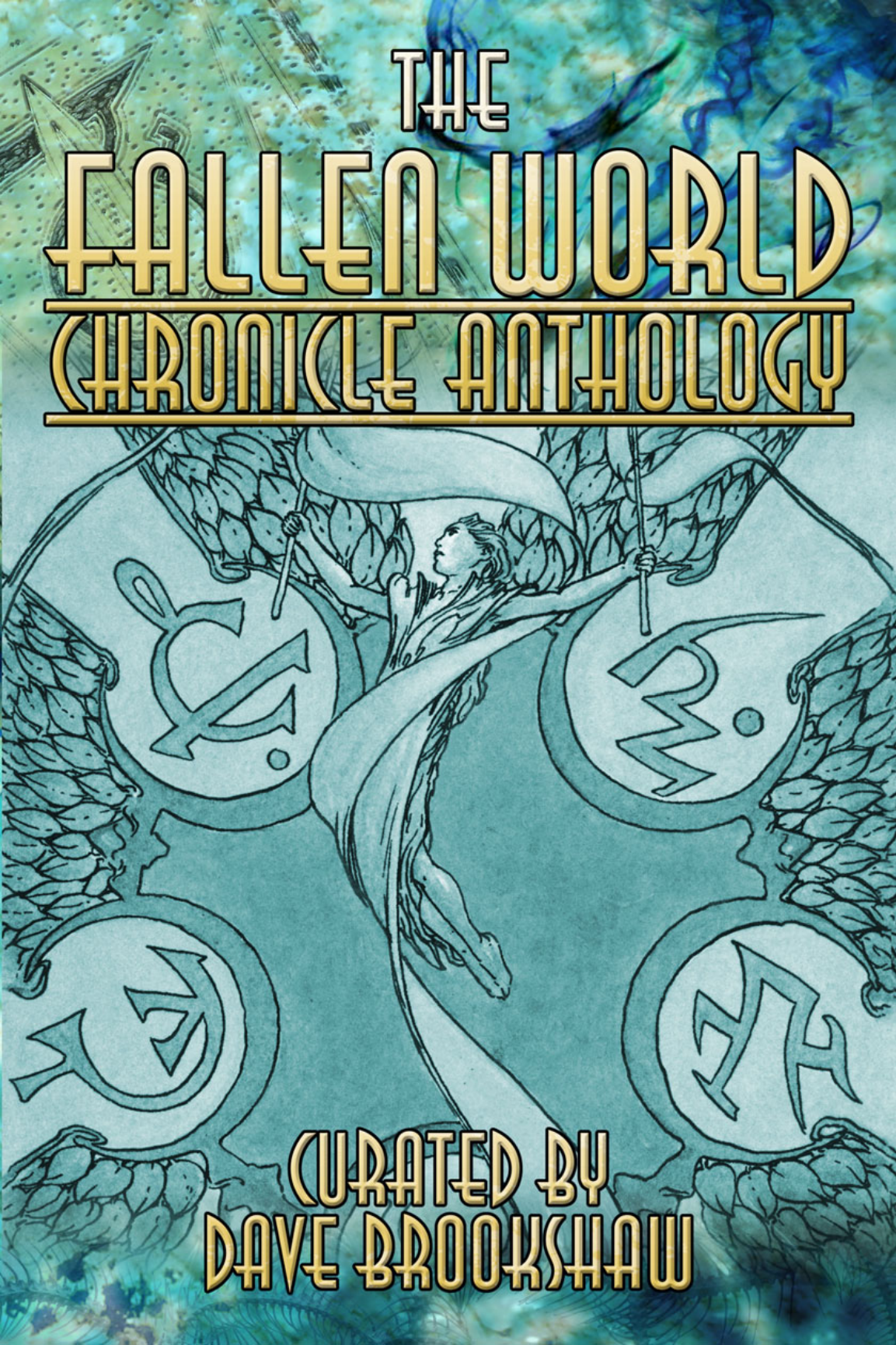
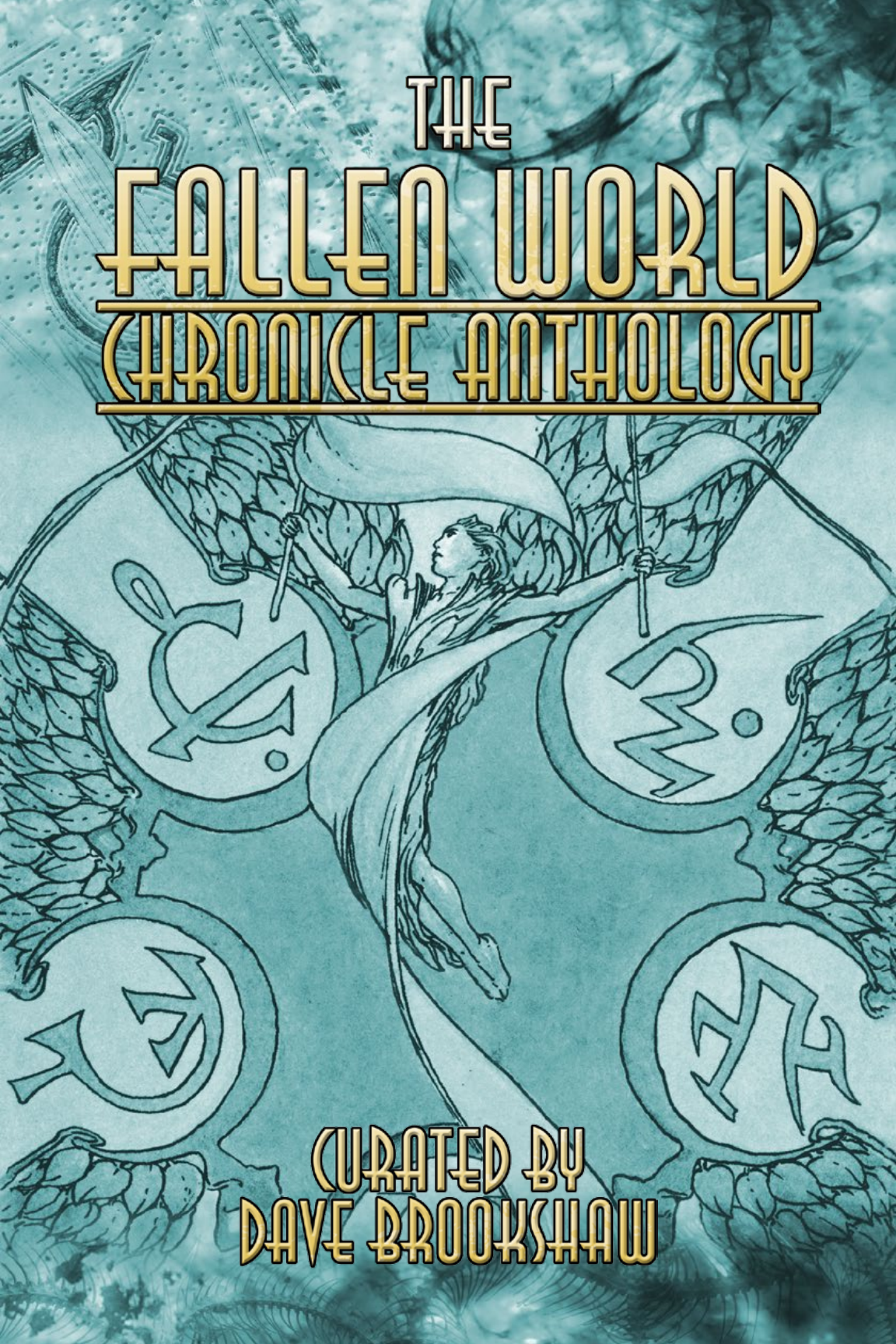
THE FALLEN WORLD

CHRONICLE ANTHOLOGY



CURATED BY
DAVE BROOKSHAW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FALLEN WORLD
CHRONICLE ANTHOLOGY
CURATED BY
DAVE BROOKSHAW

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The Hanged Woman

BY WOOD INGHAM

Louisa-Jane. Oh, Louisa-Jane. What have you done to yourself, Louisa-Jane?

There it is again, running through her head like a mantra. Lucy suppresses it, takes a deep breath and surveys the wreckage of her home. Every picture, every ornament, the TV, the stereo, all smashed, the white stone walls daubed with obscenities, the word bitch dominating the end of the lounge in huge, red spray-painted letters. Lucy leans against the doorframe, her stomach like a fist in an icepack.

Picking her way across the broken glass and the slashed, smashed, overturned furniture, she maneuvers into a position where she can see into the sound room. The mixing desk has been eviscerated. Its electrical guts are strewn across the room, the decks torn apart. Five boxes of twelve-inches overturned, their contents smashed into black shards. Lucy crouches down, picks up a few fragments of vinyl, reads the bits of white label still left, one, two, three, four. "Fuck," she says. Irreplaceable.

Lucy lets them clatter to the floor, runs her hand over the stubble on the top of her head. She feels a hangover coming on. It's 8:55 a.m.

• • •

You should have been there last night. Lucy Sulphate plays the Party in the Park! An hour-long support set in the open air, three thousand people dancing under the Swansea sky, three thousand pairs of hands raised to the air, three thousand bodies addicted to bass — a magic time.

Ten minutes into the set, Lucy looked up, and saw a lone figure among the dancers, an older man, not moving, not dancing, staring right at her, mouthing words lost in the thump-thump-thump of the bass, reaching out with the weight of his malice into the revelers (*children, they are hardly more than children!)* around him.

Lucy put a hand to her mouth, bit at her thumb. The key changed, every disc becoming an incantation. The sparks began to play across Lucy's scalp again. The droplets of sweat on her head evaporated, one by one, in little cracks of ozone. *This is my home ground*, she thought. *You're not doing this again*. Something shifted in the world.

The old man stumbled, jostled from behind. He faltered. A shove in the back. An elbow in the face. Blood running from his nose, he began to lose confidence, tried to change tack, tried something blatant, flailed out, capsized. The energy in his hands sputtered, went out. Lucy, her tears popping into steam, pushed a bit more, added a note of dissonance into the mix. Someone kicked the old man's legs out from under him. He went down, and no one saw him go, no one felt him under their feet. Lucy did not allow the crowd to care. Lucy reached out her senses. She felt him die. She went cold inside.

• • •

The kitchen's trashed, too, but Lucy finds the plastic kettle in one piece. One of her mugs is intact, and — a miracle — whoever trashed the flat didn't bother with the contents of the fridge, contented themselves with ripping the cupboards off the walls. Milk, then, and water, a salvaged teabag, and, five minutes later, Lucy has a cup of tea. She cradles the warm mug in her hands, leans against the work surface and stares at the kettle's cord. It's got about six feet of flex on it. She finishes the tea, puts the mug down, investigates the cord, disconnects it from the kettle, snaps the cord in her hands a couple of times, shakes her head, puts it down.

Then she sees the object sitting on the threshold between the kitchen and the lounge. She steps over a heap of broken plates and cups, picks it up: it's just a Kirby grip.

• • •

They met at a club, of course. Sharon and Mal brought a friend, a girl. She had cheekbones like knives and hair as black as her eyes, straight, clipped back, shining like black porcelain. The girl stared at Lucy and smiled in an odd way. When Lucy danced, the girl joined her, danced close to her, hips brushing against hips. Later, they all headed back to Lucy's for chill-out drinks. As they walked along the esplanade, the girl stayed close beside Lucy, talked to her, reached out and held Lucy's hand in cold, graceful fingers. Lucy let the girl hold it, wondering instead at the strange fluttering in her stomach.

The first time they kissed was a week later, and after they parted lips, Lucy said, "I'm not gay." The girl withdrew her hand from Lucy's cheek, smiled, raised an eyebrow. "Who are you telling?" she said. They had sex for the first time that night, urgent, terrifying, new. Each time they made love, the girl left before sunrise. Lucy wondered if the girl had powers of her own, suspected that the girl had cast some spell on her. Each time, each morning after, Lucy checked, in every way she knew: nothing.

They began to argue. Lucy challenged the girl, asked for a little trust, asked where she went for weeks on end, confronted her with the rumors. The girl told Lucy nothing, made her own demands.

A month later, at night, by a bench in the park, it ended. Ultimatums were made. "Please, don't," said Lucy. "If you love me, you won't ask me this."

"If you loved me," said the girl, "you wouldn't need to be asked." No compromise.

The girl claimed betrayal, disappointment. Lucy begged her not to finish it like this; the girl turned cold, colder than Swansea Bay in high November, screamed the word *BITCH* into the sky. She got up, turned her back on Lucy, walked away.

• • •

It's a ground floor studio flat now, but, three hundred years ago, it was a forge. As is the way of things, certain features remain, now quaint selling points for interested buyers of heritage residencies, such as a number of wrought-iron hooks and loops that still stick out of the ceiling.

Lucy stands in the doorway, still holding the hairclip, looks up and notices one of those thick metal rings on the ceiling. She drops the clip, turns and heads out through the back door, which hangs half-divorced from its hinges. She retrieves the stepladder from the shed.

• • •

Just for one day, ignoring the advice of her friends, Lucy became Louisa-Jane again. A beautiful day. Louisa-Jane looked around at the front garden, unchanged since she was a girl, felt the flowers and the privet hedge and the old street welcoming her back. A sign. She smiled, rang the doorbell. The door opened. "Louisa-Jane. Oh, Louisa-Jane. What have you done to yourself, Louisa-Jane?" was Mrs. Simms' only greeting. Louisa-Jane reached forward to embrace her mother, felt her go rigid in her arms, politely wriggle away. "Hello, Mum," Louisa-Jane said. Her mother ushered her in, hurriedly, looking up and down the street before closing the door.

Sitting on her parents' upholstery, Louisa-Jane began to feel faintly ridiculous. The shaved head, the Union Jack T-shirt, the Japanese sunglasses, the fake fur coat — they might not be so out of place in Miss Moneypenny's. Here, besieged by the floral curtains and the soft furnishings and the china teacups, here Lucy felt ridiculous, naked and overdressed at the same time.

Louisa-Jane's father said nothing at all beyond the first hello, recoiled from a kiss on the cheek, made no eye contact. Louisa-Jane sat on her parents' sofa with tea and cakes and exchanged the few pleasantries she could bear, tried to explain to Mr. and Mrs. Simms what it was she had achieved these last three years. Residencies in Cardiff and Bristol, a track on a Ministry of Sound CD, a couple of remixes with a respectable showing on the club charts, some modeling. (And the rest? The magic? The room in the silver tower? The angels and the devils and the faeries and the witches? The sparks in her hair? No. Louisa-Jane had learned that lesson in the hospital).

Mr. Simms kept his silence. Mrs. Simms, politely horrified, said, "Have you thought about what you're going to do about a career?" Louisa-Jane did not answer.

By the end of the visit, Mr. Simms had solidified, sat perfectly still, gazing at the street outside, did not acknowledge when Louisa-Jane said she'd go now, got up and picked up her coat. She was shown the door by her mother. Becoming Lucy again, she walked down the path without looking back, knowing that her mother was not watching her, but was looking up and down the street for fear of seeing someone she knew.

• • •

Lucy clears away the smashed remains of her life enough to stabilize the ladder, returns to the kitchen, retrieves the flex from the kettle, ties one end into a noose as best she can. She climbs, ties the loose end of the cable to the ring on the ceiling, slips the noose around her neck, tightens it a bit, hesitates, nearly gets back down again. She kicks away the ladder.

Her hands go to the noose; her legs begin to tread at air. Suddenly she thinks, *No, wait, hang on—*

• • •

Lucy's eyes snap open. She is naked, sweating, standing on the balls of her feet, breathing hard, breathing rhythmically in time with the crowd of naked, painted, shaven-headed people around her, breathing in time with a battering bass, pounding drums. A chorus of pipes begins to screech over the rhythm, and, forgetting who she is, she dances, joins with the people around her as they sacrifice themselves to the beat, whirling, coiling, coupling through their eyes.

Fire blazes across the sky. Lucy regains herself, stops dancing, mouth an "o".

Panicking, she turns, tries to force her way through the mesh of people, to find a way off the plain. Hands grab her, lift her up, bear her over waves of hands and mouths and eyes. She struggles. A hand slips, and she falls into the mass of people, head first. She drowns. She screams.

• • •

Lucy, clothed, breathless, opens her eyes. People still dance all around her, but this is different. A party. The music has the same beat, but now the anthem is electronic, the bass vast, warm, synthetic. The floor is circular, glass all around, high above a vast city of stars — London? LA? New York? Paris? — that stretches out below for miles.

The floor lurches, slightly; outside, fire rains from the sky. Lucy goes to the glass window, watches the city below, consumed in heavenly fire. The hall is untouched. The music surrounds this place, sustains it. Lucy looks for the unseen. The music surrounds this place: when the bass line meets the fire, there's a cloud of steam, and then nothing.

Lucy turns to the center of the hall. She sees herself on the decks, maybe twenty years older, in the middle of it all, controlling it all. The sparks play across the older head more brightly than Lucy has ever seen.

The DJ of the apocalypse catches Lucy's eye, scratches a disc, adds another track to the mix, and Lucy is drawn to the floor, can do nothing but dance. She forgets everything; she is no one, nowhere. There is only the beat. She closes her eyes.

• • •

Lucy opens her eyes to silence, to a suburban hallway not unlike her parents'. A woman, blonde-haired, sensibly dressed, has her back to Lucy. The woman crouches over a boy of six or seven, straightening his school uniform. A gentle-looking man in a suit pulls on an overcoat. The woman kisses the boy on the cheek, kisses the man; the man takes the boy's hand. They go out the front door. Outside, it's a beautiful day. The woman watches as the man helps the boy into a new Volvo and drives off. She closes the door, turns back into the house. Now Lucy can see her face: it's Louisa-Jane, a little older, but the Louisa-Jane she had always expected to become after she left college. She walks past Lucy, doesn't see her.

Lucy, unseen, follows her for hours: Louisa-Jane cleans the kitchen, makes herself some coffee, watches some daytime TV, calls a friend for a chat, sits in an armchair, her legs coiled up beneath her, doing a crossword in a magazine. After a while, Louisa-Jane curls up around a cushion and falls gently to sleep, a quiet smile playing across her lips.

Lucy sits on the arm of the chair, reaches over and strokes Louisa-Jane's hair. Eventually, she leans against the armchair back and falls asleep too.

• • •

Lucy wakes up, still in Louisa-Jane's house. She's alone. She gets up, walks through the house. She finds Louisa-Jane sitting at the kitchen table, all serene and soft-focus. The other Lucy, the older Lucy, sits at her left. They've got coffee. There's a third cup on the table, between them. Louisa-Jane smiles, and motions Lucy to the table. Lucy takes a breath, sits down.

"That night," says Older Lucy, "You were a stunner. I was a stunner. Small magic, yeah. But so many people. That, darlin', was fabulous."

"Bollocks," says Lucy. She runs a hand over the back of her head. "I killed a man."

Louisa-Jane looks away. "He would have killed you, you know," says Older Lucy.

"That's beside the point," says Louisa-Jane, all perky and disapproving. "Murder is murder."

"She's right," says Lucy. "It was murder."

Older Lucy shrugs. "That's just your conscience talking. Sometimes you have to," she says. "Omelette. Eggs." She mimes cracking open an egg.

Lucy shakes her head. "It was an abuse," she says. "The people — they stopped being people. Because of me. They were just a weapon."

"Everything is a weapon," says Older Lucy. "It's just a matter of degree."

There's a pause. Lucy takes a sip from her own cup. It's really good coffee.

"Look," says Lucy. "I know what's going on here. I'm dead, right?"

"Dying," says Older Lucy.

"Yeah," says Lucy. "Thought so." She looks out of the window on to a suburban street. "Not what I was expecting."

"You're not there yet," says Older Lucy. She folds her arms on the table, leans on her elbows. "So. Why'd you do it?"

Lucy bites her lip. "I don't know," she says. "It felt...appropriate. You know?"

Older Lucy puts her tongue in her cheek.

Lucy looks away. "Oh. Yeah. Right." She takes a swig of coffee. "So you know. So you tell me."

"All right," says Older Lucy. She counts off the reasons on her fingers. "One, you've already realized that playing dance music in clubs is not enough. It's old. You're 10 years too late. Two, you've begun to realize that writing and recording music is not enough, because — and this is the killer — you're quite good at it. But you're not brilliant. You're just OK. You sing a bit, you can play all right, but that little light of genius, it's not there. You're just good enough to know how good you're not. And that galls you."

She shifts in her chair, warms to her theme. "Three, you've had a bad relationship. You'll get over that one. Mostly. You'll need to change the locks, though." Lucy stares at the table. The older woman continues. "Four, you blame the magic for all of it. Because it was only after you got it that you started wanting to succeed in music. Without the magic, you wouldn't have tried at all. Without it, you'd have settled for Grade Nine piano , a two-one chemistry degree, a job, a house, a decent bloke, and by now, you'd have become Louisa-Jane here."

Louisa-Jane smiles.

"All right," says Lucy, "you've got me. So?"

"Consider," says Older Lucy. "For you, the real problem with the magic is that its success cannot be public. You, poppet, need to make a real, public difference. Because of Mum and Dad." The archmage points a finger at her younger self. "To top it all, now you're a killer."

Lucy scowls, scuffs her heels against her chair.

"You're just tired," says the older woman. "And still a bit drunk. You didn't really want to go through with it. You know that. You don't want to die."

Lucy looks into her coffee cup. "And if I keep going?"

"You need to find a bit of direction."

"So?"

"You know Wyn, right?"

"Bloke lives in a caravan out at Langland? Writes novels?"

The older Lucy nods. "Have a word with him. Tell him about this. Ask him about Pygmalion."

"Pygmalion?"

"Mm-hmm."

"And then what?" Lucy suddenly feels short of breath.

"Then he takes you on as a pupil, and you get your way out. One day, my love, you're going to shake the world to bits and put it back together again, your own way. It won't be the way you wanted to do it, but it doesn't matter. You're going to be one of the greats. You're going to build Jerusalem, darling. Because you are going to be me." For a split second, sparks play across the older Lucy's face.

"You're really bloody conceited, you know that?" says Lucy. "So what about her?" She casts a thumb at Louisa-Jane.

"Oh, I just made her up for effect," says Older Lucy. Lucy looks back across the table. Louisa-Jane is gone. The setting has changed. The table is on the plain, in the night, on a circle of flat barren earth, surrounded by the same blank-eyed, shaven-headed naked dancers, who wait, tensed, breathing in time to the rising beat of enormous drums.

Older Lucy rolls her eyes. Then she nods. "Get up," she says.

Lucy coughs, gets to her feet. Her breathing is becoming labored. "This isn't set, is it?" she says. "The future, I mean?"

"Quite possibly not."

"I'm not going to kill again," says Lucy.

Older Lucy leans forward, kisses Lucy on the top of her head. "I'm so sorry," she says. "It's exactly what I said."

The older woman stands back. "Now. You want to live?"

Lucy licks her lips again, runs a hand over her head. "Yeah."

"Dance," says the older woman. The bass kicks in, and the crowd rushes into the circle like a wave. Nearly engulfed, Lucy struggles for air, loses sight of her older self. She dances, and keeps dancing for what seems to her like a day and a night, and she is not Lucy, not anything, just a blank-eyed body, writhing in thrall to the beat.

Her mind drains away. For a moment, she is back in the glass tower. The fire rains down. The skyscrapers burn, but do not fall. They become fire, shining, unconsumed. Sparks rise from them, back into the sky, like thistledown. Her brain is consumed in light. *The future is not fixed*, Louisa-Jane whispers in her ear.

• • •

Lucy comes to herself, to chaos. The blood in her head is going at 160 bpm, gabba style. Colors pop in her field of vision like fireworks. Her mouth opens wide. Half-screaming, she gulps in air. Her vision clears. Lucy realizes she's hanging upside down. She flails her arms, starts to swing back and forth, begins to spin around. Nausea.

She manages to control her breathing, gets a grip, stops swinging.

She puts a hand to her neck. "Christ," she says. "I'm not dead." Her throat is sore; her voice is hoarse. Craning upwards, she sees that she's hanging by the flex, tied around her right ankle.

• • •

Eventually, she gets herself down. It's 9:15 a.m. Lucy discovers that no one got to her clothes or to the bathroom.

Lucy examines herself in the bathroom mirror. She has a red weal around her neck. And a purple lipstick mark on her head. She pushes the rising panic back down into her chest, resolves not to think too hard about it. Then she vomits into the toilet bowl.

She showers, dresses, gives her head a fresh shave, puts on some makeup. And then she wraps a silk scarf around her neck, and goes out to the car, looking for her way out.

Open Carry

BY MATTHEW MCFARLAND

I couldn't hear him. I could have read his mind, of course, and tried to figure out what he meant that way, but honestly I was afraid. I'd never tried to read the mind of anyone who was actively dying, and I was worried I might see Death or something.

I said that out loud to one of my friends, later, and he just looked at me like I was an idiot. What the hell does he know, he *had* to die to Awaken.

The guy who died was named Lamont William Blair. Lamont died in a big box store. He died for a lot of reasons. He died because he was holding a toy gun. He died because he was black. He died because the asshole who shot him thought the gun was real…even though the asshole who shot him *was holding a real gun too*.

He died because I couldn't get my shit together fast enough to redirect the bullets. I could have done that. I was close enough. I knew the spell — I'd actually been practicing it all the previous day. You don't mess with the projectiles, you mess with the target. But I forgot. I reached out and tweaked space around the bullets, but by the time I'd done that they'd already hit. So a couple of things fell off the shelves, and Lamont Blair collapsed, and I ran over to him and pressed my hands to the holes in his chest.

He tried to talk. He had blood coming out of his mouth, and he gripped my sleeve and looked around, just his eyes, frantic and scared. I learned later that his two young sons had been in the store with him, and I'm sure he was afraid they'd been hit, too, but they were playing video games a few aisles over and never even heard the gunshots.

The guy who shot him was screaming at me to get out of the way. I switched off the part of my brain that could hear him. I was a little afraid he'd shoot me, so I switched off that part, too. Unafraid and focused, I knelt down with Lamont and heard his last words.

"Where's…am I…what—" That's what he said. And then he coughed up a whole gout of blood, and he died. The cops got there and started yelling at me to get on the ground and "drop the weapon." I figured out a minute later

they were talking to the guy who'd shot Lamont, and he just calmly put his gun down.

I looked into his mind. I wanted to know if he'd known Lamont, if this was personal or something. I was actually sort of hoping it was, that they'd been neighbors and Lamont had let his dog crap on the other guy's lawn, had fucked his wife, had rear-ended him in the parking lot, something, anything.

But no. The guy with the gun (Brian Webley) had shot Lamont Blair because he'd seen a black man holding what he thought was a real gun in a threatening manner. I stared at Webley while we were both lying on the ground, waiting for the police to get the "shout and wave guns about" out of their systems, and he stared back. His eyes were a weird, muddy brown color that I'd never seen before, and his mind was strangely calm. He'd just killed someone. He should have been feeling something — hell, his surface emotions should have been so chaotic as to make them impossible to read. But he just stared at me, and his mind was flat and placid and…almost blissful.

I pushed. I stared back at him, and I muttered a little under my breath. The cops didn't hear, they were too busy stomping around. The spell wasn't complicated, it was basically the equivalent of throwing a rock into a pond. I just wanted to see what would happen.

All that calm went away, and all of the emotion I expected to find was there — rage, fear, guilt, and elation. The guy was riding high on adrenaline, just like he should be, but over top of all that was…I don't even know. A film, I guess. A skin holding it all back.

The cops helped him up, and I noticed his left ear was bleeding.

• • •

"Possessed?" Hilda was holding ice on my shoulder. One of the cops had wrenched it when she pulled me up, and I hadn't felt the pain at the time because I'd shut it off.

"Maybe." I cracked my neck. My whole body felt achy. Too much adrenaline.

"Did you see anything in his head?"

I started to shake my head and then decided against it. "Nah. But I wouldn't. I don't know shit about possession."

"You know minds, though." She took the ice pack off and walked over to the sink. Her apartment was smaller than mine, but felt more lived in. She had art on the walls and a year-old husky pup dozing on the floor. I had bare, taupe-colored walls and the complex didn't allow pets.

"I know minds, kinda," I said, "but I don't know if I've ever seen a possessed one. When I looked at his mind, it didn't look like he wasn't under control. His mind looked more…contained."

"Like he wanted to do more?"

"I guess," I said. "It's hard to describe. He definitely had something wrong with his mind," I paused, and then snapped my fingers, "Oh, I know! I only sensed one consciousness in there."

"And if he was possessed, you'd sense two?" She sat down across from me and folded her hands in front of her.

"I think so. My, um," I stumbled. I hate the word *mentor*. It sounds so stupidly parochial.

"Mentor," Hilda said. I tried not to roll my eyes.

"Yeah. So, he told me that he could teach me to see ghosts and spirits and things like that, but it was just as simple to remember that all of those things have minds. If you're looking for a ghost, but what you find is some weird-ass invisible thing that was never human, looking for ghosts isn't going to help you. But if you're looking for *thought*…"

"I get it." She smiled. "My mentor told me the same thing." I got the feeling she enjoyed the little squirm I gave. "She told me that if someone's possessed, their destiny gets all muddled because it's really two fates in one body."

"Right, OK, but that's not what I saw. I saw one mind, but bound up somehow. Like something was preventing him from feeling what he'd naturally be feeling."

"So what *was* he feeling?"

"When I looked? Nothing." I thought about asking for a glass of water, but she'd said to make myself at home. I got up and walked into the kitchen. Hilda drummed her fingers on the table. When I came back in, she stood up. "I want to try something, but if it's going to be too weird for you—"

"Oh, please." I took a drink. "Too weird. Whatever."

"OK, well," she sounded a little annoyed. Maybe I was too brusque, I can't always tell. "You didn't look at his mind at the right time, and I can't look at minds at all, but I'm pretty good with time. So I'm thinking we can shift things a little."

I don't know shit about time, but my (ugh) mentor does. "Don't we need the guy for that?"

Hilda shook her head. "I don't know, maybe. But we might be able to move *your* perceptions back, and then let you cast the spell." She smiled, a little proudly. "My mentor made this up, and she taught me the rote. But it's got… well. There's some touching involved, that's why I wanted to check with you."

"Some touching."

"Well, some kissing."

I cleared my throat. Hilda was not my usual type, but it's not like she was actually hitting on me, right? Just for the spell. "And your mentor taught you this."

"You'd have to meet her."

• • •

We went back to the store and got as close as we could to the site of the shooting. It was all taped off, of course, but we blended in with the crowd of shoppers and gawkers and family of the late Mr. Blair, come to leave cards and wreaths and flowers. The store had graciously let them do it, provided they didn't go to the sporting goods section and protest the guns being sold there. I noted, too, that the store had pulled all the toy guns from the shelves, though I suspected they'd be returned in a week or so.

The bloodstain was still there. My handprints were still on the floor. I felt queasy approaching it.

"Ready?" said Hilda. She put her hand on my shoulder, and I put my hand around her waist. She was a larger woman — the word that came to mind was *zaftig*. Her body was soft and warm, and as she drew me close it struck me that I didn't know her real name.

Her hand played out a *mudra* on my back, and then we were kissing.

Lamont Blair standing in the aisle, holding a toy gun, pulling the trigger and listening to the rattling noise it made.

Brian Webley, standing at the mouth of the aisle, looking at Blair.

Webley drawing his gun and aiming.

Gasps and screams.

Blair turning, still holding the toy gun.

Webley firing. Three shots.

Hilda's lips, warm, yielding, turning back time, me lost in them.

"You people are sick." Someone in the present objected to us kissing where a man was murdered. I didn't disagree with the sentiment, but I try to focus.

Webley's mind.

I tried to peer closer. It was hard — I wasn't actually "there," I couldn't speak because my mouth was engaged, and I couldn't use stance or facial expression to focus the spell. The best I could do was a *mudra* with my right hand, so I used Hilda's back as the surface and tapped out a gentle rhythm.

Webley's mind, filled with nothing but murder.

Webley's mind, still covered in that strange, red-brown, bloody skin, letting nothing through except murder.

Murder.

"Hey." A hand on my shoulder pulled me back and broke the kiss. A security guard stood there, obviously pissed off. Hilda blushed a little. I stared the guy down. "You guys want to take this somewhere else?"

"Yeah," I said. I couldn't really fault him for being outraged.

"So?" Hilda said, as we walked out.

“Um. Interesting spell.”

“That was my mentor,” she said. “She said there was a lot of untapped potential for magic in touch and sex. A lot of us are too uptight to—“

“Right,” I said. “I mean, yeah, maybe. So, I saw Webley.”

“His mind?” Hilda was a little curt. Maybe I’d cut her off too soon.

“Yeah. He wanted to kill someone.”

“Blair?”

“No, see, that’s the thing. When he pulled the trigger, he wasn’t thinking Blair was a threat. He wasn’t angry or scared or anything. It was more like he saw a guy with a gun, and a switch in his brain went to ‘kill.’”

“Like he was looking for an excuse?” Hilda said. We walked out the door and into the parking lot. “Oh, no.”

“What?” I’d been looking at her. She had a tattoo on her shoulder, but I could only see the bottom half because of her sleeve, and I was trying to figure it out what it said. I looked ahead, and saw the people with signs.

There were two distinct groups. One had signs that bore pictures of Lamont Blair and said things like “Justice for Lamont” and “End Gun Violence.” The other held signs saying “Shall Not Be Infringed” and “Come and Take It!” That side, of course, was armed. I wondered if the anti-gun side was. It seemed unlikely, but people don’t always make sense.

The protesters were being civil, at least. There were some chants back and forth, and a little shouting of sound bites, but for the most part everyone was fine. Hilda stopped to chat with someone she knew, and I looked more closely at the protesters. I tapped my fingers together, breathed deep, and fixed my stance. My vision turned foggy as I stopped seeing people and started seeing emotion and impulse.

