice, Miss Lesinger continued. “It’s my boyfriend, Anthony DeMayo.”

“Wait a minute. ‘Pretty Boy’ DeMayo is your *boyfriend*?!?”

“*Was* my boyfriend. He was killed in the hit on Sal’s Diner.”

Although the hit happened earlier in the week, the news story was as fresh in my head as this morning’s headlines. According to the *Defender*, only a few chunks of Sal’s still remained standing after the bomb detonated. That was a real pity, too. If I was ever working in that part of town, Sal’s was the best place for a coffee and a danish. Maybe the company there was not to my liking, but you couldn’t beat his coffee.

“Miss Lesinger, that was no hit. What happened at Sal’s Diner makes a wizard’s maelstrom look like a spring drizzle.”

“I know,” she replied, as if commenting on the weather. For someone who lost her knight in shining armor, she didn’t seem all choked up about it.

Speaking of which, I never understood why humans—even the ones in my realm—believed in this overly melodramatic image of a “knight in shining armor.” The average squire couldn’t polish shoes properly, and the average “knight” was usually some noble who couldn’t fight his way out of a thumb-wrestle. And the way those clumsy dolts fought when wearing *full* armor, it

was impossible for a squire to keep armor in pristine condition, anyway. They're a sentimental lot, humans. Eh, you got to love 'em, though.

"Mr. Baddings, I want to know why—"

"Now wait a minute there!" My hands went up as if Miss Lesinger were holding me up at gunpoint. She would have to if she wanted me to do what I thought she wanted. "Everyone knows who ordered that hit. If you want some kind of proof..."

"Mr. Baddings, you know who was behind it. I know who was behind it. All of Chicago knows who was behind it. I want to know *why*."

I could count on one hand how many murder cases I had been asked to investigate and still have digits left over for stirring the milk in my cup of java, sampling whipped cream off my ice-cream sundae, and flipping off some punk who is eyeing me up as an easy score. In that murder case, I was asked to find out "who." Once I found out the "who," the "why" would inevitably follow. But this was something different: The "who" was already understood and accepted, and I wasn't being asked to finger the man behind this hit. Good thing, too. Simply point a finger at Alphonse "Scarface" Capone in a way he didn't like (as in, "That's the guy I saw whack my cousin!") and you could not only lose that finger, but suddenly end up with the rest of you misplaced as well.

That was the way Al Capone ran the Organization. He loved telling the papers that he was simply a "businessman" answering to the needs of the people. His business, though, was something you were in for life, and in Capone's business, "early retirement" never led to a gold watch and a place in sunny Florida to enjoy the sunsets. With Capone, whether it was a double-cross or an "*I want out*," it always led to the same end: a one-bedroom flop, six feet under.

"Just find out why?" I asked, breaking the unnerving silence we were swapping. "Seems harmless enough, but Miss Lesinger, can we agree there's nothing harmless with anything involving *La Cosa Nostra*?"

“Mr. Baddings, do you wish to have me tell you that I was daddy’s little girl, never getting into trouble?” She cocked an eyebrow at me and tilted her head. “I enjoyed living dangerously, but Tony was...special. In his own way. I only ask a simple question concerning his death.”

I wouldn’t deny that. It was *who* I had to ask that gave me pause. “And since we’re being so honest with one another, why hire me, a streetwise dwarf? Hell, everybody knows the Lesingers have their own legal team, including detectives.”

“My father is hardly pleased with my public image at the moment. I wish to hire you for your talents of discretion,” she continued, “keeping this professional relationship of ours out of the papers.”

And no doubt, away from Daddy Dearest’s attention. Blunt. And to the point. When called to the mat, it appeared that the girl wasn’t shy in showing a little moxie.

“This job is gonna cost you triple.” I leapt from the chair and landed firmly on the floor with a hard thud. “Hazard pay.”

“Hazard pay?” she asked incredulously. “Are you sure ‘costing me triple’ isn’t because I’m a Lesinger?”

“Miss Lesinger, you could be heir to the Throne of Zelir and promise me a dukedom, and I would still charge you triple. This case involves Capone. You follow me?”

She didn’t know what to say then. She was probably trying to figure out the hometown reference. This is a tactic I use whenever I want to close a discussion or get in a last word with someone. Whip out the Acryonis allusions, and I’m guaranteed to end any conversation. It’s also a lot of fun to watch humans try and noodle through whatever I’ve just thrown at them. I can almost hear them thinking, “*What did he just say?!?*”

“Very well, Mr. Baddings.” She reached into her purse and produced five clean, crisp C-notes. “This should be an adequate down payment for three days’ work at triple your normal fee. I’ll return later with another payment. I will expect a progress report at that time, if you please.”

Time to test the waters. “Is there anyone else I should answer to?”

“Talk to anyone other than me, I will not only deny knowing you, but I will make your life very uncomfortable.”

No surprise that kitty has claws.

