

THE
WATCHER
IN THE
SHADOWS



CHRIS MORIARTY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARK EDWARD GEYER

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Dedication](#)
[Kidnapped, New York Style](#)
[The Klezmer King's Last Matinee](#)
[A Shtetl Love Triangle](#)
[The Devil's Bargain](#)
[Trouble on Hester Street](#)
[A Soul Like Clear Water](#)
[Naftali Asher's Last Words](#)
[No Easy Answers](#)
[Manhunt!](#)
[Payton's Luck](#)
[A Bookcase with a Bad Attitude](#)
[Death in the Pit](#)
[A Dangerous Man](#)
[Just Keep Your Mouth Shut and Look Magical](#)
[Minsky's Luck](#)
[War Council at the Witch's Brew](#)
[Sam's Secret](#)
[Minsky's Bargain](#)
[Night Doings](#)
[Where All True Magic Comes From](#)
[Sparks and Husks](#)
[Strike!](#)
[Mordechai Gets a Job . . . and Bekah Gets a Proposition](#)
[Lily Rides the Subway](#)
[Is There Room in New York for an Honest Inquisitor?](#)
[The Scabbalist Unmasked](#)
[The Rabbi's Bargain](#)
[The Elijah Cup](#)
[About the Author](#)
[About the Illustrator](#)

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For Linus and Annika

Kidnapped, New York Style

THE TWO MEN lurked in the shadows across the street from the Pentacle Shirtwaist Factory. The lights were still on in the factory, where the foreman had kept everyone late to finish a big order for an uptown department store. But on this side of the street, there were shadows aplenty.

The last hour of the long workday seemed to drag on forever, but finally the sewing machines fell silent and the guards unlocked the great iron doors, releasing a flood of chattering, jostling girls into the darkening street. Now the two men craned forward, peering into one face after another in search of their victim. But they were still careful to keep out of the light. There'd been a strike brewing at the factory for months now, and anyone who saw their rough faces and gangsters' clothes would have known that they were starkers: men who hired out their fists—and worse—to the highest bidder.

Finally the starkers saw the women they were waiting for. They were obviously a mother and daughter, but apart from their dark curls and pleasantly plump figures, you could hardly have found two women in New York who looked more different from each other.

The daughter wore the severe white shirtwaist, black wool skirt, and knitted necktie that were the unofficial uniform of the firebrand Wiccanist revolutionaries who preached strikes and rebellion down at the Café Metropole. And though she looked like a little girl dressing up in her big brother's clothes, there was a glint in her brown eyes and a pugnacious set to her pretty jaw that had already made the foreman at Pentacle mark her down as a potential troublemaker.

The mother, however, seemed to come from another century. She was as neat and tidy and proper as a woman could be, but her unfashionable dress and frumpy shawl belonged to Russia, not America.

"Are you sure you're going to be all right?" she asked her daughter. "I don't know if you should be wandering around alone at night with all this talk of a strike—"

"I'm not wandering around alone, Mama. I'm going to night school, like always."

"Maybe you shouldn't go until things quiet down at the factory. One of those girls who've been handing out flyers for the union got herself beat up just last week—"

"She's fine, Mama. She's already out of the hospital. And anyway, nothing will happen to me between here and night school." Bekah laughed, patting her mother's cheek affectionately. "And if you're still worried after dinner, you can send Sacha to walk me home."

The two women parted, the daughter walking off eagerly and the mother watching her go with a worn and worried look. Only then did the starkers step out of the shadows.

They stalked their prey for several blocks, cutting through the rush hour crowd as swift and silent as two sharks on the hunt. They made their move just after she'd passed the golden lights and steamed-up windows of the Café Metropole.

"Excuse me," the larger of the two men said, stepping in front of the woman.

The woman exclaimed in Yiddish and backed up—only to bump into his companion, who had sidled around behind her to cut off her escape.

"Are you Mrs. Kessler?"

"Who are you?"

Instead of answering, the starker grabbed a slender chain around her neck and yanked on it to expose the silver locket that hung from it. "It's her," he told his partner. "Let's go."

The two men grabbed her by the elbows and began hustling her along the crowded sidewalk.

"Where are you taking me? What do you want from me?"

"Don't worry about that. All you need to know is Mr. Morgaunt wants to see you."

She screamed then, but she might as well have kept her mouth shut. No one heard her. No one even turned to look at her. It was as if she and the starkers had dropped out of the ordinary city into a ghostly realm of silence where the thousands of New Yorkers thronging the Bowery could neither see nor hear them.

She shut her mouth and made the sign of the evil eye. She was the daughter and granddaughter of wonderworking rabbis—she knew magic when she saw it. And she knew the difference between the harmless household spells she'd learned at her mother's knee and Great Magic such as this. No pious Jew would have dared to perform such a spell, lest he upset the delicate balance of the universe. She had fallen into the hands of a *mekhashef*, a wicked sorcerer, and only God and His angels could protect her.

They turned south off the Bowery into the dark and narrow side streets, and she realized they were going to pass within a few short blocks of her own tenement on Hester Street.

Usually the Jewish Lower East Side was abuzz with activity at this time of night: shift workers making their way home, children playing in the gutters, housewives gossiping on the front stoops and fire escapes. But tonight all those people seemed to grow deaf or look the other way when Mrs. Kessler screamed for help. She and her kidnapers could have been deep sea creatures, cut off from the rest of humanity by the crushing weight of thousands of feet of dark water. And she knew somehow that the *mekhashef* had told them to walk through the tenements. He had wanted her to feel his power and to know that it reached right up to her very own doorstep . . . perhaps even into the heart of her very own family.

As the starkers hustled her down the steep stairs of the Canal Street subway station, she glimpsed a crooked sign that read

STATION CLOSED FOR LINE WORK.

They dragged her across the platform toward the subway tracks. The drop yawned before her, and the third rail glittered in the shadows like a deadly thread of silver—

—and then suddenly a lone subway car was coasting into the station and its doors were whispering open before her. The kidnapers pushed her onboard and into a deep armchair upholstered in oxblood velvet. Beside the armchair stood an ornate floor lamp, its crimson silk shade casting more shadows than light.

The car rolled north and picked up speed until, a few blocks past Grand Central, it turned off onto an unlit spur of track and coasted smoothly into a station with no name or street number. The station was as private as the subway car, and at least as luxurious. The vaulted ceiling was supported by ornate cast-iron pillars. The walls glittered with mosaics of leaping nymphs and satyrs. A fountain gurgled softly at one end of the platform. At the other end, a monumental marble staircase wound upward into a darkness lit only by flickering gaslight.

The two men hurried her up the stairs, through a dim entrance hall, and into a vast space that echoed like a cathedral.

It was a library. Books ranged around them in glass-fronted shelves that rose one, two, three stories high. All around the walls of the cavernous room hung the heads of slaughtered beasts—animals Mrs. Kessler had never seen, and some she'd never even heard of. They were *kelippot*, she told herself: husks, like the empty shells of people that dybbuks took possession of. Their dead eyes glittered like stars, at once dazzling and terrifying. But nothing in the room was as terrifying as the man who waited before the fire for her.