I grabbed Hilda. “Hey.”

“What?”

I leaned in close; I wasn’t sure if her friend was a Sleeper. “What’s about to happen?”

I admit I was sort of hoping she had another kissing spell for that, but she just twisted the ring on her finger. I felt the spell go off, and then her eyes got wide. “Spider. People are about to die.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. Who starts it?” I was scanning the crowd of gun nuts. They all had their guns slung or holstered. Their minds were all full of murder. They weren’t angry or scared or threatened (though the gun-control folks were), they just wanted to kill someone.

Hilda was looking over the crowd, too, and I heard her mumbling something. I couldn’t catch it, but I knew it rhymed. “There.” She pointed to a cop car on the periphery of the protest. “Her.”

A woman in a police uniform had drawn her pistol. None of the armed folks had noticed it. I looked at the police woman, and her mind, too, was nothing but murder.

I didn't have time to be subtle, and I couldn't reach her bodily — too many people in the way. I swept my right foot in front of me, pulled my fists to my side, and flicked my right hand out. The police woman collapsed, and I watched pain bloom up from her mind, the worst migraine of her life exploding into her brain all at once. The other officers rushed over to her, and I drew in the hands again, afraid I might have to drop someone else. Their minds weren't full of murder, though, just fear and concern for their fellow officer.

Hilda came up beside me. "Your nose is bleeding."

I wiped it with my sleeve. Price of efficacy. "We need to get these gun nuts out of here. Their brains are full of murder. Anything — *anything* — sets them off, we're gonna have a lot of dead people here."

Hilda nodded. "OK. Let me try something." She rolled up her sleeve, and I saw the whole tattoo — it was a weird mix of runes, letters, and a Dali-like melted clock. She ran a finger across the clock face, and I swear the hands on it started to move.

I watched the gun nuts, and they started glancing at watches. I saw what she was doing — she wasn't affecting time, just the perception of time. Making these guys think, "maybe I've been here long enough." I took the hint, turned my attention to the unarmed folks, and started making them uncomfortable and cowed. They started heading to cars, and the gun nuts, now without much in the way of opposition, followed suit.

Hilda's friend tapped her. "Hey, I have to get going. I'm not even going to have time to do shopping, I didn't realize how late it was." Hilda gave her a hug and she walked off.

I leaned on her shoulder. I hoped she didn't think that was too familiar, but I was beat, and my head was throbbing. We walked by the police on the way to my car, and I looked down at the woman I'd dropped. She was OK — probably going to need some sick time, but I hadn't done any permanent damage.

"Wow," said Hilda. "That was pretty brutal."

"What?"

"Her ear's bleeding."

• • •

"Sounds like influence, rather than possession." Hilda had called in a friend of hers, another local mage named Key. This guy made me nervous. I don't like Ladder folks anyway — product of living in Cincy, where the local Ladder is kind of staffed with assholes — but this guy was also very much a local

conservative. NRA stickers on the Jeep, American flag pin on the lapel, and, yep, pistol in the holster. I bit my tongue. I had no desire to antagonize him.

"What's the difference?" I thought I knew, but I figured I'd ask. Plus it would keep him from spouting off about health care again.

"Influence is just a nudge. Sometimes a pretty big one." He took a sip of his beer. We're in a bar that distills its own whiskey, and this joker's drinking domestic mass-produced beer. "But you can't make someone do something they aren't willing to do just by influence. Maybe in the moment, but you're talking about long-term behavior influence. That's a pretty big deal."

"I can't believe I didn't think to check and see if those people had anything in common," said Hilda.

"You mean aside from a terminal misunderstanding of the second amendment?" I muttered.

Key glared at me. "We about done?"

Hilda took his hand. "Yeah, Key. Thanks so much for helping out. If you see anything—"

"I'll let you know." He got up and walked out. Hilda gave me a look.

"Sorry. I just…I was there when the guy died, you know?"

Hilda nodded. She put her hand on mine. I didn't flinch at the touch, but it took some effort. "We could go back to the parking lot, I guess. Maybe see if we can look back, get a look at the affected folks."

I sipped my drink. "Yeah." I watched Key pull his Jeep away from the restaurant. Something was bugging me, but I couldn't put my finger on what.

• • •

The parking lot was a bust. Too many people had been in and out since the protest, and we were looking for something too many degrees removed and too far out of our expertise. We swung into a burger place down the street for a milkshake. Hilda flirted with the waitress, I watched the patrons. I was working on a spell to determine if someone was willing to kill, but I wasn't quite sure how to frame it. One thing I could do, though, was look for guns.

Actually, using magic to look for guns isn't productive. The material components are pretty common. Bullets, though, contain substances that aren't typically found in other materials, so I was scanning for gunpowder. Three of the people in the burger place were armed. One I guessed to be a cop, the other two were sitting together at a table, amiably chatting about an upcoming movie. No thoughts of murder in any of them. That was good.

The loner answered his phone, and looked concerned. I steepled my fingers and turned my body for a *mudra*, and listened in. "We've gotta go," I said to Hilda.

"Another one? How bad?"

"Worse than before."

• • •

"I can't believe I didn't think to check his mind," I muttered.

"He'd have noticed," said Hilda. "And then he might have shot you." Key was in the back of a squad car, handcuffed. The man he'd shot was under a sheet on the ground. Apparently it had been a traffic dispute. They'd both gotten out of their cars, Key had drawn and fired. He saw us, but gave us a little head shake, warning us off.

"That's cute," I said. "He thinks we're here to help him." Hilda didn't answer. I focused on him a bit — he might be able to block my spell, depending on his own ability, but it wouldn't hurt to try. He obviously noticed, but if he was able to counter it, he didn't bother. He had that same weird filter in his mind.

"Keep the cops away from the car for a sec," I said. I walked over, and I managed to step to Key's window *just* as the cop standing by the car was called away. Probably Hilda's doing. I tapped the door and the window moved down. "Hey," I said.

"I don't want to fucking hear it."

"Look, I'm not here to bust your balls." *Jackass.* "But I need to know a couple of things." He didn't answer, so I pressed. "Does your left ear hurt?"

He turned to look at me. "No."

"OK. Next question: Have you been anyplace weird or out of routine lately? Someplace associated with death or violence?"

He slipped out of the handcuffs, which I thought was a stupid thing to do. I kept an eye on his mental state. He was agitated, which actually made me feel better. The weird murder-calm seemed to be leaving.

He reached up and fiddled with his ear, and then pitched forward. I heard "Hey!" from nearby — one of the cops had spotted me. Key opened his hand, and he was holding a pine needle, dotted with blood.

"Buckley," he said. The cop reached me just then, and I walked away. I heard Key talking to the cop, keeping him busy. At least he did that.

• • •

"It's got a weird residue," said Hilda. We had the pine needle on her table, and we'd both been staring at it for a while. "Like, it's connected to something."

"Yeah, I agree. It might even be monitored."

"Like a bug?"

"Yeah." I stood up and stretched. "Like, if I were to cut my hand and put a blood smear on your car, I could track your car pretty easily, not because I'm connected to your car in particular, but because I *am* connected to my own blood."

"So…there's a murder tree out there somewhere?"

"Looks that way." I glanced back to the TV. The local news had moved away from the shooting, but I was expecting more. "What's Buckley?"

"I don't know," she said, "but that one I don't think we need magic for." She opened her laptop and typed away. "There's a Buckley Spirits and Liquor."

"Probably not, unless they've got a pine tree out front. We need something connected to death or murder."

She typed some more. "Buckley murder…oh, well, a guy named Damon Buckley was shot and killed about a year back."

"That's promising." I went over and sat on the arm of the couch. She put a hand on my leg. I tried not to move. Was she this touchy with everyone, or did the kiss get to her? I decided I didn't mind, it was just new.

"Holy shit…Spider, look at this." She tilted the screen up, and there it was.

"Buckley Trap and Skeet," I read. "American Trap, international trap, tournaments, sporting clays…damn. See if there are pictures on their site." She clicked a couple of things. "Look at that. They're in a damn pine forest."

• • •

"So, Damon Buckley owned the place." I pulled the car onto the freeway. It was about an hour drive to the range. "And his sons worked it."

"Right," said Hilda. "Neil, Kent, and Damon Jr."

"But then Damon Sr. got shot on the range, and prevailing opinion is it was…what, an accident?"

"It wasn't an accident," she said. I smiled. When a Witch says that, you believe her.

"OK. So the boys inherit the place, but the pine needles don't start showing up in people's ears until just recently. So something changed out there."

"Yeah, I think so. Maybe someone else died. Or maybe whatever's out there managed to get stronger somehow. Maybe it had help." She glanced at her phone. "Stay left."

"Should we call someone? Your mentor?"

Hilda swallowed. "Um. My mentor's dead."

I squeezed the wheel. "I'm sorry."

She put a hand on my knee. "It's OK."

We rode in silence for a few minutes, but she didn't move her hand. "Um. I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"I don't normally like people touching me."

She jerked her hand away. "Oh, my god. I'm so—"

"No, listen. I don't *normally* like it." I licked my lips. "But I don't mind when you do it. I'm not sure what the difference is." I glanced at her, but she was looking ahead. "But it's OK. I can tell you…feel like you should touch. And it's OK, it really is."

"OK." She smiled at me, and put her hand on my knee again. We didn't speak again for a long time, and we were getting off the highway before I remembered that we *had* been talking about whether we should call someone. I thought about calling my teacher, back in Cincy. He could maybe get out here quickly. But I didn't want to bother him, and I knew he was training new Arrows. I could do this.

We parked and walked into the forest. The ground was soft pine needles, and the scent in the air was fresh and earthy and sweet. Hilda held my hand. I warned her that if anything happened, I'd need my hands to do katas, and I didn't want her to be offended. She said she understood.

We didn't bother with a flashlight. I can see in the dark, and Hilda didn't seem to have any trouble. We didn't know exactly where we were going, but I'm happy to let the Witch lead in situations like that. We walked for close to half an hour, and wound up in a clearing. "There," she said.

The trees on one side of the path were scored with buckshot. A wooden bench and a stand sat on the other side. "Rabbit stand."

"What?"

"Sporting clays. You walk through the woods, there are a bunch of different stands. They fire clay pigeons from different angles, you shoot at them." I pointed to the ground. "See how all the shots at the base of the tree? The disc rolls along the ground, it's called a rabbit."

"Seems like that'd be pretty easy to hit."

"Harder than you'd think." I looked at the stand, and found the controls. "Looks pretty well maintained."

"I didn't think you were a gun guy."

"I'm not." I sat on the bench. "My parents did trap shooting competitively. We never had guns in the house, they kept them at the gun club. It was just a sport for them. They got out of it when the NRA went crazy."

She sat next to me. "OK, well, for what it's worth, that tree is weird."

"How so?"

She cocked her head at it. "Most trees don't have destinies. Or, they do, but they're on such long time scales that I can't see them. This one's more like…a person."

A gunshot in the distance. I stood up. "Oh, what the hell."

"What was that?"

"Twelve gauge." I steepled my fingers, but then twisted my hands and pursed my lips. "They're not very close. Probably out plinking."

"Ugh." I was surprised she knew what that meant, then I remembered she lived in Kentucky. "Are they getting close?"

I formed a quick spell — a little distance, a little sound, a little matter. "If they get within 200 feet of us, I'll know it. But we need to figure out what's going on. I don't feel like dealing with drunk idiots with shotguns."

Hilda walked over to the tree. "I wish Key were here. I don't know anything about spirits, and if that's what we have—"

"Why, where's Key?" The voice made us jump. A man was standing behind us. He was in his fifties, maybe, wearing jeans, a leather jacket and a broad-brimmed hat. I recognized him from a picture on the range's website.

"Damon Buckley?"

"Sort of," it said.

Hilda mouthed the word "ghost" to me. I shook my head. "So, what's doing?" I asked it.

"Just out for a stroll," it said. "Don't usually see people here at night."

"Have you been putting needles in people's ears?" Hilda asked. I winced. Witches *can* be subtle, they just aren't.

"Well, sure." It sounded confused by the question. Probably a spirit. My teacher had told me they think what they do is normal, and can't imagine anyone not understanding their perspective.

"Could you…stop?"

The spirit frowned. The pine needles on the ground near us started to quiver. "Don't come to my home and tell me how to live, boy," it said. "Don't you infringe—"

"Oh, fuck *off*," I snapped. "The only thing getting infringed here is people's right to live and not be afraid of everyone around them."

It shrugged. Of course it didn't understand, or care.

"What do you want?" asked Hilda. "Why the needles?"

"Well," it answered. "People kill people. Not enough, though. I just kind of help things along."

"So people die? That's what you want?" I wished we had Key with us, as much as I couldn't stand the guy. We needed a way to relate to this thing.

"Die? No, of course not. I don't care if people die." It tipped its hat back a bit. "I care if they *kill*."

Hilda nodded. "It's about murder."

"Oh," said the spirit, "yes it surely is." I felt a cold shiver up my spine.

"Well, this isn't a good situation," I said. "Can't have people just shooting people."

"Why not?" it asked.

"Because it's bad for us," I said. "And there are a *lot* of us." I didn't bother to clarify if I meant "us" like "people" or "us" like "Awakened." I was pretty sure the spirit wouldn't understand anyway. "So you need to pull your needles back. I know you can."

I was setting Hilda up, there, and she didn't disappoint. "You sure can," she said.

"Well, yeah," said the spirit. "I could. But why would I? People don't kill here, not often enough. And I'd die out if they didn't kill. Who's going to give me kills? You guys?"

I glanced at Hilda. "Uh, I don't think…"

"We won't kill people for you," she said.

"Well, then," the spirit said, and the pine needles started to quiver. I pulled my hands to my sides. I didn't know if I could fry a spirit's mind, but it was the best trick I had.

"No, but listen," said Hilda. "We won't kill people for you, but we'll make sure you get the kills."

I turned to look at her. "What the hell?"

She faced me. "People kill each other. I can figure out when that's going to happen." She looked back at the spirit. "When it happens, I go and I throw some pine needles down, before the killing."

It looked hesitant. "Well. I don't know. That's not as good as—"

"Look, buddy," I said. "This is the only deal you're getting." I gave Hilda a look. I wasn't happy about this, but I wasn't going to contradict her, either. "You don't like it, we're walking, and we're coming back with people who can put you in a damn box forever."

"Hmm." He looked at Hilda, and then at me. "How do I know you'll keep your bargain?"

"I swear," said Hilda, and I felt the *weight* behind the statement. So did the spirit.

"OK, then," it said, and it disappeared into a pile of pine needles. Hilda grabbed a double handful and put them in her pockets, and we walked back to the car.

• • •

"You're pissed at me?"

We were still twenty minutes from Hilda's exit. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. "No."

"Don't lie," she said. "It hurts my eyes."

I sighed. "Don't ask me questions like that, then."

"Why are you mad?"

I didn't answer, and she didn't push.

We pulled in her parking lot, and she put her hand on my shoulder. I shrugged it off. "Look," I said. "You agreed to dedicate kills to that fucking thing. Even if you're not doing the kill, that's still—"

"Horrible," she said. "I know." She leaned closer. "Listen. *I* agreed to it." She kissed me on the cheek, and got out of the car, and walked toward her door.

I got on the highway, and started back toward Ohio. I was halfway home when it hit me. I took the next exit, and stopped to get gas. I debated calling my teacher, but in the end, I decided against it. I knew what he'd say. I could figure this out. It just meant more work, on my own, so I didn't screw over Hilda's promise.

I pulled back on the highway, headed south, back to Kentucky. I made a mental note to give Hilda a hug when I saw her again. She was smarter than me.

She agreed to dedicate kills to the spirit. *I* had agreed to no such thing.

The Intruder

BY TRISTAN J. TARWATER

Diamante crouched down, narrowing her eyes as she peered down the alley. It was hot, humid and reeked of old garbage and the refuse from the fish market three blocks away. She knew that tonight she would shower and scrape her nails over her skin, thick chunks of black pollution and dirt and sweat collecting under her nails and swirling down the drain. That was summer in the city. Right now though, she was ignoring the trickle of sweat at her temples and peering down the alley, by the trash cans. She tilted her head sideways, cocking her head just so to see. It always helped her Mage Sight come into better focus.

There it was. The entryway.

"Great," Diamante huffed, standing. Even in this weather, she still wore jeans, the hard denim something like armor against the refuse and eyes of Sleepers of New York City. She pulled out her phone and tapped through her apps, messaging Horatio.

"So, you found it?" Gee said. Diamante tried hard not to stiffen. She hadn't wanted to bring along the apprentice to the scene but Horatio had told her to bring the young mage. Gee was young and in need of guidance, in order to steer her more erratic tendencies. Being from the city as well, Gee knew a lot of the material lay of the land, and understood the lay of the Supernal over it better than most. Horatio had assured her that with training, Gee could be a Sentinel.

"Yeah," Diamante said, not bothering to turn and look back to the younger mage. "This alley is the place."

"I was wondering," Gee said. "Since you seem to have a handle on finding this guy—"

"Go pick up Lucretia from the airport," Diamante interrupted, not in the mood for Gee's wheedling. "I know you've been waiting to see her for over a month." Diamante had noticed the younger mage looked more presentable than usual.

“Okay,” Gee said, rocking back and forth on her heels, her black combat boots almost too polished in the dirty city. “I mean, unless you're not sure…”

“I'm completely sure. I'll be alright investigating this intrusion by myself, apprentice Gee,” Diamante said. “Remember, Horatio wanted you to stay with me and track down the intruder.”

“I know, I know,” Gee said. “It shouldn't take that long to pick her up from the airport. I can meet with you after she gets settled in at the Sanctum?” Gee grinned. Diamante knew she was trying to sway her. Gee would only learn from her own mistakes.

“As one of the Awakened, you need to learn to see things through to the end, Gee,” Diamante chided. “Go,” Diamante said, shooing her off with a wave of her hand. “Text me when you meet her and when you get back to the Sanctum.”

“You've got it, Sentinel Diamante,” Gee said, still grinning. She actually saluted her. Diamante tried not to crack a wry smile as Gee turned and walked out of the alley, onto the main street. Diamante shook her head, waiting till she felt the young student's presence trickle away, her aura's effects completely out of the alley.

“Let's at least try to get a feel for you,” Diamante murmured, walking further down the alley. Most mages came into the City same as the Sleepers. Airports, Port Authority, Grand Central Station, one of the bridges, occasionally one of the tunnels. But when they just showed up in alleys, unannounced and without checking in with the local cabals? Then there were issues.

Diamante stood back from the wall. The doorway was inactive but still a sliver of it remained open, a ragged crack superimposed against the building. Diamante knew the building that had helped fuel the mage's entrance. There weren't too many places left in the city where people regularly butchered animals but this was one of them. Many lives had departed in this area, wearing and fraying the fabric of the world with frequent butchering and the comings and goings of people with their life-giving food.

Still, the outline of the doorway glimmered before her, blacker than the sky ever got at night in the city. Slashes of white lights zoomed like comets somewhere beyond the edge of the doorway. She could make them out, fathoms deep within the crevice that stretched further than even Diamante could imagine. Why hadn't the mage thought to close it behind them? Did they want to be found? She took a deep breath and looked around, feeling around for Sleepers in the vicinity before she reached out and flexed her fingers, bracing her feet against the ground.

Forcing her will through her body, she stretched her awareness towards the sliver of a doorway, pushing the edges together, running it down the seam. It struck her as feeling cold and as she eased the two sides together, she could feel a dull pulse coming from beyond the rift. Diamante pressed

with her will till the seam was smooth and whole, a mostly healed scar on the facade of the building of what the world really looked like. Diamante rubbed her sweaty hands on her jeans and turned her attention to the alley itself.

Horatio had said the intruder had come in about an hour and a half ago, according to Fern. She had felt the tear and the surge. Now Diamante was here to investigate. Had other mages from other cabals come and started their search? Not from the looks of it. It didn't mean they weren't on their way. Diamante wanted to find the intruder first, bring them back for questioning and depending on what they said offer them Sanctuary. She scanned the ground for footprints. They glowed azure on the dingy, grey cement.

Someone had emerged from the rift, staggered across the alley into the wall and slumped down. Diamante walked over and crouched down again. She looked up at the wall, a red smear about shoulder height telling her the quarry was injured. A smear of blood against the red brick and drops of blood on the ground. It shouldn't be too hard.

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a small glass vial hidden there. Carefully she scraped some of the now dried blood into the vial before tucking it away. She gave another cursory glance around the alley before stretching her hands out again. This time, she focused on the area where she had found the blood. There was no need to leave the blood around for other people to find it.

White, cleansing light rose and shimmered like hydrogen peroxide on the bloodstains, bubbling up and then dissipating, all signs of gore removed. Diamante nodded, wiping her hands on her jeans again before she turned and walked out of the alley, back onto the main street.

If he's hurt, he couldn't have gone too far. Blood always told its own tale. How badly the person was hurt, if they had hurt anyone else. When she had been on the force, she would have taken the blood to the Forensics lab, gone down to the bodega, asked if they had seen anything out of the ordinary. Someone could have seen something. But this was a mage on the run and Diamante had other methods at her disposal now, as one of the Awakened.

Diamante would find the intruder. She stepped out onto the street and looked both ways before she turned left and headed down the busy street. As if she was one of them, she wove her way between the Sleepers going about their daily business, free of the knowledge of the supernatural doorway which had been open just a few moments ago.

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A corner of the map blew up, the breeze pushing her hair into her face. Diamante piled gravel around the corners of the map, piling it up so it wouldn't blow as she performed the ritual. The top of the project building had a strange quality to it; above the noise of the ground level but close to the din of trucks, trains and cars coming across the bridge. Dark grey gravel stretched to the

brick walls which rose up several feet from the floor. As a little girl growing up in the cluster of brown brick buildings so close to the river, she had noticed it, felt strange when her family went to the tops to watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July. When she Awakened, she knew for certain. Diamante looked at the edge of the roof before she pulled out the vial, carefully tying the red and white ribbon around the top.

Diamante spoke the seeking words as she tied the knots, bringing one end of the cord over the other seven times, measuring the cadence of her words to coincide with each knot. The final knot made, she held her hand over the map and allowed the vial to fall, suspended in midair over the map. The flakes of blood jumped in the clean vial, maroon and brown and red. The mage took a deep breath before continuing with the spell, concentrating on the ribbon, the vial and the map all at the same time. Her will made the thickly braided ribbon vibrate as her energy rushed through it, running along the smooth glass and wrapping itself around the blood. Slowly the vial began to move back and forth and then around in a small, tight circle, pointing towards a point on the map.

Diamante moved her hand slowly, not wanting to infer the location, allowing the spell to do its work. With a snap, the vial stopped over a single location, fixed in place. When Diamante moved her hand, the vial remained fixed on the location.

Only ten blocks away. Diamante smiled, pulling her will back, the vial swinging back and forth like a pendulum over the map. She wrapped the ribbon around the vial and tucked it away before turning her attention back to the map. Carefully she folded the map, the pattern performed many times, once peculiar to her but now the way one always folded maps of New York City, at least if you were her. She tucked it into her bag and then waved her hand over the door that led to the stairwell, unlocking it. The stairwell stretched the thirteen floors below her and she walked down, not bothering to put her hand on the railing. No need to get spit or snot or who knows what else on her hands.

Diamante let the stairwell door slam behind her, the noise of heavy metal echoing loudly. She exited the building, not bothering to say hello to any of the old women in front of the building, ignoring the music blaring from the car in the parking lot. Ten blocks. That was it.

I'm closing in, she tapped out on her phone to Horatio, hitting send.

Good, the text came back. *You're not the only one looking*.

Did Gee ever show up?

Not yet, traffic is backed up.

"Right," Diamante said, sighing. As she expected, she would be heading into the building alone.

• • •

The building was a squat, and had been for as long as Diamante could remember. Even under the previous mayor it hadn't been demolished and turned into the newest swanky bar or obnoxious club. The squat wanted to remain. The windows gaped open, as if daring people to peer in, to enter. Sleepers avoided it. And the intruder was here.

People used a window on the east side of the building as an entrance. Diamante knew if anyone anticipated her coming, they'd watch it. There was a fire escape on the front of the building she could use, though anyone on the street would see her. She could fix that.

Diamante switched her phone to silent and slipped it into her pocket. Stepping into a shadow, she placed her hands over her face, concentrating on her skin, her limbs, how they stretched and moved and how people saw her. She held the image of a diamond in her mind, its facets throwing light away from it and she pushed her will out and through every pore, feeling the spell work its way over her. Opening her eyes, she held her hands in front of her, seeing the familiar glimmer of the spell. Looking out from the alley, Diamante stepped towards the ladder, already pulled down by someone before her. Her dark eyes caught the faint smear of blood on the rungs.

Quickly, as quietly as she could, she scaled the ladder, walking across the metal grating, flakes of paint falling to the sidewalk below as she walked. The next ladder was also pulled down, the same crusted red smear of blood mingling with chipping blue paint and rusted metal. Diamante ascended the ladder, ignoring the people below on the sidewalk, ignoring the old man across the street who looked up at the fire escape. The sound of a bus rolling by clamored over her rushing up the next and final ladder. She pressed her back against the brick exterior and took a deep breath before stepping through the window.

The inside of the squat was fetid. It smelled like years of rain had dripped through, crawled through the walls, eaten at the wood and plaster and then dried, mixed with base human smells of dried urine, bad food and garbage. Whatever had been on the walls, paint or wallpaper, it was peeling now, sloughing off in chunks in some spots, exposed wiring and pipes cold within the walls. It had been a kitchen at one point. A discolored square on the floor told Diamante where the fridge had once stood. It was on its side in the living room. The stove was stained with grease and things which had been cooked on the burners which weren't food. Was there still gas in the pipes? Diamante held her hand out and felt for the presence of the substance, feeling nothing push back against her seeking. One less thing to worry about, she thought.

Diamante stepped across the kitchen, cringing as the floor creaked under her feet. It was loud. She waited and listened for anything, the telltale sign that someone had heard and was moving towards her or away from her. Nothing. She walked across the floor, pulling out the vial and ribbon she had used earlier, letting the vial slide and fall, suspended once more by the red and white

ribbon. This close, it shouldn't take too much effort to make the spell work. She reached out to grab the doorknob, the lock on the door mangled and broken long ago, and pulled the door open before stepping into the hallway.

The hallway stretched to her left, three more doors to three more apartments, dark swaths against the peeling walls. The dirt and dust made the humidity stickier, ranker. Her hair stuck to the back of her neck, dirty sweat dripping down her skin. Diamante watched the vial circle and then pull the ribbon taut, pointing to the apartment diagonal from the one she had entered. The sconces were busted, the glass cracking under her thick soled shoes, the floor continuing to creak.

She listened again and heard nothing. The mage glanced around her before she crouched down and pulled her knife out of her boot, feeling the familiar coolness of the hilt in her hand. It had taken a lot of work to craft the weapon but the blood drinking knife meant if she did use it, no blood would be spilled. The wound would remain of course, muscle and tendons severed if she struck true. But the wound would cauterize instantly. No blood, no evidence, if it came down to it. Easier than a lot of clean up.

The vial hovered in the air, twitching almost parallel to the floor, pointing at the metal door. Diamante released her will from the vial and tucked it back into her pocket, wrapping her hand around the hilt of the knife tighter. Something was alive behind the door. She knew it. She had sensed something about the intruder when she worked the magic on his blood and he was in there. Diamante stepped forward, pushing the door open.

“Shit!” she cursed, bringing her hands up to her face as a battery of feathers and wings smashed into her face. She batted away at the frenzied beaks and feet of the startled pigeons, slashing out with her knife. The pigeons fell to the ground in pieces. One pigeon flew at the ceiling, cooing in alarm as it flapped in a circle before it found the open window.

This room was empty. The living room and kitchen had been gutted. The remnants of a score of broken beer bottles littered the kitchen floor, green and brown. Drops and splatters of blood on the faded and torn linoleum led to the bedrooms.

Diamante took a deep breath. She could try to rush in. But a startled mage, even an injured one could still instinctively throw something at her she didn't necessarily want to deal with. With this much blood loss, it could be smarter to announce herself and offer aid.

“My name is Diamante. I am a Sentinel of the local Consilium. I have tracked you to this apartment and I am here to offer you aid. If it is clear for me to enter, give me a sign or I will assume you are hostile and proceed as such. No sign will be perceived as hostility.” Diamante waited, holding her breath. The seconds seemed to drag in the sweltering apartment but after a few moments, the door to one of the bedrooms opened slowly. A quiet, melodic tune began to play, drifting on the air.

Diamante stepped forward, still clutching her knife. She walked past the partially destroyed bathroom and pushed the door open with her hand, peering in.

In the dim light she saw her. Slumped against the wall, legs spread out in front of her, shoulders dropping. Her head hung down, her chin resting against her chest, dark curly hair spilling over her face. Diamante saw the slow, labored rise and fall of the woman's chest as she tried to breathe. A trail of blood splattered and ended where the intruder sat, her clothing seeming dark and cold. The woman wore trousers and what looked like a dress shirt, as well as a fitted business jacket, frayed and torn at the edge. Her boots weren't too dissimilar from Diamante's. The glint of a ring on the woman's hand told Diamante she had a partner somewhere.

"Who are you?" Diamante ordered. The woman looked up slowly, with sunken in eyes. A smear of blood shone red on her face, her skin pale with blood loss.

"I'm a mage, like you," the woman said. Her voice was hoarse and ragged, like someone who had been yelling and crying for too long. It matched the look in her eyes. "I am a mage. I tried to get away. Is that a crime?"

"Get away from what?" Diamante demanded.

"The fighting," the woman said. The woman tried to take a deep breath and the expression on her face made Diamante wince to see it. "Such fighting like you've never seen. Never imagined. And under it, other mages turned against us. They wanted our Sanctum." The woman tried to push herself up, placing her bloodied hands on the ground.

"What are you doing here?" Diamante asked. She tried to hide her shaking hands. Diamante could smell something on the woman, like sharp ozone trying to hide the smell of death and failing. It still seeped through the dark and cold.

"I could not stay there," the woman said. Her voice cracked and her head fell towards her chest again. Her chest moved erratically, as she tried to keep back the tears she likely couldn't spare. "My friends, we tried to hold them back. We tried to hold it. But they fell. All of them. And I was next. So...." Her voice trailed off. Diamante took a step closer, hoping the woman hadn't passed out but the woman's head rose sharply, her face awash with pain and regret, her chest rising and dropping sharply.

"They died," the woman said. Her lips were grey and red, dry and cracked, blood stained. "My friends, my allies, as we tried to hold the innermost, they fell. And as they departed this world, I...I slipped away. I slipped through. I used their deaths," she whispered, tearing her gaze from Diamante's. "I couldn't be there anymore. I had to leave."

Diamante stood there, stunned. Now the woman brought her hands to her face, burying her face in her hands. Now she cried. Even her sobs were

hoarse and ragged. Diamante took a few steps away and pulled her phone out of her pocket, tapping through her contacts to Horatio.

"Did you find the intruder?" Horatio's voice was loud and clear. Diamante turned back and looked to the woman, still crying.

"I did," Diamante said. "She's in bad shape. Physical injuries, obviously exhausted emotionally and mentally. Not sure where she came from exactly. My guess would be Northern Africa somewhere."

"I'll check the reports," Horatio said. "Think she's a go for bringing her back?"

"She came here to get away. I don't think she's here to cause trouble. But she's obviously powerful and potentially dangerous. I say bring her to a satellite till we can get a handle on her and then bring her into the fold."

"You going to be able to get her back in one piece?" Horatio asked.

"I'll call a cab," Diamante said. "Gee get back yet?"

"She showed up with Lucretia but I told them to take the day off to get settled. I figured you wouldn't need the help."

"Not this time," Diamante said, smirking. She turned and looked back to the woman. She had stopped moving. "Horatio, I've gotta go. ETA is 20 minutes. Call me if I haven't arrived."

Diamante didn't bother waiting for Horatio to say goodbye. She tapped the phone off and shoved it into her pocket, sliding her knife into her boot before she crouched down by the woman, checking for a pulse. A low, steady beat, faint but present. Diamante placed her hand on the woman's wrist and took several deep breaths, feeling the woman's breath strengthen a bit. Diamante put her arm around the woman and hoisted her up to her feet. The woman leaned against her hard, stumbling awkwardly as Diamante tried to get her to walk forward.

"Someone saw me come through," the woman rasped. Diamante stopped.

"Someone?" Diamante said. "Someone who?"

"A man," the woman said. "He...I had just come through. He was putting the refuse in the garbage," the woman said. "I came through, I was hurt and leaned against the wall. And I turned and saw him."

"Where did he run to?" Diamante asked. The woman's head drooped further.

"I...I grabbed him," the woman said quietly. "I grabbed him. He fought me. But I couldn't have a Sleeper...I pushed him through the rift. I pushed him through and closed it behind me and I came here."

Diamante felt her heart thump in her chest. The man who had found her probably was just another worker at the butcher, cleaning up after work. He had probably just been taking trash out to that dumpster, as he had done countless times. "We'll look into it," Diamante said. Together they walked

across the decomposing floor, the ground creaking and bending under their weight as they walked out to the hallway.

"I had to leave," the woman said. "I had to," she repeated. She leaned hard against Diamante, staggering. "I couldn't stay there. My friends." Diamante walked towards the staircase, their footsteps loud in the empty squat.

Diamante stopped at the top of the staircase. The woman lifted her head slightly, her eyes rolling in her head. "Are we going to your home?" she asked.

"No," Diamante said. Diamante pulled back from the woman, freeing her limbs from her weight. With a grunt, she shoved the woman over the banister. The woman tried to scream, but her words caught in her throat. Diamante watched as the woman's body fell, hitting the next banister down and then landed on the ground floor, bouncing with a sick thud. She waited and watched for some sign of life but the woman was still, her limbs twisted at strange angles. Her dark, haunted eyes seemed to stare back at Diamante but she knew they weren't. The woman was dead.

