

Black Shadow Detective Agency
The Case of the Bitter Mother

By Sigurd Wolf Volsung

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I sat at my desk cleaning my .45 when I got the phone call I had been hoping would come for over a week. A client. Business had been slow over the past month, and I needed a job. I wasn't broke, just bored. "Black Shadow Detective Agency. Jason Black speaking."

"Hello, my name is Maurine Wells and I was told you could help me. It's my son..." Her timid voice trailed off, as if she wasn't sure if she should go on.

Children usually meant something interesting. "Go on?"

"Well in the last couple of years he's gotten into some weird stuff, and now he's been missing for over a week."

My hopes of excitement vanished into the air, this sounded like a job for the cops. "Ma'am this sounds like a job for the police, they do have a good missing persons department. Why don't you call them."

"Oh I did go to the police first," good, that meant trouble, "they were the ones who gave me your number. They said that with what my son had been getting into you would be better able to help me."

My tail started wagging. Now I'm not one to be glad of another's misfortune, but, as I said I was bored. "Well, if the police gave you my number, then I'll be happy to help. I'll come over to your place so I can take a look around your son's room. That'll give me an idea of whether or not I can help. I'll also bring along the standard contract so that if we both agree on things, you can sign it and I'll start work immediately. Where do you live?"

"1916 Summit Avenue."

Thank you Tyr! Summit was a rich street, the kind where a kid could afford to get into some interesting trouble.

"I'll be there in thirty minutes, Ms. Wells. Unless that will be a problem for you."

"Oh, no. No problem at all. Please come as quickly as you can." She sounded eager to have her son back.

"Okay then, I'll see you in thirty minutes. Oh, by the way, how old is your son?"

"He turns eighteen next month. Does that matter?"

"Well it means that I'm not looking for a legal adult,

which would have presented a challenge of what to do once I found him. Okay then, thirty minutes." I hung up the phone and looked at Shadow, my raven familiar. "Well, Shadow, we have a case."

Shadow cocked his head to one side. 'I hope this works out well, boss. We haven't had a decent job for a while,' I heard in my mind.

"This'll work out. Trust me."

I went into my gun safe and pulled out my shoulder holster. Once I settled the holster, I checked the spare clips: copper jacketed lead, silver, and raw iron. A nasty combination, between the three of them I could hurt just about anything, and all of them blessed to Tyr, the Nordic God of Justice. I then pulled on my trench coat and fedora. For some reason, in the magickal world they had more respect for detectives that dressed as if they had just stepped out of an old film-noir detective flick. The last thing I grabbed was my satchel, which contained the necessary tools of my trade. Shadow hopped on to my shoulder, and we were off.

The drive to Ms. Wells' place was quick since I hit all green lights. I arrived a little earlier than I told her I would. The house was an old Victorian mansion, and would probably be worth about four million on the open market. I strolled up to the porch and rang the doorbell. A minute later a feline answered the door. She wasn't what you would call pretty. I guessed she was in her early to mid-forties, and she hadn't aged well.

She opened the door and looked me up and down. I'm not the most attractive wolf out there, I'll admit. My face and ears have more than their fair share of battle scars, for someone who is the age I appear to be. In reality though, I'm much, much older than I look. What always throws people, though, is my hair. My fur is pure black, but my hair has a brilliant white streak through it. Her eyes then fell on Shadow. The large bird was disinterestedly picking at a feather with his beak.

"Ms. Wells?" I asked.

"You are Mr. Black, I take it." The voice was hopeful and a little scared.

"Yes, I am. May I come in, so I can take a look around?"

"Oh, yes. Please come in." The femme was as timid in

person as she had been on the phone.

I stepped in to the entry hall and once I had passed Ms. Wells I looked around. The rooms were richly furnished in antique furniture or very convincing replicas. The place had a stuffy, museum-like quality to it, as if no one really lived there. I immediately didn't like it. What I was interested in wasn't down here, though. "May I see your son's room?"

"I don't think you'll be able to get in, the door is locked and I don't have a key."

"Don't worry," I said, "I have a way with locks."