He was as gray as ashes, as cold as iron, as bitter as the death of a child.

He wore black, and at first she thought he was dressed in sorcerer's robes, like the evil *mekhashfim*

in her father's books, an ocean away and half a lifetime ago. But then she made out the glimmering points of white at wrist and neck, and realized that he was wearing what people in America called evening dress.

The only point of color about the gray man—the only thing in the whole vast room that seemed to be part of the bright world of warmth and life at all—was the rich golden liquid swirling in the cut-crystal glass in his hand.

“Let her go,” he told the starkers.

They released Mrs. Kessler's arms, and she sank to the floor, unable to keep her balance after being dragged along against her will for so long. She heard the starkers' boots on the marble floor and then the dry *snick* of the great doors closing behind them. She struggled to her feet and forced herself to look the *mekhashef* in the eye so he would know she wouldn't bend to him.

“Do you know who I am?” the gray man asked.

She nodded. He had visited the factory a few times since she'd worked there. And even if he hadn't she'd seen his photograph in the newspapers often enough to recognize him.

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” he told her, “but I had to see you in private about a matter of some importance to both of us.”

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Just a little job. One well within the scope of your powers. But first I think we ought to understand each other a bit better than we do at present.”

He raised one hand, and a slithery, witchy woman emerged from the shadows beside the great hearth. She held a small white and gold cylinder. It looked like a trinket, a mere child's toy . . . and yet a looming sense of power hung about it. Then the woman pushed something that looked like a phonograph out of the shadows, slotted the cylinder into the player, and turned the starting crank.

Mrs. Kessler had thought she was frightened before the music started. But that hadn't been real fear, not as a mother knows it. With the first haunting notes of the melody, she felt a terror worse than she had known in the pogroms, or huddled in steerage while waves crashed down on the shuddering hatches, or standing in the pens at Ellis Island while the health inspectors peered into her children's eyes and chalked strange symbols on them to say who would reach America and who would be turned away. For all those times, she had feared only for her children's lives. But now she was face-to-face with a man who had the power to destroy soul as well as body.

Finally the terrible music ended and the machine trailed off into a repeating suck of static. When the *mekhashef* spoke, his voice was quiet, and his words simple.

“You know what it is, don't you?”

“It's my son, my Sacha. You've taken his soul and you've . . . turned it into music.”

“Rather good music too, don't you think? It has a depth and complexity that most etherograph recordings . . . well, but then I've listened to enough of them to become something of a connoisseur.”

Mrs. Kessler couldn't speak.

“What would you do to win it back from me? You're a proud woman, I can see it in your face. But for your children, you would do anything.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Anything.” What was the use in denying it? She held her hand out for the cylinder.

“Not so fast!” He laughed. “There's someone I want you to meet first. You see, you're not the only one who wants this little trinket.”

And then he was leading her back out of the library, back down the twisting staircase to the private subway station. At the far end of the platform, there was a door, small and plain, and behind it were more stairs. They plunged deep into the bowels of the earth, so far below the city that the air smelled of worms and time and darkness. And then they stepped into a room so thick with the stink of magic

that it stole her breath away.

There was a little circle of stone at the far end of the room, just where the vaults shaded into gloom and shadows. As they grew closer, Mrs. Kessler realized it was the rim of a well, just like the one she had fetched water from in her childhood. It was so webbed over with spells and hexes that it was difficult to make out what was at the bottom. She couldn't see the spells the way Sacha would have been able to see them. But she still knew that she was looking at a prison cell for a demon so dark and dangerous that even a wizard powerful enough to kidnap souls was terrified of it.

Thinking back to the tales she'd heard her father tell in her distant childhood, she knew there was only one thing that could possibly be at the bottom of that well: a dybbuk.

"And you know whose dybbuk it is too, don't you?"

He gripped her shoulders and forced her to her knees. She struggled, but he was stronger. Her face broke the surface of the spells. And suddenly it was as if she'd thrust her head into clear water and could see straight down to the bottom.

But there was no monster at the bottom of the well. There was no nightmare creature from beyond the gates of death and life.

It was only her own Sacha. And though she knew the dybbuk must pose a deadly danger to her son, it was still a part of him . . . and how could the mother in her not love every part of her child?

"What do you want me to do?"

"Not much. Nothing that will keep you from carrying on with your ordinary little life. I just need you to work for me—"

She blinked in confusion and dismay. "But . . . but . . . I already work for you."

"I know!" His harsh laugh echoed on the stone walls and rippled along the vaulted ceiling. "That's what makes it so amusing!"

Morgaunt rose to his feet, looking impossibly tall in his black evening dress. He loomed over Mrs. Kessler and put a finger to her mouth, silencing her. "And now, my dear, it's time to send you home. You're about to learn a spell I doubt your father ever taught you. A pity you won't remember the lesson."

He placed his hand on her head and began to speak in a cold harsh voice that seemed to scour her very soul.

"I conjure you, O Zachriel and Shabriri, Princes of Memory and Forgetting, to remove this woman's memory of myself and to cast it out into the waste and the wild."

And then the voice of iron began to chant the name Shabriri, dropping a letter each time he repeated it. It would have sounded like a child's game if it hadn't all been in such deadly seriousness. But there was no mistaking the black magic behind the chant, or the way it set her head spinning and whirling.

"Bri!"

She felt a tug behind her eyes, as if someone had knotted a string around her memories of the kidnapping and was yanking them out of her brain by sheer force of will.

"Ri!"

She tried desperately to hold on to the memory, but whatever was on the other end of that invisible string was stronger than she was.

"Iri!"

A sharp pain slithered through her mind—and then the memory broke free and drained away like water running through cupped fingers.

She looked around, blinking, and rubbed a hand across her eyes. What was this place? Whatever she'd come here for mustn't have been that important, or surely she would have remembered it.

"Ri!"

As the last echo of the final syllable faded, she turned, silent as a sleepwalker, climbed the marble

stairs to the entrance hall, and walked out into the dark, sleeping streets of the city.

The Klezmer King's Last Matinee

“MOVE ALONG, FOLKS!” cried the manager of the Hippodrome. “There’s nothing to see here!”

As he spoke, he tried to hide the Klezmer King’s corpse with his own body—which was almost wide enough to do the job, Sacha reflected.

Maurice Goldfaden was a short man, but not a small one. Not that he was fat, exactly. There just seemed to be more of him than there was of most people. His big belly seemed to have a life of its own. It strained his shirt buttons to bursting and thrust out from under the bottom of his waistcoat, jutting over the top of his trousers so that it reminded Sacha of a tenement fire escape. In fact, everything about Maurice Goldfaden seemed to overflow normal bounds and limits. His hair stood up from his head in every direction, defying combs and brilliantine to break out into wild and frizzy curls with every shake of his head. He talked big too. His whisper reached the back row of the theater, and his hands gestured so dramatically that Sacha wondered if he’d been watching actors onstage so long he’d forgotten how real people talked in ordinary life.

The only thing about Goldfaden that wasn’t bigger than life were his eyes. They were small and black and very bright, and they nestled in his jowly face like the poppy-seed filling in hamantaschen. Looking at those eyes, Sacha had a feeling that very little happened at the Hippodrome that Maurice Goldfaden didn’t know about.