Diamante walked down the stairs, pulling her phone out and tapping out the text message to Horatio.

Had an altercation. The intruder is now gone. Will talk to Niniane about circumventing fallout.

Diamante didn't bother waiting for Horatio to respond. She felt the buzz of her phone in her pocket as she walked down the stairs, the stairs threatening to come out from under her but Diamante wouldn't allow it. When she reached the ground floor, she searched the woman's body for anything that would help identify her or tell her more about what had happened. A small mobile phone and a red address book, as well as a silver bracelet. Diamante tucked them all away and stepped out of the squat, out onto the street. After being in the dilapidated building, the humid city air seemed fresh and clean.

Diamante had information. They would find out who had attacked the woman and her friends, what they had been protecting. If the woman hadn't mentioned killing the Sleeper, they would probably be in a cab right now, heading home. But the woman had admitted it. And Diamante's home was her Sanctum. It was to be protected at all costs.

Diamante stepped to the curb and held her hand out to summon a cab. One turned the corner, like it did most of the time, and stopped for her. Diamante tugged the door open and settled into the backseat, slouching against the hot, sticky leather. "Take me to Houston and 13th," she said, feeling tired. She'd give Horatio the information and then, he'd take care of her. They'd be safe another day.

Crimson Lips

By Eddy Webb

Early didn't want to be found, and when a mage that controls luck and fate doesn't want to be found, he damn well doesn't get found. Unless the person looking is another lucky mage.

Rick eventually found him in a diner called "Mel's." Early sat in front of a plate that had once held the runny eggs and toast now infesting his scraggly black beard. His hat and scarf sat on the countertop, and he was counting out pennies one at a time, like children brought before Solomon. Early would look homeless if it weren't for the crisp, new gray suit and overcoat that perfectly set off his dark skin. It didn't make him any less of a vagrant, of course.

"Hey, Early," Rick said, sliding onto the stool next to him.

Early stopped for a second, and then put the penny he was holding onto the pile. "Rick," he said, not looking up. "Didn't expect to see you."

"Didn't expect to be seen." He looked over the menu for a second and ordered a coffee and toast from the waitress who walked up just as he started speaking. He handed her the menu with a movie-star smile, and she blushed and went to fill the order.

"I'm guessing you're just here to warm your bones, and this is all one big coincidence," Early continued, trying to clean his beard with a paper napkin. Rick noticed that Early had gotten a few gray hairs since they last met. How long had it been? Two years? Three? It was just after Hitler surrendered.

"You never guess," Rick said as the waitress returned with his coffee. Mages in the Eleventh Question legacy never needed to guess. Guys like Early can look at you, and just know.

"I'm doing a small job for your former coworkers," Rick continued. They both knew he meant the Guardians of the Veil. No need to be vulgar by saying it out loud. "They're worried."

Early barked out a humorless laugh. "They ain't worried about nothing except what I got in here." He tapped his temple with a finger. "And they're too proud to ask for it themselves. So they sent you."

Rick shrugged.

Having successfully removed breakfast from his face, Early finally turned to look at Rick. “Your cabal know about this visit?”

Rick shrugged again. “This isn’t about the Lamppost, but you know how we like to keep things Quiet.” Rick knew Early heard the capital Q. “Better to say the interests of your ex-employers and my friends coincide.”

Early looked Rick up and down. “And they’re paying you.”

“Man has to eat.”

A second waitress behind the counter scooped up the pile of pennies in front of Early. The scraggly mage put the hat and scarf on and stood up. “I’m retired. I told them that, and I’m telling you now. Nice seeing you again, and I hope you find what you’re looking for, but you can do it without me.”

Rick looked at his coffee so he didn’t have to look at Early. “They’re not asking.”

Early walked to the door and pushed it open. The cold November air rushed into the diner. “And that’s the problem.”

“I’m asking.”

The door swung closed again, but Early hadn’t moved. Rick took a sip of his coffee. Eventually, Early turned back to look at him.

“Then say it.”

Rick sighed. “You know I hate....”

“Say it!” Early snapped. “Tell me straight, or I walk and make sure I’m twice as hard to find next time.”

Rick sighed. This wasn’t going to be easy, but it needed to happen. When he looked around, he saw that the waitresses had both walked into the kitchen, and the only other customer had already paid his check and walked out. For the moment, by sheer coincidence, they were all alone.

“Folks... mages... have been turning up nuts all over town. No one knows why.”

Early crossed his arms. “Could be Seers, or the Mad, or any number of other things. Not worth interrupting my breakfast over.”

Rick shook his head. “Not like this. No one’s seen anything like it. Whatever’s doing this, it’s not magic. Everyone wants it dealt with, and everyone wants it done quietly before someone panics and we have a mess the size of Germany to clean up. No one knows what to do.”

“Still not seeing how this is my problem, Rick.”

Rick frowned at that. “Don’t see how it isn’t.”

“Cleaning up other people’s messes ain’t my business anymore.”

“Early, I know you’re still sore about losing your apprentice, but you have to let it go. Get on with your life. Maybe get back on the police force....”

The older mage strode forward and jabbed a finger in Rick's face. "Do I look like a man that lets things go? Rosie *died*, Rick. Died for a bunch of four-flushing mages that wouldn't give you a straight answer if you asked them the color of the sky. I've seen too much to live inside of that."

Rick pushed the hand out, hard. "Like I said, they aren't the ones asking, Early. I am."

Early put his finger away. "So ask."

Rick took a deep breath, and then exhaled. He needed a cigarette. "Will you help me find out what's doing this and put a stop to it?"

Early smiled suddenly, breaking into a grin that was too wide to be real. "For you? Sure."

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They took Rick's Buick, partially because it had an auxiliary heater, and mostly because Early didn't have a car. Traffic in Detroit was usually bad in the winter, but for now the roads were clear and they were making good time.

"Why does a mage need to live in a mansion?" Early asked, pulling his scarf down as the car warmed up.

Rick winced a little at the word *mage*. "Can we have this conversation a little more discreetly?" he said, a cigarette between his fingers while he gripped the wheel.

"Why? There a Guardian hidden in your heater I should know about? You got a Sleeper in the back seat that might run screaming into the night?"

"It just bugs me."

"And that's why I do it."

Rick smiled while he took a drag. "You're an asshole."

"And you're not answering my question. Why a mansion? If you can control reality, why do you also need to be rich?"

"Not everyone thinks they should live on the streets, getting by on their wits and their magic alone."

Early grunted and wiped the fog off the windows. "World would be a better place if they did. That's what Rosie thought, at least."

They pulled up to a closed iron gate in front of a well-plowed driveway that curled up to a big house on the hill. Some poor guard was standing by it, bundled up for an Arctic expedition. Rick rolled down the window and gave his name, and the guard moved his arm as much as he could to indicate they should go in.

"That's convenient," Early said.

"The Council are paying me to do a job. They made sure to put me on the guest list."

"Next you'll be lining up to join an Order."

"No need to be vulgar."

Rick pulled up to the front door, and the two men got out. The front door was large enough to let the Buick in for a tune-up if they wanted. Over it was a stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor, helping out a woman tied to a tree. She didn't have any clothes, but she did have some very convenient hair. Rick rang the bell and stomped on his cigarette before they were met by a butler named Wilkins. He took Rick's hat and tried to take Early's before whisking them down hallways that were two stories tall, and through a couple of French doors. On the other side was a man lying in a bed three times too big, and his pajamas looked almost as sharp as Early's suit. The way he kept giggling and drooling on himself made Wilkins nervous, and with a quick "Mr. Francis Evans," they were alone.

Early walked around the bed, looking at the man. Mr. Evans watched back with wide eyes and a rictus grin stretching his face so wide it almost snapped. Rick looked at Mr. Evans himself, using his Mage Sight to see anything unusual, but his sight fell away same as with the others, like throwing a nickel down a wishing well. Frustrated, he looked at Early. "See anything?"

The older mage walked back, absently pulling on his beard. "Not much. Mr. Francis Evans was a Mastigos of the Silver Ladder, and used to be quite a good Mind mage. He made a lot of money and a lot of friends investing in war bonds, which means everyone looks the other way when he goes off to see other men in hotel rooms."

"You said he *was* a Mastigos. Why the past tense?"

Early knelt down to look into Mr. Evans' eyes. Rick could see his hands shaking. "Because he ain't a mage no more."

"You mean something took his magic?"

"No, it's more..." Early waved his hands vaguely, as if he could pluck the explanation from the air. "Magic is a fire inside of us, right? Something that we kindle with new knowledge. It's not all lucky lottery tickets and convenient car crashes. It's about finding things out, and using that knowledge to make ourselves stronger, and maybe make the world better." He stood back up. "But that's gone now. That desire, that drive to know and do, it's just missing."

Rick nodded. That connected with what the Guardians had told him. He started searching the room, hoping that maybe there was something in the bedridden man's effects that would tell them something new. He hated being Watson, but that was the role Fate assigned him, so he played along. "So you've seen this before?"

"Nope." Early reached behind Mr. Evans' ear, and pulled out a penny. The bedridden man smiled at that, and drooled some more.

“Penny!” Both men looked, surprised at the bedridden man’s outburst. He put a hand on Early’s suit and looked into his eyes. “Need penny!”

Rick snorted, looking inside a shaving kit. “Man wants money even when he’s brain-dead.”

“Told you no good comes from being rich.” Early handed Mr. Evans the penny, and the bedridden man snatched it hungrily. “Penny for your thoughts,” Early said, watching the man carefully for any tick, any insight.

“Lips,” he said, as he carefully studied the penny in his hand.

Rick closed the lid of the shaving kit and looked over. “Lips?”

“That’s what the man said,” Early muttered, still watching the bedridden man. “I need more than that, Mr. Evans. A penny don’t go far these days, but it goes further than that.”

“Crimson,” the man said. “Crimson lips. At the club.” His eyes grew sad, and he wiped at his chin, leaving a smear on the sleeve of his expensive pajamas. “Before the end.”

“Great,” Rick said, opening a dresser drawer. “All we have to do is find out which club he went to. Maybe he has a matchbook or something.”

Early stood up. “You read too many crime magazines. Look at his fingers. No nicotine stains. And there wasn’t a single ashtray on our way up here. Why would he have a matchbook? Just go ask one of the servants.”

Rick closed the drawer. “Are you too good to talk to the servants?”

“Nah, you’re just prettier than me.” Early handed Mr. Evans another penny, and the bedridden mage squealed with delight. “But I’ll come with you if you need help with the bigger words.”

They found Wilkins in the study, dusting the books. At first, he claimed he didn’t know how his master got in his condition, and Mr. Evans certainly didn’t go out to nightclubs.

But Rick flashed his movie-star smile. “Don’t worry. We know.”

“Know, sir?” Wilkins asked. He sounded like he was trying on the English accent, but it didn’t fit him right.

“He has a secret life,” Early said, looking at the books.

“We won’t tell anyone,” Rick added. “We just want to know where he goes.”

Wilkins looked at the feather duster in his hand. “I understand that Mr. Evans sometimes does... dangerous things. And I hate seeing him in this condition.” He looked back up at the two men. “Will you find out who did this to him?”

Rick looked at Early, who nodded. “We’ll try,” Rick said to Wilkins.

The butler nodded. “He sometimes goes to the El Dorado. I don’t know who he sees there, but once in a while he doesn’t come home until morning. He never says anything, but, well, one notices these things.”

"Yes," Early said dryly, pulling a book from the shelf. "One does."

Rick ignored him. "Did Mr. Evans talk about a woman in his life? One that might have worn lipstick?"

"Certainly not!" Wilkins said.

"Wouldn't be proper being seen alone with a woman," Early said.

"Quite right," Wilkins agreed, sailing past Early's barb.

Early turned to look at the butler for the first time. He had the open book in one hand, and a letter in the other. "Which means this love letter you got from 'Dearest Jeanine' probably belongs to you."

Wilkins snatched the letter from Early's grasp. "If you are quite finished, I would ask you both to leave now."

Rick put his hands up in mock surrender. "We're leaving. Thank you for your time."

Early tipped his hat at Wilkins, Rick took his back, and they walked back to the Buick.

"What was the point of that, Early?" Rick asked as he drove back down the driveway. "He was helping us."

"Man had secrets," Early said over his scarf.

"Maybe some secrets should stay secret."

Early rubbed the fog off the windows again. "Nothing stays secret from me. That's what you wanted, ain't it? The man who asks all the questions? The one who can see everyone's secrets?"

Rick stopped at the gate and stole a glance at Early while it opened. "Can't you just keep them to yourself once in a while?"

Early ignored the question. Instead, he opened up the glove compartment. "You still got your gun in here?"

"Sure," Rick said. "I got papers for it, too."

Early closed the compartment again. "Good. I got a feeling we'll need it."

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Snow started falling as they left the mansion, making the roads more treacherous. The El Dorado was just opening up when Rick finally pulled into the parking lot. The bouncer waved them inside, more worried about letting the cold air in than checking to see if they were trouble. The bar curved around one side of the room in a long C shape, while the middle of the floor was scattered with tables covered in white and blue linen. The comfortable-looking leather chairs were all dyed blue as well, and at the far end was a stage with a bandstand, covered in blue banners with "El Dorado" stitched in white, flowing letters. The whole place probably looked classy in the dark. Instead, all the lights were on, and it just looked tired and threadbare, like a comfortable suit two washes away from being thrown out.

Rick asked the bouncer for a pay phone, and he pointed to one by the restrooms. To Early, he said "I need to call my friends and let them know what's happening." Early nodded, and Rick went down the hall. He updated the Lamppost on what was going on, and told them to keep an ear out for any more brain-dead mages that popped up. When he got back, he found Early standing by one of the tables, picking a penny up off the floor.

"I always meant to ask," Rick said.

Early held the penny up to the harsh lights of the club. He spoke in a sing-song voice, like reciting an ancient poem. "Find a penny, pick it up. All day long, you'll have good luck." Early put it in his pocket. "Something Rosie taught me, and it got me thinking. They're little pieces of fossilized luck, just lying around for anyone to claim as their own. If that ain't magic, I don't know what is."

"What about wishing wells?"

Early scoffed. "That's just hogwash."

Rick shook his head. "You're a weird fella, Early."

"Coming from you, Rick, I take that as a compliment." He jerked a thumb at the bartender, who was setting up bottles and washing glasses. "The working stiffs don't know a thing, but they expect a full house tonight."

"In this weather?" Rick asked.

Early shrugged. "That's what they said."

"Any of them broads with red lipstick?"

"Sure, if you're wanting to include every woman in Detroit on your list of suspects." Early slumped into one of the leather chairs. "You sure that's the right angle?"

Rick took the seat opposite him, crossed his legs at the ankle, and pulled his cigarettes out of his coat. "What do you mean?"

The older mage waited until Rick exhaled a lungful of smoke. "You're assuming that 'crimson lips' means a woman, but we know our victim didn't walk on that side of the street."

"Doesn't have to be sexual. Lots of reasons for a rich guy to be friends with a broad."

"More like the other way around."

Rick put the cigarette in his mouth, and talked around it as he patted his pockets. "You got a better idea?"

It was Early's turn to shake his head. "No, sir, I do not," he said. "All we can do is watch the crowd and see what happens."

"That's what I was thinking." He pulled his shot glass focus from his pocket, and handed it to the waiter who happened to walk up just then. "Two shots of whiskey. Put one of them in this."

"I don't drink whiskey," Early said.

Rick shrugged. "More for me, then. Get my friend a steady supply of ice water."

Soon the lights went down, and the place became classy again. Over the next couple of hours, the two mages watched people pour in. The customers laughed and drank and danced to swing music, and Early watched it all while Rick drank from his shot glass, focusing his energy. After the fourth round of shots came to the table, Early grabbed the waiter's arm.

"Who's the surprise act tonight?" he yelled over the crowd.

"Trixie Lamour," the waiter responded, before shrugging out of his grip and moving on to another table.

Early settled back into his seat as Rick leaned forward. He did a good job of not slurring his words. "How'd you do it, Holmes?"

The older mage pointed to the stage. "Extra microphone set up front. Ain't no one come near it in the past two songs. Stopping the music to set it up would be too obvious, so it must be someone wants to surprise the crowd. But given how many people are here in this weather, I'm guessing it ain't that much of a surprise." He took a sip of his water. "You know this Trixie Lamour?"

"Sure I do. Started off as a lounge singer a few years back, before some movie company picked her up. She's officially forbidden from making stage appearances while they're wrapping up filming, but she flew back home to Detroit and keeps coming to clubs unannounced. Can't get enough of the spotlight, I guess."

Early spun a penny on the table thoughtfully as he watched the stage. After a moment, the lights dimmed further, and a spotlight lit the microphone. A woman in a deep blue dress walked out to it. The dress sparkled and clung to her in a way that left very little to the imagination. She had long black hair that was perfectly curled, and in the stark light her pale skin was contrasted by the ruby red lipstick she wore. Her long fingers touched the microphone just as the band started their next song, and she began to sing "I Wish I Didn't Love You So."

Early let the penny drop. Rick turned to look at him, a smile starting to form, but he stopped when he saw Early's expression. "You're not seeing what everyone else is seeing," Rick said. He didn't bother to dress it up as a question.

"That woman is bound by Fate," Early said softly. "A lot of people's fates."

Rick pushed his drink away and asked the waiter for coffee. As he went to fill the order, Rick looked at the singer again, his eyes a little unfocused as he drew on the energy filtered through his shot glass and activated his Sight. Threads and skeins of Fate ran through her, like a golden knot of possibilities resting in her stomach. The threads became more indistinct as they filtered out

into the room, a cat's cradle of connections, although one thick golden rope led behind her and through the band.

The coffee cup came down with a heavy clunk, and Rick blinked away his vision. "Thanks," he said vaguely, and turned to tell Early what he saw.

The chair across from him was empty.

"Goddamn it," Rick muttered. He belted back the black coffee, burning his tongue, and stood up. He walked through the dance floor, every dancer gracefully stepping out of his way as if part of some grand choreography, until he was at the edge of the stage. There he found a large man in a well-fitted suit slumped by an open door that read "Employees Only." Rick checked him, heard the snoring, and stepped over the gorilla. He walked into a corridor with a lot of worried stage people running back and forth and a single door with a star on it.

Inside, the room was full of fancy lights and mirrors. A table was covered in brushes and makeup kits and bottles of booze. A screen stood in the corner, with women's undergarments hanging from the top. Early was standing there, looking at a man sitting on a stool by the screen. He didn't look like much — just a thin guy with a thinner mustache and a cheap suit. He was probably the kind of manager who asked for his percentage in horizontal favors.

"You left somebody back there," Rick said as he walked up.

"Got the scent of creosote," Early said.

Rick blinked. "What?"

Early turned to look at him. "The dog. Toby. From *The Sign of The Four*? You've been throwing Sherlock Holmes jabs at me all these years, I assumed you actually *read* the stuff."

Rick shrugged. "Saw a movie with Basil Rathbone once."

"No accounting for taste." Early jerked a thumb at the cheap suit. "Manager's Leroy. Was just about to tell me an interesting story about Miss Lamour."

"Look," Leroy said, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief that already looked wet, "I don't want no trouble with the police. I didn't do nothing."

"We ain't police," Early said. "We're private."

Rick squatted down to eye level and flashed Leroy his dazzling smile. "It's true. We're just looking for someone. Someone who sees a lot of people after the show. Might be Miss Lamour."

"Hey, I don't have that kind of clientele, but I know a guy downtown that can get you—"

"Don't give me that," Early said, cutting him off. "You've seen something. Something weird. Something that makes folks go missing."

Leroy winced and looked at Early. "Yeah. Yeah I saw something. There's this broad. She comes once in a while. Sees all of Trixie's shows. I don't pay

attention to the crowd none, but after a while, you start to recognize faces, you know?"

"What about this woman, Leroy?" Rick said, keeping his voice as calm as possible.

"Nothing about her. But she always came alone, and always left with someone else. Sometimes a fella, sometimes another broad."

Early's eyes grew cold. "Was she here tonight?"

Leroy just nodded.

"Why didn't you say anything to the police?" Early pressed.

Rick stood back up. "If he did, he'd have to admit that he was violating Trixie's movie contract with all these appearances. Am I right, Leroy?"

"Sure, you're right," the manager said, wiping his brow again. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a used matchbook. "A couple of times, she left these behind. I grabbed one. Don't know why, really. Just hung on to it."

Rick grabbed the matchbook. The cover said "Hotel Tuller." He put it in his pocket and turned to Early. "Too many crime magazines, huh?"

Early didn't say anything. He just turned and walked out of the room, Rick hurriedly following behind all the way to the car. Rick tried asking him questions, but Early just kept fiddling with the glove box and the windows the whole ride.

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"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't give you the names of any of our guests. We have a policy of discretion to maintain."

The desk clerk at Hotel Tuller wasn't a pushover. By the size of his forearms and the way his nose was broken, Rick guessed he used to be a boxer until he found a way to make easier money. Rick's smile may have met its match.

"I understand," Rick said, trying to sound as reasonable as he could. "Maybe we could just talk to the house detective, and—"

"I'm sorry, sir, but that's simply not possible. In fact, I'll need to see a badge or a license from both of you before I even continue this conversation."

"Sure, sure," Rick said reassuringly. "We left them back in our car. It'll just be a moment." He started to walk away from the desk so he could sneak back and go for the stairs.

Early stayed, looking at the clerk. "You might want to check on your wife," Early said casually.

The ex-boxer puffed up at that. "You threatening me, buddy?"

"Course not. It ain't me giving her what she needs. I'm too old for that kind of gymnastics."

Rick grabbed Early's arm and yanked him away from the desk while the clerk fumbled for the gate to come talk to Early personally. "Not the best time," Rick muttered as they ran for the stairs.

"Just call me Cassandra," Early said, breathing heavily as they made their way up the stairs to the second floor. They went through the door, and Rick held it shut while Early shoved a chair under the doorknob. They backed away as the knob started to rattle.

"Now what?" Rick asked, scanning the hallway.

"We look around," Early answered. "Can't you feel...."

His voice trailed off. Rick turned to look at him, and then to see what he was staring at. At the other end of the hallway a woman just passing out of sight. He could make out a pair of sensible shoes and finely-muscled legs. "Who was that?" he asked.

Early tried to talk, but nothing came out. He swallowed, and then managed to choke out "Rosie." Then he was running down the hallway.

"Rosie? She's dead, isn't she ?" But Rick was talking to himself. He ran after Early, his lungs aching for a cigarette.

The older mage moved like he was in the Olympics, racing to put his foot into the door of 219 before it closed. He slammed the door open and dove in before Rick could catch up with him.

Inside, the room was dark, the moonlight from the window sliced to ribbons by the blinds. On the bed was a middle-aged woman, dressed in clothes about ten years out of date. She stared up at the ceiling, but Rick didn't think she was seeing anything. Standing in front of her was another woman, much younger. She wore a dark polka-dot dress and a hat that sat on her head at an angle. He couldn't make out much of her face, but even in the dim light he could see her red lips. It wasn't lipstick, but more like the flesh of a lobster after it was boiled to death. It might have been blood, but it was hard to tell.

"Rosie?" Early said again. This time, it was a question. He blinked a little as he asked it. Rick thought he saw tears, but he couldn't swear to it.

She laughed. It was deep and throaty and full of life. "Yes. More."

Early shook his head. "But you died."

It was Rick's turn to ask. "More?" As he did, he suddenly felt dizzy. Probably too much whiskey combined with all the running.

"You've got me, fair and square," she said in her velvet voice. "So ask. Ask me anything you want."

"Who are you? *What* are you?" The questions started pouring out of Rick, like he was vomiting them up. He felt weak as he did, and fell to one knee. "Early, what's going on?"

There was a shiver in the woman's velvet voice. "Yes. Wonderful. Ask me more." She turned to look at Early. "Ask me for my secrets."

Early pulled a gun out of his pocket. The one from Rick's car. "No."

The woman paused. Her face was hidden in shadow, but her body language became cautious.

Rick's eyes started to blur. "Early, *what is going on*?"

"No more questions, Rick. She feeds on them."

Rick coughed up some blood and spit it out on the carpet. "She feeds on—"

"No more!" Early pointed the gun at the woman. It trembled so much Rick was afraid he would drop it. "I know it's against everything mages do, but you can't ask anything else."

"You must. You can't help yourself," the woman said. She took a step closer to Early, but he pulled the hammer back on the pistol, and she stepped back again. "That is why I hunt your kind. So full of questions. So much you need to know."

"You followed Lamour, a woman who thrived on secrecy. Someone surrounded by questions. And she's still around." Early recited careful fact after careful fact, lining them up to point at the question without asking it.

"Yes. She was bait, a lure for the true prize: those who seek out the secrets of the universe." She turned to pet the hair of the woman on the bed, who whimpered slightly but didn't move, eyes locked on the ceiling. "So delicious. And even when they are about to lose everything, they still ask me why." She looked back at Early. "You'll ask me why."

The gun sounded enormous in the room. Rick watched as blood splattered all over the blinds. It was sudden, violent, and terrifying. Even with his ears ringing, he felt the fog in his head slowly clear.

Early threw the gun at his feet. He shoved his hands in his pockets as fast as possible to hide the tremors. "Your gun," he said, choking on tears. "You do what you want with it."

Rick stood up, holding the gun. The Guardians were going to have a fit trying to clean this mess up. Maybe it was time for the Lamppost cabal to leave town for a while. He put the gun in his pocket, and touched Early on the arm.

"Early. Was that Rosie?"

He nodded.

"How did she turn into... that?"

He brushed off Rick's hand and walked to the door. "Some secrets have to stay secret."

Obedience

BY GEOFF SKELLAMS

Wednesday, 10:27pm, the F3 Freeway, north of Sydney, Australia

Durriken dropped the BMW back a gear and planted his foot on the accelerator as he slid into the left-hand lane. The car screamed as it shot past the semi-trailer, the truck's running lights quickly disappearing into the distance.

"How far do we have to go now?"

Agathon flipped another card onto the book he had laying in his lap. He stared at it intently for a second, and then looked up.

"Hard to say. The signs are damn hard to read right now, although we're going in the right direction. The question is, are we going to find those Pentacle motherfuckers?"

Durriken glanced into his rearview mirror, and then slammed the car back into top gear as he wove between two other cars, screaming across two lanes of traffic on the freeway. The Beamer's headlights lit up the sandstone cliffs beside the road as the car raced down the hill.

"We are if I've anything to do with it," muttered Durriken.

Agathon flipped another card, laying it across the top of the previous one. "Shit, looks like we might have trouble up ahead."

"I'm ready for it," said Namid, from the back seat.

The BMW shot across the Hawkesbury River bridge. As they raced past the ambulance station on the way up the hill, blue lights stabbed out of the darkness as the highway patrol car started to pull out into traffic after them.

Namid stared at it and smoke erupted from under the hood of the cop car. Durriken felt the ripple of magic before the car stopped dead in its tracks. "That should slow them down for a while," Namid said with a chuckle.

"Nice work," Durriken said, weaving the car between traffic as he continued to accelerate up the hill. His brow furrowed as he sped up the hill on the northern side of the river, weaving between traffic as he went. Something wasn't right. It was almost as if the Artifact was moving.

"What the *fuck* are those Pentacle cocksuckers up to Namid?" he said, as he imagined the strands of Fate laid out in front of him as he drove. Releasing Mana into the Imago, Durriken felt a shift in the Seers' fortunes. It was almost as if the strands connecting them to the Artifact were thinning. Things weren't supposed to go this way; after all, the Exarchs had already indicated that the artifact would fall into his hands tonight.

"I'm having trouble seeing them. Whoever's shielding them is doing a fucking good job of it," Namid said. "But, by the looks of it, they've turned off a major road and are heading onto a back road somewhere."

"Fuck," muttered Durriken. "They could be anywhere." Sending some more Mana towards the Exarchs, he opened his mind to whatever signs his masters would deign to give him. *Please, give me* **something**, he thought.

Beside the road ahead, a portable sign flashed in the darkness.

Right Lane Closed. Merge Left.

Durriken felt a surge of relief wash over him. The Exarchs had come through for him again. He slammed on the brakes, the BMW shuddering harshly as the ABS prevented the wheels from locking up.

Agathon looked up from his cards. "What the fuck?"

Durriken downshifted twice, and swung the car into the left-hand lane, in front of a family sedan, which had to brake hard to avoid him. He spotted a freeway exit just up ahead and began accelerating again.

"I've seen the signs," he said as he pulled off the freeway and sped up the exit ramp.

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Twenty-Four Hours Earlier, overlooking Sydney Harbour

Durriken stared out the window at the lights on Sydney Harbour. The Harbour Bridge was lit up, some of the arch's spans appearing to be made from silver. Beyond the bridge, the sails of the Sydney Opera House glowed softly against the backdrop of the city center.

"Did you even *hear* what I just said?" Lexia asked.

"Huh?" Durriken turned to face his supervisor in the Seers of the Throne. And his lover. "I'm sorry, hon. I got distracted."

"You've been doing that ever since we arrived in this stupid country," Lexia said. She brushed a strand of blonde hair back behind her ear, and sat back in her seat, taking another sip of her chardonnay. "What's eating you, sweetie?"

Durriken shook his head. "I don't know. I've just been feeling...well, like there's something wrong here. Everything I've seen here points to something big going on. I'm usually much more confident about what the Exarchs are saying, but here...here, everything seems to be upside down."

Lexia laughed. "Well, what do you expect? You *are* in the land down under, after all."

Durriken snorted. "Well, yeah, I guess there is that." He leaned back in his seat and rubbed his temples. "I just haven't been able to sleep properly since I got here."

"I *know*! You've woken me up a few times every night."

"I'm sorry, Lex. You know I'm not doing it deliberately."

Lexia leaned forward again. "What's going on? Is something bothering you, Durri?"

"I really *don't* know," Durriken said. "I've been trying to divine what's going on, what the Exarchs are trying to say to me, but it's not been working. All the results come out muddled. It may just be that I'm in a foreign country and that there's a lot of unfamiliar stuff going on here. Even if it does feel something like home."

"Well," Lexia said, "we'll be done here by Friday, and we can get back to L.A. I can't wait to be out of this hellhole!"

Durriken laughed and pointed out the window. "You call *that* a hellhole? You have got to be kidding me, right? You never did see Mogadishu, did you?'

"No, and I didn't need to. I've done my time in the trenches, and that's why I've earned the right to have people like you work for me now. It means that I don't need to worry about getting my hands dirty chasing Pentacle idiots all over the world."

"Somebody has to stop the Pentacle," Durriken said, his eyes narrowing slightly. "If all the Seers sat back and did nothing, those cocksuckers would find a way to rebuild the Celestial Ladder and overthrow the Exarchs."

Lexia leaned forward and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Ever the brave knight, aren't you, Durri? You need to keep the faith! The Exarchs will never let that happen, so there's no point in even worrying about it!"

She took another sip of her wine and sat back again. "Now, did you find out what the local tetrarch needed?"

Durriken shook his head. "Not yet. I've been working with a couple of the local Seers, Agathon and Namid. They have potential, but they need to be taught better strategies for keeping track of the Pentacle."

"Are you going to be finished by the weekend?"

Shrugging, Durriken finished off his own glass of wine. "I don't know yet. Like I said, it feels as though something is going on here. I'm worried that if we leave too early, the Pentacle is going to score a major victory in this country."

"And like *I* said, the Exarchs would never let that happen. You worry too much. Now, hurry up and finish, so we can get out of here. The tetrarch is expecting us for a harbor cruise."

Durriken sighed. Lexia never worried about anything, and it was going to be her downfall someday.

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Durriken ran through the maze, the walls reflecting the intense white light that seemed to burn down from above. All the walls seemed the same, a featureless expanse of stainless steel. He paused momentarily at a junction, trying to figure out which way to turn next.

"*Durriken...*" A whispered voice echoed off the walls, but appeared to come from somewhere off to the right. Durriken sprinted after it, turning right, then left and then right again as he continued through the maze.

"Where are you?" he yelled, his voice echoing loudly off the walls.

Nothing. Just silence.

He ran on, hoping to find the source of the voice that had been taunting him all night. Taking another right, he followed a passage which doglegged twice until it ended in a dead end.

"Fuck!" he screamed in frustration as he ran back the way he came. He took the turn and expected to find the junction he had just taken. But the passage ran straight ahead into the distance, without a junction. The maze was rearranging itself.

"*Durriken...*" came the whisper again.

Durriken paused and listened to the echoes carefully. They seemed stronger to the right, although he wasn't sure. He moved slowly down the passage, trying to pick up any noise other than his own footsteps.

"*Durriken...*"

He paused. The voice seemed to come through the walls. Perhaps....

Spreading his hands against the wall, Durriken pushed slightly. A line appeared on the wall, giving an outline of a door. Pushing against it with all his strength, the door opened onto a platform on the top of a massive structure.

Durriken stepped through and the door slid shut silently behind him. He was on top of a massive stainless steel, stepped pyramid, which disappeared into the clouds below.

"*Durriken,*" a voice whispered from above him.

He turned around and noticed the strings coming from his arms and legs. They went straight up, and he could barely make out a gigantic cross hovering in the dark sky above him. Something massive moved up there, and for a second, Durriken thought it looked like blonde hair.

"Why don't you do something about that?"

Durriken's head snapped to the right. Standing beside him, hovering in midair just beyond the edge of the pyramid, was a glowing figure. Durriken had to shield his eyes, as the light was so intense it was beginning to burn.

"What do you want from me?" he said, trying to make out who it was that was speaking to him.

"From you? We want obedience; we want faith; we want courage." The figure pointed at something behind the mage.

Turning around, Durriken saw a long altar situated on the top of the pyramid. The top was slightly above waist height, and it was stained with something almost rusty in color. In the middle of the table lay an obsidian knife, its long blade so highly polished that it appeared to almost drink the light in from around it.

