

Spring 5-23-2019

Crossroads and Crow Feathers

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Crossroads and Crow Feathers

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Travis Bowman

B.A. Naropa University, 2011

May, 2019

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of the instructors I've worked with during my time in the Creative Writing Workshop at UNO and specifically to my thesis committee. Special thanks to Barb Johnson and Randy Bates for showing me the tools and how to build with them. I couldn't have done this without the help of friends, so must offer my deepest gratitude to the wild, inspiring, loving people of my community. Thank you for your patience with my particular brand of madness. Finally, eternal thanks to my mother, Annette Green, for teaching me to read and then setting me loose on every book in the house. You showed me the power of words, and I will never be able to thank you enough.

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Abstract

This thesis uses the short story form to examine the influence of myth, magick, and the supernatural on the interstitial areas of the United States. The power of words as a force for change figures prominently in these stories. This thesis looks at the monstrous as it moves in the darkness and in the minds of humans, but also at the tremendous depths of compassion and courage we find in ourselves when faced with monstrous situations.

Fiction; Magick; Fantasy; Myth; Crossroads; Crows

Dark Offering

The first time she came to me, I was in a passage tomb on a hilltop in Ireland called Carrowkeel. I sat in one of the stone cairn's three chambers, listening to the leader of the Celtic Magick group I'd studied with for about a year play a frame drum, while he chanted in Irish Gaelic. I could still taste the liberty caps I'd chewed as me and my four companions walked up along the sheep trails leading to the tomb. The body buzz from the mushrooms flickered up and down my spine. The rapid drumbeat pulled me deeper and deeper into a familiar trance state. I heard a sound like wings fluttering. A wry, feminine voice spoke into my ear.

"What have we here?"

My eyelids, which had been sinking, snapped wide open. The voice didn't sound like either of the women in the group.

"Ah, the audacity of you Americans never ceases to surprise me. Do you know that no one within thirty miles of this hill would dare do what you five mortals are doing right now?"

The drum continued. Our leader sang over the beat. I couldn't see the others from the shadows of the alcove where I sat, but no one else spoke up.

"What? No words from you, traveller? You're the boldest of all. You ate the flesh of the gods, picked from inside a stone circle, and then climbed into an ancient cairn to pray. Have you no greeting for the queen of these lands?"

These lands? We'd been studying the history and mythical cycles of Ireland for the past year, so I knew we were in Connacht, one of the four ancient realms, along with Leinster, Ulster, and Munster. According to myth, each of these regions was tied to a different goddess. Brigid with Leinster, Anu with Munster, Macha with Ulster, and...

“You aren’t the quickest, but you get there eventually. Say it.”

Not once in my life had I refused a directive given to me in the tone she used. My lips formed the word as it appeared in my mind. I whispered into the tomb, into the sound of the drum and the chanting, “Morrigan.”

“Yes.”

She drew the word out as if she were tasting its sound.

My first thought was that these mushrooms were fucking strong. She snorted at that, and it sounded like she was sitting right next to me, in the deeper shadows of the chamber where my body blocked out the candles’ light.

I knew I should be freaking out, but I wasn’t. Going with the flow was a way of life and a solid option when tripping face. I’d partied a lot in the last fifteen years. Acid in Northern California. Ecstasy in Goa. Peyote out in the Arizona desert. Ayahuasca in Peru. For a few years, I even tried out more acceptable techniques for expanding my mind. I sat in sweatlodge ceremonies, meditated, and cultivated my kundalini energy through yoga and breathing exercises. None of it ever seemed to touch me. I felt things, sure. I had some beautiful nights and met some interesting people. But I had never experienced ego death or enlightenment or even an overwhelming urge to sell all of my possessions and travel across the country in a van. And none of my prior hallucinations had ever spoken aloud before. Yet, I sat in that old tomb listening to the drum’s steady beat and a goddess older than written language whispering to me from the shadows, and I felt as calm as I would snuggled up in my bed back in the states.

“I find this quite curious myself. Can’t have you thinking it’s the drugs, though, can I?” A cold wind touched my face. The body buzz fell away. The colored swirls at the edges of my vision disappeared. “That’s better. You do know who I am, yes?”

Battle Crow. Lady Winter. Phantom Queen. Death Bringer. Harvester of warrior souls.