“That’s why it says ‘*Private Investigations*’ on the door, sweetheart. I’ll talk to ya in a couple of days.”

The door closed, but I didn’t watch her leave. My eyes remained on the five greenbacks fanned out on my desk.

Suddenly, the neon lights outside were casting shades of pink, light blue, and green into the dim lighting of my office. It was getting late. I had lost track of time because my mind was trying to grasp my new client and my new job. Julia Lesinger of the Lesinger estate had hired me to ask Big Al ‘*Why?*’ concerning one of his hits. It’s not like he needed to explain to anyone why he did anything. He was, and still is, the Boss of Chicago. Capone’s business is Capone’s business.

Now, these five C-notes in front of me made it my business.

This was a serious score for a private eye, no doubt. But did the payment make the risk worthwhile? Maybe I didn’t have to ask Capone outright. Maybe I could check a few sources, ask around in that subtle Baddings style I was building a reputation on. I couldn’t deny this was going to be a risky job, but I also couldn’t say no to the green. No, sir. There was that nagging voice in my gut telling me I was stepping into a world of hurt. But it was either this or playing “Waldorf” again.

So, Billibub, what’s it gonna be?

I hadn’t even finished asking myself that question before reaching for the down payment and stuffing it in my pocket. Who would have known my Lady Trouble was going to be a princess in high heels?

C H A P T E R T W O
SCENE OF THE CRIME

A quiet weekend is a private eye's best friend. There were no special parades or galas planned, the ball team was out of town, and other forms of revel and raucous were either enjoying their current run or getting ready to shut down. Since nothing special was happening in the Windy City, there would be the same number of cops on the streets as usual—and those cops tended to take it slow on the weekends. No one likes to be working on a Saturday when you can be at home with the wife and kids, enjoying a picnic, or huddled around a radio enjoying a morning with the Philharmonic or an afternoon of theater. So while the cops were taking their time walking the beat and the Chicago nightlife types were catching their breath, a dwarf could expect to enjoy a day of honest work without too much hassle.

"You work too hard," I could hear Miranda saying just before popping her gum. *"Even a guy like you needs to take a break."* She never liked it when I worked weekends, and I wouldn't argue with that. I *did* work hard, even with things as slow as they had been at our office lately. But I needed to turn things around for Baddings Investigations, so my weekend began with the biggest case this little guy ever had cross his desk.

Two's a crowd when you're snooping where you're not wanted, so I got this morning started before the early bird sounded its battle cry. The trolley dropped me a few blocks shy of the corner of Kingston and D Street, where Sal's stood—excuse me, where it had once stood. Rounding the corner of a brownstone, I couldn't help but just stand there for a moment, taking in the epic scale of this mob hit. All that was left were a few stone pillars and wooden beams, charred by the heat of the fire but defying the urge to collapse into dust and soot. Maybe it was the ghost of Sal himself keeping the last shreds of his place standing. I don't know if he had paid protection money or not, but whatever his

deal was with Capone, it certainly didn't protect him or the few innocents in his place when the bomb went off.

So far, my only company this morning were bakers, butchers, and various other tradesmen, sweeping their porches free of the soot and debris that had wandered over from Sal's the night before. They paid no mind to this pile of rubble that had singed the buildings surrounding it, nor did they seem to care about the lives lost. As far as they were concerned, it was a week-old *Tribune* headline that would soon be replaced by another gang-related incident. Life had to go on.

Casting a final glance over my shoulder at the merchants still busy opening their shops, I crossed the street and stepped across the threshold of scorched tile work. I was on my own for the time being, at least until the more-adventurous tourists showed up.

The locals here were smart enough to respect Sal's for two things: First, that it was a crime scene, and you only wandered through it if you wanted to announce that you were involved; second, that they considered this place a gravesite. Disturbing a grave, even in this magic-free realm, was considered an invitation to curses and bad luck. Still, there were those "mob fans" who wanted a piece of the action—a little memento of a true gangland crime.

In Acryonis, we had a name for trophy-hunting dinks like this: Lycanthrope's Lunch.

Suddenly, my eye caught sight of a tiny crater in the floor next to the remnants of a bar. This must've been where an inconspicuous, Italian-pinstriped goblin left the bomb. With nothing like a storeroom underneath to take part of the blast, whomever sat around here got the full taste of Capone's wrath. Ouch. This bomb took most of the bar and the surrounding tables with it. Good bet that ol' Pretty Boy was somewhere in this vicinity.

Yeah, Capone didn't care for anything on a small scale. He liked his hits like he liked his operas and his picture in the papers—big and brash. I think his smile irked the Feds more than anything else. It was one of those genuine "F.O." smiles,

letting them know they had nothing on him but speculation, circumstantial evidence, and J. Edgar Hoover breathing down their necks demanding results. Even if I were human-sized, I wouldn't have wanted to trade places with a Fed at this point. Too much overtime, with very little hazard pay.