The glowing figure appeared suddenly on the other side of the altar.

"True power requires sacrifice, Durriken. You know what must be done...."

Durriken sat bolt upright in bed, sweat streaming from his forehead. His stomach roiled and he felt as though he was going to throw up.

He threw off the sheet and sat up on the edge of the bed. Next to him, Lexia rolled over, her breasts uncovered. She reached out for him in her sleep, muttering something incoherent.

Durriken stood up, and silently padded out into the apartment's kitchen. Grabbing a glass of water, he wandered over to the windows and looked out over the harbor. Everything seemed so peaceful, and yet his mind was still reeling from the dream he had just had.

Why now? He thought. *That dream* had *to have come from the Exarchs. It was too powerful for anything else. What was it that they wanted him to do?*

"Hon?"

Lexia crept up behind up and put her arms around his waist, pressing her naked body up against his.

"What are you doing out here? I woke up and you were gone."

"It's nothing," Durriken said. "I'm just having trouble sleeping again. I can't help worry that there's something important going on that I'm missing."

Lexia moved around to face Durriken and put her arms around his neck. "Well, how's about you come back to bed with me, and I do something to take your mind off whatever it is that's worrying you?" She licked his lips to reinforce the message.

Durriken smiled. "Yeah, alright. I guess I'm up for it if you're good to go again."

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Wednesday, 6:10am, Sydney International Airport

"Ladies and gentlemen," said a sultry woman's voice over the aircraft's PA system, "welcome to Sydney. The local time is now 6:10am and the temperature outside is already a very pleasant twenty-two degrees Celsius, heading for a top temperature of thirty-seven. For safety reasons, please remain seated with your seatbelts fastened until the plane has come to a stop at the terminal and the captain has switched off the seatbelt sign."

About fucking time, Kadar thought. *Christ, I hate international flights. I really must get Machiko to teach me how to portal, so I don't have to waste so much goddamn time crammed in with all these fucking Sleepers.*

"It's going to be good to get off this plane and have a proper stretch, isn't it?" said the obese man sitting next to him. "I hate long flights like these. I always end up so stiff and sore."

"Yeah," muttered Kadar, "something like that."

He put his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. He imagined the face of his contact in Sydney, a tall, ebony-skinned mage named Solomon. Sensing the familiar tingle of a magical connection, he reached out with his mind.

Solomon?

Brother Kadar! came the friendly voice of his contact. *It is so good to hear from you. I take it your plane has arrived finally?*

Yeah, it's just touched down. I guess it'll take me at least an hour to get through Customs. Should I just get a cab to your place then?

Kadar felt as though Solomon was nodding. *Yes, that would certainly be the easiest. I'm in the middle of something here that I can't leave just yet, so if you could come to me, I can show you what I have learned recently.*

I can do that, thought Kadar. *How is your research going? Have you learned anything new?*

Perhaps, brother, perhaps. I will explain all when you get here and have had some refreshments. It would not do to have you try to understand while you are still tired from your journey.

Fuck that noise, joked Kadar. *I've wasted enough time. I only want to know what happened to Orenda!*

Solomon laughed. *You always were the impatient one! Very well, as soon as you are here, I will explain what I have found out.*

Good man, Kadar thought. *Have you run into any problems from the fucking Seers? Thanos was murdered by them in Bangkok three days ago.*

Yes, I heard about that, Solomon thought, with a tinge of sadness. *It is a crying shame. He was a good man and a superb Mystagogue. The order will miss him. But no, I have seen no trace of the Seers lately, not for many months.*

Excellent, though Kadar. *I've been worried they were going to ruin this as well. Let's hope they don't find out. Alright, I'll be at your place soon. I'll see you when I get there.*

Stay safe, brother. I shall see you when I am looking at you.

Kadar felt the telepathic link close and he opened his eyes again. The plane had finally stopped moving and there was a ding as the pilot switched off the seatbelt sign. All around him, Sleepers were leaping out their seats to grab their belongings from the overhead compartments. *Idiots,* he thought. *No one's going anywhere for another fifteen minutes or more.*

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Wednesday, 7:43am, North Sydney

Namid pushed open the door and walked over to where Agathon had a spread of cards laid out in front of him. He put the takeaway coffee down beside his friend.

"G'day, mate. How're things going today?"

"Meh," said Agathon, without looking up from the cards. "Not a lot to report from last night." He pointed at his card layout. "This looks ominous though. If I'm reading this right, something's going to happen today. Someone's arriving who is going to stir up some trouble."

Namid sat down and took a sip of his coffee as he looked over the cards. "Have you told the Yank yet?"

"Who, Durriken?" Agathon took a sip of his coffee. "No, not yet. I was waiting for you to arrive before I called him."

"Well, I'll check in on our African friend while you call the Yank."

"Gotcha," Agathon said, pulling out his cell phone and heading out into the kitchen.

Namid sat on the couch and flipped open a timber box on the coffee table. He flipped through a collection of index cards until he found the one labeled "Solomon". Taking it from the box, he settled back on the couch.

He rubbed the couple of hairs taped to the card, then closed his eyes and pictured the tall, dark mage. He concentrated on the feeling of his fingers on the hairs, and then he reached out with his mind, looking for Solomon.

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Wednesday, 7:48am, Newtown

Kadar paid the cab driver, and then looked around. The area was only beginning to come alive, with the bakeries and cafés opening their doors to customers. It looked as though the street was going through a period of urban renewal. The buildings were old, but many had been renovated and given a new lease of life.

Picking up his bags, Kadar walked towards the unmarked door between the fruit shop and the café. He was about to knock when the door was flung open from the inside and Kadar found himself looking up into the dark face of Solomon, which was split by a wide, beaming smile.

"Brother Kadar!" Solomon said, as he hugged his friend. "It is so good to see you again. Please, let me take those bags for you!"

Solomon grabbed the bags and led the way up the stairs to his apartment. The African had decorated the place in brightly-colored rugs, mostly greens, yellows and reds. It gave the otherwise dull room a much more vibrant energy.

"I like what you've done with the place. It sure beats a dull off-white paint, that's for sure."

Solomon grinned again. "Thank you, I find resting in here makes me much happier. It helps bring part of the joy of magic into the world for me."

Kadar stretched and walked around the room a little. His legs were aching after the long flight from San Francisco. "So, did Ogun tell you why I was coming?"

Solomon shook his head. "He didn't tell me much at all. He said you would explain it all to me when you got here."

"If you get a pot of strong coffee going, I'll explain."

• • •

Wednesday, 8:49am, North Sydney

Namid sat up and opened his eyes. "Holy shit."

Agathon looked up at him. "See something interesting? You were gone for a long time. You don't normally Scry for anywhere near that amount of time."

"When's the Yank coming over?" Namid took a swig of his now cold coffee and rubbed his eyes.

Agathon shrugged. "He didn't say. He said he had to attend to some business first, and then he might come over after lunch."

Namid stood up and walked over to the phone. "Bullshit, after lunch! He needs to get here *now*! There's some shit going down that he needs to hear about." He punched the numbers into the phone. "Hello? Durriken? It's Namid here. I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but I've just learned something that I think you should hear urgently...No sir, I don't believe that it can wait at all... Yes, sir, we'll be waiting for you as soon as you get here."

He ended the call and tossed the phone back onto the coffee table, before starting to pace up and down the room.

"What's gotten into you, man?" Agathon said. "You look like you've seen a ghost or something."

Namid shook his head. "Not a ghost. Well, not yet anyway. But it could be a lot worse than that."

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Wednesday, 9:16am, North Sydney

Durriken sat down on the coach. "So, Namid, what's so important that you had to pull me out of a meeting with the tetrarch?"

Namid glanced out the window momentarily. "I'm sorry about that, sir, but you did ask for us to contact you if we should find out anything unusual."

"I did," Durriken said. "So, out with it then!"

"Well," Namid started, wringing his hands together. "I was doing my usual morning Scrying on a Pentacle mage named Solomon. Have you heard of him?"

Durriken nodded. "African Thyrsus and a member of the Mysterium, if my memory serves me correctly. Apparently fascinated by Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime knowledge."

"That's him," Namid said, nodding. "Well, we managed to get a couple of strands of his hair and we've been using it to keep tabs on him over the past couple of months. Until today, he hasn't been doing anything unusual. He visits the university library a lot and does his usual magical oblations."

"He's not aware of your Scrying, then?"

"No sir, we've been very careful to ensure that he doesn't realize we're there."

"So what's so different about today?"

"Solomon received a visitor this morning: a mage I'd never seen before. He was carrying bags when he arrived a bit before 8am, as though he'd just arrived from the airport. Solomon called him Kadar."

Durriken sat up and leaned forward. "Kadar? A tall white guy with a bald head and a salt-and-pepper goatee, probably about 40?"

Namid nodded. "That sounds like the guy I saw. Who is he?"

"He's a Moros, part of the Mysterium. I've run across him before. He's a Censor, and a fucking nasty piece of work. I've run across him before, not long after I joined the Seers. He'll happily kill mages, even Pentacle ones, who cross him. What's he want with Solomon?"

Namid shuddered. "Kadar is only in Australia for a day or so. Apparently, he's learned that a Mysterium mage, named Xanthus, has uncovered an intriguing Artifact somewhere north of Sydney and is keeping it a secret. Kadar is here to collect it."

Durriken nodded. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. When he told Solomon about it, he only referred to it as a Tecpatl. I'd never heard of it before. I assumed it was some sort of tool."

"Jesus Christ," muttered Durriken, going pale. "It *is* a tool. A Tecpatl is actually an Aztec sacrificial dagger, usually with an obsidian blade." He shook his head, trying to get the memories of his dream to go away. "Did he say where it was?"

Namid shook his head. "Not exactly. He said a rogue Mystagogue had acquired it and was using it north of Sydney."

"Using it for *what,* exactly?"

"He didn't say, but he did say he suspected that the police would eventually find a stack of corpses. Kadar wanted Solomon's help to recover the artifact and

stop Xanthus from racking up a higher body count. Kadar hinted that Xanthus may have gone completely off the rails and may actually be *eating* his victims."

Agathon looked across at Durriken. "So, are we going to help the Pentacle stop this guy?"

"Of course not!" Durriken snapped. "If a Pentacle mage has become unhinged enough to kill and eat people, then it's not up to us to stop him. However, we *are* going to recover that Artifact. More than anything, the Seers need to prevent the Pentacle from getting their hands on it. Or perhaps even better, let them recover it, and then take it from them."

Durriken stood up and reached into his jacket pocket for his cell phone. "You two did the right thing by calling me in on this immediately. Such service will not go unnoticed.

"Now, I need you to find out all you can about Solomon and Kadar's movements today. If Kadar stays true to form, he won't recruit any more Pentacle mages into the operation. He's much more of a lone gun and I suspect that the only reason he even called on Solomon is he needs someone with local area knowledge." He headed for the door as he started pushing buttons on his phone. "Be ready to move at any instant. The Exarchs are on our side, so by tonight, that Artifact should be in our possession. I'll call on you guys later for an update."

Durriken let himself out of the apartment and took the stairs down to the street. Getting into his BMW, he pressed the dial button on his phone.

"Lex? Hi, gorgeous. Listen, the guys have turned up a lead. The Pentacle fucks are up to something in town and I'm going to help the locals sort it out. I probably won't make the meeting this afternoon...Yes, I know this leaves you in an awkward position, but this is why we came, wasn't it? I'll make it up to you somehow...Love you too. See you tonight."

Durriken rested his head against the steering wheel and closed his eyes, remembering Lexia in bed last night. *Why does it have to be this way? Why??*

• • •

Thursday, 12:17am, near Mt White

Durriken switched the engine off, leaving the cabin of the BMW in darkness. "Namid, where is Solomon now?"

"Hard to tell," came the voice from the backseat. "I'm having trouble seeing them in the dark. They're in a car, and it would appear Solomon is badly hurt. He's been stabbed."

Who gives a fuck? thought Durriken. "Do he and Kadar have the Tecpatl with them?"

"I can't see...wait. Yes. I think so. There's a bloodstained bundle on the front seat. I'm guessing that's it."

"*Excellent*. It'll be good to finally get my own back on Kadar." Durriken sensed the threads of Fate again. They were strengthening, and fast.

Thunder rumbled overhead as storm clouds blew in from the east. "Oh, this just gets better and better," said Durriken, with a grin. "Gentlemen, the Exarchs are smiling upon us tonight. They're nearly here. You both know what to do?"

The two junior Seers nodded.

"Good. Then I suggest you go find yourselves suitable positions. Wait until I give the signal."

Durriken got out of the car and strode to the middle of the road. *I want Kadar to see my face before he dies.*

The silence was broken by the sounds of a screaming engine, winding its way up the hill towards them. The bush was lit up briefly as the storm moved overhead, lightning flashes lit up the road as though it was day. Rain started falling, but Durriken didn't care.

With a roar, a Chrysler screamed around the closest corner. Durriken waited, the car coming straight for him, its headlights almost blinding him. There was no way the driver couldn't see him.

"Now!" he screamed. With that, he visualized all the oil in the car's engine instantly evaporating. The Imago solidified in his mind and he unleashed the spell.

As he did, the area was lit up by an enormous lightning strike. Three bolts lanced out of the cloud above and struck an old eucalyptus tree by the side of the road. It burst into flames and started to collapse, just as the car's engine seized with a hideous shriek and an enormous shower of sparks.

The Chrysler slid sideways and the tree trunk crashed down on it, crushing the roof. There was a sudden shattering of glass and then the hillside was covered in both darkness and silence once again.

Durriken strode forward to the car, his hands clenching and unclenching. He hadn't realized just how much he was looking forward to this.

As he reached the car, a man was struggling to free himself from the driver's seat. Lying half out of the car, his legs trapped underneath the dashboard, he looked up as Durriken approached.

"Hello, Kadar," said Durriken. "Fancy meeting you in a place like this."

"You...who are you?" said the mage, blood running down his face.

"What?" Durriken said, a little surprised. "You don't remember me? I was the young Seer you left for dead in Las Vegas about ten years ago. I spent six months in the hospital after that accident. You took something from me then, and now I'm going to repay the favor."

He walked around to the other side of the car, reached in through the shattered window and pulled out the blood-stained bundle. Flipping the cloth

off, he saw the shiny obsidian blade that he had seen the night before in his dreams. *Dear God, this thing is real.*

Kadar groaned as he managed to free one of his legs from the tangled wreckage. Durriken walked back around and stood over the bloodied Mystagogue.

"It's such a beautiful piece. I do sincerely thank you for retrieving it for me." He knelt down and grabbed Kadar's chin with his free hand, so that he was looking into the mage's eyes.

"You see, once again, the Exarchs have provided us with something that you wanted for yourself. The Pentacle will never win. It's only a matter of time before the Seers of the Throne crush your orders once and for all."

With a swift flick of his wrist, Durriken slashed the obsidian blade across Kadar's throat. The blade almost drank the blood as Kadar's eyes went wide, before fading into lifelessness.

Durriken stood, and wiped the blade on the cloth that had been covering it. He turned to face the other two Seers.

"Gentlemen, I thank you for your assistance tonight. With your help, the Seers have recovered another Artifact from the hands of the Pentacle. Such deeds will *not* be forgotten. But now, we should return to Sydney and leave this mess for the Sleepers to tidy up."

• • •

Thursday, 2:32am, overlooking Sydney Harbour

Durriken sat on the floor, tears trickling down his face as he watched Lexia's naked form sleep. The adrenaline and anger that had been coursing through him when he killed Kadar had gone, replaced by the enormity of the task ahead of him.

I don't want to do this! he thought. *I can't do this! This time, the Exarchs are asking too much of me!*

He held the obsidian sacrificial knife up to the light, watching as it gleamed softly. It seemed to fit perfectly into his hand, almost as if it had been made for him, thousands of years ago.

He suddenly remembered the words of his mentor when he was an apprentice. "The Exarchs often demand much of us, and they expect our complete obedience. In return, they will reward us beyond our wildest imagination. But they will ask for things you may not be willing to give them. The cost of their patronage is often exceptionally high. Are you willing to do whatever they ask in return for your power?"

Durriken had sworn then that he was, and he felt the strength of his conviction return. He stood and wiped the tears from his face with his jacket sleeve.

Walking silently over to the bed, he looked down on Lexia's sleeping body. It was perfect in so many ways. She was perfect for him, the woman of his dreams.

And yet, she had forgotten what being a Seer of the Throne was all about. She had lost sight of what the Exarchs wanted of their servants.

Now, they had asked him to prove himself at her expense.

Lexia stirred beneath him. "Durri? Is that you?"

Durriken bend down and kissed her forehead lightly. "Yes, Lex, it's me."

"Mmmmm, I was dreaming of you. Are you coming to bed?"

"In a minute, there's something I need to do first." He kissed her again. "Always remember, I love you with my whole heart, more than any other person in this world."

She smiled up at him and his heart melted. "I know."

She was still smiling when he slammed the obsidian knife into her belly and forced it up through her diaphragm. Her eyes went wide and she tried to scream, but her lungs were failing.

With his spare hand, he reached inside her chest and tore her still beating heart from her chest and held it up in front of her.

Tears started streaming down his face again. "The Exarchs demanded it. I'm so, so sorry, Lex. I do love you, but sometimes we must sacrifice the very things that we love so they may triumph."

Her heart stopped beating and Durriken just stood there and let her blood run down his arm.

"Bravo, Mr Durriken. Bravo."

Durriken whirled around to find a portly man silhouetted in the doorway to the living room. "Who the hell are you?"

The man chuckled softly. "My name is Sharif. The Exarchs sent me to oversee your case. You have done exceptional work this evening. Not only have you recovered an Artifact from the hands of the Pentacle, you have used it to do the Exarchs' bidding, even though it has cost you very dearly indeed."

Durriken looked down at the eviscerated corpse of his lover. He dropped the knife and the dead heart onto her chest. "Was it worth it?"

Sharif laughed gently again. "You may ask that now, but in a year, or three, you will know with all your heart that you did the right thing tonight.

"The Exarchs greatly reward those who do what they are asked. True power, after all, requires sacrifice."

The Storyteller

BY RICK CHILLOT

Jimmy held the warm bundle close to his body as he stepped across the soggy field. The Wilsons had moved off this land long ago, and it hadn't been farmed since. The soil was scarred with deep ruts and pockmarks, some filled with rain from the night before. Jimmy noted the mud that was clinging to his shoes and pant legs, and for a moment he worried about how to explain it. But then he remembered that his mother and father didn't care about that kind of thing. Not anymore.

Up ahead, at the top of a rise, he saw the curved stone wall of the old well. The ground felt a bit drier and firmer as Jimmy made his way up the slope. Mosquitoes and midges buzzed around his face. He shifted the bundle, cradling it in one arm to shoo away the insects with his free hand. He felt the blankets move and twist, and pulled them to his chest again.

As Jimmy reached the well, a slim, rufous, four-legged animal stepped out from behind the stones. The creature's pointed ears twitched once; it raised its angular muzzle and sniffed the air. A light breeze carried the scent of spoiled meat; the creature shook its head, pawed at the ground with one black-socked foot and raised its bushy tail.

"Fox," Jimmy said to the animal, "Are you sure we should do this?"

Fox sat on his haunches, glanced to the right and left, taking in the barren farmland, the broken-down barn, the dirt road that led back to town. "I've given it a lot of thought, Jimmy," he said. "And I'm certain it's for the best. Don't you trust me?"

"Sure I do." Jimmy stepped to the edge of the well and looked over, down into the darkness. "I think it's waking up." He said suddenly, as the cloth bundle quivered and shook. "I think it wants to come out."

"Hurry, Jimmy," Fox told him. "Hurry. If it wakes and you hear its voice, you won't be able to do it."

Jimmy stared at the swaddled white cloth for another moment. Then, taking a deep breath, he heaved the parcel into the well with an exaggerated

grunt. He looked in and saw the bright white shape, lit by the sun, tumble into the black. He felt like he'd thrown a scrap of food into the maw of some hungry giant. At the last moment, before it was swallowed up by inky shadow, the wrappings flew apart and Jimmy could see the infant's stubby arms and legs flailing and waving.

• • •

"You did good today, Jimmy," Fox told him that night as he curled up at the end of Jimmy's bed. "So I have another story for you. Do you want to hear it now?"

"Sure," Jimmy said. He didn't bother to whisper, because his parents never checked up on him after bedtime. Not lately, anyway.

"This one's called:

The Bull and the Ants

There was once a large, strong bull who was mightier than any other in his herd. None of the younger, weaker, bulls ever dared challenge him. One day, the bull decided that life with the herd was boring, and so he decided to see what lay beyond the pasture. All the cows warned him not to go, and said that there were unspeakable dangers out there, and that it was much better to stay safe where they were. The bull just laughed at their fear, convinced that there could be no other animal as strong and powerful as he.

So the bull easily broke through the fence and began walking through the field beyond. He had travelled for a whole day when he heard a small voice call out to him. "Please, mighty one, do not go any further." Looking down, the bull saw a tiny ant. "Please change your direction, O powerful bull," said the ant, "or you may tread on me and my family." The bull laughed. "No one tells me what to do or where to walk!" With that, he deliberately crushed the ant beneath his hoof. The bull kept walking, and every time he saw an ant he crushed it out of spite.

But then, as his powerful hoof crashed to the ground to crush another ant, his hoof broke through the turf. The bull had stepped into an anthill and now his foot was trapped. He tried to pull out, only to find his other three limbs trapped as well. As the bull snorted with rage, hundreds of ants swarmed from their holes and crawled up his legs and flanks and chest and back until his body was covered with the insects. They began to rip away his flesh, carrying bit after bit of him down into their anthills.

With his last ounce of strength, the bull turned his head and saw the broken fence, very far away now. He could just make out all the cows standing behind it, watching. And then the ants carried away his eyes.

• • •

"Babykiller!"

Jimmy was in the far corner of the schoolyard, where the asphalt was torn up, when he heard the snickers of the three older boys. They passed him by, then stopped and turned back to look at him.

"I never see this kid in church," one was saying. "How come you don't go to church, kid?"

"Maybe he has better things to do."

"Maybe he's out looking for babies to kill. Babykiller."

"How come you call him that?" The runt of the trio asked, his voice ponderous with boredom.

"What are you, stupid? Everybody in town knows the story," their leader answered. "His whole family are babykillers. They took his mom to the plant and they cut out her baby and hung it on a meat hook. Isn't that right, Babykiller?"

"You'll be sorry," Jimmy sighed.

"What did you say?" The lead boy stepped closer; his companions scuffled their feet on the macadam as they followed. "You little fuck, what did you—"

Then the three aggressors began shaking their hands in the air, brushing at their arms and legs. Jimmy was surprised at how girlish their shrieks were as he watched the black and yellow blurs of a dozen wasps diving at their faces and hands. The boys fled in a blind panic, not looking back, falling to the ground more than once.

"Jimmy." He already knew Fox was behind him; he didn't turn around. "You don't have to go to school anymore, Jimmy. I told you that. You have more important work to do."

• • •

That night, Jimmy lay in bed thinking about his parents. Rumors about them had been making the rounds for over a year now. His mother and father assured him there was no truth to them, but their explanations of what had really gone on were unsatisfying. They said he wasn't old enough to understand, that he shouldn't worry about it.

From what Jimmy had pieced together, his mother and father had been in a big argument, bigger than any they'd ever had before, right in front of everyone at the plant. And then his mother had gotten sick somehow. She tried to get to the bathroom but didn't make it in time, and ended up bleeding all over the floor. One schoolmate who'd taunted Jimmy about it said Jimmy's father pushed his mother down, but Jimmy didn't believe that.

To help himself fall asleep, Jimmy muttered one of Fox's stories:

The Leg

Long ago there was a man who became so furious that he tore himself in half. He threw his bottom half down a deep well, where it lay in the cold dark for seven years. Then the man's left leg couldn't stand the loneliness anymore ,

so it ripped itself away from the right leg and wriggled up the side of the well like a snake. Once out of the well, the leg crawled through the countryside for days until it came across the small cottage where the leg used to live. It waited until dark and then slithered into the house.

The next morning, the man rolled over in bed and felt something cold and hairy brush up against his arm. He threw back the bed sheets and there he saw the leg, which had crawled into bed with him during the night.

"What is this thing!" the man shouted.

"I'm your leg!" answered the leg. "Don't you want me back?"

"Leg?" the main cried. "I don't know what that is!" He grabbed the leg by the big toe and tossed it into the fire, where the leg was burned to ash.

"What a disgusting and incomprehensible nightmare," the man said to himself, using his arms to crawl into the kitchen for breakfast.

• • •

After breakfast, Jimmy was on his way up to his room when he heard his parents' voices.

"What are we going to do with him?" His mother sounded like she was about to cry. "He just won't go to church. People notice. They're talking. He has to come to church with us, he has to."

"I know," his father was saying. "I — well, making him go to church when he doesn't want to, that isn't what Our Lord wants. He wants Jimmy to come to Him of his own free will."

Jimmy gripped the top of the banister with both hands, pulling himself up. He leaned over to see his parents clearly.

"I…I know you're right." His mother wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "I just…I just hate all the talk."

Jimmy watched his father lean in to kiss his mother on the cheek. But before his lips touched her skin, he stopped, holding his face a few inches from her, his lips pursed. He looked confused, blinking his eyes and taking a sudden breath. He looked like he was trying to remember what it was he was about to do. Jimmy's mother looked equally puzzled, and after a few awkward seconds, she took a step back. His father pulled back as well, and they looked at each other, not upset, not afraid, just uncertain. Jimmy's father shook his head, as if to wake himself from a stupor; his mother gave a little shrug. Then they nodded and went their separate ways.

Later, Fox told Jimmy he'd be away for several hours. But before he left, he shared a new story.

Grandpa's Favorite

There was an old man who lived in a house near the edge of the world, and he had four grandchildren. Every morning they would walk to the great glass wall

that separated the world from what was beyond. One day, the eldest grandchild said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child began to climb. They watched him for a while, until he was a small dot, and then was gone.

The next day, the child returned, and they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Light," the child said, "but I have no eyes, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the second oldest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child climbed. When the child returned on the following day, they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Music," the child said. "But I have no ears, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the third oldest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child climbed. When the child returned on the following day, they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Time," the child said, "But I have no clock, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the youngest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"Wait," said the old man. He went into the house and returned with an iron box. "You are my favorite grandchild," he said, "so before you climb, take these." He opened the box. "These are eyes, and these are ears, and this is a clock."

The child took the eyes, the ears, and the clock. And then, for the first time, he saw his grandfather, and heard his grandfather's voice, and knew how long they'd been living in the house at the edge of the world. And he screamed in horror and tore himself to shreds.

• • •

"Is someone there?"

The voice was so soft that Jimmy wondered, at first, if he'd imagined it. He stood still for a minute, listening. The room was dim, even with the sunlight that found its way through the narrow basement window he'd pushed

open. The voice did not repeat itself, but seemed to Jimmy that the voice waited behind the only door in the room.

He knew that Fox wouldn't like him coming here to see the Magician. Fox seemed to regret ever mentioning the Magician. But Fox had let enough details slip for Jimmy to find this place, a long-abandoned farmhouse across the road from the plant. "You can't trust a magician, Jimmy," Fox had told him. "All magicians are liars. And when magicians lie, their lies become real."

Jimmy considered turning back, but he didn't relish the thought of going outside so soon, smelling that carrion stink, or hearing the awful shrieks and the insect noises that drifted on the wind. So he approached the door and reminded himself of Fox's warnings concerning magicians. Not to trust them, not to tell them your name, not to give them anything of yours, not to let them look into your eyes or touch you.

The door made no sound as Jimmy pushed it open. A few flies whirled around his head and sped off. The cage that the Magician was lying in looked just like the large dog kennels Jimmy had seen once at the state fair. This room had a light on, a bare bulb that hung from the ceiling and made shadows along the walls and floor. Jimmy stepped into the room and squinted at the figure lying in the cage. The Magician's form was mostly covered by a dark blanket or sheet. Jimmy could only see the vague outlines of a body beneath, and a thin-fingered hand jutting past the blanket's edge.

Jimmy cleared his throat.

"Is…Someone…there?" The Magician's voice was faint, and not as deep as Jimmy had expected. He took one step closer, just as the Magician rolled over and the sheet fell away to reveal a face.

"Come closer," the voice said. Jimmy didn't move. He was staring at the Magician's narrow chin and pale cheeks. It was a woman's face, he realized, and a woman's voice.

"Who…" the Magician whispered, sitting up slowly, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders. "Who is it?"

"I'm…I'm…" Jimmy wasn't sure what to say. He'd been looking into her eyes, contrary to Fox's warning. But it didn't seem to matter; the lady's eyes were half-closed and distant, as if she were in a trance.

"Don't be afraid," she said to him. She was young, Jimmy realized, younger than his mother, younger than some of his teachers. Her hair was brown and reached to the bottom of her ears and was very messy, as if she'd been sick in bed for a week. Her lips looked dry and cracked. She stared at Jimmy as if she couldn't see him properly.

Then her eyes widened a bit.

"I need help," she said, not quite looking at him.

Jimmy considered this for a moment. Then he said, "Fox says it wants to eat you."

"Fox…Something attacked me. It looked like a fox."

"Why don't you just magic yourself out of here?" Jimmy glanced back at the door, making sure it was still open. He'd forgotten the questions he'd been planning to ask, the questions about his parents and how to get them back to normal.

The Magician didn't answer right away. She seemed to sag a bit beneath the sheet; her shoulders slumped and she wasn't sitting up as straight. "What's your name?" She asked.

Jimmy just shook his head, slowly.

"Look…There's something you should know. There's something around here. From…Somewhere else." She rubbed her eyes. "I can't concentrate…" For a moment, she seemed to shake off her stupor.

"Listen," she said, more urgently now, "you have to listen to me."

"I already know all about it," Jimmy said to her. "And it's too late for you to do anything."

He'd made a mistake, he realized. He'd come to ask for some way to fix things, a way that didn't involve doing what Fox wanted him to do. But the Magician couldn't help him. She couldn't do anything. Jimmy sat down on the floor. Despite his disappointment, he felt like he should do something for her. So he began to recite one of Fox's stories.

The Mannequin in the Closet

There was a girl whose parents died when she was young, so she was sent to live with her aunt, who was a dressmaker, and her uncle, who was a tailor. The girl spent every day alone in the house while her aunt and uncle were working in their shop. They had told her that she was welcome to play anywhere in the whole house, but that she was never to open the closet door next to the big chest of drawers, up in the highest room of the attic.

Soon enough, she'd explored every nook and cranny in the house several times over, and her curiosity go the best of her. She decided that she had to see what was in that attic closet. She climbed three flights of stairs, entered the attic, stood in front of the door, closed her eyes tight and then turned the knob. When the door was open, she opened her eyes and saw two eyes looking right back at her. Leaning inside the closet was a mannequin, the same size as her, with glass eyes as blue as hers and blond hair as gold as hers and wearing a pretty dress just like hers. The little girl shrieked and turned and dashed for the attic staircase.

As she ran, she could hear the steady patter of footsteps following after. She ran down the stairs, and behind her she could hear every step creak in turn. She ran into the parlor, closing the door behind her, and as she reached the kitchen she could hear the parlor door opening again, and as she exited the kitchen she heard behind her the slapping of feet against the kitchen tiles.

She ran around to the back stairway and up to the second floor hall. She ran into her bedroom and slid beneath the big four-poster bed.

From her hiding place, she heard the kitchen door fly open, and then the sound of footsteps coming up the back stairway, and then the pitter-patter of foot-falls coming toward the bedroom. Then she had an idea. She fled the bedroom and ran up the attic stairs and dashed into the closet and slammed the door closed. She crouched down in the darkness and gripped the doorknob with both hands and pulled the door as tight as she could. She heard the attic door open, and heard footsteps coming closer to her, and closer and closer. And then they stopped.

The little girl heard a voice, and it said:

"You nasty mannequin. You won't get out of that closet ever again."

And then she heard the sound of the big chest of drawers being pushed tight against the closet door, and the attic door closing, and footsteps fading away down the attic stairs.

After the story, Jimmy rose. "You can tell me a story if you want to."

"What…Would you like to hear?"

"Tell me about the day you came to town."

He didn't expect her to comply, but she began talking. "I was exploring. With my mind, with my senses, with my body. I explored in every way I knew how. First I heard the cry of an infant, echoing through time. So I retrieved it from the bottom of a well, but it wasn't an infant. Not anymore. It was just… Flesh. Shaped like a baby, wearing its clothing…Animate, but not alive. Its head was like a mass of ground beef, squirming like worms….

"Then I went into the school. All the classrooms were empty. All the children and teachers were gathered in the cafeteria, sitting at the long tables, silent, staring. There were…heaps of bloody, butchered meat, piled on the tables. Every so often, someone reached over and ripped off a piece. They'd put it in their mouth and chew, not even brushing the flies and maggots off first. At three o'clock a bell rings, everyone springs to life, running and laughing and unaware of what they'd been doing….

"Then something took hold of my mind, and it pulled me…down a long, steel-plated hallway, marked with rust-colored handprints. It became narrower and narrower, and at the end...hooks and chains, the smell of rot, flies crawling on lips and eyelids. Decapitated cows wandering listlessly, the stumps of their severed heads opening and closing like mouths, vomiting clouds of horseflies and hornets. And the kill floor, strewn with fingers and toes. And…a faceless mound, marbled pink, white. The fleshy pile, ragged, raw muscle and gristle and grease…it rears and unfolds itself into a vast maw…and the people walk in…a soft lipless mouth, rows of maggots hanging like teeth, a long throat that stretches into infinity…"

"Tell what you did then." It was Fox's voice. Jimmy jumped to his feet, opened his mouth to explain what he was doing there, but Fox interrupted. "Go ahead, Juna. Tell what you did then."

"It was horrible. I…."

