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THE STRANGE CASES OF RUDOLPH PEARSON

HORRIPILATING TALES OF THE CTHULHU MYTHOS

WILLIAM JONES



THE STRANGE CASES

OF

RUDOLPH PEARSON
HORRIPILATING TALES OF THE CTHULHU MYTHOS

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THE STRANGE CASES

OF

RUDOLPH PEARSON
HORRIPILATING TALES OF THE CTHULHU MYTHOS

by William Jones
Cover Art by Steven Gilberts

A Chaosium Book

2008



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To Edwin and Irene

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is often thought that writing fiction is a solitary endeavor. That is both a truth and a falsity. There are long stretches of solitude for any writer, but inspiration comes from various and diverse sources. Some of these sources are people, and there are far too many to list here. However, some do require mentioning. My appreciation for his erudition, although perhaps unknowingly, goes to Dr. Kevin Grimm. My apologies for all of the things I portrayed inaccurately. Without your knowledge, I could not have managed even that much. And in many ways, Boethius dwells in these pages. Dr. Kathleen Pfeiffer also needs thanking for introducing me to an era and topic that has carried my imagination to strange lands, and for revealing a world that is not so distant from the present, still worthy of discussion. These two people unknowingly worked together, providing information and details unique to them, and unavailable from any other sources.

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their manifold meanings. Perspectives change when viewing texts through such lenses, and “perspective” is an important aspect of this book, even if it is a bit more supernatural than the topics discussed.

And I would be remiss not to give a special thanks to Dr. Christopher Leland, whose simple question, “Why not?” opened a portal to a new reality. His advice was sagacious and sharp. He immediately grasped the insanity of my project, and urged me forward. He is one of the great guardians of the imagination. Soldier on, my dear friend.

When writers are fortunate enough to be a part of a group, much is owed to everyone involved. I appreciate everyone’s determination and kindness and patience.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There is nothing worse than having instructions on “how to read a book.” So I’ll not offer any such thing. But, I must comment upon the structure of this work. It is a collection of interconnected short stories. Several were previously published in various anthologies and magazines in the U.S. and U.K. From the first “Pearson” story, it was my intent to write a series of ongoing tales. There had always been a plot and direction to them. As a result, *The Strange Cases of Rudolph Pearson* is something of a hybrid, a cross between a short fiction collection and a novel. The “cases” can be read out of order. But if read from start to finish, an overall plot and subplots come to the forefront. The only alterations have been to remove the repetitive introductions and descriptions of characters, and linking some plot and subplot elements.

Common Sense tells us that the things of the earth exist only a little, and that true reality is only in dreams.

—Charles Baudelaire

FOREWORD

Here rests the noblest of all human endeavors, and its rankest, most wretched secrets. In New York City, I see mankind's greatest hope, or the last spark of divinity forever extinguished. What will those who judge us decide?

THOSE WERE THE WORDS of my great grandfather, Professor Rudolph Pearson, Doctor of Medieval Studies at Columbia University, New York City. Upon my father's death, a manuscript bearing my great grandfather's name came into my possession. At first I was intrigued. I too teach literature at Columbia University, and I have a great interest in the writings of the early Twentieth Century.

I must admit, at first, my primary interest was academic. Being gifted an obscure manuscript from a dead ancestor who lived and wrote during this period was thrilling. I was surprised to find the manuscript not to be Modernist, but something more supernatural in subject. I must confess, before reading this text, I had traveled through my days blindly and blithely,

entirely unaware of the nature of the universe.

Cosmology and physics were once hobbies of mine. I thought such studies held the secret to understanding all that existed (with the aid of literature). Science was my religion. And yet, strangely, it had revoked the hope of theology, replacing eternal existence with the certainty and totality of death. Nevertheless, these sciences held sway over my imagination.

Over the years, I'd spent countless hours reading books on everything from Superstring Theory to parallel universes. They were the things of fiction, fortified by the rigidity of scientific theory. All of that changed, however, when I read my great grandfather's manuscript. When my eyes had touched upon the final word he'd written, I understood that humanity's existence went ignored on the cosmic scale. We weren't insects overlooked by a divine being, not a mote in some omniscient entity's eye. We weren't. Or, we weren't if we continued down the path set before us.

By this point, there is no doubt that any reasonable reader is confused by my ramblings. I cannot promise that the sentences in the following manuscript will make things clear, or even convince you of the unknown nature of reality. After all, who questions reality? Rebellious against the notions put forth by my great grandfather's manuscript, my first thought was to discard the work as one of pure imagination, the mind at its most romantic and its most horrific. Then, I researched the content. I applied literary theories, hoping to dissect the social and psychological foundations that produced such a creation. In the end, I found what I was looking for—but what I was looking for was not what I wanted to find. Rather, to shield myself from the impossibilities put into language, I analyzed and theorized, containing and reducing my great grandfather's writings to nothing more than an object to be

studied, and not accepted at face value.

This was a great mistake. In a manner, it is perhaps the greatest mistake of human nature. We see what we desire to see, and ignore the rest. We shun that which is unpleasant, seeking refuge in security, happiness, bliss—just as when we dream, recoiling from the terrifying, taking solace in the pleasant. Doing so does not validate one dream over another. It merely blinds us to the truth: all dreams exist, and each is of our own creation.

In retrospect, I cannot dismiss the manuscript presented here, nor can I validate it beyond the simple words I've already presented. It speaks for itself. It speaks of a universe that is not neatly stitched together by a grand unifying theory. It speaks of a horror that humankind may never be able to accept. It speaks of us.

—Josuha Pearson, Ph.D.
Professor, Columbia University

CASE ONE

FEASTERS OF THE DARK

I CLIMBED THE SEESAWING STAIRS of the fusty tenement building, only reaching the fourth floor after much arduous effort. The dimly lighted hallways and sullen doors kept me close on the heels of Detective Matthew Leahy. Being a professor of literature, I seldom frequented the darker places of New York City, or participated in any form of strenuous exercise beyond the carrying of texts—though there are a few works I do indeed consider strenuous in bulk and content.

It was 1922, a scant few years since I'd arrived in the city, and I was hoping that such adventures were not commonplace.

“Professor Pearson, you may want a moment to prepare yourself,” Leahy said as we ended our expedition before an apartment door. Flanking this scarred and worn portal stood two placid uniformed officers.

Detective Leahy himself was a stocky man with thick black hair, not too dissimilar to the officers. Unlike them, though, an ill-fitting gray-wool suit covered his bulk, combined with sharp features and slow, seemingly calculated movements, making

him reminiscent of a tortoise toting about a cumbersome shell. This image, however, I found was quickly dispelled by his alert brown eyes that were always taking in the world around him.

“This is an—” The detective halted abruptly, not for lack of a proper word, but as a man might catch himself before putting forth a remark in which he did not fully and earnestly believe. His expression grew dark as though he had stepped from light into shadow. I had the distinct impression that he felt there was no accurate means of describing what lay beyond the doorway.

“It is unusual,” he finally concluded.

I was grateful for the brief lull, which allowed me a moment to catch my breath. As I stood huffing, I was certain I spotted a twinkle of amusement in the eyes of the previously stoic officers. A Columbia University professor at the scene of a murder likely did seem ludicrous to these gentlemen, who most probably thought me nothing more than a mollycoddle. In honesty, it seemed such to myself. Had not Detective Leahy convinced me of the necessity for a literary scholar, I most assuredly would have thought my presence nothing more than a fancy, only likely to appear in the countless commercial literature plaguing the publishing houses nowadays.

Instead, I struggled to make my attendance seem commonplace, matter-of-fact, as if professors of English regularly patrolled New York City’s streets enforcing good grammar, lecturing upon the literary canon, and solving crimes.

“I understand,” I replied firmly. Then I committed myself to a course that would gnaw at my very soul for the remainder of my life.

As I followed Detective Leahy through the door, I realized I did *not* understand. I had no comprehension of what I was seeing, or its greater meaning.

The apartment was divided into two small rooms. There was neither a private bath nor room enough for anything more than the smallest of beds.

“This—” Leahy gestured toward a dark corner of the modest room. “This is where the landlord found the victim’s body. His remains are bein’ held at the medical examiner’s office at the Bellevue Pavilion.”

Reflexively, I withdrew a handkerchief and placed it to my face. The sickly sweet odor of dried blood permeated the room, making the already small space feel as immuring as a coffin. A single light bulb dangled from the ceiling, casting a wan light, making tall shadows on all of the walls, leaving the close corners of the room dark and gloomy.

I stepped forward, halting before a black stain that stretched from part of the floor to the wall. The discoloration extended toward the ceiling as though the blood had climbed upward with a life of its own.

“The way in which the blood has splattered on the wall,” Leahy said, “indicates the victim, a Russian immigrant named Adrik Ziven, was killed at this spot.” The detective extracted a flashlight from his overcoat and shone it upon the location. A circle of light danced in the grisly corner. “This is what I wanted you to see.”

I followed the light as it sliced through the shadows along the wall, revealing letters scrawled there. They were thick and ill-formed, writhing like snakes, obviously written in blood.

I studied the dark scribbling, immediately recognizing the words, though not wanting to confront their meaning. After scanning the ghastly writing several times, I read it aloud: “*Lætan riht onfindan þæt scyldig.*”

Leahy looked at me expectantly.

“It is as you suspected,” I said. “A form of English. Specifically,

a corrupted version of Old English. It loosely translates to ‘Let justice discover the guilty.’”

I continued. “*He gearwian þæt fyllo man hwa forlætan se leoht.* He serves the feast for those who have abandoned the light.”

I turned away, hoping vainly that not seeing the words would distance their meaning from me. “How was Ziven killed?” I asked, a cloying nausea burning in my throat.

“The medical examiner thinks he was eaten alive.” Leahy moved to the wall, still shining his torch. “These high stains indicate arterial splashes . . .”

I raised a hand, interrupting him. The dreadful message already conveyed more detail than I desired.

“I apologize, Professor Pearson,” Leahy said. “I’ve grown dull to such sights. In time, it all becomes puzzle pieces and nothin’ more. You must become inhuman to solve inhuman crimes.”

As Leahy spoke, the memory of a text I had studied years ago came unbidden to my mind. It was a medieval text about religion, demons and devils. The part I suddenly recollected was identical to what I had just read on the wall. *He serves the feast for those who have abandoned the light.*

It seemed unfathomable that a fiend capable of such an act would also be a connoisseur of medieval literature. I tried to convince myself that my mind was playing tricks on me; my unsettled state was causing morbid fancies, nothing more.

“What was Ziven’s occupation?” I asked, attempting to divert my thoughts from their dark course.

“He was a petty thief and robber. Sentenced to three years at Blackwell’s. Insignificant when compared to many others in his field.” The detective shrugged his shoulders. “He must have made a bad enemy somewhere along the line.”

I looked at Leahy. “Then maybe this message is an epitaph for Ziven?”

“Or a challenge to the law,” Leahy countered.

“Have you consulted an alienist? Perhaps he may be able to shed light upon these writings.”

“Already have. It was pointless.” There was sharpness in Leahy’s words. “There are few alienists who care to diagnose absentee patients. Most are interested in injectin’ drugs and applying straightjackets. They have little to gain from speculatin’ about messages on walls in tenement houses, and often don’t consider the death of such a man as Ziven a crime. But what the alienist did tell me—” Leahy gestured to the wall— “was he thought this to be Old English.” The detective moved forward, his gaze intent upon the mystery before him.

I could see passion in his eyes. To understand the meaning of this riddle gave him a purpose, a significance; it separated him from the senselessness of the crime itself. It provided him with the semblance of meaning in a world where meaning was often absent. I knew this because I too felt the need to understand tugging at me. The riddle on the wall called to me like it did Leahy. The meaning and purpose behind those words, in conjunction with such an unimaginable act, attracted me like iron to a lodestone.

I watched him scrutinize the wall for several moments before I spoke. “I believe I can assist you.”



I returned to my office at Columbia University by taxicab to scour my notes. I had hoped to find a hint or clue in my records that might lead me to the medieval text of which I had earlier been reminded.

I pored over volumes, notes and lists of references I maintained for research. I have always despised thumbing through endless cards in a catalog in pursuit of a text; so I

developed, like most professors, a highly specialized list of commonly used and referenced works. This tack soon proved unproductive, forcing me to continue my research at the university library.

The library's card catalog guarded the main entrance. Like the Sphinx, it sat silent and knowing, fat with knowledge, reluctant to disgorge even the slightest tidbit. I loathed the thing and needed it all at once, a horrible irony for any scholar, and doubly so in my eyes.

Reluctantly I set to work. My desire to understand the meaning of the writing in the tenement overpowered my hatred for "thumb-work." I focused my search upon the darker writings of the medieval period, the superstitious manuals about demons and devils and witchcraft.

Tedious hours passed as I skimmed countless volumes, many long forgotten or dismissed by scholars. Endless pages given life with words by dead authors worried my eyes. Eventually I set upon a curious text by Henry Hollowell—a pendant of whom I knew nothing.

The book was titled *Divine Feasts*, and was published in 1914. It described a medieval grimoire that Hollowell claimed to be lost, and most likely destroyed by the church. That book was titled *Haes of Gowles*. According to Hollowell this hoary and quite elusive tome held an account of an obscure monastic order that drastically deviated from their Christian doctrine. This handful of monks practiced heretical rituals and spoke of fantastical creatures that lived in the bowels of the Earth. Years of pursuit by the church forced the monks into caverns and the deep places of the world only they knew existed. The surface was shunned; they ventured out only in darkness to steal away humans upon whom they feasted.

The cannibalism, Hollowell theorized, transformed these gruesome monks into creatures that resembled an unnatural

mixture of humans and canines. And he stated that this very same diet also extended their lives far beyond the years of the oldest humans. The practice apparently was an element of their rituals; for the monks believed that they were devouring the evil of humanity, absolving mankind of its sins. Each ceremonial feast concluded with the writing of sacred phrases in the sinner's blood. I must confess, for many moments I was unhinged by what I read next:

Let justice discover the guilty. He serves the feast for those who have abandoned the light. We cleanse the path for those not of darkness. Our hunger consumes the flesh that sins. In us, the lost shall find a living Hell.

Although I cannot be certain, I now believe there is at least one copy of *Haes of Gowles* in existence. And it is held at the Oxford library in England. That is where I did my undergraduate studies, and that is where I believe I had previously read those putrescent words.

I do not know how long I stood there, frozen in place, grabbing the book in my hands, fingers clenching the pages. When I had recovered sufficiently, I carried the volume to a table, where I feverishly went to work copying the sections I believed most significant.

Word for word I hurriedly scribbled, not bothering to translate, fearing something might be lost in my rush. My attention was so intense, so focused, that I lost all awareness of the world around me. My only means of perceiving how many hours had passed was the blurriness in my vision, and the remonstrations of Miss Webber, a persnickety librarian, who doggedly reminded me that all rare texts must be returned to the desk thirty minutes before closing.

When I had finished I was astounded, or perhaps horrified, to see how closely my scrawl resembled the script on the

tenement wall. The likeness unleashed a horde of scurrying chills across my flesh.



When I returned with Leahy to Ziven's tenement on the Lower East Side, a vault of darkness covered the city. As we rolled down the street in his department purchased Chevrolet, anemic yellow light glowered from the narrow tenement windows like incandescent warning signs.

"You think this book is related to the murder?" Leahy asked, still trying to sort out the details in my hurried explanation.

"No," I replied. "The book explains—possibly explains—the writing." I wasn't ready to commit to a theory. Too often in my career I have learned that reality and theory do not meet; and in my present, frazzled state of mind, I wanted to avoid any sort of commitment, permanent or temporary. Yet, there was something about it that smacked of truth, a fearsome truth that I could not ignore. I needed to peer behind the curtain of reality to see what dark secrets lurked there, unknown to those of us going about our mundane lives.

"The book describes a religious cult," I said. "A cult that practiced cannibalism. The words on the wall belong to one of their ceremonies."

Leahy steered the automobile into an alleyway. "Eatin' people is part of their religion?" he asked skeptically.

"They consume the flesh of . . . sinners."

"I see," he said. "So if this is true, why haven't I heard of these hoodlums before? People are murdered everyday in New York City, but this is the first bit of cannibalism I've seen."

Although I did not attempt to change Leahy's mind, I suspected there had been others in the past. Either they went

unnoticed or had gone unmentioned. I feared with the continuing growth of the city's population, he would certainly see more in the future. And at that moment I was struck with a terrifying realization.

New York City was rapidly expanding skyward in an attempt to accommodate the immense horde of urban denizens within its borders. Each day a new, taller building was erected. Apartment houses and hotels reached toward the heavens, overflowing with residents. But upward was not the only direction the city was expanding.

Without uttering a word of this to Leahy, I stepped from the automobile into the murky alleyway. Leahy promptly followed, asking about my intentions.

It took some convincing, but I eventually coaxed the detective into assisting me with the removal of a manhole cover I found behind Zevin's tenement.

With a muted *clank* we pulled the heavy cover from its snug fitting. The exercise appeared to have little if any effect upon Leahy, while I found myself dabbing a handkerchief at beads of perspiration gathered on my brow.

"What'd you think is down there?" Leahy asked, shining his flashlight into the depths of the glistening shaft.

"I pray nothing. My hope is that I am reading far too much into this entire episode."

He pointed the light at my chest, casting a dim glow upon my visage. With his face steeped in shadows, unseen, I felt his hard eyes settling upon me.

"You sure you're up to this?" he asked. His words were anxious—not from fear, however. He too could feel the puzzle drawing us below. No matter how adamantly either of us denied the sanity of our actions, we both sensed an answer awaited us.

"I don't think waiting will prepare me any better," I said,

then proceeded to climb into the sewer.

Cautiously I gripped the rusted and slimy rungs anchored into the walls. Leahy followed, the light clamped in one hand.

A fetid stench awaited us at the bottom of the ladder, as did a dark stream of water.

“Which way?” Leahy asked, his voice bouncing off the stony walls, mingling with the plop and drip and splash of water. He guided the light down both ends of the passage. They continued endlessly.

“This way,” I ventured a guess and started to walk.

“Hold up there,” he ordered. “Let me take the front.” He produced a revolver. “I’m better prepared in case we do find someone.”

The passage was narrow, forcing both of us to crouch as we slogged along. I did my best not to think of the ankle-deep water that flooded my shoes and turned my socks into disgusting mires of damp cloth.

The further we drudged into the watery darkness, the more the place took on the appearance of a labyrinth. Here and there new tunnels intersected, stretching into blackness. With each intersection, Leahy slowed, waiting for me to offer guidance. After a while, he understood there was no method to my navigation and began selecting the direction himself.

The farther we delved, the more oppressive the putrid atmosphere became. A need to feel open air began to boil and churn inside me. I fought against the urge to flee back the way I came and return to the familiar embrace of the surface.

Just as I was about to suggest we abandon the sewer, I heard a strange cry, a sound akin to that made by a startled person. It was shrill and sharp, but brief. I could not discern

if a man or a woman made it, a child or an adult. It was so . . . unusual that I wasn't sure it came from a human at all.

Immediately Leahy halted, his stocky frame blocking my progress. He quickly cast the light about, searching in all directions. As he turned to shine it behind us, I heard another sound. This time it was a guttural gibbering of sorts. A sense of rhythm and structure. I knew it was a language. But I did not recognize it in the least.

Within a few seconds there was another gibbering, this time more distant and urgent. It was clear the sounds were coming from behind us.

"Stay put," Leahy said, dashing off after the sounds.

Before I could protest, Leahy bounded down the slimy corridor, quickly darting into a side passage, bringing all the light in the world with him. I found myself in absolute and total darkness.

Standing there, alone, in festering water, I listened intently for any new sound. My hearing seemed almost supernatural, for in the darkness I could now hear rats gnawing at the refuse, cockroaches scuttling across the old and weary stone, and the worms wriggling in the silt and slime beneath my feet.

The desire for open air burned in my brain. I dug in my pocket, feeling for a matchbox, hoping to relieve the building pressure of the darkness. Fumbling blindly, I fiddled out a match and snapped it to life.

The small flame that danced on the match-head seemed insignificant against the menacing curtain of blackness that threatened to enshroud me.

Anxiously I squinted and peered into the surrounding void, hoping to glimpse Leahy's light. I carefully moved in the direction he'd bolted, taking only a few steps before the

match flickered out. Ghosts of the flame lingered in my vision for several moments before they too vanished, leaving me in a deeper darkness than I had ever before known.

With greater urgency, I lit another match, and found something other than Leahy. It was beyond my imagination; beyond the conception of the fiction I had dedicated my life to studying. It was utterly *unreal* because it was all too real. *Too, too sullied flesh.*

My blood chilled. My muscles froze. I was unable to cry out or flee in panic. I simply stood as still as a statue, brandishing a tiny flame in one hand.

Icy yellow eyes gazed upon me. Their fearful owner slouched low, its rangy arms dangling at its flanks. The sickly light of the match revealed a flesh of greenish tint, and a visage that had a nose and mouth that seemingly formed a muzzle.

I fully expected it to lurch forward, eyes wide with hunger, sharp teeth ready to rend flesh. But like myself, it remained in place, shifting from one foot to another in its low crouch.

The match burned low, scorching my finger and thumb. I instinctively waved it out and began to strike another.

“No,” a rasping voice said. “No light.”

I returned the matchbox to my jacket pocket.

“All right,” I said congenially, hoping not to agitate it.

Moments passed without an utterance. Although I could not see the creature, I pictured it rocking from side-to-side before me. The image was unbearable. All I could do to quench the impulse to flee was to speak.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Ad . . . rik,” it hesitated as if stumbling of the words. “Adrik . . . Zi-ven.”

“That’s not possible. Ziven is dead.”

The creature meeped and gurgled for several seconds, as

though it too were subduing some urge.

“Not . . . dead,” it finally said. “Ch-changed.”

“Changed how?” I asked.

Before answering I heard its mouth smack as though it needed to contend with a growing pool of saliva. “Consumed,” it uttered flatly. “He is in me,” the creature continued, its words swollen. “I consumed his memories . . . knowledge.”

I remembered Hollowell’s book and his claims. His theories had become my reality. It was electrifying and repulsive at the same time. My mind spun at the knowledge contained in this creature, and others like it. It was a living library, replete with the lost secrets and memories of humanity.

“How many people have you . . . changed?” I asked, anxiously.

“Many . . . many . . . many inside me.”

“Are there others here like you?”

“Yesss.” I heard a wetness in its answer as though it were losing a Pavlovian battle. “We are many. We have always been here. Your secrets draw us. Change us. Give us life.”

My mind whirled. I was consumed by thoughts of discovery. This creature’s knowledge and abilities could shape the destiny of humanity.

“Why do you hide?” I asked. “I—we—could help you. We could share knowledge.”

The reply came in the form of a swampy hiss. “Nooo. We eat your secrets,” it said harshly. “Sins . . . we consume your sins. The light is not ours.”

With this confession, cold sanity returned to me. I was standing before a creature who was a repository of humanity’s evil, a living collection of mankind’s atrocities and dark secrets. It lived in a world of bounteous feasts, and possessed an insatiable hunger.

I could hear it slaving. I imagined long ropes of drool

oozing from its muzzle. Terror burned inside my mind, fired by the realization I was its next feast.

In an instant I bolted from my spot. I ran blindly through the darkness, hoping against hope that I would stumble upon an exit from these loathsome tunnels. With each step my heart raced, pounding against my chest. My movements felt sluggish. With every stride, I sensed the vile creature on my trail.

I do not know how far I had fled before I slipped. Looking back, I now realize it was inevitable. The slick, uneven floors, crooked and cracked from age, were difficult to cross in the light. But in complete darkness, there was no hope.

With a single misplaced step, I tumbled forward, splashing in the tainted water, flailing to upright myself. Each time I reached out, my hand returned with a disgusting handful of sewage. I crawled on my hands and knees, searching for an outlet. Unable to bear the darkness any longer, I reached into my jacket pocket and retrieved my matches. The box had miraculously avoided being doused. Hastily I fumbled with the matchbox, spilling matches as I delved for a single one. When I snatched it from the box, I heard the splashing nearby.

I gasped for breath, gulping the foul air, choking with every breath. Fearing my huffing would extinguish my solitary hope for light, I clamped my mouth shut, fighting my instinct to breathe. I snapped the match against my thumb, hearing a reassuring pop of the chemical head. A blinding light and a thunderous roar followed this. Flames filled the sewer, flaring in all directions.

For an instant I felt the burning tongues of Hell lapping at my flesh. Then I found oblivion.



When consciousness returned, it came turgidly and painfully, in the form of slow needle pokes. The pain eventually blossomed into a biting sharpness, shifting along my arms and legs. The world remained dark.

I was certain a pack of ravenous creatures were stooped over me, feeding upon my flesh. Unable to endure this bleak fate, I screamed a pitiful cry. I screamed until my lungs ached. I struggled to upright myself, but insidious paws pressed me down.

“Rudolph,” I heard someone utter my name. “Rudolph, be calm. All is well.”

It seemed as though an eternity passed before I recognized the voice. It was Effram Harris, a dear friend of mine, and a professor of physics at Columbia.

“You are at the hospital, Rudolph. The doctors are treating you for minor burns. They say you ignited a methane pocket in a sewer.” I felt his hand press against my shoulder. “You really should read a few more books on chemistry if you intend to go prowling the city’s sewers.”

I flinched at Effram’s touch, not from pain, but from the memory of fear, it coursed through me like a poison. I brought a hand to my eyes, feeling the bandages covering them.

“Those are only temporary,” Effram assured me. “You’ll be reading your books in no time.”

“What about Detective Leahy?” I asked, my voice as raspy as the creature I encountered in the sewer.

“He is safe. He found you. He said you were assisting him with a case, the details of which he was not permitted to disclose.” Effram snorted. “Everyone has a secret. You will have to tell me this story sometime. I’m very anxious to learn how you became tangled up with a police detective, Rudolph.”

But for now, the doctors want you to rest.”

I heard a chair scrape against the floor. “I must return to the university to update the faculty,” Efram said. “I’ll be back tomorrow. Get some rest.”

I lay in bed for sometime after Efram had departed, marveling at how Leahy and I had miraculously survived—and no doubt how the creatures had also survived. I was certain they were still in the shadows below the city, feeding on humanity’s malevolence, waiting for their next feast. This was the answer for which I so desperately had been searching since I read the words on the wall. There was no satisfaction to be had from this dark knowledge. It only offered horror and despair. And there was nothing I could do to erase it from my mind, no way of ridding my soul of this foulness. It would always be present, lurking inside me, burrowing its black tendrils deeper into my brain. Forever changing me. How long, I wondered, before my time comes? How long before all the sins of humanity—all of humanity—are consumed and find a new life inside the feasters of the dark?

CASE TWO

THE TRANSGRESSION OF EFFRAM HARRIS

THE TAXICAB DRIVER WASTED no time in departing, once I had stepped onto the pavement. I could hear the growl of the old Buick's engine and the watery sluice of its tires as it rumbled down East 22nd Street.

It's no wonder the driver was in a hurry. The neighborhood he delivered me to, the Gashouse district in midtown Manhattan, had a notorious reputation, and few sane people ventured into it at night, particularly on a night like this.

Before me stood the dark and brooding warehouse of Efram Harris. He used the ramshackle affair as a workshop. The neighborhood offered, if anything, much privacy.

I dashed to the stoop, hoping to prevent a thorough drenching from the sudden downpour that had commenced during my ride from uptown. Anxiously I rapped on the door, and stole glances at the shadowy corners and dark buildings lining the street.

The Gashouse district was once the heart of New York City's consumer gas production. In the previous century, the city

relied upon the district to provide fuel for lighting. Now the world was electric, and all that remained of the area were abandoned warehouses, factories and shabby tenements. True, a few factories still operated, only surviving by employing immigrants at pitiable wages, but with the advancements in science and technology, it was predicted the need for gas would be completely eliminated by 1930.

I heard a *click*, then the heavy door swung open, squealing on its hinges, revealing Effram Harris.

“Rudolph!” exclaimed Effram upon seeing me. “Why Mr. Pearson, your visit is quite unexpected, but certainly welcome.” He stepped aside and motioned for me to enter. “Very welcome, I will say.”

Effram was as tall and gaunt as ever. His black hair was tinged with silver, and his watery green eyes looked impossibly large through the lenses of his thick-framed glasses.

“What brings you here on a night so unsuited for travel?” he asked, ushering me to a metal table that stood in the center of the room.

“You,” I replied. “Or rather, your absence.”

Though I had known of Effram’s workshop, I had never visited it. He’d told me of it shortly after acquiring it, at what he believed was a bargain price. I considered the purchase an eccentricity, and nothing more. The university, where we both taught, had a complete facility, all that a professor of physics could desire, or so at least I thought. The need to play with machines and to experiment eludes most of us in the English department. Still, I saw no need to purchase a private laboratory, except for privacy’s sake.

All had been well for the first few months. But then, Effram spent more and more time away from the university and more here at his workshop. Within the last week, he’d disappeared completely.

“You missed all of your lectures this week,” I said as I peeled off my soaked overcoat and spread it across a chair to dry. “The head of your department is seething. Fortunately, Joseph took over your classes for the week.”

“Please,” Effram said, “take a seat. Would you like tea? Or perhaps brandy? This weather favors brandy I believe.”

I started to say “tea,” but uttered, “brandy.” Something about the place, or maybe the neighborhood, chilled me. I decided brandy would be the best remedy for such a malady.

As I lowered myself into a hard, metal-framed chair, I decided the room I found myself in must have once been a front office, for it was devoid of any apparatus commonly found at Columbia’s laboratories. Its only windows stretched across the street-side wall, and were covered by heavy, brown curtains, completely obscuring sight. A single light bulb, covered by a dinner-plate sized reflector, hung from the ceiling, producing a dull circle of light around the table.

“You know, I completely forgot about my classes,” Effram said. “I’ve been so occupied with my experiments, I nearly forgot about the entire world.”

Effram opened a stubby cabinet resting against a wall and extracted cups and a bottle. “I apologize for the uncouth containers. I don’t keep proper snifters here. And I fear the brandy lacks much as well. Living in a Dry country does make life difficult, doesn’t it?”

Something about Effram looked different. Unusual. I couldn’t put my finger on it then, but a ghost of something unsettled me as he handed me the white coffee cup with a single brown line around the lip. I sipped the brandy, placing the cup on the table.

“Are you feeling well, Effram?”

His limpid eyes shifted left, then right as if considering the question. “I believe so. What makes you ask?”

“Your absence from the university. You did not answer your door or your telephone. No one has known your whereabouts for nearly six days. Then I find you in this place, unaware of the day or how much time has passed. Even you will have to admit that warrants concern at the very least.”

The eccentric professor of physics from Columbia University chuckled as only he could. The noise was a harsh sound like that made by a radio tuner during a storm.

“I do suppose you are right,” Effram said. “I’m sure I’ll have much amends to make with Farnsworth, if he hasn’t already had me released.”

“Exactly what is it that has kept you so busy?” I asked.

Effram brightened measurably. “Allow me to show you, professor Pearson.”

Without hesitation, the wiry professor scampered across the room and through a door—which I assumed led deeper into the warehouse. After several moments, he returned, cradling an object in his arms.

As he placed it on the table before me, his countenance bore an expression I can only liken to that of a proud parent gazing at a beautiful child.

“This is what has been occupying my time,” Effram said. “Is it not beautiful?”

Revulsion churned in my stomach, followed by the urge to bolt from the room. The hideous object spurred such fearful emotions in me—base emotions—it took every effort of will to subdue my desire to flee upon scrutinizing the . . . *thing*; only my concern for Effram kept me within arm’s reach of the monstrosity.

Struggling against disgust and terror, I forced myself to speak in a calm voice. “What is . . . it?”

Effram continued to beam, completely unaware of my contrary feelings. “I am not certain,” he said, his large, watery

eyes scanning the object. “But that isn’t of as much interest to me as *where* it is from.”

For an instant, I thought something, some detail, some obvious fact about the object had eluded me, and that my reaction was entirely based upon an overactive imagination. Steeling myself, I forced my gaze to return to the object. It was oddly fashioned, in many ways resembling an egg in shape, though nearly one-foot in length. Deep, narrow glyphs twisted in a manner difficult for the eye—and mind—to follow. My first impression led me to believe it was made of stone. But when my curiosity overpowered my loathing, I was able to place a hand upon it. Strangely smooth and cold to the touch, my tactile sense told me it must be metal. But if it were metal, it was of a kind unknown to me.

“Come,” Effram said, gesturing for me to follow. “I’ll show you *where* I found it.”



The back of Effram’s warehouse was filled with all sorts of alien devices. Being a scholar of literature, and not of physics, I had little knowledge of the contraptions used in Effram’s field, so every machine, gauge, wire and tube belonged to another universe as far as I was concerned. I was intrigued by the sublime creations of the mind, not scientific wizardry produced by gadgets and widgets. Someday, I thought, the physics department will be the end of us all.

I followed Effram through a maze of equipment—a most untidy maze—until we stood before a large circular construction.

It towered easily twelve feet in height, and it was round in shape, with shining copper wire wrapped around what I believed to be tremendous magnets. It was like looking through the center of a gigantic doughnut that had been

created by Victor Frankenstein.

“This is what has consumed my time,” Effram announced, as would an artist unveiling a masterpiece.

“What is . . . it?” I asked, and chided myself for the disdain I heard in my tone.

Effram waved his hands expansively. “It is an invention that will make the universe smaller. It will destroy the boundaries placed upon us by nature, giving us the freedom to transcend vast distances in an instant.” As he sang the praises of his invention, he began turning knobs and flipping switches.

“The object I showed you is not from this world,” Effram said, his enthusiasm growing. “It may not even be from this *universe*.” He sidled around device, examining several jittering needles set into gauges. “It . . . it melts away the barrier placed upon us by nature. It pierces time and space, acting as a portal to other places.”

“Should we be turning it on presently?” I asked, concerned by the mounting electrical hum and Effram’s zealotry.

“You see, I first tested it by using baseballs,” he said excitedly. “Numbered baseballs, mind you. I’d throw one through the opening, and then I’d scour the dailies for baseballs appearing out of the blue. One was found in the Bronx in an icebox. Another in Long Island, and then a second in the same spot.” He rubbed his hands together excitedly. “I’ll show you the journal sometime. But first, I want to show you the place where I found my trophy.”

He jumped about, eyeing meters and lights. “Time is most precious. There are beings at this place. Nervous creatures, nothing more than animals, I am certain. My expeditions seem to agitate them, so I must be quick. Each time they grow bolder.”

His speech had become frenetic, causing my concern to

deepen. I looked around the confusing tangle of wires and machinery for a master switch. The situation was becoming entirely too Gothic for my liking. A loud cracking sound interrupted my search, as though something in the room had been struck by lightning.

When I looked to the source of the noise, an image filled the center of the large doughnut to which Effram had been attending. Like my encounter with the peculiar object adorned with strange glyphs, I was immediately and intensely revolted. The image I saw in the center of the doughnut was of a place filled with gigantic towers, glistening in a brilliant, violet luminance. Some of the towers had fallen, broken into jagged shards. And everywhere, dull shadows seemed to shift and grow very unnaturally. Without explanation, I realized I was gazing upon another world.

Effram scurried up the ramp leading to the large ring. "I cannot maintain the portal for more than a few minutes," he called to me. "I need more energy. But that will come," he said jauntily. "That will come." With a flourish of his hand, Effram added, "I shall be back momentarily with another trophy."

Then, before I could stop him, he stepped through the portal, and into the otherworldly landscape. I started to chase after him, to bring him back. Maybe there are places where humanity can visit using Effram's device, but this, I knew, was not one of them. Instead, I remained locked in place, held by a primal terror such as I had never known. I watched, dizzy with a horrid fascination as Effram strolled across an alien terrain, knowing the entire time what would come, for the unearthly shadows made the story all too clear to me. In them I could read the inevitable ending. And when that ending did arrive, there was nothing I could do.

I watched Effram Harris climb amidst the ruins, collecting

samples from a place where no other human had dared ever walk. I watched in silence as the preternatural shadows gave form to solid shapes, hundreds of them, each sloughing toward him. In the space of a few hurried heartbeats, I watched as the demons of that world encircled and descended upon Effram. Faintly, as though listening through a thin tenement wall, or maybe the diaphanous membrane that separated my world from the place Effram had traveled, I heard a faint cry. Pitiful, mournful and loathsome was the cry, and it multiplied into others. They were sounds I thought impossible to hear; impossible to be made by a human. But they escaped Effram as the creatures descended upon him. Muffled and squelched as though they came from beneath a deep ocean, the unbearable sound soon transformed into a plea. A plea that carried my name. And though I was overwhelmed with disgust and horror, I could not help but admire the sublime anguish my senses now tasted.