I placed a hand into the hole created by the explosives, rubbing the dust and soot between my fingertips and giving the mix a few whiffs. Nothing new or out of the ordinary here: It was a standard, Capone-style bomb, triggered by a timer that gave his man a chance to casually walk out the establishment and then double-time it across the street. The bagman probably looked like an innocent jaywalker trying to avoid the traffic, so no one would notice him running from the scene—especially when the bomb blew.

The stench of burnt wood still clung to the place, even after a week. From the faint traces of burnt flesh I was also picking up, it wouldn't have surprised me in the least if the coroners had overlooked a finger or toe in here somewhere. The sight of this place reminded me of orc raids that me and my boys would clean up after. Orcs didn't think a village was properly raided until everything—houses, barns, and the villagers themselves—weren't level with the ground. They called it efficiency. I call it a serious lack of self-control.

I stepped over a small pile of timbers that had collapsed to make what resembled the skeleton of a tent. Just the glimpse of it brought back campaign memories. I smiled at the chance happening, but the smile quickly faded when I caught what was hidden behind it. Shooting another quick look around to make sure I was enjoying the private time at a dead man's party, I bent down to sample the second crater. Sure enough, my fingers felt the unmistakable grit of black powder; and the sharp scent assailing my nostrils confirmed my conclusion.

Like a broadsword into a troll's gut, it now started to sink in why this crime scene had struck me as particularly eerie. Usually in a mob hit involving a bomb, the building's front gets obliterated in the blast, leaving behind a gutted-out shell that

serves as Capone's reminder to everyone—be it those closest to him or not yet part of the Organization—that things are done his way. Period. It's important to have that reminder to the good people of Chicago, so lessons are not only learned, but *stay* learned. Teaching those lessons requires only one bomb.

So, this second crater was way out the ordinary. Two bombs for one hit? Capone liked his hits big, sure, but a few pounds of dynamite and a timer would have sent DeMayo the message. A second bomb, even for Alphonse, was too much of an orc's approach to things. Even the St. Valentine's Day Massacre had a *panache* to it, brutal as it was.

Unless...this was something more than the standard hit. Had "Pretty Boy" been planning some kind of *coup d'état* (I just love those French words, but they're a bitch to learn when working your way through a library!), and Capone caught wind of it? Or was he pledging his allegiance elsewhere? Had "Pretty Boy" been thinking of changing his nickname to "Stool Pigeon" and turning state's evidence? Had he reached the decision that a retirement and old age suited him better than a dirt nap at the prime of his life? What could Capone's second-in-command, sitting pretty in the right hand of the Big Boss himself, have been up to that would merit this kind of drastic retaliation?

Why? That is what my client wanted to know. Why was Capone's confidant in all matters suddenly and unceremoniously removed from his court via methods of extreme prejudice? This hit clearly wasn't intended to send a message or a warning—Capone had intended this hit to be the final solution to a problem. From the looks of this hit, the problem must've been a big one.

Hearing the unwelcome sound of other shoes against soot, I crouched lower behind the rubble and peered through cracks between blackened timbers to see exactly how many cops I was had to contend with this morning.

Well now, yet another surprise this morning for ol' Billi Baddings. The two guys belonging to the shoes contaminating the crime scene along with mine were not cops. One of them was a real behemoth, chiseled jaw and all that. The other one

was his doppelganger, but shorter, definitely the runt between the two of them.

I couldn't hear a word they were saying, but guessed they weren't working for the Mob because they weren't communicating with grunts, whistles, and clicks. The drab, off-the-rack suits that probably weighed as much as your basic leather armor were the second clue.

When I noticed the duo making a beeline for the site of the first crater, my eyebrows went up. These guys knew exactly where to look for the location of that bomb, and they studied the soot and ash found there very closely, even giving it a few whiffs themselves. It didn't take an extraordinary honker like mine to get a hint of the kind of bomb used, but for humans, it took someone with the training and the talent.

"Now, wha' d'ya think yer doin'?" came a brogue thick as potato soup from behind the two newcomers to my investigation. "This is wha' we here in Chicago call a *crime seen*, ' an' unless yer warin' a badge, yer either a corpse or a con ta be mullin' about 'ere! Bett'r thin's in Chicago ta do than disraspect tha dead, don'cha think?"

Slower than keep slime, the two guys stood up from the crater, opened their coats with one hand, and withdrew their wallets with the other.

As the suits opened their billfolds and did the ID routine, I took an opportunity to make my exit. Keeping low (which was easy for me), I stayed close to anything that would conceal my presence: overturned tables, razed foundations, burned-out booths, and so on. The cover that remained was enough for me to slip out of the ruins and into the now wide-open alleyway.

From my new vantage point, it looked like the two bombs had done little surrounding damage. When I vigorously rubbed my fingers against the worn, blackened blocks of Sal's next-door neighbor and gave my stained skin a few whiffs, I picked up those signature scents that I knew Chicago for. Engine exhaust. Coal soot. Standard city smells.

