

Valhalla After Dark

by David McKenna

In traffic I cry bloody murder, but my bloodlust subsides once I'm in Valhalla. Chip Whitehead wants to see me on the 22nd floor before I start my shift. Charlie and the other suits have been looking at me funny since I sent Chip a memo suggesting the recession needn't be a drag on gaming revenues. I wonder if I'm heading into trouble upstairs.

But Chip is all smiles when I step off the elevator. He likes that I think we should train more Valkyries to be dealers. This would mean replacing standard-issue dealers — the stoop-shouldered automatons who dress like parking valets — with regal looking women in high boots and breastplates, to attract a higher percentage of upscale losers. He wants me on a task force to cut the fat and increase the drop.

He says, "It's all very tentative but I like the way you think, Salvatore."

I say, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade."

I picked that up from a wealthy girl I dated briefly at school, a marketing major and self-described libertarian. Her default mode when we argued was a glib cheerfulness that belied her absence of compassion for the poor and lame. My ability to voice her odious cliché, with just the right note of irony, indicates the extent to which upgrading my Good Sal persona has payed off.

Chip smiles, as if my coolness reflects his indifference to all that's outside his realm. He's CEO and lord of Valhalla, a pleasure dome where rare liqueurs flow from unseen springs.

But the hybrid Sal I'm perfecting is in two places — here in the dome, above the hall of dead warriors, telling Chip I am for Valhalla, I am of it, and in a faraway dive playing Thelonious Monk's "Epistrophy" on a baby grand, very much among the living.

This is fakery on a level I haven't previously achieved; fakery that makes me worthy of acceptance in the twilit world, even on the 22nd floor.