Before Effram's final moments, the image vanished, replaced with the mundane view of the warehouse. He'd said his portal could only sustain the bridge between this world and the *other* for mere minutes. I knew even minutes were far too long a time. What Effram had seen as a transcendence of nature was really a transgression against nature. A transgression that must be stopped.

Knowing the neighborhood would be none the less worse for the loss of another rickety building, I felt no remorse when I set flame to the warehouse. I stayed long enough to assure the blaze had taken hold, and watched from a distant stoop down 22nd Street as the conflagration consumed the gloomy warehouse and the nightmarish experiment within. Rain continued to fall upon the city, seemingly halting the fire's progress to neighboring buildings, though doing nothing to hinder the hungry inferno that devoured the secrets of Effram Harris.

And as I gazed into the dancing flames, twisting in yellows and purples, I remembered Effram's plea. An inhuman sound formed by pure terror; a sound that no human had ever known. And as I listened to his morbid cries echoing in my memory, already haunting my thoughts, I noticed a shifting in the shadows down 22nd Street.

My breath caught. My heart raced. For a moment my mind struggled with the unthinkable possibility. Had one of those hideous beings slithered through the portal during another of Effram's excursions?

I pushed aside the fancy. It was too frightful to embrace. It had to be a whim of my imagination. Effram was right about me. I was too easily given to my imagination.

CASE THREE

SHADOW OF THE PAST

IT WAS LATE JULY, and six weeks had drifted past while I toiled over the strangest of books. The summer break was swiftly coming to an end, promising less time to spend with the yellowed and tattered tome now resting on my dining room table.

Even while I worried my mind with other things, Effram's death haunted my thoughts. A mere two months had passed, but sometimes, I thought I'd spotted him in the corner of my eye, or heard my name whispered in the night. So distractions of any sort were welcome. The book I had found in Effram's office while cleaning it out was one such distraction. An intriguing volume titled *Penetrating the Natural Processes*. It wasn't a technical treatise on Natural Science. Rather, it was something of a philosophical work. Untangling its notions became my greatest reverie, pulling my mind from all other worries.

But an abrupt knock on my apartment door nearly sent me spilling from my seat.

“Rudolph,” came a muffled voice. “I need to speak with you.”

I hurried forward, opening the door wide.

Jordan Gabriel stood before me, a canvas bag slung over her shoulder, and a dark expression on her soft face.

“My apologies for disturbing you,” she said, pushing past. “We must speak.” The usual cheerfulness was absent in her tone. Still, she retained her jaunty step and an assured demeanor.

With a *thump* she planted the canvas bag on my dining room table. I cringed at the sound, although my concern went unheeded.

Jordan nearly reached my height, and while she appeared slight, almost to the point of being as fragile as china, it was not so. Her fiery hair, cropped close, matched the resilient façade New York City had given her. Being a female anthropologist with little hope of acquiring tenure from a university required determination and eternal hope. Rather than professing, she catalogued at the Museum of American Indian Studies in uptown Manhattan. A respectable job, but not broad enough for Jordan.

“Something’s wrong,” Jordan said, a frown creasing her visage. “Is there something you didn’t tell me about *this*?” Pushing back the canvas bag, she revealed the ovoid stone that had once belonged to Effram. As with the first time I’d seen it, revulsion coursed through me—a sensation that seemed to be peculiar to me for some reason. Even now I couldn’t identify the cause. In appearance, it was nothing more than a large, coal-black, egg-shaped stone with strange, graven glyphs.

“Rudolph?” Jordan’s green eyes fixed on me.

“There are minor details I did not reveal,” I muttered. “In honesty, I know little about it myself.” With a great effort I

continued to ignore the hideous stone. "But, I can assure you that it belonged to Effram."

Jordan let the canvas flap fall over the *thing*. She glided from the table, dropping into one of the two wingback chairs in my living room, the pleats of her blue skirt dancing as she moved.

The growl of automobiles motoring along Broadway and 111th street slipped through the open windows. Three years in this city, and I still hadn't adjusted to the ceaseless clamber of vehicles day and night.

"It used to be a trail used by Native Indians," Jordan said. She cocked her head toward the window, as though reading my mind. "Broadway. I'm certain it was much quieter then."

"Quite," I replied, lowering into the other chair. "It seems that I don't blend with native New Yorkers very well."

"No one's native to New York. You worry too much."

One of the first acquaintances I made in New York City was Jordan Gabriel. And even though I had tried to hide my North Carolina drawl, she promptly picked it up, identified the region, and started to tell me about the history of North Carolina. I'd been warned by some of my colleagues that she was abrasive and overreaching. If that were true, I'd noticed nothing out of the ordinary in the academic world. But she did make me feel comfortable.

"Was it stolen?" she asked abruptly.

"What?" Sometimes Jordan also made me feel uncomfortable. "What are we discussing now?"

"The stone. How did Effram get it? I ask because I believe someone is watching me."

My back stiffened. Of the two of us, I certainly had the greater imagination. Even in the worst of times, Jordan was always level headed and logical. I had attempted to pawn

off my concerns about being watched and hearing voices on reading one too many books. Now her words awakened a deeper fear.

“Have you heard someone whispering your name?” I asked.

Her soft face tightened. “*No*. Don’t mock me, Rudolph. I’ve seen . . . someone outside my flat.”

I exhaled deeply, relieved that my fears were *my* fears. “I wasn’t mocking you. How long has this been going on?”

“Shortly after you gave me the stone.” She shook her head, brilliant hair shifting about. “I can’t make heads or tails out of it, either. It’s not native to North or South America. The glyphs were carved with incredible detail. Beyond any primitive skills I’ve seen previously.”

I listened silently and intently.

“What I’m saying is that it is either a fraud or some type of *avant-garde* art. Since someone is prowling around my place, I assumed maybe it didn’t belong to Effram.”

“Oh, it belonged to him as much as it did anyone,” I said. “I certainly can’t imagine anyone wanting to take it. Perhaps this prowler is not related to the stone.”

Jordan slumped into the chair wearily. “I’m tired of cataloguing, of filing away the artifacts of others. There is no room in this city for women doing *men’s* work. I’ve probably just let it get to me. You know how women become hysterical when they think too much.” A scornful scoff followed her last statement.

“I have a friend in the police,” I said. “Let me ask him to have someone watch your flat for a few days.”

“A friend in the police?” She brightened at the thought. “Oh, I have to hear about this.”

“There’s nothing to say,” I answered. “How about some tea?” I stood, hoping to change the subject. I trusted Jordan

profoundly, but there are some things that I was not prepared to part with her. *The heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to*, I repeated silently. *For in the sleep of death what dreams may come.*



O’Conner’s was a crowded little diner wedged between two giant granite buildings, almost on the corner of Centre Street and Park Row. Through its grimy windows, one could see City Hall Park. It was Detective Matthew Leahy’s favorite spot to dine—if “dining” accurately described what took place in the establishment.

Also being near the Detective Division headquarters made it a convenient meeting place for him.

“So what’s the rumpus ‘bout, Professor?” Leahy asked, cutting at a square of meatloaf. While I worked to hide my dialect, he made no such effort. And years of being in the city had transformed his words into things often undecipherable. “Is this friend of yours in trouble?”

“Associate,” I said.

Leahy’s angular face lifted. His eyes were a rich brown, sharp and intelligent. A broad smile appeared. “So she’s a lass?”

“She is female, and she is an associate. However, she is not in trouble. There is someone following her . . . I believe.”

The waitress arrived with a coffee pot, filling Leahy’s cup and attempting to do the same with mine. I covered it quickly. “No thank you. I’m having tea.”

Her lips tightened into a thin line, and she stiffly strode away from the table.

“What did I do?” I asked.

“Never you mind,” Leahy said around a mouthful of food. “It’s an English thing.” He waved a fork. “Go ahead.”

“Her name is Jordan Gabriel,” I continued. “She is an anthropologist at the Museum of Indian Studies, Uptown. I suspect someone from where she works is snooping around her house at night, attempting to frighten her.”

“So you’ve given up teachin’ and become a detective, have you?” Leahy said.

“No. But she has seen people around her flat.” I pushed my card across the table. “On the back is her address.”

His gaze settled on the card, and for a brief moment I saw the countenance of the man I’d first met in 1923.

Nearly one and a half years had passed since I’d worked with Leahy on the investigation of Adrik Ziven’s murder. After the explosion in the sewer we’d spoke little of the events. Though I had tried several times to convince him of what I had seen, he refused to believe it was anything but a “gang of hoodlums.” During that time, I had continued my investigations into the secret histories that surrounded the ghoulish group. That night had changed me in many ways. And while Leahy could never confess to it, I knew it had changed him as well.

“I’ll have an officer patrol the neighborhood. We’ll either catch someone or send ‘em a message.”

The door chimed, and a blue uniformed patrolman entered, halting alongside our booth. He bent low and whispered to Leahy. The detective’s eyes narrowed. The cheer vanished.

Leahy nodded, and the officer stood to leave. Briefly he glanced at me, seemingly struggling to hide a smile.

“They all think I’m a milksop,” I said. “Is it because I’m a professor?”

“Not at all,” Leahy said. “They think you’re a soft nancy because you always look so proper. And you’re a bit underfed as well.” He tossed a napkin on the table. “Duty calls,” he sighed.

“Something bad?” I asked.

“Yeah. And the muckers are paintin’ the town yellow with it. It’s another Baseball Murder,” he said. “Least that’s what the muckers call it.”

He started to climb out of the booth, then my expression must have halted him. “You have to have read about it in the papers?”

“I tend to avoid reading about murders as of late,” I said.

“Swell lucky you,” Leahy said. “He killed two already. We just found a third in the Bronx. Someone at the department let it slip that we find baseballs at each scene, so now the muckrakers call them ‘The Baseball Murders.’”

“Why a baseball?” I asked.

“No bloomin’ idea. It’s not like they’re next to the body. We find ‘em at the scene. Sometimes stashed in a drawer or a closet. I’d give ‘em no mind had they not been numbered. Mind you, one numbered baseball at a murder scene isn’t anything special. Two numbered baseballs spells trouble. Now we’ve found a third.”

Pushing to his feet, Leahy added, “Thanks for the meal, Professor. I’ll get someone Uptown to keep an eye on your *associate*.”

My stomach soured. Suddenly the smell of the diner caused it to churn. It didn’t seem possible, but I had to say something. “Have you found fingerprints on the baseballs?”

“Yeah. The lads at division have been working on them for days. No matches yet. But each baseball does have a common print.”

I nodded slowly, feeling the gorge rise in my throat. There were too many coincidences occurring. I wondered if in some way I was being haunted by Effram’s ghost. “I might

be able to provide you with an identity for the fingerprints.” The words were bitter in my mouth. Nothing good was to come from this.

Leahy’s jaw dropped. For a moment he simply stared at me, his lumpy gray suit hanging over his bulk. “Tell me you’re havin’ fun with me,” he said, his voice steely.

I shook my head.



Leahy was silent as he drove the Ford up 1st Avenue to the Willis Bridge. Certainly I was thankful for not having to endure the bumps and popping of the subway, but he recklessly skipped around and dashed between vehicles. The entire time his face remained stoic.

“I didn’t know about the murders,” I said, hoping to put him in a more amiable mood. “Had I known, I would have promptly contacted you and provided Effram’s baseball.”

“We don’t know if there’s a connection yet,” he said flatly. “Sean . . . Officer Davis will get the ball from your office and the lads will look it over.”

I nodded, watching the Harlem River approach, and the billowing factories in St. Mary’s Park. For me there was no doubt—not even hope for doubt remained. Remembering what Effram had created and reading the text from his office assured me that some sort of abomination had been set free from the folds of the universe. Effram Harris had tampered with Nature. Such acts of conceit always result in ruin.

As the Ford rumbled across the bridge, Leahy followed 3rd Avenue to Boston. Automobiles screeched and drivers yelled as we rolled through Morrisania. Reflexively I stamped on the floor, my foot pressing against an invisible brake.

“It’ll do us little good if we don’t arrive alive,” I said.

Leahy slowed the vehicle. "Sorry, Professor. I wanted to beat the muckers."

As we stopped on East 163rd Street, it was clear his fears had been realized. Standing in front of a brownstone tenement were two men. Both wore muddy brown suits, and one sported a camera.

The Ford groaned to a stop. Leahy eyed the men for a moment, then sighed heavily. "Don't speak to 'em," he said, swinging open the door.

"Detective Leahy," one of them cried the minute we approached, "I've had good word that this is another Baseball Murder. Is that true?"

Like a stampeding rhinoceros, Leahy moved forward, brushing past the reporter. "Come on. Give the World Telegraph a scoop on this. I'll use your photo with the article."

A flashbulb popped. Leahy spun, grabbing the reporter by his jacket, yanking him forward with a fearsome force.

"Either get your jackseat out of here," Leahy growled, "or I'll be playing slapface with you. Do you understand me?" With a brutal thrust he pushed the man away.

The reporter stumbled backward, eyes wide, mouth gaping.

Quickly, Leahy marched into the tenement with me fast on his heels.

Two uniformed officers waited in the hallway. I ignored their gazes. They avoided looking at Leahy, simply handing him a clipboard as he strolled past.

The apartment was small, but much better than most around the city. Nonetheless, the walls were confining, and only one window allowed the afternoon light to spill through.

While I'd been on the road, the July heat had not weighed upon me. Now it felt as though a hot towel had been wrapped

around my head. The heat also worked with the odor of death, producing a rancid burning in my lungs. Promptly I placed a handkerchief over my nose and mouth, and shrugged off my jacket, wrapping it around an arm.

“You don’t need to be in here,” Leahy said, standing at the threshold of a bedroom.

“I may be of some use,” I said, swallowing heavily.

He nodded and passed through the doorway. “This one is worse than the Ziven murder,” he called to me.

It took a moment for me to comprehend his meaning. Adrik Ziven had been consumed alive. For the life of me, I could not fathom how anything could be worse.

Slowly I approached the doorway. The fetid odor thickened until it felt solid.

“Keep to the side,” Leahy said, pointing to my left.

The floor creaked beneath my feet. A thick pool of dark red blood had nearly reached the doorway. It stretched into the room, forming a large, glassy pool. Shreds of clothing were strewn around the room. What once was a human body lay scattered in the lake of blood. Protruding bones, mutilated flesh, and a gruesome mass of intestines added to the sickly smell of death. Buried in the mess was a crushed skull.

I closed my eyes. My stomach twisted.

“You need to step outside?” Leahy asked.

I let my mind drift for a moment, away from a world where such things could happen. I forced myself to recite poetry, and remember the tree-covered hills of North Carolina.

“He’s male,” Leahy said casually. I heard the floor groan as he shifted about. “Name’s Thomas Fenton. Says ‘ere he was thirty-six. Murdered while his wife and daughter were out—they’re being held at Division for now.”

My eyes flicked open. “This has happened to others?”

“Two so far,” Leahy said, flipping a page on the clipboard.

I turned away, focusing on a row of metal buckets and ragged mops. Understanding their purpose brought a cold sweat to my skin. My stomach roiled.

“We think the killer brings animals with ‘em,” Leahy continued. “The medical examiner says that the victims have been ripped apart by something like a lion. But it doesn’t appear that the victims are eaten.”

As I listened, I realized what Leahy’s world was like. It was a place where he could gaze upon unfathomable atrocities, and speak about them calmly. They were puzzles to him. Yet, beneath that hard façade was a man who cared. I now understood the risk that created in his line of work.

The heat and mutilated innards conspired to make the air unbreathable. I pulled tiny breaths through the handkerchief, keeping away from the blood.

“Those are bullet holes,” Leahy said, pointing to a far wall. Dotting the chipped paint were several holes. “I’d bet a .38.”

As I looked at the wall, I felt something tugging me toward it. My heart pounded against my ribs; its deep hammering sounded in my ears. It was as though something were *touching* me.

I stepped forward. There was a wrongness about the room, as though it didn’t belong in the tenement—in the world. There were no words, no ideas that made sense of the feeling.

When I reached the far corner, I paused. On the scarred wooden floor were prints—enormous paw prints.

“Matthew,” I said. My head whirled as though a storm were passing through it. I sensed something beyond words. “There are bloodied animal prints here,” I stammered.

“We’ve found ‘em before. Can’t identify ‘em, though.”

“That’s understandable,” I said. “They are massive. Still,

the unsettling aspect is that they lead *into* the corner and vanish.”

Leahy grunted, shambling forward. He scanned the floor and wall. “That one’s a fancy riddle,” Leahy said after a moment. “I wonder if the killer is playin’ with us?”

The whirlwind in my mind continued—thoughts whisking about, spiraling within each other until the world around me vanished. It felt as if I had been yanked out of my body into a void, a space between spaces. In the distance there was light, but only a faint glimmering like stars on a cloudy night. For a fleeting moment, I thought I heard someone speaking, faint, indiscernible words, quickly devoured by the nothingness.

Somewhere in this land of emptiness, I sensed a profound rage. It was inhuman in intensity and in loathing. It was like a faint, angry breeze that blew across me, chilling me. I searched the emptiness, glancing at each speck of light, looking for the fearsome source. One speck brightened, a luminescent purple. With speed it approached, burning brighter with fury.

A hand settled on my shoulder.

“You need to go outside,” Leahy said, his large hand shaking my body. “You still in there?”

Once again, I was in the tenement. I wasn’t sure which place was more terrifying.

“Come on,” Leahy said, turning me about. “Last thing I need is a professor stuck in a corner.”

Without thinking, I said, “Efram did this.”

“Whoa there, Professor. You need some air and a drink, I’d say.”

I moved toward the doorway, passing from the bedroom. Leahy trailed behind, one hand still guiding me. “We are not safe in our ignorance,” I said, the words pouring forth

as though a dam had been broken. “Effram violated the nature of our reality—what we sense as reality. And there are things that exist, monstrous things, that prevent such transgressions.” Certainly I sounded like a blathering madman, but in that moment of stormy thoughts, I glimpsed beyond the curtain that veiled reality. A brief and dreadful glimpse; a clarifying instant exposing the severity of Effram’s experiment.

Leahy ushered me into the hallway and out of the tenement. “The air will do you good, Professor.”

“Rudolph is fine,” I said.

Leahy studied me for a long moment, a man examining a malfunctioning machine. “All right, *Rudolph*,” he said at length. “We’ve gone from monsters to first names.”

The tap-tapping of my heart slowed once outside. The dream-like hallucination had faded, returning me to myself, leaving a heaviness in my soul.

“I apologize,” I said softly. “I fear—” My eyes locked on an amused looking officer standing behind Leahy.

“Git!” Leahy scolded, clearly reading the concern on my face.

“I fear this might be a result . . . a repercussion . . . of my colleague’s experiments,” I said.

“You mean the late Effram Harris?” Leahy asked skeptically.

“There are boundaries,” I continued, quoting the book I’d been reading—Effram’s book— “in the universe to prevent chaos. Barriers are erected, a means of limiting our sense-perceptions. It not only protects humanity; it protects everything from dissolving into a primitive chaotic state.”

“Oy . . .” Leahy grunted. I wasn’t sure if he was following me. Most likely he’d thought I’d gone mad.

“If those barriers, such as time and space, are ruptured,

there are guardians to repair the wound. Those guardians have been here . . .”

“Right,” he said, although the word sounded more like “roight.” In that one word, one syllable, I detected the undercurrent of concern. He whistled, gestured over a shoulder. One of the nearby officers scuttled over. I noted the number of police was increasing, as was the crowd. Weary, worried faces huddled around the tenements, peering from behind corners. They seemed to fear the police as much as any potential murderer.

“I’m going to put you in a cab and send you home, Prof . . . Rudolph.”

“It’s a beast—a hound—you’re looking for. Not a person.” The words spilled out, as I plumbed my memory of the arcane volume I’d been reading. What had seemed ludicrous now seemed horribly possible. Like a peg slotted in a hole, the book formed coherent concepts in my mind.

“A hound it is,” Leahy said. “Aye. Like that Baskerville beastie?”

I exhaled heavily. Sometimes pragmatism frustrated me. For the most part, I blamed the zealotry of the Realist movement. It destroyed Romanticism, replacing the sublime and imagination with observation and spurious logic. At the present, New York City needed more Romantic detectives—a far-fetched notion.

A taxicab rolled to a stop in the street. Curious eyes continued to take in the scene. Without looking, it was as though I perceived their fears. I tried to close my mind, push away the growing thoughts. I had no doubt there were many denizens of the district who’d readily believe in the horrors of a vast, uncaring universe. They knew all too well they had no say in such matters, supernatural or earthly.

“Take him to Manhasset Apartments, Broadway and

111th,” Leahy said to the driver as I was guided into the backseat.

“Give yerself a rest,” Leahy said to me. “Go home, have some tea, and read a book or somethin.”

The door closed with a heavy thud.



The taxicab sputtered across town, cutting through the Valley toward Morningside. The vehicle jounced on the hard pavement, reminding me that I was as tightly wound as a watch spring.

To the south I gazed at the towering buildings downtown. They reached into the evening sky, scraping the heavens. All the way, traffic growled and barked along Cathedral Parkway.

The scene brought Jordan’s words to mind. When Broadway was a trail cutting through the forest of Manhattan, it certainly had been quieter. The grass and trees had been uprooted, replaced with a concrete landscape. Even the earthy loam had been covered now. What would be the cost of those transgressions? I wondered.

Then an electric terror seized me. I sat bolt upright, calling to the cabbie, “Take me to West 158th Street!”

I chided myself for such ignorance, for such narrow vision. When I looked at the puzzle as a whole, the answer lay before me.

“Can we accelerate this process?” I asked the cabbie, leaning forward.

He glowered at me. Nonetheless, the cab weaved through the traffic all the quicker. I focused my mind, willing myself to remain calm. I should have realized this sooner. With mounting despair, I knew Jordan was the next victim.



I kept vigil on my pocketwatch until the cab pulled in front of my destination. Without a word, I stuffed several bills into the cabbie's hand and dashed away.

Taking the steps to Jordan's flat two at a time, I stumbled to a halt before her door. I knocked, apprehension swelling inside. Time stood against me, a disadvantage my foe didn't have.

Through the square panes, I spotted Jordan approaching the door—the heavy glass distorted her figure.

“What's going on?”

I raised a hand, interrupting her. “This is urgent,” I said. “I need the artifact. And you need to leave immediately.”

Her bright green eyes tightened with suspicion. “What is this about?” Irritation shaped her words, yet her voice managed to retain its melodious tone.

“The stone is dangerous,” I said. “It isn't of this world—”

It was Jordan's turn to interrupt. She folded her arms and stared at me squarely. “I won't tolerate this,” she said hotly. “Who put you up to this?” She made no attempt to disguise her disappointment.

I winced. Her thinking I'd fallen to the level of her Neanderthal colleagues cut deeply. Yet, years of harassment and ridicule had made her suspicious of everyone, including, and most regrettably, myself.

The stifling summer air carried the scent of lilac across the porch. Planted on both sides were tremendous bushes, long bereft of flowers, yet their scent lingered. A trick of my imagination, I was certain.

“The stone doesn't belong here, Jordan.”

She remained silent.

I tossed up my hands in surrender. “I'm not a conspirator of any sort. You are at great risk.”

“I intend to wait in this doorway until you explain yourself

in some sensible fashion,” she said.

Frustration filled me. I danced in place, searching for a means of explanation. Each ticking second promised horrors. Finally, I decided to try a simple plea. “There is nothing I can tell you now that will make sense. But I *promise*, I will clarify things once I’ve removed the stone from your flat.”

A endless moment passed before she answered. “Fine,” she said, stepping back. “But I’m going with you.”

There was little time to argue the point. It felt as though the world were diminishing, squeezing me. Something pressed against my mind as though foreshadowing a dark event.

“Agreed,” I said, slipping past her, into the hallway.

“I’ll fetch it,” Jordan said.

“No—” The fierceness of my response startled even me. “Let me,” I added more gently.

Her eyes narrowed again. “It’s in the cellar, on the work table.” She pointed to a door in the hallway.

I opened it and walked down the stairs toward a steeping darkness.

“There’s a light with a pull cord at the bottom,” she called.

The glow from the hallway quickly faded until a palpable gloom embraced me. I breathed in the damp air, swinging my hands about, searching for the pull cord.

The darkness was menacing. An unseen pressure still squeezed my chest.

“Let me do it,” Jordan said. The stairs creaked as she started down. The image that each stair had once been the plank of an old coffin filled my mind.

Giving up on the light, I pushed into the blackness, hoping to bump into the table. Once there, finding the wretched stone would be simple.

As I walked, a momentary flash of light caught my eye. I turned toward the source. It wasn't the overhead light.

Another brief flash appeared. This time it resembled a crooked streak of lightning. The brilliance blinded me, making the darkness all the more solid. An ear-piercing screech accompanied it.

The electrical display continued, as did the cacophonous noise. Jagged line after jagged line appeared in the corner of the cellar, revealing the brown stonework. The intensity grew until it seemed that a thick web of light hung in the air. Now the sound fell in a crescendo of dissonance, transforming into a rhythmic thrumming. The noise vibrated through the stone floor, creeping up my feet, sending a coldness along my bones.

"What are you doing?" Jordan asked from somewhere behind.

"We need to leave," I said urgently.

I heard the *click* of the pull cord. The cellar remained dark, the sole illumination coming from the corner, ever increasing.

"Quick," I said. "Get the stone."

In the space of a heartbeat, the flickering intensified. I shaded my eyes from its white radiance. Glued to the spot, I tilted my head to gain a better view—for a creature stood inside the light. It resembled a massive hound, nearly half my height on its four legs. The thing was astounding and horrifying. In one moment it appeared solid, and then it suppurated a thick ooze as though it were melting. The enormous head possessed a maw filled with pointed teeth, and deep amber eyes. Eyes filled with intelligence and rage.

My heart raced.

"I have it, Rudolph," Jordan said. I blocked the view, not wanting her to witness the monstrosity. Her footsteps shuffled about.

“Leave,” I said. “We need to leave.”

“What is it? What’s over there?”

The beast stepped from the burning sphere, dread claws scraping on the stony floor. Its yellow eyes glowered with an unfathomable hatred. The images of Fenton’s eviscerated body flicked through my mind—the stench of death, and the pool of blood. My hands balled into fists, and I struggled to clear my head.

“Oh my . . .” Jordan said over my shoulder. For some reason, I hadn’t noticed her New Jersey accent previously. It seemed ridiculous that I stood before a hideous monstrosity with an appetite for killing, and I pondered accent.

I redoubled my effort to focus. Clawing into the depths of memory, I uncovered phrases, passages of texts; I searched for anything helpful.

A guttural snarl escaped the hound as it casually took another step closer. Its movements were cautious, and seemed almost taunting. The portal of light behind began to fade. The basement fell silent except for the beast’s menacing breathing.

Jordan pulled on my arm. “Let’s go!”

Symbols flooded my mind; words that I’d read but never uttered. They surged and rushed from the depths of memory. I began to chant, tracing lines in the darkness. A violet light followed my finger. As a shape formed before me, the hound paused, snarling as though warning me. I continued. Seemingly, my mind had been split, existing in reality and unreality, in two universes. Part of me stood in Jordan’s cellar, and another part wandered a vast emptiness—the space between spaces. I uttered the alien words louder, slicing through the inky blackness with my finger, producing a sigil that seared the air.

The hound bared its feral teeth, jaws snapping. I completed my work. Mere feet before me, the monster halted.

The shimmering pattern radiated, and as it did, the hound backed away, growling, lurching against some unseen force. The sigil remained, a barrier of some sort. Somehow I felt connected to it, and it was sapping my strength.

With a surprising jerk, Jordan pulled me back, waking me from my trance. “Unless you’ve got another plan,” she said, panic edging her words, “I say we run.”

I turned, stumbling, climbing the stairs behind her. The hound remained beyond the luminous sigil, howling with fury.



Jordan guided the Studebaker expertly through the river of traffic. The stagnant air had cooled, but it did little to soothe me. A dark cold settled over me as I realized the folly of my predicament. It was a Baudelairian realization. *In all its raucous impudence, life writhes, cavorts in pallid light . . .*

“What was that? What just happened?” Jordan asked. The Big Six touring car lurched forward, weaving between vehicles.

With effort, I kept one hand on the artifact in my lap, and the other on a handgrip, trying to steady myself. “Go to the Gashouse district,” I yelled over the rushing wind. Thoughts of throwing the black stone on the avenue filled my mind.

The automobile jerked left, turning off Broadway onto 5th Avenue, whisking past the towering trees of Madison Park. We then pushed through the bustle, trailing onto West 22nd Street.

“What just happened?” she repeated, stealing a glance at me.

“I don’t think I can explain it. At least right now.”

“That thing came out of a wall,” she said. “How can it do that?”

“It came out of the corner of a wall,” I added. “It can, because it doesn’t live in our world . . . our space.” Recalling all that I had read about the beast, I tried to summarize it. But to convey the impossible was simply impossible. “It is not a three-dimensional creature like we are. It can slip from its dimension into ours through angles—corners.”

The cold spread through me, lingering on my skin. Killing a hound that dwelled outside of time and space did not seem likely. My mind rebelled against the impossible logic.

“I know that look,” Jordan said. “Is that thing coming after us again?” The engine groaned as she shifted gears. The hot summer evening puffed air at my face.

“Yes. I don’t know when, but it will. I’m certain the barrier I created won’t last long.”

She started to speak, but pressed her lips together in silence.

“Something I learned from an old book,” I said, answering the unspoken question. It was best not to follow that topic. I knew how she felt. The world she’d known had been twisted into an unfathomable knot. Her world had once been mine—a beautiful place where stars glittered in the heavens, each a treasure, a wonder. The truth was wholly different. The universe was a cold, desolate void, cruel and malign.

For some time we rumbled through the gridiron streets of the city without speaking. Without a doubt, Jordan had countless questions—as did I. But for us, there was little time, and I needed to brood over something that could not be done—a task I’d become accustomed to when attempting to excite students about reading Chaucer.

The Studebaker rolled to a stop on East 22nd Street. The sun cast a ruddy glow and lengthy shadows over the bleak city block. Decrepit warehouses and countless gas storage tanks were scattered on both sides of us. In some spots the

forgotten tanks stood on high platforms, with veins of rust wrapped around them. Smaller, cigar shaped tanks cluttered the area between abandoned buildings.

“What do we do?” Jordan asked, concern lining her face. “What’s going on?”

“I still can’t explain,” I said. “Not because I don’t want to,” I quickly added, raising a hand to halt her. “Because I can’t make sense out of it myself.”

“Try,” she said, steely.

I exhaled, feeling the weight of time pass. “That creature you saw hunts by scent—the scent of time.”

With deliberate motion, she inclined her head, eyes still fixed on me.

“The *scent* of time was a metaphor,” I said. “A poor one I admit. But workable. You see, that hound in your cellar can sense things that have traveled through time in a non-linear fashion.” I loathed physics, and it was all the more intolerable when combined with metaphysics. “Effram’s artifact moved through time from someplace . . . I don’t know where or when.”

“The artifact is what it’s after?” she asked, not questioning any of my other absurd statements.

“Yes . . . or maybe its scent. The hound seems attracted to living beings with the smell of time. And the artifact’s *scent* has tainted us.”

“Is there some way to wash it off or cover it?”

“Ironically, I believe it dissipates with the natural passing of time. So the longer the artifact is here, the weaker the trail becomes. The same seems true for us. The problem is that the hound will find us before then.”

My mind flashed to those people who were killed by the hound, and Effram’s thoughtless experiment with the baseballs. What had been a simple test for him became a promise

of death for others. A universe that permitted such horrors was unfathomable.

“Can’t we hide until the scent fades?” Jordan said.

I shook my head. “The hound travels through dimensions using right angles—corners—in our world.” I gestured dejectedly toward the debris. “And there are right angles everywhere.”

The circumstances redoubled my disgust for geometry. As a young man the study of points, angles, lines, and shapes had brought me plentiful woe. But just as I was about to voice my odium for that branch of mathematics, everything fit into place—like the perfect solids were supposed to do according to Johannes Kepler’s failed theory of the planets.

I moved forward, into the landscape of forgotten rubble. “We need a sphere,” I announced.

“What?” Jordan trailed me.

For the first time since I’d lived in New York City, I was happy to see a field without an abundance of plants. Pipes, cinderblocks, crates, barrels, and all manner of detritus covered the surrounding ground. With a tug, I pulled a tarpaulin cover from a corroded and crumbling, automobile-sized storage tank. Ragged holes yawned through the fabric, but the bulk of it dragged behind me.

“Look for an underground fuel tank,” I called over my shoulder. “We used them in North Carolina.”

Jordan came alongside me, skipping over the rubble as she went. “Explain what you’re doing before we’re both dead.” Even though she appeared calm, there was a sharp edge to her words.

“We can make a trap,” I said. “The hound travels through corners. Fuel tanks are spherical—well, cylindrical—close enough.”

“No angles,” Jordan concluded, stealing my wind. She

pulled the tarp from my hands. “We find one with an inspection lid, and place this over it so—”

“And perhaps the hound will fall into a tank,” I interrupted, determined not to lose all of my glory. “First we must find a tank.”

“One is over here,” she said, dragging the tattered tarp. She glanced at me over her shoulder, eyes still bright in the gloom. “They mark them with posts, Rudolph.” She pointed to a yellow pole planted in the earth. “The city is removing them for new construction.”

At that point, I remembered when Jordan wasn’t cataloguing, she ventured onto construction sites in the city, helping other anthropologists remove Native Indian remains for the museum.

“Fine,” I stated. “I’ll gather the cinderblocks for the right angle.”

She nodded knowingly, trudging toward the pole.

Although it was only a few moments’ work, I was puffing from toting the masonry to a single point, and overlapping the blocks to form an angle. When finished, the breast-high gray blocks stood like an orphaned corner of a building before the tarpaulin covered tank opening. Jordan had gathered and strewn rubbish across the tarp’s surface so as to disguise it.

We stood opposite the makeshift right angle, just beyond the covered opening of the tank. The artifact rested at my feet—a lure. Even when not touching it, disgust washed over me.

“When the hound falls in,” Jordan said softly, “I’ll run to the lid and close it.”

The sun had dropped below the horizon. Ebony threads of night weaved a shroud over the city. In the distance, the din of life filled the air, while a silence settled over the surrounding area.

Desperately I wished to send Jordan away. This foolhardy plan was reckless. Effram had tampered with the universe and the cost had been great. Now I stood poised on the very same precipice. A tangled rat's nest of reality, where the past and an unknown future collided.

As the light wilted into utter blackness, the familiar pressure began to surround me. Comprehension of its cause or purpose was beyond my ken. Instead, I took it as an augur for approaching malevolence. The wake of evil.

"Be ready," I whispered.

Jordan crouched, preparing to sprint toward the lid.

As night settled, my cinderblock corner vanished in the thickening murk. Vainly I searched for it. My pulse thrummed in my ears. Long moments passed, where it seemed the cloying air muffled my hearing, leaving only the sound of my heart. Then, through the silken night, a light flickered. As before, it repeatedly flashed, growing. Crooked lines twisted through the air, illuminating the corner. The chilling squeal returned, avalanching down sonic registers until it became the cadenced beating of a world-sized heart.

Arcs seared from one side of the cinderblocks to the other; a solid globe of light danced before me, illuminating the land.

From its center, a massive, malicious shape pushed forth as though being hammered out on an unearthly forge. Its head and shoulders protruded, spiteful eyes scanning for prey. Lips pulled back in a vicious sneer. With an agile motion, one leg stepped from the glowing portal.

"Rudolph," Jordan said in a hushed tone, "I'm not sure I can do this."

My heart hammered. I hoped against hope that the beast would spy me, and ignore her. Rightfully, I was its quarry. Jordan was innocent, as were the others. These thoughts stampeded

around my head, causing my chill blood to boil. Seconds ago the sight of the hound had filled me with unimaginable terror. And with those few words from Jordan, I became outraged. This foul beast stalked the universe freely. Others paid dire prices, while its malevolence continued to exist undaunted. I could not tolerate that. Even though it might be my last action, I decided to wage war against such blind malice.

I placed a hand on Jordan's shoulder. She felt warm, but her body shivered. "You'll be fine," I assured.

The giant hound growled ferociously, soulless eyes gazing into mine. A plum-colored mucus exuded from its hulking form, glistening in the preternatural light. The unearthly *thrumming* continued.

With another step, it pulled free of the glowing gate—a few feet short of the trap. Paws moved slowly. Colossal shoulders shifted beneath sickly wet flesh.

Another growl issued forth, ominous and filled with a hatred.

Mirroring its movement, I stepped forward like a knight issuing a challenge. I was not a warrior even in my wildest imaginings. The likes of Gawain and Lancelot were not in my stock. Yet, a task had fallen unto me. Unlike the heroes of my study, I wasn't driven by noble courage. Madness seemed my motivation. I was at a nadir, a pivotal point between realities—a place I'd never known existed. Despair embraced me, and a great darkness braced me. No, I wasn't a hero of yore. But there was something inside me that should be feared.