After a good, strong exhale, I took a slightly deeper whiff. Yeah, I could detect minute traces of the blast, but I couldn't convince myself that this building had been even impolitely nudged by the two bombs. The new blast scent I was picking up was a lot stronger...but it wasn't coming from the alleyway.

I returned to Sal's through what was left of the men's bathroom, daring to get caught. And there it was, just as my gut had told me it would be, where the ladies' loo had once been: A *third* crater.

The crunching of debris underfoot, much closer than it was before, reminded me my borrowed time was now gaining serious interest. It was that moment when a bard knows he's hit his final note for the evening, or when a jester drops that joke that kills. Know when to make your exit. If I didn't get out of there, and get out of there now, the cop would probably use something a lot nastier than a hook to haul my ass off of this stage!

"That was no hit. What happened at Sal's Diner makes a wizard's maelstrom look like a Spring drizzle." Hey, I was just joking when I said that in my office to Miss Lesinger. Still, my own words kept echoing in my head as I wiped my fingers with a hankie, making sure I was clean of any evidence.

Now I was back in the alleyway and coming around the corner to Sal's nonexistent storefront, where the cop and two suits were continuing their Saturday-morning tea. Keeping my head down, my face concealed under the Stetson I was wearing, I took advantage of the angle to study Sal's sidewalk. While there were no real scorch marks projecting outward to indicate a blast, this sidewalk had not fared as well as that of Sal's neighbors. The damage implied this job was far from perfect. From the placement of the third crater—and if my hunch was right about possible other craters—Capone never intended to blow this place up. The Big Boss wanted to blow the diner *down*, effectively and efficiently burying whomever happened to be there that morning.

I lingered at the street corner, pretending to see if there was any oncoming traffic. It was still early in the morning, so traffic could barely be described as light. While the flatfoot continued

to act like a cheerful tour guide, the suits knew this for the tactic that it was, and their hushed conversation went dead on me.

I crossed the street, then once again to the opposite corner, turning back to face the diner-in-ruins. This time, I was playing the part of a dwarf looking to hail a cab. By now, the cop's crusty demeanor had left for the Emerald Isle, and he couldn't have been more pleasant. Yeah, I guess the suits were cops after all, probably from another precinct. Chicago's Finest were working together to put on a show for the commoners, but still nowhere closer in riding the city of Public Enemy Number One.

Cute little show, but I enjoy the vaudeville at the State Theatre a lot more.



Halfway to the office, I slipped the cabbie a Lincoln and changed directions for the opposite side of town, toward Chicago City Hall and the courthouse. One of the big news stories of late was the commission for a new statue of Lady Justice to stand proudly in the center of the courthouse foyer, life-sized and elevated on a grand marble pedestal. Its completion had been slated for January, but January had come and gone. So had February. Now, it looked liked Ms. Justice, along with some of the other improvements happening throughout City Hall and the courthouse, would be unveiled sometime in the late spring. No later than the early summer, the sculptor assured *The Chicago Daily* recently.

The screws were beginning to tighten on the contractors, and no doubt a rack waited in the wings for Justice's artist. I guess those lawmakers were growing tired of the tarps and stepladders between their offices and the courtrooms. Can't say I blamed the suits too much on this one. Miranda had impressed on me the selling value of an image, and it's tough to sell the public through

press conferences and photo opportunities when Chicago's legal hub appears to be a work in progress.

With all these steps leading to a set of massive doors with ornate carvings, you would think Chicago's downtown courthouse housed the finest and most prestigious of this realm. In fact, the lowest of lowlives—low enough to make a nest of trolls look like the Rockefellers—spent enough time in these hallowed halls to call it home, if but a second one. Of course, as it was the weekend, the courthouse was quiet as well as locked up. Crime didn't take Saturday and Sunday off, mind you, but those who made the laws that got broken did.

Peeking through the crack between the doors, I could make out the scaffolding, tarps covering the commemorative plaques and busts of judges and men of history, and other signs of work crews who were either off for the day or sleeping in late only to come in and continue work later. And I could make out a few pair of coveralls lying to one side of a ladder. It was easy to imagine those guys wearing their pinstripes underneath their coveralls, painting right up to quitting time and leaping out of their work clothes before the last stroke was dry.

This was my stage. Let the play begin.

Out of a fine leather pouch, I slid out a set of favorite tools from my realm. The small pick and its longer brother had been forged from a charmed metal that would not break under any stress, even if a marsh dragon tried to use one as a toothpick.

When I "acquired" this little kit off a mercenary fighting on the wrong side of my battle-axe, the other officers thought I'd come up on the short end of the quarterstaff. Then again, I didn't travel in the same circles as those privileged dinks. The buddies I traveled with from tavern to tavern took one glance at the pouch and knew I had struck a mother lode of ore! Sure enough, a wizard passing through my village appraised the metal in the tools as being "of magical origin." Three words that a dwarf loves to hear.