She laughed loud enough to drown out the drum for an instant. Surely, the others could hear it. But the drum kept beating and the chant followed along without interruption.

“You charmer. Yes. I have worn all of those names and more, but I like my true name the best.”

“Morrigan,” I whispered again.

She purred, and I felt her fill the space inside the cairn. It felt like a pillow of cool air pressing against every inch of my body. The drums sounded muffled, and what had been a fairly rapid beat slowed until it matched the thumping of my heart. A pair of hands settled on my shoulders, their touch as soft as wing tips. When she spoke again, her breath tickled my ear.

“Do you know why I have chosen you, wanderer?”

Her hands slid down my arms. Her touch made it impossible to speak.

“It is because you are not afraid of me, like the others.” Her fingertips traced whorls on my forearms. Her breasts pushed against my back.

I was definitely afraid of her.

“No,” she said, and one of her hands tangled in my hair. She pulled my head back. “You are afraid, of course, because despite your ignorance, you have wisdom enough to know how dangerous I am. But you aren’t afraid like they are. When you think of me, it isn’t with hatred. My name doesn’t sound like a curse when you speak it.”

She was right. From what I could tell, death gods always got a bad rap. My studies hadn’t focused on the Morrigan, but my impression, when reading some older translations of the Irish mythological cycles, was that the old white men who wrote them couldn’t figure out what to do with a dark goddess of battlefields and sorcery. So they painted her as a demonic tyrant queen

and dismissed her. In the one story of hers that I knew, Cúchulain, the Hound of Ulster, a warrior of tremendous power, rudely rejected her for no discernible reason, so she tried to kill him.

Perhaps it was an extreme response, but I never understood why he dissed her in the first place.

“That is what I mean, Cormac.” She still gripped my hair with one hand, while the other slid up my chest, towards my throat. “Tell me. Would you accept what the Hound refused?”

“Are you asking me to have sex with you?” I prayed I wasn’t just hallucinating, because I’d just blurted those words out into the cave for the others to hear.

None of them spoke, but her laughter was loud and as pleasing to my ears as a lover’s tongue against my neck. She purred again, and my body responded to the sound and to her touch. “I suppose I am, but I am also asking for much more than that. I am asking if you will be mine, wholly mine.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I can only show you,” she said.

“Okay then, show me.”

So she did.

I can’t remember much of what she showed me, but what I do remember sometimes pulls me out of sleep at night. I know I saw a lot of death. I saw the aftermath of thousands of battles, crows landing to pick at the dead, a hundred visions of my own death. I flew over frozen landscapes on fierce winds and watched impenetrable castles fall into ruin before being swallowed by moss and trees, all in a few blinks of my eyes. At some point, my clothes disappeared and she rode me, holding my face hard against her neck. I couldn’t see her, but I could feel her. Her skin was cool everywhere except where I slid in and out of her. She fucked me while centuries scrolled past my unseeing eyes, while she showed me who and what she was,

and at some point I started babbling words of praise and devotion, telling her I would always be her lover, telling her I would sing her songs to the world. Our pace increased until her cries shook dust from the stones overhead and I thought my heart would stop from the pleasure. We climaxed together, and when I came, I spoke her name for the third time.

“Morrigan.”

We held each other until our shaking slowed to an occasional tremor. She leaned back, and I saw her for the first time, her pale skin, her hair so black it shimmered iridescent. Her large eyes were completely black, but I thought I saw something in them, some glimpse of what it might be like to exist for millennia. My mind really couldn't fathom what I saw. She wore a smile and nothing else. Her smile faded, and then she was gone, my clothes were back in place, the drums sped up, and I finished the ritual with my group.

The sky was clear when we crawled out of the tomb. Someone laughed and said we had only been in there for an hour. The moon's position confirmed this. No one looked at me funny. On my way down from the cairn, I decided I should probably keep my version of the night's events, much of it already fading, to myself. I knew one thing for certain, and it troubled me; I was dead sober.

* * *

I was back in the states for less than a month when she came to me again.

It was a day like any other. I'd fallen back into my routine. Wake up at nine or ten, have coffee, check my emails, go for a walk or a jog, shower, eat, and then settle down at my desk to work on whatever editing project was next on the ever-scrolling list. When I finished for the day,

I headed out to grab some Thai food and possibly meet up with some friends for a beer or two. I was walking alone past the brownstones on Newbury Street one second, and the next, she walked beside me. I yelped and jumped sideways.