Ms. Wells led me up to the second floor, where there were a lot of doors, but once I used my second sight I easily knew which one belonged to her son. There was a small, but effective, charm on the lock of the door which kept it locked.

"By the way, what is your son's name?" I hadn't thought to ask before now.

"It's James Ford. He kept his father's name after the divorce."

I nodded. It could be that the kid had run off to be with his dad. "Have you contacted your ex-husband about James' disappearance? It could be as simple as the kid wanting to see him."

Ms. Wells vehemently shook her head. "James' father moved over-seas. I did call him though, and he says that James hasn't contacted him."

I walked up to the door. The charm on the lock was effective, but made by an amateur with no real training. It was effective at keeping most people out, but I'm not most people. I whispered a quick phrase in the daemonic tongue and the lock clicked open.

Ms. Wells gasped as I easily opened the door.

"How did you do that?" she whispered.

"I told you. I have a way with locks." That was an easier explanation than trying to explain true magick to the uninitiated.

I took a look around as I walked into the room. In some

ways it was a normal teenager's room, messy, but in other ways it stood out. The kid who lived in this room was definitely a mystic Goth. Posters of daemons and other creations covered the wall, most of them probably ordered from Heavy Metal Magazine. I walked over to the two bookcases and scanned the titles on the shelves. The first case contained a lot of horror and fantasy, nothing out of the ordinary. The second contained books of Myths from all over the world. I have a similar, though larger, collection in my head. I then got to the bottom two shelves, that's where the trouble began, books on the occult.

Most of the books were harmless, new age mysticism written by hacks. There were however a pawful of books that made my blood run cold. The three worst offenders were; The Circles of Darius, Riding the Soul, and The Book of Daemonic Tongues. With those three James could get himself into some serious trouble. The question is, where had he gotten these? You couldn't just go into any bookstore and buy them off the shelf. These three, you had to have serious connections to get a hold of. I knew of only one dealer in the occult that would be able to get his paws on such books. I pulled the three books off the shelf and wrapped them in a piece of white silk to bind the energies contained in the grimoires. For their proper use a drop of the owner's blood must be smeared across the first page. Who knew how many owners these three had had over the centuries. The newest hadn't been printed in over two-hundred years. The good news of seeing these books was that it gave me a promising lead.

I slipped the three into my satchel along with the other two real offenders. When I got the kid back to his mother I wanted to make it hard for him to start his magickal studies again. These books were not easy to come by, and I'm sure he had done something illegal to get them.

Now it was time to find his altar, the problem was that it didn't seem to be in his room. He may have packed it up when he left, but I didn't think that would be the case. Unless he had memorized the books, which I doubted, he would have brought the five main ones with him. More than likely he had gotten into a situation he couldn't handle. No, his altar was somewhere else.

"Did your son spend a lot of time in the house in places where he wouldn't be disturbed, other than his room?" More than likely the altar was in the house. It would be hard to explain an altar to his mother if she had come into his room. The books had been hidden in plain view, so they had been fairly safe from a mother's snooping.

"I'm not sure. I'm not usually home much, but since James disappeared I can't seem to face the world." She then

seemed to consider her words again. "The door to the attic has also been locked recently. I had a key but I can't seem to find it anywhere."

Another good sign, that would be a good place for an altar, away from where people go very often. "Where is the door to the attic?"

"It's on the third floor." She led me out of the room and to another staircase. "Do you think there might be something up there that will give you an idea of where James is?"

"Well, I should check it out, just to see."

I followed her up to the house's third floor, and quickly saw the door to the attic.

Again it was locked by the same simple charm on the lock. I unraveled the charm and opened the door. The staircase to the attic was narrow and steep. I looked back at Ms. Wells who was holding on to herself shivering with fear, her tail completely frizzed out.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked her.

She shook her head slowly. "I haven't liked going up there for a while. It seems, I don't know, dangerous."

"What do you think, Shadow?" I asked my familiar.

'Well boss, I was beginning to think you had forgotten about me.' The voice in my head sounded a little irked. 'It's a simple fear spell. You've grown so used to dealing with pros that you don't even notice it.'

I nodded my head, now that Shadow had pointed it out I could feel it working. It would be scary to a normal person, but I handle much scarier stuff on a regular basis.