“Nothing to see!” Goldfaden repeated to the world at large. And then he turned to Maximillian Wolf and added in a quieter voice, “And certainly nothing that need concern you, Inquisitor!”

Frankly, Sacha was inclined to agree with Goldfaden. The cause of death was certainly clear enough. The Klezmer King lay sprawled across the stage of the Hippodrome with one long-fingered hand still clutching his clarinet. He had died onstage during the Friday afternoon matinee. He’d been in full song, right in the middle of a dazzling high E-flat solo riff, when his electric tuxedo had sputtered, flickered, and flared up in a blinding flash. He was still wearing the tuxedo that was billed on the marquee outside as his “world-famous electric tuxedo.” No one had mustered up the nerve to turn it off. So now the Klezmer King lay at Wolf’s feet, flashing and twinkling like a flurry of falling stars.

Wolf looked down at the dead klezmer player for a long moment without speaking. Then he walked backstage, following the wires that snaked away from the body into the shadows, and kicked the plug out of the wall.

“Oh,” Goldfaden said sheepishly. “I guess I should have thought of that.”

They walked back to the body and stared down at it. Wolf wore his usual bland and disheveled expression, but Goldfaden looked completely undone by the presence of a corpse on his stage.

“Pathetic,” Goldfaden said. “Asher was a genius, an absolute musical genius, one of the all-time klezmer greats—even if his box office wasn’t exactly to die for. And now look at him! Fried to death by a couple of strings of cheap Christmas tree lights!” Goldfaden shook his head mournfully. “That’s not just tragic. It’s worse than tragic. It’s *bad showmanship*.”

Lily giggled, and Wolf let out a strangled sort of cough. But Goldfaden wasn’t laughing.

“And to have it happen at the Hippodrome,” he went on. “Terrible, just terrible! The poor old girl doesn’t deserve this indignity. Why, the Death-Defying Dershowitzes defied death right here on this very stage! And that rascal Harry Heller practically invented smoke and mirrors here. I even had Houdini headline his disappearing elephant act—no illegal magic, mind you, just honest fakery, all totally kosher. But in all these years, I never imagined the Hippodrome would come to this!” He

frowned at the spot where Asher had died, his mouth tightening in a way that confirmed Sacha's suspicion that Goldfaden—and maybe a lot of other people too—hadn't much liked Asher. "But isn't that Naftali Asher for you? Electrocuted by his own tuxedo because of some stupid publicity stunt the—mind you, I saw the nightly take, and I know for certain—didn't do a thing at the box office. What *shlimazel!* If he ever makes it into heaven, everything will go wrong from the minute he gets there. The neighborhood will start going to pot, and the angels will move to hell to get away from Asher's Yiddish luck."

"Sounds like he wasn't the sort of fellow who ought to have been messing about with electricity," Wolf hazarded.

"Yeah, well, thank God he had Sam to do that for him, or he probably would have fried himself months ago."

"Sam?" Wolf echoed, scrounging in his baggy pants pockets for his ever-elusive pencil stub.

Suddenly Goldfaden looked like he could have bitten his tongue off for having mentioned the name. "Asher's dresser. A good kid. The best."

"And what's Sam's last name?" Wolf had finally scared up a disgracefully chewed pencil stub. Another search produced a dog-eared scrap of paper that looked like it might once have been a laundry ticket.

Goldfaden's eyes shifted around nervously. "I'm sure Sam'll turn up sometime. He's probably just too upset about the whole thing to—er—and anyway, Sam wouldn't hurt a fly!" Goldfaden glared fiercely at Wolf, as if daring the Inquisitor to contradict him.

"Ah," Wolf said in a soft voice that made Sacha's ears prick up. He looked sideways at Lily and saw that she had caught it too. Wherever Sam was—and whatever his name was—Sacha wouldn't have changed places with him for all the tea in China.

"Well, this certainly is an unpleasant business," Goldfaden said, as if eager to change the subject. "Pathetic, really. It's enough to make you wonder if all that crazy talk people made about him was true."

"What kind of crazy talk?" Wolf asked in a very quiet voice.

Sacha held his breath. Next to him he could feel Lily practically buzzing with anticipation. Something was definitely up. There might not be any magical crime involved in Naftali Asher's death. But there was a secret. And if Sacha had learned anything so far in his apprenticeship, it was that one way or another, Wolf would know what it was by the time they walked out of the Hippodrome.

"Oh, well, you know," Goldfaden said. "People always talk. Especially theater people. Can't believe everything you hear, can you?"

Wolf seemed willing to go along with Goldfaden's changes of subject—for now anyway, though Sacha had watched him at work long enough to know that he would eventually meander back to every dangling hint and unanswered question. "I understand that it was a lady who called in the Inquisitors," he said.

"A lady!" Goldfaden cried, as if in all her storied history, the Hippodrome had never seen such a creature. "Oh, you mean Pearl! Well, I don't see why you need to talk to *her*."

Wolf fished out his pencil stub again. "Pearl—?"

"Pearl Schneiderman, a.k.a. Madame Eelinda the Electrifying Eel Maiden."

"What?" Wolf sounded perplexed. "Did she dress up in light bulbs too?"

"Nah, she's a contortionist." Goldfaden twisted his arms up like pudgy pretzels. "But not the usual contortion shtick. Veeery artistic is our Madame Eelinda! Anyway, the point is you don't need to know. This isn't a magical crime. It's barely a crime at all. More of a—a—an unfortunate happenstance. No need whatsoever for the Inquisitors to involve themselves."

Sacha looked at Wolf to see what he thought of this, but it was impossible to tell. Wolf stood stock

still, his handsome bony face impassive, and his dishwater gray eyes blinking mildly at Goldfaden through spectacles still fogged with cold. The only moving thing anywhere on Wolf's person was the icy rainwater dripping from his coat and pooling around his sodden shoes.

Sacha glanced at Lily Astral, who stood beside him. But his fellow apprentice just widened her bright blue eyes at him as if to say, *Don't ask me. I have no more idea than you do what goes on inside Wolf's head!* Then she reached into the pocket of her heavy winter cloak, fished out a delicate little lace handkerchief, and blew her aristocratic nose with a resounding honk.

It was February, in the middle of the worst New York winter anyone could remember, and if there was one small satisfaction that made up for Sacha's raw fingers and frozen toes, it was the sight of prim and perfect Lily Astral with her nose running all over the place.

Not that he wanted her to be *too* miserable. He liked her. And if she were just a little less rich and a little less of a know-it-all—and if she weren't a girl, obviously—she would have been the best friend a fellow could ever have. But still, it was nice to know that even Lily Astral was human enough to catch a cold.

"Seriously," Goldfaden insisted. "The guy was hopping around onstage strung up like a Christmas tree, sweating like a hog, and spitting into his clarinet. You think he needed *help* killing himself?"

"I do see your point, of course," Wolf said mildly. "But all the same, Miss Schneiderman did report a magical crime."

"Well, she was upset. People say all sorts of things when they're upset."

"And people say all sorts of things when they aren't upset too. But I've generally found that the things people say when they're upset turn out to be a good deal closer to the truth."