The first pick fit easily into the top notch of the lock, and searched for a latch to catch. Once I struck it, the second pick slid inside the lock until it hit the bolt.

I casually walked away from the door for a moment, making certain I was in the clear. There was some weekend traffic on the street, but it was still too early for the tourists to be paying a visit. No beat cops in sight either, so I was all set to work my magic.

The last tool was a larger, U-shaped piece of metal forged into the top of a small metal rod. I rapped it hard against the door, producing a small hum from the fork—a perfect pick.

The picks in the lock remained still until I placed the fork tongs on either side of them. The two slim rods now vibrated in a blanket of sound, and soon the picks moved on their own accord, searching for the grooves and bolts that a key would trigger. Suddenly, the top pick slipped forward while the lower turned slightly to an angle, and I heard the bolt in the courthouse's front door slide back with a loud *thunk*.

I'm not crazy about magic, but it does come in handy now and then, especially when your specialty is infiltration and reconnaissance. My bread and butter in Acryonis...and now, Chicago.

"One-Hanselthrop...two-Hanselthrop...three-Hanselthrop..." I whispered as I slipped through the massive doors. The alarm was sounding, and soon the weekend detail would wake up and find out who or what triggered the bells clanging in the main hallway. The only thing that could screw up this little plan of mine would be an eager beaver in his first day on the job.

"Ten Hanselthrop...eleven Hanselthrop...twelve Hanselthrop..." I now had my coat off and was drowning in the smallest of the coveralls I found by a covered paint bucket and a set of wide brushes and rollers. Regardless of humans' height, everything was big on me, but nothing that I couldn't solve by rolling up sleeves and pant legs.

"Seventeen Hanselthrop...eighteen Hanselthrop..."

Clop-clop-clop-clop. Yeah, here comes the infantry.

I jammed a painter's cap on the back of my head and tossed my own fedora on top of my coat, now folded up next to the nearest stepladder. I even added the final touch of paint can and brush in my hands by the time courthouse security—an older cop who was looking to make retirement by taking a job like this one instead of risking the beat walks—came tearing around the corner. I suppressed a smile on noticing the top buttons of his uniform and dress shirt were left open. Poor guy had been deep in the Fairy's Realm when the alarm went off.

"What the hell, bub?" I barked. It was always good to come out of the box strong. Adds to the disorientation of the initial sight of me.

"I was gonna—" he shouted, but then shook his head as he cast a wary glance to the alarm bell. "I was gonna ask you the same thing, Shorty!"

"Weekend detail!" I shouted back. I don't know if it was just me, but I had to wonder if those damn bells were getting louder. "I was told to be here this morning 'cause we were going to finish up the second floor today! Door was unlocked, so I figured everyone was here! Guess I got here early!"

"What?!? You got to hurry?"

And now, the vaudeville routine. "Guess—I—got—here—early!"

"Kinda small for a painter, ain't ya?" the cop shouted at me.

"Save the wall for later?!? Okay, but there's gonna be hell to pay when we start on the ceilings without finishing—"

"No, I said you're SHORT for a PAINTER!"

I shook my head, "Nah, we won't be short! There will be a full crew on today! I'm just early!"

"NO!" he screamed in desperation. "YOU—SHORT!"

"Oh, yeah! I'm short. So are a lot of us on the Saturday crew. Why do ya think we got so damn many ladders!?"

The security guard flung his hat on the ground and leaned in closer to me. "Have you got a work order?"

"Fork over?!?" I asked, stretching up and turning my ear closer to him. I could hear him just fine, but I needed him to go away

and stay away. No better way to be left alone than to establish oneself as a severe pain in the ass. “Fork over what?”

“A WORK ORDER!!!” The poor sap was shouting so loud now that his voice was cracking. “I need to see the work order!”

I placed a hand on his shoulder and leaned on him as I stood on my tippy-toes. “I think my boss has it!”

“What!?”

“MY—BOSS!!!” Since I’m used to shouting orders over charging axemen, sounds of sword on shield, and goblin battle cries, my voice nearly knocked him off his feet. “My boss should have the work order on him!”

The bells were really starting to get to me now, so I know his patience had to be wearing thinner than a wraith’s wardrobe. He just nodded and pointed to the wide staircase at the end of the hall. “Offices are that way! Next time—back entrance!”

He was probably swearing up a storm over why he hadn’t checked the courthouse doors at the end of the previous day. As I watched him disappear to shut off the alarm, I set down the paint and brush for a moment so I could grab my memo pad and lock-picks. I was about halfway up the steps to the second floor when the sound of the bells ceased, replaced by the *scuff-scuff-scuff-scuff* of my own feet ascending the stairs.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Hope you enjoyed the show. I’ll be here all week!