I looked over my shoulder at Ms. Wells. "It's okay. You don't have to go up there."

The femme was too scared to answer so she simply nodded.

I turned back to the staircase, flicked the lights on, and walked up it.

The attic was dimly lit by a couple of bare 40 watt bulbs. Someone, probably James, had pushed a lot of boxes

around recently judging by the lesser amounts of dust in specific areas. I followed the path that had been made and came to what I had been looking for.

An old coffee table had been draped with black silk and was covered with candles, a fairly good knife, what appeared to be an ash wand, bowl of water, and a crow's feather. The kid had made sure to have all elements represented. There was also a piece of parchment with an intricate circular design on it. The center had a tell tale brownish mark on it which was obviously blood.

I took a good look at the circle and was relieved to see it wouldn't have summoned anything too major by itself. In this case it would have summoned a simple air elemental. That still wasn't completely good news. Any summoning spell could attract the attention of one of the major players. There was no use in me trying to recreate the spell, he had not invoked a name, only a type. There are millions of minor air elementals out there and I'd never get the right one. Even if I did it wouldn't be smart enough to tell me what I wanted to know. I put the parchment into my satchel along with the grimoires I had confiscated.

I looked around again with my second sight but the scene was too old for me to pick up on anything. All the magickal energy had long since dissipated. I was going to have to do things the hard way.

I walked back down the stairs to where Ms. Wells was standing.

"Well I did find what I was looking for, and it leads me to believe your son could be in very serious trouble."

I had to quickly grab the femme as she collapsed. I sat her gently on the floor, propping her against the wall.

"What did you find?"

"An altar. Your son tried and may have succeeded at summoning something."

Her eyes went wide with fright. "You're saying my son's a devil worshiper?"

I shook my head. "No, the symbols he was using date back to Sumeria. Long before your notion of the Devil was around. He summoned what is called an elemental, a spirit of air, like a little whirlwind. My guess was that he was trying to see if it would work."

"Did this... this air elemental have something to do with James's disappearance?" The terror in her voice was pronounced; this mother just wanted her son back.

"Not directly, no. What probably happened was that he may have accidentally attracted the attention of something much more powerful. There are many beings out there who would take advantage of someone like James. He's in way over his head, wherever he is." The news was hard to give, but there was no point in sugar coating it.

"You have to get him back. I don't care what you charge I have to get him back."

I don't know if there were any problems between the two of them. My guess was that if she did spend most of her time outside of the house, then the problems were like those that happen to most youth. He turned to something dangerous to get the attention he wasn't getting at home.

I told her the price for my services, which were high, what I was dealing with was probably going to be dangerous. She didn't argue even when I told her that she would have to give me a five day retainer up front. After that I got a picture of James. It was a high school picture like you'd have taken every year. The feline in it was a skinny, grey tabby with sunken, haunted eyes. He may have been attractive if it wasn't for the eyes. They had a burnt out quality like you'd see in a junkie, but no drugs had done this to him. He was burning the candle at both ends to power his magickal experiments.

With picture in hand I headed out towards Felix's. If there was anybody who could get his paws on the books James had gotten, it was Felix. Felix was a quarter daemon and had been collecting and selling books for a few hundred years. He moved his entire stock to a different location every couple of decades. Now I have no personal gripe with Felix, but if he had sold James the books I had just taken from the kid's bedroom we were going to dance a little.

I looked at the raven who was on the passenger seat of my Pontiac Torpedo, part of the film-noir look. "What do you think of this whole mess, Shadow?"

'The kid's in some serious trouble, and we're probably the only ones who can help him.'

"That's what my thoughts are as well. Let's see if Felix can answer our questions." I drove towards the college district where Felix's store was located, after glancing at my watch.

I got to Felix's store ten minutes to closing. When I walked in Felix had his back to me, talking to some customers. Shadow and I took the chance to slip, unnoticed, behind a bookshelf. I have an innate ability to enter places unnoticed if that is my intent. Like in this case, my ability had altered probability so that Felix would just happen to have his back to me when I walked in. I got this ability from my father.