"You offered yourself to It, didn't you? Offered yourself to the Meat God, the King of Flies, the Flesh that Devours. Begged it for power in exchange for service. Am I wrong?" It was the first time Jimmy had ever heard Fox sound angry.

"I…."

"Admit it." Fox paced around the cage as he spoke. "You expected this entity to be something you could bargain with. Something you could outwit. Something you could trade favors with, a fast track to knowledge and strength if you didn't mind getting your hands dirty."

"All right. Yes. But it's different now." The Magician's voice was stronger, steadier. She didn't seem half-asleep anymore.

"Is it?"

"Yes! I saw the thing. I felt its…its breath on my soul. My God…I fouled myself and maybe I'll always be tainted, but all I want now is to send that abortion back where it came from. I'll fight it to the end. I'll fight it. Just give me a chance." She staggered to her feet, gripped the mesh of the cage.

Fox looked at Jimmy. "I put her here because this place is so close to the Meat God that magic is difficult to make," he said "but she can't stay for much longer, or the thing will sense her presence." Jimmy nodded, not sure he understood. "Our options are few and we could use the help. This is your town, Jimmy. Your people. What do you think? Can we trust her ?"

He wanted to say he didn't know. No adult had ever invited him to participate in one of their arguments before. He looked at the Magician, barely able to hold herself upright. Humbled, defeated, eyes downcast. And she reminded him of himself. Of how beaten he felt after the local bullies had their fun with him, how shamed he felt when his mother and father brushed his fears and aspirations aside like crumbs. How foolish he felt when his teachers sent him back to his desk, after he'd failed miserably to solve some math problem at the blackboard. He knew that feeling, and he knew it came with a determination to never make the same mistake again.

"Yes. I think…yes."

Fox stared at Jimmy for seemed like a long while. Then Fox's left ear twitched. "All right then," he said. "She and I need to talk. I'll see you at home."

• • •

When he got to the house, Jimmy hopped off his bike before it came to a full stop. He slowed down as he entered, catching the screen door so it wouldn't slam shut behind him. He didn't expect his mother to be waiting in the living room. He'd imagined that he would slip inside, grab a few important things and slip out again. But when he saw her he couldn't keep himself from approaching.

"Mom," he said, his voice cracking, "I need to tell you something…."

His mother looked at him quizzically. She was holding a bag of trash; something was leaking out of the bottom and creating a dark stain on the carpet. She didn't seem to notice.

"Mom," Jimmy said, "I have to go away. I have to leave town because Fox wants me to do something that I don't want to and…well, I wanted to say…remember last year when you and Dad said I'd be having a little brother or sister soon? Remember? And I got mad and said I didn't want it and I ran out of the house? Well, I…" He sniffed. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I really am. I—"

She dropped the bag, crossed her arms. "You're the one they talk about in the hotbox," she said, "aren't you? The boy who won't go to Meat Church? What was your name again? No, names don't matter anymore."

"Mom?" He rubbed the tears from his eyes.

His father entered the room. "Oh. Have we met. And you — you live here, too?"

She blinked at him. "Yes. It doesn't matter. Today's the day. We all become It."

"That's the boy." His father stood next to his mother. They didn't look at each other, they looked only at him. "That's the one we need to bring. The one that Our Lord of Butchered Flesh has been waiting for."

They moved toward him, calmly, patiently, and a pink, watery liquid was dripping from their hands. Even as Jimmy ran out the door, climbed shakily onto his bike, he was wondering if he could ever forget the putrid stink of the juices dribbling from his parent's fingers.

• • •

The metal hallway leading into the Processing Center was very long, and its plated walls made sounds bounce around at odd angles. There was a faint humming that sounded almost like music.

"Wait," Jimmy said.

Fox stopped walking. "Do you want one more story, then, before you do what has to be done?"

"Yes. Yeah, just one more, please."

" All right then. This one is called:

The Whispers in the Alley

Once there was a boy named Jimmy. Jimmy's father was the manager at a meatpacking plant, and his mother was in charge of the plant's finances. Jimmy was very unhappy because it seemed as if his mother and father didn't like each other anymore, and didn't like him, either. After school, Jimmy would ride his bike to the edge of town where his parents worked, and try to imagine what his parents were doing inside.

One day, Jimmy was coasting alongside the chain link fence in the back of the plant, when he thought he heard someone calling his name. He stopped his bike and walked up to the fence. And then he heard it again: "Jimmy..." It was a faint voice, not much more than a whisper. It seemed to be coming from the other side of the fence, where there was an alley between two of the plant's larger buildings.

"Jimmy...."

There was a gap in the fence where someone had once cut through some of the links. Jimmy was able to separate the edges and slip through.

"Jimmy...."

Jimmy followed the sound of the voice, walking slowly down the alley, holding his hand over his nose and mouth because of the stink. At the far end was a kind of loading dock, and a long row of Dumpsters and a huge pile of sagging trash bags. Jimmy walked closer, following the whispers. He found a small green trash bag toward the bottom of the pile, with grease and blood spots all over it.

"In here, Jimmy," whispered the voice, and Jimmy could see the bag move as the thing inside it spoke. "Help me."

"Where did you come from?" Jimmy asked the bag, crouching down to hear it more clearly.

"I was born, same as you," said the thing. "But I was born alone, with no one to talk to. If you'll be my friend, and tell me stories, I'll do great favors for you."

So Jimmy brought the bag home. The thing asked many questions, and Jimmy told it how unhappy he was. The thing in the bag said it could make Jimmy happy again, that it could make his parents forget about being mad all the time. It told Jimmy to untie the bag and reach inside, and he did. He only put the tips of his fingers in and immediately Jimmy felt something cold and wet. He yanked his hand out and saw, stuck to his little finger, the tiniest bit of raw, greasy meat.

"Feed this to your parents," the thing in the bag told him, "and they won't be angry anymore."

Jimmy thought and thought about this, and decided he would bury the meat, and then take the thing to the river and throw it in. But when his father got home he shouted at Jimmy for not putting away his bike, and when his mother got home she yelled at his father for something Jimmy couldn't understand, and two of them began their usual argument about someone called "Miss Carey" and Jimmy decided he'd do what the thing in the bag said after all. So he dropped the little bit of meat into the Crock-Pot where dinner was simmering. Neither his mother nor father seemed to notice anything different about the meal. Jimmy wasn't hungry, so he threw away his food when nobody was looking.

The next morning, Jimmy came down to breakfast to see his mother and father sitting at the table. For the first time in as long as he could remember, they were talking to each other in calm, polite tones. This seemed like a miracle to him. But then he noticed that every so often his mother would look at his father with a strange expression on her face, as if she wasn't sure who he was. And he caught his father, now and again, with the same expression. This scared Jimmy. So that night he took the bag back to the alley at the meatpacking plant and tossed it into one of the Dumpsters. And as the bag fell, it kept whispering "Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy...."

But that wasn't the end of the story, Because the thing in the bag had grown stronger on what it had taken from Jimmy's parents. It found others, and tricked them, and they fed on its flesh, it fed on their spirits. Soon it had emptied several people of their memories, their stories, the things that made them who they were. And then it had slaves that carried it deep into the plant, and they brought more people to taste its offerings; any who were able to resist got chopped into pieces and fed raw to the Meat. And it grew stronger and bigger, and soon everyone in town was feeding on it, and it was feeding on everyone.

Everyone except Jimmy. Because Jimmy's friend Fox had come to town. And he protected Jimmy from the Meat. In the end, it would be up to Jimmy, who had been first to feed the meat, to kill the thing. Fox had figured out a way to do it. But they had to do it soon, because the Meat had found a way to grow little bits of itself inside the people whose minds it had hollowed out. The Meat had tried it first with the body of a little baby, changing it into something the Meat could understand. Soon it would do the same to all its slaves. And then the Meat would have hundreds of bodies and would be unstoppable.

"And now the time has come," Fox finished.

"Are you really the same Fox I used to talk to when I was a little kid?"

"Does that matter?"

"I guess not." The echoing chorus of flies and flying insects was louder now. "I think I'm ready."

"I would do it if I could," Fox said. "But I'm a magician . My stories are too strong, they would make that thing too powerful, make it unbeatable."

"Sure," Jimmy replied. They had reached the end of the line. Jimmy stopped at the door. "Will I see my parents again?"

"I'm not certain," Fox said. "But everything that made your parents who they were is inside the Meat." Fox didn't look like a fox anymore; he was a tall man with red hair, dressed something like a cowboy, in a long reddish-brown duster coat and wide-brimmed hat. He had a pistol holstered on each hip. The lady magician walked next to him, alert and self-assured now, looking something like a nurse because she was dressed all in white.

Jimmy said, "I can feel them in there." He bent down to grab the handle, then stood up, raising the gate. It slid upwards like a garage door. "Can you come in the room with me?"

Fox shook his head. “Once things get going, the Meat will call on its servants to defend it,” Fox said. “Juna and I will have to stay out here to keep them from getting to you.”

“Oh. All right.” Jimmy raised the door until it was just higher than his head.

Juna knelt next to him, placed a hand on his shoulder. “Jimmy,” she said, “I’ll go in with you if you want me to.” Behind her, Fox crossed his arms and frowned.

Jimmy looked into her eyes. “No,” he said. “I didn’t think I could do this. I was going to run away today.”

“Why didn’t you?” She asked him.

He licked his lips. “I thought…I thought if I run, I’ll never be able to stop running. And always…in my head, I’ll always carry everything that happened here, without knowing how it all ends.”

“That’s my boy,” Fox whispered. He laid a hand on Jimmy’s other shoulder, gave it a squeeze. Then the two adults stepped back. “Good luck, Jimmy.” Fox said. “I know you can do it. I’m proud of you.”

Jimmy walked through the gateway. The door slid closed, softly, after he passed.

He didn’t hear what they said next:

“Does he stand a chance?” Juna retrieved a palm-sized mirror from her pocket as she asked.

“Of surviving? No. The thing will swallow him whole. That’s what I’m counting on.”

“You are?”

“I’ve been preparing him for weeks. Seeding his mind with stories. Special stories, carrying subliminal engrams to traumatize the creature with conflicting accounts of its own existence. I crafted them as best I could, based on what I’ve learned about its nature. It’s the best hope we’ve got. You can’t fight a thing like this conventionally—”

“Maybe,” she answered sharply. “Or maybe the time you’ve spent in this thing’s sphere of influence has warped your judgment, and you just gave it exactly what it wanted.” She held the mirror in her left hand and moved it in a slow figure-eight, frowning. “Something’s not right….”

Fox shrugged, drew his guns and cocked the triggers. “The world is just information, Juna. Stories. When you eat something, you’re making its story part of your story. When you work magic, you substitute one story for another. But we’ll have to debate all that later, if there is a later.” He handed one of the guns to Juna.

“With luck, spells will come easier once the Meat is distracted. If not….” He shrugged again. “They’re coming. It will be the housewifeflies who arrive first. Ignore their eyes and aim for the thorax.”

The Unhearted Man

BY MALCOLM SHEPPARD

The Nemean took his lead-heavy hand off my chest. I wept with the terror and joy you might feel after a numb year of living without a soul. The tragedy of Awakened life is that this wasn't a metaphor. I shook off gray memories and stared at the pores on my palms. They were pointillist etchings on the universe, starkly distinct.

My confused feelings condensed into one of the oldest emotional shapes; the sharp awkwardness you feel when a terrible guy does you a solid.

"Garfield."

The Nemean's breath smelled like bloody steak and coffee grounds. He was my terrible guy; the Thyrsus Master who used to run Boston like it was a failed state populated by meth-heads. To be fair, this describes about a quarter of Consilia. Just replace fine Filipino *shabu* with grimoires and other dangerous trinkets. He played the warlord and took what he wanted until his Silver Ladder, noted believers in benevolent tyranny, knocked him out of power and locked him up in his dreams.

Idiots. Our souls are expert escape artists. It's why we Awaken. We're addicts running sorcerous narco-states. I'm a Mysterium Censor; the guy who takes your magical dope, locks up the brown acid and sells you the good stuff, if you can handle it. Or I was. I wondered how many iPhone versions separated today from my last memory.

I felt drool on my chin.

"Garfield?" He tapped the side of my head with one of his big, wrinkled hands. His nails were thick and either black with dirt, or some animal trait he'd fostered in himself.

"Call me Khonsu. Please." I wiped my face with a shirt sleeve.

"Listen. I found you a durable soul, but it's still new to you. Avoid sugary foods and existential crises. It'll eventually feel like you were born with it." He smiled, all big yellow teeth framed by a gray-red beard. His dreads swayed like willow branches. It wasn't a hairstyle; I guess losing Hierarchy eliminated certain grooming demands he deemed superfluous.

"Sugary foods?"

"The previous owner had a sweet tooth. It's a good idea to avoid anything he liked. Otherwise, bad things might happen."

"What kind of bad things?" When I stood up, pink light cut across my chest in lines that snuck through the shutters. That's the color of smog and sunset; we were in my LA office, where I pretended to be a private eye.

"The unspecified, ominous kind. The same kind that will *definitely* befall you if anyone finds out who found you a soul."

"I get it. I don't get *why*." I felt a wordless, foreign longing for a Mars Bar.

"First, you owe me a favor now. Second, you're an honorable man, so you won't try to get out of it by telling anybody where to find me, will you?"

"No sir. What's the third reason?" There's always a third reason.

"You need to tell me why you're dead."

• • •

Avoid existential crises. Like fuck. I poked my corpse with a wand. I ate a Mars Bar.

Two years ago or so, a Reaper jumped me on the road to Salem. The Ebon Noose cabal ran Boston out of that town, from a cluster of creaky houses straight out of Nathaniel Hawthorne. They drank dark rum and watched the witch tourists from their balconies. The Noose used to be the Nemean's gang but when the warlord falls, his junta never gets so sentimental as to wait for him to return. They owed me for dealing with some cannibals back in '08, in a misadventure that cost me two fingers and my cabal. A mage alone is meat for the monsters, but I planned to buy protection with my earnings.

She'd pulled up to the bar with a brilliant smile and that move where they stare and keep touching your arm, but I drink scotch alone. She respected that, and only stuck around long enough to drug my double on the rocks.

She stole my soul. Again , *not* a metaphor.

I can't tell you what it feels like because afterward, you don't feel much of everything . After it happened my life turned into the dirty smear you edit out of your thoughts, because you're not feeling love, anger or the rest of it. Soulless people get nothing but these shuffling interstices. I don't remember much, though I assume the Nemean kept tabs on my body. Irons in the fire. Contingency plans. He was that sort of man.

This thing on the floor wasn't that body yet it was mine, down to the birthmark on my neck and the retro work pants my old friend Rex said, "Make you look like a college Communist."

My unbreathing doppelganger weighed down a dirty rug in Milwaukee at our old place. From back when Rex and I were a part of a cabal. I still paid rent here, but it hadn't been a safe spot since Libertines busted in a few years

back. When Rex teleported in to help, they beat the shit out of him. He quit. He told me he was done with "Mysterium Censor bullshit" and took a big step between the chains of distance, right out of my life.

In fact, it wore the *exact* clothes I remembered from that day.

I turned the body over. It looked like an angry chimp had ripped the soft parts off my face. Its left hand was bandaged, covering stumps of my (*no, its. Its.*) pinky and ring fingers. They were fresh wounds, just like after the cannibal had bit them off, days before my little home invasion. Blood seeped through the gauze. It was a new corpse, wearing six-year-old clothes and wounds.

Maybe that's when you died. Maybe you're a fucking ghost now, Garfield.

These were not useful thoughts.

I'd Spaced myself here, carving a short path through the maze of the universe. The blade-thin lines between ultradimensions had only left superficial wounds, spiral scratches on my arms and face like the work of an artistic, rabid cat. Now it was time to peer along these edges instead. I wanted to see this body's sympathetic bonds.

Demons of the Knives, show me the red connections you cut. I'm Aten's shadow, moon-mirror of God! Obey!

The apartment dissolved, leaving darkness and the body. Blood leapt from its wounds, streaming in dozens of perfect, red lines. Touch one, and you'd see a mystic bond. I dipped a finger into a thick stream that poured from the body's broken face.

Me. I was inside the body, so still. My soul's eye wandered out, a newborn fly from the rot like the Egyptian *Ba*, my winged Self. The corpse wasn't just a sympathetic object like a witch-doll or photograph. This was me. I was dead.

But not just here.

I also lay dead against a pine that sprouted between hunks of Canadian Shield. I was cut up. I felt severed segments that refused to line up into arms and legs.

So I was three men: two dead, one alive. Alive! I flew from ruined flesh to the bright third of myself, and the light became my old apartment, my breathing body. I vomited on the Nemean's boots.

• • •

"How'd you get here?" I tore into brats and fries. The Nemean sipped a glass of water.

"I didn't," he said. "This isn't me. It's a repurposed, shape-changed body into which I've shoved a recalcitrant little spirit — or into which I've been shoved, I suppose — who's been modified to act like me, and in my best interests."

"Where did the body come from?"

"Where did your soul come from? Efficiencies, Garfield. He wasn't a nice man, but he makes fantastic raw material. Half for each of us."

"Good to know. It's Khonsu, by the way."

"The spirit was an asshole too, but what do you expect from a minor god of urban decay? Anyway, how goes the investigation?"

I told him about the fresh body here and the third, out in some forest.

"I think I know who killed me here," I said. "Given when I was wearing the clothes, it'd be some Libertine assholes from Chicago. I remember kicking their asses back to Wrigley Field though."

"US Cellular. That's almost the right question." Not-Nemean smirked.

"*Almost?* Is this a fucking game to you?" I banged the table with my left hand but my fist was off — it still feels like I've got five fingers — and it slipped. My thumb clipped the plate and it jumped, launching half a brat onto my lap. "Shit. Why do you even care? You're so smart, why couldn't you find my original soul?"

"Better questions. I know I can be a little intimidating, Garfield. Why am I not eating?"

"What?"

He cleared his throat and I felt a spot of his phlegm hit my neck. "Social carnivores dole out food by status. Last in gets skin, facial muscles, or nothing. So here I am, letting you eat your fill and take the lead. I didn't even come as my true, scary self. So now that you're *confident*, let me answer. Third, one of my former subordinates was supposed to turn your soul over to the Mysterium, where it would presumably find its way back to you. They complained to the, ah, *interim government* of Boston that it wasn't the genuine article. It took a suitably brutal, theatrical interrogation to establish that their courier never knew about the switch. That leads to your second question. Why would anyone steal your soul so carefully? Tremere would kill the courier to double their haul. That's interesting, isn't it?

"This is the part where I, the low-status primate, wait for your approval and permission to continue." He snapped his fingers in my face.

I twitched. "Yeah! Interesting. Go on."

"First question last, then! Yes, it's a game," said the fake Nemean. "It's not my game, and I've only recently learned the rules. I'm afraid I'm not even a player, but a piece: a sort of bishop, sideswiping certain problems so the pawns can trudge on."

"Nice. Very cryptic. Is mysterious wizard shit part of the rules?"

"I don't know. I'm not the real Nemean, remember?" He grabbed half my fries, wadded them together and ate them in six bites. "Must go — I'm leading his pursuers astray. Don't forget about the half-sausage on your pants."

• • •

"Batter up, motherfucker!"

My hands were the rays of the Aten; God in the sun's disk. I channeled its power through a Louisville Slugger and turned Bo "Grand Slam" Dodson's sternum into a spider's thorax, because I caught him right in the chest and twelve ribs broke off into sharp legs that grabbed and stabbed his lungs. Twelve. Maybe not a spider. What has twelve legs? Anyway, he gargled enthusiastically; phlegmy blood smacked my lapels.

Last time, the Game of Geometric Perfection bum-rushed me. They're Free Councilors, modern mages who rip magic from mundane culture. They were obsessed with baseball, and loved the shapes, stats, symbols, and exalted Americana. Bo was an Ecstatic: an intuitive body-weaver. Give him time to breathe and he'd channel the pain to heal, even ride it into speed and strength. That's why he smiled when I picked him up, but not when I tossed him off the roof and teleported his ass out of town.

I took in the view from the roof of US Cellular Field until the rest of the Game arrived. They probably heard the screams.

"Garfield. I don't know how you're still in the game, but I think you're about to strike out." That was Triplex, dressed head to toe in White Sox merchandise. He was a trim man with a quick stride, and his arms whipped out as he walked, apelike and long, like a pitcher's. He left the trap door open and as he walked across the U in the stencil on the roof, the rest of his crew followed. Southpaw cracked her knuckles after tying back her cornrows, and Pennant, the stats woman, just popped her head up and adjusted her glasses, presumably readying herself for some magic Moneyball shit. After Grand Slam, Southpaw was the heavy; she beat the shit out of me in Milwaukee (*and probably ripped your face off*) before I got away (*no you didn't*).

"Sure we can play? Looks like you're missing a player from the field. Gee Trip, this baseball metaphor bullshit is kind of fun." I dropped the bloody bat and drew my wand, pointing it like a pistol — ridiculous, but Libertines don't know that. "I'm a cricket fan myself, capable of outdoing you for impenetrable banter from a boring sport, so to get to it; Why aren't you trying to kill me now?"

I watched their throats twitch and eyes dance. *Amateurs* do that when they're conversing telepathically. I raised my hand.

"Two reasons. You don't know why I'm alive, and you don't know where I put your friend. Oh, I can feel Moneyball back there trying *so hard* to bust open my shields, but that's her second choice. She should be able find him through his sympathetic threads but she can't. Right?"

"You'll tell us sooner or later." Triplex took off his Ray-Bans and gave me an eyefuck, though he smiled. "Pennant's going to find a way in, or maybe 'Paw's just going to beat it out of you. Batter up!"

"That's what I said. But listen, Trixie."

"Tri—"

"Tipper. Timmy. Fuck you. I'll tell you where he is. The benefit of belonging to a hidebound society of non-baseball worshiping sorcerers is that we need nice, safe spots to stow dangerous things. Bobo's cooling his heels in one. A Witch made me swear a binding oath, so I can't tell anyone its location. It even suppresses connections to unauthorized users. He's gone diamond duck, chaps!"

"Diamond duck?"

"Cricket slang. Cricket, remember?"

"Fuck it. Let's negotiate." Triplex put his sunglasses back on.

• • •

"So, no Cubs fans?" The Sox lost, but we got a great view. Triplex told me they never influence the game.

"The Cubs are the werewolves' team." His eyes betrayed no bullshit.

We compared stories. In 2008, I snatched Ken Hart, a Sleepwalker who wrote tongue-in-cheek conspiracy books based on prophetic visions. The Free Council had wanted him bad, because despite their talk about uncovering revelations in everyday culture, they constantly hurt for access to grimoires, mystic places and other stuff Hart could find through his weird dreams. I hid him in Milwaukee. The Game tracked me down, but I teleported Hart away, and took a beating from Southpaw until they got bored. Or maybe Southpaw killed me — that's what the Game remembered.

"Why'd you do it?"

They twitched with telepathy again, and Southpaw said, "No. I'm going to be straight. I'm not a killer. We didn't even want to do it. The Founder pushed it."

Triplex glared at her. "You want to say it in front of this guy?"

"Founder? You're talking about the first Libertines, aren't you? From a hundred years ago?"

"Yeah." Southpaw flung her ball cap in the corner. "I didn't join the Council to keep secrets for some old-ass wizards. That's Diamond bullshit. Some of them are still alive. We're not supposed to say anything because they're afraid of assassins or something and hey, nothing says 'forward-thinking' like following the security policies we set a hundred years ago. He said we needed to kill you, man. He even wrecked your defensive shit so I could do the deed. Me. Because *they* were too chickenshit to get their hands dirty."

"'Paw." Triplex put a hand on her forearm; she pulled it back and smacked him, hard.

"Fuck you! Is that what you're going to use me for now? You think that since I did it once I'm the team's designated murderer?"

I raised my hand. "I appreciate your regret but maybe you can do this another time. Who was the Founder?"

Southpaw opened her mouth and closed it, failing to speak. Her forehead wrinkled with frustration. "I knew it. Why the fuck don't I know it?"

"Maybe he ensorcelled you. Anybody else?" I looked around and saw more blank faces, so I drew two fingers over my eyes. The mudra triggered my subtle senses; the world caught fire with Prime. *Words in Aetherial flame.* I looked for seals of bound thought, but the angels left no signatures to indicate a spell. I've always sucked at psychic magic, however, so I wasn't confident about my readings until Triplex said, "It's Time."

I dismissed my visions. You can always tell when Awakened refer to Arcana instead of ordinary words. Their voices deepen to indicate Capital Letters.

"Time. Destiny. It went wrong around him." He waved his hands like he was trying to paint a picture. "We don't know his name because we were never supposed to know it. The more we talk about it, the more he slips away. I've got to tell you now. He's Latino, maybe? Thin. Pennant, let him in the circuit so he can see."

"See who?" A whisper entered my thoughts. I let them in, and saw a teenager with gray-shot hair in a cotton robe. Dry heat hurt my face, forcing a blink, and he was gone.

Triplex stood up fast, startled. "Were we talking about someone? I don't remember."

"I've still got it. How long will I keep it?"

"Don't know," he said. "Time's hitting fouls around you."

• • •

I took the big step through Space. It was easy — I *was* the third corpse as much as the second, as much as my breathing self, so it was no more difficult than touching my own face. And that's what I did when I arrived. It was quartered by clean, deep slashes. I traced them with a finger. They were still wet but given the last body's saintly state of preservation, it meant nothing. Why did it always have to be my face?

My eyes settled on luxury cottages on wild granite, and maple trees and pines, black against a deep navy night. The moon marked Eastern Standard Time and my phone zeroed in to Sherin Island on Stoney Lake, Ontario, Canada. (I made a mental note to wipe my phone's really interesting location data later.)

I swept the phone across the rock and its light caught a mottled skull, crowned with corroded knives. I contemplated a hieroglyph, and my eyes saw

night as day. The skull topped a rusted steel skeleton, its every bone decorated with blades. Two more leaned against a boulder to the left. They were the fucking Metal Dead.

I admired anything that made full use of the Moros oeuvre, but not the willful irresponsibility of anyone who'd not only freely share an innovative way to desecrate corpses (and produce new ones, at the end of bloody metal bones) but build it up from black metal album covers, ensuring the shallowest possible moral approach. I recognized the Metal Dead from a Schattenbahn album. They were more Free Council trash; a German industrial metal band that distributed magic by CD. (Slightly retro, but even Libertines can't digitally distribute grimoires — *yet*.) The spell enhanced animated skeletons by turning them to steel sculptures with lots of sharp, pointy bits. They could rip right out of host corpses, and right into anybody you didn't like.

Libertines killed you twice, and time's hitting fouls all around. Think of the odds, Garfield. A one in three chance that you're real instead of an echo in a strange loop. A skipping CD squawking the little track of your life between real deaths.

Opening my subtle eye to the flow of Prime, I saw Matter and Death emanations; fading vortices shaped like skulls and pillars the color of LA's toxic sunset. My corpse shone stark white, as if illuminated by the desert sun. When I hovered my hand over it, I felt the same heat as when I'd seen the silver-haired boy.

A ley line cut across the lake, joining others at a stone tower on the adjoining island. The Hallow there wasn't far, and I knew how to walk on water — it's a classic Obrimos party trick, though less popular with a sensitive segment of our Path's membership. I made it a hundred yards before the remnants of a motor boat's wake caught my toe. Once you manipulate your relationship with water's surface tension to make it respond to you as a solid, it becomes a slippery bumpy, painful solid to land on. Blood from my skinned hands clung to the surface until I crashed ashore, turned, and watched it sink to feed the fish.

I approached. The forgotten soul of the world pulsed green through cracks in the tower's rough stones. If the Supernal Realms are five flames that blaze with power of existence, that light passes through a mile of smoky, distorted glass to generate our world, a funhouse hologram. Hallows are cracks in the glass, through which the full nourishing light shines. So are we Awakened, if we're brave.

I opened the door and felt my life fray like an old rope, its strength revealed as the sum of fragilities. I was many men, bound into one by the tightening noose of Time, or one cut to pieces against possibility's razor. Forgive the language. In magic, poetry often acts as our technical speech.

• • •

I followed one thread into liquid, emerald fire, murky water turned precious by Prime's sight. I stood ankle deep in Tass. I bent to scoop up a handful, and a rust-rimmed pipe brushed my shoulder. I looked up and saw more pipes, arrayed like storm-tossed branches. This used to be some kind of pumping station. Rough stone stairs spiraled up, past broken tanks and valves. I drank the filthy water. Emerald fire rushed through my veins. I took two steps at a time.

"You're not going to kill me."

I heard the voice before I opened the trap door at the top and saw him, illuminated by his laptop. Tin-toned industrial music pulsed out of its speakers; the chorus screamed *Metal Dead! Metal Dead!* He was bald and wore glasses with thick black rims, like he did Big Science in 1955. He even wore a lab coat.

"How do you know?" I drew my wand and wiggled it at him threateningly, because he looked like another Libertine.

"You're not him. You look like him but you're shining like the moon came out just for you. That's not his Nimbus."

"Deserts, right? Dry heat?"

"Yeah." He put the laptop down and stood, flexing his fingers. That's what stupid old men do before they weave mudras.

"But you killed him? Don't you think the resemblance indicates I might take it a little personally?" I jabbed my wand at him for emphasis. "Let's make those hands a bit less busy."

"Are you going to point that thing at me and say 'bang?' I've been around the block. It's a Western ceremonial instrument, not Harry Potter's Desert Eagle. My name's Doctor Kultur. You're Khonsu, right?"

"You say 'Culture' funny."

"It's German. You probably think Schattenbahn's a German band, but we're Canadian hicks. It's one of the tricks we use to spread true knowledge without your sort clamping down on it."

"You know my name and my job? Well, that's motive." I walked right up and slapped his glasses off with my good fingers. "You didn't want the Censors fucking up your musical grimoire business, so you killed somebody you thought was me! It wasn't, so now you're arguing that it doesn't count? Well, you might be very fucking wrong about me not killing you, Doc!"

Then I slapped him again — just two fingers across the cheek. The secret to effective violence is to ramp it up fast, so your target doesn't have time to get used to tussling with you. Also, pick on wimps. Even wizards have trouble forgetting they used to get teased in gym class, and Doctor Kultur looked a little short on chin-ups.

Thus, he stumbled back and crossed his trembling arms in front of his face. "Wait! He told me he wasn't you! Told me first! Said he ripped your soul off down in the States and needed to lay low. We had to take him in!"

"Why? Who was he, really?" *You. He was you*. I suddenly felt warm, dry and peaceful.

"Who?" Kultur tugged at his tweed lapels and straightened up, looking for dignity.

"Fuck." This again. "Never mind. Tell me fast, before you forget. Why'd you kill him?"

"We took him here and he started doing something to the Hallow. He opened a door."

"What, a spatial gate?" I smiled at the memory of an Iris opening into my soul's parching wind.

"No. It didn't feel right," said Kultur. "There was a desert. The rest of the band tried to stop him, but it opened around them. I called the Metal Dead and killed him. The door went away, but the band never came back. When I went back to town, nobody else remembered them. We had shared a house, but now I had different roommates — and they'd always been there! I started to forget their names, so I came here. I've been waiting ever since. I owe them that, whoever they were."

"Ah, they're still alive, my friend. They just have different lives." I was surprised to hear the words flow out in a trilling, singsong accent.

"Wait. What happened to your Nimbus?" He pointed at me but I felt relaxed, warm and dry.

"You'll have a different life too." The dust parted on a new path.

"Khonsu?"

"Now that I think of it? No, I'm not."

• • •

This thread unraveled with a step into foul, black slush, crunching through a crust of ice. Shredded, rotted organs slid to either side of my boot. The stench burst out, like a suffocating hand, heavy on my face. I dug face into the crook of my arm to ward it off and saw the other side of the tower, fallen to scattered stones that stretched to the far shore. The trees were gray skeletons, the stars were wrong and though the lake was ice, there was no frost. It was an enormous mirror for deformed constellations.

I heard men snarling, as if imitating dogs. The bent, scarred people came soon after. There were two, walking on all fours, elongated faces covered in sores and crusted blood.

They smiled when they saw me. Someone had filed their teeth to points. They picked up the pace like hunting beasts, until a gristly bone landed in their midst.

The bigger one looked up and said, "Baron," in slow, wheezy syllables. The Nemean tossed another one at them.

"It's not my favorite title," he said, "but it keeps me from the limb farms." He was well-groomed this time, wearing a black kilt and no shirt.

"Where am I?"

"Time befouled, Garfield. Or Xaphan. I liked the little Obrimos better, with his bad hand and shit luck. He, or you, was imaginative yet unambitious. That's the true path to power. In his plodding wisdom Garfield would say, 'This is what happens when you fuck it up.'"

"Thanks? Don't call me Garfield. Use my shadow name." What name? My memory bled.

"There are bound to be some holes, places where the story of your life doesn't come together, like a badly-set bone." He grinned with bloodstained teeth. "This world's full of them. It doesn't make sense in ways that would inspire vomit to choke your screams! You two made it impossible for either of you to have ever existed, which brought you here, to the impossible existence itself."

"The Abyss."

"No. Don't confuse the baby for its caul! The problem with the Lie is that it's fragile. Without proper rites to ease the transition our universe can't function if even a single soul falls out of place. This is the world that used to contain sitcoms, global warming and pornography — well, it's still fairly pornographic in the traditional, pejorative sense. This is what you made so Xaphan could be! Aren't you proud?"

"I am Xaphan!" I twisted my fingers in the Thread-Cutting Mudra, to erase his birth. "I founded the Free Council! I made the Diamond a Pentacle! I freed magic, and by my will alone, I buried myself in the sands of Time! But none of the sorcerers I liberated remember me. None of my lovers remember me! I took this little man's soul. Can you see the hurtling dust of ages? He'll always suffer, and he'll die seeing his greatest works undone. I did him a favor by grafting my life on his. I can return, lead my Libertines, and break open the vaults his Mysterium fears to open."