I climbed up to the seventh floor, where I knew the more important lawyer-types congregated: District Attorneys, Assistant D.A.’s, and the rest of their lot. I figured these were the guys who were keeping tabs, or at least trying to, on thugs like “Pretty Boy” DeMayo. Apart from the Feds itching to prosecute Capone for his various criminal activities, the D.A.’s Office would love to score one up on the Treasury Department. Locally, it would easily make anyone’s career in politics if it were the local law enforcement that brought Capone down. On a national level, it would attract a lot of attention—and alongside that, commerce—to the Greater Chicago area. And hey, if you wanted to leave Chicago for greener moors and cleaner shires, you could

write your own ticket if you could boast how instrumental you were in taking down the Big Boss.

My enchanted picks barely broke a sweat with the Assistant D.A.'s office. I slowly poked my head around the doorway, because you never knew if an Assistant D.A. would be burning twilight torches in order to come across that one all-important clue leading to Capone. This Saturday morning, no one was home. The office was kept immaculate—a *very* good sign that I was in for a quick visit. Setting down the paint can and brush, I set to work finding what I would need in this office: Height.

There are certain constants in this new realm to which I have grown accustomed, and now I'm reaching a point where I appreciate them. I can always rely on hot dogs in Wrigley Field tasting a lot better than the dogs I get in Grant Park. I can always count on the news in the *Herald Examiner* to be less biased than that of the *Defender*. I know that politicians, be they local or higher up in the Congressional pecking order, will promise to make everything better while they're actually trying to make things worse for their successors. And I also know that humans who work in offices believe themselves to be in such a hurry that they need wheels on their chairs to shave off those all-important seconds between sliding away from a desk and getting on their feet.

The whole concept of a chair with wheels on it initially struck me as not only hysterical, but just a hint pretentious. Come on, you can't just get a normal chair, scoot up to a table, and conduct your business like anyone else? Does one truly believe the time saved between gliding away from a desk and planting your feet on *terra firma* is that crucial in getting things done? It really took a lot for me to not laugh at these humans in their "wagon-thrones," as I had called them from my hiding places in the library.

Of course, when I had gone shopping for office furniture, there wasn't a lot of "dwarf-sized" furniture around...and it was pretty disappointing to find out *how* miniature "miniature furniture" truly was. That was when I realized that the carpenters of Acryonis who specialized in "Scrap Furniture" were pretty

skilled at what they did, regardless if what they called their wares made dwarves flinch.

So I swallowed my pride and bought my own office chair. And I love it. I not only get height, but I get a lot of mobility.

This guy apparently liked his chair with a lot of swivel, so I had to adjust to its give. I climbed into the seat and pushed against the desk, rolling over to one of the file cabinets. I opened up the top drawer and started scanning through the “A’s,” hoping that the Assistant D.A.’s filing system was as neat and pristine as his office.

The top drawer was continuing into the “C’s,” so this was a strike out. I pushed back from the filing cabinet to give me enough room to go down into the “D’s” one drawer down. Still nothing. And when I was in the “C’s” there wasn’t even a file on “Capone.” Was I not looking in the right place? Should I be checking “M” for “Mafia” or “Mobster?” Would I need to check under “I” for “Italians?”

I removed the painter’s cap and scratched my noggin, trying to itch the answer out of my brain. You don’t walk into an office as clean and organized as this and have to struggle to find something. I could tell from the absence of an old newspaper and the lack of clutter on his desk that there was no room for anything out of order. The easier it was for him to find, the happier he was and the more he could accomplish. I knew whatever I was missing was staring me in the face.

Then I realized I was staring at the Assistant D.A.’s desk. Considering the current state of Chicago, would I really keep mafia files on the other side of my office, or within arm’s reach?

I hopped down from the chair and waddled over to this fine mahogany keep, taking a closer look at how well this thing was put together. The obvious craftsmanship that went into creating this monstrosity, I had to wonder what the District Attorney’s desk looked like. It must take up one wall and continue down another!

The top drawer opened with no effort and its contents were as neat as a new blade, back from the forge and sharpened to

a fine edge. Pencils were grouped with pencils. Erasers were grouped with erasers. Yeah, this Assistant D.A. redefined the term “particular.” There were three small drawers on the left hand, and two drawers on the right. The top-right drawer, which was smaller, kept memo pads of various sizes. It was the most cluttered area of this office, as smaller pads slid freely over the larger legal-sized notebooks. (It would have come as no shock to me if he had partitioned the top drawer to remedy this. Maybe that was his weekend project.)

The larger drawer was locked. Oh, the search-and-infiltration memories this drawer brought back! Journeying down stone corridor after stone corridor, all doors unlocked or open...and then there was that last one on at the end of the corridor, locked. Usually, there was something mighty fine waiting for us on the other side of that door. (Although there was that one time when the locked door was actually a nursery of new-bred orcs. Yeah, that was a rough night.)

Applying the picks to this smaller lock proved a challenge, but I managed to find the necessary grooves needed to trigger it. I rapped the fork against the floor (not wanting to take any chances in scratching the oak of the desk) and passed the tongs on either side of the picks. The silver instrument vibrated lightly, and then...