The beast cocked its head as though sensing my thoughts. Its gaze was black and pitiless. It hungered for my death.

I remained still, readying a foot to step on the tarp.

Casually, the hound stepped to the side, navigating around the covered opening. Its sneering muzzle seemed to form a smile.

Without thinking, I lurched forward. “No!” I made as much commotion as possible to entice it, to lead it directly to me and over the pit.

It paused a moment, lowering its head to the tarpaulin, making a snuffling noise.

All seemed lost when from beyond the curtain of night, a gun roared. The hound jerked as a bullet slammed into its flank. Two more shots followed, sending goutts of putrescence spouting into the air. In the periphery of my vision, I spotted muzzle flashes, and in the light I saw Detective Matthew Leahy.

The hound only twitched with each round as though they were nothing more than an annoyance.

Quickly its head raised, swinging between Matthew and myself. Determined to retain its ire, I attempted to re-create the barrier I had produced in the cellar. Rhythmically I uttered forgotten words, tracing a pattern in the hot air.

Furious, the hound hunkered down, frenzied howls pouring forth. This time it didn’t hesitate; it stalked forward, intent upon its victim.

One, two, three steps it took, gaining speed. Then suddenly a paw landed on the opening covered by the tarp. As though being sucked into a void, the creature dropped downward, momentum sending its large bulk forward, tumbling into the fuel tank. The tarpaulin *snapped* into a bundle under its descending weight, wrapping around it. The hound’s rage echoed in the metal chamber even after it had slammed against the bottom.

Almost instantly, the luminescent portal began to fade, withering into nothingness, followed by silence.

A pale beam of light sliced through the night as Matthew moved forward—flashlight and revolver ready.

Pushing aside my revulsion, I hefted the artifact. At the

lip of the opening, I let it fall into the tank. A split second after it clamored to the bottom, Jordan slipped from the shadows. She gripped the lid, heaving it upward. The tank rang like a bell as she threw her weight against the lid, landing on it, sealing it.

A seeming eternity passed in silence. Even the night held its hot breath.

“What in the blazes was that?” Matthew called, breaking the stillness.

As if in response, the tank dinged and rumbled, the hound thrashing inside.

“Your murderer,” I proclaimed. Anger and fear had numbed my mind, making my voice sound distant in my ears. Willing myself, I tried to expunge the morbid thoughts that had been guiding me. Grief and rage for the innocent who’d brutally died only inspired a desire for vengeance—a pallid substitute for life.

“Listen to that,” Matthew said. “I swear I shot it least twice, and it’s still makin’ a grand ruckus.”

“I don’t think bullets hurt—” Jordan started.

“It’s a feral dog,” I interrupted, stealing a glance at Jordan. “It might be best to keep it locked in here. Maybe fill the tank with concrete and leave it buried.”

Mathew stopped before me. The flashlight shone against my chest. “Prints on the baseballs matched Professor Harris,” he said matter of factly. “Does this end here?”

“Efram kept track of the baseballs in his journal. All are now accounted for.”

“I’m guessin’ that’s as close to a *yes* as I’ll get from you.” Matthew shoved the revolver into a shoulder holster. “No matter how I look at this, I can’t figure it. So I guess buryin’ a rabid dog in a tank somehow makes sense.”

“*That* is not a rabid dog,” Jordan announced, climbing to

her feet, slapping the grime from her skirt.

Matthew held up a hand. "Lass, no offence. But I'm reportin' a rabid dog." He shot a look at me. "Bout the size of the Baskerville one."

"A mastiff," I said. "I'm certain the reporters—the *muckers*—can come up with the rest of the story."

"Aye," he said grimly, nodding. "That they can."

"So you're just going to fill up the tank with concrete and forget about it?" Jordan said, astonished.

Matthew cocked his head at the night sky, scratching an ear. "I can't prosecute a mutt. And from the fuss this one is makin', I'll be damned if I'm lettin' it out. So yes, lassy."

"Miss Jordan Gabriel," she said, jutting out her chin. Matthew's answer displeased her, but it was apparent that the detective was one of Nature's immovable objects.

"I know who you are," he said. "One of my lads was watchin' you for the professor—" he jerked a nod toward me — "he said someone had been prowlin' 'round your place. My lad followed the two of you 'cross the city and telephoned me when you stopped here."

Jordan started to speak, but fell silent, folding her arms across her chest.

"She's fiery," Matthew said to me in a stage whisper.

A silent glare was the only response she offered.

"Determined," I corrected.

To the south, a column of vehicles rumbled down west 22nd Street.

"Those will be my boys," Matthew said. "The muckers won't be far behind."

I studied the closed lid one last time. Muted howls reverberated inside the tank. Human imagination was one of our greatest gifts, and in all of its reckonings, the horrors of the universe far surpassed it. As so many of my colleagues

in literature rejoiced in saying, "Reality has no structure." And that was their excuse for the extravagances of modern writers who pondered aimlessly, looking to transgress the boundaries of art.

Now the scaffold that formed the sensible world had collapsed for me, bringing together two realities. In one, people who saw a world with a wondrous future; in the other, unnamable terrors stalked through the quiet voids. It was a path from which I could never return.

CASE FOUR

THE WHISPERING DEAD

“**Y**OU CAN SEE THEM, can’t you?” asked Sebastian Borchett.

He was a lanky fellow, made all the leaner from his time in the Manhattan State Hospital for the Insane. During my brief visit, I had noticed that the patients were underfed and ill-treated.

“I’m not sure I understand your meaning,” I replied. “I’m simply here to interview you.”

He laughed, a caustic sound. “You’re here because of the deaths. I see that. I know that. But you’re also here because you see *them*.”

His bald pate glistened in the overhead light from his cell. I wanted to slide my stool closer, but Doctor Milroy had warned me about Sebastian. I maintained a distance between us. Yet, somehow the bars seemed a feeble barrier. While physically Sebastian appeared frail, I sensed a ferocity buried inside him.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked. I dabbled the pencil tip against my tongue, prepared to scribble down his response.

The answer came in the form of a languid, almost serpentine smile slithering across his visage. “Yes . . .” His dull eyes darted around as though searching for someone in the corridor behind me. He leaned forward and whispered, “*They* told me about you.”

Although I feigned writing, I did not put a solitary word to paper. His tone and the cold knowledge hidden beyond his words rattled me, sending a storm of chills across my flesh. I continued my deception for several moments while I regained my composure. His declaration was not only disturbing because of the eerie manner in which he uttered it, but also because I believed it to be true.

“Who are *they*?” I asked at length.

His lips spread, revealing yellowed teeth. “Come closer,” he said, gesturing. His narrow frame angled forward, coming to rest against the bars. “They don’t like it when we say their names aloud.”

The compulsion to obey filled me. For nearly sixteen months I had pored over countless eldritch texts—every work within my means. I yearned for knowledge, and also some method of ending the ceaseless whisperings and dreams.

During those days and nights of study, the long abandoned arcane knowledge I’d gathered continually changed my perception. But nothing gave me any clues, any answers, an understanding of *them*—as Sebastian Borchett termed it.

Gently I placed my journal and pencil on the tiled floor, outside of Sebastian’s reach. Then I inched the stool closer, wooden legs protesting with a shrill squeak.

“I wouldn’t do that,” came a voice from behind me. “Ain’t nothing good going to come of it.” A smooth Southern drawl shaped the words.

They came from a man draped in an olive-green custodial uniform.

Like a caged animal, Sebastian snarled, leaping to his feet, cursing and striding the length of his cell. "Go away!" he barked. "This isn't your business! Go away!"

I recoiled at the man's feral demeanor. Standing, I toppled the stool in a rush backward.

"You're not wanted here," Sebastian ranted. "Can't you see the professor and me were having a conversation?" With each syllable, his voice grew coarser and his mannerisms wilder. Then he turned his gaze to me.

"You leave then! Go ahead! *They* know who you are. *He* knows who you are. Leave!" Sebastian gripped the bars, and for a moment it seemed as though he were going to pull them from their stony anchors, rend them from the very walls themselves. But that didn't happen. Instead, he slammed his head against the iron barrier, almost squeezing it through the gap. His eyes bulged; his countenance flushed a deep red. "*They* are waiting, Professor Pearson. And they are patient. *So* patient." Then his words melted into an inhuman cackle. A sound part growl and part laughter.

"Please," said the man, stepping next to me. "Come with me, Professor. When he gets this way it's best to stay clear."

Hurriedly I gathered my belongings. Without another word, I followed the man down the corridor.



His name was Louis Merrit, a custodian for the hospital. Age had robbed him of his full height. Stoop-shouldered, he stood a few inches shorter than I; his skin cinnamon colored, hair gray. His manner seemed sanguine, and all the more so when compared to Sebastian's choleric outbursts. But caution had found its way back. Matthew had warned me that some of the staff were inmates from Blackwell's Prison. In fact, he'd urged me not to venture onto Ward's Island alone.

Naturally, I ignored the advice. The matter was distasteful, if not wholly foul. To be honest, I had no solid idea of precisely what I hoped to discover. But everything led here, and to Sebastian Borchett.

“Did you know him before?” Louis asked as we strode down the corridor.

“Mister Borchett?”

Louis nodded.

“No. I’m doing research, and Mister Borchett’s family history may prove to be useful.” Knowing little about my newfound companion, I decided it best to avoid specifics. The last three months I had spent dreaming of him in his hospital cell. My hope was that Sebastian might reveal something to me.

Again Louis nodded as though he knew I were lying, the response a parent might give a child who had manufactured an outrageous fib.

“I figured you were here about the things he done,” Louis said matter-of-factly. “The killings and such.”

Many times in my life I had attended conferences where I had engaged in rhetorical combat with fellow scholars. Battles of words and logic to prove or disprove a proposition, support a conclusion or claim. At those times I could sense my opponents setting traps, putting forth false assumptions to lure me into agreement. Scholarly debates were fierce confrontations. However, they paled to the feeling I had when speaking to Louis. There, beneath his words, flowed an undercurrent of meaning, while on the surface there was only politeness and innocent inquiry. Put plainly, Louis Merrit knew more than he was saying.

“No,” I muttered, keeping pace. “I know of Sebastian’s crimes. But they are not my concern.”

“Mmmm.” The sound was melodious, although it possessed

a hint of what I thought to be disappointment.

As we marched through a confusion of corridors, it became clear that no matter how much I tried to obscure my motives, I somehow remained transparent to Louis Merrit. Eventually we passed outdoors, and it felt as though a burden had been lifted from me. While inside a heavy gloom settled upon me, a melancholy that embraced me while within the hospital's confines. Departing the drear structure peeled those feelings away.

Outside the sun perched above the horizon. The smell of water revived me, pushing my grim task to the far reaches of my mind.

"I'd stay clear of Sebastian for a few days," Louis said. "When he takes to these moods, there ain't nothing but time that'll ease them."

Now, in the sun, I desperately wanted to question Louis. In his solemn brown eyes I read a lengthy history; a life filled with many things, although malice did not seem to be one of them. Rather, I sensed a dark wisdom lingering behind those orbs, as though he knew what thoughts I wrestled with, and that he had long ago discovered the answers.

Of course I knew this to be more fancy than fact. My own desire to share my numinous secrets sometimes made me think I sensed an understanding in others.

"I'm not from Blackwell's, Professor Pearson. If that's what you're wondering. I live over in the Valley in Harlem. Came up from North Carolina just like you."

A smile flashed across his face. Obviously he'd read the astonishment. Indeed, I did come from Jefferson, North Carolina. But very few in the city knew this.

"It's easy," he said. "You're trying to hide it in your words. But I can tell a Carolinian when I hear one. I understand, though. Most folks here find the way us Southerners talk amusing."

Gravel crunched as we ambled across the courtyard to a

grassy field dotted with a handful of trees. They danced in the faint breeze. Green surrounded the hospital, and beyond, the wrinkled water of the East River threatened to swallow the entire island.

“We do seem like a different animal to many New Yorkers,” I replied.

“We do for sure. Some of us more than others.” He raised a hand to shelter the sun. “Over there. They are from Blackwell’s.”

I followed his gaze. In the distance, I spied several figures conveying one of several coffins into the folds of the earth. Then I remembered that the island also served as a potter’s field, a cemetery for the city’s wretched, forgotten, and the poor. Another way in which the inhabitants of Jefferson differed from New Yorkers.

“We sometimes get upwards of fifty a week,” Louis said. “Not all of them whole, mind you. And a fearsome number ain’t nothing but children.”

“Fifty?” I said, appalled.

“Just about.”

I watched as men in prison uniforms shoveled and kicked the dirt into the large rectangular pit that served as a grave. Beyond them, gliding upon the waters, were myriad sailboats and yachts. White paint shone in the fading sun, emblems of the city’s wealthiest and most influential members, all on their way up the East River to Long Island Sound.

“Looks like your ferry’s arriving,” Louis said. “Don’t want to miss it. Be an hour ‘fore another comes. Ever since they closed the bridge to fix it, the ferry man’s been smiling. I reckon that’ll pass soon.” A faint smile flashed on his lips.

A bridge stretched from Manhattan to Ward’s Island, the usual route back and forth. But a century’s use had forced the city to rebuild it.

I thanked Louis, departing for the slip, notes clutched in my hands. As I entered the gangway, I couldn't help but think about Sebastian Borchett's words: *They* know you who you are. *He* knows who you are.



The next day I met with Jordan for lunch. Thursdays my classes at Columbia didn't start until mid-afternoon, which allowed me a quick walk to Morningside Park. The trees shivered in the brisk May air, fresh leaves chittering. This had become a ritual for me, although in the last two years, it had lost some of its sweetness.

The park itself rested upon the summit overlooking the Valley—the lowland that led into Harlem. Greenery was abundant, and the high ground kept the stifling stench of automobile exhaust at bay. But the stone that formed the walkways and stairs of the park were slate black and roughly hewn. After my encounter with Effram's device, each time I climbed the stairs at Morningside, I was reminded of the weird land where my friend had found his end. The bizarre stonework towering and tilted in the strange world seemed too familiar to that in the park. Many times I wondered about the background of the park's architect, but I'd never dared to look into it for fear of what I'd learn.

"I have some thrilling news," Jordan said, approaching the bench I occupied. Her charming smile brightened the afternoon. "I will be working on a dig in Throg's Neck."

"What is there to dig up there?" I asked. It was an old neighborhood in Bronx that seemed devoid of anthropological treasures.

"A road construction crew found several skeletons, and the museum has managed to halt work until Dr. Barnet can examine and remove them."

“It seems the city is working with the dead,” I said, opening the brown bag perched on my lap.

“Oh heavens, Rudolph. Tell me you’re not eating that abomination of a sandwich again.”

I produced the sandwich. “Yes,” I replied, unfolding the wax paper on top of the bag. “Don’t be so quick to condemn it until you’ve tried one.”

“It’s not a sandwich. It’s *part* of a sandwich.” Her shoulders twitched in mock revulsion. “People don’t eat just lettuce on bread.” Like a stage magician pulling an animal from a hat, Jordan removed a staggering creation. A sliced roll filled with meats, tomato, protruding onions and lettuce.

“Perhaps the *Earl of Sandwich* disagrees with my definition of his creation,” I said smartly, “but I enjoy it nonetheless.”

“What’s bothering you?” she asked point blank.

I crunched, only shrugging my shoulders.

She smiled, shaking her head. “Any time I attack your lettuce sandwich, you change the topic. When you don’t, I know there’s something else on your mind.”

Her words tumbled around my head for a few moments. I’d become so accustomed to being ignored in my daily life—always considered an eccentric—I always assumed little attention was focused on me. That assumption had blinded me to Sebastian Borchett’s ravings. Rather than simply happenstance, it seemed possible that someone was paying close attention to me.

“Rudolph?”

Nodding, I attempted to divert the conversation. “When do you plan to tell me why you hide your Jersey accent?”

Jordan slumped, biting into her sandwich. She chewed for several seconds before extracting a book from her canvas bag. “I brought you a gift,” she said sullenly, placing it next to me.

The gaudy dust jacket art appalled me. A man clad in a red toga clinging to the side of an unidentifiable flying vehicle. The title glowed in luminous yellow, nearly illegible letters: *A Princess of Mars*.

I raised an eyebrow in confusion. “You know I detest the pulp published these days.”

“John Carter visits a place named Barsoom,” she said. “Published in 1917 . . .” She let the last float in the air.

The remark bore into my heart. She had no way of knowing what the date meant to me, what skeletons it dredged up. The dead never remained buried.

Clearly sensing my dark mood, she continued, “I’m curious to see how it stands up against the literary canon.”

“I don’t need to read it to answer the question. But I appreciate the thought.” Fearing some passerby might see the wretched text sitting next to me, I quickly picked it up, removed the dust jacket and folded it inside the book.

She nodded, smiling, returning to her lunch.

Secrets are slippery things. Sometimes they’re a pleasure to share, and other times painful. The same holds true for when they are discovered by another unwittingly. I wondered what secrets of mine had been learned, and who had discovered them. I suspected Sebastian Borchett knew many of the answers. And there were those who’d never forget.



Dr. Milroy escorted me to Sebastian’s cell as he had on my visit two days prior. This time a constant downpour tapped against the hospital, making the morning damp and dismal.

“I trust your research is going well,” Milroy said.

I nodded. “It is moving ahead. I’m still not sure of the final direction.”

“One would hope that you don’t intend to uncover old wounds,” he said. “The families suffered greatly at Borchett’s brutalities. And the newspapers are all too happy to resurrect such stories. If . . . if they were to learn of your interests—” he hesitated as he unlocked the last door. “Well, you understand, Professor. Some things are best left buried.”

“The research will not pass to the press,” I assured him. “It is for my work, not related to the murders.”

A wan smile crossed Milroy’s lips. “Thank you.” He gestured toward the hallway lined with inmate cells. “Please remember to remain at least four feet away from the bars—for your own safety.”

“Indeed,” I replied, passing through the threshold.

As of late, I had read several articles about the mismanagement and investigations brought against the hospital. I suspected his concerns had more to do with the newspaper interest in those topics, and not in a ten-year-old resolved murder case.

I rounded the alcove that led to Sebastian’s cell. Waiting for me was the stool, the overhead light already burning. Compared to my last visit, the tone of the cellblock was solemn. Either the inmates were sleeping, or had recently been medicated.

Sebastian sat on his cot, hunkered in the corner. Upon my appearance he did not move or utter a word. His eyes simply followed me as I settled onto the stool.

“Good morning, Sebastian,” I called. “I thought we might continue our conversation.”

Muted thunder rumbled in the distance as though offering a response.

Leaning forward, I searched his face for signs of sedation. His countenance was tight and anxious. Even though he sat huddled in a corner, arms wrapped around his knees, he seemed alert, coherent.

“You know why I’m here,” I said.

“No!” he snapped. “I don’t know. I suppose Milroy sent you here to taunt me.”

“Do you remember me?” I asked.

“I don’t know your game. You’re either one of Milroy’s pets or a reporter.” In a sudden motion, he shot forward, landing against the bars. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

Altogether, he seemed like a different person. His sly mannerisms had been replaced by a nervous anger, and his loquaciousness had vanished completely.

“Do you know my name?” I asked bluntly.

Gripping the bars, he peered at me. “No. Why should I?”

Since my childhood, I’d put little stock in psychology. The practice always seemed barbaric, and the longer it was studied, the more esoteric it seemingly became. Still, it didn’t take an alienist to see the overt changes in mannerisms, voice, and actions of Sebastian. Either he was a gifted actor, or since my last visit he’d transformed into another person. Regretfully, there were *therapies* that transformed people in such ways. I feared Sebastian’s last rage had garnered him such a treatment.

Keeping my notebook on my lap, for it was little use presently, I thought I’d try one last question. The appearance of Louis Merritt had infuriated Sebastian at my previous meeting. “Have you seen Mr. Merritt today?” I asked.

Sebastian thrust his body away from the bars with a grunt. “You need to be in here, not me.”

“He’s the custodian who works here,” I continued.

“Ha . . . I’m done playing. There’s no janitor here by that name—and I know them all.” He dropped onto the thin mattress, fell back, and curled into a ball.

The conversation had ended. My first thought was to press

Dr. Milroy about Sebastian's behavior. But given Milroy's anxiety over my research, I knew I'd get no useful answers. Then I had the dread thought that my prying had provoked Milroy.

I gazed at Sebastian as I stood, hoping my actions were not responsible for his present condition. If I'd been forthright with Milroy, perhaps he would have been more at ease. However, there was no way to broach the subject. I had been dreaming of Sebastian Borchett, seeing his face, hearing his voice, and I'd never known the man existed. His crimes had occurred before I arrived in New York City. Had not he spoke his name in a dream, I'd have probably never found him.

I left in silence, wondering why the universe needed monsters when humans so deftly handled the work.



... I am forbid to tell the secrets of my prison house. I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood . . .

Dead King Hamlet's words haunted my thoughts as I sifted through my scribblings. What a tale specters could unfold, if *they* were able to speak. The secrets of the dead, the *undiscovered country*, a domain unknown and forbidden to the living. Such knowledge any sane man would shun; yet, I had an unwholesome desire to possess it, and it had an unwholesome longing to possess me.

I'd hoped Sebastian Borchett would have answers. In the court records, he ranted to judges and doctors—there I noticed a theme. In his trial, he'd claimed that he'd heard voices from the netherworld, and it was those voices that had driven him to murder and mutilate his victims, killing ten people in all. As a defense, Sebastian professed he'd merely exacted retribution for the dead. He avenged those who had

been forgotten by the living. This, he claimed, made him innocent.

Insanity was the final verdict.

Sitting in my apartment, I jotted notes, viewing a mosaic of notions that refused to form a cohesive image. Cool May air pressed against me. The madman had been right on one count: I see *them*, the dead. As of late, they always lurked at the edge of sight—ethereal and shifting in form, vanishing under direct gaze. I also heard their whisperings, awake and in my dreams. They were always there, as was Sebastian in my dreams.

Having peered beneath the veil of reality quickened me against the thousand shocks of the flesh. But there are some things so haunting they cannot be ignored. Sometimes, I spied a familiar shape, a visage I recognized. Those shadows were the most bone chilling. A past returned to exact revenge.

The cause of my spectral vision I did not know. None of the loathsome tomes I'd studied made mention of second-sight, phantasms, or even a netherworld. Some souls seemed to exist between worlds. Others were yanked back from the swells of oblivion. Among these spirits, I sensed a profound blackness hiding beneath the folds of perception. It was a thing in itself, searching, wanting, consuming. Somehow it pushed the apparitions forward into the visible realm. Yet, time and sensation made me certain of one thing. This uncanny perception was not similar to peering through a microscope or telescope, where I would be the lone spectator. The otherworldly gaze of spirits focused on me as well.

The telephone jangled. The late hour caused me to worry—foreboding news traveled in the depths of the night.

As I removed the earpiece from the hook, I watched the headlights of automobiles rumbling along Broadway—ma-

chines forever in motion. Through the half-opened window of my third-story perch, the avenue resembled a river of glowing lights.

Lifting the telephone base to my mouth, I said, "Hello?" ". . . r . . . so . . ." came the reply, muffled and scratchy.

"Hello?" I repeated. "This is Rudolph Pearson."

". . . ours . . . taken . . ." The words faded and returned. The voice was soft, accompanied by a ragged, breathless rattle with each syllable. The eerie tone sent gooseflesh spilling across my skin.

Ominous thoughts flooded my head. The chill air grew dense, giving shape to my every breath. As the haunting voice continued, my gaze lifted to the upper half of the window. There I saw my reflection, holding the telephone. Behind me stood someone else.

I remained motionless, as still as a stone. The figure over my shoulder shifted, and I recognized the face. This one lacked the malign and hateful gape of the others I occasionally glimpsed. It possessed a gentle countenance. Most strikingly, it didn't vanish when I focused on it. The reflection was that of Louis Merritt.

Then others appeared. Spiteful. Glaring. Their shapes echoed in the window. Myriad eyes glowered at me; lips formed unspoken words. The receiver snapped sharply and the line fell silent. Simultaneously, the host of apparitions vanished.

I set down the telephone, surveying the room. I was alone, or so my eyes told me. I was comforted by my solitude only for a second, when it occurred to me. I had met Louis Merritt before, and now he'd appeared to me like the others.

The telephone clanged again. Without thought, I snatched it up as though controlled by some unseen force.

"Rudolph?" came a gentle voice.

I sucked a lungful of air, relaxing. After a few hurried heartbeats I regained my composure. “Jordan,” I said. “Is something wrong?”

“Did you ring me a moment ago?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “The operator must have made a mistake.”

“What’s wrong, Rudolph? And don’t try to pawn a lie. I can hear it in your voice.”

I inhaled deeply, exhaling slowly. “I’m worried something terrible is occurring—or has occurred. And I have no evidence other than an intuition.”

Over the last month I’d avoided mentioning my affliction to Jordan. While I knew she’d believe me, I feared revealing it might somehow transmit the curse. Besides, she’d already seen too much of my world. I’d not give shape to more horrors.

“What is happening?” she said anxiously.

“I’m not sure, but I’ll sort it out. Though to do that I must go to Ward’s Island tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes,” I said. “I can’t explain it—”

“I know . . . I know. I remember the last time you had one of these feelings,” she said. And then added without hesitation, “How can I help?”

With the bridge to Ward’s Island closed for construction, Jordan’s Studebaker was of no use. “You can’t. I need to go to Ward’s Island and the bridge is closed.”

The line buzzed for a moment. “Meet me at Jack Penley’s Marina in Sutton Place. Its on the East River docks.”

This unlikely answer stymied me. “How—”

“I expect details on the way to the island—and, I am going.”

I started to protest, but an abrupt *click* promptly ended it.



By the time I stepped from the taxicab at Penley's Marina, part of the enigma had solidified. Like the famous 1915 cover of *Puck* magazine, where the image of a young woman could be resolved into that of an old woman simply through perception, I had been overlooking the phantoms patrolling the world. Slowly, my arcane readings had altered my perception, and the invisible had become visible. The spirits had always been there, I had never seen them. But this epiphany made my dreams of Sebastian all the more worrisome because something else was at work there.

I paid the cabbie, and turned to find Jordan before me. I started. "Make noise when you approach someone," I said.

A delicate smile played on her lips. "It'd make no difference. You're as jumpy as a cat." She hitched a thumb toward the dock. "Jack is ready when you are."

"The island has a hospital for the insane," I said. "It isn't safe—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," she snapped, pointing a finger at me. "I have enough of that already. I don't expect it from you."

My concerns were for her, not the frailty of a gender. I had every faith in her as a person.

"Assuming my fragile mind will survive, explain to me what's going on." She walked toward the boat slip.

"What I'm doing is . . . unusual," I muttered.

"Not from my perspective," she replied, striding up the gangway. On deck, she faced the bridge, cupped her hands, and called, "Let's go!"

The engines rumbled, shaking the vessel.

In the past, she'd told me tales of appropriating boats to avoid using ferries. One time she'd cruised to Staten Island, exploring an old Dutch iron mine, using John Astor's yacht.

No doubt she was brazen. And very strong willed.

As we glided up the East River, a horned moon rose high in the black vault above. The air grew chill—a seemingly perfect stage for the play about to unfold.

“What happens when we get there?” Jordan asked.

We stepped along the rail to the bow. The yacht sliced through the rough waters with a slight bounce.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “And I don’t think you can help me once we’re there.”

Her dark eyes shone in the moonlight. For a long moment she studied me. “Like the kings in the books you so adore, you try to build walls around yourself. I can see the anguish in your eyes. Let me in. Let me help.”

Her words pierced my heart. All my life I’d believed I was unseen, slipping past the world unnoticed. To learn I was so obvious, so clear, was disturbing.

“I’ll trade you a secret for a secret,” she said playfully.

“A fair offer,” I said, against my better judgment. “Why do you hide your New Jersey accent?”

Her lips rounded into a pout. “The gloves are off then,” she said. “We have a deal.” Abruptly, she spit in her hand and extended it.

“Oh . . .,” I said, attempting to hide my shock.

“*Shake*,” she groused.

I gripped her hand, feeling its warmth and softness, and I wondered why someone so gentle had been born into such a hurtful world.

“I’m from Hoboken,” she said. “My family owns a ball bearing factory. Well-off by most standards. I figured if no one knew I was from Jersey, no one would connect me with them, and I’d get no ‘favors.’” She paused a moment, then added in a thick Jersey accent, “‘Sides, no one takes an anthropologist from Jersey seriously. Know-what-I-mean?”

Laughter erupted from me. It was the first time in years I laughed, honestly laughed. The act felt alien, but it also felt good. She waited, eyes gleaming, face bright. When I'd calmed, she asked her question. "Last year, in my cellar, when that giant hound appeared, you spoke words and drew a pattern in the air. Was that magic? I mean, *real* magic?"

"It's not magic at all," I started, closing my eyes in concentration. "The words acted like incantations, but they are merely vibrations, sounds that reshape the reality we see." My mind glided over the concepts searching for edges to grasp. Human language did not convey the notions that formed the eldritch ideas. At best, I could only offer analogies.

"Some *incantations* require physical gestures, another means of producing vibrations. I suspect the notion of witchcraft and sorcery as we know it is derived from this. In the end, it is a reshaping of the energies that bind the universe, preventing it from collapsing into chaos. Sometimes the energies combine, other times they oppose. It's not magic."

As I spoke, she'd shifted opposite of me, resting on what I took to be a capstan. The wind tugged at her short hair, brushing it around her cheeks. "That's it?" she asked. "That's a gloss, not an answer."

"So was yours," I said.

She straightened her shoulders, crossing her arms. "I've breached one wall," she said smugly. "So why are we going to Ward's Island in the middle of the night?"

"What do you know about Ward's Island?" I asked.

"Hospital for the Insane. Potter's field. Poor place for a picnic." She leaned against a rail, gazing at the river. "In the eighteen-hundreds, nearly one-hundred thousand bodies were moved to the island to make space on Manhattan for new buildings. Long before that the Lenape Indians believed it to be haunted by dark spirits."

Her knowledge of the city was encyclopedic. But the mention of the spirits staggered me. I'd never looked toward native legends for answers.

"I believe something foul is taking place on the island," I said. "But telling you is like revealing a stage magician's trick. Once you've seen the truth, the illusion is gone. You never see the trick the same way again—or in this case, the world." I placed my hands on her shoulders. "I don't want that to happen. So I need you to promise to stay on the boat."

A moment passed before she responded. "I'll keep that promise—twenty minutes. After that, I'm following you. Jack needs the boat back by morning, and I don't want to leave you behind."

"All right." I suspected that would be the best bargain I could achieve. She was very determined. "Also, I need to borrow your makeup compact," I said.



Once the yacht eased into the slip, I stepped onto the concrete pad, moving to the gravel path. There, I opened the compact, using the mirror as a guide.

Slowly I panned the mirror from one side to the next, keeping it level to avoid reflecting the baleful moonlight. If I were correct, reflections in glass focused my perception, aiding me to see what was already there.

My hopes rallied when the glass revealed only darkness. I came here under dire assumptions, and I'd rejoiced to learn they were nothing more than my fancy. Then, just as I turned, a pale figure shone in the looking glass.

My chest tightened, icy spiders dashed across my body. A lone man, gaunt and gray, stood some distance behind me, his head lowered with eyes—hollow eyes—peering at me.

I gripped the mirror with my other hand, a feeble

attempt to steady it. He said not a word. Still, I sensed his malevolence.

An ill breeze puffed across the path. I twisted my hand, scanning the night. Others appeared. Each stood as though rooted to the earth. Each held the same countenance. Their number I dared not guess. It was far more than I'd ever witnessed. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, filling every inch of space.

Frantically I spun about, turning in circles, viewing a netherworld of countless ghosts in every direction. Thousands gaped at me with burning spite. Their voices washed at the edge of my mind like waves on a shore. I continued to twirl, growing dizzy. I could not stop the motion.

Literally, from nowhere appeared Louis Merrit, and I halted. He stood several feet away on the path.

"I wouldn't do that," he said, a faint smile edging onto his face. "Ain't nothing good gonna come of it."

"Are you alive?" I asked, looking directly at him.

"You see me, don't you?" His smooth, Southern drawl shaped the words.

I raised the mirror to peek behind me.

"Don't do that," he warned. "No need to go looking at them. You know they're here. That's good enough."

"They have always been here," I said. "They want to be seen."

Louis nodded. "You need to get up there," he said, lifting an arm, pointing in the direction of the hospital. "*He* is there."

Without asking, I understood. *He* was the one responsible for my dreams—*he* had been haunting me, dogging me for the last sixteen months. Somehow I'd appeared in his looking glass.

Resisting temptation, I pressed the mirror against my

leg, and moved toward the hospital. A light flickered in that direction.

As I neared the front of the hospital, I stepped from the path, moving through the gloom into a strangle of bushes. I hunkered behind them, watching through the gaps at the growing blaze.

Yellow flames twisted and reached at the heavens. A group of five robed figures stood motionless, chanting. The air blew on the flames, exciting them.

The spectacle was a riddle. It was a ceremony, but its purpose eluded to me. A cold longing welled inside me, a desire to glance at the mirror, see the malevolent visages. I struggled against the urge.

“*They* want more than to be seen,” said Louis.

His pronouncement nearly sent me fleeing from my hiding spot. I turned to find Louis crouched next to me. His smile transformed into a frown.

“They want to *be*,” I replied, comprehending. “They want to return.”

He nodded.

The robed figures continued their rhythmic incantation, words that held no meaning, yet they were familiar, bloated with power. Somewhere inside me I knew the men were beguiling the spirits, inviting them to inhabit their bodies. As the fire blossomed, I occasionally glimpsed a prison uniform beneath a robe when one man or another gestured.

A sixth figure stepped from the shadows, his face shining in the ruddy blaze. Sebastian Borchett—or at least his form. Someone else possessed his body, controlling him.

“Their souls will be pushed out,” Louis said. “For them it don’t matter, I reckon. They were already hollow. What comes after . . .”

Louis didn’t need to finish. I understood what came next.

The dead were everywhere; this was only the first doorway. So many ached to live. The robed figures saw these apparitions without need of a mirror. They listened to ethereal voices, and welcomed their return.

Sebastian stepped forward, raising his arms, uttering malign syllables that sullied the very air he exhaled. Who knew how many inmates he'd sacrificed already, trading their souls for the dead. Even from a distance, I sensed his dark power. How foolish I'd been to think I alone peered beneath the veil of reality. I was a mirror image of the being who possessed Sebastian. In an abominable fashion, we were connected.

The hospital loomed tall in the reddish firelight, as though watching over the ceremony in stony approval. Misshapen shadows pranced along its façade as though they too were alive.

"He intends to take the lives of everyone inside," I said.

"Don't figure they'll be missed much," Louis answered.

A contemptible truth—a truth that made me want to turn away. Instead, I stepped from the bushes.

"I won't allow this," I said. The fear lurking inside me had burned away. I slipped the compact inside my coat.

Sebastian whirled about, eyes wide. Slowly a broad grin appeared. "Professor," he gestured broadly, "you decided to join us."

The robed inmates halted, all turning in unison.

"Stop," I said. "Don't let this happen."

A caustic laugh filled the night. He shot back his head, cackling like an animal baying at the moon.

"Don't do this!" I yelled to the other men.

They stared with empty eyes.

Sebastian focused on me. "You're outnumbered." He raised a hand. "I guess you can't see that," he snickered. "Of course not. You can't even see the greater truth in what I'm

doing. Life is wasted on the ignorant, on those who toil their days away, playing in this charade called *existence*. Those bodies are already husks. Each one empty of real *fire*,” he balled a fist, holding it before him for emphasis. “I’m just filling empty bodies with souls. Old souls.”

“And you’ll dominate them,” I said. “Then they’ll toil under your command.”

He cocked his head, staring in silence, lips pressed into a hard line. Slowly the edges upturned. “Yes. There is a price for a second chance at life,” he sniggered.

Palm open, I waved a hand in a circle before me, uttering a short phrase, focusing my energy.

Quickly Sebastian stepped back. When nothing happened, his face brightened. “Oh, Professor. All that trouble I went to, and it wasn’t worth the effort. It seems I overestimated you. In the end, you are insignificant.”

He shoved a hand into the raging fire, pointing the other at me. “Don’t worry. I’ll reunite you with your friends.” His visage sharpened. “Remember their cries? Their pleas? *They* remember you.”

His eyes narrowed. He chanted a phrase that resonated in the air. A spout of searing flames streamed from his splayed fingers, engulfing me. It felt as though the universe burned. The roaring fire deafened, blazing light blinded. A line from Dante’s *Inferno* rushed to the forefront of my thoughts. *They unto vengeance run as unto wrath*. Unlike Ulysses and Diomedes, the pair imprisoned in Hell’s flames, my prison faded.