“Oh, stop it. People will think you’re crazy,” she said. Her grin was the same as the last time I saw her.

“You mean it wasn’t just the mushrooms?”

“Of course not, lover. Surely, mushrooms have never made you come that hard?”

Images from that night at Carrowkeel flashed into my mind, and my cheeks flushed. I turned and continued walking. She took my arm.

“So, can anyone see you?” I asked as we walked past the seating area for an outdoor restaurant.

“They can if I want them to. Right now, they simply see you walking with a dark-haired woman, whose gorgeous features they couldn’t describe if someone asked them two minutes from now. I wouldn’t bother, except that you insist on speaking to me aloud, so I need to keep people from thinking you’re a nutjob.”

“I’m surprised you know words like nutjob,” I said, trying to wrap my head around what was happening.

She simply shrugged and glanced over at a display of jewelry in one of the shop windows. For a moment, the sparkling silver was reflected in her eyes and a hungry look passed over her face. The look fell away as we moved further up the road.

“So, what do you want?” I asked.

“Do I have to need something to come visit my young devotee?”

I just looked at her.

“Oh, you’re no fun,” she said. We walked along in silence. “Okay, there is something I need you to do. There are actually a lot of things I’m going to need you to do. They won’t take up much of your time.”

“I sure hope not,” I muttered.

She stopped walking, which nearly jerked me off of my feet. It was like walking past a telephone pole only to find you’ve been handcuffed to it. She didn’t move an inch. When I looked back, swirling shadows hid her features. Above her head, I could have sworn a giant crow made of the same shadows was staring down at me.

“You are mine, mortal. You gave your life to me in that tomb, freely, knowing all that it entailed.”

“I don’t even remember what you showed me,” I complained.

“It isn’t my fault your weak mind can’t hold onto something for even a full cycle of the moon. You remembered all of what I showed you when you swore yourself to me. If you hadn’t been certain, I wouldn’t be here now. I would have stopped at Carrowkeel.” Her fingers dug into my arm like talons. “I enjoy your irreverence, Cormac. I love your independence. You can always tell me no. But you will remember what I am, and you will speak to me with a civil tongue. Or I will tear it out of your head.”

The air around us had grown so cold that I could see my breath when I exhaled and feel my nose hairs crackle when I inhaled. “Okay. Okay. I get it. I’m sorry.”

She stared at me long enough for bone-deep fear to slide through me. Then she smiled. “Apology accepted.” We started walking again. My heart started beating again.

“So, what would you have me do, my Goddess?”

She laughed, and even though she scared the shit out of me, I couldn't help grinning.

"That's a little formal for this time," she said, "but I like your attitude."

We strolled past the Exeter Street Theatre.

"How does this work?" I asked.

She considered the question. A cold Boston wind stirred the leaves, which were just beginning the change that would turn the street briefly into a flare of reds and oranges in a few weeks. "It's a standard covenant between priest and deity. You do things for me, and I help you out."

"Priest?" I didn't associate the word exclusively to guys with white collars, but still.

"What did you think you were, Cormac? Do you think I walk arm in arm with every goth kid who lights a black candle in my honor? I didn't make much of an impression on you in the cairn, did I?"

I ran a hand through my hair. "I...I've done a lot of drugs, okay? I was starting to think it was just one hell of a mushroom trip. Part of me is wondering if maybe I really lost my shit that night and now I'm permanently crazy."

"That would look more like this," she said, sweeping her arm in an arc in front of us.

The shadows along the street elongated and twisted, some sliding up the sides of the brownstones and other dripping into puddles under the streetlamps. A couple walked past, their faces devoid of any feature save oversized mouths rimmed with jagged teeth. Yowls exactly like cats fighting punctuated an ominous buzzing sound from somewhere on the other side of the street. I looked for Morrigan, but she was gone. Cars roared past like demons with blinding bright eyes. I spun in place, trying to ask her to make it stop, but a cacophony of voices were shouting at me, some of them in languages I didn't understand. I lifted my hands to cover my

eyes, but just before they got to my face, I saw multicolored threads crawling in and out of the skin on my palms. A scream was pushing its way into my throat when everything snapped back to normal.