Nothing. The instruments stopped suddenly, and the drawer lock remained engaged.

I gave the fork a much harder knock against the floor. Once in the cradle of charmed sound, these picks were working overtime. Let me put it another way: These metallic locksmiths were either trying to solve this puzzle of latches and levers, or knitting a sweater inside that keyhole.

I rapped the fork on the floor again, evoking an even stronger sound from its prongs. As the tone grew, the picks began to vibrate violently, and then *glow*. The longer they shook in the lock, the more the picks' light-blue glow turned bright white. The glass panes of the office windows shuddered lightly, and the symphony of tinkling from the plaques, law degrees, and various

other honors hanging on the walls and sitting on bookshelves swelled louder and louder, reaching a level of sound that I was sure would attract the attention of that overnight wonder of a guard.

I gritted my teeth hard to keep them from chattering as the magic I generated turned more ferocious. The picks were now bright as a pure-white, prolonged flash of sunlight catching polished silver—so bright that I could no longer look directly at it. I heard two of the Assistant D.A.’s honors shatter, along with a vase of wilting flowers at the right corner of the desk.

Then I heard a sharp *crack*, and the tone of my fork, shuddering of windowpanes, and dinging of glassware faded together, much like the tunes of court musicians ending with a decrescendo that leaves only a moment of silence before the nobles’ applause. The concert of sorcery was over. I almost broke out into applause myself, but I was still too busy catching my breath, wiping away the cold sweat from my brow, dabbing my lips on the cuff of those baggy coveralls.

The only sound in the office now was a steady *drip-drip-drip* of foul-smelling water from the vase, now partially covering the desk. Wisps of thick, pearly smoke slipped off my picks. Placing a hand on the drawer handle and closing my peepers, I whispered a quick prayer to the Guardians as I gave a gentle pull.

The drawer slid closer to me, and I gave a heavy sigh of relief. *I dodged a throwing dagger on this one*, I thought as I looked on the treasure waiting for me.

They were all here. Alfonse “Scarface” Capone. Anthony “Pretty Boy” DeMayo. Frank “The Enforcer” Nitti. Rio. McGurn. It was dossier after dossier of the Organization, many of them incomplete and only a sacred few with red tabs marking their folders. No doubt, those marked folders indicated the ones who were somewhere in The Big House.

I pulled out the DeMayo folder and started flipping through the various clippings and pictures of Capone’s showy second-in-command. It looked like DeMayo loved the ladies, and he loved the lifestyle. I paused at the sight of one picture where he had

his arm around my client's waist as she offered up a polite smile for the camera. Tony was obviously captured in a moment of true hilarity, because his mouth was open so wide that a marsh bat could fly in, remove his tonsils, and fly out without catching the roof of his mouth. He had Julia Lesinger in one hand, and a smoldering stogie wedged between the index and middle finger of the other.

Surrounding him were a variety of mob types (including an inside contact of mine that I was needing to get hold of) and a few of Julie's types: rich, good girls sampling the wild life. Yeah, life was good to Tony. Damn shame life couldn't remain so kind to him.

Julia's expression gave me a slight chill because of its complete detachment from the raucous setting. The people around Tony were definitely putting on a better act than she was. Or maybe Tony was, in fact, that funny of a guy. Maybe he was the life of the party, and Julia preferred to put on the airs of high society for this moment captured by Eastman-Kodak. Or maybe she knew what he really was at his core.

In my world, the minor nobility ranks—Countesses, Viscountesses, Barons, and (especially) knights—really enjoyed the privileges and prestige of their titles, but they were *appointed* their titles. You can dress an ogre in the finest silks of the Hunshe Dynasty, adorn them with the finest jewels from the mines of Gryfennos, encase their feet in the softest, most supple leather of the Elvish tanneries and bestow upon it the title of “Lord Constable of the Realm,” but that doesn't change what you've dressed up in your Sunday best. That ogre, bathed, dressed, and titled, is still an ogre, and will tear out your throat so it can gnaw on your trachea. Same thing can be said for minor nobility. A peckerwood with a title.

That was the look Julia Lesinger had in this photo: The look of a Princess in the company of Baron Peckerwood.

I continued through the file's contents. Not so much as a mark, check, or a star to hint that DeMayo was caught with his hand

in the cookie jar and singing to the D.A.'s Office or Uncle Sam so he could keep feeding his late-night social habits.

I had to give the D.A.'s Office credit—they were trying to catch the same big tuna that kept eluding the Fed's lures, hoping for a moment when they would be there and the Feds would not. You would think that Capone would sweat being tailed by both the Feds and the local cops, and he *would* sweat it, too, if they were working together. Capone probably figured he could count on the “healthy competition” between state law enforcement and J. Edgar's boys. And as the G-men and cops tripped over one another trying to trip up Capone, Capone sidestepped the law and ran his business much to the chagrin of honest folks.