Like Felix I'm part daemon, my father was a daemon, but unlike Felix I had been trained in the use of all of my talents. My mother had been a sorceress so I had been trained in the magick of mortals by her, and the magick of daemons by my father. Felix only had training in mortal magick.

I waited until Felix had locked the door for the night to make my presence known.

"Hello, Felix." I drawled.

The red fox jumped, and turned around slowly. "Black? What are you doing here?" he asked in a French accent.

I grinned at him menacingly. "I'm merely looking for something."

He tried to act cool and flippant with me, and failed. "Well please feel free to come back tomorrow. Store hours are 10:00am to 6:00pm."

"Well, you see," I said slowly letting the words sink in, "I don't want anyone around while I ask for what I'm looking for."

Felix apparently got the wrong idea. "Oh well in that case, what is it you're after? A vial of dragon's blood? I just got some in last week. Or maybe you're after water from Mimir, I'm sure I can get some for you. I'm sure I can get anything you're after."

I shook my head. "I don't actually want to purchase anything material. I just want some information."

Felix looked put out. "What do you want to know?"

I pulled James' picture out of my pocket and shoved it in front of his face. "Do you know this kid?"

"I've never seen the kid." He was lying and we both knew it. "Why?"

"The kid's disappeared, and I have a damn good reason to think you know him, so don't lie." I let my eyes turn to a glowing purple, which was their natural state.

Felix edged away from me and backed into the counter. "Why should I lie? I have nothing to hide."

I reached into my satchel and pulled out one of the books I had gotten from James' room. "Then where, by Tyr's right hand, did he get this?"

I slammed down the book, a copy of The Rites of Tekkaria. Felix looked at the book and then back at me.

"All-World Book Exchange?" He said weakly.

I grabbed him by his collar and shook him. "You can't buy something like that off AWBE Books so don't lie to me."

Felix threw his hands up in defeat. "All right, all right I gave it to him, plus a few others."

"You must have gotten something pretty important in exchange for those." A battered and stained copy of any one of those was worth hundreds of thousands, or more. "What did you get?"

"I measured his shadow," he squealed, "at midnight of the full moon."

I took a step back, and then backhanded him with the strength of a half-daemon. Felix flew across the room and slammed into a wall ten feet from where he had stood. I pulled the .45 from its holster and made a great show of ejecting the standard lead clip and substituting it with the blessed silver. Lead wouldn't hurt Felix much, but the silver would inflict some real damage.

Felix tried standing up but before he could I knelt in against him, the barrel of the gun pressed against his forehead. "Now, Felix, I don't want to hurt you, but you're holding out on me. His measured shadow is enough for one, maybe two of those books. What else did you ask for?"

"He needs to provide some sacrifices."

This was getting tedious. "What kind of sacrifices, and to who?"

"Virgins! What else?" I smashed him across his jaw with the butt of my pistol.

"To who?"

"Enlil, alright. Enlil"

This was just great. The kid was supposed to bring sacrificial virgins for Enlil; the Sumerian God of Air, King of Heaven and Earth according to the Babylonians. As important of information as this was, it still didn't explain where James had gone.

"Where's the kid now?"

"I don't know, okay? He was supposed to be here with some dumb freshman from his school last week, but he never showed." Finally the little shit was telling me the truth.

Now to find out some things that may interest the cops. "How many girls have you killed?"

Felix looked genuinely shocked. "What? None! We sacrifice their virginity, we don't kill them. We screw the idiots and let 'em go. It's voluntary. No one gets hurt."

I stood up and walked over to where I had dropped my original clip and swapped it back with the silver. "Well, James is in something over his head, so I'd lay good money that he's probably hurting. Though it probably wasn't a Sumerian god."

I picked the book up off the counter and stuck it back in my satchel. "Sorry about smacking you around, Felix, but next time don't hold out on me."

Felix smiled slightly. "I'll remember that next time you come shopping for information, but I'm thinking that maybe it's time for me to close up shop and move elsewhere."

"Sounds like a good plan, Felix, send me a post card."

"Is there anything else you want?" Felix was trying to be helpful so I wouldn't get mad again.

I nodded. "Yes there is. I want the cord you measured his shadow with. I don't want you to have anything on him that could be used to control him."