Goldfaden pursed his lips and narrowed his prune-colored eyes. "I could kill Pearl for making that phone call," he muttered. "I really could!"

"I hope you won't," Wolf said earnestly.

Suddenly Goldfaden seemed to remember the body lying at his feet. He turned a little green and tugged at his shirt collar as if he felt in need of air. "Pearl overreacted a little, that's all. Because Asher was involved . . . and . . . well . . . *you know.*"

"Actually, I *don't* know."

"Well, I'm not one to repeat malicious rumors. And Asher was a—well, okay, not exactly a *friend* of mine. Asher wasn't the kind of guy who *had* friends. But I felt sorry for him. He was tormented. Even for a genius. Which he certainly was, whatever people might say about how he got his talent."

"All the same," Wolf said, circling back to their earlier disagreement, "I would like to talk to Madame Eelinda—er—Miss Schneiderman. And of course Asher's dresser, Sam—what did you say his name was?"

"Oh—er—I didn't," Goldfaden blurted out. "I mean, I sent Pearl home. The strain of it all, you know."

"Shall I send an officer to her house to assist her?" Wolf asked solicitously.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary. I'll just ring her up."

"And what about Sam?"

"I . . . um . . . don't know where he lives, actually."

Wolf gave Goldfaden a blank stare that Sacha wouldn't have wanted to be on the sharp end of for love or money.

"No, I swear, really I don't! He was living with his family on Henry Street last I knew, right over the kosher butcher. But those Schloskys move around like gypsies. You know how it is in the tenements. Every month come rent day, there's kids whose home address is a pile of furniture on the sidewalk. That's the Schlosky boys for you: sent unshod into this sorry world with nothing to their name but red hair and empty bellies. So how's a man supposed to keep track of a family like that? I

paid Sam in cash under the table, and we were both happier that way. And if you want to report me for *that, go suck on an egg!*”

But Wolf just laughed and told Goldfaden to call Pearl Schneiderman.

“For you, anything,” Goldfaden proclaimed with a wink. “And in the meantime, you can always talk to the other eyewitnesses—all three hundred of them!”

For the next hour, while a Black Maria trundled Asher’s body down to the Tombs, they heard from a parade of eyewitnesses. They talked to matinee-goers from every walk of life: Hester Street shopkeepers and Orthodox cantors, Wiccanist revolutionaries and sweatshop seamstresses. They talked to the sellers of seltzer water and candy and roasted chestnuts. And finally they talked to the vaudeville performers themselves—the contortionists and chorus girls and song-and-dance men who had watched from the wings in what turned out to have been the best seats in the house for the Klezmer King’s final, fatal performance. But they all said the same thing—so much so that Sacha started to wonder if they’d all rehearsed it together before the Inquisitors showed up.

The Klezmer King had just embarked on his most famous solo—the great *Terkish*, with all the high notes—when the electric tuxedo sputtered and flared, sending out a shower of blue sparks. Asher staggered and cried out. And then he collapsed, stone dead before he hit the ground.

Or that was the story, anyway. And everybody who worked at the Hippodrome seemed pretty determined to stick to it.

Wolf was a subtle and delicate questioner. So subtle and so delicate, in fact, that he could usually interview witnesses—or even suspects—without them ever noticing when he moved from casual questions to the really important stuff. But Sacha had watched Wolf at work many times by now, and he could see that there were two burning questions on his mind: Where was Sam Schlosky? And what were Naftali Asher’s dying words?

Sooner or later, more or less discreetly, Wolf asked every single witness those two questions. And one after another, from the fat lady to the midget boy, every single witness lied to him.

No one had heard Asher’s last words. No one was even willing to guess what they had been. No one had seen Sam Schlosky after Asher died. And no one had the faintest, foggiest clue as to his whereabouts.

“This is absurd,” Wolf said at last, sounding as close to annoyed as he ever got. “How can a man shout his dying words onstage in front of three hundred eyewitnesses without a single one of them hearing him?”

“Acoustics,” Goldfaden intoned with a lugubrious shake of his jowls. “I always say acoustics is more art than science. Why, I worked at a theater in Moscow once where—But whaddaya know! Here’s Pearl! Pearl can tell you everything!”

Despite Goldfaden’s obvious doubts about her status as a lady, Pearl Schneiderman looked nothing like the “painted women” Sacha’s mother was always accusing Uncle Mordechai of consorting with at the Yiddish People’s Theater. She wore no makeup, and her prim shirtwaist and heavy wool skirt covered her from neck to ankle. In fact, Sacha couldn’t see the slightest difference between her and any other nice Jewish girl on the Lower East Side—except for an odd nervous tic she had of cracking her knuckles by bending the fingers so far backward that they all but touched the backs of her alarmingly flexible hands.

“So,” Wolf said when he had worked his way around to the subject at hand. “You are the young lady who called the Inquisitors. And Mr. Goldfaden here seems to think that you did so because of some rumors you’d heard about Naftali Asher.”

“All nonsense!” Goldfaden interrupted. “What good can come of passing on such crazy talk?”

Wolf turned his dishwater gray eyes on Goldfaden. There was nothing threatening or intimidating about Wolf’s stare. In fact, it was so absent-minded that you couldn’t really call it a stare at all. But

Sacha had been on the receiving end of that absent-minded gaze often enough to know just how uncomfortable it could make a person.

Goldfaden squirmed and swallowed nervously, but he was made of tougher stuff than most people. He clamped his jaws shut and glared at Wolf like a dog defending a bone.

It was Pearl who cracked first. “They said he’d sold his soul to the devil,” she whispered. “They said he met the devil at the crossroads and sold his soul for a bunch of klezmer songs.”

“See?” Goldfaden said. “Utter nonsense! People have been saying things like that about great musicians ever since there *was* music. How many klezmer players were supposed to have traveled with gypsies and played with the devil in the Old Country? And how many times have we all heard about some blues man down south who met the devil at the crossroads and sold his soul for the magic in his fingers? But the very idea of such a thing happening in New York is ridiculous. I mean, honestly, how many crossroads are there in Manhattan?”

“Two thousand four hundred and sixty-seven,” Wolf answered promptly. “If you count Five Points and Mulberry Bend.”

Goldfaden shuddered—though whether it was at the idea of all those hitherto unsuspected crossroads or at the mere mention of the two foulest slums in Manhattan, Sacha couldn’t guess.

“I still don’t believe it!” he said stoutly.

Wolf turned to Pearl. “But you believed it,” he said softly. “At least enough to call in the Inquisitors. And don’t think I’m unaware of how very reluctant anyone who works here would have been to do that. So why did you?”

Pearl seemed to collapse into herself. She glanced desperately toward Goldfaden. But he was looking resolutely the other way, as if now that he’d failed to keep Pearl away from the Inquisitors, he was determined to show Wolf that he wasn’t going to interfere with her telling her story.

“I—I heard Sam and Asher fighting,” she whispered at last. “While Sam was dressing Asher for the show last night.”



“What were they fighting about?” Wolf asked.