Astonished, Sebastian huffed. His visage reddened with rage and disbelief. In his arrogance, Sebastian mistook my invocation as a blunder. Like a fetid odor, I’d sensed his power. It radiated. I was no match for it. My only hope was to use it against him, to reflect it back.

When I retrieved the compact from my coat, he must have realized my plan. As I prepared to snap it open, he rushed me—his bulk colliding into me. I toppled backward, hitting the ground.

Like a wild beast, he scrambled back to his feet. A simple knife would have finished me. But that wasn't satisfying. He needed to use a darker craft.

Hastily he commenced another spell, hands spiraling in the air, lips forming wicked sounds.

I raised the compact, snapping it open, leveling the mirror at him.

A spout of red-hot light jetted from the mirror, flames embracing him. For a split-second he remained motionless like a man captured in a painting, reeling backward, but never falling. Then darkness slammed a heavy fist over the scene, taking Sebastian with it, leaving ashes in its wake.

My heart rattled against my ribs, blackness filling my eyes. I stood between time and space in a land of nothingness. I took measured breaths, remaining motionless. It seemed that something slithered through the void, menacing and evil, a devourer of souls. I urged time to pass in a timeless place.

Suddenly, the world exploded into existence. The vast fire lurched and jumped. The robed men scowled. At the edge of my mind, I sensed the entity that had possessed Sebastian. It still lingered in this world, imposing its will. I had only destroyed its vessel.

Then, as if some supernatural lamp had been switched on, the specters that I'd once only seen in reflections appeared. Not all at once—in small numbers, near and distant they resolved.

These were not the dead I'd seen in other reaches of the city. I knew these ghosts haunted the island. Their bodies buried in nameless graves. Old and young, weary and frail,

men and women and children, a host of deceased who had fallen through the cracks of the living world, unseen in both domains.

Some stared at me in contempt, others with expressions that made my insides churn with guilt. I longed to clamp my eyes together, fearing I would see more familiar faces.

Those closest to the robed figures glowed brightly as though agitated, anxious for their opportunity to return to the living world. In a solitary motion, all of the pitiable visages turned at once. The celebrants turned as well. I already knew the cause.

Through the spectral forms swarming the island, I saw a light bobbing in the distance, approaching by the gravel path. Although I could not discern the form, I knew it was Jordan.

Driven by an unseen demon, the five men shrieked and charged toward her, robes flapping as they moved.

I dashed after them, calling to Jordan. "Run! Run away!"

She ignored my pleas. Instead, she held the lamp high, focused on the charging men, remaining still as though bracing for the impact. It seemed she'd lost all her wits.

I struggled to gain ground, feeling a deathly chill with each ethereal figure I passed through. No space on the island remained unoccupied.

One of the robed men grunted and jerked backward, arms flailing as he collapsed on the ground. Jordan's lamp shifted briefly, and I heard another of the men cry out, although none fell this time. They would descend upon her, before I could reach them. Nonetheless, I steamed onward.

The inmates were several strides ahead when their pace slowed. It was as though they were running into deepening water, each step becoming a hindrance to their progress.

In the glow of the moonlight, I watched as the shimmering apparitions gathered around them, clawing at them, tugging and pulling, grasping from the netherworld into the living world.

Soon the mass of phantasmal figures swallowed the five men. They lurched and wailed, striking at their ghostly captors. I continued my pace, rushing past them, keeping my eyes locked on Jordan.

She watched, face pale with fright. Sickness swelled in my stomach, dreading the thought that she now shared my *vision*.

“Don’t look,” I said, as I reached her. I grabbed her shoulders. “Turn away.”

She jumped at my touch, dropping the lamp she carried.

“Rudolph!”

“Look at me,” I said with as much force as I could muster between gasps.

Ignoring my words, she stared at the path. “What is happening? Are there ropes or something pulling those men backward?”

I thought about her words. Delight overwhelmed me. She only saw the five inmates. “Yes,” I answered promptly. “They are inmates from Blackwell’s who were attempting to escape.”

Something *thumped* on the ground. I glanced to see it was a fist-sized rock.

“You were throwing rocks?” I said, amazed.

“Yes,” she said, pulling away. “And you are lying. Do the guards build bonfires before capturing prisoners dressed in robes? Perhaps they have a party before the event?”

“It does seem a stretch,” I said. “Either way, I’m certain the inmates won’t be leaving tonight. However, we should.”

With a bit of urging, we marched to the yacht. The moonlight illuminated the path before us. In her world we walked alone. In my world, a legion of spirits watched us depart—a journey the unseen could never take.

CASE FIVE

HAUNTED HORROR

IN THE DEAD OF December, I found myself holed-up in my office at Columbia University. I'd just finished the final grading for the semester, and had turned to the book Jordan gifted to me several months earlier. Night had placed its hand on the city's shoulder as I finished the last page. To my horror, I had just read *A Princess of Mars*, a wondrous work of pulp, and I had enjoyed it. Even though there was not another soul in the building, I locked it away in a drawer. Guilt gnawed at me over the pleasure I'd discovered. This was a secret that must remain buried.

With my secret secured, I shrugged on my overcoat, slipped on my galoshes, and pulled on a pair of leather gloves. After locking my office, I tromped down the stairwell to the exit. Wind rushed to greet me as I stepped outside. Bloated, gray clouds obscured the night sky, while freezing gusts whipped at my overcoat. The lush grass that carpeted the campus in the summer was now a lonesome arctic landscape. Hurriedly I plodded at a diagonal between the Buell and Kent buildings, heading

toward 116th Street. I dreaded the walk to my apartment.

At seeing the snow covering Low Plaza, I remembered Jordan from the previous year. She stood in a silent snowfall, face turned to the heavens, waiting for snowflakes to melt on her tongue.

I'd progressed halfway across the campus when a shadow borne by the storm passed over me. Immediately, I sensed it. Halting, I listened to the huffing wind and scratching snow. I lifted my head, searching for a shape drifting in the sky. But a curtain of white limited visibility to mere feet.

Then my curiosity took hold. It didn't seem possible for a shadow to pass over me in the thick gloom, unless it wasn't a shadow but a living darkness, visible only to my second-sight. Since the discovery of my ghastly ability, I'd learned to control it, to block out the apparitions. But I knew that some entities could push through reality, appearing visible to all. This one was in the process of crossing that threshold. The wind nipped, reminding me to ponder puzzles in a warmer locale.

I started forward, and as I did, a screeching sliced through the night. Leaning back, I glimpsed the creature I had sensed. It was sheathed in an unnatural blackness, hiding any real details, leaving only the silhouette against the clouds. Vast wings flapped, seemingly changing with each stroke. They protruded from a serpent-like form which effortlessly swam through the storm. My thoughts jumped to the idea of a dragon—which was ludicrous. Yet, it glided in a circle above just like the legendary monster, moving with and against the bitter wind, as though preparing to strike its prey.

Again I turned, facing the Kent building with its four fluted columns anchored in banks of snow, its high-arched windows dark and empty. The building was my closest retreat. However, the doors would be locked this late, and while

I might enter through a window, their two-story height made it just as easy for anything else to follow.

Another screech carried through the wind. A twisting blackness glided across the snow, seeming to sprout arms as it went. Something monstrous surveyed me.

I started toward the Philosophy building from which I came. Pale sheets of snow hung in the caterwauling wind, as though attempting to hide the structure. Something beyond the tempest's touch seized me, chilling bone and soul. The creature approached. I felt it descending in an ever-shrinking spiral.

Following my path through the nine inches of snow, I trudged ahead. Yelling was pointless. Any calls would be swallowed by the keening storm, and it was doubtful there was even anyone to hear them.

Without warning, the snow-quilted earth beneath my feet jerked, sending me sprawling face first into the snow. I spit out a mouthful of the cold, and looked over my shoulder.

An impossible form stood behind me. Its shape twisting and shifting, wings melting into muscle and flesh, arms slithering outward. The former dragon had now transmogrified into an entirely different creature. It towered in the blasting winds, an enormous, protruding head with long tentacles reaching from the sides of its mouth, exploring the space before it, surrounding a vicious mouth, round and crowded with fearsome teeth. It possessed two large eyes, where expected, and five smaller eyes, like those of a spider's, each scattered across the center of its vast forehead. They glistened, falling snow reflecting in them.

The long, snake-like body continued to shrivel, as though being absorbed by the massive torso. The creature easily towered twice my height. As it reshaped, it sat on its massive haunches, rippling with muscles. Two forearms, lengthy and

ending with hateful claws, pressed into the snow. And most astonishingly, the midnight black color swirled, becoming a translucent, milky white as though it were camouflaging itself.

I don't know how long I watched with perverse fascination. It seemed the creature held me spellbound. I had to forcibly pull my attention away from the grotesque sight. I pushed to my feet, and ran for the Philosophy building—the irony of fleeing to the refuge of philosophy did not escape me.

Once more it issued an unwholesome cry, a sound so inhuman, so unnatural that its blackness seeped into the marrow of my bones.

I bounded up the stairs, digging my keys from a pocket. Fortunately, I had a key-slip over the building key, so I quickly selected it from the bundle. In a flow of motions, I unlocked the door, slipped inside, and slammed it closed behind me. My ears thrummed from my hammering heart. I exhaled long cold breaths in exchange for warm air. And from the shadows, I watched the pallid horror trundle forward.

Given its size, the wood frame doors and glass windows offered little hope of holding it at bay. “A Tyrant’s spell has bound me, and still I cannot go . . .” I muttered the lines of a poem to myself. Given a choice, I would have fled—a pointless act. I knew there was no escaping this abomination. No matter where I chose to hide, it would follow, altering its shape as it went.

Resolutely, I heaved open the door and commenced chanting. A dark energy ebbed inside me, fueled from memories as black as coal, smoldering with regret and guilt and pain. Power flowed from my hand as I carved a burning sigil into the air. The same barrier of protection I’d used against the time-stalking hound now floated before me. Over the

months, I'd become much more practiced, and my knowledge of arcane mysteries had grown.

The pattern shimmered with a red hue. Through it I spied the approaching beast. The sigil burned all the brighter as it neared. Halting, the pallid beast screeched at the heartless heavens. A roar of pure rage sent me back a step. The barrier continued to glow.

Eddies of snow whirled through the open doorway. I edged back farther, pushing the door closed.

"You are only prolonging your fate," a hushed voice said.

I spun, scanning the darkened foyer for its source. Several paces from me, I discerned a shadow within the shadows, a deeper darkness with a human form. I realized the voice was in my head. No one had spoken. Even so, I recognized it. Or perhaps I recognized its source.

"Is that guilt I sense?" the shadow asked. "You should rejoice in Sebastian Corbett's death. He was a murderer."

I glanced at the beast. It stalked back and forth, eyeing the sigil, waiting for it to disappear.

"I intended to destroy you," I said.

"So I gathered." The shadow glided closer to the entrance way, rippling over the pillars that stood inside the foyer. "It seems you failed, only adding to your burden. How many men have you killed, Professor? How many were in your company?"

A barren landscape flicked through my mind. An earth pocked with great craters, covered in mud and dead bodies. I'd left graduate school to join the army. My lanky frame fought to keep me out, but persistence and bribery won the battle. I'd been determined to be a part of the war to end all wars. It seemed a worthy cause. The last, great war ever to be fought. I believed in it.

Wind rattled the windows and doors as though attempting to pry them open with icy fingers. I pulled my mind back to the moment.

“Why am I such a threat?” I asked.

A subtle laugh came in reply. “You are not a threat,” the shadow said. “You’re an annoyance.”

I nodded toward the prowling beast outside. “I wonder what you summon for those who anger you.” The sigil continued to burn in the frigid air.

“You could have saved them,” he said. “You could have warned them. Instead, you let them die. How many men, Professor? You let them be slaughtered. And not a peep from you. Is that why you fear the creatures that lurk beneath the city?”

I felt his ghostly presence inside my head, although the purpose eluded me. Like a deck of cards, he was flipping through my memories, uncovering my wretched secrets. One rainy night in 1917, after a three-day artillery barrage had ceased, my company was ordered to charge the enemy. Through the night we ran, our spirits waning, our bayonets gleaming. As we charged the German entrenchments, machineguns ripped through the night. Muzzles flashed from one end of the enemy line to the other. Men cried out. The charge continued. Rain drizzled down like countless angels weeping. That was before I’d learned there was nothing above and nothing below. Only monsters in between.

My eyes locked on the sigil, its fiery form wavering. “No!” I exclaimed, forcing him from my mind. “I remember.”

“No, you try to forget,” said the shadow. “But what you did remains a black stain on your heart.” Delight danced upon his words.

“Not true,” I replied softly. Now I let the memory unfurl in my mind. “We were in No Man’s land when the machine-

guns started. It was a battle of attrition between bullets and human lives—one always runs out before the other. My company continued. The men fell by the score, screaming, bleeding, dying, and we continued. The machineguns fire at ankle height.” I swallowed hard as I spoke the sour words. “That way they saw down the men.

“There, where even the moon dared not venture, we ran away. A barren, scarred ground, where craters covered the earth. Everyone took cover in the depth of a hole, ducking below the line of machinegun fire. In the darkness we listened. The clatter of guns went for an eternity. The craters were the only safe place. But when I scurried about my earthen hovel, I found I was alone. Up above, I heard the calls of other men. Henry Russell and Andrew Crawford, both of their voices I still hear in my sleep, calling to me.” I paused, listening to the wailing wind, my eyes on some distant land.

“They’re here, you know,” the phantom said. “You block them from your sight. Yet, they wait for you.” He gestured with a shadow hand. “Look at them.”

I clenched my eyes shut. Their visages would never leave my memory, and I couldn’t bear to see them again. “I heard the whistles,” I continued. “The shrill calls sounding over No Man’s Land. The Germans were organizing for a counter-attack.”

The phantom figure snickered. “You did nothing. You are weak.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “I was weak. I heard them coming and I didn’t yell out a warning. Instead, I cowered against the muddy earth, pretending I was dead . . . listening to the screams of my friends.” My blood ran as cold as the ice lacing the windows.

“You see, you have no strength, Professor. Surrender. Lower the impotent protection outside and embrace the

emptiness that exists beyond life. You'll feel no pain there."

In the shadows, I gazed at the dark figure, allowing my second-sight to pull him forth. He struggled against my will. Now *I* smiled. "I am weak," I said flatly. "And my heart is stained. And in my soul is a blackness so profound." I raised a gloved hand. "Can you feel it?" I asked, closing my fist, sending forth my anger as a dark energy.

The phantom gasped. He tried to pull away, but I held. In my hand, I sensed a heart pulsing rapidly. With one squeeze, I could extinguish his life force.

Outside the beast howled with fury. It lurched from side to side, pressing against the barrier. A weariness settled over me.

"You fear ghosts, Professor. You won't kill me."

Like smoke dissolving, his shadowy form began to fade. I clung to his essence, holding him here. At that moment, I briefly glimpsed into his mind. His corporeal form existed in this world, nearby. He was human.

Gathering my will, I skimmed through his thoughts as he'd done mine. Instead of easily thumbing memories like cards in a catalog, each recollection I touched upon was a struggle. In defense against my intrusion, he'd erected a powerful rampart that clouded my reason with my every effort. I pushed on, mustering my anger and transforming it into energy. As I did so, he worked to slip from my control.

Knowing this would be my last chance, I surged into his consciousness. The world exploded, folding upon itself, collapsing as he horridly shoved his thoughts and memories into deeper reaches of his mind. Pain throbbed in my skull, increasing like a building pressure. But even as he worked to obscure his inner thought, a horrifying vista still remained before me. Jumbled in pieces like a jigsaw puzzle, I scoured an endless number of fragments until I came upon one that

halted me. My first reaction was to deny it, cast it aside as a trick. The truth in it, the cold truth it possessed did not allow that. At the same moment, there was a wickedness, a terrifying inevitability.

Like a steam boiler exploding, I was cast out of his mind. The dark world resolved before me, except the shadowy shape was now gone.

I spun toward the doors. Panic seized me when I saw the sigil no longer burned. The beast clawed its way up the stairs, screeching as it came.

Good sense told me to run. Unbidden, I shuffled back, preparing to flee. But my actions were dampened by a re-kindling anger. Like those who stayed at a distance from the battlefield and blathered about the Great War and the glorious struggle, the phantom figure used others to do his bidding, only ever risking a shadowy image of himself. I had been one of those puppets, and while playing their game, I'd sacrificed my soul, and let many others die to save myself. Nobility didn't dwell in those actions. Nor did it touch upon the Great War. That meant there was no hope of redemption. Fighting was my only option.

With a crash of wood and glass, the beast burst through the set of doors of the Philosophy building. Splinters and shards flew threw the air, trailing the cold breath of the storm. Abruptly, the creature came to a halt as it collided with one of the great pillars standing in the foyer. For a moment, I thought the vast marble column would collapse, or a tiny crack would snake through it as it began to crumble. This didn't happen. The beast slammed into it, toppling over. It snapped viciously, feverishly clawing at stone to right itself.

I dashed out the new opening, into the wind-blown night. With each step, I intoned acrid words and bitter syllables. When I reached a few hundred paces, I had completed. Turn-

ing, I spotted the pallid beast hulking down the snow-covered stairs of the building it had partially destroyed.

One finger at a time, I pulled off my gloves. The action brought a smile to my face. I was far from a pugilist, but the metaphor emboldened me.

Each stride quickened as the beast approached. The slow gait became a stampeding charge. Tentacles twitched and coiled around its head. Frightful teeth shined in a rictus of delight.

Even at this distance, I felt its darkness. I steeled myself, tensing my muscles, preparing. Sheets of white blew into the night, creating pale shrouds that seemingly stretched over the city.

I now muttered a different incantation:

*Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me;
I will not, cannot go.*

Out of the white the beast erupted, snapping and striking at me. A powerful forearm cut through the air with razor-like claws. With one fell motion, I was to be split into halves. When this didn't happen, a furious wail spilled from my foe.

Its brutal claw passed through the spot where the beast *thought* I stood. While in the mind of my phantom pursuer, I had appropriated a trifling of secrets. Being inexperienced, the best I could manage was hiding my true self, and producing a likeness—a poor one at that—a stone's throw away. Still, that was far enough to gain me the extra time I needed.

Refocusing my mind, the phantasmal doppelganger vanished. I felt the black eyes settle on me. Miniature whirl-

winds spiraled around me, causing my overcoat to flap at my ankles. In my mind's eye, I reached into the fabric of reality, the great structure that held chaos at bay, and I clasped at a small bit.

The beast spun, crunching in the snow. My minor trick only strengthened its ire. It didn't have to move far to be within reach.

I held my hands before me as though holding a ball. The creature's hideous maw hung above my head, slathering excretions upon me. This time it intended to remove my head.

It lunged. As it did so, I called into being a brilliant light. The radiance shot from my hands in all directions, burning the darkness that lurked in the world. Like a flashbulb *pop-ping*, the night illuminated. Spears of light flew outward in all directions. Those that hit the creature pushed through it, incinerating it as they went. In that portion of a second, the campus glowed. And in that same instant, the beast turned to blackened ash.

Wind gusted, blowing snow and ash away, as though conspiring to hide the horrors that prowled the world.

Alone, I stood in the blustering storm. Frigid kisses of snow upon my cheeks. Moments passed, and I remembered Jordan frolicking in the snow, arms extended like a windmill as she spun. Her bright eyes and melodious laugh making the cold night beautiful. And I knew, *I could not go*.

CASE SIX

HARAMI

I'D FLED TO MOROCCO out of cowardice. A hope to escape my past, and the fears that had stolen my life. I pushed aside everything that I'd experienced over the last few years, trying to regain the world lost to me.

But try as I might, I could not soothe my conscience over my rash decision. I'd left no word of my departure. It was winter break at the university, so at the last minute I hunted down Alton Warner, a professor of history who'd been planning a sojourn to the far side of the world. Being one of the "pills"—a moniker the students used—stiffer than I, my company was warmly welcomed.

However, I'd felt it from the moment we'd arrived in Morocco—that unsettling feeling I sometimes had. A feeling I dared not mention to Alton. So after a day of prowling the city, it was a relief to finally return to our room. The heat of Rabat and the endless trudging through the twisting and confusing streets of the medina had conspired to give me an unbearable headache. Even the last few stairs to our second floor room had

become an arduous labor that I only wished would end.

“I certainly hope this chest is worth the sweltering heat and the throngs we had to endure in order to get it,” I complained to Alton. “I very much would have preferred a hotel outside the medina, in any one of the newer French quarters. At least they have private baths and glass windows!”

It seemed unimaginable to me, even in 1926, that there was a place in the world without indoor plumbing. But then I remembered the tenements of New York City, and saw little difference between this ancient city and the most modern.

Asim was our dragoman while we were in Rabat. He’d been referred by the French Embassy, and had proven to be reliable, and remarkably quiet. While I certainly preferred these attributes in a guide and translator, I knew that his profits suffered. For a dragoman to turn a good profit, he needed to always be suggesting shops and merchants who bribed him to bring tourists to their businesses.

He was a young boy, probably in his mid-teens, a native Moroccan, with hawkish features, and a humble disposition.

“Rudolph,” Alton said sternly, although I heard the fatigue in his voice. “You have scolded me since the sun rose. I have certainly overpaid the price for your discomfort.”

As we mounted the top of the stairs, Alton continued to dab at his sweaty pate with a handkerchief. He was a tall man, taller than I, and lean. In New York I never saw him without a coat, tie and often a vest, even during the summer months; and never did I see him perspire. Here he wore only a white cotton shirt and trousers, and he had not stopped sweating from the moment we set foot outside this morning. Hearing the weariness in his voice, and seeing him in such an unusual manner did inspire pity for my ruthless behavior. I had been complaining most of the morning.

“And I do appreciate your effort to include me on your *expedition*,” I said in a softer tone. “I’ve just let this climate get the best of me. But now that we have your chest, it won’t be long before we are relaxing in Athens.”

We had planned a summer trip to Greece, but Alton had convinced me to layover in Rabat so he could acquire a chest from one of his contacts.

Asim hurried ahead of us down the hall to unlock our room, his dirty-white *gandouras* waving behind him.

“The amenities in Athens will certainly be more conducive to relaxation,” Alton said.

As we approached the door to our room, I noticed at the end of the hall a large, rather extraordinary looking feline perched upon the windowsill. It was stark white, and its jade green eyes peered at us with seeming interest.

I tried to imagine how an animal, bearing such an abundant coat could endure the heat. I would expect it to be napping in the shade in one of the city’s cooler spots. Outside the medina, literal oases flourished on nearly every other block. It is there where a cat should be lounging away the midday heat—as most of the city’s denizens did.

Once I made direct eye contact with the animal, it stood and gracefully hopped from the sill. I assumed that somewhere beneath the window there was a ledge. For even though I considered cats talented acrobats, I could not fathom one leaping from a second story window to the street below and surviving.

“Please, please,” Asim said, holding open the door to our room and ushering us inside. “It is cooler inside. There is a breeze from the ocean this time of day, and the room is high enough to capture it.”

Alton was the first into the room, lugging with him the ornate brass chest that apparently had some significant value

to both his research and Columbia's museum. Although he hadn't opened it at the shop where it was being held, I could tell from his stiff back and awkward motions that it was heavy.

As I passed through the doorway, Asim closed it, following on my heels.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Alton. What in the blue blazes is in that chest?"

"I wondered how long it would take you," he said, lowering the chest next to his bed on top of a lovely Moroccan carpet.

Although the place in which we were lodging bore the name of "hotel," it most certainly wasn't. In reality, it was the home of a former wealthy Moroccan who offered us a good price. With some clever remodeling, the lavish abode had been converted into a "hotel." Instead of glass windows, it had beautifully carved lattice-worked shutters that allowed the ocean breezes to pass through, just as Asim had suggested. But the *meshrubeyeh*, as the ornate carvings were called, did provide the function of blinds, blocking much of the sunlight during the day.

"It is said to be the remains of a sorcerer," Alton announced.

"You mean you're carrying about the bones of a dead man?" I asked, astonished.

Alton laughed as he poured water from a pitcher into a bowl and began washing. "More like the dust of a dead man," he said, splashing water on his face. "I'm certain any remains this small chest contains are dust now."

"I know I keep asking this question, but is this Aswad ibn Fahd on the up and up? Is this chest really Roman? And how can you know the dust inside isn't just . . . dust?"

"As I've told you, Rudolph. Aswad has provided me with

many other artifacts, all valid and valuable. As for the dust, it makes no difference. It is the chest that is important. I can vouch for *its* authenticity.” Alton grabbed a hand towel and patted at his face.

“Now that we have this confounded chest, how long before we take a ship up to Greece?” I asked, dropping into an obscenely padded chair, clearly designed to satisfy Western tastes. Asim, silent as usual, had lowered himself onto a rug at the far end of the room where he sat quietly. Outside I heard the soothing splash of the Moorish fountain in the courtyard.

“Another day or so,” Alton said. “I just need to wire the university to let them know I have acquired it. But for now, I think we’ve earned ourselves a fine dinner and strong drinks.”

“I second that,” I promptly replied. “And I’m certain we can find someplace outside the medina in the newer French quarter.”

“I’m sorry, Rudolph. I invited Aswad to dine with us tonight,” Alton said as he strolled to the window. “So we will be dining here. A traditional Moroccan supper in Aswad’s honor.” With that, Alton opened the window and jumped back with a gasp.

I quickly turned to see what had startled him, as did Asim.

Sitting on the sill of the window was the very same white cat I had spied earlier in the hallway.

I exhaled heavily, relieved to see it was just a cat that had surprised Alton. Since our arrival in Morocco I had been jumpy. With both Spain and France claiming to be protectorates of Morocco, the country had much unrest. In many of the cities, including Rabat, there had been protests by nationalists, with some cases resulting in violence. According

to the French Prefect of Rabat, there was nothing to be concerned about. But this did as much to alleviate my concern as a cold glass of water did to rid one of a headache. Being a Westerner, I felt edgy. So the slightest surprise brought about great distress. Although we hadn't discussed the matter, I believe Alton shared some of my anxieties as well. His reaction to the cat underscored this for me.

When Alton had opened the window, the cat remained for the briefest of moments before jumping from the sill.

With an exaggerated laugh, Alton said, "It looks like I just scared off our company." He leaned out the window, peering below. "It's all right," he called. "It's running along a ledge on the façade." Pulling himself back into the room, he said, "It did give me a good start."

I slouched into the chair. "You're not alone. I can't wait to visit Athens."



I heard Alton and Aswad laughing as I trotted down the stairs to the dining room. It was an expansive room, with a long, yellow citron table and chairs. While the walls were white, they were decorated with ornate Moroccan rugs, as was the floor. Being July, the evening sun was still far above the horizon, shining through the open windows at one end of the room. Upon the table were several plates of food and bread I had no name for, but had grown to enjoy.

"Here is Rudolph," Alton said, his tone quite boisterous from alcohol. I was surprised to see him drinking in the presence of our guest. "Professor Rudolph Pearson, Columbia scholar of Medieval literature," Alton added hyperbolically.

"Greetings, Professor Pearson. I am Aswad ibn Fahd," Aswad said softly, tilting his head toward me. "But please use Aswad. A friend of Alton's is a friend of mine."

A loose fitting, azure *jellabas* covered Aswad's frame. I'd seen Asim in a *jellabas* once, though it was more worse for the wear than Aswad's. Where Asim's cloak bore a rainbow of stripes, Aswad's was a single rich blue, with spectacular embroidery upon it.

The familiar feeling returned. It was like the sensation one gets before a thunderstorm, the smell in the wind, or the static in one's hair if the storm were electrical. This *perception* was still with me, always flitting in the background, buzzing like a tiny insect. Now it filled the air. I could sense it, but I was still unable to identify the source. For an instant, I felt the urge to focus on my second-sight, but I buried the desire. Nothing good led down that path.

My mind was pulled from its musings when for the first time I noticed Asim in the corner of the room, pouring tall glasses of what I assumed to be mint tea.

The youth's head was low, as though paying homage to a higher authority. I'd seen him this way when we'd first hired him. But after a couple days, I managed to get him to relax. Now he'd returned to that respectful manner. He was dressed in a *gandoouras*, except this red tunic was one I had not seen before. I suspected it was the finest selection of his wardrobe. His respectful demeanor, and improved dress made me reappraise the social status of our guest. Alton had never indicated that Aswad might be of high social position, or perhaps even royalty. Now I was beginning to wonder, but I knew it would be impolite to ask.

"Please, everyone sit down. Let's relax and enjoy this wonderful feast," Alton said, gesturing toward the table—another Westernized feature of the house we were staying at.

Aswad nodded in agreement, taking up residence at the head of the table. Asim quickly served the mint tea, and then started offering the dishes of food. Although the table and

chairs were to accommodate Western visitors—many Moroccans I had noticed sat on cushions and pillows on the floor while dining at lower tables—there were no dining utensils. So as Asim humbly presented each dish, we each craned food with our hands onto empty plates.

“Before we stray afar, as we certainly will once Rudolph joins the conversation,” Alton said. “I would like to thank Aswad ibn Fahd for his generous donation to Columbia University, New York City, Columbia University and the scholars of the United States are indebted to you, Aswad. This chest you have provided is in excellent condition, perhaps the best specimen I’ve seen in my entire career. It is priceless.”

Alton and I hoisted our glasses and drank to Aswad.

“Thank you, Alton, Rudolph. But it is my honor to advance the study of world history in whatever humble means possible.”

Once again we raised our glasses, this time Aswad included.

As I sipped the sugary mint tea, I noticed Asim had found a distant corner where he stood in silence. He was near the window at the far end of the room, and the setting sun cast a wan light over his small figure. And for the first time, I noticed the familiar feline, once again perched upon the windowsill. Briefly, I was reminded of Poe’s *Raven*, and once again that sense of the uncanny returned to the forefront of my mind.

“When do you plan to visit the States?” Alton said as he dropped a cinnamon covered orange slice into his mouth.

“I have been planning for many, many years now,” Aswad replied, sharing his attention between the two of us. “But I may be visiting sooner than you think.”

“Posh!” Alton said. “You’ve been threatening me for years.”

“If you wait too long,” I added, “the city will be so overgrown you won’t be able to see anything but skyscrapers.”

“What a sight these buildings must be,” Aswad said. “They remind me of the ancient Roman structures. Grand. Noble. They must be marvels to gaze upon.” Aswad’s eyes seemed to drift as though he were gazing upon those very marvels. Then his eyes focused upon the cat. His countenance hardened, becoming steely cold. “*El-sandouk*, close the shutters.”

Without the slightest hesitation, Asim grabbed the lattice-worked shutters and did as ordered. Unlike the previous times, the white feline remained upon the sill; even with the shutters closed I saw it peeping through the lattice, peering directly at Aswad.

“Ah, forgive me,” Aswad said. “I am superstitious. Cats for me possess the spirits of the dead. But enough foolishness, I have been here for nearly an hour, and yet I’ve not given you the most significant part of my gift.” Aswad reached into a pocket and extracted a key. He turned his attention to Alton, whose eyes were sparkling at the sight of the key. “Certainly you wish to view the contents of the chest?”

“Most assuredly!” Alton exclaimed.

“*Ya walaad hither El-sandouk*,” Aswad said to Asim with a curt tone.

As quickly as before, Asim responded, dashing up the stairs to the second floor.

“I apologize,” Aswad said. “I requested that your drago-man bring us the chest. I *think* in my native tongue and often forget to translate. My deepest apologies. You must think me rude.”

Alton wiped his hands on a cloth, shaking his head emphatically. “Not in the slightest, Aswad. “And when you visit New York, you’ll learn that many languages are spoken there. It is something a New Yorker gets used to.”

A narrow smile crept across Aswad's face. "That is most comforting."

"Tell me about this sorcerer in the box," I interjected.

Now Aswad's gaze glided toward me, carrying with it what I took to be a hint of contempt.

"It would appear that Professor Pearson is a skeptic," Aswad said dryly.

"Don't heed him . . ."

"Curious," I interrupted Alton.

"Rude," Alton muttered.

"There is no place for superstition in your mind?" Aswad asked.

"More than you might suspect."

Sipping at his tea, Aswad seemed to contemplate my words for a moment. Meanwhile, Alton was beginning to stew.

Finally, Aswad chuckled. "But it is just superstition. This man, this sorcerer, was said to be . . . possessed? His life stolen by a demon-thief. All superstition, you see?"

There was more, of that I was certain. Aswad's reluctance to discuss the matter further intrigued me, pulling at the uneasiness that had been growing inside me.

Before I could pursue the matter, Asim came stomping down the stairs, arriving with the chest, which he promptly carried to a spot Alton had cleared on the table.

Aswad offered the brass key to Alton, its polished surface glinting in the fading evening light.

"You must open it, Alton. The honor is yours alone," Aswad pronounced.

Graciously Alton accepted the key and opened the box. When he lifted the lid, all but Aswad stood to see its contents. Even Asim approached to glimpse inside.

As Alton had said, the chest contained a heap of dust.

"Not much to look at," I offered.

Alton shot me a sharp glance, warning me not to rekindle the previous topic.

A soft, and somehow disturbing laugh escaped Aswad. "I hope Professor. Pearson wasn't expecting to find a living being inside. A demon, maybe?"

The remark amused both Alton and Aswad.

I, however, was more concerned with what I could not see than with what I could see. I looked back to the window, noticing the cat had again vanished.



We'd finished dinner amicably, turning the conversation to history and the sights of Morocco. Overall the evening ended better than it had started. By dusk, Aswad was ready to retire, vowing to see us again before we departed.

Alton and I returned to our room.

"Other than your attempt to start a row about the contents of the chest, I think the evening went well," Alton said. "You must understand, Rudolph. Aswad is a spiritual man. He is generous and gentle. It takes time to find these qualities."

I didn't say it, but I did indeed believe it took time to understand Aswad. A long time. Instead, I said, "I understand. I did not mean to offend. I've just been feeling uneasy today, and I was in a mood."

Alton nodded. "Soon we'll be relaxing in Athens." As he spoke, he set the chest on the floor at the head of his bed, placing the key inside a dresser drawer.

Asim returned to his mat in the corner.

Soon the sun had dropped from the sky, replaced by the moon, and accompanied by a gentle evening breeze. Since my bed was the closest to the window, I opened the shutters to let the cool air flow.

In a matter of moments I was in a deep sleep, dream-

ing of things more disturbing than my waking mind could imagine. In my dreams I watched as a horrific being, twisted and gnarled, slowly consumed a living man. I could not hear the cries of the man, and I soon realized that was because the man offered none. He was oblivious to the foul act. He too was in a deep slumber as the loathsome creature tore at his flesh, lifting handfuls to its mouth with repulsive delight. Occasionally the creature glanced toward me, although it made no movement in my direction. Its diabolical visage, the likes I can only describe as demon-like, possessed glowering eyes, burning with hunger and hatred and satisfaction all at once. The gaze forced me to look away.

Then came the pain. First it was nothing more than pin-pricks on my chest. Slowly it increased.

I looked back at the foul thing, watching it consume the man. *Alton*. The demon hungrily gulped Alton's blood, all the while twisting and transforming into something that resembled Alton.

The pain intensified. My breathing became ragged. Then, as though it had been whispered to me, an understanding came. Before me stood a demon, a demon as old as humanity. In my mind I heard a voice whisper, "*Dinriddamu*." I did not understand the word, although I recognized its face. Its poison had sullied countless souls; its taint had infected a world where human ruled over human, where human enslaved human, where human killed human. It was a devourer and thief of humanity. And the greatest irony was that it needed a human vessel to survive. Alton.

Again the pain increased. This time the agony was unbearable, forcing me from my slumber.

I awoke to the moonlit glow of the room. On my chest there was a weight. Not the pain I had previously felt, but the warm weight of a small animal. Sitting there, staring

defiantly into my eyes was the white cat I had seen so many times that day. I could only assume it had slipped in the open window and took up residence upon my chest. But this was no ordinary feline.

In its unrelenting gaze I saw a wisdom, sentience. I knew it was unreasonable, but I believed that the cat had somehow given me that dream. It was a warning, an urging.

It continued to stare at me for some time, until the silence of the night was disturbed by Alton's moaning. The cat gave me one last look as though commanding me, then it pounced through the window.

I pushed myself from my bed, my arms weary and head throbbing as though I had been in a long race. As I stumbled toward Alton, I slowly regained my balance. There I saw him, twisting fitfully. Next to him, on the floor was his prized chest. In the moonlight I could see its metallic glint. I could feel it radiating evil.

Without thinking, I grabbed the chest and carried it to the open window. My mind thundered as though it had been dragged across the folds of history. There was no doubt, no questioning, no second thought. I hurled the box out the window, sending it crashing to the cobblestone courtyard below. It landed with a resounding *crack*, followed by the ring and rattle of metal. I knew the box had been shattered.