I dragged air into my lungs in massive, ragged gasps. Morrigan waited until my breathing slowed down and I shook off the terror of those few seconds. “You aren’t crazy. Your mind hasn’t broken. This is real. Now, come on. There’s work to be done.”

* * *

Work, for Morrigan, turned out to be a loose concept. That first night, she had me buy a baguette from a Safeway in Jamaica Plain and walk three times around Jamaica Pond while tossing little pieces of the bread to either side of the path. She accompanied me while I did it and asked me questions about my childhood. By the time I returned home, my feet hurt and my cheek, where she’d kissed me goodnight, felt chilled until I fell asleep.

Weeks passed, then months, and I did everything Morrigan asked me to do. None of her tasks struck me as the sort of thing priests would do for their gods. Some made sense, given who she was. Wander the city until you collect seven crow feathers. Verbally greet any corvids you encounter. Okay. Fair enough. But others were less intuitive. Swim naked across Jamaica Pond. Dress in black, stand outside the entrance to Fenway Park for three full games, speaking to no one. Join an aikido dojo. Listen to the Dropkick Murphys or Flogging Molly at full volume during the entire workday for a week. Drop petals from thirteen roses into the Charles River from the BU Bridge on a full moon night. Buy a large knife.

Sometimes, my instructions were delivered through dreams or visions that would fill my mind in the middle of the day. One morning, I exited my shower to find directions written in the condensation on my mirror. Nothing creepy about that. Other times, Morrigan would inform me of the tasks herself, appearing on my couch the moment I finished work for the day or sitting in the chair across from me when I glanced up from a book.

A few of my priestly assignments seemed more like the kind of things I might do with a friend. We caught *Against Me!* at the Paradise and listened to jazz at Wally's. We sat together outside a coffee shop in Cambridge for almost five hours one night, me freezing my ass off and her asking me each time someone walked past whether I found them attractive. When I said yes, she asked me why, pushing me to be specific. She seemed more curious than jealous, but she grew more frustrated with every answer I gave. Finally, exasperated, I asked her which people she found attractive. She favored me with the look she reserved for those moments when she thought the answer to my question was painfully obvious before saying, "Why, all of them, of course."

I did everything she asked me to do, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was failing. She seemed surlier with each task I completed. Her missions took up more and more of my time, and required more effort. She stopped asking and just told me what to do. I did it. I went without sleep. I skipped meals. I missed deadlines and dropped clients. I managed to hold myself together enough to pay the bills, but the few friends I still ran into on occasion had stopped trying to hide their concern. I was a mess. I was doing it wrong, and I couldn't understand how to make it right.

A few days before Halloween, she appeared in my kitchen wearing knee-high leather boots, thigh-high fishnet stockings, and a skirt short enough to reveal several inches of her thighs

above the stockings. Torn strips of fabric comprised her top. She held out a garment bag and told me to get dressed.

“I want to dance,” she said.

* * *

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

We stood across the street from a night club in Cambridge, watching Goth kids slip through the door. Each time it opened, industrial music spilled out. The smell of cloves drifted from where two guys wearing very similar tight mesh shirts lurked in the shadows. At least Morrigan hadn’t asked me to wear something like that. Although the black coat over the black suit, black shirt, black silk tie, and black bowler hat were just as dramatic, at least I was warm. The 7-inch Ka-Bar knife was a comforting weight in its horizontal sheath at the back of my belt. She had insisted my ensemble wouldn’t be complete without it.

“I like this music,” she said.

I grunted in response. By this time, her tasks, which had originally occurred once or twice a week, consumed almost all of my nights. I would crawl into my bed around dawn, and my dreams were filled with the battlefield clamor of clashing blades and the screams of dying men. The last thing I wanted to do was go to a fashion show masquerading as a dance night.

“Come on,” she said. “It’ll be fun.”

I grumbled, but I followed her when she linked her arm in mine and started across the street. I nodded to the clove-smoking mesh-wearing boys when one of them complimented me on my suit, gritted my teeth and opened the door for Morrigan. She beamed up at me with a

smile that just did not belong on the face of a battle goddess. The security guys just inside the door seemed blind to our presence as we strolled past, a phenomenon I'd noticed several times over the past months when we were out together. I added a mental note to ask her about this, one more item on a list of several hundred other weird occurrences I kept meaning to ask her about.