I released my spell, but no sandstorm answered. Nothing happened. Here, destiny was writ in human ash.

"Time isn't what it used to be," said the Nemean.

"Yeah," I said, remembering a bit of Ross. "It's hitting fouls all around me."

• • •

This thread turned to sand. A little boy sat on it and played with lettered blocks, stacking R, O and S. He smiled at me and said, "Yuh face is like Daddy's."

I knelt. "Family resemblance." I looked for another S block; there wasn't one. I remembered how frustrating that used to be. "Ay and ay see it ain' T

an' T around here, lil' Rossy?" My patois was rusty; I left when I was fifteen. He giggled and waved at a cluster of red and tan houses a hundred feet away. Each had a door and two flanking, glassless windows. They were giant, dusty bricks with soulless faces.

I hoisted Rossy up into the crook of my right arm but he suddenly relaxed into dead weight, and when I touched his cheek he crumbled into the same sand as the ground. *Illusion*, I thought, but my tears still wet the spot where he fell. I put the R brick in my coat pocket.

This was a desert with no sun, yet white radiance coaxed short shadows from whatever it hit, like it was noon. I stopped a glittering tumbleweed; it was made of brass wire. A desiccating breeze erased my tracks faster than it should have, all the way up to the village's silent doorways. The houses were arranged to suggest a village square on the other side. I heard my voice calling from behind every gap between them, and followed.

There I was, a baby wailing in the dust, a long limbed teenager with angry pink acne (which made me feel the scars beside my nose) and a few middle aged faces, with graying cornrows and hard expressions.

There were no really old men. Goddammit.

The ones who could walk or crawl did it in a circle. The baby cried, stopped, and cried again in exactly the same way. Teenage me said, "America? Don't even *know* my auntie dere!" in a looped track. They all babbled this way, shuffling around a huge sundial where a silver-haired Latino kid stood, wearing a cotton robe. Xaphan looked about the age as the teenage me who yelled about being sent to the States, but his eyes were ancient.

"Ross Garfield." He smiled, stepped from the sundial. He walked straight and steady, but never disturbed a single shuffler.

"Call me Khonsu, Xaphan."

"I'm pleased you know me. Not many do."

"I've been forced to make your acquaintance. It looks like you're taking my soul out for some fresh air."

"You found a replacement!" He rolled his eyes. "That complicates things and explains my difficulties. Time doesn't tolerate redundancies. No matter how the wind blows, the sands can only etch so many waves in the dunes."

"So I've learned. Something erased you, didn't it? You gave up your history to become...well, whatever the fuck it is you are. You want it back, but you need to piggyback on someone else's Destiny. Mine."

"No, mine. Look!" He pointed his chin at the circling Garfields. "No old men walk the village square. The middle aged ones have scars. To please you, I removed all the screamers and bloody ones. So many! I don't want to upset you, Khonsu. I want to convince you that giving yourself up to be me is a noble sacrifice."

"Go for it. Who wouldn't want to learn at the feet of an Archmaster?" I locked eyes with a doppelganger in his fifties who didn't speak. He rarely blinked and had a facial tic: a quick sneer. I touched my mouth.

"I know you've argued with my Free Council. They're vital, erratic children, but it's time to bring them *focus*. The *enfant terrible* becomes the prodigal son. The Libertine Art is about the future, not as steps on a calendar, but an edifice of human aspirations, each building on foundations of the last. Freedom is the means; Ascension is the end. But the other Founders are old men and women, squandering what Art they have to keep themselves functioning. The Council says it hides them to avoid assassination but honestly, we're embarrassed. We're *youth*. Wrinkles are for the Diamond.

"I crossed the Threshold of Time to provide an alternative — to be with them throughout history. I'm still mortal, but I have a non-linear relationship with Destiny. I can appear when they need me, but they need to *remember* me. Wouldn't you relish a disciplined Free Council, able to bring its massed powers against the Seers — against the very problem of the Lie?"

"You chose my soul to do all that? I'm flattered, Xaphan. I really am honored that you'd replace my evidently shitty destiny with such an idealistic alternative." I glanced at the village square, "My soul seems fairly committed to its dismal history though, doesn't it?"

"*Your* doing. Look around. I grew up in a place like this and often dreamed of returning, but the dream also contained my ambitions, fears — everything about me. I call it Nowhere. It's my personal Utopia. Your soul accepted its solace. Its temporal constituents live here, standing in for my friends, relatives and early loves. Now that you've stitched up your identity they've all put your face back on. I need to bring these rogue components to heel!

"Now I insist: Give yourself up. Give your place in Time to me. My destiny will exalt it, in your honor."

"Why?" I smiled wide, fairly sure he couldn't read my mind — or if he could, that was the end of it anyway. What the hell.

"I thought I just explained that."

"Nope!" I shoved Xaphan hard. He tripped over the hem of his robe and fell, one leg in the air. The soles of his feet were white, caked in illuminated sand. "Why must you *insist*? You're a fucking archmage! An invisible master! You don't ask or even insist; you just fucking *take*!" I kicked for his ribs but he dropped an arm against his side; my boot hit bicep and hard humerus — that'd leave a bruise.

He propped himself up on his other elbow. "You ridiculous little shit! I'll unmake you!"

I raised my foot for a stomp; he flinched and rolled away. *Nerds*. "Wasn't that the plan? No — there was a subtle difference because you'd take my place, correct? You even managed to join my soul with yours. The problem is, it's *my* soul too now, isn't it? You gave me the keys to the Nowhere. Thanks!"

He glared, but kept his mouth shut. I imagined the old house in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and we were there. It was bigger and a bit bent, but I was working with childhood memories.

I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him along the green tiles I used to stare at as a kid. I smelled curried dal cooking in the kitchen. I assumed beating the shit out of a sorcerer of unimaginable power would annoy my Mum, so I made a right for the front yard. The screen door was open, and the coconut tree was right where I left it. I slapped Xaphan again. His face was terribly old now, and he was bald; I saw a trail of white hairs in the grass.

Wait. Am I an archmage now? I dropped Xaphan and contemplated a little spell to accelerate my hand the next time I smacked him, but the imago vanished, as if diluted in a vast ocean of power. Neither of us could join our Gnosis to it, but if I beat him down and willed it for myself....

The gate whined. I used to think it sounded like a puppy. The Nemean entered.

"Your mother let me in, Garfield. She seems nice. When's the last time you called her?" He leaned against the tree. It swayed under his bulk.

"I didn't let you in. I've got a bit of pull here." I glanced at Xaphan. He was young again. His lips trembled and his eyes went wide.

The Nemean shrugged. "I released your borrowed soul the moment you entered, hoping that your friend here had in fact attempted the very thing he is not supposed to do; return to the world as if he'd never crossed the Imperial Threshold. Normally I'd have to shove your soul back into you, but since you were surrounded by it, the process occurred automatically. Once you leave, your soul should accompany you, and Xaphan's should return to him."

An ocean of power. "I think that would be a remarkable waste of my potential."

"How exactly does this constitute *your* potential?"

"Let's just call it potential. How'd you get in? Besides asking my mother, I mean."

"You left the Iris into this realm open. On a subconscious level, you're a sensible, unambitious man."

"Thanks. So, you're an Archmaster?"

"Absolutely not. I've been given a vision — an opportunity that burdens me with certain obligations. The great ones regulate themselves with laws as bent and flawed as our own, yet avoid direct conflict. This creates problems with enforcement, and a demand for proxies. One law prevents them from interfering with our lives beyond certain parameters. Another restricts Xaphan from undoing the process by which the world forgot him. If he succeeded, he would injure history — and I represent parties who claim an *exclusive* right to destroy the universe."

Xaphan tottered as he stood. “The Pax is clear,” he said. “Depriving me of my Art would be an unprecedented punishment — you’d draw the wrath of the others. And since you can’t do *that*, you lose — I’ll run this day over and over again, until he surrenders.”

“No. It’s the last moment of your folly.” The Nemean pulled a wooden block out of his battered tweed jacket. I saw the familiar letter R, and realized I couldn’t feel the block digging into my side anymore. “I’ve been allowed to take just a tiny bit of your being away, Archmaster — just your knowledge of and ability to perceive Ross. You won’t miss it.”

He pointed to me with the block in his hand and said, “Walk with me, Garfield.”

• • •

“I was an archmage once.” There was more to it, but the room shuddered when I tried to stand and pontificate. I acknowledged defeat by alcohol and sank into my seat — one of the nice, stuffed ones in the back of the Emerald Scroll. You know, the ‘wizard bar.’

“Bullshit.” Davy Jones poured me a double. 15 year old Dalwhinnie. Nicer scotch would have been wasted on me because my tongue felt like icy asphalt. “I think you keel-hauled your brain with the last three,” he said. “Your next one’s water, Ross.”

“Khonsu.” I burped and it burned my throat. “Keel-hauled? Why the pirate talk? Why do you Libertines *always* go for theme park shenanigans?”

“Beyond the known principles of occult synergy? We ground ourselves in this world, mate. The so-called Lie’s full of wonders. We don’t want to rise above it all. We want to celebrate it. We love our own history.”

“Yeah? Well don’t love it too much.”

• • •

He sat by the fire in a bearish crouch. The flames were purple tonight, but still effective against the cold. He tugged on his beard and looked for omens in the fire.

He glanced at the hut. When the thin old man came out, the Nemean heard a sound like grinding teeth. The old man closed the flap, muffling it.

“Mark?” He said. “You know you can always come in to warm up.” The old man smiled. For a moment, the Nemean thought he saw interlocking rows of scorpion stingers.

“As usual, no. Besides, the cold’s in my mind.”

“That’s real enough. Where else do you feel cold? Nerves and skin react, but that’s not cold. Cold’s a thought.”

“I know better than to debate with you. This is business. I threw it in the Oroboros.”

"All of the archmage's knowledge of this... 'Garfield'?"

"He prefers Khonsu." The Nemean chuckled. The old man joined him.

"Ah yes. And the rest?"

"His destiny? Yeah. That was part of the object."

"What he saw of it upset him. You did him a favor! That's excellent. You keep telling me you want to become a better person." As the old man spoke, he drew a circle in the black sand with his foot. He started in on a complicated design with his big toe, but stopped and smoothed it over when the Nemean cleared his throat.

"I'm glad, but disturbed."

"Why?"

"I did you a favor, too."

The Wheel

BY JOHN NEWMAN

He sleeps. In his dreams he sees the bloated shape of the prayer wheel spinning, ever spinning, propelled by the wind. Bolted to a rocky precipice, overlooking the sea, its rusting metal body tattooed with glyphs. A storm moves across the coast, all lashing rain and howling wind. The wheel spins faster and faster, its clotted axle sending metallic screams into the leaden skies like blasphemous paeans to the gods. Faster and faster it turns, the glyphs glowing red from the friction and merging into a single word. The word is wrong, somehow, written in a language never devised by men and it hurts his eyes. He approaches the wheel, drawn to it involuntarily, the word burning in his mind. The wheel spins faster still, growing hotter. Raindrops evaporate from the heat, sending up clouds of hissing steam. He hears voices on the wind, wailing in harmony with the shrieking of the wheel. They call to him, whispering his name, urging him to quench the heat with his blood. The phone rings.

• • •

Kale woke with a start, tangled in his sheets and sweating through the cool of the AC. He fumbled for the phone, dropped it and, swearing, snatched it off the floor. Out of the picture window in his bedroom he could see the rising sun reflecting off the stately progression of ocean waves. The morning sun illuminated the room in a ruddy glow just bright enough to make him squint.

"Hello?"

"Hey buddy! Did I wake you?"

"Yes. Don't worry about it," Kale said, cutting off the apology he knew was coming. "Was having a nightmare anyways."

"The wheel again?"

"Yeah. That fucking wheel. I always hated that goddamned thing. Tell me again why I shouldn't just melt it down," said Kale, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Well, for starters, the Historical Society would have a fit. That hunk of metal is a piece of genuine Americana, cobbled together by your great-grand-

father. It might be junk to you, but to them it's art. Then there's the whole legacy issue to contend with…"

"Alright, alright, I know," Kale interrupted. "What do you want, Jimmy?"

"I have some papers here for you to sign. You coming down to the office today?"

Kale swung his legs out of bed. "Yeah. Later though. Say around three?"

"Swell," said Jimmy, cheerfully. "See you at three."

Kale hung up the phone, got out of bed, and walked towards his closet. Kicking off the boxers he'd slept in, he threw on a pair of grey sweats and a ragged black T-shit that said "The Ramones" in fading letters. He dug out a pair of white athletic socks and padded to the kitchen. Like every other room in the house, the kitchen looked shiny and new. The stainless steel counters were free of dents or scratches and the appliances looked fresh out of the box. After his father had died and Kale returned home for good, he'd had the entire place redecorated. It wasn't just that his father's taste had been bad (it had) or that the house was decades out of style (it was); living among the detritus of his father's life had been like living with a ghost. Before it was redecorated, every time he came home, Kale had half-expected to encounter his father's slightly disapproving face around every corner. So he'd cleaned out the place, even renovating the grounds. Anything that reminded him of his father was removed, replaced or refurbished. Except the wheel.

"That fucking wheel" he said aloud as he started up the coffee machine.

• • •

After breakfast he slipped on his running shoes and headed outside. The wind blowing off the ocean was cold in the morning air, and he picked up his pace to stay warm as he jogged along the cliff's edge. As he ran, his thoughts returned to his father. The old man had never understood Kale's drive to become an artist. Even the fact that the family fortune was founded in the money generated by great-grandfather's art hadn't swayed his father's mind. He had wanted Kale to follow his footsteps in the company. Kale only wanted to paint. Their arguments eventually drove Kale from the house, and only when his paintings began to gain some recognition, when he proved his art wasn't just a rich kid's hobby, had his father relented.

Other than holidays and the occasional family get-together, he hadn't spent much time around his father for the last 20 years. The old wounds scabbed over slowly. In a bit of irony, he was painting when he got the phone call telling him his father was dead. The maid hadn't been able to find the old man when she got to work, the car was still in the garage and the back door was open, banging back and forth against the house in the wind. She called the police and the sheriff's deputy that responded found the body. The coroner's report said that the old man had died from a heart attack. The

police had asked him if he knew why his father would've gotten up in the middle of the night and wandered the grounds (the body had already begun to display signs of rigor mortis when it was found) and Kale had said no. Sure he already knew the answer, he asked where exactly the body had been found. His father had died beside the wheel.

"That *fucking* wheel," he said, absently.

He was jolted out of his reverie when he realized he was standing in front of the wheel, like he had conjured it by speaking its name. Panting slightly from his run, he walked around the wheel, eying it with distaste. According to family lore, his great-grandfather had begun construction of the wheel after visiting Tibet, inspired by the wind-driven prayer wheels of that country. The wheel itself looked like it had been constructed from an oil drum and was set horizontally to the ground with an axle running through it. Wind was captured by a series of bent fins, which turned the wheel smoothly on its axle if had been oiled recently or jerkily, accompanied by screeching metal, if it hadn't. The entire thing was constructed from galvanized steels and was supported by matching struts, bolted into the stone of the cliff. Taken as a whole it looked, to Kale at least, like a giant paper towel holder set upright, that had been attacked by a windmill.

Great-grandfather had known next to nothing about the Tibetan language, so he had decorated the wheel with glyphs of his own devising, searing them into the metal. No two glyphs were alike and (according to every expert who had examined the thing) were completely decorative in design, conforming to no known or guessed-at language. In his will, great-grandfather had declared the wheel a legacy of the estate and forbade its removal from the ground. Every couple of weeks, the people from the Historical Society would come out to oil the thing and polish it clean of rust. It had remained in the same spot for nearly a century.

Kale had a very clear memory of when simple distaste for the wheel had turned to outright hatred. At his 11th birthday, buzzing on a high of cake and ice-cream, he and his friends had roamed the grounds of the estate until they ended up by the wheel. He remembered his friends looking at the thing in awe, daring each other to touch it. The wind was calm that day, and the wheel was turning in lazy revolutions, glinting innocently in the noon-day sun. Finally, one of his friends from school, a boy named Niko, reached out to touch it. Kale had wanted to shout at him to stop, had wanted to smack his hand away like Niko was extending it to a rabid dog. Only the fear of being labeled a "sissy" or "puss" kept him from acting on his growing sense of unease. Just as Niko placed his fingers on the wheel, a hard gust of wind blew in off the ocean and, *snicker-snack*, the tips of Niko's index and middle fingers were lopped off by the sharp edges of the metal fins. He remembered with crystal clarity Niko's screams and the bright red blood running in the grooves of the wheel, filling the incomprehensible glyphs.

He shook himself mentally and began to jog back to the house. *Spending a lot of time today down memory lane,* he thought, which was immediately followed by, *Maybe Jimmy is right. Maybe I should get out more often*. He'd get out this weekend, he promised, just as soon as the painting was finished and, hey, he was going down to the office today. *That* was a social occasion not to be missed. He snorted. Behind him, forgotten for the moment, the wheel continued to turn, its revolutions not quite matching the steady beat of his heart.

• • •

Kale stepped back from the canvas to take a look at his work. In leaner times he'd painted dull landscapes for hotels and restaurants, always to the exact specifications requested by the client. Once his work had grown more popular he'd sworn to never take another commission and to only paint what he wanted to paint. He'd always painted from instinct, rarely planning out exactly what his next project would be. Commission work was the antithesis of that kind of spontaneity and he was glad he'd never signed his real name to any of the commercial paintings. The painting he'd just spent the last several hours working on was nominally a traditional sunset. In it, the sun sank slowly into the waves of the ocean, infusing the water with an orange glow. The twilight sky was still lit by the last rays of the sun, the horizon a luminous pink.

Disrupting all that mundane tranquility was a black keyhole, larger than the sun, floating near the right border of the painting. The keyhole was pitch black for now — though Kale thought he might end up lighting the darkness with stars — and the edges of the keyhole glowed with a strange grey, eldritch light. He had the oddest sensation that there was something moving behind the keyhole, something very large and very old. He had an idea that, whatever the something might be, he'd only capture a portion of it in the painting, only an eye. An eye peeking through the keyhole like a child might on Christmas Eve to spy out her presents.

The inspiration for this work was no great mystery. He'd painted the view from his living room balcony, though he'd worked indoors to avoid the erratic ocean winds. Kale wasn't sure why he'd added the keyhole, either. It just seemed to fit. The location of the keyhole in the painting nagged at his mind. It reminded him of something, but he couldn't think what. Shrugging his shoulders, he attempted to banish the idea from his mind and began to put away his tools. Brushes were carefully washed out, paint lids screwed firmly in place and everything was packed away into his kit. Even though he was sure he'd work on the painting again tomorrow, he always followed the same routine. In its own odd way, returning everything to its proper place was as much a part of his creative process as the actual painting was.

He'd nearly forgotten about his earlier fixation on the keyhole's location until he began to carefully cover the painting. Frowning, he secured the cover, wondering anew what bothered him about its placement. Vaguely

irritated by this disruption to his normal routine, Kale moved the easel to the side of the room and marched over to the double-glass doors that led to the balcony. Sliding them open, he stepped out into the evening. The real sunset taking place was far more prosaic than the one he'd been working on, albeit still quite lovely. The wind tugged gently at his hair as he surveyed the view, his hands resting on the railing. Intentionally sweeping his view from left to right, he tried to guess at what seed had germinated in his imagination into the keyhole of his painting. Moving his head only a fraction at a time, eyes straight ahead, Kale tried to mimic the viewpoint of the painting. Nothing, nothing, nothing; he continued to scan. Then he stopped. This view this vantage of the grounds was exactly the same as the one he'd captured in the painting. The wheel. That *fucking* wheel was in the exact same position in his point of view as the keyhole was in the painting.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered.

The goddamn thing had begun to invade his work! Furious, Kale slammed the side of his fist into the railing. Turning on his heel, he strode with quick steps back into the house and grabbed the painting from the easel. He ripped the covering off it and stared. There could be no doubt. The keyhole and the wheel were in the same place. Angrier than he'd been in years, he walked back out to the balcony and hurled the painting over the edge.

"Fly motherfucker," he said, and watched as the painting caught an updraft and sailed over the cliff edge.

Slamming the door behind him, Kale stomped out over to the bar and poured himself a glass of brandy. He downed it in two quick gulps and poured another. Still fuming, trembling from the shock of adrenaline that had surged through his body in his anger, he downed that one as well and poured a third. Forcing himself to relax, he picked up his drink and shuffled over to the sofa. The leather of the cushions creaked as he sat down. He idly picked up the remote and turned on the flat-screen, plasma television that hung from his wall. He flipped through channels at random, not really even seeing the pictures on the screen as they flashed by; his mind filled with images of prayer wheels and keyholes.

• • •

He sleeps. The storm has come again and he stands beside the wheel, wet hair plastered to his head. The glyphs on the wheel are gone and in a flash of lightning he sees keyholes painted in their place. One by one, stars appear in the keyholes, shining dully, leaving streamers of light as the wheel turns. The winds scream in his ears, the voices gibber and laugh insanely. In slow motion he sees himself reach out to stop the wheel, just as poor Niko reached out to touch it. His mind screams with the danger, visions of Niko's fingers spurting blood flickering through his sight like film on a faltering projector. The fins slice through his hands, snicker-snack, and he feels nothing, only an icy cold

that seeps up his arms. Impossibly, the mauled remains of his hands obey his commands and grasp the wheel, sliding on its wet surface before catching it and holding it still. The winds dies, the voices stop, and the storm abates. All is quiet. The cold moon stares down at him and he begins to shake, the chill from his arms spreading to his chest. He stares at the wheel and sees a shadow pass over the stars twinkling out of the keyholes. The cold has spread its icy fingers to his heart, the chill freezing the blood in his veins. His shakes become more violent. His body spasms, dancing a lunatic jig. Eyes appear at the keyholes, starkly white against the black, pupils a putrid yellow. The eyes stare at him and he screams.

• • •

Still screaming, he awoke. The room was freezing cold and, for a moment, he could see his breath fogging in the air. He could see frost lining the edges of the windows. His skin was painful with gooseflesh and he realized that he was naked. At some point in the night he'd thrown his sheets to the floor and stripped free of his boxers. Reaching out with a trembling hand he pulled the sheets over his body and huddled in their warmth. Slowly, the room lost its chill and, still wrapped in the sheets, Kale rose from his bed. He staggered, body aching, to the bathroom and stepped into the shower, not bothering to remove his cocoon of sheets before turning on the hot water. The pounding spray of the shower jet, combined with the heat and steam, finally drove the chill and stiffness from him. When he felt almost human again, he turned off the shower and rang out the sheets as best he could before hanging them in the stall. Toweling off, Kale stared at his reflection in the fogged mirror and asked himself a question.

"What the hell is going on?"

The bedroom was back to a normal temperature when he left the bathroom. Dressing quickly in jeans and a button-down, blue and white striped shirt, he hurried downstairs and set the coffee to brewing. He plucked the phone from its wall mount and dialed Jimmy's cell. He wouldn't be in the office on a weekend. It rang five times before he got Jimmy's voicemail. Kale snarled, hung up, and immediately called back.

"Answer the phone you asshole," he muttered, digging in the fridge for the cream.

On the third ring he heard a click and a tired-sounding voice said, "Hello?"

"It's me, Jimmy. I need an answer. Does the Historical Society have great-grandfather's papers?"

"What?"

"Wake up, dammit! Listen. Does the Historical Society have great-grandfather's papers? You know; original designs for his sculptures, journals, that sort of shit?"

"Christ, Kale, I don't know. Why?"

"Never mind why. Can you find out for me?"

"Does this have something to do with the wheel?"

"I told you never mind why! Can you find out?"

"You know you can't get rid of that thing."

Kale almost screamed into the phone. "I don't give two shits what you think Jimmy? Can you find out or not?"

"Whoa, whoa! Calm down, man. Yeah, sure. I can find out. If they do have that stuff, what then?"

"I wanna see it," said Kale

"OK, sure. Right. I'll call on Monday and find out."

"Today, Jimmy! You find out today. I don't care if you have to hitchhike to the director's house to ask. Find. Out. Now."

An exasperated sigh. "Fine. I'll call you back when I know."

"Good," said Kale, hanging up.

• • •

Kale sifted through the small mound of books, drawings, and journals laid out before him on a desk in the back of the Historical Society building. It had taken Jimmy four hours to track down the director and convince her to allow Kale to look through his great-grandfather's memorabilia. The large cash "donation" Jimmy had offered hadn't hurt either.

The documents smelled faintly musty, as though they'd been kept in a basement with poor ventilation for years, which was probably the case. As first, he had found great-grandfather's spidery handwriting difficult to decipher, but after staring at it for over an hour now he was able to make out what the man had written without too much difficulty. It hadn't taken him long to find the original design for the wheel. Great-grandfather had made several pencil sketches of the general shape of the thing and across the bottom of one of the pages were drawings of all 29 of the glyphs had been seared into the metal body of the wheel. Viewed as a whole, the glyphs were disconcerting to look at, the angles seemed wrong and, not for the first time, Kale wondered exactly what they represented.

He continued to pore over the materials, and after another hour had passed, he thought he'd found something interesting in an old ledger. Before the construction of the wheel, great-grandfather had been considered something of a local eccentric. His pieced-together metal sculptures were seen as curiosity pieces rather than works of art. All that changed following the wheels creation. Suddenly, art critics who had previously sneered — often publically — at great-grandfather's work had a change of heart. They proclaimed the works the product of a visionary in the field and, consequently, demand for the sculptures had skyrock-

eted. A year prior to his construction of the wheel, great-grandfather had been nearly bankrupt. A year later he was flush with cash and nearly overwhelmed with orders for his work. Somehow the wheel and great-grandfather's sudden success were tied together, but Kale was at a loss to explain how.

Setting the ledger aside, he picked up the drawings of the glyphs again and stared at them. A quick scan of the room turned up a notebook, which he brought back to the desk. He began to copy the glyphs, looking for a connection. He reversed their images, transposed one over the other and tried to deconstruct them to their most basic elements. Nothing he tried made the glyphs any more intelligible and he eventually admitted defeat, his head pounding from staring at the odd symbols. Frustrated, he went back to shuffling through the rest of the collection, flipping through pages, looking for anything out of place. Every single book was filled from front to back with great-grandfather's writing, notes and sketches. Except that wasn't true, was it? He remembered leafing through one book with several blank pages in the back. It hadn't struck him as unusual at the time, but now it definitely seemed strange.

He dug through the stacks around him until he found it. The book, large and sturdily bound in rigid leather, was one of great-grandfather's personal diaries. Kale flipped to the back and found the blank pages. He held one of the pages up to the lights, cracking the spine as he did so. Nothing. Disappointed, he began to close the book when he caught a whiff of something other than the musty smell he'd become accustomed to. Putting his nose to where paper met binding he took a sniff. The crevice held the ghostly faint smell of lemon. Excited now, he hurried over to one of the bright lamps the staff used for restoration projects and removed the hood. He turned the lamp on and held the page close to the heat of the bulb. Slowly, excruciatingly, brown words began to appear on the page. He subjected the remainder of the pages to the same treatment, then sat down to read what he had discovered.

The first few pages were written in a language he didn't recognize. He skipped past these until he came to writing in plain English.

• • •

March 9

I keep this secret accounting of my work and the summoning ritual, as a testament. You, who have discovered this secret, will bear witness to my triumph, to the ascendance of the ancient. It calls to me in my dreams, promising me immortality, riches, and more. I will be the first disciple and rule over the Earth as a god. Those of my line will become prophets to my glory, walking among the herds in forms of terrible splendor. I begin.

March 12

The summoning was a success. I have spoken to the ancient and formed a pact. Upon the morrow I'll begin construction. Glory to the name I dare

not write! He who is Lord of Nightmares, King of Fever Dreams, Prince of Insanity!

April 16

The Wheel is done.

April 20

The thing is finished. I have inscribed the 29 names of the ancient onto the Wheel and anointed them with my blood, binding the turning of the wheel not only to me, but to my family line. Tomorrow, I will place the Wheel on the highest point of the cliffs where it will catch the ocean winds. In accordance with the pact I have made, the Wheel will turn for 100 years and for every second of every day of every year it turns, me and mine will be rewarded with fortune and glory. Each time the Wheel turns, the names of the ancient will be shouted to the heavens, defying the banishment that traps it out of space and time. When I die, my soul will be drawn through the Wheel to the ancient's side where I'll bask in its splendor and be rewarded with a new body, not of flesh but of the Void; vast and eternal. The souls of my descendants will enhance the hideous strength of the Wheel as it turns, like a key in a lock, sacrifices for my godhood. They will die for me, and the ancient will return, I at his side.

• • •

Kale stared in horror at what he'd just read. It was unbelievable, insane, and yet he believed it all the same. He remembered the unnatural chill of his bedroom, his nightmares, his instinctual loathing of the Wheel all his life, and the blood from Niko's fingers. He ripped the formerly blank pages out of the back of the book. No one could be allowed to see them. He folded the pages up in the drawings of the Wheel and stuffed the bulky papers in the waistband of his jeans, nestled in the hollow of his back. He pulled his shirt down over the bulge, disguising it from view. Hopefully no one would notice they were missing until he could burn them. He walked out of the room, down a hall, and past a volunteer who was manning the front desk, forcing himself not to run. He nodded at the man, mumbled a word of thanks for his patience and was out the front door. Continuing his feigned calm, just in case the volunteer was watching him out the window, he walked slowly to his car and got in. Once the Historical Society was out of sight, Kale gunned the engine and sped for home. Home and that fucking wheel.

A storm was brewing by the time he reached the house. Fat raindrops splashed against the car's windshield and streaks of lightning split the cloudy sky. Thunder boomed and rattled the windows as he pulled into the garage. Wasting no time, he vaulted out of the car like it was on fire, great-grandfather's papers clutched in his fist. He hurried into the house, nearly running by the time he reached the kitchen. Slamming a cupboard door open with a

crack that was echoed by the thunder outside, he reached inside for a stainless steel pot. His mind had raced all the way back from the Historical Society. How much time did he have? Did the world have? The entry had only been dated by month, not year. There wasn't any official date for the day the Wheel was bolted into place. Grabbing up a book of matches from beside the stove, he sprinted back to the garage. He set the pot on the concrete floor of the garage and tossed the papers in it. Kale picked up the gasoline can he kept for the lawnmower and doused the papers. He lit a match and dropped it in. The gasoline lit with a whoosh and the papers began to burn. Soon the drawings, the notes, and great-grandfather's insane ravings were nothing more than ash. He left the remains smoldering in the pot and searched through the tools he kept in the garage. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for and, crowbar and tire iron in hand, he stepped out into the storm.

The storm raged around him, rain lashing his body. The wind screamed in his ears and he could hear voices mixed with its howls, moaning and tittering madly. He leaned forward as he struggled along the cliff, fighting against the gale. The skies had darkened to near black, lighting flashes and thunder cracks disorienting in the gloom. He was so intent on reaching his goal he almost walked into the Wheel before it registered in his consciousness. It was spinning so fast its shape was a blur of motion. St. Elmo's fire danced and skittered around the metal, lighting the Wheel with an eerie luminosity. The glyphs glowed with the light, seeming to combine into one monstrous Name. Unnoticed by Kale in the rain, blood had begun to stream from his nose. The Name reflected in his eyes and he felt his stomach churn, his mind reeling. The voices whispered words of nameless dread in his ears; they cajoled him to throw himself on the wheel, to feed its hunger with his blood and soul. With one swift motion he slammed the tire iron into the Wheel, metal against metal, and screeching with protest the wheel ceased to turn. The voices in his head roared in anger, then ceased.

Kale dropped to his knees and hefted the crowbar. Blood dripped from his nose onto the stone as he attacked the bolts that held the thing in place. The Wheel was rocking back and forth in the wind, groaning against the tire iron that held it still. Grudgingly, the first bolt pulled free of the stone. His hands tingled with the static charge of the metal. Ignoring the increasing intensity of the storm, he worked the other bolts free, each one more stubborn than the last. He felt dizzy from the exertion, from the blood loss he'd just noticed and from the power of the storm. Summoning the last of his strength, he stood up, defying the wind, and kicked the Wheel over the cliff. His last sight before he staggered back from the edge and passed out was of the Wheel, bouncing down the stony cliff face into the churning waters.

He awoke. The sky was blue and the sun shone down on him, warm and comforting. Kale crawled to the cliff edge and peered over. Below him, he saw the ocean waves pounding against the cliff. The Wheel was gone,

sucked into the belly of the sea. Muscles protesting, he got up and staggered toward the house.

The Wheel tumbled along the ocean floor, mangled and broken, caught in the flow of a current. Its motion was arrested when one of its struts snagged on a rocky outcropping on the ocean floor. The current pulled against it, wedging the strut more firmly in place. One fin, less damaged than the others, caught the pull of the current. The Wheel began to turn.

IMAGINARY SKIN

BY WOOD INGHAM

"This is stupid," says Catesby. "Rmoahals never existed." He is sitting on an old cathode ray television set, and he is massaging his temples with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, looking down at Lucy. She is sitting on the grey, hard ground, her back to the trunk of a broken, petrified tree. She has grey dust-stains on her jeans from where's she's been sitting. She is fiddling with a broken Bakelite telephone she found lying nearby, pulling the dial around and letting it spring back with a whirr and a click with her finger, over and over. It has no handset, just a sad length of coiled cable like a tail.

He sighs.

"They're a fiction," he says. "A white man's Orientalist fiction. Basically, just believing they exist is racist. I mean, it's offensive, basically. It offends me."

Lucy tosses the phone, and it lands with a crunch on top of a couple of old toasters that are so rusty they half-crumble on impact. She pantomimes a finger to her lips.

"Shush," she says. "They might hear you."