Felix went into his back room and retrieved a piece of black silk cord. I looked at it with my second sight. It was indeed the measure of James' shadow.

I turned back to Felix. "Oh, before you ask for your

books back. Forget it. I'm keeping them."

"You're what?" Felix sounded horrified. That was some very valuable stuff to lose.

"What can I say Felix? I can't trust you not to get another kid mixed up in stuff they don't understand. So I'm keeping these books." The look on his face was priceless as I walked out the door.

'Well boss, what now?' Asked Shadow, who had watched patiently as I beat up Felix.

"It looks, my fine feathered friend, like it's time for you to go looking from the air." I opened the passenger door and he hopped from my shoulder onto the passenger seat. "First though, we go home for the night since we'll need a good night's rest for the morning."

The next morning we drove back to Ms. Wells' neighborhood. We weren't going there to see her, but we would use this as a starting point for the search. When we got out of the car I looked around to see if anyone was watching. When I was certain that no one was paying attention, I put on a falconer's glove and had Shadow jump onto my paw. Earlier that morning I had given him another look at James' picture and the blood that had been smeared on the books I had taken from his bedroom.

"You know what to do, Shadow?"

The raven cocked its head at me. 'Of course I do! I fly up and scan the area, looking for that idiot's energy pattern, or anything else that shouldn't be there.'

I nodded my head. "You ready to go?"

'As ready as I'm ever going to get.' I flung my arm up and Shadow leapt into the air.

I sat back down in my car and went into a trance looking through Shadow's eyes. It's a weird feeling because I feel everything Shadow feels, so I know first hand what it's like to be a bird in flight.

The first hour was boring, nothing interesting popped up at us. Well nothing that we hadn't already known about.

Half way into the second hour we got something new. A faerie circle. This could be it.

"Shadow, keep an eye on it. I'll be there as soon as I can." The raven heard me through our mental link even though we were miles apart.

'Sure thing boss. Though I doubt we'll get any activity until tonight.'

"If no one seems reasonable, I'll just kick down the proverbial door." I could enter the faerie realm whether they wanted me to or not.

Before I went to the park where the new faerie circle had been spotted, I stopped to pick up a few provisions. I needed organic cream, high quality tobacco, and a loaf of good bread as a bribe to be let in. It's easier dealing with a faerie court if you don't have to barge in.

Shadow had perched in a tree within eyeshot of the circle and I knew he had not let it out of his sight. "Anything happen?"

'I would have told you right away if anything had.'

I walked around the circle of mushrooms that marked the border of the door to the faerie world. These were little people, transplants from Europe which made things easier since I couldn't speak any of the American Indian languages. I cast a circle around the faerie circle which would block out the possibility of outside observation. Before I 'knocked' I traded the lead bullets in my gun for the iron ones. Most Faeries can't stand iron, though there are a few exceptions. I put the gun back in its holster, picked up the bag of provisions I had just bought and prepared to knock. "See you soon, Shadow."

The knock is simply a spell spoken in ancient Gaelic. Suddenly the bright outside day was replaced by a jeweled cave and I felt cut off from Shadow. In front of me were two Pixies in the uniform of the Faerie cavalry, behind them were their primitive feline mounts.

"Halt, mortal!" One of them yelled at me. "State your business with the faerie court."

I tipped my hat to them, no sense in being rude. "I have come seeking an audience with your king. I am prepared to pay you for admittance."

The pixies' eyes gleamed with greed, they are as easy

to bribe as most people if you know what they want.

"What do you have with which to pay us?"

"Fresh baked herb bread, tobacco of the finest quality, and heavy cream." I said watching with pleasure as their eyes widened, but pretended not to notice.

Then they regained control of themselves, trying to act as if they weren't very interested. "We have to sample the items before we decide to let you in."

They were, to put it mildly, very pleased with the offering.

"Now will you take me to your king?"

There was a momentary discussion between the two Pixies as they decided which one of them would have the honor of escorting their guest. While they talked I pulled a cigarette out of a silver case, put it in my mouth and lit it with just a thought. I had just taken my second long draw on it when they made up their minds.