The sound roused Alton.

"What is it?" he called groggily. "Who is there?"

"Just me, Alton," I said.

In the glowing light of the moon I saw Alton turn to the side of his bed.

"The box!" he exclaimed. "The box is missing!"

The weariness evaporated from his voice, replaced by panic. In a heartbeat he was on his feet, groping for matches to light a candle.

Knowing he would not understand, I had no intention of explaining my action. I knew Alton would never comprehend my reasoning, and I knew that the lack of understanding would destroy an old friendship. But I had little choice.

“I’m sorry, Alton,” I said. “Your chest—”

“Harami,” Asim interrupted.

“What?” Alton said, turning on the boy. “What did you say?”

“A . . .” Asim paused as though searching for the proper word. “A thief.”

Asim glanced in my direction, and I caught the faint glimmer of a smile. I followed his lead.

“Yes. It was a thief,” I said. “I spotted him just as he was climbing out the window.”

Alton rushed to the window, his motion almost carrying him through the opening.

“No!” he cried, looking down at what I assumed to be the destroyed remains of the chest—*or a demon’s box?*

“It was as Professor Pearson said,” Asim continued, climbing to his feet. “I awoke to see him trying to stop the thief.”

“It is irreplaceable,” Alton uttered pathetically. “Aswad will be beside himself. He’ll never trust in me again.”

I bit back a bitter laugh. I suspected without the chest, Alton, or anyone else would not see much of Aswad. I’m sure there was enough of him infecting humanity already, but at least the bulk of it was lost. Of that I was certain.

Asim approached us, and in him I thought I sensed something different. A trust that hadn’t existed before. For the first time, he now looked me squarely in the eyes, not averting his gaze as a servant did. There was something familiar about his gaze.

“In America you have a better word for such a thief,” he said. “A . . . cat burglar.”

CASE SEVEN

THE MISSING CURIOSITY

WHEN WE ENTERED ALEXANDER'S Antiques and Curiosities, a summer breeze escorted us over the threshold. Detective Matthew Leahy was already waiting. The small shop was overflowing with a worldly assortment of items—no doubt costly, and delicate. This gave Matthew the proverbial appearance of a bull in a china shop, perhaps explaining the anxiety of the shop's only other occupant, and presumably owner.

"Bout time," Matthew said, setting down a miniature oriental vase he'd been scrutinizing. The man behind the counter flinched at the sound.

"Sorry we're late," Jordan announced. "Rudolph's developed an aversion to public transportation. Of all things, I've become his chauffeur."

Matthew arched an eyebrow. "I'd not turn down a ride in that Big Six you own. I'm getting' weary of lumbering 'bout town in my Ford."

The curiosity shop was a sturdy brownstone building located

on Madison Avenue and 159th Street. The neighborhood had expensive tastes, and the wares filling the shop underscored that.

My attention promptly fell to one of the bookshelves, which was stuffed with a wonderful collection of intriguing titles. I quickly navigated through curios from Egypt, China, the Middle East, and Asia occupying the room. Statues, mirrors, trinkets, jewelry, all manner of things seemed to be the stock and trade of the shop. My journey ended at a collection of aged volumes. After stepping through the threshold, I'd been drawn to the books like a moth to flame.

Matthew cleared his throat. "Mr. Mylonas is the fellow I mentioned to you, Rudolph. One of his . . . *things* has gone missing, and he suspects it has been stolen."

"I recall your saying as much," I replied, pulling a text titled *Unspraken Kults* from the shelf.

"That's dandy then," Matthew said gruffly. "Perhaps you should be speakin' with him instead of readin' books."

Over the years I'd let my German slip. Still, I understood enough from skimming the tome that it spoke of things familiar to me. The words repelled me and intrigued me simultaneously. Hurriedly I flipped through the pages, attempting to satisfy my growing, grotesque fascination.

"He's been this way since his vacation," Jordan chimed in. "I think I'll be able to tolerate another month before I have a few sharp words."

I closed the book, and approached the counter. The man behind it had thinning gray-black hair, with a broad forehead, and serious eyes. His round face had sagged from age or worry. As though to compensate, he was clad in a tailored, herringbone suit, with wide shoulders squaring it off. He had a sturdy build, not flabby in the least, and a height that tapered off just below Jordan's respectable elevation.

“Professor Pearson,” he said, extending a hand. “I’m pleased to meet you. Detective Leahy has spoken many good things about you.” A heavy Greek accent carried his words.

His grip was firm. Something I expected from an expert on antiques who catered to the city’s wealthy. I wondered how much he knew about the items in his little shop.

“As I told you before, Rudolph. Mr. Mylonas says something was taken from him, a box of some sort. It appears *some* of his clients pull water in the city, so the police are unofficially involved. A few of the lads at Division thought this one might fit your particular . . . knowledge.”

“So no one’s been gunned down by mobsters, I take it?”

“No,” Matthew snapped. “But someone will be, and my time’s better spent on that.”

Jordan cleared her throat. “See what I mean?”

“Aye,” Matthew said. “He’s a tad on the smart side today.” Matthew turned to Alexander. “Either way, Mr. Mylonas, if anyone in the bloomin’ city can find whatever-it-is you’re missin’, Rudy here can do it.”

“Rudolph,” I corrected. He knew I disliked that abbreviated moniker.

“*Rudolph*,” he said mockingly. “I stand corrected. Now if you’ll excuse me.” He tipped his hat to Jordan. “I have mobsters to gather up.” With that, Matthew strolled through the doorway.

“Price is not a question,” Alexander started. “Only secrecy—privacy. The item was not mine. It belongs to a client’s collection.”

“A client with clout,” I said.

Alexander nodded anxiously. “Yes-yes. He does not like talk. Uh, publicity. I am acting as his agent. But he does know many people in city government.”

I lowered the *Unsproken Kults* on the countertop. “What

is the price of this book?"

Wide eyed, Alexander promptly said, "Very expensive. If you are a professor, then forgive me, but it is perhaps beyond your means."

"Indeed," I said. "However, you said that 'price is not a question.'"

A moment passed as he considered the proposition. "I have many other books that are equally interesting. Perhaps . . ."

I placed my hands on the tome. "This book is my price."

"Good grief," Jordan said. "Don't you have enough of *those* already?"

A grandfather clock snuggled in a corner of the shop ticked away the seconds of silence as Alexander mulled over his options. Given the value he placed on the book, I'd expected to see him begin to sweat. Throughout the long silence, he remained nonplussed, revealing his many years of experience at negotiation.

"If you retrieve the missing item," he announced, "then we have a bargain."

I wondered how much he knew about the book resting on the counter. Clearly he valued it, but that might have been because it was rare, and not due to its content. What was more apparent was the value of his client's vanished item. *It* was either of great import, or Alexander had been offered a considerable fee to locate it.

"We have a deal," I said.

"Wonderful," Jordan added. "I was about to jump out of my chair from the suspense." She looked at Alexander. "So how lost is lost?"



The backroom of Alexander's shop displayed an impressive

décor. Urns, plates, and several paintings adorned the walls. Jordan and I sat on an obscenely padded couch, she sipping Arabic coffee and I Arabic tea. During my journey to Morocco, I'd learned to enjoy the sweet teas of the region. This one, however, had a splendid bouquet, with an abundant sugary cinnamon flavor. Quite unlike anything I'd previously encountered.

"My client enjoys his privacy," Alexander said from across the room, refilling our cups. "You likely have guessed he is very fortunate financially. Although this item has little worth itself, to him it possesses sentimental value."

He lifted a silver tray with the cups, crossing the mosaic-tiled floor. "I do not wish to be improper," he said hesitantly. "It is the expertise of Professor Pearson I require." As he placed the ornate tray on the coffee table before us, his stare leveled on Jordan.

I cleared my throat, adjusted my jacket and tugged at my shirtsleeves beneath. "Miss Gabriel is a knowledgeable researcher, and necessary to any investigation I undertake." The hope was to reduce the ire about to be visited upon Mr. Mylonas.

"I'm necessary in *some* investigations," she corrected. "The professor has been known to undertake overseas trips without so much as notifying me." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "He is being polite. At the moment, I'm merely a chauffeur."

Alexander lowered into the chair opposite of us, his eyebrows moving in the opposite direction. "I can provide a private chauffeur," he said. "My client is—"

"Yes," Jordan interrupted. "He's very *private*." She lifted the china cup to her lips, sipping at the coffee. "The choice is the *Professor's*."

Jordan had spent the last few weeks scolding me for my

unannounced trip to Morocco with Professor Warner. There was no means of justifying my actions without shattering her vision of the world—a pleasant, beautiful land. Like a coward, I slipped away in the night, savoring my guilt, allowing it to fester into hatred.

“Miss Gabriel is most necessary,” I said. Hoping to change the subject, I continued, “What can you tell me about the item?”

Sitting on the edge of the chair, Alexander smoothed the remnants of his hair with a hand. He drew out a gold cigarette case and snapped it open. Politely he proffered it to us, and then produced a lighter, igniting one for himself.

The clock in the front of the shop chimed six. To accommodate us, Alexander had closed early, further proving the importance of the mission.

“The stolen item is a stone chest,” he started, exhaling a stream of smoke. “It is said to contain the remains of the High Priest Martu of the city of Aratta. Tales cast him as the avatar of the ancient god Niaba.”

“This treasure was from Sumeria?” I asked in disbelief.

Alexander nodded.

“If that’s true, it should have been in a museum,” Jordan said.

“My client purchased it privately. An unremarkable stone box.”

“Was anything else stolen?” I asked.

“Nothing. Only the chest.”

“Matthew was correct,” I said. “This is a bit out of the purview of the New York City police. Still, to be of any use, I will need to see your client’s collection.”

Alexander puffed smoke into the air. “I can arrange that,” he said at length. “But my client is not available. There is no need to meet with him.”

“Where does your client live?” Jordan asked.

“The collection is located in his Park Avenue mansion.”

“Oh my . . . Millionaire’s Row,” she replied, sounding the words with a nasal New Jersey accent, continuing to taunt me.

I suspected the private millionaire was most likely a New York Blueblood. Like professors, the wealthy were allowed eccentricities. But ancient boxes with the dusty remains of pagan priests might be more than his family name could endure. The necessity for my involvement became clearer by the moment.

Social worries and woes mattered little to me. I held greater concerns about chests with any sort of remains in them. But it was Alexander’s promised payment that secured my participation. Even so, I was unsure of how I’d ever locate the missing treasure.



It was Jordan’s turn to be chauffeured. Once we were ready, Alexander had us motored to the doorstep of the mansion. Unlike many of the other abodes in the city, it lacked the distinct brownstone exterior. Its limestone face gazed upon the verdant earth of Central Park. Even to my untrained eye, the architecture seemed grandiose, perhaps more fitting on a university campus than a New York neighborhood. Yet, it didn’t stand alone. Running along Park Avenue was a line of other ostentatious mansions, each seemingly trying to pale the others.

With familiarity, Alexander opened the tremendous wooden door. The entrance hall stood two-stories high with a marble floor and a winding staircase scrolling upward. Fortunately, I’d made sure to memorize the address. Matthew would have been outraged had I not done that much detective work.

Not giving us a moment to pause, Alexander ushered us into the wing holding the collection. Again, the entrance was barred with an almost medieval castle style door—wooden with iron bands and pins.

“How did the thief get inside the mansion?” I asked, my voice echoing against the hard walls.

“Please, please,” Alexander said urgently, motioning us through the doorway. As we passed, he replied, “I do not know the details of the . . . *caper*. I can only assure you that the chest was stolen.”

The room was oblong and vast, with pole ropes cordoning off the items placed along the wall. Rugs from around the world hung on the walls, and the only light came from a chandelier dangling from the ceiling. There were no windows, and only the one door by which we’d entered.

In the center of the room towered a statue, depicting a most despicable creature. The work’s origin eluded me.

“The boy’s got dough,” Jordan said with her Jersey accent.

I glanced at her, pleading with my eyes for her to stop prodding me.

“Sorry,” she said, nasal and prolonged.

“The item was over here,” Alexander said, marching across the room. His shoes tap-tapped against the marble floor.

As I followed, I stole glances at other relics, all worthy museum pieces. Ornate mirrors, Greek and Persian urns. Bronze shields and horsehair helmets. Stele freckled with cuneiform writing, golden statuary of sphinxes and jackals and chimerical things unknown to me. Two large clay tablets were mounted on a wall, each inscribed with some ancient language. The parade of history went beyond my measure—a wealth of knowledge beyond the wealth in coin any man should possess.

Resting on a black lacquered table sat a silver dagger. The strange engravings of the blade's surface immediately captured my attention. They were startlingly familiar and dredged up foul memories.

"Say, Rudy," Jordan said. "Set your eyes on that." She pointed to the dagger.

Right then, something cold passed over me. At the spot I stood, psychic memory of a vile event hung in the ether. A residue, or lingering taint. I shot Jordan a stern look. Her surprised countenance revealed she understood something worried me.

Politely, Alexander cleared his throat. "Here is where the chest sat."

I approached the empty space. The swirled marble surface bore no scars, although there was a dull, oblong spot. I assumed that the items in the room were not moved when the floor was polished, and what I saw was the "footprint" of the missing chest.

"There are no windows in here," I said, scanning the room. "Are there any hidden exits?"

Alexander's face soured. "There are none."

"Are you sure the chest isn't still in the house?" Jordan asked.

"My client," Alexander cocked his head slightly as though an idea had suddenly sprouted, "and my temporary employer has made a thorough search."

I kneeled, placing a hand on the location the chest occupied, opening my senses to the world around me. A veil of darkness dropped over my vision. I felt so many things pushing, longing to be seen, reaching out to touch my mind. Knowing what lay down that path, I centered my mind on the space before me. There, existing in the space between spaces was a scar in reality—a place that had served as a gateway, a

means of entrance and exit.

Pulling back my focus, I lifted my hand. A residue covered my fingers. Some sort of spice, and a gritty material such as salt covered the area.

“When was the last time the floor was waxed?” I asked.

Alexander looked quizzical. “I don’t have such knowledge. However, no staff lives on the premises. They attend to it by schedule.”

“Do they have keys?” I asked. “And are they unattended?”

His eyebrows twisted into a knot. “Yes. However, I’ve already questioned each of them.”

“Indeed.” I stood. “Mr. Mylonas, I will need privacy to continue my investigation.”

He stared at me in stunned silence.

I gestured openly with my hands. “There is only one way out of this room, and you can stand sentry beyond the door.” It was fortunate that professors were allowed eccentricities as well, giving me some leverage.

“Fine. I will wait outside the door,” he said. If he were disappointed, it didn’t show in his straight posture and proud stride. The heavy door boomed closed behind him.

“You really should read some of those pulps I’ve been giving you,” Jordan said. She then affected a hyperbolic tone, an outlandish attempt to impersonate me when quoting literature. “There is something of you in them.”

The sharpness of her taunts had dulled. Still, I wondered how deep her goading delved. Perhaps she suspected me of reading *those* books. My face flushed at the thought she knew.

Jordan casually turned, approaching the wall with the clay tablets. “I figure you wanted privacy to apologize.” Her voice was musical in the stuffy summer air.

That had not been my intention. Although, considering the matter, the moment did present itself conveniently. Regardless of my approach, I knew there were no words to salve the wound I'd unintentionally created. Bereft of alternatives, I simply uttered, "I'm sorry."

"Rudolph Pearson," she exclaimed, pivoting. "There better be some sort of explanation to follow. What you did was *cruel*. Not a note or even a telegram . . ."

"I have no better words to offer," I said. "Any explanation would be like taking one of your favorite books and revealing a hidden, sinister interpretation. I . . . I cannot bring myself to that."

Her features sharpened. "You seem to think that I've not seen what's going out around us—" she gestured with her hands. "Professors dying in fires. People being murdered by melting mastiffs. You using magic—or whatever you want to paint it. You're slipping away from *this* world, from me." She knotted her hands, letting her chin drop.

"You're getting good with the alliteration," I offered.

"Changing the topic won't work this time. Yes, I'm angry because you left. I'm also angry because you're giving up on this world . . ." She fixed me with a gaze. Her green eyes were shimmering emeralds, and a deep concern troubled her countenance. "You're going some place I cannot follow."

There was so much I wanted to say, but I couldn't bring myself to speak the words. Something inside me constrained my actions. She was right, though. I walked between two worlds, and I often felt lost. "I've not given up," I said gently. "Maybe at one time I had. Not now. Something is wrong with *this* world, and I need to venture into another world to correct it. And I cannot let it pass."

A tear ran from her glistening eyes. "You want to be a heroic knight." She sniffled, turning away. "I just want . . ."

So many words could complete her sentences, and in the passing silence, I contracted every possible ending, finding only one that satisfied me.

“I’m not a hero,” I said after a while. “I’m not letting go.” Gently, I placed a hand on her shoulder. “And I won’t hurt you again.”

Given the moment, I felt I should prove my determination by spinning her around and kissing her. My personal aesthetics forbid that as it was quite clichéd. A better time and place would present itself, one more original, I hoped.

Removing the handkerchief from my jacket, I reached around her, offering it. At that moment, I realized I could read the inscriptions on the Sumerian tablets. Unconsciously, I translated the words:

*For the city, alas, the treasures, my soul doth sigh,
For my city Lagash, alas, the treasures, my soul doth sigh.
In great Girsu the children are in pain.
Into the interior of the splendid shire the horror gains;
The blessed Queen from her temple he brought forth.
O Goddess of my city, desolate and ruined, when will you
return?*

I astonished myself with my utterance. I’d never studied Sumerian, nor attempted any translations in my life. It simply poured forth, as though I had an ancient soul that remembered the tongue. Admittedly, it had a flare for Poesque language, but perhaps that was more my flourishes than the seeming supernatural translation.

“Did you just read that?” Jordan asked, astonished as well.

“It seems so,” I said. “I think it is a lament for the destruction of the Sumerian city Lagash, and the death of its

god-queen. Anticipating her next question, I offered, “It is beyond my understanding how I know that.” Then I saw the fright in her eyes. “I’m fine. All part of a greater mystery I need to unravel.”

This mystifying occurrence redoubled my interest in the vanished stone chest. I wondered about the connection between the missing remains of a Sumerian High Priest and my sudden ability to read primeval poetry. I circled around the chest’s last location, deciding on my next move.

“What’s your theory?” Jordan asked, brightening slightly.

“Magic.”

She crossed her arms, eyeing me coldly.

“Or what appears to be magic. My knowledge is limited, but it appears I have a slight natural talent.” Once again, I scanned the room. Earlier, I’d felt the psychic memory of what I suspected to be a blood sacrifice. Our wealthy eccentric was far more off center than perhaps any of his upper-crust societal members suspected. Ever since I was a child, society’s fascination with the occult had grown. For that matter, I’d recently read an article in the Brooklyn Eagle that had cited a house in a nice neighborhood, coal heating, and a ghost as selling features. In many ways, the occult and the horrific world whose shores I’d only begun to wade into were related.

“I need chalk,” I said, marching toward the silver dagger I’d spotted earlier. “I suspect there might be some hidden in the room.”

Upon touching the dagger, my blood ran cold. It was as though the blade possessed a life of its own—or it was possessed. Nonetheless, it served my purposes ideally.

When I’d returned with the knife, Jordan already held a stick of chalk in her hand. “In my job, it’s handy to have.” I marveled at the capacity and variety of the ubiquitous canvas

bag hanging from her shoulder.

Taking the chalk, I drew a circle on the floor, around the two of us.

“What are we doing?” Jordan asked.

“Finding a hidden doorway.”

“Wait a minute. Won’t that call those hounds after us again?”

“Maybe. But I don’t intend to step into another universe, or transgress time. If my suspicions are correct, the thief is nearby, and in our time. So this should simply act like a shortcut.”

“What if you’re not correct?” she asked.

“You wanted to come along for the ride,” I said snidely. “This time I’m the chauffeur.”

She exhaled heavily, gripping the straps of her bag.

With the circle complete, I gripped the dagger, chanting phrases I absconded from the mind of my elusive phantom sorcerer. In conjunction with key words, I touched the dagger tip to different points of the circle. Upon my last motion, a narrow gap appeared before me—radiating in a spectrum of colors beyond my imaginings. It was like a curtain had been partially opened, revealing a scene from some other location. Outside the opening was the room I occupied. Inside was another room. It was dark, with an earthen floor, and a coal stall against a stony wall. It appeared to be someone’s cellar.

It took Jordan a few seconds to comprehend what she was seeing. “Where does it go?” she stammered.

“I’ve no idea. The only thing I’m certain of is that it is the same gateway that was used to remove the chest.”

“And the people through . . . there can do what you just did?” A sense of awe still clung to her words.

“Probably,” I said.

With the dagger in hand, I pushed through the opening. Each passing second sapped my energy. “Come on. I need to close it.”

I stepped onto the packed earth of another room in another place. I looked back to see Jordan, eyes wide, mouth gaping. I waved for her to follow.

When she stood at my side, I let the portal close.

“I want to learn that one,” she said.

“When I understand it, I’ll show it to you.”

We stood in darkness. The only light had come from the gateway. I pulled a box of matches from my pocket, striking one. The murk edged away slightly, enough to reveal we were standing in a cellar.

The heavy scent of coal and earth filled the room. Extinguishing the match, I fumbled for another. Light blossomed before I could do so. The source came from a lamp in Jordan’s hand.

“What isn’t in that bag?” I asked, marveling.

“As I’m *not* a professor, I practice anthropology mostly on my own. I spend a great deal of time in old buildings and cellars. And I need my tools at all times.”

She guided the beam of light around the room, revealing uneven walls, a set of rickety stairs leading upward, and a coal stall, partially filled.

In a hushed tone, I said, “Someone here knows how to step through gateways. So it’s probably best if I go upstairs first. Wait until I call you.”

She moved to the coal stall, grabbing the flat bladed shovel. “Call if you need help,” she said, pointing the lamp downward.

Try as I might, it seemed impossible to prevent each step from creaking as I ascended. After the first three, I gave up all hope of sneaking, and quickly climbed the

stairs, pushing open the door.

A light in the ceiling painted the room in a waxy yellow color. I stood in a kitchen, with nothing amiss, and no one else present. Windows along the wall revealed dusk had settled over the area—wherever that was. I peeked through an archway into the living room—also empty. Making a speedy survey of the house, I returned to the kitchen to find Jordan standing at the top of the cellar entrance, shovel held high in both hands.

“It sounded like you were running from something,” she said.

“I think we’re alone,” I said. I went to the exterior door, peeking through the blue-checked curtains. “It seems rural,” I observed. Beyond the house I spotted a barn with a sliver of light shining between a set of closed doors.

Jordan’s response came in the sound of a *clicking*. She’d exchanged the shovel for the telephone, and was tapping to connect with the operator.

“Good idea,” I said. “The operator can tell you where we are. For all I know we’re in another country.”

“Close,” she said, smirking. “We’re in Brooklyn.” She pointed to several envelopes on the table. I looked at the address.

“Right.” I nodded, pondering my ignorance. “Who are you calling?”

“Detective Leahy,” she said. “We found who stole the chest.”

“Oh no . . .” I held up a hand. “You can’t . . . I mean, he’ll never believe how we got here. Just tell him we need a ride.”

“So what are we going to tell him?”

“I need something more substantial. I hope to have that before he arrives.” I opened the kitchen door. “I’m looking in the barn. Wait here until I come back.”



Timid stars scattered across the darkening vault above. On the horizon, the glow of what I took to be Manhattan teased the approaching night, vainly attempting to fend off the approaching blackness. The evening air smelled of grass and heat as I trudged through the summer meadow of knee-high grass, the tall blades of green snapping at my knees.

Sweat covered my brow as I neared the wooden barn. I thought to remove my jacket, but countless chill hands kneaded at my flesh, urging against it.

Reaching the barn, I heard a voice speaking sing-song words in a foul but familiar tongue.

The tone rose and fell as the rhythm increased. I had no understanding of the language, except that it was an incantation, and it was nearing the end. The barn offered generous gaps between vertical planks that formed its skin. Enough light escaped to reveal a path. Slowly, I sidled along the wall, reaching one of the two doors.

Looking through a crack, I saw four kerosene lamps hanging from rafters, filling the interior with light and long shadows. Below lay a young woman clad in a knee-high summer dress, her body resting on a makeshift table of several wooden planks supported by two sawhorses. Her sides heaved with each breath like the action were a great effort.

The voice belonged to a tall man. He wore dungarees, suspenders, and a dirt-stained white shirt. He pranced around the woman, cutting shapes into the air with a silver dagger, and repeating the discordant, rancorous words that held more emotion than true meaning.

I searched the interior for others. In a far corner, planted on the earthen floor, sat an oblong stone chest. The lid had been removed.

Each time the man circled the woman, the dagger in his

hand swung high and slow. With every pass it came closer to her chest on the downward thrust. Little time remained.

The fellow inside the barn had a distinct advantage in size, and given his feverish enthusiasm, I saw no other means than tackling him to quickly halt the ritual. If I were a sorcerer of Merlin's caliber, doubtless myriad options would have presented themselves. Instead, I had to rely upon brutish means.

Throwing my lanky weight behind the effort, I pulled wide the barn doors, calling out as I did. My heroic action garnered no response. Not even a pause or a quick glance over the shoulder. The doors swung open, bumping against stops. The man blithely and blindly continued his chanting.

Knowing one is not of heroic mettle is a dismal fate. But to be utterly ignored because of those shortcomings was outrageous. In Medieval tales, even the vilest knights obeyed the chivalric codes to some degree. Be he worthy or not, acknowledging an enemy was perhaps the most fundamental rule.

Deciding my presence *would* be acknowledged, I rushed toward the man, my shoes slapping against the hard earth. A cold pit formed in my stomach as the man's hand halted at its zenith, dagger held firm.

"No!" I cried, seized by terror.

The weapon plunged into the woman's chest. Her body shuddered, flinched, although no sound escaped her lips.

I slammed into him, propelled faster by fury. He released the dagger, his motion stiff and mechanical. Quickly I folded my arms around him, and let myself fall backward, using my weight to assist in pulling him down.

We toppled to the ground. I hit hard, his body landing on top of me. Air whooshed from my lungs, leaving me gasping. I scrambled and crawled, pushing at his rigid form, trying to

move from beneath him.

He didn't protest or struggle. As I crept away on my hands and knees, I kicked at him—expecting him to spring up and attack. Instead, his body simply lurched with each blow.

Halting my attack, I climbed to my feet. The man lay prostrate, flesh flaccid and pale. He very much had the countenance of a corpse.

My heart rattled in my chest, anticipating something . . . anything. All logic had fled the scene, leaving only imagination and nightmares.

Turning to the woman, I pressed fingers against her neck. The flesh was warm, but no pulse moved beneath the skin. I looked at her strained visage. Her lips were tinted blue, as were the folds of her eyes. The dagger protruded from her chest, blood pooling around the wound, soaking into her blue-flowered dress.

Chaos reigned. I felt certain the two were husband and wife, making the hideous act all the more gruesome and unexplainable. All my efforts to stop it had been impotent. It felt as though the wall of darkness erected in this world was insurmountable. Life in the shadow of such evil seemed futile, pointless.

I stepped away from the dead woman.

The powers at work were an indecipherable mosaic beyond my comprehension, perhaps beyond all comprehension because there was no meaning behind it. I wondered how many times the scene before me had played out throughout human history. Then I remembered the Sumerian lament I'd read on the clay tablets, and their meaning touched my consciousness. The poet had the same thoughts at the loss of his city and his goddess queen. Sorrow seemed timeless, while joy ever fleeting.

“*Dinriddamu*,” a raspy voice sounded. I spun, facing the

source—the opened chest. “I taste your presence,” it said.

A chill pricked at the back of my neck, sending a wave of shivers across my body, freezing the sweat on my skin. The sensation bore into the very marrow of my bones.

Gingerly, I approached the sound. I did not understand the word uttered, but at some level I knew it was a name—a name that touched me.

“Martu,” I said, stepping to the front of the chest. “The priest of Niaba,” I added disdainfully.

A detestable form reclined in the oblong chest. If it were capable of standing, it would have possessed a height of no more than four feet. The thing resembled a human only in a fundamental manner—torso, extremities, head. Its skin sagged on bones, flaccid and glistening, making it nothing more than a living, desiccated carcass. There were no muscles beneath the flesh. And two large eyes gazed from a shiny head, black pools filling holes in a skull.

“I am the avatar of Niaba,” it gurgled. “I am the Will of Niaba. Kneel, slave.”

With the last words, my head tingled, my thoughts swirled. I wasn’t sure if it were speaking English, or if for some reason, I understood its native tongue, just as I’d been able to read the Sumerian writing. For the moment, I decided, that riddle mattered little. I definitely felt Martu attempting to slip into my thoughts. With ease I closed my mind.

“I am not your slave,” I said. “I am your executioner, come to bring the centuries of your imprisonment to an end.” The words slipped from my mouth with a dark joy. And like tiles in a mosaic, I formed an image of what had happened. Somehow Martu had entered a human mind by sending thoughts and dreams until that mind was fractured. That human then became the slave of Martu, and had been working to free him from imprisonment. While I’d not saved

the life of the woman, I had prevented her possession by the imprisoned priest.

“Out!” Martu croaked.

I stood, amazed. Without realizing it, I had entered Martu’s thoughts. A long moment passed as I stood on the precipice. I could consume his memories, but the similarity of the action to the cannibalistic “sin eaters” living below the city overwhelmed me with revulsion. How wretched and twisted the thoughts of a trapped being must be. I feared losing myself in such an abyss. No secrets outweighed the price.

“You cannot kill me,” he announced. “I am a corpse priest. There is no death for me.”

“Rudolph!” Jordan’s voice seized my attention. The panic in her tone worried me.

I dashed from the barn. Night had fallen, and a distant moon hung low in the sky. In its light, I saw Jordan plodding backward, to the barn, coal shovel in both hands. Before her were several people, shambling forward. She waved the shovel before her as though shooing them off.

Not sure what trickery was afoot, I ran to Jordan. There were maybe six or seven people staggering across the meadow. Colored in shadows, I saw no angered or crazed faces. At the most, they appeared drunken.

“This is disgusting,” Jordan said, still waving the shovel.

“Who are they?” I asked. “Where did they come from?”

She glanced at me briskly. “I didn’t do a survey, Rudolph. But I can tell you they’re not alive, and they won’t die either.”

I stepped forward.

“No, don’t get near them,” she said. “They look like they’re sick with some sort of disease.”

In the wan light, their flesh was ashen-gray, like the man in the barn. Their movements were awkward. Another tile

fit into the mosaic fitting. Somehow Martu had spread a plague, allowing him to use the dead as his slaves. *Corpse priest*, I thought.

“Did you call Matthew?” I asked, returning to Jordan.

“Yes. And I also found out that we’re on Barren Island. The only place farther away from Manhattan is Coney Island. I think he’s going to be a while getting here.”

“Let’s get inside the barn,” I said, grabbing an arm and guiding her backward. She wouldn’t turn away from the approaching dead. “We’ll run to the barn and lock the doors. *But* when we’re inside, I do not want you to look in the chest.”

“You found it then?” she asked, a mild hint of relief underscoring her words.

“Yes, and you can’t look in it.”

She gazed at the approaching undead. “I think they’ll keep me occupied. You don’t have to worry about any secret treasures this time.”



Outpacing the gathering servants of Martu was easy. I secured the main doors, sliding the wooden beam through the iron latches mounted on the planks. The single rear door had a chain and bolt, which Jordan handled. As I finished dragging an empty barrel before the front door, Jordan returned.

“There’s another up there,” she pointed to the loft.

“Sacrifice her to me,” Martu suddenly said. “And I’ll grant you the beauty of endless death.”

She glanced around apprehensively, looking for the source of the voice.

“No,” I said quickly, placing a hand on her elbow and guiding her to me. “Don’t look over there. Don’t listen.”

She swallowed as though her vocal chords were knotted.

“You close the loft door. I’ll deal with the rest.”

I’d never seen her so unsettled by anything. I wondered if she understood Martu’s words, of if it was merely the eerie quality that disturbed her.

Pulling free of my grip, she climbed the ladder.

I marched toward the stone chest, checking to make sure it was out of sight from her perspective. Satisfied, I spoke, “Release those people outside.”

The thin flesh that covered blackened teeth pulled back in a macabre grin. “Death is eternal. It is undying. That is my god. I simply perform his will.”

Trying to puzzle-out meaning from his words seemed hopeless. We were separated by centuries and sanity. Persuading Martu of anything seemed impossible.

“They’re almost here,” Jordan called.

I stepped back to see her. She perched next to the loft doorway, watching. “Close the door,” I yelled.

“Believe me,” she said. “They’re not up to climbing.”

“Let me know if they do anything clever,” I said, returning to the smiling monstrosity.

I wondered how long before the sickness affected Jordan and myself. It certainly was magical in nature. The thought of her transforming into one of his mindless servants unsettled me.

“Release them,” I said. With my words followed a gesture that focused energy at the priest. His form shook, but the smile did not waver.

“You used them to extract you from the mansion,” I said, hoping to engage him in a conversation that might reveal something useful, some edge.

“The fool sorcerer thought he’d dominate me. His spell failed. But it did break my imprisonment. Then I called upon other servants, immortal servants, to bring me to this

place. I'd pulled the location from the mind of one of the sorcerer's slaves."

I assumed Martu meant the unknown millionaire when he'd referenced a "sorcerer." Although, given the nature of Sumeria, the two were probably the same. The absolute absence of pity in his words and thoughts infuriated me. By worshipping Death, he'd become as uncaring and cruel as death. The irony was that it seemed he could not die.

A shrill scream sounded. I ran to the center of the barn. Thumping sounded on the door—not the hammering of the living, but that of the dead. Jordan had backed into a corner, back against the plank and beam walls, flailing against something unseen to me.

I scaled the ladder. I'd not abandon her like I had others.

The front doors bulged. The slaves of Martu were working in unison.

Clearing the top rung, I worked through a maze of crates and tools. Reaching into the netherworld, I tried to force the invisible entity into my vision. A vague outline took shape. It was a cumbersome figure, arms that were more ape-like than human, and an oversized head with a protruding brow. Large hands gripped Jordan, pulling her forward. She kicked and cursed at the creature.

My head swam with thoughts, incantations, invocations that may or may not work. Unsure of the invisible creature's intention, I attempted to dominate its spirit. Speaking words older than humanity, I plucked at the threads that formed reality, attempting to unravel those connected to this timeless servant's mind.

A loud *crack* sounded below as the dead pushed through the barrier. Moments remained as they fumbled with the doors, working to pull them open.

Maintaining all my concentration on the incantation, I plumbed the dark corners of my being, using that energy to control the creature. And, in the blink of an eye, Jordan and the servant of Martu vanished.

The cold hand of panic seized my spine. I called forth the unseen world, every shade, spirit, and foul entity into sight. They too looked upon me. But Jordan was not there.

At first the host of specters moved toward me, hands reaching to grasp me. Unable to control my rage, I felt waves of power pushing outward in concentric circles, each blast sending red-hot pain through the countless beings surrounding me. In moments, they attempted to flee from me, crying out, some disintegrating, entering the void where a profound blackness lurked.

Driven by my anger, I moved to the edge of the loft, and leaped onto one of the shambling dead. When my living, burning, flesh touched the undead body, it shrank as though being evaporated, quickly shimmering into a shadow of dust.

Instantly, I was on my feet, reaching for the shovel Jordan had carried. At some distant place in my mind, I knew these dead were innocents, condemned by Martu's magics, enslaved by him. That part of me seemed a fading light, growing ever smaller.

I rushed the next of the undead, swinging the flat bladed shovel. In my fury, I severed its throat, the weight of its head pulling flesh and bone and tendons backward until the skull dropped to the earth with a hollow *thump*. Though they attempted to swarm me, I pushed dark energies through my hands into the shovel, hacking and slashing until none remained standing.

Covered in blood and gore, I stood a moment surveying the wretched vista. I sucked in lungfuls of putrid air. Sweat

mixed with blood and viscera on my face and hands. And still an unquenchable wrath burned inside me.

I marched to the stone chest, letting the dripping shovel fall to the ground. “Bring her back,” I commanded.

“Out of my mind,” Martu squealed. “Out of my mind.”

Like flipping pages in a book, I shot through his memories, hunting down the moment of his imprisonment centuries ago. Seizing upon it, I played it endlessly in his mind. His feeble body jerked and thrashed at the unending pain. “I promise you an eternity of this if you do not return her.”

Inhuman screams exploded from its black mouth. Had I been able to intensify the memories, there would have been no hesitation. A door in my mind had opened, one that hid a deep darkness in my soul. With that came power beyond my reckoning. If the evil in an uncaring universe indiscriminately dispensed pain and terrors upon humanity, then I was a new nightmare. The loathsome part of my soul I’d sensed before stood dwarfed compared to what had been unlocked.