She told me to find a seat with a view of the dance floor, and made her way to the bar. I watched her navigate the crowded space without touching any of the patrons, her movements reminding me of a bird stepping between passing feet in a rush hour train station. I spotted an empty table at the rail of a balcony that overlooked the crowd writhing to Ministry. Morrigan returned a few minutes later carrying a bottle of amber liquor.

"They don't sell whiskey by the bottle here," I said.

She cocked an eyebrow while wagging the bottle in her hand. I just shook my head and stood until she slid into her chair. She used her teeth to peel the plastic seal off the single malt Bushmills. Her eyes closed when she tilted the bottle back. She wiped an arm across her mouth and handed me the whiskey. I sipped, and I'd almost sorted out the flavors of sherry and bourbon seasoned casks from those of malted barley when she spoke.

"You have a problem, boyo."

I set the whiskey on the table, watching her and waiting for her to continue. She snatched the bottle back up and took a quick swig.

"That's what I'm talking about. You just wait until you're told what to do, and then you do it." She paused. "What do you want?"

It was my turn to snatch the bottle. "I thought that was what I was supposed to do," I said with whiskey still on my tongue. "I'm your priest. I listen for my goddess and do as she bids."

She looked disgusted. She took a deep swig. “You have walked closer to me than any mortal in a thousand years these past months. And you still don’t know a damned thing about me.” Another drink. Her words gained the smallest hint of a slur when she continued. “I’m letting this body feel everything tonight, by the way,” she said. She reached across the table and opened her hand. Two large, peach-colored pills shaped like Darth Vader’s helmet rested in her palm. “Take one.”

I picked one, tossed it in my mouth, and washed it down with single malt. She did the same, and sat back, smirking.

“What?” I asked.

“Why did you take that pill?”

“Because I wanted to. I didn’t have to work tomorrow, and we’re at a club.”

“Not because I told you to?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” She grabbed the bottle and didn’t wait for me to answer. “I don’t require blind obedience, Cormac. In fact, it’s the last thing I want from my priest.”

The accumulated fatigue of the last few months met the whiskey in my bloodstream. I snagged the bottle out of her hand. “Well, then, why don’t you tell me what the fuck you want, lady? It’s not like I’ve ever done this before.” I took another drink and glared at her, not caring if she saw my anger.

She met my gaze, studying me. “What do you want?”

How the fuck should I know? I couldn’t even figure out what she was getting at. We’d been hammering the whiskey pretty hard, and I was running on five hours sleep. Every time I

tried to approach the question she was asking without actually asking, the question skittered away and left me even more confused. I stood up.

“I thought you wanted to dance,” I said.

My response seemed to delight her. She grabbed my hand, and I led her down the stairs and onto the dance floor. Movement helped settle the whiskey. My mind stopped churning. I pulled off my overcoat and dropped it onto a nearby bench, but I kept the suit jacket on, figuring the knife at my back should probably remain concealed.

The DJ shifted gears, dropping into something more downtempo. The music sank into my bones, and I danced with Morrigan. A space opened around us, leaving us room to writhe slowly as we hung our bodies on the beat. Lights strobed and flashed, revealing and concealing her. She moved with perfect balance, sensuous and dangerous, each movement as much an attack or defense as a dance step. I surrendered to the music, to the chemicals pumping through my bloodstream, to the fire in my head. I surrendered to Morrigan’s beauty. Time disappeared, and my surroundings flickered between the night club’s dance floor and other places, other times, other worlds.

One moment my arms were clad in the suit’s black material, the next moment wings covered with black, iridescent feathers extended from my shoulders. I waved them skyward. Morrigan, laughing, danced in her goth outfit. The lights flashed and she wore armor, raised a sword above her head. The dancers behind her transformed into warriors locked in battle, killing and dying and covered in blood. Our dance became a duel, wings and claws, blades and hammers, lover and beloved. Euphoria swallowed the whiskey’s delirium, and the dance shifted into one of mutual support. My body understood what it would feel like to fight side by side with her, how the two of us, even surrounded, would leave our enemies flinching away, fighting to

escape the reach of our wrath. Lights flashed. We were just two well-dressed lovers, high as fuck on ecstasy, with sweat streaming down our faces while we mesmerized these goth kids with our moves.