"Follow us." They said together. Apparently I had seemed important enough for both of them to take me back. Either that or they thought I might just be too dangerous for only one guard to handle on the way to see their king. I liked to think that it was the second reason, being feared helps a lot.

When we arrived at the throne room I was slightly disappointed, but not overly surprised, that it was only half finished in its construction. The circle was recent so they hadn't had time to get everything settled. This was on the other paw a good sign for me, it meant I was probably dealing with an inexperienced king.

An Imp blew a horn as I entered, letting the king know that a visitor had arrived. The king was a plump Elf who was looking very pleased with himself.

"Well, well, well this is an honor," he boomed. "If I am not mistaken, you are the detective, Jason Black."

"You have the advantage, noble king of the fey. I have come looking for a mortal sorcerer who has gone missing." While I was talking I looked around with my second sight. I knew James' energy signature well, and it was here, despite all the interference, it was here.

"What use would we have for a mere mortal sorcerer?"

asked the king. "We have much more powerful magick of our own."

I smiled. "Why indeed? Maybe he was stupid enough to come into your circle at midnight and was trapped in one of your dances. Or maybe he thought to strike a bargain with you and didn't bring appropriate gifts."

"And what if we did have him?" The king asked. "Do you think you could pay for his release?"

"I have sources greater than most any mortal fur. I would like to see the boy before we talk of striking a deal."

The king turned his attention to the two guards who had led me in. "Bring the mortal."

The two guards disappeared for ten minutes by my watch and reappeared dragging James between them. He looked like he had been running marathon after marathon. His feet were covered in bleeding blisters and the kid looked like he had barely eaten or drank anything the entire time he had been gone. It was simple to tell what they had done to him.

"Why did you make him wear the Green Shoes? Did he try to steal your gold?"

The king laughed loudly again. "I did it for amusement. His mother said that he was ours to do with as we pleased."

"His mother?" There was only one way of knowing with certainty if the king was telling the truth. "King I bind you by Oberon's word. Did the boy's mother give him to you?"

"Oh, yes. You see, he was payment for services rendered."

"What could she have wanted that she would pay for with her son's life?"

"Revenge against the boy's father. She remembers the ways of the old world. She knew that through us she could reach to Ireland to strike at her former husband and his beautiful, younger wife. The boy had become more of a problem for her, so she followed the old path and brought the boy to us in exchange for services."

"The woman exchanged her son for revenge against her ex-husband. I wouldn't have thought her capable of it." She had tried to play me for a fool, as an alibi that she had done all she could to find the boy.

The question now was what to do? I couldn't leave James here, they would kill him with the Green Shoes, then feed him to the cavalry mounts, or something even worse. I had no use for him. That's when it struck me. Felix had measured his shadow; that meant he was willing to take him as a student. That meant, by the old laws, he was responsible for the boy. I'd just had to besure Felix took the responsibility seriously.

"What would the cost be to take the boy with me?"

"You would have to make an exchange of equivalent value, you know that."

"So what is of equivalent value to the boy?"

"The mother." The king laughed.

I grinned my most evil grin. It was the perfect trade. No legal system would believe for a moment that the femme had traded her son to a faerie court for revenge against her ex-husband. They simply wouldn't believe the faerie part, but, if I was to hand her over to the court itself, then justice would be served. "Agreed. I will bring the mother to you, the night after next."

I turned to leave when I heard the king call out. "You are a wicked fur, Detective Black."

"No," I replied over my shoulder. "The mother is a wicked femme. I merely seek justice."

When I reemerged into the mortal world I found that only five minutes had passed.

'Did you find him boss?' came Shadow's greeting.

"They put the Green Shoes on him."

'What in the nine realms of Yggdrasil did they do that for?'

"Entertainment. James' mother said he was theirs to do with as they pleased. She used him as payment for revenge against her ex-husband."

'She must not be very bright, if she hired you to find the boy, then.'

"She was using me as an alibi to show that she was doing everything possible to find him. She probably didn't

think that I'd actually find him or that if I did, that the faerie king would find it amusing to tell me who gave them the boy."

Shadow shook his head. 'So what do we do now, boss? Your not going to leave him are you?'