And that was the end of the file. Nothing. According to what was in my pudgy little hands, the D.A.'s Office knew DeMayo was part of The Business, but lacked any hard evidence that could persuade him to turn on his Big Boss. Of course, finding a witness willing to step forward against anyone in Capone's organization was about as likely as finding a survivor from a Goblin bachelor party.

I returned the file to its rightful place among the lower dregs of Chicago society, removing the picks from the drawer's keyhole as it slid shut. The instruments were still warm, their heat just seeping through the leather pouch.

Suddenly, my hand whipped back on feeling a sharp sting of electricity from the drawer's keyhole. I must have brushed against it while keeping an eye on the door for any visitors curious about the earlier noise I was making. My hand tingled lightly and I gave a small, spiteful laugh as I rubbed it.

The lock's bolt sliding into place seemed a lot louder than it should have been, but I chalked that up to my nerves playing tricks on me. I carefully stepped through the puddle formed at the corner of the desk, wiping my shoes clean on the modest office rug before returning to the hallway.

I could hear a commotion downstairs growing. The weekend shift was arriving.

I came back down the steps at a quick pace, unheard by the workmen who were lining up lunchboxes. Two guys were trying to talk in hushed voices about being stuck on the Saturday shift, but I could hear every word. Safe to assume the supervisor hadn't arrived yet.

The chatter came to a halt at the sight of me, and I clearly heard, "*What the hell is that?*" and "*Is the circus in town?*" followed by a few chuckles from the other three in the crew.

"You know something, pal?" I began, pointing a finger at the "Circus Comment" clown. "If the circus *was* in town, I'd give you the sound advice to ask if there was a job opening for mucking out the elephant's car! You're going to find yourself shoveling shit if you don't make some progress on this lobby pronto!"

One of these Rembrandt-flunkies, still buttoning up his coveralls, didn't bother to look at me as he asked, "And just who're you, Shorty, to be barking at us like some kinda mutt?"

"I'm the mutt that'll piss on your leg and tell you it's raining if you don't drop the attitude! Now, if you want to keep your job, send a crew upstairs to the seventh floor. Some dink left the Assistant D.A.'s office a mess."

"Seventh floor?" another worker, the "What the hell" guy, piped in. "We haven't even finished the second!"

"Doesn't matter who made the mess!" I snapped back. "You know how these bureaucrats are! They are elected royalty. If there is *anything* wrong in their offices, it'll be our fault. So clean it up! Now I want three people here and two on the second floor. I'm going to call in a second team."

"Jesus, are we *that* far behind?"

It's amazing how much bigger I look when I rest my fists on my hips. Letting out a heavy sigh, I looked up to the ceiling as if I was about to blow my top. This was my little one-man show, and I wasn't going to disappoint.

"All I know is I got the phone call this morning to be here, do the walk-through, and let you dinks know where we stood. Now it's our asses if we don't gain some ground with this job, so GET

GOING!” I grabbed my coat and switched the painter’s cap for my Fedora. “I’ll be right back. Call in that second team.”

Halfway down the steps, I saw a mousy excuse of a human pass me, casting a nervous glance at first but then staring at my coveralls. He was probably thinking, “*Those look like mine,*” but then dismissed the thought, figuring I was way too short to fit into anything of his. He must have missed the rolled-up cuffs or sleeves. Too bad I had to leave so soon. I would have loved to hear him say, “*Anyone seen my cover—hey, wait a minute...*”.

A few minutes later, the coveralls were bunched up in the floorboards of the cab that I’d caught a block away. I was back in the preferred fit of my coat, my hand still tingling a bit from what happened in the Assistant D.A.’s office.

The last time I saw something like that glass-shattering sideshow, it was deep in the musty darkness of a labyrinth back in Acryonis when I was working with a rather tricky lock. My boys and I watched as my charmed instruments took on a glow, vibrated inside the keyhole, and then came to a rest. When I rapped the fork harder against the stone wall of the maze, like I’d just done in the office, some of us shielded our eyes at the light generated from my picks.

That was when our mage-in-residence (it was always a good idea to travel with some kind of sorcerer when breaking into an enemy stronghold, especially if that enemy was suspected of allying themselves with necromancers) gave us the bad news that we were not going through this door anytime soon. There was some serious magic in place, broken only by equally powerful magic—magic we didn’t possess.

The buildings of Chicago passed by me, but I was paying less attention to the city and more to the people now awake and roaming the sidewalks. Someone out there, someone working for the Chicago D.A.’s Office, was casting spells on office furniture. Not particularly powerful magic, but enough to discourage any humans from trying to pick the lock of a particular desk. Much like Acryonis, Chicago was a town of surprises and secrets, and

this secret was a doozie. It had been a long time since I'd gotten this homesick.

Spellcasters in 1929 Chicago. Just when you think you've seen it all in this town...