“What did you summon?” I asked, blasting through the priest’s mind.

“They are servants . . . shamblers between worlds,” he answered frantically. “This world is not theirs. When they are here no barrier can stop them. I called upon them to move my prison, and now to take the female.”

In his decaying body, I sensed the languid movement of blood—or something analogous to it. Speaking a solitary word, I transformed the liquid into a fiery acid. “Death is undying,” I said. “I promise you will remain undying.”

A long, mournful cry twisted from the priest. There was a sweetness about the sound. “Where did they take her?”

“To their domain! To their domain!” he cried, bending in agony.

“Show me the magic to follow.”

“I cannot. None return from there. She is lost.”

Again I smashed through his mind, searching for lies. He was guilty of countless deceptions, but this time he spoke the truth. I refused to believe, pushing further into the despicable memories that countless decades had heaped into his mind. No incantation, no hint of anyone returning from the land of these shamblers drifted in his thoughts.

Black despair filled my heart, poisoning my thoughts.

For now he was useless to me.

From my jacket, I produced the ceremonial dagger I'd used to open the portal. Leaning forward, I severed the ropey strands that served as his vocal cords—noticing that at one time the priest was likely human.

A silent gasp issued from his parted mouth. Like a fleeting flash of lightning in a thunderstorm, for the briefest of moments, I felt pity. Quickly my rage brushed it aside.

“You deny it, but you possess the soul of a corpse priest,” it muttered.

“I don't deny it.” Remembering the Sumerian lament, I repeated the words as I prepared the incantation to return the corpse priest to his prison, accompanied by never-ending pain:

*In sacred Girsu the children are in distress.
Into the holy shrine the invaders press;
The goddess Queen from her temple he brought . . .
Oh goddess of my city, desolate and ruined, when shall you
return?*



A tapping on my office door arrested me from my reading. Before I could stand, Matthew opened the door, leaning his head inside.

“Have a moment?” Matthew asked.

“Certainly. Please, take a seat.” I indicated the leather chair opposite my desk.

“I’m just followin’ up,” he said, gazing at the bookshelves as he moved from the doorway. “Thought you might like to know how things worked out.”

Two weeks had passed since the night on Barren Island. The events still remained disjointed in my head, like a narrative continually interrupted. I’m certain I was a sight to behold, when Matthew arrived. Though foggy, I remembered Matthew directing several patrolmen to search the grounds and neighboring houses. I’d warned him about the disease, but all indications of it had vanished from the corpses.

“Right now we’re assumin’ that the ring leader kidnapped Jordan.” Matthew leaned forward. “We’re still lookin’ for her. It won’t fall to the side.”

“Thank you,” I said, rubbing my fingers over the corner of the book before me.

“Aye. Thing is, it looks like some sort of special heist. I mean, my take on it is that only a rich man steals a stone box out of a millionaire’s mansion. So I’m lookin’ into the backgrounds of the dead people to see who else they worked for. I figure they’ve been waxing floors for a few of the well-to-do.”

A delicate breeze gusted the open windows, invisible, crossing from one side of the room to the other.

“Do you know the name of the mystery millionaire?” I asked.

Matthew nodded. The motion resembled a large tortoise shifting its cumbersome head up and down. “It’s Gregor Van Eych. Never much heard of him. Figures though. This city makes a millionaire a day. Can’t keep track of ‘em all. Anyway, I got the name after you gave me the address. But

just to make my point, I leaned on Mylonas. Figured he'd pass the message along."

I sank back into my chair, closing the book I'd been studying.

"That the one Mylonas promised you?" Matthew asked, nodding toward the text.

"Yes." Realizing the title was in German, I translated it. "*Nameless Cults*. It is a very rare volume."

Again Matthew eyed the shelves of books filling my office. I knew he was wondering why one more book mattered.

"Rudolph, we'll find her," he said, his voice low. "The whole thing stinks, and Van Eych is pullin' strings at City Hall to quash this thing. But I promise you, no matter who gets in my way, I'll get to the bottom."

"I appreciate that," I replied, smiling wanly. I disliked keeping secrets from Matthew, but like the events at Barren Island, there were some things best left alone. Through my own research, I'd already learned the identity of Van Eych. It was my intention to shadow him for a few days. He had resources I needed, and I'd previously seen what was in his mind.

CASE EIGHT

THE MYSTERIOUS MILLIONAIRE

THE COLOR OF MY dreams was black since Jordan was carried from this world. From that summer through autumn, I'd labored over the disturbing writings of those who had seen beyond the veils of reality, a universe hidden beneath our universe. The labor of mere words and thoughts fall short of describing the truths I'd found in these works.

During those weeks, I studied and practiced the loathsome craft with my thoughts bent to a singular purpose: finding the woman who'd been cruelly plucked away. What I learned only deepened my despair.

For privacy, I'd taken to using Columbia University's underground tunnels. Forgotten in the basement of Buell Hall were the remnants of the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum—the structure that had existed on the grounds before Seth Low had purchased the property to build the university in the 1890s. Ghost stories and rumors kept even the most brazen students from venturing into these lost rooms. There, I created a sanctuary, where I gave utterance and form to the incantations bound

within the pages of my unwholesome books.

It was mid August when I successfully summoned my first shambler—a process I repeated incessantly thereafter. Each time I called upon these beings, I brought forth a different creature. They possessed no names, no unique features or traits. They were truly alien, and most brutish. Repeatedly, I questioned them, using every dark power at my disposal. None knew of Jordan. They had great difficulty merely understanding the concept of identity, and only were slightly better at differentiating between other creatures.

Try as I might, venturing to their realm was not possible. I lacked the ability to penetrate the barrier between the worlds. The more knowledge I gained of the detestable creatures and their home, the more solidified the truth became—a truth I was not ready to accept.

As best I could, I continued my daily routine. In the first week of October, I lunched at Morningside Park—a daily ritual bereft of its former joy. I sat alone on the benches, remembering and planning. A distance had grown between Matthew and myself, as did the frequency of our meetings.

The wind was blustery on the October day he unexpectedly appeared for lunch.

“So this is your hidin’ spot,” he said, dropping on the bench. “A bit late in the year for lunch outdoors, ain’t it?”

I’d not bothered with my lunch. Lost in my thoughts, it sat untouched in my lap. “I enjoy getting away from the campus.”

He nodded knowingly. “I feel the same about my place.”

For some time, we’d known the identity of the anonymous millionaire. My thoughts of cleverness at memorizing the address of the Park Avenue mansion dissipated when I learned Matthew had followed us there. By the next time I’d spoke to him, he had the owner’s name. He did confess that so many

people were listed on the deed that it took some digging to learn the real owner's name, Gregor Van Eych. Clearly, the man did enjoy his privacy. While I hadn't know the man's name, I already knew he was the sorcerer stalking me.

Knowing the futility, I still asked, "Has Gregor Van Eych confessed to anything?"

Matthew sighed heavily. "No. He's even had the case officially closed, and just about had me hung out to dry. His money whispers in quite a few ears 'round the city." Matthew produced a cigarette, lighting it. "So I'm workin' it on my own time."

"His family name goes back over one-hundred years in New York," I said. "They are masters of industry, the wealthy among the wealthy, and he is the sole heir. I expect his impunity was purchased long ago."

Since my first suspicions, I'd prowled in ethereal form through his Park Avenue mansion numerous times. Van Eych either expected as much, or due to paranoia, he'd warded most of the house, limiting my non-corporeal explorations.

For a while, Van Eych had worked to kill me. No other threats had been visited upon me. Other than thwart Matthew's investigation, the shadow sorcerer did nothing. Something was out of place.

"What is that mess?" Matthew asked, pointing with the cigarette at my lunch.

"A lettuce sandwich," I said. My appetite had been waning for weeks. Still, I made the sandwich for lunch everyday. "Here," I said, offering it.

The large man's eyes widened. "I'll pass." He pulled on the cigarette, the tip glowing brightly.

Moments passed as we sat in silence. The wind swept the leaves across the stony surface of the park, corralling their

desiccated husks into a corner. Overhead, the sky brooded, threatening to storm.

“You know you’re not to blame,” Matthew said, breaking the silence. “By all accounts, you pulled your water in that barn.” He drained the remaining life from the cigarette, then ground it beneath a heel. “A bit more than anyone expected. There’d be nothing wrong with takin’ a break.”

“I’m not quitting,” I snapped. “I’m responsible. If you want to let it go, you can.”

He turned his bulky frame toward me. “Listen. I’m not quittin’, and if you say as much again, I’ll set you straight. I’m tired of the money in this city tellin’ me how to do my job, when to do it, and when to stop. Thousands of dollars are spent on parties every night, and thousands of people are crowded into tenements, dying of sickness. That’s not right. But the rich get away with it. So, I’m not lettin’ up on Van Eych. He’s lying and I’ll get to the bottom.” Matthew stood abruptly, wind tugging at his ill-fitting suit. “Now you need to quit being such a nancy and blamin’ yourself ‘cause your ‘bout as useful as a spoon to a starvin’ man. Either use the pot or get off it.”

He tromped away, quickly vanishing down the stairs toward Morningside Drive.

I bundled my sandwich into a paper bag, shoving it into my overcoat pocket. I had been little use, spending my nights locked away in a basement, practicing a craft that did nothing to help Jordan or put an end to Van Eych’s machinations. I literally crept through the shadows spying on him, hoping to garner information. He’d played me for a fool. Somehow all of the events were tangled together, and every avenue I followed he blocked. He’d kept me occupied—and at a great cost.

It was time I pay a direct visit to Gregor Van Eych.



To the delight of my students, I canceled the afternoon classes, and took a taxicab to the Park Avenue mansion. My ethereal snooping provided a convenient schedule of Gregor Van Eych's visits to the address.

Vigorously I rattled the knocker until a man appeared. Though it tried, the door only partially blocked his large build. I suspected he'd be a match for Matthew. Unlike Matthew, his eyes were empty, disinterested. And a prodigious nose dominated his face, successfully diverting attention away from his bald pate.

"I wish to see Van Eych," I said, meeting his gaze.

"He's busy." The door started to close. I braced it with one hand, while producing a card in the other.

"He'll see me." I slipped my card through the opening. "Now."

The man examined the gift as though dumbfounded. Then he opened the door, grumbling as he did so—though the noise sounded closer to a growl.

I trailed him through the vast entrance hall, down a corridor into a cavernous room. A dark wood ceiling with heavy struts formed large squares above, giving the chamber a gloomy, almost medieval feel. Heavy curtains cloaked the windows. Several table lamps cast circles of light on the polished walnut floor, yet not enough illumination to successfully thwart the shadows. Masks, swords, strange plants and inset bookshelves busied the room. A vast mahogany desk and leather chair sat before the windows, while couches and chairs were scattered about. This was one of the warded rooms I had not seen previously.

The big man stared at me for a moment. I returned the favor, producing my compact briar wood pipe. I made a show of lighting it, puffing blue smoke into the air.

“Mr. Van Eych doesn’t like . . .” he said, trailing off.

“Undoubtedly.” I removed the pipe, letting it smolder between us, waiting expectantly for Van Eych to appear.

“He will be here shortly,” the giant said, leaving the room through the doorway by which we’d entered. The heavy door *thumped* closed.

I moved toward the desk, examining a brass orrery perched on a corner. Instead of revealing the motions of the planets, the device had strange, mystical seals mounted on a series of rods, serving some unknown purpose. I moved one of the arms, causing the mechanism to rotate the others in conjunction.

The gears *clicked* as the device turned. It was then I became aware of Van Eych. He’d not entered the room, but I felt his presence beyond the door at the opposite end of the chamber.

The orrery continued to tick, the clockwork machinery always producing a predictable pattern, symbolizing the mechanistic nature of whatever it represented.

Just as I started to grow impatient, the door flung open. A tall man dressed in a black, double-breasted suit strolled into the room. He was self-assured—a man of wealth, a man of business, a man of the world, a man of the otherworldly.

“Such hubris,” Van Eych said sharply, halting behind the chair and desk. “You come to my house uninvited.”

“There’s irony,” I remarked. “And hubris didn’t bring me here.” I gestured toward the books. “Read more Chaucer, he covers the seven deadly sins quite well. There you’ll discover the one which *does* motivate me.” I puffed on the pipe.

“Put that thing out,” he demanded, his frustration compounding. “I don’t tolerate that detestable habit here.”

A moment passed. Smoke billowed as I pondered his rather uncouth imperative. At length, I complied, tapping

the bowl against the bottom of my shoe, letting the ashes empty on the floor. From the corner of my eye, I saw his face redden.

“When someone stops playing your game,” I said, “you become outraged.” Dropping the pipe in my pocket, I stepped back, expecting a supernatural response.

A wave of dizziness washed over me. For a split-second I felt as though the room were spinning, then I felt Van Eych touching my mind. Promptly I shielded myself, and to add nuance, I sent a blast of energy across his desk, causing the orrery to start spinning, gears *ticking*.

He raised an eyebrow. “You always over-estimate yourself.”

“Then why not kill me?” I spread my hands, looking from side to side. “We’re alone, and I’ve no plans.” While sincere, I admittedly appropriated my response from a recent pulp I’d read. In the book it had proven a provocative retort. I couldn’t resist imitating it. But it also provided a small amount of needed verbal legerdemain I required.

His dark eyes settled on me. Turning, he walked along the windows, briefly peeking through the curtains. “And then your friend has reason to arrest me,” he said. “I’m not that foolish.”

I didn’t need to read his thoughts to know what he meant. Quite cleverly, Matthew had followed me. While that had not been my intention, it seemed all the more tempting. Sacrifice a pawn to capture a king. If I didn’t leave this mansion, Matthew *would* be pounding on the door.

“A missing professor shouldn’t be a problem for you. You are used to pulling strings and making people dance.”

A cold smile touched his face. He paced back and forth as though considering it. “I don’t take such risks. That is how you lose valuable things.” He faced me squarely. “It seems

you'd have learned that lesson by now."

His belligerence boiled my blood. Unlike him, I had nothing to lose. I already entered the land where all hope was abandoned.

I clenched my fists, preparing to bring an end to the matter. It wasn't enough for him to dominate others with power and money, he desired to control their minds with mystical arts, and rule destinies, rolling over those unable to defend themselves.

Van Eych dropped into the leather and wood chair behind the desk, his features forming in ugly satisfaction. I didn't know why, but he'd been playing the same game. As I had hoped to provoke him, he desired the same of me. I yearned to grant his wish even though my instincts warned me against it. Drifting near the edge of my awareness was something familiar.

I relaxed, holding his gaze. I'd come here for a reason, and to sacrifice that too early would be a mistake.

He opened a deep drawer, removing a glass and a bottle. Dark liquid flowed into the glass. The air was redolent with the scent of single-malt scotch. With a swift motion, he gulped it down. "Have a change of heart, Professor? Or have you only lied to yourself? Still searching for a place to hide on the battlefield?"

The bottle clinked against the glass. Again he emptied the glass. Reclining in the chair, calmly lacing his fingers, propping his elbows on the armrests, he spoke, "Most men can be purchased. Some must be stamped out. But your fabricated morals and fantasies of duty won't let you sell out—even though you have a price." He nodded slightly. "Perhaps you just don't know it yet."

Without a reply, I took my leave. I didn't need to see his face to know it was molded in a sickening delight. When I

opened the large front door, I pushed a psychic whisper in the air, letting it drift across the edges of his mind. A delicate touch, gentle enough to only raise doubts.

On the street, I hailed a taxicab, pretending to be oblivious to Matthew's presence. Admittedly, I would not have spotted him if it were not for Van Eych—I lacked the proper paranoia. Undoubtedly, it would come with time.



One final time I surveyed the circle and patterns within it. I'd first created it when I started summoning the shambling creatures. Over the weeks I'd improved upon it, adding new seals, and sharpening older ones. They held no power in themselves, but their forms displaced and shifted the fabric of reality, allowing me to weave new patterns. With each added shape, my skills became sharper.

I used the silver dagger I'd borrowed from Van Eych's collection. Keeping it had been unintentional. My frantic search for Jordan kept all other thoughts from my mind. When I'd stumbled across it in my apartment, I already knew the identity of the anonymous millionaire, and it was one less trinket at his disposal.

I worked alone in one of the cells of the old Bloomingdale Insane Asylum, now nothing more than a forgotten basement. The only light came from countless candles, although they often proved useful in some incantations. I still required many materials to focus my thoughts in complex castings.

The years had caused most of the stone floor in the old asylum to crack. But a few rooms remained unmarred—precisely the unblemished surface I needed.

Hurriedly I finished the sigil. The dagger grated against the concrete, its edge ever sharp. The glyphs along its edge glowed with my motions—fluid and practiced, beyond my

abilities. With great reluctance, I had avoided the truth for many months until it was beyond refutation. The demon I'd battled in Rabat had secreted away a part of itself within my life force. Too weak to manifest and control me, it was festering, swelling, and growing in power. As a result, I'd gained some of its ageless knowledge and skills—it was the demon *Dinriddamu* the corpse priest had recognized. But like a cancer, I knew it must be exorcised soon, else it would consume me. For the present, I needed its strength. A gamble where I wagered my soul. A small price to pay if I lost.

Most likely, Van Eych had left the mansion shortly after my departure. I'd hoped to thread worries throughout his thoughts. The trick was a variation on controlling the dreams of another. In this case, it tampered with the subconscious. And by his inhaling the burning incense from my pipe, I hoped to repeat the minor possession similar to what the demon had done to me, except I'd make no attempt to influence Van Eych. Once the incense left his body, I would be expelled. Until that moment, I'd be able to pass with him into any warded locations.

Time ran short. He'd breathed in very little of the smoldering compound. Fortunately, I'd had better luck with his oversized servant, although I doubted the usefulness of possessing his body.

In the flickering candlelight, I prepared to chant the words to open the Gate of Shadows—the first stage of my endeavor. The words flowed smoothly, the repetition adding to the concentration.

“Ku-u altum ini ini malsea nitum iäll iäll limnuta!” The phrase had no meaning to me, but with each utterance I felt a power swelling within, the room becoming indistinct, and the sound of an ethereal wind whooshing through the stagnant air of the fusty basement. I followed the chant,

building upon it, carving the glyphs and seals in the air with the dagger. Then, as though hurling through a black tunnel, I found myself inside the mind of Gregor Van Eych.



He arrived at the Bayside estate in Queens infuriated. There to greet him in the foyer was Denby Thornton. Van Eych made a mental note to arrange for the disappearance of the annoying man.

“Ah, Mr. Van Eych,” Thornton said. When he spoke it sounded as though he clenched his teeth together and pushed the sound between them.

He stood no more than five-ten, had jet hair, thick and shiny from hair cream. And he always seemed to be wearing a tennis shirt and shorts, regardless of the weather.

“You see,” Thornton continued, “I’ve been conveying to your man Lucan that I’m having a soiree next week. It’s really a spur of the moment thing. Nothing much. In any case, I hoped you might let me use your slip at the docks. I noticed it was empty, so . . .”

“My yacht will be occupying it soon,” Van Eych said, cutting the man short. He had needed it when he was transporting possessed inmates from Ward’s island to his estate. But Pearson had put an end to that by killing Sebastian Borchett. A never-ending supply of souls lost to that meddlesome fool. From the moment he had visions about Pearson, the man had been a hindrance. *He’s a mere imp*, Van Eych thought. *But like vermin, he’s clever enough to escape every trap set.*

“Oh, I see,” Thornton said dejectedly. His eyebrows jumped upward. “Of course, you’re invited.”

“Naturally,” Van Eych said. “Lucan, show Mr. Thornton out. I have other business.” Van Eych flashed a smile and brushed past the two men.

Thornton continued rambling as he was escorted to the door. The irritation of his voice was intolerable. *Creatures like that lower the quality of human stock*, Van Eych thought. *Each a sacrifice to Xinlurgash, the ever-consuming*. The smoldering anger recalled the memory of Pearson's visit today. The action riled Van Eych again. He balled a fist, ready to strike out. *The time will come*, Van Eych told himself. Pearson had distracted him enough for the present.

Van Eych passed from the foyer into the great room of the mansion. Expensive tapestries hung on high reaching wooden walls. Squares of marble stretched across the floor, rolling into an immense stairway that climbed to the second floor. The rich red wood of the banisters glistened beneath the ponderous chandelier. Mahogany tables supported ornate brass lamps topped with cloth covers, each standing by the side of a lavish cloth divan or chair. Natural light had no hope of pushing through the heavy burgundy curtains that covered the rectangular floor to ceiling windows.

Moving toward the bar in the corner, Van Eych prepared a Scotch. Before he'd finished pouring it, Weldon Buck, the chauffeur and bodyguard, appeared.

For a fleeting moment, Van Eych felt a strange connection with the large man. As though they'd shared this moment in a distant dream. Feeling any link to the brutish man disgusted Van Eych. He gulped the Scotch, shrugging off the chill sensation.

"I want you to purchase several dogs," Van Eych said, setting down the empty glass. "Rabid ones would be ideal—" he shrugged—"but that's not plausible. Either way, release them on the grounds. That might limit Mr. Thornton's visits."

Weldon nodded his bald head. "I will have it done by tomorrow. I know a fellow in the Bronx with some real biters."

“Good,” Van Eych said, strolling from behind the bar. He crossed the room toward a spiral stairwell made of cast iron. It sat below the ornate staircase leading upward. Gripping the cold railing, he climbed downward into the chamber below the mansion.

The bottom spilled onto a broad concourse that had the atmosphere of a tomb. Long lines of granite columns supported the arched ceiling, standing hundreds of feet beneath the surface. Rectangular blocks of rough hewn stone, slate colored, formed the floor. Oil lamps mounted on the columns cast circles of light around the shrouded chamber. Several arched entrances led into corridors. Van Eych strolled forward, footsteps echoing. He halted before a hideous portal. A circular stone ring clung to the wall. Seals and sigils covered the surface of the circle. Two stone creatures, inhuman and fearsome, extended gangly arms with talons, grasping at a V-shaped pillar with an inset blood-red stone, easily the size of a human head, possessing the same ovoid shape.

For the moment, the portal cast a darkly light.

Scraping footsteps approached. Van Eych struggled to remain expressionless, hoping to hide his roiling terror.

“*She* hungers,” a thick voice said. The hollow voice floated through the cool underground air. “More sacrifices.”

“There will be more,” Van Eych said, turning to face the creature. It towered over him by several feet. Its huge torso covered in a thick ooze, exuding a foul odor. Two eyes gazed without emotion. It was an avatar of Xinlurgash—a blessing for any sorcerer. Every time Van Eych stood before it, that blessing seemed more of a curse.

“Your impotent schemes are unsuccessful,” the avatar gurgled, narrow lips pulling back across jagged teeth. “*The Ever-Consuming* has granted you great powers.” It raised talons resembling those of the carven images above the

portal. "You have constructed a worthy temple. But *she* must consume."

How I long to summon you now, my Goddess, Van Eych thought. *I will open a gateway between your realm and this world. Your minions will feast and become bloated.* He didn't speak this to the avatar, the words would have been blasphemous.

Van Eych swallowed, feeling a knot in his throat as though his vocal cords were tangled. "Everything nears readiness, my Lord." He bowed his head as he spoke. "The mere days are nothing to the Goddess."

"You presume to speak for the Goddess?" the avatar roared. Its head leaned forward, stubby spikes protruding through the flesh. The thing trudged around Van Eych's motionless form, taloned feet scraping. "Your bloodline has proven itself with centuries of offerings. Do not overstep your bounds, mortal."

"My apologies." Van Eych remained bowed. "I will expedite the ceremony."

Ragged breaths issued from the openings that served as nostrils for the creature. Rage caused them to come in staccato bursts. "Then do so," it said, fading into the shadows.

Urgently, Van Eych hurried across the chamber and down one of the tunnels, passing grotesque marble busts of entities he'd only seen in his fevered dreams. With practiced ease, he moved through the darkness, coming to a metal door.

The large iron door blocked the room beyond. A rusted chain and padlock secured it. At the foot was a rectangular sliding frame, used to pass food through the barrier.

Kneeling, he unlatched it, pushing it open. Moments passed without a sound. He wondered if the woman was dead. *That would be a shame.* So much effort to capture her; controlling the ancient, insane priest's mind had been

challenging. But it allowed him to carry her away without suspicion. True, he had little use for her. Nonetheless, she was a tool to keep Pearson from interfering in the last days.

“I can sense your mind,” he said through the small rectangular opening.

A voice replied, no more than a whisper.

He lowered his head to better hear. “Speak up, Miss Gabriel. It seems you’ve lost your voice.”

With cat-like speed, an arm extended through the opening, clawing at Van Eych. The hand thrashed about frantically, briefly catching the front of his suit. With a psychic blast, he filled her mind with energy, overflowing it.

From beyond the door, the hard slap of her body flailing against the floor sounded, and labored breathing, interrupted by struggling gasps.

Van Eych smiled. “You are determined,” he said, feeling an unusual admiration for her. Normally he loathed the woman. Perhaps her strong spirit had captured his fancy. Today had been a day of many unusual happenings.

Knowing she was unable to move, he leaned closer, whispering, “It won’t be much longer.” He only hoped that Pearson could witness her death.

His head began to spin, thoughts blurring. The sensation passed as quickly as it had occurred.



I stood in the gloomy basement, my mind swirling, thinking thoughts beyond all possibility. Like iron filings gathered by a magnet, all of the facts came together. All along Van Eych had hoped to use the imprisoned corpse priest to kill me. The feeble-minded creature was easily controlled, nothing more than a puppet. When events soured, Jordan was taken to keep me pre-occupied, and as insurance against my meddling. The

priest had never whisked her away. Van Eych took her to his mansion in Queens to secure my submission.

My spirits brightened. Jordan was alive and not lost in an unreachable realm. Admittedly, Queens was a nightmare to reach, but not impossible. Ideas tumbled through my head. Hatred of Van Eych urged me to confront him again. But after possessing him, I realized that was impossible.

In the gloom of the old asylum, I considered my options. A growing fear welled, fed by the belief I had accidentally revealed myself to Van Eych. When he came into contact with Jordan, I surged to the surface of his thoughts, minutely directing his mind and emotions. Given enough time, he'd realize what had happened. I needed to act quickly, before Jordan was moved or worse.

Weldon was the answer.

He'd inhaled more of the mystical smoke from my pipe, and while physically imposing, I'd be challenging him on the battlefield of the mind. There the advantage went to me.

With haste, I prepared to reopen the Gate of Shadows, this time to possess Weldon Buck. My heart hammered from anxiety. So much depended upon this. Forcing myself to remain calm, I chanted the phrases that resonated with reality, parting veils, revealing the machinery behind the façade.



"Where is Gregor?" Katya Petrovik asked, entering the garage. Five automobiles were parked inside the large building, and Weldon Buck was busy rubbing a cloth over the hood of the *Ghost*.

"Mr. Van Eych is inside, Miss Petrovik," Weldon answered. He always avoided eye contact with the woman. Gregor Van Eych was dominating, but this woman gave him goose-pimples.

She glided with graceful economy along the opposite side of the automobile. Weldon felt her eyes on him. She was attractive enough, with long blond hair, tall with a bright smile. Her icy blue eyes were the softest thing about her.

“What is he up to?” she asked.

An evening breeze gusted off the bay, captured inside the garage, fluttering Katya’s silky skirt and blond tangles.

“He wants me to buy some dogs,” Weldon said.

She sighed, taking a cigarette from a silver case.

“Mr. Van Eych doesn’t . . .” Weldon trailed off. It made little difference what he said.

Four years ago he’d run booze to Chicago. He had a talent with guns, and the stomach for using them. New York City seemed like the land of opportunity for a fellow with his skills.

“You have a light?” Katya asked, sidling around the vehicle.

Weldon snapped a lighter open, offering the flame. Katya leaned close, cigarette held between her red lips.

“Want a ciggy?” she asked demurely.

“No,” Weldon grunted.

“You don’t like me, do you?” Her blue eyes settled on him. “Did you know me before?”

“Didn’t know you till I met you,” he said.

He remembered her from before, when Van Eych had brought her home. She’d been a dancer in one of the Broadway burlesque houses. Playing the numbers put her in trouble with the racketeers, and gin made her look like a threadbare rug. She disappeared a few days, and the next time Weldon saw her, she wasn’t the same. It was like she’d always been born to money, and she’d just found her daddy. She pranced around like the Queen of Sheba. Why even the way she walked had changed. And those cold eyes . . .

Never had he met a broad who gave him the heebie-jeebies. Not even the most hard-boiled guys did that to him.

She turned away. "Get back to work," she called over a shoulder.

At that moment, Weldon wanted to strangle her—hold her skinny neck in his hands and squeeze until she turned blue. In Chicago, things made sense. Once he got good with a gun, he collected debts. The work was straightforward. In fact, Katya would have been one of people he would've bumped off just to send a message. But that was in a town where being a torpedo meant something, where people worried about dying. No one working for Van Eych seemed to care about that.

Sometimes it got him all balled up. If folks weren't afraid of being dead, then he was nothing but a flat tire. No one gave him a second thought, except to look down their noses at him.

Weldon knew Van Eych did that sometimes. So did the others. They all thought nobody was home. He just waxed cars and drove folks around.

Then, right out of the blue, like the first drop of a rain, it came to him unexpected. *Van Eych's rigging me to be the fall guy.* Sure, bosses always had a backup plan, and Weldon was it. "He's dumb," they think, "so keep him around till we dump the trash." That was the plan.

Weldon knotted the cloth in his hands. Everything was suddenly so clear. It was just a matter of time until his number came up.

Not to this guy, Weldon decided, tossing the buffing cloth into the wax kit. He'd give them a twist.

Opening the trunk of the Silver Ghost, he unwrapped a shotgun from a blanket. From a toolkit, he pulled a box of shells. One after another he fed the slugs into the receiver.

Then he grabbed a handful and filled his jacket pockets.

The woman locked away in one of the rooms below the mansion was important to Van Eych. Most everyone else vanished for a day or two, then reappeared like they'd had their brain replaced. That didn't happen this time. And that meant the woman figured in some way. Anything *important* to a rich man was like money in the bank.

This was his chance to return to Chicago. He'd ransom the woman back for a big payday, and return home a boss himself. With his free hand, he removed the flashlight from the toolbox.

The wind picked up as he crossed the courtyard, entering through the backdoor. The hallways at the rear of the mansion were usually empty. Quietly, he moved past the kitchen and library, entering the foyer, then turning toward the Great Room. There was no one in the room.

His heart jumped in his chest like a wild animal. *Just out of practice*, he told himself. Killing Van Eych would do no good for the scheme to work. But if he came toe-to-toe with the man, there would be little choice.

Weldon went to the spiral staircase, stomping downward. The air felt cool, but thick with foulness. He held tight to the shotgun, keeping the flashlight underneath the barrel. The dull beam played along the iron stairs. Dread moved through him like a thick fluid. He sensed something lurking at the bottom. Waiting. *It's my future*, he reassured himself. *Get the woman and you're on easy street.*

Over the last two years, he'd accompanied Van Eych into the basement several times. On each trip, he'd seen shadows moving, or figures peeking around one of the tall columns. The place was flat queer, but so were most of the rich people he'd met while in the employ of Van Eych.

Sometimes, when they were below the mansion, Van Eych

would tell him stories. His favorite was about a real egg of a fellow who bricked up his friend in the cellar. Van Eych always laughed at that one. Weldon thought it was a way of teasing him, or maybe trying to spook him. Mostly, Weldon figured the stories and the shadows were supposed to keep him out of the basement without Van Eych around.

He scoffed. *He must really think I'm a moron. It'd take more than a bedtime story to put me off.*

The coarse black floor finally appeared in the wan light. Tiny spiders crawled beneath his skin as he stepped onto the hard floor. That happened most every time. He aimed the flashlight before him. The solid blackness swallowed the pale beam.

At first he'd been honored when Van Eych brought him down. Then, he learned it was only so Weldon could carry people to the rooms. The boss needed muscle to lug the meat—nothing more. And that's the very thing that made him sure the woman was different. Someone else carried her down. Weldon only brought her food, and no one ever stayed around long enough to be fed. *No way, brother, Weldon said inwardly. This one was special. I'll put one over on him. Show him he's not as smart as he thinks when he has to pay to get her back.* The thought cheered Weldon briefly.

The place was darker than pitch. The last two years had given Weldon time to memorize the cracks in the floor. At least the ones leading to the rooms. He never much wanted to go exploring in the place.

The circle of light searched out the path along the stone floor. A dead silence hung in the air, interrupted only by his breathing. The quiet was so loud it almost hurt his ears.

He followed the familiar path, tracing one crack, skipping to the next, navigating around the columns until he arrived at the corridor leading to the room with the woman.

As he moved past the last giant pillar, it was standing there, waiting.

Without hesitation, Weldon pumped the shotgun and squeezed the trigger. It flashed and roared, kicking, sending the flashlight beam high. But in the momentary muzzle flare, the *thing* was visible.

Blackness rushed to fill the hole created by the shot. The brightness temporarily blinded Weldon, but the image stayed in his head. A monster larger than a grizzly bear, squat, low to the floor, with ropey tentacles protruding from all over its body. Spikes filled its large mouth, and horns, or giant needles, stuck out of it like an angry porcupine.

He edged back, sweeping the light before him. His gut tightened when the smell hit him. A horrid stench twisted his insides.

Against his will, he gulped in the putrid air. Slowly he guided the light across his path.

From behind him came an unearthly growl, low and guttural. His chest squeezed. His knees turned to soft clay. A flat, wet slapping sound came next, like something smacking the stone. Slick gobs of *something* splattered on his face and arms and hair, stinging his eyes.

Weldon pivoted, firing the shotgun—aiming by instinct. He pumped another shell into the chamber and fired again, and again until the fifth cartridge clattered on the floor.

Seconds passed. He wanted to reload the shotgun and he wanted to search the area. The hideous smell seemed weaker, less acrid. He swept the light in an arc, shifting with sudden jerks, spying impossible shadows.

Nothing.

Bile burned in his throat. Never before had he encountered such a thing in here. He wondered if Van Eych already knew about his treachery. Or maybe, this was his “dog” for

the basement. He listened to the silence, his heart hammering in his ears and his gasps. *It's the gun*, Weldon decided. *Somehow the monster must know what I'm up to.*

In a way, it was funny. He stood in a hidden room, deep below a mansion in Queens, hunted by a monster beyond his worst dreams. Waves of dizziness washed over his mind. *The woman. The woman was all that mattered right now.* Whatever it was, he'd scared it off for now.

Weldon cradled the shotgun in his arm, resting the flashlight between his shoulder and chin. Moving forward, he pulled shells from his pocket. One at a time he pushed them into the receiver. As he entered the tunnel, the ceiling rounded above him, narrowing. In a few steps he was at the chained door.

He knocked on the door. The sound reverberated down the tunnel. "Can you hear me?" he whispered, leaning close.

No reply.

Nervously, Weldon glanced over his shoulder, transferring the shotgun to one hand and the light to the other. "I've come to let you out," he said. "I'm the one who brings you food."

He pressed an ear against the cold door. Inside there was a shuffling.

"I can hear," came her reply. "Open the hatch. Speak into it."

Weldon huffed. *Broads*. He dropped to his haunches, resting the shotgun on the floor. Shining the light against the feeding hatch, he pulled the lever and slid it open.

Instantly an arm reached out, clawing at his face, grabbing his shirt. The woman yanked, trying to pull him closer.

"Lay off!" he yelled. "Let go!" *This tomato was cuckoo*. "I'm here to get you out." He clamped a large hand over hers, and easily pulled her fingers free. Instead of letting go, he held

them. "Now you can stay in there, or you can come with me. No, that's baloney. You're coming with me, one way or another if you catch my drift." To make his point, he squeezed her fingers until she flinched.

"We got an understanding?" he asked, letting go of her hand.

"I get your point," she said. "So I guess you'll just have to come in here and drag me out."

Things just got crazier by the second. There was no way she could know he planned to double-cross her. Right now, for all she knew, he was her knight in shining armor. *What gives?* he thought. *Did the world just turn upside down?*

Weldon pushed to his feet, picking up the shotgun on his way. "Listen, lady. I'm letting you out. I'm taking you away from here. You can thank me later. It's your choice. Either you walk or I carry you out."

He shone the light on the chain and padlock. Without a key, he'd have to put a slug straight through it. If someone was going to hear it, it was already too late.

"Stand back," he called. "Shooting the lock."

Just to be safe, he backed away a few paces. Then he racked a shell and aimed at the lock.

He heard the woman screaming something just as he pulled the trigger. A thunderous boom bounced off the stone walls down the length of the tunnel. The report set his ears ringing, muffling whatever the woman was saying.

Using the barrel, he jerked the chain free, then yanked open the door.

She burst out like a storm. "You idiot! You could have killed me." For a moment, it looked like she was going to charge down the passage. Once she had a good look, that notion seemed to vanish. She halted, dim light reflecting on her pale face.