"I have promised a trade of equal value. The mother. Maurine Wells will pay. I can't prove her crime to the law, so I'll have to provide the punishment myself."

'What do we do with the boy after we trade his mother for him. You can't be thinking of keeping him?'

"No need to worry yourself about that. I have no intention of burdening myself with a teenager. I am, however, thinking of dumping him on Felix. He was Felix's pupil, so Felix can take responsibility for James."

I headed back to the Torpedo and sat down in it, and waited for Shadow to join me. Once he had landed on the passenger seat I started the car and headed back to Felix's shop.

Twenty minutes later we were pulling into the parking lot behind the store. I needed to talk with Felix as well as obtain some supplies that only he could give me. When I saw that the store was empty I walked straight up to the counter where Felix was standing, and threw down James' measured shadow.

"What's this?" Felix asked bewildered.

"I found your student and as of this moment I'm giving you back your hold on him. You can test it yourself, I haven't stripped it of its power."

Felix picked up the cord as if it was a dead snake and peered carefully at it, as if looking for a flaw in a gemstone. "What's the catch, Black? I know you. There is always a catch, so what is it?"

"He was your student, so he is now your responsibility. I've found him, and I know who is responsible for his disappearance. His mother traded him to a faerie court for revenge against her ex. I'm going to trade her for the boy."

"Why should I take him back?"

"First you took him on as a pupil, by the old laws that makes you responsible; and secondly," I pulled the five grimoires out of my satchel, "I'll return all of these to

you."

"There's still a catch, isn't there?"

"Yes there is. I need a skull from an adult, female feline."

"You want what? Why on Earth do you need a skull?"

"I need it to make a homunculus of James' mother. There is going to be a very big fire in her house and I need a body for the fire department to find. I'll use some of her blood to complete it so that it will convince the coroner, but to start it I need the skull. Now, do you have one?"

"Of course I have one. While I'm downstairs getting it you might want to grab the other supplies you'll need to make your creation. Don't forget the graveyard dirt." Felix went into the back room and disappeared.

I never bothered to question Felix about where he got the skull or to whom it had originally been attached. All I cared about now was that I had it.

The next day was spent in my home working on the homunculus. It had the form of a femme but there was no life to it. Almost like a manikin, but unlike a manikin it would be completely life-like. When completed it would fool even the most advanced medical examination into thinking it was the lifeless body of Maurine Wells.

The next night I loaded the homunculus into my car and headed back up Summit Avenue, to the now doomed Ms. Wells' home. I walked up to the door of the home and rang the doorbell.

Maurine answered the door still acting withdrawn. "Do you have any information?" She asked in a voice that almost sounded desperate, but now that I knew the truth I knew it was faked.

"I've learned some things, and I think you can be of some help. Do you mind if we step inside?"

"Of course not. Please let's step into the kitchen and I'll get you something to drink."

"A drink won't be necessary." I said as she led me into the kitchen. While she had her back to me I reached into my coat and withdrew my gun, and hid it behind my back.

"You said you have information regarding my son?" She asked, still with her back to me.

"Mostly a question." I raised my gun and pressed it to the base of her skull. "Why did you use your son to get at your ex-husband?"

Maurine stood there frozen, then she relaxed slightly. "You're a better detective than I gave you credit for."

"I get that a lot. Now answer the question."

"James was a little shit. He was always getting into trouble. The occult stuff was only the most recent of it. And then there was his father who left me for a bimbo trophy wife. I have my pride. When my ex-husband moved to Ireland, I realized I could kill two birds with one stone. I found a faerie circle and struck the bargain. I was rid of my ungrateful son and got revenge against my ex."

"And you called me in as an alibi to the police that you were doing all you could to find James."

"That's right." I could hear her smile, "You know you can't turn me over to the police, they'll never believe you. You're stuck."

I smiled wickedly, not that she could see it, but the change in my tone made it evident. "I'm not turning you over to the police. I'm trading you for your son, to the faerie court."

"What..." I cut her off by smashing the butt of my pistol into the base of her skull. She went out like a light. I knelt down and said a little charm that would keep her unconscious until I was ready to wake her, and then I got to work.