On the ridge, five stick-figure-thin figures have appeared on the edge of the valley, silhouetted against the purple setting sun, their feet obscured by the stiff, coarse blades of the only grass that could ever grow here. One raises a crooked spear into the air, long straight hair and jangling strings of shell-beads caught by the wind.

Lucy stands up, straightens her T-shirt, lifts the strap of her bag over her shoulder and raises a hand in reply.

"I still don't actually know why we're doing this," says Catesby, standing up

The stick-figure-thin silhouettes give the illusion of getting shorter as they cross the bluff and come down the hill, towards the pair. Catesby stares at Lucy, the classic *now what are you going to do?* look etched on his aquiline features.

Lucy gets that look a lot.

She clicks her tongue stud against her teeth, once.

“Come on, Cates,” she says, scratching on the black rose freshly tattooed on the side of her clean-shaven head. “Let's go say hi.”

• • •

She had been waiting by the door. Within three seconds of the doorbell ringing, she thrust it open and her hand shot out, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him inside so fast he barely heard the door slam behind him.

“The fuck—?” As she let go, Catesby, still disorientated, slipped on a McDonalds' wrapper and landed face down in the doorway of Lucy's living room, looking at an old tape deck lying on its side on the ground.

“Crying out loud, Cates. Get up, will you?” Lucy, in the midst of the detritus of her world, sound equipment, unwashed mugs, ashtrays, magazines, was biting her lip, folding her arms around herself, jittering from one foot to the other.

“Christ. What is up with you?” He had never seen her like this.

She raised a finger. One moment. Then she started to peel off her T-shirt, no bra underneath.

“Fuck! Stop no fuck no—” Catesby waved his hands, blustered, and finally without knowing what to do, where to put himself, turned his back on her.

“What are you, twelve?” Lucy was her old self.

“You're, uh, *topless*.”

“I want you to see something. All right?”

“I think I got that. I didn't want—”

“—What?”

“I don't know. Why are you topless?”

“Could you just *look*?”

Catesby turned around. He tried not to look at her breasts, but she had little bars in her nipples and he didn't know that before, and he realized that he was staring, so he shut his mouth and made eye contact.

She carefully put her hand under her right breast, lifted it. With the other, she smoothed out an area of skin underneath it, the better to show him.

“Do you know what that is?” She says.

“It's...that blotch thing?”

It was irregular in shape, with a surface in parts like a big mole, in parts almost scaly, about two inches wide, and an uneven brown.

“Yeah.”

“Is that a birthmark?”

“It was a mole.”

“Was?”

“It grew.”

“…Fuck.”

“Yeah, it grew.”

“So does that mean...?”

“Malignant melanoma.”

“*Cancer*? Fucking hell, Lucy.”

“Yeah, kind of stupid.”

“But it's not like a really terrible cancer, right? I mean, you can fix skin cancer really easily.” Catesby realized how insensitive he was being, was cringing inside before he finished the sentence.

Lucy didn't seem to notice.

“Only if you catch it in time.”

“But you have?”

She looked at him like he was an idiot.

He tried again.

“You haven't.”

“Well, fuck, Cates. Last week we stole God's paintbrush from under the noses of the agents of the Glorious Duality. Week before that, you and me, we sewed the wings back onto an angel. Week before that, we caught the final thoughts of Helio Arcanaphus in the Abandoned Brain. And before that we climbed the Tower So High That it Reaches the Sun, and before that we stole the Amethyst of Pushkara, and before that we made a pie out of the Final Apple of the Tree of Knowledge and Life. And before *that*, I headlined Ibiza.” She picked up her T-shirt from the sofa and pulled it over her head. “You'll excuse me if I might have been remiss about health checks.”

She flumped onto the sofa, raised an arm and grasped the back of her head. Defense changed to resignation.

“I noticed it *months* ago. Little mole I had. Going sort of blue. Fuzzy at the edges. Thought I'd might get it looked at. But there was work and there was the other stuff. We see all this fabulous stuff. I saw a black dog born from a rose only last night, and then it turned into a man with wings and it flew away. Swear to God. It was amazing. We see this stuff all the time, Cates. All the time. And you forget stuff like this. And every so often I'd see this thing spread and I'd think, shit, better get that looked at. And I finally did.”

Catesby sat down on the swivel chair by the mixing desk and rubbed his chin.

“How bad is it?”

"It's invasive. As in, I might not survive bad."

"But that's mental. I mean, *magic*. We do magic."

"You any good at taking away cancer?"

"Ah, no. But, I mean, we have to know someone we know who can heal something like that. I mean, magic, Luce. I met a guy who could turn corn on the cob into swarms of bees. I mean, how hard is it to turn cancer into, I dunno, 'not cancer'?"

"I saw a couple people. It wasn't straightforward. I mean, how many people who can do this do we actually know, Cates? I mean I was so desperate I even…"

She folded her arms, clammed up.

"Even what?"

"Nothing."

Catesby sat bolt upright.

"Tell me you *didn't* go see Vamani."

"Well…"

"You couldn't have been that desperate."

"Nope. I wasn't. I totally didn't see Vamani." She folded her arms. "You think I'm mental?"

• • •

Vamani Daksha's home was well lit, minimally furnished, full of potted plants: peace lilies, aspidistras, yuccas. Lucy had always found it unspeakably banal, banal to a sinister degree.

Vamani had not, on hearing Lucy's plight, ceased to smile, his/her smooth round face inscrutable, still more or less the face of a teenager, although she/he had left his/her teens behind with binary gender a good ten years ago. Simply being around Daksha reminded Lucy of how soon it would be before her thirties ended, made her think of the tightness of the skin on her neck in the mirror that morning, the first few lines under her eyes, the creases at the corners of her mouth.

"So, you would prefer to be healthy?"

"Yeah. You can fix it?" Lucy was not at ease.

"I can."

Silence. Lucy tried again.

"Will you?"

"No."

Lucy sighed.

"I can pay."

As Lucy watched, Vamani's features blurred slightly, became more angular; his/her shoulders broadened slightly under that loose white tunic; his/her voice deepened, took on a masculine edge. The smile remained constant.

"No, you can't."

It was a personal slight.

"OK. Why, may I ask?"

"I don't want to."

"Thanks, loads."

Lucy stood up, turned to leave.

"There is a place you can go," said Vamani.

Lucy stopped without turning around.

"If you want the cancer gone."

"You know I want it gone."

"Well then."

"If this is one of your games, Vamani…"

"Of *course* it is one of my games."

"Why should I play?"

Vamani, still smiling, now feminine again, motioned Lucy to sit down.

"You shall play."

• • •

The Rmoahals number about ten men and women.

Twenty yards or so from the tree, the first of the Rmoahal men stops, standing behind two upturned, skeletal fridge-freezers. Catesby is very close behind Lucy.

"I am not sure how they're supposed to help you," he whispers.

They are giants, the smallest of them nearly twice the size of Lucy. Each has smooth, blue-black skin, a wide mouth, birdlike black eyes with pupils so wide it almost looks like they have no whites. They are naked but for strings of dyed seashells and straps for knives and quivers of arrows made from old pairs of jeans, old belts, strips of fabric from jackets and coats, braided together. Solemn, clean-shaven men stand silently, holding barge-pole-long spears; each has teaspoons, screws, SIM cards and bits of broken ball-point pen braided into long black hair that catches fire in the twilight. The women are statuesque, alien, their heads shaved bald and painted or tattooed with intricate patterns of flowers, or thorns, or knives. Vicious-looking gold spikes pierce the skin of their breasts and faces and upper arms. Unlike the men, the women talk and laugh with each other. One turns in the direction of Lucy and Catesby and smiles, revealing teeth filed to sharp points.

Lucy turns to Catesby and smiles tightly.

"I knew it was going to be OK," she says.

Lucy pats Catesby on the shoulder and takes a few steps towards one of the women. The Rmoahal women stop talking; the men look down on them with mild interest.

Lucy calls something out.

"What was that?" Whispers Catesby.

Lucy, still looking intently at the Rmoahal women, puts her finger to her lip.

One of the women takes a few more steps forward. She gives no sign that she is surprised, or even curious. Her stance is, in some strange way, formal.

"Don't talk to the women," whispers Lucy. "Stick with the men, OK?"

Lucy steps forward and touches her fingertips to the centre of her chest, and then offers the palm of her hand to the Rmoahal woman. The Rmoahal touches her own chest, reaches down and touches Lucy's fingertips. The Rmoahal woman looks at Catesby, who looks across at Lucy.

"Now what?" Says Catesby.

"Go talk to the men. Just raise your right hand, like a salute." Talk to them.

"I don't speak—"

"Yes you do."

"*Oh*." Catesby knits his brows. "But you don't…I mean, you don't *communicate* in it."

"They're waiting, Cates."

Catesby sighs, and advances on the waiting men, his hand raised.

• • •

Some of the men are roasting foil-wrapped baked potatoes over the fire. When a potato is done, one of the men gingerly unwraps it, cuts it with his knife, and sprinkles those fake bacon bits over it, from a little plastic pot he takes out of a leather pouch.

He hands one to Lucy's host, the youngest of the Rmoahal women, who has the casings of ballpoint pens stuck through her earlobes and bone rings in her lower lip, and she in turn hands it to Lucy.

Lucy thanks her. Balancing the potato on her knee she eats a single mouthful with an old plastic spork the Rmoahal woman has given her.

"Lucy. My name is Lucy. And, ah, my mother was Elizabeth. And her mother was Lavinia."

The Rmoahal woman puts her hand to her face, as if to brush away a lock of hair that isn't there.

Chloë. Daughter of Heré. Daughter of Arsaké.

And that is all. Chloë nods again and turns back to her baked potato.

Catesby pokes Lucy gently in the ribs.

"I don't get this."

"Look. It's rude to talk to someone of the opposite sex if they're not in your family, OK?"

"If you're a Rmoahal."

"Exactly. Look, you won't have to talk much, all right. The boys aren't very talkative."

"How do you know this stuff, Luce?"

"I did a DJ set here one time."

"…You're kidding me."

"Of course I'm fucking kidding. I read some books, OK?"

After having finished her potato, Lucy reaches up and touches Chloë's arm.

"Thank you. We are sisters now." Lucy takes off her wristwatch and offers it to Chloë, who grunts, and holds it up in the firelight, and regards it appreciatively.

One of the men whistles, and the humans and giants turn. More potatoes.

"You hungry?" says Lucy, not looking at Catesby.

"Starving," says Catesby. "I could go another one."

"Good. Best not to turn this one down."

They sit for a while, blowing the hot potatoes, trying not to burn the insides of their mouths. The Rmoahal women make matter-of-fact, explicit conversation about their silent menfolk, commenting frankly on their bodies, their sexual performance, their successes and failures in the business of living. Their laughs are hisses through bared, filed teeth.

And the men poke the fire and prepare baked potatoes.

• • •

Catesby awakes. He's been lying on a rock, and his back is killing him. He is so cold that every muscle and bone in his upper body aches, and his threadbare duffel coat isn't helping.

The moon is up, dying everything a grayish color.

Among the detritus of the twentieth century, the Rmoahals sleep peacefully on the ground. They are beautiful in repose. A statuesque youth with his arm up over his head, the moonlight glittering over his smooth bluish skin; an older man, craggy and handsome with his arm wrapped tightly around his young wife, whose head nestles in his chest. A woman, face buried in her arms; a man whose expression in rest looks like nothing other than a child.

He can see Lucy kneeling over the sleeping Rmoahal woman and reaching for something in her satchel. He sits up and sighs heavily. Lucy spins around, stuffing whatever it was she was holding back into the satchel.

"Luce?" He whispers.

She says nothing, stares at him.

"What were you doing, Luce?"

"Nothing."

She said that out loud. Too loud. None of the Rmoahals have stirred at all.

"Did you—?"

"They're not gonna wake up for a little while."

"So what's in the bag, Luce?"

"I told you. Nothing."

"Lucy."

She gets up and comes to sit by him on the ground, slumping as she does so. She looks away as she hands him her satchel.

His brows knit, and he stares at her, and she is resolutely looking the other way.

"OK," he says, and opens the satchel. Inside, nestled among a pink vinyl purse, a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, a phone, a few lipsticks and a makeup compact is a knife. It's old, curved, evidently sharpened many times, with text of some kind embossed on the hilt, running along the strip of leather that winds around the handle. It looks like Sanskrit or something like it. The thing smells of enchantment, something sickly and overpowering, almost choking him. Catesby doesn't touch it.

"OK, *Now* explain it."

Lucy, sinking deeper into her silence, pressed her lips together and folded her arms around her knees.

As Catesby watches, a droplet of blood forms at the end of a nick on the Rmoahal woman's chest.

• • •

"Fuck you. I'm not doing that."

Vamani's smile flickered at its corner, but remained otherwise steady. His/her long fingers toyed with the knife, a fingertip on its point, fingers caressing the soft leather of the handle.

"It isn't real skin. They are not real people."

"You don't believe that. You're all, *'these are our actual literal ancestors.'* I know this. I went to the seminar."

"We are born of imagination, Lucy. We are born of the ideas of God."

Lucy radiated hostility like a force field, no magic required; Vamani was only blankness and calm, as ever.

"What does that even fucking *mean*, Vamani?"

"It means that an imaginary skin has power, that an idea brought into the Fallen Realm of material can have a potential that is both transformative and demiurgic."

"You want to make something?"

"If you like."

"So if I bring you this — patch of skin, lump of flesh, whatever — you'll use it to heal me?"

"No. I will use it, and you will not tell anyone that I have it or what I will use it for, and I will heal you."

"You could do this yourself."

"You can do things I cannot. And me, me they already know."

Lucy bit her upper lip, shifted from one foot to the other and back again.

"And they're not real," she said.

"If it will help you to think that." Vamani's smile broadened.

• • •

Catesby's arm is around Lucy, a fraternal gesture, the awkwardness of which is testament to how hard he finds sympathy; she is pressed against his side. She is not crying. Catesby is rambling now, and she just wants him to shut up, but doesn't how to stop him.

"I mean, I know these people never existed, but here they are, with their manners and their — their — stuff, and I was talking with that guy over there about oneirics and he had opinions, and you can't mutilate people with opinions, because it's just not — not — it's just not on. It's not *on*."

Lucy looks up.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well what do I do now?"

"We—"

She withdraws, looking hard at him.

"*We*?"

"We. Go for a road trip. We find someone else who can do this. We re-build some of the bridges we bust. I mean, we know a whole dozen people who can do magic, you and me, and three who can fix you, and two of those won't because they hate you, and the other one won't until you do something weird and awful. There has to be someone else. There are whole schools of thought out there, whole colleges. There are other magicians. Lucy, you talk

to *vampires*. You found a tribe of people who don't even fucking exist. What on earth made you desperate enough to talk to Vamani of all people?"

"This is not your problem."

"Yes it—"

"No it fucking *isn't*. Who made you my keeper? Who made you my *owner*?"

"All right."

He has his hands up, a conciliatory gesture. One of the Rmoahal women stirs, turns over.

"Why would you do that? Why do something so stupid?"

"You'll never understand."

"No, no I won't. Just — don't, Lucy. *Please*."

Surrounded by sleeping Rmoahals, the two of them sit, silently, observing them, their relationships with each other visible even in sleep, just like real people.

"They look so sad," says Lucy.

"Yeah."

Lucy stands up, brushes her jeans down without making a whole lot of difference.

"OK, let's go."

She picks up her satchel and takes the knife out. Without looking at Catesby she says, "We need to leave a gift."

She uses the knife to scratch a few symbols into the top of a broken table that lies, legless, near to Chloë's face, and then thrusts the knife into the wood, so it stands, point down.

"Vamani's going to be annoyed," says Catesby.

"Vamani can go fuck herself," says Lucy.

She turns and begins to walk up through the hill, picking her way through the detritus of twentieth century living.

Catesby pauses. He walks over to his Rmoahal host and takes his phone out of his pocket, leaving it by the sleeping man's head. Then he follows Lucy up the hill.

Custody Battle

BY ERIC ZAWADZKI

Sophia's destiny had a warmer glow today, Margaret thought. The four-year-old girl sat reading *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* to her growing army of stuffed animals. Margaret didn't know whether Sophia could actually read already, or whether she had merely memorized the words after countless repetitions when she was younger.

"From there to here, from here to there, funny things are everywhere."

It didn't really matter to Margaret. She was simply glad that Sophia was healthy and happy in spite of the bitter divorce her parents had just gone through. Several times in the last year Margaret had feared the events would be traumatic enough to change Sophia's destiny permanently, to twist it into a festering wound in the world instead of the shining beacon Margaret had always seen around the girl.

"When I wish to make a wish I wave my hand with a big swish swish."

She comes back from visits with her father a little darker, but she is still brighter week by week.

Margaret didn't know exactly what fate had in store for little Sophia, only that its fulfillment would bring light into the Fallen World. Perhaps she would become a great leader or a brilliant scientist. Perhaps she would Awaken and become a great name among the Wise. Whatever it was, Margaret had resolved to make Sophia's future as bright as possible.

"Today is gone. Today was fun. Tomorrow is another one. Every day, from here to there, funny things are everywhere," Sophia finished and closed the book. Her fate danced like a well-tended fire around her as she turned. "Aunt Margaret, can I have a cookie?"

The girl could look like a cherub when she wanted something, as she did now — her brown hair hanging in a curl along one cheek. Margaret weighed the possibilities, peered into the possible futures to discern which had the best effect on Sophia's growth. Every choice she made had consequences. She found the best path she could and walked along it.

"Maybe after dinner, little one. Your mother will be home soon. Why don't you put your books back on the shelf in your room?"

"Okay," Sophia said agreeably.

Margaret lounged in the recliner with a smile and watched the girl tidy. Sophia disappeared into her room with an armload of books. When she returned to the living room, Margaret couldn't suppress an audible gasp at what she saw.

Sophia was a young woman with a cruel smile and a bloody knife. Her fate was dark, darker than any destiny Margaret had ever seen. Its shadow leaked into everything around her like a lethal poison systematically shutting down its victim cell-by-cell, one burning nerve ending after another.

In a blink, the vision passed, and Sophia stooped to pick up more books. Margaret scrutinized her again. The bright aura was still there, but a thousand new paths had opened into her future, each one darker than the last, some of them more troubling than the one in Margaret's brief vision.

The front door opened, and Donna arrived. Her eyes were puffy from crying.

"Mommy!" Sophia shouted, running over to her.

Donna hugged her daughter tight, as though she might be snatched away from her at any moment. Sophia's possible futures brightened, but when the girl finally squirmed free of her mother's embrace, the danger of darkness reasserted itself.

Margaret wanted to ask Donna what had upset her, but she waited. Donna wouldn't want to talk about this in front of Sophia. Margaret could sense that doing so would turn the girl's destiny a little farther away from the light in any case, and she didn't want that.

"Did you and Aunt Margaret have fun today, Sophia?"

"Yes."

"What did you do together?"

And Donna was off, the image of the attentive mother. Margaret started making dinner and waited. Once Sophia was asleep, Donna collapsed onto the sofa and dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

"Roy?" Margaret asked. Whenever her friend cried it was almost always because of Roy. The divorce had been almost a relief for everyone involved.

Donna nodded.

"What did he do this time?"

"He wants sole custody of Sophia so he can move to San Francisco for his job!" Donna hissed, dabbing her eyes some more.

"Roy's full of shit," Margaret told her, flatly. She had always struggled to pretend to like Roy and was glad that she didn't have to anymore. "He

can't win a custody battle on the strength of that, and I'd like to see him try to convince a judge that you're an unfit mother. He's just trying to control you like he did when you were married. He's bluffing, Donna."

"Not this time," Donna said with a choked sob. She took an envelope out of her purse and held it out. "There's a hearing in three weeks. I've already called my lawyer. I don't want to lose my little girl!"

Margaret sat next to Donna and held her soothingly. "That's not going to happen. You're a good mother, and I'll tell the judge so if it will help get Roy laughed out of court. Even if it won't, I'll come to the hearing with you."

"Will you?"

"It's the least I can do."

It would mean missing the monthly trip to the quicksilver fountain. Pericles wouldn't like that, but the rest of her cabal would understand.

• • •

Margaret sat quietly next to Donna, only barely connected to the proceedings going on around her. Roy was explaining the reasoning behind his demand for sole custody. His lawyer tried to spin some tale about manipulating Sophia into defying him for no reason, but Roy's true motives came across loud and clear. He wanted to pursue a career opportunity in California, but he didn't want to leave his daughter behind to do it. Margaret found the whole thing so trite. From the moment she sat down in the courtroom she knew how the argument would go, knew the judge would rule against Sophia's father.

It was all she could do not to burst out laughing at the unnecessary pageantry of it all.

Roy's line of argument is doomed to fail. How can he not see it?

Margaret pitied Sleepers at times like this. They really had no idea how much time they wasted attempting to escape or delay the inevitable. Donna was wound as tight as a spring, terrified that she would lose access to her daughter forever. Roy remained smugly certain that the judge would see the wisdom of his lawyer's arguments. Even the judge appeared sincere in her desire to make a fair decision, to weigh the arguments of both parties despite the fact that their assertions were objectively unequal.

So much time spent anticipating, weighing, and resisting the obvious. No wonder they fail to notice the Mysteries staring them in the face.

Margaret forced herself to be a source of comfort anyway. She offered Donna tissues before her friend asked for them, whispered encouragement in her ear whenever Roy's lawyer made unfair insinuations concerning her fitness as a mother. It was the least she could do as Donna's friend.

At first, the judge looked intent, willing to be convinced. As the proceedings continued, she looked almost bored, her decision already made. The rest was just a formality the way most intervals between thought and

action were. Roy's lawyer finished his final arguments, and the judge leaned forward to render her judgment.

Margaret sensed a sudden ripple in the lines of Fate, like a hand interrupting the flow of a stream. She focused her attention, seeking its source and finding the judge at the center of it. But wait, the judge wasn't the source of the divergence but its target.

Someone is interfering with events, but who and why?

Margaret decided it didn't matter. An outside force had changed the judge's mind, forced her to comply with Roy's ridiculous demands. Margaret knew what the consequences would be for Donna, for Sophia, for the special destiny mother and daughter must share. She had invested too much to let some outsider merely take it away from her by force.

An image. A few whispered words. Margaret plunged her will into the river of Fate and redirected it.

With a crack, a water pipe above the courtroom burst, drenching the judge. The woman rose up from her bench with a surprised cry, black robes trailing cold water. She had just enough presence of mind left to adjourn the hearing.

She'll reschedule the hearing, Margaret knew. *The courts are clogged with divorce proceedings and custody disputes, though, so it will not be immediately. That will give me some time to identify my mysterious outside source of interference.*

"One week from today," the judge was saying. Margaret didn't catch the rest. The individual words were irrelevant anyway. Roy's lawyer stood up to object, but she was already out of the room.

• • •

Once she left Donna behind Margaret wandered the city, taking buses almost at random. Someone else clearly had an interest in the outcome of this custody battle, but whom? Until she knew that she couldn't prune away Sophia's darker potential futures.

Only one solution for that.

As she walked past a bus stop Margaret reached into a stranger's purse and removed the phone. She walked around the corner and into a secluded alley. The phone required a passcode, which Margaret thumbed automatically. She focused on the hearing earlier that day and the meddling presence she had felt. Then she dialed a number at random. Someone answered on the third ring.

"Who is this?" The male voice sounded annoyed, as if interrupted in the middle of something.

"My name is Thetis. I have an interest in the Mystery surrounding the Granger family and would ask that you don't interfere in their affairs again."

"You have absolutely no idea who you're talking to, do you?" Contempt dripped from every syllable.

"A warlock of some skill, I presume."

"Indeed you do presume."

"Please. This is important."

"Please?" A snort of laughter. "I have spent the last twenty years in preparation for this moment. I'm not going to throw away decades of work just because someone asks nicely."

"If both of us have an interest in the same Mystery, we should take it to the Consilium for mediation." Margaret tried to say it firmly, with authority, but her heart was pounding in her chest.

"Don't try to frighten me with the Consilium." He sounded annoyed. "I've committed no crime, and my claim is stronger than yours, so they'd rule in my favor."

"If you're so certain of that, why not refrain from fighting me for access to this Mystery until they've had a chance to render judgment?"

Her rival chuckled. "I don't know whether to sneer at your stupidity or to be impressed by your audacity." His voice hardened. "No. It'll take the Consilium weeks to convene on the subject, and I'm not going to wait until then when I can guarantee the judge will rule in Roy Granger's favor in a week. Do you really think the Consilium will reverse the decision of a Sleeper judge?"

Margaret knew he was right. The Consilium would take the path of least resistance in a case like this. This was a dispute between two mages and not worth going to the extreme of destroying records or altering memories.

"You are making a terrible mistake," Margaret told him through gritted teeth.

"I very much doubt that, Thetis was it? Now, you've wasted quite enough of my time. Do not attempt to contact me again."

The line went dead. With a pop and a small puff of smoke that smelled like melted plastic, the phone in her hand did the same. It didn't look any different, so Margaret quietly slipped it back into its owner's purse. She hated not returning things in their original condition, but whatever the warlock had done to it was beyond her power to fix.

What a waste. As if something so simple would deter me.

Margaret laid a quiet blessing on the Sleeper she had wronged, however inadvertently. Hopefully the good fortune the woman received would balance out the misfortune of a broken cellphone.

If I'm to force this warlock to face me, I'll have to get his attention.

Margaret retreated into a quiet coffee shop nearby and took a seat in the back. She closed her eyes and listened to the vibrations of fate around her.

She focused on the darkest threads she could find. She stood up, leaving the untouched cup of coffee on the table as she picked up the end of one black strand and followed it into the labyrinth that was the city's side streets and alleys.

At last her steps led her to a dumpster. Margaret could sense her prize inside, hot and pulsing like an infected wound. Without a lot of dignity she climbed inside. The scent of garbage on a summer day almost overpowered her, especially mixed as it was with the sickening aura of the destiny of the dread weapon she sought. Margaret swallowed bile and fought down the nausea as she dug among the refuse of discarded fast food and the rotting produce of the grocery store at the far end of the alley.

At last she found it — a discarded Glock pistol of the kind commonly issued to police. Margaret could already guess at its history. She found a plastic bag that looked mostly clean and slipped the heavy pistol inside. Then she stuck the whole thing in her purse and climbed out of the dumpster. The thought crossed her mind that the gun was probably still loaded and might not have its safety on. She had a brief vision of the weapon discharging, leaving her corpse covered in filth in a deserted alley. It wasn't the sort of premonition that carried the weight of fate, though — just the usual human paranoia and safely disregarded.

An awkward bus ride later, Margaret reached her sanctum. She wanted to change out of the filthy clothes she wore, to shower away the garbage odor, but she didn't want to keep the gun in her sanctum even one minute longer than she needed to. She could already feel the reek of its aura soaking into everything around her. It made her sick to her stomach to think of it.

Margaret cast a quick postcognition to confirm what she already knew. The gun had belonged to a police officer once, one murdered on the beat, his weapon stolen by his killer. She could sense the taint of at least one other shooting before its new owner finally decided it was too dangerous to continue carrying a pistol looted from a cop's still-warm corpse.

Eminently traceable. Just the thing for the purpose I have in mind.

The ritual took the rest of the night and left Margaret feeling sick to her stomach for reasons that had nothing to do with the garbage smell that permeated her sacred space. She had pushed herself too hard, bent destiny in a direction it had never been meant to go. Now it was done, though.

Margaret held the Glock between gloved fingers and let it drop out of sight into a canvas grocery sack. She could sense the twisted path it would take when she left it on the bus in the morning. It would seek out its target unerringly and discharge its payload at precisely the right moment.

She wasn't sure this was the right choice, whether the consequences of her actions would be worth the gain. Margaret could see no better options, though. She left her sanctum and got onto the bus.

• • •

The expected phone call came the morning before the rescheduled visitation hearing. Sophia was playing with her Duplo. A wobbly tower of colored blocks rose from the floor. Margaret quietly slipped outside and closed the patio door behind her before answering.

"Hello?"

"Are you trying to bring the Guardians down on both our heads?!?"

Margaret couldn't help but feel a little smug pride at causing a warlock to lose his temper, his precious self-control. She let the smile creep into her voice. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't even know your name."

"Endymion," the caller snapped. "And don't play dumb with me. A pistol stolen from a dead cop makes its way into a man's luggage just as he walks through an airport security checkpoint. That's not a coincidence."

"Roy brought a stolen handgun into an airport?" Margaret's feigned shock did nothing to hide the sarcasm. "That seems like the sort of behavior that might endanger his chances of getting sole custody of his daughter. It might even convince the judge to terminate his visitation rights entirely."

"Fuck you. I spent the whole night altering memories, and I'll be cleaning up the traces of his arrest for days, but he's free and clear now. Do you have any idea how long he would have gone to jail if I hadn't intervened? Is that something you really wanted on your conscience?"

"And taking a child away from her mother is any better?" Margaret snapped back.

"I suppose you wanted to get my attention," Endymion growled. "Well now you have it. I suggest you yield your interest in this matter and walk away."

"And if I don't will you complain to the Consilium?" Margaret asked innocently. "You know it could take them weeks to convene a hearing, and they're not going to…"

"Silence, witch. You know very well I don't need the Consilium. I have a true name and a comb. Picture this little tableau: Roy's daughter comes to the hearing covered in bruises. She sobs uncontrollably as she tells the judge that her mother beats her. She tells stories of many more forms of abuse — nights without dinner, being locked in the closet, being told horrible lies about her father, and much, much worse. I can make the girl beg never to see her mother again."

On the other side of the patio door, Sophia's tower gave one final wobble and toppled. Her aura darkened as if Endymion had already made good on his threats.

Margaret's face heated. "Who knows what the future might bring? Roy might drop dead of a heart attack tonight or die in a car on the way to the courthouse. Maybe a gas leak blows up his house when he gets home. Fate can be very creative. He'll never see it coming, and neither will you."

"You wouldn't dare. The Guardians would…"

"Even if they took an interest in the death of a single Sleeper, the Guardians would not be able to bring your dead Mystery to life. My only interest is in keeping mother and daughter together."

Endymion's silence stretched on for a long moment, until Margaret began to fear he would hang up on her and make good on his threats.

"A meeting on neutral ground, then," the warlock said with a sigh. "Now."

"Tonight," Margaret countered. "I have obligations until seven."

"You're willing to kill for the Mysteries but not change your schedule for them?"

"My daytime obligations concern those same Mysteries."

"Fine. Tonight at eight. Come alone."

• • •

They met at a construction site. The workers had gone home for the night, and Margaret was no stranger to climbing fences when she needed to. Endymion arrived via magic portal — an ostentatious way to put in an appearance, Margaret thought, which was in keeping with her impression of him. Even with his assertion that he had been pursuing a single Mystery for twenty years, the warlock was older than Margaret had expected — at least sixty and possibly much older.

"Are you Endymion?"

"Yes. You are Thetis?"

Margaret nodded.

"For the last time, I must insist that you yield. I've been grooming Roy for my purpose for twenty years, and you will respect this. This is not open to debate."

Endymion seemed to suddenly loom over her. Margaret shrank back instinctively for only a moment before she noticed the distinctive hum of her destiny being manipulated by someone else's magic. Rage boiling in her, she pulled the strands of her destiny free of the warlock's grasp.

You made the choice to break the peace when a witch stands beneath the flag of truce. You will not enjoy the consequences of that decision.

Instead she said in a tight voice, "Do not attempt that again."

Endymion shrugged. "It was worth a shot," he said in an unconcerned voice. "Let's talk compromise. My interest is in the father, Roy. His mind

is the right shape to unlock a particular ancient library in the San Francisco area."

What kind of awful library would refuse access to anyone who isn't like Roy?

"You can have Roy," Margaret told him. "My interest is the child, Sophia. She cannot fulfill her destiny unless she has regular, significant contact with her mother, which is incompatible with her father receiving sole custody."

Endymion frowned. "Regrettably, I need for Roy to bring his daughter with him to San Francisco. She helps his mind maintain the proper shape."

"Can't you just have him take a trip to San Francisco with her long enough to open your library and then bring her back?"

He shook his head. "One-time access to the library won't do me much good. I need to be able to keep Roy near at hand for as long as it takes to explore the library fully."

Margaret waited. She sensed it was not yet her time to respond to him. He wanted a compromise? Well then let him suggest one.

"The mother could come to San Francisco with Roy," Endymion said slowly. "It would solve both our problems."

Margaret let fly a small laugh, "Leaving aside the messy divorce and now this outrageous custody battle, Donna has no reason to follow him to San Francisco. Her life is here, and she intends to keep it here."

"I can make her remember why she fell in love with him. She would be content with him, happy even. They wouldn't be the first divorced couple to get back together again."

"You're actually suggesting…*rewriting* her? Her free will is inconvenient to you, and so you'll just cut it out of her?!" Margaret knew she was shouting but couldn't bring herself to care.

Endymion looked confused by this reaction. "It isn't as though I'd be lobotomizing her, just bringing forward the parts of her that still care about Roy…"

"Tinkering with an innocent woman's mind is the very definition of hubris!"

"And killing a Sleeper with magic, as you threatened to do just a few hours ago, isn't?" He looked angry, now, offended. "You're every bit as ruthless as I am. You want to pursue the mystery of Roy's daughter? Fine. I'm giving you that. But I can't bargain with you if…" Endymion went suddenly silent, and a pitying look crossed his face. "This isn't about the Mysteries. It's *personal*, isn't it?" He said the word distastefully, as though "personal" were a euphemism for something reprehensible — like drowning kittens for fun.

"I warned you not to use your mind magic on me again," Margaret said sternly, although she hadn't felt its influence this time.

"I didn't…" he began, sounding like the boy caught in the girl's dressing room. He quickly checked himself. More calmly he said, "Look. It's written all over your face, all over everything you've done to convince me to cede my claim to you." He compressed his lips briefly, considering. "How long have you known the mother?"