“I couldn’t tell, really. I couldn’t hear them all that well. And what I did hear didn’t make any sense. Sam said something about Pentacle, which seemed strange, since Asher stopped working there years ago. Asher tried to laugh it off, and Sam said, ‘Don’t lie to me, Asher. I know where you go. I followed you.’ And then Asher got really angry, but I couldn’t hear anything much of what he said. He wasn’t a shouter—he always got bitter and quiet when he was angry. He could say terrible things, things people never got over, in the quietest whisper.” She put her hands to her mouth, and her eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry! It’s horrible to talk that way about him when he’s—”

“Never mind,” Wolf said gently. “You can’t help it if that’s the way he was. And people don’t become angels when they’re murdered. What else did they say? You’ll feel better once you’ve told me.”

“Not if it gets Sam in trouble,” Pearl said darkly. “Anyway, the next thing I heard, Asher was telling Sam it was none of his business, and besides, he’d already quit. ‘It’s all settled,’ Asher said. ‘Tomorrow’s my last day. They’ve found my replacement.’”

“And then?” Wolf prompted.

“And then—Sam laughed. You can’t imagine that laugh. It was so *old* and world-weary. And he said, ‘Don’t tell me pretty stories, Asher. I saw that creature. I saw the watcher in the shadows. Do you think that *thing* will go quietly back to wherever it came from? Do you think you can sell your soul to the devil and not pay the bill when it comes due?’ And then . . . and then it was time to go onstage. They didn’t say another word to each other. But I saw Sam’s face when Asher died. And one thing I can tell you for certain: Sam didn’t think it was an accident.”

Wolf looked from her to Goldfaden. “Is that what you’ve all been hiding from me? Why?”

Goldfaden looked sheepish but still defiant. But Pearl clasped her hands together with a pleading look on her face and almost seemed about to drop to her knees before Wolf.

“Because of Sam!” she cried.

“What about Sam?” Wolf seemed genuinely mystified.

“We were all terrified of getting him in trouble.” Pearl grasped at Wolf’s coat sleeve. “He’s a good boy. He never hurt anyone. Whatever Asher was mixed up in, Sam couldn’t possibly have been part of it! Can’t you just . . . just forget we ever mentioned him?”

“Do you really think I can do that?” Wolf asked sadly.

Pearl dropped her head into her hands and sobbed. “Then it’s all over! As soon as the newspapers get word of this, it’ll all be ‘Anarcho-Wiccanists’ and ‘subversive magical elements.’ And that’ll be the end of any justice for poor Sam.”

Wolf frowned. “What on earth does this have to do with politics?”

“But—but don’t you understand who Sam Schlosky *is*?” Pearl stammered. “He’s Moishe Schlosky’s little brother!”

Sacha’s heart sank. Pearl was right, no matter how much he hated to admit it. Moishe Schlosky had spent the last year trying to organize the workers at J. P. Morgaunt’s Pentacle Shirtwaist Factory. If any reporter sniffed out the faintest hint that Moishe’s own brother was mixed up in a magical crime every paper in town would declare it an Anarcho-Wiccanist conspiracy. Sacha knew that as surely as he knew the sun would rise tomorrow. And he knew something else too—something that made the sinking feeling in his stomach even worse. Moishe was in love with Sacha’s sister. And—though he couldn’t fathom how his plump, pretty sister could possibly even look twice at a redheaded klutz who was skinnier than a starving chicken—Sacha was starting to have a sneaking suspicion that Bekah was sweet on Moishe, too.

At that moment, the door at the back of the theater burst open. Light footsteps tripped down the aisle, and a voice Sacha would have known anywhere called out, “Good golly, who canceled the

second matinee? And what's all this about Inquisiduh?"

He turned to look up the aisle—and sure enough, there was Rosie DiMaggio, a.k.a. Rosalind Darling, in all her gorgeous, auburn-haired glory.

Halfway down the aisle, she caught sight of Wolf and his apprentices. "Hey, whaddaya know!" she cried. "Sawshah! Lily! Inquisiduh Wolf!"

"Sounds like the elocution lessons are coming along swimmingly," Lily whispered in Sacha's ear.

Sacha tried not to laugh, but he had to agree. The purpose of Rosie's mother's life was to backstage mother her dazzlingly beautiful daughter into fame, fortune, and a high-society marriage. But honestly, Sacha thought she ought to just give up and let Rosie follow her dream of becoming a famous inventor. Rosie had as good a head for business as any Wall Street Wizard. And Lily had a point about the elocution lessons too. Rosie might be a thousand times prettier than any of the society beauties who flocked to Maleficia Astral's dinner parties . . . but Sacha still doubted there was a speech coach or elocution spell in the world strong enough to conquer Rosie's New York accent.

"Well, well," Inquisitor Wolf said with the friendly smile that he always had for Rosie. "If it isn't Miss Little Cairo!"

"Nah, I got a new act this year. My mother decided I needed something more artistic if I was gonna break into high society. Now I'm doing 'Miss Rosalind Darling's Living Statue Exhibition.' A one-girl museum, complete with depictions of illuminated miniatures from Mr. Morgaunt's world-famous magical manuscript collection. Very classy. But the white paint's hard to get out of my hair. And I got the cramp somethin' awful havin' to stand still so long. Honestly, I preferred the belly-dancing."

Lily made a sound that Sacha would have called a snort if anyone but the heir to the Astral family millions had made it.

"Anyway," Rosie said, oblivious as always, "what are you guys doing here?"

Wolf stepped aside so she could see the chalk outline on the stage.

"Oh, no!" Rosie gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. "Who was it?"

"Naftali Asher."

Was it Sacha's imagination, or did Rosie suddenly look a lot less sorry? But all she said was "Ooh. Nasty. How'd it happen?"

"The electric tuxedo."

Rosie shook her head, tossing her auburn curls. "I never thought that claptrap thing was safe."

"See?" Goldfaden insisted. "Of course it was an accident!"

"Oh, sure, sure," Rosie replied absent-mindedly. "Wouldn't want to speak ill of the dead. Still . . . there was one guy in vaudeville I *wouldn't* be surprised to see turn up murdered, it'd have to be Naftali Asher."

"Why's that?" Wolf asked quietly.

Rosie gave him a meaningful look. "I guess you never met the guy. Still, Mr. Goldfaden's probably right. Sam's a good kid, but he's no genius. I tried to tell Asher they needed to ground the thing properly, but he practically bit my head off. He shoulda listened to me, huh? After all, I got exploded and set fire to enough times back when I worked for Mr. Edison to know a thing or two about electricity."

"You're not working for Edison anymore?" Lily asked.

"Nah. After the fire at the Elephant Hotel, my picture got in the paper, and Mrs. Edison saw it and decided to take Mr. Edison on a long trip to California to promote 'his' motion-picture camera. As if He can barely run the thing without my help! But two can play at that game. And the way I see it, since I already invented one motion-picture camera for Mr. Edison, there's nothing to stop me from inventing another one for myself!" She gasped again. "Oh, golly! If the camera was working right today, the whole thing must be on film!"

Suddenly Rosie was off and running. She dashed back up the aisle toward the exit. Wolf followed close at her heels, with Goldfaden waddling behind him and the two apprentices bringing up the rear. They made it into the lobby just in time to see the muddy tails of Wolf's overcoat vanishing through a green baize door that led to a steep flight of stairs.