Something clicked inside my head, and there was no longer any separation between the visions. Yes, I was a crow, spinning and waving my wings. Yes, I was a warrior on the battlefield. Yes, I was a sleep-deprived freelance editor with MDMA sparking across his consciousness and through his body. All of the Morrigan's grinned at me as they watched understanding sink in. I grinned back, just as fiercely, and over her shoulder, I saw it.

Something misshapen and twisted stalked along the far edge of the dance floor. Oily blackness shifted and throbbed, nearly concealing the form of one of the clove-smokers from earlier, who moved with the same focus that fills a predator when it spots its prey. In that moment, I saw the steps in the dance that would take me to him and the steps that could lead me away. A cold wind brushed my forehead, and just like Carrowkeel, the intoxicants fell out of my system. I kept dancing, taking the steps that would let me keep him in view. When he reached out to grasp one of the pale-skinned women, who turned to him, rising up on her tiptoes to kiss him, clearly oblivious to the oily tendrils that folded around the back of her head, around her waist, under the hem of her skirt, I made my choice. Clear headed, I chose the path that would intersect with his, not because Morrigan wanted me to, not because I felt like I had to, but because I wanted to. I wanted to stop whatever he had in mind. I wanted it to be me that stopped him.

As my dance took me past her, Morrigan nodded once, but I didn't take the time to check in with her. With her nod, the ecstasy dropped down into my body and onto my perception once again. Pure joy suffused my steps as I wove across the dance floor, sliding between dancers

without missing a single beat. I reached the door less than a minute after they passed through it. I followed them without hesitating.

Cold air hit the sweat on my face like a lover's caress. I shivered, not because I was cold, but because it felt so damned good to be a part of the dance. It wasn't quite raining, just that bizarre Boston phenomenon where the sky spits periodic drops of moisture down out of the wind. Each drop landed with exquisite precision on my cheek, my neck, the back of my hand. I reached back to stop the door from slamming behind me just as I heard them from farther down the alley.

"The fuck you mean you want to go back inside? I haven't had a minute alone with you all night." His loud voice echoed off the bricks. Her response was inaudible. I walked towards them, not rushing, just feeling delight in the way my muscles and joints worked together to propel me through my environment. The wind fluttered a sodden copy of the Weekly Dig, and a rat darted out from under the dumpster hiding Clovesmoker and the woman from my view. "Come on, baby," I heard him whisper as I got closer. "Don't you feel good? Those pills are fucking fire, aren't they?"

The girl made a sound that was half whimper, half moan. I reached the edge of the dumpster. He had one hand around her throat, above the black leather collar she wore, and his other hand was running up the outside of her thigh, curling around to cup her ass. He wasn't choking her, and if it were any of a dozen other couples from the club, I'd have figured they were just stepping out for a little bit of kinky play. But those oily tendrils writhed over his skin and crept up from where his hand gripped her neck. The oil pushed its way into her ears and slid around her head to wrap her eyes. I felt hunger pulsing off of him or whatever it was that had found its way inside him.

“Well,” I said, “that’s about enough of that shit.” We all startled, then because they didn’t know I was there, me because I hadn’t known I was going to say the words out loud. He jumped back from her, another clear indication of his guilt. I took the opportunity to step into him, adding to his momentum and sending him stumbling further down the alley. The woman slumped, her eyes loose in their sockets, shuddering and unable to fix on anything. “Hey.” I waited for her gaze to focus. “Go inside.” She nodded and ran back towards the door to the club. Her steps wobbled as badly as her eyes, and I turned to watch her, afraid she might fall. So I didn’t notice his fist coming at me until it connected with my temple.

I fell against the dumpster and shook my head. Was this part of the dance? Luckily, I’d been in enough scraps as a kid that I instinctively raised my arms to protect my head and his second punch landed on my forearm. It didn’t do much against the third punch he slammed into my gut, though. All of the air in my lungs whooshed out, and I fell, curled around my stomach, unable to breath. I had a great view of his Doc Martens as one of them swung back like a pendulum then forward towards my face. I got my hands up in time to take the kick. Some small part of my brain, a part unconcerned with breathing or keeping my teeth in my head, noticed three crows land on the roof high above us.