“Listen,” Weldon said. “Do as I say, and you’ll get out of here.”

She seemed to consider the words. In the terrible silence, they stood facing each other.

“Understand?” he pressed. Time was wasting, and if she was just extra baggage, he’d leave her now. Things had gone beyond the point of fixing them with the boss. No matter how you sliced it, Weldon Buck was leaving New York City very soon—rich man or not.

“Yes,” she replied, nodding.

“Good. Follow me.” He returned the way he came, trailing a slick streak running along the way. He hoped whatever it was Van Eych kept down here had been spooked off. If there was ever a time in his life, now was when Weldon needed a lucky break. He was in over his head. He also realized that all along, Van Eych had his number. It was just a matter of time when it came up. *Might as well be now as ever*, he thought, guiding their way through the huge chamber.



Bruised clouds plated the sky as they rode along in the Silver Ghost, making a beeline for the Queensboro Bridge. Wind rattled the canvas top of the expensive automobile. Weldon kept the speed pushed. No one had been around when they came out of the basement and made for the garage. But he knew Van Eych would begin to wonder once the automobile was gone for more than an hour. His boss trusted Weldon to maintain vehicles, though not returning by evening would raise a flag.

With distance between the Bayside estate and himself, the reality of everything dropped on Weldon. The hinges of his sanity were loosening. Try as he might, he couldn’t get his head around it. The cellar, the people, the creatures.

Van Eych was always in the middle of queer things. Maybe Weldon had just built up a tolerance, stopped noticing. That was until the *thing* had attacked him. Even though he'd wiped off the sickening clots of *whatever*, his skin still crawled with a million spiders. More than ever, he was certain this was the right play. Get to Grand Central Station, hop a train for Chicago, and cut a deal with Van Eych.

"Where are we going?" the woman asked over the rumbling. She leaned close to the door, keeping plenty of space between them.

"On a trip," he said. So far she hadn't been much trouble. But his gut told him that might change.

"I want to go home."

"You can't yet. That's the first place he'll look." Weldon glanced at her quickly, adding, "The man who kidnapped you."

"What's your name?" she asked.

He couldn't put a finger on it, but for some reason he trusted this dame. All of his instincts told him not to.

"You don't need to know that," he said.

Abruptly, she jerked straight. "I can't know your name, and you won't tell me where we're going. How am I any better off than before?"

This one's a handful, he thought. "Look," Weldon started, "I got you out of there. We're going someplace safe. And you can call me Joe. That's all you need to know for now. Until we get on a train, all you got to do is what I say."

"A train? I'm not getting on a train with you, *Joe*, or anyone else."

Weldon clenched and unclenched his hands on the steering wheel. This wasn't going to work. Dragging her through Grand Central was just stupid. No, driving straight to Chicago was the best bet. "All right. No train then."

That seemed to calm her. She leaned against the seat, gazing out the side window for several moments.

Dusk edged over the city. The glowing skyline of Manhattan appeared on the horizon. Once he was on the other side of the East River, he'd feel better. He'd learned the city inside and out while working for Van Eych. Even if someone was tailing him, Weldon was certain he could lose them on the gridiron streets of Manhattan. And once he crossed the George Washington Bridge into Jersey, he'd be home free.

Then it occurred to him. The dame might be waiting until he hit jams of traffic to jump out of the car. He turned to her. "If you try to get out of the car, I'll shoot you."



Knowing time was running out, I broke the astral connection. For what seemed an eternity, I was addled, my thoughts swirling. The possession had been far too long for my liking. There were several times I'd considered possibly taking full control over the host body—just as Van Eych does. It was a risk, however, and one I wasn't willing to take. I hoped to push enough thoughts into Weldon's subconscious to keep him heading for the George Washington Bridge.

Hastily, I fled from my secret hideaway, through the tunnels, back to my office. All the while, I debated over the best approach to use with Matthew. Certainly telling him about the possession was right out. He'd grown accustomed to my peculiar methods, but it was doubtful he'd accept a bald confrontation. How difficult, I wondered, would it be to cordon off the bridge leading to New Jersey?



As chance would have it, I had to say very little. "I know who has Jordan, and he's trying to cross into New Jersey." Matthew

efficiently took the details and told me to meet him there and hung up the telephone.

By the time I'd arrived uptown, Matthew had stalled all outgoing traffic at the George Washington Bridge. It was so backlogged that I was forced to exit the taxicab and walk the rest of the way. The sharp-eyed detective spotted me first.

"What on Earth?" I said, looking at the mass of vehicles blocking the bridge entrance. City trucks from the Department of Street Cleaning formed a haphazard blockade.

"I drafted the Distinguished Service Company," he announced smartly in his Irish brogue. "The DSC, Department of Street Cleaning. Their trucks are trollipin' around all night. I called in a favor and had 'em block the way till I got here."

I looked at the long line of headlights lining the avenue. There must have been hundreds of vehicles formed in two columns. "What about other men . . .?" I searched for the colloquialism. "*Backup*. What about your backup?"

He nodded. "Aye. They're 'ere. We kept the cars hidden. I didn't want to scare the fish off. I had a few radio cars come ahead. Tryin' not to make a stink 'bout it. Just a typical jam."

We strolled along the side of the road, casually glancing at the mechanical congestion. A Rolls Royce Silver Ghost should be easy to spot. But with the deepening night, and the sea of automobiles, it proved a greater challenge.

"So who tipped you?" Matthew asked.

I smiled. "I can't reveal my sources. It's doubtful you'd believe me."

He fixed me with a serious stare. "You sure 'bout this? There will be hell to pay if I don't hook this fish on this trip."

"As sure as I can be. And, as I said, he's linked directly to Gregor Van Eych. That should give you something to cut

through the red tape.”

Matthew chuckled, something I'd not heard him do much as of late. “Indeed it will. But first we have to find the rascal.”

By all appearances, we were two men who'd abandoned our automobile and were walking in the opposite direction. As we spoke, I stole glances at the bumper-to-bumper traffic. An angry wind flapped at our overcoats, the dark clouds spilling into each other above.

Horns blared. People yelled, throwing curses—occasionally at us. This was a part of life that never visited Jefferson, North Carolina, and I hoped never would. In some uncanny manner, I longed for a place in the world that remained unchanged by the ravages of society and technology.

“Rudolph!” A voice called from amid the noise.

The lights mounted on the bridge illuminated the area like a train of pachyderms in a circus. But in the mess, I spotted Jordan's rangy form, waving from a Silver Ghost.

In an instant she vanished into the vehicle. I turned to inform an absent Matthew. He was already threading through the traffic toward the Rolls Royce.

Quickly I took after him, waving my hands at the angry drivers I passed.

“Stop there,” said the big man who I'd come to know as Weldon Buck. He stood partially blocked by the automobile door, shotgun pointed.

Matthew slowed, but didn't halt. “Put that down,” he snapped. “You shoot me and a hundred other bulls charge you.”

For a moment, it was clear Weldon considered the option. However, I knew his mind too well, how his thoughts flowed. Desperate and becoming unhinged certainly made his decision-making foggy. Inhaling deeply, I focused my

mind. Without the aid of other material, it was impossible to gain control of him.

Just as he lifted the gun to fire, Jordan burst from the driver's side of the vehicle, throwing herself against his large bulk. While laudable, such an undertaking was destined to end poorly—except, it unbalanced Weldon, sending him sprawling headlong into the metal doorframe.

The shotgun boomed.

Desperately, I ran forward.

Although he resembled a tortoise in many ways, Matthew was quick on his feet. With speed he bounded for Weldon, reaching around the door, and hauling the large man effortlessly forward. I heard the thud of Weldon's head hitting the hood of the Silver Ghost. Matthew was paying his respects to the vehicle's chauffeur and owner.

The blare of horns continued. Some people fled by foot. A gang of uniformed patrolmen bolted from the shadows. In the confusion, I searched for Jordan. Seized by a new fear, I moved into the forming mob.

Like an unsuspecting window shopper, I was rushed from the flank. Jordan slammed into me, holding onto me. Even in the growing wind, I smelled her hair. Her grip was so tight that it seemed she were trying to squeeze the air from my lungs.

Try as I might, I couldn't budge—I couldn't untangle myself from her embrace. And I didn't want to.

Many things haunted me, but if that moment, that feeling, were the cost, then I'd gladly wait for the dunning.



Surprisingly, it took very little effort to convince Jordan to stay at my apartment until things were settled. She was not one to shy away from a conflict, or even a kidnapping.

I thought my suggestion might appear both forward and overly masculine. At the very least, I anticipated taunting from Matthew. Instead, he agreed with a grunt as though it were an obvious conclusion.

With Weldon Buck in jail for kidnapping, Matthew easily re-opened the investigation into Gregor Van Eych. By no means did he expect Van Eych to *roll*—as he put it—but it was another twist of the thumbscrews.

My immediate worries went to Jordan, however. The first two days at my apartment she did little but brood in silence. Her eyes still glimmered like emeralds, but perhaps with the ever slightest of flaws. I could easily imagine what she'd seen in the netherworld when being transported by the shamblers. Knowing how it affected her remained a mystery. I decided to let her broach the subject when the time was appropriate. My only hope was her world had not been destroyed by what visions loomed behind it.

On the third evening after her return, Matthew dropped by with flowers. Upon seeing the gloriously red roses, I chastised myself for not having the same idea.

“Not sure if you like roses,” he said awkwardly.

Jordan smiled, quickly accepting them. “They’re beautiful,” she said. “You really shouldn’t have.”

This was not the Jordan Gabriel I knew. This was not the Matthew Leahy I knew either. I shook my head, fearing I’d entered some fevered dream. Alas, the motion did nothing but strain my neck.

“How are things here?” Matthew asked as Jordan vanished into the kitchen.

“You know the color has significance,” I said.

A blank gaze faced me.

“Red, in roses it had an underlying meaning.”

He shrugged and trundled into the living room, anchoring

himself to a chair. "I don't know the meaning," he said. "But I do know it makes a better gift than a book."

"Was that a dozen, or did you harvest a field?"

A broad smile filled Matthew's visage. "You need to wear your glasses more often. If you could only see what I see."

"Would you like some tea?" Jordan called from the kitchen. "It's no trouble. I have some brewing."

"Tea would be grand," he called back. Then he said to me, "What's wrong with coffee?"

I dropped into the chair opposite him. "I find the taste bitter."

"Aye . . . Of that I'm certain. Still, you should try it sometime." He peered toward the kitchen doorway. "How's she doing?"

"Better," I said. His tone worried me. "Is Mr. Buck being cooperative?"

A heavy sigh answered the question without words. "He's full of tales, that's for certain. The big fish is still dancing 'round me, but I did haul in one of his lady friends." He paused as though concentrating on the words. "A *Miss Katya Petrovik*."

I arched an eyebrow as though the name held no meaning.

"My records have her as a burlesque dancer with a few vacations in the joint. She claims to be an assistant to Van Eych. I was hopin' that if Jordan could identify her, I'd have more to go on."

There seemed no end to this. To think of Van Eych nestled in his mansions, going about his wretched business without regard for anything but his own interests infuriated me.

Jordan appeared with a cup of tea, handing it to Matthew. She gave me a sidelong glance. "Oh, would you like a cup?"

"No need to bother," I said, my thoughts elsewhere. She

smiled and returned to the kitchen where I heard her inhaling the scent of the roses—quite loudly.

“Can we give her a few days?” I asked. “We’ve not spoken about her experience yet.”

Matthew raised a hand. “Give her time. I’m not out of tricks yet.”

“Nor am I,” was what I wanted to say. “Good,” was what I managed. I had little faith that the law could lay hand on Van Eych. His ilk was immune to punishment without knowledge of the supernatural. Being a sorcerer doubled his protection. But I was weary of this, and he was not beyond my reach.

CASE NINE

AN ANCIENT SUMMONING

THE HALLS OF THE Detective Division in many ways resembled those of the Manhattan State Hospital for the Insane. Upon reflection, there seemed a remote connection—beyond the institutional relations. A drab green paint, chipped and marred, covered the block walls of what Matthew termed “Roll Row.” Although it was a short hallway, several rooms lined each side.

As I stood outside room 3B, waiting for Jordan and Matthew to question Katya Petrovik, patrolmen continually passed by, stealing sidelong glances as they went. I’d made sure to wear a raincoat so as to fall in with the crowd, yet I still garnered curious stares.

After several minutes of my entertaining the city’s finest, the door flung open with Matthew hauling Jordan out, her fiery hair swaying as she struggled.

“What on Earth?” I said, surprised.

Matthew easily settled Jordan against the opposite wall, loosening his grip on her arms. “Straighten your feathers, lass,” he

said soothingly. “You need to leave the hard stuff for me.”

Jordan huffed, her eyes narrowed.

“What happened?” I asked.

“This one’s a real bearcat,” Matthew said. “Gave Miss Petrovik a haymaker.”

“You punched her?” I said, astonished.

“She had it coming,” Jordan answered, some of the Jersey returning. “I recognized her voice. She sat outside of my room, saying . . . saying hateful things . . .”

Delicately, Matthew guided her to a bench. “Have a seat, and maybe some water to cool you down.” He turned to a peeping patrolman. “Aye! Quit gawkin’ and get me a glass of water!”

The uniformed officer jumped at the command.

Overall, matters were becoming more and more difficult to reconcile. My temper simmered at the thought of what had happened to Jordan. I needed to speak to her about it, hopefully to help her. But first, I needed more answers.

“Matthew, I must speak with Miss Petrovik.”

He looked at me, surprise registering on his face. “I don’t need you havin’ a go at her too. I’ve got all I need. Jordan can identify her voice. With that and the yarns Weldon Buck’s spinnin’, I can go after Van Eych.”

“Of course,” I said. “Remember I mentioned sources. I need to verify some details—they may or may not prove useful.” I lifted both my palms. “I swear I’ll not strike the woman.”

He screwed his eyes tight. “Just questions. Don’t get near her.”

“Just questions,” I repeated, then entered the room.

When the door closed behind me, Katya Petrovik didn’t bother to look up. She sat in a hard, wooden chair, elbows on the table, head cupped in her hands. I wondered which

caused more pain, her eye or her dignity. Then she giggled with an air of self-satisfaction.

Ever so slightly, I opened my second-sight, touching upon her soul.

Her head jerked up, eyes of blue ice set in her face.

“You’re not Katya Petrovik,” I said.

She sat back, her face almost bloodless. “I know you.” Her eyes shifted about the room. “*They* know you, too.”

“Good. Then we both know why you should fear me. You cannot keep this woman’s body.”

“It’s mine!” Katya yelled. “The strumpet was tired of living. All she did was squander her life. I deserved a second chance. She never even deserved a *first*.”

“And Gregor Van Eych thinks *I* suffer hubris,” I replied calmly. “It seems that affliction runs in his family. Which one are you? A dead sister? Aunt? Mother?”

A shadowy, ironic sneer danced upon her lips. “Perhaps a lover . . .”

“I’ve heard his thoughts. My aim was too high. A servant?”

She jumped to her feet, sending the chair squealing behind. “You insignificant worm! I’ll do as I like. Soon this . . . this world—” she waved her hands— “it will belong to Xinlurgash, and those who serve her.”

“Perhaps. But you will not be here to see that.” A blackness swept over me. Continuing the conversation was contemptible. I extended my second-sight, bringing into focus the others standing around us in the room. The wretched, the huddled masses of dead, forgotten and sacrificed.

“No!” She stumbled backward.

“*Ninshri ka imma gish . . .*,” I intoned the first words of the exorcism.

“You’ll murder me for a worthless degenerate?” Katya

spluttered. “She was the chaff of humanity. I . . .”

With a gesture, I silenced her. Frantically she clawed at invisible hands around her throat. This isn’t killing, I told myself. Defending the powerless against the powerful was what I was doing. This undying spirit had locked away a living soul to take a second life at life.

As I continued the incantation, the figures of the dead pulled away from me, strangely fearful. Meanwhile, others leered. And still others, familiar countenances, watched in stoic judgment.

I extended my hands, using energy inside me to draw out the spirit. No, not a spirit. If ever there were a name, *demon* was it. The darkness in my soul, the lingering demon, recognized its kin.

The woman’s head shook. Her body contracted. She hissed and gnashed her teeth.

I uttered the final phrase of the incantation, and Katya collapsed on the floor.

Before I refocused my thoughts, Matthew flung the door wide. “What in the blue blazes is goin’ on?” An iron grip held my shoulder, keeping me from toppling.

“Whoa, there, Rudolph.” He leaned me against the wall. “What’s goin’ on?”

I inhaled deeply, returning the curtain over the ethereal world. “I believe the woman was suffering from amnesia. It appears Jordan’s knock on the head has set her straight.”

“Stay there,” Matthew said. He moved toward Katya, kneeling. “Did she faint?”

“Yes, as best as I can tell. Then again, I’m not a physician. I know she started to say something about a man kidnapping her and then suddenly fell over. My guess is when she wakes, she’ll be quite cooperative.”

Hastily, I retreated from the room.



Over the few days since Jordan had returned, we'd grown accustomed to sitting together in silence. The ride to my apartment offered no variations on this theme. No conversation seemed better than superficial banter. To speak of things as if nothing had happened, as though what she'd experienced were commonplace, felt demeaning to me. Standing against all of that was my desire to help her.

When we reached my apartment door, I made a show of unlocking it, positioning myself before her, the cold autumn rain dripping from my coat.

Her step lacked its familiar jaunt as she passed over the threshold. Midway in, she paused. My nerves tingled, and I held my breath, waiting for her response.

"Is this for me?" she asked. Her words were light and fragrant like rose petals.

"Yes. I didn't know what to put in it." I closed the door. "Rather, I wasn't sure what *not* to put in it." My awkward and tangled string of words caused me to flush. She stepped to the table, quickly picking up the canvas bag, seemingly undisturbed by my strangled oratory.

"Thank you," she said. And then froze. "Oh, I've overstayed my welcome. I didn't . . ."

"That's preposterous," I countered. "I merely wanted to give you a gift."

She looked at me expectantly, strands of hair playing across her smooth forehead. Finally, she arched her eyebrows. "And?" she prompted.

How Matthew managed these situations completely confounded me. Most definitely he possessed keen insights about people, and this gave him a distinct advantage. Non-plussed, I soldiered on. "Do the shops on Fifth Avenue carry what we need?"

Rain tapped against the windows.

“You want to go shopping?” she asked. There was a slight edge to her words.

“Only if you want to. I’ve no classes today.”

“Maybe next week.” She shouldered the bag as though trying it out. “Besides, I usually shop at the East Side markets or in Brooklyn.”

I realized that we had fallen into the very discussion I so greatly wanted to avoid. Fearful that we might continue in this direction endlessly, I decided to be blunt. “Wait,” I said, sliding a chair from the table. “Sit a moment. We need to discuss this at some point, and I’m not mentioning it now because I want you to return home. In fact, that is the farthest thing from my mind.

“I need to know that you’re all right,” I said, lowering into a chair next to her. “And I don’t know how to ask.”

She slipped the bag from its resting place, hanging it on the back of the chair. Planting her feet firmly on the floor, she smoothed her skirt. “I understand why you distance yourself from me,” she said wistfully. Her head turned upward, eyes welling. “When I was . . . *taken*—I saw a horrifying place. It was dark, and lonely, filled with a nothingness that went on forever . . .”

A sickening sensation fell over me, making my heart a hollow hole in my chest.

“Why?” she sobbed. “Why is it this way? That night, in the field, I saw dead people walking, and such horrible things in the darkness. *Things* touching my mind. Why would God create that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, clasping her hand.

She looked at me pleadingly. “I need to believe there is something more. Some reason. Some hope. If the universe can be malevolent, then why can’t it be good?”

“It isn’t one or the other. Both are there, in plain sight and hidden away. We choose what we want to see. You *can* choose.”

“But that doesn’t make it better . . .” She gripped my hand. “If I ignore the emptiness, then I become empty. I become a part of that.”

Guilt formed like a weight in my stomach from the truth in her words. *In the dark clouds hidden, the stars can shed no light.* So many times I’d read that passage, but ignored its meaning. Hope died if no one fought for it. I’d fooled myself into thinking otherwise. Small gestures were all I had made, meager offerings to a just universe—forever longing for redemption, forever fearing the real terror, an uncaring creation.

“I won’t let that happen to you,” I said. “I promise.”

“How can you? There are hounds that walk out of corners and monsters that pass between dimensions.”

“You’re safe here.”

She started to speak, but she stopped when I folded her hands in mine. The warmth was comforting. “There are ways of protecting places. That is why I wanted you to stay with me. Nothing foul can enter here.”

A moment passed before belief shaded her countenance.

Once I’d learned of wards, I quickly carved them in the focal points of the apartment. Together they formed a greater sign, an ancient glyph that barred otherworldly trespassing.

“What about Van Eych?” she asked. “What does he want?”

No man is rich who shakes and groans, convinced he needs more. Again, Boethius came to mind. “He’s lost. He worships an ancient evil, thinking he’ll become more powerful.”

“That’s why he had the Sumerian lament in his collection,” she said. “The clay tablets that spoke of a horror laying waste to a city. He worships that destroyer.”

“And he’s working to that end now.” The demon dwelling inside me seemingly shivered with delight at my realization.

No matter how many times I turned away from the facts, I always found myself facing the same truth. I couldn’t choose my path. It had been set. Fated. Van Eych had dominated me like he had so many others, taking away all I loved.

There was something I very much wanted to tell Jordan. But doing so was mere folly. Instead, I pulled my hands away, standing.

“He used you to occupy me,” I said. “I’m a thorn in his side. Now he has to move quicker. And so do I.”

“You can’t go back there. Let the police arrest him. They can deal with it.”

“We both know he’ll never be touched,” I said bitterly. “His roots run too deep in this city. And Van Eych isn’t worried about that. He intends to open a portal, allowing unimaginable abominations into this world. The enslaver has become the enslaved.”

“No!” She jumped up. “Don’t do this. You can’t see how you’ve changed, what all of this is doing to you. You’re slipping away, Rudolph. I can’t let that happen.”

I looked at her, briefly smiling. “If I turn away now, then I’ll lose everything. Please believe me.”

She dropped into the chair, burying her face in her hands. “This isn’t fair.”

“It never is,” I said.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.



I hatched up a story and brought it to Matthew. He ruminated over my words for some time, sitting behind his cluttered desk. Years in his occupation had hardened him. All that remained were bits and pieces of puzzles. He worked them out, trying to make sense of things. And this puzzle was probably the strangest. One of New York City's wealthiest men was kidnapping people without rhyme or reason. There was no obvious profit, and no discernable motivation. That left my options limited.

"What do you mean by a cult?" he asked, quizzically.

"It's like the Ziven murder," I replied. "A group of individuals who share the same beliefs. Work to the same end."

"A gang, then?"

Matthew had spent some of his youth in Hell's Kitchen, giving him a propensity to view the world through a narrow lens. Then again, I had no better claim to the shape of reality.

"A gang, but they worship something like the Devil."

His dark eyebrows climbed up his forehead. While he wasn't a religious man, the suggestion did go against the grain of his Catholic upbringing.

I puffed on my pipe, trying to appear casual.

"You're lousy at lyin' for a professor. Either that or your students are pushovers."

The remark surprised me. It was replete with indictments at many levels. I opted to keep to the matter at hand. "The fact is, I need your assistance. I believe Gregor Van Eych is planning to perpetrate a crime. Also," I paused briefly, blowing a cloud of smoke, "it *is* related to a cult."

"Sure you're not goin' for revenge?"

"If I were, I would not invite you."

"Aye." He nodded. "But you've done queerer things. If

you're on the level, I'll play along. 'Sides, it wouldn't hurt to stir the pot a bit. He doesn't know what tales his friends have been tellin'." He stood and grabbed a trench coat from the hanger next to his desk, wrestling it over his bulk.

Although he didn't say it, I knew the matter gnawed at him. From our first meeting, Matthew had made it clear that a man's conscience was for sale. Gregor Van Eych sold his long ago, and Matthew wanted to collect on the debt.



A driving rain pelted the hard top of Matthew's Ford as it pulled in front of Van Eych's Bayside mansion. It loomed before us in Gothic glory. Water streamed down the three-story walls of stone which were interrupted by tall, rectangular windows. Scrolled columns supported a roof over the main entrance.

I struggled with my umbrella while Matthew dashed up the marble steps.

"A little water won't harm you," he called.

Surrendering to the mystifying mechanism that refused to cooperate, I left it behind, pulling my raincoat over my head.

"Good heavens. You're a real sheik, Rudolph. I'll testify to that."

"It's that contraption. If any of them worked properly—"

"Hold the ten-twenty-thirty speech," Matthew interrupted. "Save it for the big fish." With a meaty hand, he thumped on the heavy oaken door.

We waited as the rain sizzled on the earth. Growing impatient, Matthew hammered again. This time the door parted slightly. A moon-eyed face peered at us, settling on me. It belonged to Lucan—another of Van Eych's servants, another of the demon possessed.

“We’re here to see your boss,” Matthew announced before the man could speak.

“He’s occupied presently,” Lucan said. “Another time would be better.” And the large door started to close.

“Whoa!” Matthew slipped a foot in the gap. “Hold your horses. We didn’t drive in this weather to get the brush off. Or did you already forget who I am?”

Lucan took a moment before reconsidering. The door opened. “Please, come in. I’m certain Mr. Van Eych can make time for your visit.” He motioned and we entered.

“You can wait in the salon,” he said, leading us across the vast foyer.

I had memories of the mansion, but they were pale in comparison to the actual place. The majestic marble floor seemed endless, and glistened as though beneath a pool of water. Passing through an archway, we entered a smaller room by the standards of the place. A tall fireplace roared along the far wall, and a Persian rug stretched across the hard floor, with a square of four leather chairs on top. Oil paintings hung on the walls. Most likely all of the portraits were ancestors, and each the corporeal image of those doing the possessing.

Lucan maintained a distance from me, moving through the room from one entrance to the second. “Would you like something to drink?”

“A good belt of whiskey,” Matthew blurted.

Lucan started to reply, but then hesitated. “I regret that there is no alcohol to offer.”

“A grand shame,” Matthew replied. “But you almost took the bait.”

Just then a man and a woman appeared in the first entrance. The female had short black hair that shrouded her serious face. The man was muscular and wedged into his clothes. He looked like he could throw a baseball like

a cannon shot. Both were demons in disguise.

“What is this?” the woman with raven eyes asked. “No one else is—” She halted upon meeting my gaze.

My thoughts whirred. The familiar supernatural pressure gripped me. To blurt out a warning seemed pointless. The reasoning would certainly be unclear. Before I had time to organize my thoughts, Matthew reacted.

“I always keep a fishing pole in the Ford in case I find a nice place to fish like the bay down the road.” He spoke to me, ignoring the new arrivals.

There was little doubt that if I’d attempted subterfuge in communicating, my meaning would have been as obscure to Matthew as his was to me. I was nonplussed by my ability to comprehend ancient languages and inhuman speech, yet unable to decipher Matthew’s language.

Without another word, the woman slipped from the doorway. The two men moved forward. In a remote part of my mind, myriad voices whispered. I knew Van Eych’s black ritual had commenced.

I stepped toward the fireplace, Lucan slowly closing on me. In the periphery, the other fellow rushed Matthew.

I bounded, taking up a fireplace poker. Lucan continued toward me, his eyes dark, skin sallow. The demon was beginning to transform his physical form, consuming the human soul within.

A crash sounded from across the room as Matthew tossed his opponent aside, cursing as he went.

Realizing Lucan was more monster than mortal, I dropped the poker. It clattered to the marble hearth. Bending my will upon him, I prepared to cast a spell.

Unexpectedly, Matthew shifted behind Lucan, hammering the back of his head with a revolver. Lucan promptly fell forward, his head *cracking* against the floor.

“Were you goin’ fisticuffs?” Matthew said. “Fraid the poker might hurt him?”

“A misjudgment on my part,” I said, shaking my head.

“What a brazen bunch.” Matthew kept the revolver in his hand. “But that’s good enough for me to haul in Van Eych.”

The whispers continued to drone. “We don’t have much time,” I said. “Van Eych is in the basement, and he’s . . . I need to stop him.”

Matthew gawked. “Do you even know how many more of these hoodlums are prowlin’ the place? I’m goin’ to get a few more of the boys over here to clean up.”

Before he’d finished, I was running toward the foyer.

“Hey! Where are you off to? Didn’t you hear me?”

“The basement,” I called over my shoulder.



The chamber glowed with unnatural light. Through the rows of columns, I saw the portal. The stone circle churned and tossed with reddish-yellow light. The murmuring voices crested and faded.

I extended my second-sight. The otherworldly shroud shimmered away, revealing a chamber filled with tormented souls. They blurred and blended, passing through each other, unable to escape. Glowing wards contained them—an earthly purgatory for the unearthly.

The remnant of the demon-thing inside me stirred. Determined, I stepped forward. The sea of dead cleared a path, fearful of touching me. A strange irony.

Approaching the portal that linked this world to another place, I heard rhythmic intonations. I’d thought it to be Van Eych, but as I drew closer, I saw it was the avatar of *the ever-consuming*, Xingurlash.

It stood alone, the space around it empty, countless

specters swirling around, folding through one another as though to be near it were painful.

A mound of bodies lay to the left of the towering avatar—the corpses of the once possessed who'd served Van Eych, now sacrificed. Lifeless eyes gazed upward, heads rested against torsos and extremities. All of their essence drained.

The chanting stopped. "You are persistent," the avatar said. Its voice boomed. "And pathetic."

A wickedness radiated from the being, and in that miasma of foulness, I sensed Gregor Van Eych. He'd joined with it, blending his soul with its soullessness.

"It is time," it growled. "For generations my kin worked toward this day. She who was banished shall return."

What little sanity Van Eych possessed had most certainly departed when he surrendered to the avatar. Somewhere in his history, the madness had sparked, smoldering over the years until it became a raging fire of lunacy. Wealth and power had been the rewards. The desire for greater power had been the trap.

The avatar faced me. In its eyes blazed an ancient evil. The abomination named Xinlurgash could not enter this world, so it sent a minion, an aspect of its mind, its will to destroy the barrier.

Hollow eyes gazed at me. Barbs covered its glistening form. From nickel-sized pores in its flesh, a viscous fluid oozed, dripping from its talons, pooling on the black floor.

A tingle climbed my spine, slipping into the back of my head. It was trying to read my thoughts. With growing anger, I forced it out.

"Still arrogant," it said, smiling wolfishly. Jagged, yellowed teeth filled its mouth. "I will savor your death." A vicious hand waved, indicating the surrounding shades. "Your soul will join them."

I snorted. "You're a fool. I may die, but so will you." As I

spoke, I felt something lurking behind me. Chaotic thoughts spilled from the unseen creature's mind. Only the drive to kill existed. I recognized it from Weldon's encounter—an abhorrent creation pulled into this existence by Van Eych. Guardian and monstrosity both.

“You have wasted my time long enough,” the avatar growled.

The murmuring of the dead swelled. Then, faintly, I sensed the avatar's will, reaching out, commanding the spirits, *kill him!*

The blackness inside me stirred. I touched upon it, disturbing the residue of the demon. Willing myself, I pulled its energy forth, focusing it.

The lurking guardian behind me lurched forward as did the horde of formless dead. The pressure in my head increased as I concentrated upon the vile force within.

“Die!” With a word, I released the psychic blast.

Waves of astral power surged, radiating outward in concentric circles, transforming flesh to ash, pushing souls through the cracks of reality into an eternal void.

The charging creature squealed as it was incinerated. The voices of the dead rose in a chorus of pain and fear and agony. After the flash of white light had faded, only two dark souls remained.

The avatar hissed—a wet, ragged sound. The blossoming light of the portal shone upon it.

I slumped with weariness. I'd used the demon's remaining life force in an attempt to bring everything to an end. The living and dead in the chamber had been destroyed, banished. Without their souls, the membrane between worlds could not be pierced.

Faintly, I heard the clanking of feet on the iron stairs. I knew it was Matthew descending.

The avatar howled in rage. It raised a gangly arm, and impaled it in my chest. The talons did not penetrate flesh; rather, it reached into my soul.

A preternatural silence filled the room. It was as though time had stopped. Then came the pain. Each beat of my heart pushed scorching agony through my body. My thoughts dimmed. I felt my soul being consumed.

The scene unfolded from a distance in my mind. I saw the thing that was Gregor Van Eych before me, one arm buried in my chest, another pointed at the portal. A hellish light boiled in the circle. Flaming tongues lapped at the gloom. A cold emptiness swathed my body.



I drifted in a nothingness—oblivion. In a perverse manner, there was something peaceful about it. Beyond the reach of life and death meaning and purpose evaporated. The worries that had once burdened me belonged to another realm. I drifted in absolute emptiness.

It seemed without a form, my memories started to wither. Phantom thoughts vanished when I touched upon them. One at a time, I tugged at things I knew were in my mind, and each slipped away. Fearful of losing the remembrances most dear, I thought to blank my mind. My effort was futile. Unbidden images flashed past, each evaporating as quickly as they appeared.

If I ignore the emptiness, I become a part of it. The words flicked over my consciousness. They floated on a mournful voice that had once been melodious, full of life and happiness. Then the memory abruptly died.

The numbness inside became a bubbling rage. Anger, grief, joy, and anguish twisted into a knot, surprising me with their strength. *I will not go . . .*



Marshaling my will, I transformed it into resentment, forming a scream—a cry that thundered through the void.

My eyes winked open to find the avatar of Xingurlash chanting despicable phrases, sapping my life force, using it to open the gate.

I thrust a hand forward, mystically penetrating the thing's flesh, reaching for its black soul. So many had died at its hands. I could not allow it to continue, to steal a world where goodness could exist. Although this might be the last place in the universe, I was determined to protect it. At that moment, the uncaring universe became my enemy, as did all of its progeny and brethren.

Furious eyes locked on me in disbelief.

“Two can play this game,” I hissed. I twisted my hand deeper.

Wrath quickened my spirit. A malevolent power pulsed along my arm. The avatar reeled back, choking, whimpering. From his ruthless maw ushered an inky mist, billowing upward, dispersing, expanding. It reeked of a profound wretchedness—the evil of the ages given shape. The putrid cloud emitted images. A horrid past flooded my mind with the unholy combination of an undying monster and Gregor Van Eych. Knowledge emerged as the mortar that bound the sights and revolting pleasures. Unwilling to be sullied with the loathsomeness inside the avatar, I deflected much of the effusion.

Then I pushed further, probing into the hidden spaces of its very being. Fury stormed in the part that once had been Gregor Van Eych, fueled by his failure. But the avatar rejoiced.

Its arm jerked free of my body. Gasping, clawing at my arm, it crumpled to the floor, uttering a solitary curse.

A fitting reprisal came to mind, though I didn't speak it.

My thoughts were like gliding storm clouds rolling between Heaven and Hell, light and dark. In the timelessness of the moment, I stumbled forward, driven by the anger for those innocents who'd been sacrificed, abused, murdered, and the manifestations of evil in its many forms: pain, illness, loss, death. Then—the portal erupted—I heard an unwholesome keening echoing throughout the chamber.

This was far from over.

In the fiery circle, a vast, malign shape writhed—a thing of despair and misery.

Long stalking limbs extended from the portal, landing on the rugged stone floor. They were spider-like in their motions. Others followed as a massive creature pulled itself from another existence into this one.

The circle flared and flashed, wiggling tentacles sliced through the air, and a gigantic, bloated body appeared. Man-sized horns extended in every direction, and the sound of a snapping maw filled the chamber. It was the forgotten entity known as *the ever-consuming*, or at least the only shape possible in this reality.

Unseen energy burst from the gate, sending me staggering backward. My arms flailed as I struggled to remain balanced. There was no end to this.

Among the tumult, I suddenly experienced a moment of terrible clarity. It was doubtful that my lifeforce could open the gateway, particularly since I'd exhausted the essence of the demon inside me. But when I attacked the avatar, discarding most of its power, I had inadvertently weakened the barrier dividing the worlds. My rash action had summoned forth the abomination. The Wheel of Fate had spun again.

I crouched, shuffling away, every nerve electric with dread.

Now and again, I stole glances for Matthew. In the shadowy distance, I spied him as motionless as a statue on the stairs. Time remained unmoving.

Sluggishly, the ancient god emerged from the portal. I'd never set eyes on such a hideous malformation, yet it was markedly familiar. It and the others of its kind, worshipped by humanity as gods, were barred from entering this existence by some unknown law of the universe. Even so, their progeny squirmed through barriers in the form of nightmares, sickness, and cruelty, finding hosts in mankind. I stood dismayed. Those who were to be consumed by this beast venerated this merciless thing—what could I do against that?