As soon as Sacha stepped into the stairwell, he was surrounded by the soft whirring and clicking of some piece of machinery running overhead. It was a familiar sound—and not in a good way. It reminded him of Edison's etherograph. Morgaunt had used that machine to steal Sacha's soul and make a dybbuk of it. And then Sacha had played into Morgaunt's hands by recklessly summoning the dybbuk—a blasphemy that still made him cringe with guilt every time he thought of it.

He'd never seen the dybbuk again after that night; it had vanished into the flames of the Elephant Hotel, and he fervently hoped it was gone forever. But he still knew he wasn't finished with J. P. Morgaunt. Morgaunt had told Sacha that he had the makings of a Mage. He'd said that Maximillian Wolf had caused him so much trouble that he wouldn't tolerate another Mage-Inquisitor in the city. Then he'd offered Sacha a job—and laughed in his face when he refused it.

Ever since that night, Sacha had tried to forget Morgaunt's mocking laughter. And he'd tried almost as hard to avoid Wolf's efforts to get him to learn magic. He couldn't give up his apprenticeship, because his family needed the money too badly, but he was still determined not to become a magician. The one time he had worked magic—to summon his dybbuk—he had felt with every fiber of his being that he was doing wrong. And the magic that Wolf had used to defeat Morgaunt in the burning hotel had been even more terrifying than the summoning of the dybbuk. If that was magic, then Sacha wanted nothing to do with it.

Sacha had stopped on the stairs as the memories came to him, overwhelmed by the weak, sick feeling that always overtook him when he thought about that night. But now he realized that the other had gone on before him, and he forced himself to follow. At the top of the stairs hung a heavy red velvet curtain. Sacha pushed it aside—and stepped out into what felt, in that first instant, like midair.

They were in a private box: a little balcony that hung just to the side of the Hippodrome's stage, close enough that the actors could have stood onstage and struck up a conversation with the uptown ladies and gentlemen who could afford these seats.

But there were no audience members in the box now. Instead, a spindly-legged steel spider crouched over the plush-upholstered seats—it was cobbled together from about five regular camera tripods. On top of the thicket of spindly legs, like a clockwork daddy longlegs, was the strangest camera Sacha had ever seen.

Or at least he thought it was a camera. It seemed to have all the parts and pieces cameras had. But it also had other parts: an extra-long adjustable lens, a speaker trumpet just like the one on Edison's etherograph, and a strange figure-eight contraption on one side that seemed to be doing nothing at all except rolling a long strand of shiny tape from one bobbin to another bobbin.

It was this part of the machine that was making the whirring and clicking noise. And now that Sacha stood beside it, he could hear a sort of scritchety sound as well: the sound of the shiny strand of tape catching in the little cogs and gears that sent it snaking through the belly of the machine.

Rosie flicked a hidden switch, and the machine sighed and wheezed and shuddered to a stop.

"What is it?" Lily asked in the soft silence that followed.

"It's my walking, talking motion-picture camera," Rosie said proudly. "The only one in existence—but not for long! This invention's gonna make me the toast of Hollywood!"

"Why I let her talk me into allowing the thing in my theater, I really couldn't tell you," Goldfaden kvetched. "It's unfair competition, the worst threat to real theater since the phonograph! The actors' union would kill me if they knew I was aiding and abetting the enemy this way. But that girl could charm a stone into getting up and walking!"

“And you think you filmed Naftali Asher’s death with it?” Wolf asked Rosie. “Sound included?”

“Hopefully. I’m still having a heck of a time making the sound match up to the pictures—there’s a trick I used for Edison, but he’s got the patent on it now, so it’s back to square one on *that* little problem. Still, you can usually hear everything pretty good, even if it looks a little funny.”

“Can we see it?”

“Well, not yet. You gotta develop the film just like with a regular camera, you know? I could do it for you. Let’s see now . . . if I rushed it a bit, I could probably have it ready for you day after tomorrow.” Then her face fell. “But wouldn’t that be a conflict of something or other? I mean, I work at the Hippodrome. Ain’t I a suspect?”

Wolf’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. Then he smiled, a little ruefully. “You forget, Rosie. I know you. And out of all the millions of people in New York, you’re about the last one I’d ever suspect of killing anybody.”

“Oh!” Rosie seemed flattered and even a little flustered by the compliment, though Sacha couldn’t figure out why. “Uh . . . I’ll bring it to the Inquisitors Division on Monday. I always wanted to see where Sacha and Lily work. I heard so much about it, I got a real curiosity for the place.”

“Anyone else I should talk to?” Wolf asked Goldfaden. “Besides Sam Schlosky, I mean.”

“Well, you’ll need to talk to Asher’s wife, of course. And Ki—erm—” Goldfaden fidgeted for a moment, once again unable to meet Wolf’s eyes. “Ahem, that is to say—no. Nobody who comes to mind, strictly speaking.”

Wolf gave Goldfaden one of his blandest looks. “Everyone has enemies, Mr. Goldfaden, or at least people who don’t like them very much. If you’re worried that I’ll jump to unwarranted conclusions just because you mention, say, a rival or a professional competitor—”

“Oh, heck!” Goldfaden erupted. “I guess you’ll hear it sooner or later, so it might as well be from me and not the rumor mill. Asher had it in for the Kid. Thought he was trying to put him out of business. You know who I mean, don’t you? Hottest klezmer clarinet in New York.”

Wolf looked blank.

“That guy was the Klezmer King,” Goldfaden said, pointing at the wavering chalk outline where Asher had lain. “And in my humble opinion, he was the greatest klezmer player who ever lived. But genius or not, he was finished. No one wanted to hear him anymore. They were all too hot for the new sensation that’s sweeping the nation: Kid Klezmer.”

“Oh!” Sacha gasped before he could stop himself. “*Him!*”

“You know about this person?” Lily asked, as if the mere idea were too absurd to be believed.

“Sure—um—my mother sort of has a thing for him.”

Goldfaden snorted. “Your mother and every other live female on the Lower East Side between the ages of nine and ninety. If you ask me, he doesn’t have a tenth of the talent poor Asher had. But the women are almost as crazy for him as they are for that talentless hack, Mordechai Kessler. I should be so handsome. I woulda been a millionaire!”

Sacha started guiltily at the sound of his uncle’s name, but Wolf was too busy asking where he could find Kid Klezmer to even notice.

“We-ell,” Goldfaden said doubtfully, “he spends a lot of time at the Essex Street Candy Shop.”

“Oh,” Wolf said, in a very different tone of voice. “I see.”

Lily looked mystified, but Sacha knew exactly what Goldfaden meant—and why Wolf suddenly sounded as wary as a mouse who’d just caught wind of a new cat in the neighborhood.