“Motherfucker,” he said softly, almost as if he were speaking to himself. “Kill you, motherfucker. Fucking kill you. Fucking lay your hands on me.” He kept kicking me, and I kept twisting on the ground, putting my arms in the way. The oily, demonic shape danced and grew larger above me. My left hand was going numb by the time I managed to draw a gasping breath. I climbed that thin thread of precious air up into my lungs and used it to find the dance I’d felt so clearly moments before.

When he drew back to kick me again, I rolled towards him, trapping his weight-bearing foot under my body. I rolled into his knee and he fell back on his ass. I crawled up his body, through the roiling darkness. I reached back with my right hand and shoved my left at his throat, giving him something to grapple with while I freed the knife from its sheath. Once again, Morrigan's wind cleared my head. Once again, I made my choice. I waited until he was looking down at the hand near his throat and had both of his hands wrapped around my wrist, and then I whipped the Ka-Bar in an arch that ended with the point driving through his left eye. I felt a brittle crunch, and the blade buried itself to the hilt. His other eye widened and he, incredibly, still saying, over and over, "Fucking kill you. Motherfucker."

The MDMA dropped in again. It made sure the whole scene burned itself indelibly into my mind. His body twitched beneath me. I stared into his remaining eye while he died, thinking it might show me the moment when life left him, but it didn't. The oily darkness spun and twisted, flowing into the punctured eye, turning the knife cold in my hand. I let it go and pushed away from him only moments before his bladder and his bowels let go. The smell of shit and urine joined the copper smell of blood in the alley. I staggered far enough away not to splash his body with the vomit that rushed up from my stomach. I heard the sound of wings between retches, and when I looked up again, she stood over him. A crow landed on his face. I watched it pluck the man's remaining eye and swallow it. A laugh tried to slip out of my mouth, but I fought it down along with the bile that rose again in my throat.

"Next time, try not to let them hit you so much," Morrigan said.

"Next time?"

"Of course, my dear. You do not think the war is over simply because you won a single small battle, do you?"

The body still twitched, just a few feet away. “I didn’t...this isn’t what I wanted. This isn’t what I agreed to.” I leaned on the dumpster to get to my feet. “What the fuck did I do?”

“We don’t have time for this, Cormac.” I could tell from her tone that she was fighting back frustration. She made an angry gesture at the crow. It took off, flying straight at my face. One flap of its wings took it past the battered hands I tried to raise, and the crow dove through my forehead. I felt it enter my third eye. I saw.

I saw the man’s history and his potential future, the fate recorded on the eye the crow had consumed. Clear seeing was one of her gifts. I saw the pain left in his wake, and I saw trauma rippling out from him like cancer spreading. But cancer could be cut away. All it took was a sharp blade and a steady hand, the means and the will. These, too, were her gifts. I understood. And through this understanding, I knew her final gift, the soldier’s burden, the choice. Always, with her, it came down to choice.

I chose. Something died inside me as I did it, but I walked over to where he lay and pulled my knife out of his eye. I wiped the blade on his mesh shirt, sheathed it, and stood.

Morrigan and I looked at each other over his body. I saw her and knew her and loved her. I chose to love her. Were we monsters? I suppose we were, but I could live with that. She could help me live with it. Another of her gifts. Maybe, after all of these centuries, I could help her live with it, too. Surprise flitted across her face. I winked at her.

We turned and walked down the alley. Crows lined the edges of the roofs high above us, and before we had gone more than a dozen steps, they descended into the alley. I looked back and watched as they covered the body we’d left behind. A few seconds later, they all took off at once, flying over our heads. The body was gone. Morrigan took my arm, and we walked together

towards the street at the end of the alley. Overhead, the crows rose into the night on wings darker than the starless sky.

Her Secret is Patience

She watches him through the fogged glass. I can tell she is close to giving up. A light, cold rain falls as I approach her. The music and laughter inside the pub promise a warmth blessedly absent out here on the sidewalk. I'm no good at this kind of thing. Love is my sister, Áine's, specialty, but she isn't here, and this is important.

The woman's auburn hair collects raindrops, which catch the streetlights, sparkling as she turns from the window, frustrated, raising her cigarette to take an unpracticed drag. She exhales, smoke blocking her hair's shimmer. I like her a little more. She sees me through the cloud and goes still.

"He's a handsome one," I say, lighting a black clove.

"Excuse me?"