Since we were in kindergarten. Her mother always sent her to school with a little box of raisins, and she always traded them to me for some of my orange slices.

A warlock could use that against her, though, and so instead Margaret simply said, "Long enough."

"Before your Awakening?"

Margaret said nothing, which she knew told him everything.

If he does a little research he'll learn my true name. The next attack won't be a petty spell cast in haste and easily resisted. It will tear through my defenses like tissue paper.

"Perhaps we can still maintain joint custody of this Mystery," Endymion said, smiling at his own joke. "A weekly switch between San Francisco and Milwaukee is unreasonable, but we could do three month or six month swaps. Or maybe Roy could travel here every month or so for a week at a time. I can get him an apartment or condo to stay in when he's here."

He sounded sincere, but Margaret supposed that could be feigned. It still made her uncomfortable to hear him talk about Roy as though the Sleeper were a child to be rewarded, punished, or given instructions whenever and however Endymion wanted.

I came prepared. He set events into motion as soon as he tested my defenses.

"Can we at least agree that neither of us will interfere with tomorrow's hearing or its participants?" Margaret asked him.

Endymion hesitated. "I will not use any magic to manipulate events during tomorrow's hearing so long as you agree to the same terms."

Margaret pretended not to notice the significant change he had made to her wording.

Cleverly leaving himself the option of interfering with the hearing between now and the beginning of the hearing.

"Agreed," Margaret said.

She offered him her hand, and he took it. They parted as they had arrived.

• • •

From the moment she sat down in the courtroom Margaret knew how the argument would go, knew the judge would rule against Sophia's father. This time, when the judge leaned forward to hand down her decision, no one interfered.

"Roy Granger, I must deny your request for sole custody," the judge announced. "You have provided no convincing proof that Donna Sherman is an unfit mother."

Donna gave a cry of joy and hugged Sophia close. Margaret looked at mother and daughter with a satisfied smile. Sophia's destiny had lightened again, the shadows all but burned away from her potential futures. As she waited for the judge to finish admonishing Roy for wasting the court's time, Margaret became aware that one of the bailiffs near the front entrance was watching her intently. A second figure in a police uniform watched her from where he stood at the rear entrance of the courtroom.

Margaret let out a sigh. She hugged Donna and then hugged and kissed Sophia, murmuring something about a family emergency that might keep her out of town for a while. Sophia was too young to question this, and Donna was too busy celebrating. Margaret let go of both of them and walked toward the police officer at the back of the room. He looked grim as he motioned her to follow him outside.

"You are Thetis?" he asked when they were out of the courtroom.

"I am. What is this about?"

"I am Antikythera."

Margaret's heart pounded in her chest. "The Sentinel."

He nodded gravely. "The Consilium would like to ask you some questions in connection with a fatal accident that befell another mage last night. You were the last one to see Endymion before he died."

Margaret merely nodded. She already knew the course this inquiry was likely to take, and she was eager to get it over with so she could continue to guide Sophia toward her destiny.

Endymion's cabal will call for severe punishments. Pericles will be furious at me, but he is my cabalmate, and he'll convince the others to stand with me. The Consilium will think I've overreacted, but they know that no punishment will bring Endymion back from the dead.

Margaret went to her trial with head held high. She had made some difficult choices, and she was prepared to face the consequences.

The Farmhand's Stick

BY GEOFF SKELLAMS

The guy bounced off the pickup's bull-bar with a thud. Kermodei hadn't even seen him as she came around the bend in the road. One second the road in her headlights was clear; the next he's jumping out of the forest into her path.

Kermodei slammed on the brakes and her truck slid to a halt in a cloud of dust. Grabbing her flashlight and backpack from the passenger seat, she leaped from the vehicle and ran back to find the man.

He lay face down in a shallow ditch beside the road. From what Kermodei could see, the hair on the side of his head was plastered down with blood. His clothes were ripped, the edges stained with dried blood.

Kneeling down beside him, she gently checked his neck for a pulse. It was weak, but still there. There was still hope for this guy. He didn't stir when she touched him though, which worried her.

Pushing her hair behind her ear, she gently touched the fingertips of her right hand to the top of the man's head, and those of the left to the base of the man's spine. She concentrated her attention on her right hand as she breathed in, and then on her left as she exhaled.

Her breathing settled into the same shallow rhythm as the injured man, as the imago for her Healing Trance sprung almost unbidden into Kermodei's mind. She knew instantly that he had several broken ribs and the truck's impact had collapsed one of his lungs. He had a concussion and his right eye socket was fractured.

But even more confusing was his ragged, scraped life force. Kermodei had assessed injured people before and knew what to look for. This was something completely different. Whatever had happened to this man, it had begun scourging his very life force from him.

What the hell happened to you?

After carefully rolling him over, she opened her backpack and removed a large, stained leather pouch. She untied the drawstring and pulled it open, before laying it down on the road beside her.

After rummaging about in the pouch, she pulled out a dented old tin. She unscrewed the lid and scraped a thick daub of the foul smelling paste with her fingers. She smeared the ointment on the man's face, and after unbuttoning his shirt with her left hand, she smeared the rest of the paste in a series of chevrons across the man's chest.

The healing chant sprang from her throat almost by itself. Placing her hands on either side of the man's face, she chanted louder and louder. She imagined the man healed and well again, as she kept chanting and moving her hands down to the man's chest. As she went, she could feel the difference immediately; his bones knitted themselves together and his pulse strengthened. His breathing deepened, and Kermodei's jagged, torn feeling smoothed out to something more normal. Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Kermodei opened her eyes and removed her hands.

His eyes flickered and he started coughing. Kermodei helped him sit up and kept her hands on his back until the coughing subsided. She pulled a cloth and a water bottle from her backpack, and after dampening the rag, wiped away the worst of the mess from his face. Her magic had closed his wounds, which relieved her.

He turned to look at her. "Where am I? What happened?"

"You've had an accident," she said. "I nearly hit you with my truck and you collapsed. It's taken me a while to bring you round."The man coughed and spat out a little blood.

"Thank God I found you. I hadn't seen anyone on this road for hours."

Kermodei frowned. "Why? What are you doing out here?"

"I was out here with a friend of mine," he said, rubbing his head. "We wanted to hook up with some other friends who were camping in the area, but we couldn't find them. We think we found their campsite, but there was no sign of them anywhere. Just as we were about ready to leave, something attacked us. I think it was a bear."

Kermodei looked at him carefully. While there were long gashes in his clothing, they weren't from a bear. She'd seen bear claw injuries before. It didn't explain his scourged life force, either. No, this was something completely different.

"A bear? Are you sure?"

The guy just nodded his head. "Yeah, it must've been. The sonofabitch's huge, bigger than me. But we didn't get a good look at it before it hit us. It had a go at me before it turned on Jake. We managed to get away from it somehow, but Jake's pretty torn up. I had to leave him behind so I could find some help."

It didn't *feel* right. Kermodei squinted her eyes slightly and concentrated on feeling the man's aura. A shimmering field of mottled orange appeared around him, with some light green shifting in and out. He was confused, afraid, and lying.

"Where was this?" Kermodei asked, slowing standing up again.

The guy looked up at her. "A few miles up the road from here. It's hard to tell. It was dark when this happened.

Kermodei extended her hand and helped the man to his feet. He grunted with pain.

"You said your friend was badly hurt?" Kermodei asked. "Can you take me to him? Maybe I can help him and get him to a hospital."

He looked north towards the forest and then back at her. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure that we can find him again. But I'm hoping that it's not too late."

Kermodei took his arm and helped him as he limped towards the pickup. "My name's Keely, by the way."

"Ray," he said, with a sharp intake of breath as he took a step. "Ray Holm."

She glanced at the leg he was favoring. Fresh blood seeped through his jeans. So, while she had stabilized him, he still had a fair bit of healing to do.

"You doing ok?" she said. "Need me to take a look at that leg before we go?"

Ray shook his head. "No, it hurts like you wouldn't believe, but I'll live. I'd rather go pick up Jake and get him to a hospital."

Kermodei opened the pickup's passenger door, threw in her backpack before helping Ray climb inside. "Jake is your friend?"

Ray winced as he climbed into the truck. "Yeah. Been friends for years. I didn't want to leave him alone, but he needed more help than I could give him. I couldn't just let him die."

After helping him buckle in, Kermodei closed the door and ran around the front of the pickup, then climbed in herself. She glanced across at Ray before starting the engine. "Holding up?"

Ray gritted his teeth and nodded stiffly. "A stiff drink wouldn't hurt right about now, but I'll live ."

Kermodei shifted the pickup into gear and took off carefully down the dirt road. "How far down this way to we have to go before we pull off?"

Ray shrugged. "A couple of miles, I guess. I remember there's a huge boulder beside the road not far from where I left Jake, so that's probably worth keeping an eye out for."

"How bad was he?"

Ray shook his head. "Don't know if he'll make it. Whatever hit us cut his guts pretty bad and he's lost a lot of blood. I think I managed to stop most of it, so as long as he doesn't try to move much, he *might* be OK. But he was in a lot of pain."

"It's not too cold up here this time of year," Kermodei said. "If this was the Rockies, he might be in for a tougher time."

Just as they came around a bend in the road, barely fifty feet in front of them, a giant fir tree lay blocking the road. Kermodei jumped on the brakes with both feet and spun the steering wheel hard to the left.

The pickup bounced over the shallow drainage ditch and slid to a halt with its front end up a slight embankment. Ray's head bounced hard off the door frame as the truck came to a shuddering stop.

"Jesus Christ!" Kermodei shouted as she craned her head around to look at the tree she had narrowly missed.

"Oh fuck, that hurts!" muttered Ray, wiping fresh blood from a cut on his forehead.

Kermodei glanced across at him. "You OK?"

Ray shook his head. "It's nothing. I'll live ." He opened the truck's door and leaned out to look at the tree. "This wasn't here earlier tonight. I followed the road and never saw this. You didn't take a turn when I wasn't paying attention?"

"Nope," said Kermodei. "Didn't even see any turnoffs." She grabbed her flashlight and jumped down from the truck.

The tree looked as though it had been lying in the road for a while. Dust and leaf litter had piled up alongside it and moss had started growing on the top of it.

Even more bizarre was the lack of road on the other side of the fallen tree. Tall trees grew where she expected to see a road.

She headed back to the pickup and leaned across the driver's seat to flip open the center console. She pulled out a battered GPS receiver and powered it up.

"Are you sure this was a road?" she said, giving Ray a dirty look. "By the looks of things, this is the end of the line."

"Yeah, I'm fucking sure. I've been up this way a bunch of times and the road should go a *lot* further than this."

Once the GPS locked onto the satellites, Kermodei zoomed in the map. It showed the road was supposed to go on for at least another four or five miles into the mountains.

Kermodei looked up at Ray. "According to the GPS, you're right." She played the flashlight's beam across the trees on the other side of the log. They looked like they'd been there for decades, if not centuries. "Wait here a sec. I'm going to check this out."

Kermodei climbed the bank beside the road and moved past the fallen tree. She jumped down on the other side and looked at the ground. It was hard packed like the road on the other side of the log, but worn and rutted by the weather.

But it the place *felt* different. The forest on this side of the log was more... vibrant. More alive. Kermodei opened her senses and was stunned by the

sheer amount of life here. The forest nearly throbbed with it; Kermodei hadn't felt a forest this *alive* since her Awakening. She just sat there for a few seconds drinking in the forest's energy.

Ray called out from the other side of the log. "Everything OK over there?"

Kermodei let go of her spell and sighed as the vibrancy faded. "I'm fine, but there's something seriously weird about this place."

Ray clambered down the bank beside her. "Find anything useful?"

Kermodei shrugged. "Not sure. It looks as though there *was* a road on this side of the log once upon a time, but it's overgrown as hell now."

Ray hobbled over, still obviously in pain. "I'm tellin' ya, these weren't here when I came through this way earlier."

She stood up and patted the trunk of one of the giant trees growing in the middle of track. "This thing's been here for years. So there's no way in hell it just grew in the past couple of hours."

"Well, your GPS map says otherwise."

Scowling at him, Kermodei played the flashlight through the trees up ahead. "I guess we'll have to press on on foot from here, if we want to get your friend out. Give me a couple of minutes to grab a few things from the truck and we'll head off."

"Sure thing. You need some help?"

"Nah, I got it. Be back in a sec."

Kermodei climbed back around the log and went back to the truck. She reached over the side of the tray and grabbed a heavy rucksack. She had a heavy hiking pole in there; it'd probably help Ray walk over the forest's uneven floor. From a locked trunk hidden under the backseat, she pulled out a giant revolver in a leather holster, a huge battery lantern and a heavy hunting knife.

After hooking the holster onto her belt, she pulled the knife from the sheath and held it up to the light. The hand carved timber handle was polished smooth from heavy use. The blade's edge was razor sharp and its length was engraved with a series of weird glyphs. Kermodei gently ran her fingers over the symbols and recited the High Speech in her mind as she did so. The words held as much power for her now as they did when she first learned them.

She slipped the knife carefully back into its sheath and strapped it to her thigh. After grabbing the GPS from the front seat, she locked the truck and then headed back to where Ray was resting.

"Ready to go?"

"Huh?" he said with a start. "Oh shit, you scared the crap out of me!"

"Sorry. Come on, we need to get moving."

Kermodei held out the hiking staff. "Here, this might help you walk. If

nothing else, it'll give you something to protect yourself with if that bear comes back for you."

Ray glanced longingly across at her pistol and knife. "Don't suppose you've got one for me?"

"Nope. These are mine." She tossed the flashlight to Ray and flicked on the lantern. The beam lit up the forest and captured all the dust motes floating in the air. "Ready to move?"

Ray hauled himself upright using the staff. "Yeah. Christ, I hope Jake is still OK."

The pair threaded their way through the trees, following what was left of the road. The lantern created a bubble of light in the dark forest. The sounds of birds and other small animals came whispering out of the darkness, causing them to start more than once.

Kermodei opened her senses to the vitality of the landscape as they walked along. The further they went, the more vibrant the life became. She could sense things moving in the underbrush. The trees were more alive, and the underbrush off the road was getting thicker and more luxurious. Kermodei smiled quietly in the darkness; it was feeling more and more like the Primal Wild with every step.

• • •

Rounding a bend, they found a huge white boulder lying embedded in the bank beside the track. Ray hobbled over to it. "This is it! That's the rock I was telling you about before. But I *swear* that this road was clear all this way before."

"Yeah, so you keep saying," Kermodei muttered. "So, how far from here did you leave Jake?"

Ray pointed north into the darkness. "Maybe a quarter mile or so in that direction."

"OK, let's keep moving. We'll rest once we get there."

The lantern's beam sliced through the dark as they picked their way along what was left of the road. With each step, the ground became more broken and the undergrowth thicker. The tree trunks were broader here, as though the trees were even older.

The pair pushed through the ferns and came through to a clearing. Kermodei played the lantern's beam around in a circle. The crushed and rusted remains of semi-trailers lay buried in the underbrush, their paint faded and peeling and the metalwork covered in thick moss. They looked like they had been there forever.

Kermodei looked across at Ray, her face darkening. "*This* was your campsite?"

Ray looked puzzled. “Well...I think so,” he said looking around the clearing. “But the trucks weren’t like this. How the fuck can something like this happen?”

“Just what were you guys doing out here? These look like logging trucks. I thought you said you were camping out here .”

Ray shrugged. “We were. We were just looking to make some extra cash. The bank was threatening to foreclose on our mill. We just needed a few truckloads of the good stuff to keep us going.”

Kermodei ground her teeth together. “You *do* realize that this is old growth forest, right? And protected by law?”

“So fucking what? There’s still shitloads of trees around here, and we’re so far out that no one’s going to even notice a few of them missing. What are you, one of those tree-hugging hippies or something?”

Kermodei balled her fist to deck the guy, but was interrupted by a crashing sound coming from the forest. Something was moving out beyond the edge of the light.

Ray’s head snapped around to look in the direction of the noise. “Did you hear that?” The hairs on the back of Kermodei’s neck stood up. She sensed a massive spell being cast and she staggered back with its intensity. *Christ on a stick! What the hell is that?*

Opening herself to the flow of nature, she could see that the life around was on overdrive. Everything was so intensively *alive* and growing madly. Nature was reclaiming what these douchebags had tried destroying. But she couldn’t see anything that could have made the crashing noise. Something was moving around out there, but she had no idea what the hell it was.

“Wait here,” she said to Ray. “I’ll go take a quick look. I can’t see anything moving out there, so perhaps it was just a branch falling from a tree or something.”

Ray shook his head. “That was no fucking branch, sister! There’s something big and *alive* moving around out there. It’s probably what attacked Jake before!”

“It might not be either! I’m just going to take a quick look and come straight back. You’ve got the other flashlight. Take a look around and see if you can find your friend!”

“What if it tries to take you too?”

Kermodei patted her holster. “Bear repellant.”

Without waiting for him to reply, Kermodei turned and headed into the trees.

• • •

She moved quickly and silently though the undergrowth. Once out of sight of the clearing’s edge, she flicked off the lantern. Darkness rushed in

around her, but Kermodei was expecting it and waited a few seconds for her eyes to adjust. Pulling her rucksack from her back, she opened one of the side pockets and took out a well-worn pouch.

Without even thinking about, she pulled several bundles of dried herbs from the pouch, and pinched several leaves from each one. She then crushed the leaves together in her palm, grinding them into a thick dust. The aromatic scent combined with the earthy smell of the loam on the forest floor as she pulled an old pipe from the rucksack pocket. The leaves went into the pipe's bowl before she lit them up with a battered old Zippo lighter.

She closed her eyes and inhaled the fragrant smoke deep into her lungs. Kermodei relaxed as the warmth spread through her chest and she began to chant quietly in High Speech, imagining seeing a new level of reality.

When she opened her eyes, she could see more than just the forest. All around her, the spirits of the trees and the ground were going about their business on the other side of the Gauntlet. She had seen this sort of thing hundreds of times and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. None of the spirits were paying her any attention, and they were not cowering or hiding from something big or dangerous.

Kermodei turned slowly, checking out the spiritual landscape. Just the forest. She was about to give up when she spotted something weird in one of the trees. It was almost as if the tree had been superimposed over a human figure. It wasn't a ghost; she'd seen enough of those to recognize the difference.

She walked over carefully and laid her hands on the real tree. It had a weird resonance to it. It didn't feel quite like a tree should; there was something more *human* about this one. Kermodei ran her hands up and down the trunk and a few feet from the ground, she felt something cold and metallic. Releasing her spell's imago, she blinked to let her eyes get used to seeing only the mundane. She picked up the lantern and flicked it back on for a clearer look.

Embedded into the tree trunk was a thin silver chain, with a crucifix dangling from it. A bit further around the side, the bark had been removed from the trunk and the smooth wood there looked as though it had been shallowly carved with a skull and two crossed guitars.

Kermodei grabbed her backpack and headed back to the clearing.

• • •

Ray was sitting on the ground, leaning against one of the wrecked logging trunks, his head in his hands.

"Hey dipshit," Kermodei said. "I found something weird. Come and look at this."

He looked up at her. "Huh? What was it?"

"Just come and have a look, will you? It's easier than trying to explain it to you."

Ray struggled to his feet, grunting with pain. "Did you see what was making that noise?"

Kermodei shook her head. "Didn't see a damn thing."

"Why'd you turn off the lantern before?" he asked as he hobbled over. "How'd you expect to see anything in the dark?"

"You ever done any hunting?" she said, fixing him with a stare. "Animals see a light like that and they high tail it. You may as well be shouting your way through the damn forest." She started leading him through the trees. "Once your eyes get accustomed to the dark, you can see a whole lot more out here than you'd expect, especially once you've done it a few times."

Ray just grunted and tried to keep up with her.

• • •

Kermodei stopped next to the tree with the crucifix and waited for Ray to arrive.

"Have a look at this. Did you guys see this when you were out here looking for trees to cut down?"

Ray limped over and stared at the pendant, his face going pale. "Holy fuck."

"What?"

"It's Jake's. He never took it off. How the hell did it get embedded into a tree like that?"

Kermodei just ran her hand over the tree trunk. "Did Jake also have a tattoo? A skull with crossed guitars?"

"Yeah," Ray said, nodding. "How'd you know?"

She just patted the carving on the tree. "See for yourself."

Ray moved around her and took a look at the tree, then stared at Kermodei in disbelief. "What kind of sick fucking joke is this? Where's Jake?"

Kermodei laughed quietly. "As crazy as it sounds, I believe you're looking at him."

"You have *got* to be fucking kidding me!" he snapped. "You want me to believe that this *tree* is actually Jake?"

Kermodei shrugged. "I've seen weirder shit."

"You *seriously* need to lay off the drugs, lady."

She laughed. "No drugs, well, apart from that one time I tried ayahuasca in the Amazon years ago. But seriously, you wouldn't believe half the stuff that I've experienced."

Ray got up in her face. "Enough of this shit! Tell me what you've done with my friend!"

Before Kermodei could answer him, a strange rustling noise came from behind them. Something was moving quietly through the treetops towards them.

Several somethings, as the same noise started coming in from several other directions at the same time.

Ray spun around in a circle, playing his flashlight beam back and forth through the treetops. “What the fuck is out there?” he yelled.

Kermodei quietly sat down and chanted under her breath, opening her feelings to Nature again. The vibrancy was growing stronger with every second. The forest was becoming even more alive.

Once her spell completed, she turned her gaze to the treetops and just watched. Through the darkness, she was able to see several figures, almost human-shaped but looking like they were made from the fir trees themselves. They leaped from tree to tree, the firs rustling in their wake.

As they came closer, Kermodei heard a strange chattering between the figures. It wasn’t in any known human speech, but it sounded like High Speech. There were a lot of unfamiliar sounds, but there were some words that she recognized .

Ray leaned over her and shoved her. “What the hell are you sitting down for? There’s something moving this way! We have to get out of here!”

Kermodei scrambled to her feet, and then pushed Ray backwards away from her. “We aren’t going *anywhere*, dickwad. And if you *ever* try touching me again, I’ll kill you!”

“Bullshit!” snapped Ray. “I don’t know what the fuck is out here, but I’m not sticking around to find out. I’ve already seen what they did to Jake. There’s no way that’s happening to me!”

“There’s no point in running, not now,” Kermodei said, staring him down. “They’ve already surrounded us. They’re closing in for the kill.”

“WHAT?” Veins in Ray’s forehead bulged and threatened to pop. “How the fuck can you know that?”

“It’s what pack predators do,” she said, quietly.

Kermodei turned her face and hands upwards to the treetops. Slowly, she began to chant in High Speech, sounding each syllable precisely and secretly hoping that whatever it was in the trees could understand her.

“I pay my respects to the beings of this forest. I wish you no harm.”

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. The sense of growth nearly overwhelmed her as Nature in the area intensified; the sense of life was far more intense than anything she’d ever experienced outside her Awakening in the Primal Wild.

Ray rushed over to her. “What the hell are you singing about? We ain’t got time for this shit!”

Kermodei felt him fumbling for the latch on her holster. Her elbow snapped out and caught him under the chin, and she spun in place and planted

her right heel into Ray's kneecap. His leg buckled with a sickening crack and he collapsed in a screaming heap, clutching at his leg.

Yanking her revolver from its holster, she jammed the end of its barrel underneath Ray's nose. "Shut. The. Fuck. Up," she said through clenched teeth.

"You crazy bitch! What the hell was that for?"

She lashed out with the butt of the revolver and pistol-whipped him across the skull. As he collapsed back to the damp earth, she straightened up and turned around.

Six figures lowered themselves from the trees and stood in a semi-circle before her. They were only about five feet tall, and appeared to be a tangle of tree branches and undergrowth, shaped into a bipedal body. Their eyes were two bright green glowing circles, hidden amongst the tangle on twigs and leaves on their heads.

Kermodei bowed deeply before them. She wasn't sure what they were or where they had come from, but she was certain they weren't spirits. They were something else entirely.

One stepped forward towards her. "*Who are you that you disturb this place?*" it rumbled in High Speech.

"*I am called Kermodei*," she said. "*Thyrsus Adept of the Ungula Draconis. I mean you and this place no harm.*"

It pointed at Ray. "*You bring this one here. He and his had come before to destroy the forest.*"

"*When I brought him here, I meant no disrespect. It was not until we arrived that I learned what they had been doing. He had been worried for his friend.*"

The creature tilted its head slightly to one side. "*He ran like a frightened rabbit when we used his friend to regrow the damage they had caused.*" It paused and stared directly at her. "*How do we know that you are not one of them?*"

"*I have made it my life's calling to protect the wilderness such as this. I hold no quarrel with you; indeed, I would rather learn from you and pledge my life to help protect this place from outsiders who would harm it.*"

"*So you say*," the creature rumbled. "*But how could we know that you speak the truth?*"

Kermodei bowed her head slightly. "*Because I present you with a gift.*" She turned slightly and pointed at Ray's unconscious form. "*Take this one as a token of my sincerity. I understand that he and his had harmed this place and he can pay with his life as the others before him already have.*"

One of the other creatures on the end of the circle spoke up. "*You would sacrifice one of your own kind?*"

"*He is not one of my kind*," Kermodei spat. "*He would destroy this world and everything magical in it. I would happily scour him for the desecration he caused here.*"

The creatures rumbled at each other in a language that Kermodei didn't understand.

Behind her, Ray began to stir. Kermodei turned quickly and kicked him in the head and he collapsed back.

The closest of the creatures approached her. The leaves on its head moved by themselves, and tendrils of new growth sprouted from the timber on the side of its head and wove themselves threw the leaves. "*We have considered what you have both said and done and choose to believe you at this time, Kermodei of the Ungula Draconis. You will surrender your offering to us and watch as he repairs the damage he has caused us. But understand that if you would dare to cross us, you will befall the same fate.*"

Kermodei nodded. "*I pledge my protection of this region. You have my word.*"

Two others reached down and hauled Ray to his feet. They held him upright while they all began chanting in their strange language again. Kermodei felt Rays' pattern being scourged, and she watched as his feet sprouted roots, anchoring him to the ground. His skin turned to bark and thickened as the trunk of the tree began to swell and grow.

Kermodei smiled as she watched Ray the human vanish from view and a magnificent tree take his place.

Whatever it takes.

The Human Heart

BY MALCOLM SHEPPARD

When I was Hierarch, I asked petitioners and heralds if they'd ever eaten a human heart. I did it with a hungry look in my eyes and it scared the shit out of them, for a time.

Even so, the red, twitching muscle spitting blood down my right arm at fifty beats per minute scares me. I almost dropped it after ripping it out. I don't like the wind blowing through my chest. I already yelled "Old Man!" once, and it feels bit ridiculous to wait outside his hut for this long.

It's a cold wind, here at the end of the Dreamtime.

He eventually drags himself out like he's seen his share of aches. He leans on a cane that looks like a child's spine when you see it out of the corner of your eye, and his slow footsteps melt the sand into mottled glass.

"You've got another present for me?" He has a charming, youthful smile.

"Of course I don't. You're the Abyss."

That wins his laughter. "That's what they say. Let me have a look at that."

"What?"

"The heart. I know it's not mine, so there's no harm in letting me see it."

"Fine." I toss it over to him, as long as we're being casual about the whole thing. He catches it quick, curls up with it and reads it like sacrificial entrails — and that's appropriate, really.

He scratches his head (his fingernails are long, pointed and made of iron, for a moment) and throws it back with an impressed whistle. "Let me tell you a secret."

"I said I don't have a present for you."

"This one's free because you already know it, oh Baron of Rukhavira."

"Don't call me that."

"That's your title, isn't it? Your real title?"

"No. That's the name of a place that never existed." But I remember the Secret Concord, thirty three pages describing a world in a god: the Prince of

100,000 Leaves. There are no wolves in his land. Bent-legged, filthy men and women occupy their niche, hunting in packs. On the High Day, city nobles fed them those children they believed has exceptionally beautiful faces. And after these chronicles and hymns to torture, the last page described a contract between that world and Boston's. The preamble was clear, but its other runes shivered and slid beneath my gaze. As Hierarch only I was permitted to read it, but I didn't know how.

I still murdered anyone who tried to look. It was tradition.

I cultivated the Consilium's hate. I wanted them to manage themselves and stay away while I studied the Concord, my Mystery. I crossed the Threshold just before they deposed me, as I had planned. But they imprisoned me in my own mind, before I could reexamine the Concord with a more enlightened eye. I took years to remember who I really was: a Seeker whose Golden Road opens any prison. It was a slender, shimmering thing, this soul-path of mine, yet to be fully formed: a tether to the sky anchored too lightly.

Its weighty replacement bleeds in my right hand.

A withered man with my face still babbles under their care. I created a different body and returned to the page containing my Mystery.

It was perfectly legible. The Secret Concord relied on an emissary: a noble of the 100,000 Leaves, a shaman to keep the worlds apart, and give each one its necessary sacrifices.

In that moment, I remembered feeding the 'wolves' of my youth.

"Baron Maahes, have you awakened from your dream to come home?" The Old Man rocks forward on his cane, extending a hand. I ignore it and open the door to his hut myself. I whisper syllables that have never been heard in this universe. I have a spell to complete. But first:

"Was I always the Baron? Or did I make myself the Prince's when I approached the Threshold?"

The Old Man shrugs and smirks. "You gave that Mystery the only answer you knew."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"You didn't answer mine just now, Baron, but I can see what it will be."

He joins me at the door.

"You know? You really are a fool. For the last time: I don't have present for you!"

Yes, I walk through, but I drop my heart just before the door, inches from the Abyss. I've always loved the fragility of magic — how a thumb's distance can keep an apocalypse at bay. It sinks into a dream of black sand, and falls back into the world. It doesn't belong to him. It belongs to you.

Once you've eaten this human heart, you'll know why.

About the Authors

Dave Brookshaw is a freelance writer and game designer based in Cheltenham, England. He's written for almost every line in the new World of Darkness, including every second edition so far. After writing on **Seers of the Throne**, the **Mage Chronicler's Guide**, and **Mage Noir**, he co-proposed and authored **Imperial Mysteries** and **Left Hand Path**, co-Developed the **Mage Translation Guide**, and has now completed his long transformation sequence into **Awakening** Developer with the upcoming second edition of the game.

Rick Chillot is a writer and editor at Quirk Books in Philadelphia, PA. His writing has appeared in Psychology Today, Men's Health, Parents, and other national magazines. He recently authored the book **How To Make Your Baby An Internet Celebrity** (Quirk Books, 2014) which is full of totally legit advice for new parents looking for a get-rich-quick scheme. Follow him on Twitter (@rickchillot), Instagram (Instagram.com/rickchillot) and Tumblr (eye-of-rick.tumblr.com).

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He was most recently published in Parthian Books' anthology **A Flock of Shadows** and is currently writing comic book series **Transhuman Resources** with Ashur Collective, Detroit. In 2015 he is curating the **This Could be Beautiful** festival. Facebook.com/howarddavidingham

Matthew McFarland is an Ennie-award winning game author and developer. His work has appeared in almost all of the World of Darkness games (both the old and new iterations), and he is presently developing the new upcoming World of Darkness line **Beast: The Primordial**. In addition to working as a speech-language pathologist in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, he and his wife, Michelle Lyons-McFarland, own and operate Growling Door Games, Inc. http://growlingdoorgames.com.

John Newman enjoys all things nerd, including movies, video games, miniatures, and tabletop RPGs. A freelance writer, he is still astonished when people pay him for the things he's made up out of his head. John currently resides in Cleveland, OH, with his wife Yvonne and their two yappy dogs.

Writer and game designer **Malcolm Sheppard** has spent the past decade and a half working on tabletop RPGs, electronic games and alternate reality game content. Sometimes he quietly consults on other games by new or established designers. Sometimes he makes his own games and less often, releases them. Beyond games and writing, Malcolm works in the nonprofit and community action fields on projects ranging from adult literacy to electronic privacy, focusing on working with members of marginalized communities.

Geoff Skellams is an Australian game writer who has been gaming for the past thirty years. He's written for several gaming companies, including White Wolf and Onyx Path, after getting started with the DEMONGROUND fanzine in 1998. A database jockey by day, he's recently taken up playing guitar, which he's found to be surprisingly fulfilling.

Tristan J Tarwater is a writer of fantasy and weird fiction, comics and RPG bits. The author of **Reality Makes the Best Fantasy**, she has also worked for Onyx Path and Pelgrane Press. When she isn't writing about elves, thieves and generally bastard-type characters, she is thinking about them or researching domestic farm animals for color schemes. She currently resides in Portland, OR with her spouse, child, two cats and four ducks. You can find out more about Tristan at http://www.backthatelfup.com.

Eddy Webb (with a "y," thank you) is an award-winning writer, game designer, and Sherlockian. He has worked on over 100 products, including five years on the World of Darkness MMO. Today he is a freelance writer, game designer, and consultant. He can be found at eddyfate.com.

Eric Zawadzki is a fantasy writer and game designer. His credits include work for **Mage: The Awakening** (1st and 2nd Edition), **Demon: The Descent**, **The God-Machine Chronicle**, and 20th Anniversary **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**. He is also the co-author of **Kingmaker**, **Lesson of the Fire**, and **The Pithdai Gate**, and he hopes to release the sequel to Kingmaker in 2015. He spends his free time hanging out in Minneapolis with his filk rocker wife and their 3-year-old son William, attending local sci-fi conventions, and blogging about books, movies, games, TV shows, and writing at http://fourmoonspress.com.

THE FALLEN WORLD CHRONICLE ANTHOLOGY

The world is a Lie

A prison for souls warped by an Abyss of madness. People Sleep through their lives, never knowing the wonders and terrors concealed from them. Awakened mages see the Lie for what it is, scratching the surface and uncovering the World of Darkness' Mysteries. Each is a revelation, a danger, an obsession in the making. Armed with magic and a need to know, mages confront the supernatural and unexplained.

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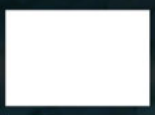
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