Everyone on the Lower East Side knew that the Kid was Meyer Minsky’s favorite klezmer player. He was practically the official clarinetist for Magic, Inc. And he hung out with all of New York’s most notorious Jewish gangsters in the back room of the Essex Street Candy Shop. Mrs. Kessler wouldn’t let Sacha or Bekah set foot in that store, even though it had the best candy in town and was only a

mouthwatering block and a half from their apartment on Hester Street. But Meyer Minsky had once visited Benny Fein's mother in the apartment upstairs from theirs, arriving in his canary yellow limousine with his pockets full of candy for all the neighborhood kids—and the taste of that candy was one of the sweetest memories of Sacha's life.

"But I guess you wouldn't want to be seen walking into the candy store," Goldfaden said hesitantly. "It'd give people the wrong idea."

"Quite," Wolf agreed.

"But . . . uh . . . Meyer likes to have lunch at the Café Metropole. And it is almost twelve. And that might be . . . ah . . . neutral territory, so to speak."

"A very astute suggestion," Wolf agreed in his blandest voice. "And now we really should be going. Rosie? We'll see you Monday?"

"You betcha!" she called from the bowels of her walking, talking motion-picture camera.

A minute later, Goldfaden was hustling Wolf and the apprentices out onto the street under the blinking, flashing Greco-Roman awning of the Hippodrome. The weather was still appalling, and they hurried to button coats, twine mufflers around chilly necks, turn up their collars, and prepare for the freezing slush of the New York sidewalks in February.

But before stepping into the icy rain, Wolf turned back to Goldfaden for one last question. "You mentioned Harry Houdini earlier," he asked the theater manager. "Just out of curiosity, would you still hire him now?"

Sacha and Lily both knew what Wolf was asking: Would the Hippodrome still hire a magician who'd been unofficially blacklisted by ACCUSE, the Advisory Committee to Congress on Un-American Sorcery? Maurice Goldfaden knew what Wolf meant too. And from the look of things, he didn't like it much. His eyes narrowed, and his already flushed face turned a purpler shade of red.

"What kinda question is that? This is the Hippodrome, not just some garden-variety vaudeville joint. We started out in Yiddish theater way back when. We've had all the greats here: Adler, Thomashefsky, Kessler. I mean *David* Kessler, of course, not Mordechai the Meatball!"

Sacha jumped again at the sound of his Uncle Mordechai's name—and Goldfaden's poppy-seed eyes flicked his way with a twinkle in them that made Sacha suddenly suspect Goldfaden knew exactly who he was and was taking active pleasure in insulting Mordechai to his face. Sacha had seen his uncle Mordechai in several Yiddish People's Theater musicals—you had to catch them fast, since almost every show that opened at the Yiddish People's Theater folded before the actors even got their first paycheck. Still, he couldn't help feeling that Goldfaden was being a little unfair. But he wasn't going to argue the point, so he tried to copy Wolf's blandest expression, forcing out of his mind the very idea that he even knew anyone named Mordechai Kessler.

Wolf knew about Sacha's family, of course—though Sacha hadn't exactly gone out of his way to tell him more than was strictly necessary about his scapegrace Uncle Mordechai. But Lily still thought Sacha was a respectable middle-class boy who lived in the sedate row house near Gramercy Park, where the Astral family limousine dropped him off every day after work. And she'd go on thinking that as long as Sacha had anything to say about it. He'd die of shame if she ever found out that he lived in the tenements.

"Anyway," Goldfaden went on, "the point is the Hippodrome's got history. She's got soul. And the Hippodrome is not gonna stiff Harry Houdini just because a bunch of congressmen from states with square corners think being a rabbi's son makes him un-American!"

Goldfaden was shaking a finger in Wolf's face now, his big potbelly pushing the taller man backward step by step. Soon both were standing in the rain, Goldfaden in nothing but his suit jacket and waistcoat. But he was too angry to notice—and the finger that had been waving in Wolf's face was now jabbing at his chest.

“And you know what else, Mr. Fancypants Inquisitor? If you think you’re going to lean on me to report my friends and neighbors for Wiccanist activities—”

“Actually,” Wolf said mildly, “I’m quite a fan of Mr. Houdini myself. And he seems to be having little trouble finding work lately. So I thought I might mention that if he did appear at the Hippodrome, I’d be happy to buy a ticket.”

“—you’ve got another think—oh!” Goldfaden stopped short. “Really? You’d come see Harry? And the Inquisitors wouldn’t shut us down if we had him back? D’you think we could get away with doing the elephant trick again? No, wait . . . that elephant’s on tour in Saskatchewan. And trust me, you don’t want to try that trick with the wrong elephant! So I suppose we’d have to come up with something new. A séance? A death-defying escape? Something underwater, perhaps?” His eyes sparkled, and he rubbed his hands together excitedly. “Harry’d have to get back in training, of course. Nothing makes a good magician go to seed faster than testifying in front of Congress.”

A Shtetl Love Triangle

AS THEY WADED through the dirty slush on their way to the Café Metropole, Sacha dropped back to talk to Lily.

“That has to be about the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen,” he began.

“Maybe. But it’s still not a job for the Inquisitors.” She sniffed disdainfully. “And I have better things to do with my time than run errands for the ordinary cops.”

“Crime is crime. And Naftali Asher’s still dead, no matter what he died of.”

“I suppose. But personally I’m getting sick of traipsing up and down Manhattan on the say-so of illiterate immigrants who can’t tell the difference between Old World magic and perfectly ordinary machinery. I mean, are we training to be Inquisitors or public information officers? And how can anyone possibly make it through Ellis Island without figuring out the difference between a killing spell and an electrical circuit?”

Sacha was quite sure that Pearl Schneiderman could read very well and had never set foot on Ellis Island, but he bit his tongue and let it pass.

“And what was all that stuff about Kid Klezmer and the candy store anyway?” Lily asked as they forged on through the driving sleet. “Now there’s some problem with Inquisitors going into a candy stores?”

“Rule five hundred and eighty-four in the NYPD Inquisitors handbook,” Sacha teased. “No candy for Inquisitors. Wanna quit yet?”

Lilly elbowed him in the ribs. “Come on!”

“Everyone knows the Essex Street Candy Store is Magic, Inc., headquarters. So if an Inquisitor even went in there and came out alive . . . well, the whole world would think he was working for Meyer Minsky.”

Lily stopped in her tracks and stared at him. “That’s completely ridiculous! You’re telling me the most notorious magical gangster in all of New York runs his rackets out of a candy store? Why on earth would he do that?”

“Maybe he has a sweet tooth.”

“Oh, *be* serious, Sacha!”

“I am.”

“Well . . . but what parents would ever let their children buy candy there?”

“I don’t know about that. But one thing I do know: they don’t have much trouble with shoplifters!”

“Would you two like to come inside?” Wolf called back to them from halfway down the block, where he was holding open the big mahogany and plate-glass front door of the Café Metropole. “Or are you enjoying the spring weather too much?”

The Café Metropole was the legendary watering hole of New York’s intellectual set—or at least the Jewish part of it, which pretty much amounted to the same thing. It was strategically located between the Eldridge Street Synagogue, the Industrial Witches of the World headquarters on Hester Street, and the several Yiddish theaters that competed for the hearts and wallets of Lower East Side theatergoers.