I went out to my car and grabbed the homunculus and carried it back to the house. I cut Maurine's paw and smeared a couple of drops of blood on the face of the homunculus and with a spell it took her form. I carried the thing up to the bedroom, dressed it in a nightgown, and put it in the bed. I then went back and found a bottle of vodka and a lowball glass. I filled the glass half way and then tipped the bottle on its side on the nightstand, which was right next to an electrical outlet.

Walking back down stairs, I carried Maurine's unconscious form out to the car. During this whole time I had been using a charm so that no one would notice anything strange. Lastly I went back up to the bedroom and drew a

fire glyph, with a five minute countdown, on the outlet. It would look like an electrical fire with aid from a half-empty bottle of vodka. I walked back down to my car and proceeded to drive to the faerie circle. I wasn't anywhere near the house when the glyph activated.

When we got to the faerie circle I carried Ms. Wells out of the car and over to the circle. I spoke the spell of admittance. When I appeared in the faeries' domain the two Pixies who had been on guard before were still there.

"State your business, mortal."

"I have come to see the king to make a trade of one mortal for another. The king expects me." My voice was hard as steel, letting them know I wasn't fooling.

One of the Pixies ran down the hall to check my story. When he came back he asked me to follow him, which I did, still carrying Ms. Wells.

"Well I wasn't sure you'd keep your end of the bargain, Mr. Black." the king said. "I take it that the femme is merely asleep, I won't take her if she's dead."

I grinned slightly. "She would have been hard to bring here had she been conscious."

I spoke the counter charm to wake Maurine. "Wake up Ms. Wells."

She looked around blurredly. "Where am I?"

"You should recognize this place." I said evilly. "This is where you struck your bargain with the faerie king. This is where you'll spend your remaining days."

Panic gripped her. "You can't leave me here! They'll kill me!"

"You left your son here to suffer the same fate that is about to befall you. Lady, this is true justice." I then turned my attention to the king. "King, I have upheld my end of the bargain. I want the boy."

The king clapped his hands. "Bring the boy sorcerer in."

James was dragged in and dropped in front of me. He was in better shape than he had been in when I first saw the boy. I bent down and checked his pulse, he was still alive.

Next I pulled a piece of iron out of my satchel and touched it to James' fur. The boy let out a scream of pain, and jumped up away from me. A damn changeling. I was pissed.

I yanked out my Colt, which I had taken the precaution of loading with the iron rounds. My eyes started glowing as I aimed the pistol at the king. "We had a deal, King. The mother for the boy. I'm not about to take a changeling."

"You can't blame me for trying."

"I most certainly can. I'll give you two minutes to bring me the boy before I unload a clip of iron into your hide."

"Okay, okay. I'll have the real boy brought to you."

The two guards disappeared again, and a minute later returned dragging James in and dropping him before me. I performed the same test on this James as I had on the fake one. This time he didn't react to the iron, this was the genuine article.

I used a charm to revive him. "James?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Jason Black. I have come to bring you out of here."

"Why?"

"Your mother hired me to try to find you so she could pretend she didn't have anything to do with your disappearance. Luckily for you I did find you."

James shook his head. "Where am I gonna go?"

"I'm bringing you to Felix. He'll take care of you. Let's go." I turned towards the king. "Don't think I will forget about your failed trick. If I have to deal with you again I'll be more heavily armed, and ready to do some real damage."

"Understood, Mr. Black. We will try to stay out of your way."

I left carrying James. When we returned to the mortal world I spoke a spell, destroying the circle of mushrooms that was their door. It would keep mortals safe, for a while.

I called Felix, got directions to his house, and brought James there.

"Can you take care of him, Felix?" I asked, after we had put James to bed, after he had eaten a good meal.

"What do I tell the cops?"

"Tell them that you found him wandering about in a daze, almost starved to death, in this state."

"What about his mother?"

"By now the fire department has put out the fire in her house, and found the homunculus of her. She's officially dead and more than likely everything goes to James."

"So what does the kid owe you for his life?" Felix asked, leading me to the front door.

"Nothing. His mother's check cleared yesterday, I've been paid."

"You're one mean bastard, you know that Black?"

I put on my fedora and walked out the door. "I close cases, that's all."