Legs extended as it stepped over the mound of corpses. My head roared with its pernicious, tumultuous thoughts. The tremendous creature stood backlit by the stirring fires in the portal. A long, misshapen shadow darker than the black floor stretched forward.

With obscene fascination, I stopped. I could not turn away; I was compelled, drawn to it. I knew the beast bore hatred of all living things, longing to consume them, consign them to non-existence. But I was driven toward it.

“Submit.” The command pushed into my mind. The solitary word rang with a million voices.

Once again, I stood on a battlefield between the enemy and friends. Like so many years ago, the answer called to me: flee, hide. But this time I would not turn away.

This false god had no rightful place in the cosmos I'd once known. But it did belong to a domain hidden behind the veils of reality where suffering and anguish and malice were divine. Its tendrils had wormed into this world, taking root in such fertile soil. To battle it was folly, and I boiled with the madness for such folly. I would bring about the end to such a creation. I'd tasted enough of the desolate universe's

vitriol, and I knew there had to be something better. Faltering determination became cold steel. The uncaring universe was my enemy, as was its offspring and brethren.

“Submit to me,” the beast commanded. My skull ached like it was cracking from pressure.

I dropped to my knees, holding my head. Malign delight spilled from the monster.

“I will consume you,” it said without words.

Did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the lamb make thee? The questioning lines from Blake clawed to the surface of my thoughts. I pushed to my feet.

“No,” I said acidly. I followed with a casting, sending a streak of azure energy across the chamber. It exploded against one of the beast’s legs, sundering it.

Black bile squirted from the severed limb. The beast staggered, shifting its weight to the remaining five legs.

I prepared to cast again, one at a time I’d saw off its legs, just as the machineguns did in the war.

With bounding leaps, the thing darted between columns and was upon me, slamming a tentacle at my body. The force hurled me through the air, spinning me. A granite column intercepted my flying form. I crashed against it, dropping to a heap on the floor.

“Your kind wallows in pain and chaos.” The words blazed through my mind, a cacophony of voices.

My ribs felt like spears piercing my chest, sharp and ruthless. I struggled upward, facing the monster. An eldritch comprehension germinated, flowering into understanding. A smile crossed my face. No fear lurked inside me, because I was the nightmare this beast feared.

Mindless chaos struggled to rip apart the universe, collapse it upon itself. Countless horrors roamed the voids and the depths of time and space, seemingly intent upon bringing

an end to all existence. That was the malevolent purpose of the chaos—if *purpose* were even the correct term. But with startling clarity, I saw a reason, the meaning of humanity. So long as we survived, so did the whole of creation—for good or ill. It wasn't a matter of those who judge us, for we were the judges, the arbitrators. Humanity was the soul of the cosmos.

I intoned the arcane words, thrusting another bolt of light at the beast. It seared through another leg. The creature tottered.

Another burst followed, scorching a third stalky limb.

Unable to keep its balance, the beast reeled, plummeting to the stony floor. Furiously, tentacles slapped and whirled, wrapping around columns, sliding across the rough ground. The remaining legs pumped like pistons, hopelessly struggling to lift the massive body.

I approached slowly. For the first time I noticed the thing possessed no eyes. It sensed through other means.

I felt—tasted—the ferocious hatred and hunger inside it. Fleishy extremities swept at me. I stood beyond their reach. A blur of words shot through my head. Other than a repetition, they held no meaning for me.

Suddenly, the portal exploded. Spouts of flame stretched outward, passing through everything. One whipped through my body, burning, but with a supernatural pain. In the blink of an eye, the world shifted. I stood in two realities. One was the familiar dimension, the other overlaid it, adding a sepia tint to everything. In that reality, the taint of evil blew like ash in an ethereal breeze. Everything shed the dark residue. Looking at my hands, they dissolved and reformed, repeating the process over and over again.

A ruddy aura surrounded the beast in this realm. The fire of the portal lapped at it, caressing it. Dark particles flew

away, but I noticed they didn't return. Bit by bit the thing was vanishing.

I mentally reached out. Beneath the insatiable fury was a fulsome mirth. Then I understood that the creature was feeding itself to the portal to shatter the gate, leaving a permanent channel between the worlds.

As if in response, words came, "I shall gorge upon this world."

The familiar dark rage returned. I charged forward. Effortlessly, the beast snapped me up in a writhing tentacle. I knew its intent—dash me against the floor, then devour my essence.

Infuriated, I clamped my hands on its oily flesh, and called upon its foulest memories. Using my hands as a conduit, I expelled a part of my lifeforce. With that I intoned a baleful incantation, one of its own making, to extinguish its existence from both realities.

It roared and shrieked. The tentacle pitched me aside as though I were poison. I flew to the floor, rolling, tumbling, my coat wrapping around my legs. I felt the jagged pain of bones breaking. Darkness enveloped me.



I woke to Jordan's tender touch. She stood over me, a soft hand on my cheek.

My eyes focused on her cherubic countenance. I saw the lingering concern slip away. She smiled.

Like a black geyser, memories gushed from the depths. I struggled to move, pain searing my body.

"It's all right," Jordan assured. "You're in the hospital. And safe. In fact, Matthew has been guarding you day and night."

"So has the lass," Matthew's voice sounded. He appeared

at her side, a broad grin on his angular face. “You gave us a bit of a scare.”

I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes for a moment. Faces and monsters blinked across my lids. “What about Van Eych?” I said, my voice hoarse and words slow.

What I wanted to know was about the beast, but I had no means of phrasing that question.

Matthew’s face rearranged itself into a frown. “No need for that now. Rest up, then I’ll fill you in.”

I shook my head. Even that slight motion pained me.

“You know he won’t rest until he hears,” Jordan said to Matthew.

“Aye. Rudolph is Rudolph.” He sidled to the foot of the bed, gripping the rail with his large hands. “Gregor Van Eych is dead. Do you remember that?”

“Yes.” I remembered that and much more. Those memories had become a part of me.

“After you ran off, I went for my twelve-gauge—”

“Your fishing rod,” I interrupted, slightly cheered that I’d decoded his message.

“Right. Then I radioed some uniforms and chased after you. When I got down there, I thought everyone was dead. I went lookin’ for you first, and instead stumbled over a pile of dead people. The short end is Gregor Van Eych was one of them.” He sighed heavily. “You were across the room. Looked like you’d been in a tussle.” He looked toward the window.

His avoidance worried me. The fear seeped into my bones. Perhaps he’d seen the beast or its remains or something on his way down the stairs.

“What else?” I mumbled. The medication made my lips malleable and difficult to control.

“Nothing else. You’re the only witness. I counted twenty-six dead, including Van Eych. Best explanation the medical

examiner has is poison.” He leaned forward, an expression of disapproval on his face. “Mind you, that’s ‘bout the only thing that spoke in your defense. We don’t run ‘round the city gettin’ revenge.”

I pulled at the corners of my mouth, doing my best to smile. His only worry was for my mortal soul. “I didn’t kill them. I wanted revenge. But I don’t think I could have handled the bunch.”

A hard laugh escaped him. “I thought the same, though I wanted to hear you say it.” He released the bed railing. “So then it was a cult then. A cage full of cuckoos doing somethin’ foul.” He turned to Jordan. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to stir up memories. I’ve said ‘nough for now.”

“What about the dancer and the chauffeur?” I asked.

“Petrovik is hoofing again, and Buck was nothin’ but a thug. He’ll get what’s comin’.”

I wondered what *was* coming. An emptiness gnawed at me, biting deep as though devouring the marrow in my bones.

“You need to rest, Rudolph,” Jordan said. “It’s all behind us now.”

“Right, it is,” Matthew agreed. “And you’re getting’ quite a reputation at the Detective Division. If I’m not careful, I’ll be on the streets.” Again he laughed and excused himself.

Once we were alone, Jordan pinned me with a long, silent scrutiny. “You can’t fix the world,” she said finally. “No one can.”

I laughed, although it sounded more like a grunt. Either way, it caused my body to ache. The world was too broken for me to fix. “You were right,” I said. “We can’t look away. We must gaze into the abyss.”

“In your condition, you should not be quoting Nietzsche,” she mockingly chastised me. “Sleep now, and forget about

fighting monsters.” She tucked the blanket around my shoulders. “I’ll always be here.”

She placed two books on the stand beside me. *The Gods of Mars*, and *The Iliad*.

I closed my eyes, and wandered in my sleep, remembering Homer’s words:

*Two urns by Jove’s high throne have ever stood,
The source of evil one, and one of good;
Blessings to these, to those he distributes ill;
To most he mingles both: the wretch decreed
To taste the bad unmixed, is cursed indeed;
He wanders, outcast both of earth and heaven.*

CASE TEN

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

PALE, GAUNT FACES TURNED toward us as we rumbled down 11th Avenue. Eyes, deep and sad, gazing, belonging to a never-ending human snake that stretched block after block after block. No light, no life lingered in the cold stares. Only woe and despair dwelled where once lived happiness and hope.

Hell's Kitchen was Matthew's neighborhood—at least prior to his becoming Detective Matthew Leahy. Now he was the enemy—one of *them*.

The Ford sputtered as we turned onto East 34th. He'd been promised a new automobile, but that had been before the 1929 market crash. Like the haggard men four abreast in the soup line, the vehicle was tired from overwork.

"I hope this is just a fool's errand I'm takin' you on, Rudolph," Matthew finally said. His eyes darted about. His vocation had taught him to see what most others overlooked. "It just can't be. This city can't stand it." He hesitated, leaving the words to smolder like a fire. It seemed as though if he were to

utter another syllable it would re-ignite a flame that could not be dampened.

“New York is very different from the farm I was raised on in North Carolina,” I said, hoping to alter the course of our conversation. “My parents’ house was surrounded by tall mountains—” I peered through the window at the tired tenements towering six-stories over the street. “There was always land to grow food. Here we are surrounded by steel and concrete. I must admit, I feel like an ant among these buildings that scrape the sky.”

Matthew twisted the complaining Ford into a place along the curb. In front of a tenement were four uniformed officers, standing like posts, watching over an empty building. The aged structures standing shoulder-to-shoulder had a few faces peeking from their grimy windows.

“New York is my home now,” Matthew said, clambering onto the street. “Always will be.”

I kept close on his heels as we entered the building. Already I spied the smirks and sharp glances of the officers. At one time they looked at me as a mere mollycoddle, now their thoughts were dark. Undaunted, I continued onward. Prepared to spout a lengthy quote or provide an impromptu lecture should I be challenged—a frightening defense to many.

By the time we reached the second floor, Matthew had removed his overcoat, leaving a cumbersome wool jacket draped over his large frame. I pulled my coat closer for warmth, knowing what I was about to see. I had already known this was not a fool’s errand.

Without preamble, he opened the door and strode inside. I heard a sharp inhale, like a man prepared to dive into a frigid pool of water. “The victim was found yesterday afternoon by an officer on rounds.” The detective moved to the center of

the empty room. Only the wan light from a narrow window provided illumination. It spilled across the filthy floor like a stagnant pool of water. “His body was found here—” Matthew gestured toward a black stain near his feet. “He was mutilated . . .”

As I listened, my eyes drifted toward the wall, pulled there like iron to a lodestone. Upon seeing the words, an icy hand seized me. The room now felt as cold as a crypt.

“Is it the same?” Matthew asked.

“*He gearwian þæt fyllo man hwa forlætan se leoht,*” I read aloud. “He serves the feast for those who have abandoned the light.” The corrupted Old English script had been scrawled on the wall with what I already knew to be human blood. It was the same as it had been nearly a decade ago.

“Are you sure, Rudolph?” Matthew asked bleakly. “Could it be someone else?”

I struggled to breathe. The chill air and its cloying odor of death and sweat and sickness stifled me. Gasping, I reflexively withdrew a handkerchief, locking it over my mouth and nose.

Matthew waited, but he didn’t need my confirmation.

“I am certain,” I managed after a moment, turning about. “It is the same.”

“*Damn,*” Matthew muttered. “There’s no escapin’ it this time.”

The weary floor creaked beneath his pacing bulk. I willed myself to face him. “What do you mean?”

“The first time the victim was a petty thief, and an immigrant. Few in city government want money spent on investigating that sort of murder. But this . . . this—” he shook a fist— “this time a man of *substance* was murdered.”

I thought it unlikely. We were standing in a ramshackle tenement in Hell’s Kitchen, not in a mansion on Millionaire’s

Row. "Who was it?"

"Harold Alstyne," he announced.

Another Blueblood, I thought. My tolerance of New York City's elite was quickly waning. "While I don't take an evening stroll along the gold paved lane of Park Avenue," I said. "I still know that a man like Alstyne would not be prowling around Hell's Kitchen. Even if we were to assume he had some unsavory appetite, some vile attraction to this district, men are at his beckon to manage such details—as you know. I can't imagine him even setting foot in this neighborhood."

"Detective," came a voice from the doorway. Startled, I spun to find a uniformed officer. "I've been called to Union Square. Some of the rabble are gathering."

As of late, I'd heard the word used often. It seemed that cold, hunger and poverty metamorphosed the people of the city into "rabble."

"Be gone, then. You're not needed here."

I felt the officer's stare settle upon me. There was a glimmer of curiosity in what I took to be the pale cast of my countenance. Without the residue of a demon sullyng my soul, I was skittish around gruesome sights.

"*Git!*" Matthew roared, and like a mouse to his lion, the officer scurried away.

"It *was* Alstyne," Matthew said, his voice hoarse but softer. "And this city is so bloated with corruption that a murderer *must* be found. While the *rabble* gathers at one end of Manhattan, the wealth gathers in midtown pullin' strings to protect their own. And our politicians dance and jump like the puppets they are. All the while gangsters set up gamblin' houses—even in the mansions on Park Avenue. No, this one won't be forgotten. This death was one of theirs."

"What about Van Eych? He was forgotten quickly. Isn't it possible—"

“No,” he interrupted. “That one was queer. He wasn’t one of them, he was above them. He never let them forget it either.”

While I didn’t share my friend’s instincts in many areas, I could read into this. The dark secret we’d uncovered a decade ago, one that we’d let rest in fear of what might be uncovered, was now in danger of returning. He was correct. The city couldn’t withstand this. We were facing something beyond humanity’s ken. And disturbing it would result in something far worse than a riot.



... the mighty beast was slain by my blow in the storm of battle. In this manner, and many times, loathsome monsters harassed me fiercely; with my fine sword I served them fittingly. I did not allow those evil destroyers to enjoy a feast, to eat me limb by limb, seated at a banquet—

A gentle tapping interrupted me. I gingerly placed *Beowulf* on a stack of books teetering on my end table—a skyscraper of writings.

When I opened the door, I received a cheerful, “Hello!”

Jordan Gabriel stood before me, a canvas bag slung over her shoulder, and a bright expression on her soft face. “I thought I’d pay a visit,” she said.

My gloomy disposition unexpectedly lightened. “Matthew is a perceptive fellow. And I suspect in league with you. Please, come in.”

Time had seemingly healed her wounds. Months after my discharge from the hospital, I noticed the return of her jaunty step and her self assurance.

With a *thump* she planted the canvas bag on my dining room table.

I winced at the sound.

“Books,” she pronounced. “Those type you dread so very much.”

“No more,” I said, closing the door. “Unless you brought them for the fire, you’ve wasted your time.”

Countless times I had lectured her about the ubiquitous *pulps* that plagued the world. At every opportunity I renounced them and condemned them. I professed about them, and fed them to my fireplace. Or at least, that is what I claimed. By some inexplicable means unfathomable to me, I’d come to enjoy them. It was a foul habit; one of which I was quite ashamed. And Jordan kept me plied with volumes of the sinful treasures. But now I suspected her motives. I couldn’t help but wonder if she knew of my horrid addiction.

“I won’t read them you know,” I offered as firmly as possible.

“They are for the fire. Cheaper than coal or wood.” She glanced at my end table. “Chrysler or Empire?” she asked.

I thought for a moment. “The last one was *Beowulf*. Malory would topple the lot. Therefore, it has reached its apex. It must be the Chrysler building.”

“I should have known. Chaucer or Malory always forms the foundation of the Empire State building.” She marched into the kitchen. “I’m having tea. Care to join me?”

“Indeed,” I answered, while quickly stealing a glance at the contents of the bag. Books and magazines! Enough to carry me for several days if I paced myself.

When she had returned, I had the fireplace blazing, and was settled on one side of the table.

“Lucky I brought plenty of books,” she said, placing cups and saucers before us.

For a long moment we said nothing. The fire hissed and popped, and the cups clanked. Finally, Jordan broached the subject. “Matthew says that they’ve returned.”

Even in the company of a roaring fire and within the walls of my apartment a bitter cold still slipped beneath my skin. “I suspect they’ve always been there. Only now we can no longer ignore them.”

She nodded. “Is it time to leave the city?”

“I can’t. That would be too easy. I’ve carried this secret too long to run from it now.”

“What have they done?” she asked.

“Another murder. Harold Alstyne.”

She arched an eyebrow. A motion I found charming. “How is he involved?”

“It seems that he owns a number of tenements in Hell’s Kitchen, and probably nearly every other district in the city. I’ve read in the papers that many people in that neighborhood have been turned out, living in the streets as they are unable to pay rent. I believe that’s why he was . . . *consumed*.”

“It *was* those creatures, then. The sin-eaters?”

Although I avoided using that label, it had been given to them in countless texts I had scoured in search of their history.

“I fear so. The medical examiner believes that Alstyne was eaten alive. Originally he stated it was an animal attack. But when pressed for the sort of beast, he recanted and proclaimed it a human *animal*.”

“It seems now the guilt is being placed upon the doorstep of the ejected tenants—if they had a doorstep that is. The argument is that they found Alstyne and murdered him.”

Softly, Jordan said, “Some men worship rank, some worship heroes, some worship power, some worship God, and over these ideals they dispute—but they all worship money.”

This sudden pronouncement startled me. My surprise clearly amused her, as the hint of a smile danced upon her lips.

“Mark Twain,” she said.

“I’ve never read that.”

“It was just published in his notebooks.”

“Oh . . . right. Well, either way, it appears that Twain has seized upon the root of the problem. One of the wealthiest men in the city is turning out people, leaving them homeless, and his brethren want satisfaction. Justice be damned.”

“Do you think Matthew is going to arrest—capture—one of these degenerated humans living beneath the city?”

“You’ve examined the original bones I brought from the sewer. They are not human. Maybe they once were. Since I first encountered them, I’ve combed through dark tomes, and volumes of folklore and history, hoping to make sense out of them. Originally, I had traced them to a monastic order—one that believed eating the flesh of sinners would save humanity. They were persecuted by the Church, and it was said they confessed their sins and were executed.”

“Instead, they hid,” Jordan amended.

“Yes. But I’ve found other writings describing such cults as far back as ancient Sumeria.” I avoided mentioning Martu, the corpse priest. “I don’t know how long they’ve been lurking in the dark places of the world. But I do know that New York has plenty of hiding spots, and I’ve feared for many years that there may be scores of them here.”

Jordan’s visage darkened, concern creasing her smooth skin. “How many, Rudolph?”

“I can’t be certain. But if they arrived in the 1600s when New Amsterdam was settled, then they’ve had plenty of time to propagate. For them, New York is a veritable paradise. Think of it. Creatures who consume those guilty of sins?” My spine felt as though Death were tugging at it from the grave. “This *is* the Big Apple.”



My words had no effect. Matthew continued to load the shotgun. One shell following another.

“You are only endangering yourself,” I pleaded. “This isn’t a Lower East Side gang, or a few hoodlums hiding in the subways.”

He fixed me with a withering gaze. “You didn’t see fit to tell me this before? You’ve let me believe that only a few of these *things* lurked beneath the city. Now you tell me there’s an army of them.”

“There are many things I don’t tell you, Matthew. You’re too skeptical. And the truth is too dread. My hope was that they had vanished or died. The other possibility seemed too terrifying to accept.”

Clad in our overcoats, we stood inside a subway maintenance house, near the tenement where Alstyne’s body had been discovered. Our heated words formed clouds in the air. Outside traffic sputtered past.

He worked the shotgun, loading a shell into the breech. “The folks Alstyne tossed out have been arrested,” he said bitterly, his lips white with anger.

“What evidence stands against them?”

“Ha! Evidence, you want. Lucky swell that’d be. If you want that, then you’d be the first man in the city who required evidence to rid our grand metropolis of a few rats.”

“You’re risking your life,” I countered.

“I’m doing what’s right,” he said. “Maybe the cannibals won’t see it that way. But I do.”

Our debate was eerily familiar, except the sides of the matter had changed.

Effortlessly he pulled wide one of the two steel doors covering the opening to the tunnels below.

“These are more than cannibals, Matthew. They are

monsters. The only reason they hide is because they still fear us—*those who live in the light*. Memories of the Church persecuting them keep them at bay. Entering their world might provoke them.”

“So we just let the innocents be punished, and that keeps us all safe? Is that it, Rudolph? Wouldn’t that put us on the plate next? ‘Cause if that ain’t a sin, then it should be. An’ I’ll not stand for it.”

I started to reply, but my words caught in my throat, contemptible words that I could not force myself to speak. Instead, I watched him climb downward, vanishing into the blackness.

Terror held me fast. Since the first time I’d encountered one of these creatures face-to-face, I’d seen many wretched things. In rage and darkness, I’d heaped sin upon myself. And beyond that, I had left men to die. Of all the abominations I’d encountered, it was these creatures I feared the most, for they saw me as one of the world’s evils.

What I’d never conveyed to Matthew was that not only did they eat the flesh of their victims, they also consumed their memories. These ghoulish monstrosities had somehow become a literal living Hell. The humans they devoured lived on inside them. Memories persisted. Thoughts continued in new brains. They were repositories of humanity’s vileness. Foul, loathsome vessels of darkness. I knew this, but no others did. Another secret I had never uttered.

Try as I might, I couldn’t force myself to follow Matthew.

Time ran on as I stood on the precipice, urging myself forward, all the while cowering inside. I had reached my wit’s end. I quaked and shivered from head to toe. I locked my eyes tight and thought of my friend, and what awaited him. As so many times before, he’d unfalteringly entered the fray,

with the intention of protecting those who were innocent. This propelled me forward, though I knew no good end would come of it.

With the fury of a storm, Jordan stomped into the maintenance room, cloaked in a heavy woolen coat with her canvas bag hoisted on her shoulder. The door slammed behind her.

“Again, no note? No word? You just intended to vanish into the sewers?” Blazing anger heated each word, giving them shape in the frigid air.

“Yes,” I said flatly.

“I know!” she bit back. “You just don’t understand, do you?”

I rummaged throughs her questions, hoping to discern some hidden meaning. But I didn’t have the time to give the matter proper consideration. With each second, Matthew gained a further lead.

“No,” I confessed. “I’m sorry, but I must stop Matthew.”

“Without a lamp, I suppose?” she asked, and commenced searching the canvas bag. Her rage had transformed into determination.

“Do you have one?”

“I do. And it is staying with me.” She waved the lamp with its bulky battery, urging me down the ladder.

“You cannot follow me,” I said, appalled. “It is too dangerous.”

She brushed past me, and with the agility and grace of an acrobat, working her way down the ladder. “I have the light. You’ll be following me.”



We plodded through the darkened subway tunnel—my ears alert for the rumble of a bulleting train. But above the crunch

and snap of the gravel strewn around the rails, hearing anything except for the pounding of my heart and the huffing of my breath was difficult.

I'd exorcised demons. Killed entities worshipped as gods, and when pursuing these creatures, I was seized by the grip of terror.

Jordan trotted a pace or two ahead. Ignoring my pleadings, she refused to relent, pressing onward.

It didn't seem possible that Matthew had gained so much ground. Precisely how long he had been gone, I was no longer certain. What seemed to be seconds might have been minutes.

The circle of light from Jordan's lamp danced and bobbed in the gloom. My eyes remained fixed upon it.

"Look at this," Jordan called, halting several paces ahead. "This is an old service duct." She aimed the lamp at a round shaft that burrowed downward, into the tunnel's wall. Partially buried in gravel was a rusted grate. Clearly, it had once covered the shaft, but had been ripped from its hinges and lock.

"Matthew certainly didn't wrestle that grate from its hinges," I said, sending puffs of air before me. "I doubt if he could even squeeze through the opening."

"It leads to old electrical tunnels, or the pneumatic tubes the city uses for mail delivery," she said, ignoring me.

In the lamp's reflection, I glimpsed her face. Intent and resolute, she examined the passage. "How on earth do you know that?" I asked.

She settled on her knees, planting the lamp on the grate. Then she started down the rungs anchored in the wall. "My job, Rudolph. I know the strata of this city, above and below."

"Good heavens," I exclaimed as she reached out and

snatched the lamp. "Matthew simply couldn't fit down there."

"Perhaps," she answered, her voice tinny and faint. "But his prints stop here."

I gave a heavy sigh. I very much longed to be in a classroom on the Columbia campus, in warmth and safety. Unbidden, the memories of gawking officers returned to me. I was a riddle to them, and myself. Not only had I faced death, I had died. *For in that sleep of death what dreams may come?*

I hunkered down, and finagled my way into the entrance.



"Is he alive?" I asked.

When I had reached Jordan, she'd already located Matthew. He lay prostrate upon the hard floor of the narrow passage.

"He's breathing," she said, kneeling at his side. "It appears like he's taken a nasty fall." Her hand slipped from underneath his head, damp and red in the lamplight.

I crouched. "Matthew? Wake up. Can you hear—" A slobbery growl interrupted me.

Immediately I fumbled for Matthew's flashlight. Before I could snap it on, Jordan turned her lamp upon them. Four of the gangly, gray skinned creatures huddled down the length of the passage. They slouched forward, clawed hands swiping at the light.

"Turn the lamp away," I said. "It angers them."

Slowly, the beam glided to a spot before us.

I climbed to my feet, holding Matthew's light. I didn't understand why he was alive. He hadn't fallen. Rather, he came upon them, and they'd overpowered him. Maybe our approach had frightened them off before they could consume

him. Regardless, I was resolved. No harm would come to Jordan or Matthew. In hopes of achieving this, I started to formulate a plan.

The creatures crept forward, small jumpy movements. With them came a fetid stench. My stomach churned as my gorge rose.

I stepped forward, planting my feet in the light. "Is Alstyne among you?"

"Rudolph . . ." Jordan's soft voice quivered. I felt her hand grab my ankle.

A chorus of hissing reverberated in the passage. Smacking sounds, and more growls followed.

"I must speak to Harold Alstyne," I said.

"Good God, what are you thinking, Rudolph?" The words sounded close to my ear. Jordan was now at my side, the light shifting about our feet.

"No liiight," came the answer. "Nooo. We bring to him." The guttural sound was part hiss and part slavering.

"Find Matthew's weapon," I whispered to Jordan. Turning to face her, I only caught sight of her delicate visage, swathed in the shadows. "Wake him and leave. Do not follow me."

"What?" she gasped. "You don't intend to go with *them*? You can't."

I placed my hands upon her shoulders. Even beneath the heavy coat I felt her trembling body. Gently, I kissed her forehead. "Don't linger," I said, and stepped from the light.



The passage seemed an endless series of twists and turns. My escorts did little to make the journey pleasant. With every step, one hissed or whimpered or released a watery hack. And the fetid odor worsened as I drew closer to what I believed to be only one of many colonies hidden beneath the city.

Nonetheless, I stumbled along in the darkness, until I knew I was there. No doubts worried my mind about the final location. The overwhelming rot that permeated the air brought me to the point of retching. I struggled against the foulness, using my handkerchief in hope of diluting the odor.

The air pressure had changed as well. I sensed a large room or chamber. For a moment, I considered using my second-sight, but the dead in this place I did not want to face.

From every direction came an inhuman murmuring, as though hundreds or thousands were chanting in some alien tongue. Unable to tolerate it any longer, I called out: "Harold Alstyne!"

The chanting continued unabated. I knew these creatures could see—or sense—me in the turgid blackness. I had expected to silence them for a moment, at the least. When no response came, I raised the narrow flashlight.

"*Nooo liiight.*" A force, anger or fright, I knew not what, propagated the words.

"I must speak with Harold Alstyne," I said.

"I . . . am many. Alsstyne is with me."

Hoping to purchase more time, I pressed onward. "You killed Alstyne?"

A sharp hiss shot back. Snarling and slavering followed like a reproach. "Con . . . sssume. Nottt Kill. He is now ussss."

My readings, be they legend or fact, told of these creatures being able to "smell" sin upon a person. I knew the corpse priest had sensed the demon within me, so there seemed little room for skepticism. Now I wondered if it was that unique sense provoking the salivating I heard around me, or my own imagination.

"He sinned," I said, using all of my resolve not to let my voice waver. "His flesh served as the feast for those who have left the light."

Another refrain of whimpering and growling came in response. I took the noise to be an affirmation.

“Alstyne, why did you evict those people? There is no one to rent the rooms. Why let them stand empty?” I hoped a direct approach might awaken the memories or whatever part of Alstyne was trapped inside the creature. If anyone, Harold Alstyne knew that with the countless empty places in New York City, and the thousands living in ramshackle structures in Central and Riverside Park, evicting the people achieved nothing. Almost one third of the city was on the dole, unable to do more than wait in lines for jobs and food. But if my hypothesis were correct, he would have a reason.

Something part howl and part wail echoed through the vast room. “Greeeed! Greeeed!” It was a tortured sound. With the words came thoughts, lightly touching my mind.

With each moment I felt my determination dissolve. The compulsion to flee flowed through me like the blood pulsing through my veins. But like the Dane who ventured into Grendel’s lair, I came to seek out evil.

Not wanting to enter the mind of the creature, I ventured a guess from what drifted through my head. “You evicted the people to set up a gambling house, is that it?”

Something slammed into me. I stumbled, colliding with another wretch. The slick touch of its skin and putrid breath again set my stomach roiling. Impossibly, I remained on my feet.

“Yesss . . .” the thing that was Alstyne cried.

He’d been in league with racketeers. Like many businessmen in the city, Alstyne saw more profit by tossing the destitute renters on the street, and creating a crooked gambling den to earn revenue. It was an ageless sin. He was akin to a man drifting in an ocean, squeezing water from a sponge, discarding it once it was dry and moving to the

next. Contemptible as I found him, I so feared his fate that I only felt pity.

One by one the creatures started jostling, dancing about with agitation, snarling and slaving. Without the light, it seemed that I was shifting in an endless mass of the hideous creatures. Any moment, I expected them to pounce upon me. I had leaped and grabbed at virtue over the years, but like Alstyne, I had fallen short many times. Righteousness, like Grendel's slayer, did not attend me. I only hoped my life might purchase mere minutes for Jordan and Matthew.

The haunting memories replayed in my mind. There in No Man's Land, hiding, while my comrades were searching for me. One at a time the approaching enemy had killed them. And they were always there when I lifted the curtain of reality. They remembered my sin. I knew I was rank with offense.

Like a man caught in a strong river current, a slimy mass of flesh pushed and pressed against me, forcing me in an unknown direction. Tempted as I was, I did not use the light, knowing it would only hasten the ending. I wanted every last moment.

Then above the repulsive sounds, I heard Matthew's voice.

"Rudolph . . ."

The call was repeated, but this time it came from Jordan.

No. If they entered this place, they would never leave.

Although I didn't know what number of people it took, two, ten, twenty, to break the dam, releasing the colonies beneath the city, I was certain there was a point when they would flood from the sewers and subways, pouring into the streets, frenzied by the seemingly endless feast on the surface.

I slipped through the throng, and with each step, Matthew's call grew clearer. I dared not reply for fear I would be located. The touch of the greasy skin made my insides stir until I thought I would burst. Eventually, I felt a clammy wall, and followed it with the repetition of my name as a guide. The horde that had enveloped me now seemed to recede. The disturbing chanting continued, and far off, I heard a mournful cry—one like Alstyne's. Yet, I remained unharmed. I passed through the greatest darkness, and my flesh had not been consumed. The meaning behind this seemed impossible, a dream I dare not dream, but one I so very much longed for . . .



The fire crackled as Matthew read to Jordan and myself from the newspaper. He reclined on the couch while enlightening us.

“Rusty McCarron, one of the city’s most notorious gangsters, was arrested for racketeering yesterday evening. Sources in the Detective Division believe that he was also involved in the murder of Harold Alstyne.” Matthew lowered the *Post*, allowing his brown eyes to peer over the paper's edge. “I'm not that source. Probably someone on the mobster's payroll who sees a chance to move up.”

“I'm sure he's murdered someone,” Jordan said, sitting opposite of me. “But he'll probably get off scott free.”

“Of that you can be certain,” said Matthew, returning to the paper. “So many judges in the city are on the take that they are drivin' the price of bribery down. It's a gangster's market, I tell you.”

The fire *popped*.

“Those pulps make a nice blaze,” Matthew said from behind the paper.

I fixed my eyes on the yellow flames, trying to avoid Jordan's gaze. Even so, I felt her looking at me.

Moments passed as Matthew read various articles aloud, eventually falling silent, lost in the comics.

Jordan touched my hand. The warmth pushed away a portion of my chill.

Through the window I watched snow fall from the heavens, gently filling the gaps and folds of the city, silently covering it like a sheet draped over a corpse. It had been said many times that we lived in the greatest city in the world. I wondered what would be said on the day the rabble streamed from the shadowy recesses to overwhelm this great metropolis and those who dominated it.

AFTERWORD

A FEW YEARS AFTER my great grandfather completed this manuscript, he dabbled with other projects. He produced a philosophical work titled, *Unveiling Reality*. It saw publication only one time, and it is quite obscure today. The scientific community rallied against it, until it became nothing more than a whisper in my family, eventually fading into silence. This same silence shrouded my great grandfather's life as well. Tales of his exploits were never mentioned at family gatherings. His writings vanished. He became nothing more than a ghost in history. Where there is such silence, there is often truth. With little to go on, I researched his life and works.

My great grandfather went on to decode several Sumer writings found buried in an underground library. Thousands of tablets were discovered, each placed in numerical order. One of the tablets he translated was thought to be an example of the pre-historic mythical tales. It was titled, *Corpse Priest*, and it told of a figure named Martu. The translation was soon lost in the boundless collections of various universities. But I was

fortunate enough to locate one. Eerily, it confirmed many theories, particularly one fearsome possibility.

It is now my belief that the cult of “sin-eaters” existed as far back as 7500 years ago, possibly even longer. They’ve had many names throughout time. Sometimes, as in the Egyptian myths, they were known as ghouls, other times as grave robbers, or creatures of the night. Over the centuries, evidence of their continued existence has been uncovered many times. Always, they are dismissed as fanciful creations of the mind. Every generation comes with a new paradigm, and a reformulation of history. The myths of the past wilt, and we find explanations for our misguided ancestors’ beliefs. This never changes.

I would be neglectful not to mention that my great grandmother, Jordan Gabriel Pearson, outlived her husband. She eventually accepted a position at Princeton. It is my belief that she kept her own journals, but I’ve never been able to locate them. Quite possibly, they are buried in some place in New York City, like so many other things. But what is past is past.

As I write these words, I’ve learned of plans to start construction on a new subway line in New York City. This system dates back to the 1800s, and has proven to be one of the most reliable transit systems in the world—even if my great grandfather had a fear of them.

It is said that the new tunnels will burrow deep into the city. I have no doubt, as with so many other construction projects in the metropolis, that numerous treasures will be uncovered. What I fear is that something else will be found. They have been waiting for so long, and their numbers must be countless. *What dreams may come . . .*

—Josuha Pearson, Ph.D.
Professor, Columbia University

THE AUTHOR

William Jones is a writer and editor who works in the fiction and hobby industries. In a previous life he worked in engineering for a variety of defense contractors. In an unusual plot twist, he returned to university for a doctorate in English literature. He spends his days writing and teaching. Currently, he lives in Michigan with his wife and a variety of archaic computers. Visit him at his website:

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THE STRANGE CASES OF RUDOLPH PEARSON

HORRIPILATING TALES OF THE CTHULHU MYTHOS

*"Here rests the noblest of
all human endeavors, and its rankest,
most wretched secrets. In New York City I see either
mankind's greatest hope, or the last spark of divinity
forever extinguished. What will those who
judge us decide?"*

Those were the words of my great grandfather, Professor Rudolph Pearson, Doctor of Medieval Studies at Columbia University, New York City. Upon my father's death, a manuscript bearing my great grandfather's name came into my possession. At first I was intrigued.

All of that changed as I came to understand that humanity's existence went ignored on the cosmic scale. We weren't insects overlooked by a divine being, not a mote in some omniscient entity's eye. We see what we desire to see, and ignore the rest. We shun that which is unpleasant, seeking refuge in security, happiness, bliss.

The manuscript speaks for itself. It speaks of a horror that humankind may never be able to accept.

This book is one in an expanding collection of Cthulhu Mythos horror fiction and related topics. Call of Cthulhu fiction focuses on single entities, concepts, or authors significant to readers and fans of H.P. Lovecraft.

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