Each great Yiddish theater had its own stars, its own playwrights and songsmiths, and its own army of die-hard fans ready to come to blows with one another to defend their favorites. The Thalia had the great tragic genius David Kessler. The Windsor had the immortal Thomashevsky. The Grand had who seemed like an endless string of comic leading ladies, each shamelessly promoted as “America’s Sweetheart,” regardless of the fact that no one north of the Tenderloin had ever heard of her. And of

course the ever-struggling Yiddish People's Theater had Uncle Mordechai. But the center of all this flamboyant Lower East Side *mishigas* was the gleaming main saloon of the Café Metropole. Here rabbis happily rubbed shoulders with actors and revolutionaries. Here the IWW organizers plotted strikes over tiny steaming glasses of strong tea. Here young men (and young women too, despite Mrs. Kessler's clucking tongue) debated deep into the night over the latest revolutionary pamphlets smuggled in from England or Russia.

Which made it strange that Sacha hadn't realized until this very moment just how much he *didn't* want Lily Astral to set foot inside the place. But there was nothing to do about it now. Wolf was holding the door open, and already getting irritated looks from the customers near enough to the entrance to feel the cold wind blowing in around him.

Lily marched inside, shaking off her sleet-spattered coat and looking around the place in wide-eyed curiosity. Suddenly, Sacha saw the Metropole through her eyes. The gleaming mahogany bar with its polished brass railing was as immaculate as ever, but everything looked a little shabby compared to the uptown places he'd seen in the last year as he followed Wolf from crime scene to crime scene. And, truth be told, the people looked a little shabby too. None of the Metropole's regulars bothered much with appearances. For one thing, they were mostly poor. And for another thing, they were all far too busy planning the coming Wiccanist magicworkers' paradise, or plumbing the mysteries of theoretical Kabbalah, or penning the next brilliant masterpiece of Yiddish theater. All of which could be done perfectly well in old, tattered, ink-stained clothes. But still—

"Who's *that*?" Lily asked, poking Sacha with her elbow.

Sacha followed her stare across the room—and to his horror, he saw that Uncle Mordechai had gotten up from his usual table in the corner and was headed straight for them with his hand out and a welcoming grin on his face.

Sacha glanced at Wolf—who was busy talking to the bartender, thank God—and then gestured desperately to Mordechai behind Lily's back.

Mordechai caught the gesture, wavered ever so slightly, and then kept advancing toward Lily as if nothing had happened.

"Let's go," Sacha said, trying to drag Lily toward Wolf and get away from Mordechai.

"Wait a minute—"

"Good afternoon," Mordechai said in his smoothest voice. And Sacha turned back just in time to see him sweep his hat off his glossy black curls and give Lily his most winning smile. "May I be of any assistance?"

"Uh . . . well . . . oh!" Lily opened and closed her mouth like a fish out of water, but she didn't seem to be able to make a rational sentence come out of it. What on earth was wrong with the girl?

Sacha gave Mordechai a pointed stare. "No help required, thank you very much. We're here with the Inquisitors."

"A nice Jewish boy like you working for the Inquisitors?" Mordechai said, with an absolutely malicious grin on his face. "You must have broken your poor mother's heart!"

"I don't discuss my mother with *strangers*," Sacha snapped.

"I applaud your discretion." Mordechai's solemn smirk told Sacha he was going to be the butt of his uncle's jokes for many family dinners to come. "Good day, young sir. And please accept my utmost apologies for intruding upon you, Miss—er?"

"Astral," Lily gasped.

"Not *Lily Astral*!" Mordechai exclaimed as if he'd just heard that she was the goddess Aphrodite fresh off her clamshell.

"But—how do you know my name?" Lily asked breathlessly.

"Ah, well, I can be discreet too. Shall we say a little birdie told me? But they didn't tell me you

were so very charming. Little birds can be so unreliable, can't they?" Mordechai gave Lily the smile that had broken the hearts of half the girls on Hester Street. And then—having tormented Sacha for long enough—he retreated to his table in the corner.

Sacha glanced back at Wolf to see if he'd noticed anything. But he had been talking to the bartender and was now making his way through the crowd toward the Metropole's back room.

"Come on," Sacha said brusquely, starting after Wolf. "Don't you know better than to talk to strange men in public?"

But Lily was too busy staring after Uncle Mordechai to hear him. "That is the handsomest man I've ever seen in my entire life," she said as Sacha dragged her along. "And I feel like I've seen him somewhere before too, if only I could remember where. He *must* be famous, Sacha. Who is he?"

"How should I know? Just some out-of-work actor."

"Don't be ridiculous. Actors are seedy and disreputable. And he's . . . well . . ." She cleared her throat and looked a little embarrassed suddenly. "You know what?" she asked brightly. "I think he must be one of those exiled Polish noblemen one sees around town these days. That would explain why he looks so familiar, too. I must have seen him at one of my mother's parties."

"I seriously doubt that!" Sacha muttered.

"As if you'd know anything about it!"

But what they saw when they stepped into the Metropole's private dining room stopped their argument cold. Kid Klezmer was sitting at a table full of food and drink far better than anyone in the front room of the Metropole ever got to eat. At the table's far end lounged Dopey Benny Fein, the most notorious starker on all the Lower East Side—a man bold enough (or, some people said, stupid enough) to hand out a professionally printed price list of his starking services. And between the Kid and Dopey Benny sat the king of the Lower East Side: Meyer Minsky.

Sacha had seen Minsky before, of course, but he still couldn't help staring at him. Sure, Kid Klezmer was handsome enough in that skinny Uncle Mordechai kind of way that girls seemed to like. And Benny Fein would have been a fine figure of a man if he hadn't broken his nose so many times that he talked like he had a permanent head cold.

But Meyer Minsky—now, *that* was Sacha's idea of what a real man ought to look like.

Minsky had grown up on the streets of the Lower East Side, among the poorest of the poor. But you'd never know it to look at him today. He wore the best clothes money and magic could buy, and he carried himself like a perfect gentleman. Yet the set of his broad shoulders would have demanded respect even if he'd been dressed in beggar's rags. That and the proud glint in his blue eyes that seemed to say, *Other Jews may be poor and powerless, but I'm not. Respect me, and we'll get along. Disrespect me, and I'll make you sorry you were ever born.*

That quiet but indomitable pride had made Meyer Minsky the idol of every Jewish boy in New York, and the closest thing the Lower East Side had to royalty. He was an honest-to-goodness made-in-America Jewish folk hero, and in the eyes of most Lower East Siders, he could do no wrong. If you called him a common criminal, they'd tell you he was a nice Jewish boy who treated his mother like queen and made the streets safe for respectable girls. If you told them he abused magic in ways no pious Jew should tolerate, they'd look uncomfortable for a moment—and then ask if you wanted to let the Irish and Italians rule the streets. If you told them he was dangerous, they'd tell you that Jews had been slaughtered and persecuted for two thousand years, and maybe it was time for a dangerous man to step to the fore.

And so Meyer Minsky reigned over the Lower East Side, living off the fat of the land like a modern-day King David—and far more beloved by his subjects than most kings could ever hope to be. Of course the owner of the Café Metropole would have paid his protection money to Irish gangsters if he had to; there was no escaping life's harsh realities. But he would have felt ashamed. Minsky, on the

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