"That lad you're watching. He's handsome, not pretty like the other ones in there. I approve."

"Do I know you, lady?" she asks, distracted. She glances inside again.

"No, but he does. Though he knows it not."

I wince. I've never learned to throw a cloak over my words. I needn't worry. My strange phrasing hardly registers. She watches him, her expression slipping towards surrender. I know that look well.

"He's amazing," she says, "but it doesn't matter. He's just a friend." Another drag. "He doesn't think of me like that."

Ah, the stupidity of mortals. “He is a warrior, woman. He carries scars visible and unseen. He holds as much darkness as you hold light.”

“So?”

“So, he has hurt people, some badly. It doesn’t matter that he did it to keep people like you safe. He sees himself as a destroyer.”

She turns to face me. She gets it. She’s quick. I like that. She will do nicely.

“He’s afraid,” she says.

“Yes.”

“That he’ll hurt me.”

“Yes. He thinks his distance keeps you safe.”

“He’s an idiot.”

“Sometimes.”

She takes a last drag, tosses her smoke, and pauses with her hand on the door, looking back. “Who are you?”

“Does it matter, Evelyn?” She tries to remember if she gave her name. Then she remembers what she’s heading inside to do. She goes. Through the window, I watch her tap him on the shoulder and kiss him when he turns.

The soldier will heal. Her light will lead him from despair. My debts are ever repaid.

“Good work, Morrígan.”

I blow smoke at the green-clad fertility goddess who has appeared next to me. “Where have you been, Áine?” I ask.

“Lady of Blood and Battle. Winter Queen. Harvester of Souls.” She giggles.

“Matchmaker.”

“You know I could kill you, right?”

“Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“I hate you.”

She laughs. I despise the sound, but she’s right. It does feel good. I get the sense her absence was intentional, some feeble attempt to teach a lesson. It makes me hate her even more. Inside, they’re still kissing. We turn and walk together down the street. Darkness and light. Winter and summer.

“They’ll be okay?” she asks.

“Aye, they will,” I answer, and I smile.

Crazy Magick

A red leaf, pulled loose by a gust of autumn wind, landed on my notebook as I sat outside Tom's, a little café on the outskirts of town. Tom's didn't have the best coffee, but it was drinkable and a traveler could sit for hours at the shaded smoking tables. A steady flow of locals and tourists passed through, providing both a touch of anonymity and entertainment. My backpack leaned against the chair next to me, relaxing in that way only well-worn and loved backpacks can. I lifted the leaf and spun it by the stem. I might have had some thoughts about the ephemeral qualities of life, cycling seasons, death and rebirth, Persephone, Orpheus, Love. It's possible. I was on my fifth cup of coffee. I had set the leaf aside and bent forward to keep writing when I heard a familiar voice.

“Howdy, Rambler.”

I looked up, and there she was, her thumbs hooked under her backpack's straps, holding all of existence together with casual grace, smiling down at me like a benevolent deity. Have you ever looked into someone's eyes and, in that moment, everything else in your visual field blurs until that someone is, for an eternal sliver-thin pie slice of a second, the only thing in your reality? I hope you have. All humans should feel that at least one time in their life. This was my second time.

The first time? That was her, too.

“Briana?”

She laughed. My cynicism burnt itself to ash. “Mind if I join you?” she asked.

All the inconsequential things, like the table and the trees and the sidewalk and the passing cars, came back into focus. I stood up and moved my backpack to the other side of the

table. She set hers down. We hugged. She smelled like pine needles and good sweat. I remembered that smell, those arms around me. I stepped back and could see her remembering the same. Her eyes were the same grey as the autumn sky. We smiled at each other. Sat down.

“So, what have you been up to since Georgia?” I asked. Live oak branches, saw palmettos, and moonlight flickered in my mind like heat lightning. I hoped the question didn’t sound like one I’d pondered almost every day for the past five months.

“Oh, you know. Rambling.” Her answer felt as carefully casual as my question had been. She pulled out a pouch of tobacco and rolled a cigarette. It was an ugly thing, little shreds of tobacco jutting from both ends. I’d watched her roll one just a few months before, sitting cross-legged and naked in the small bed we’d shared for three nights, our skin slowly drying in the sticky Georgia heat. She’d never called me anything other than Rambler, and I didn’t mind at all.

She noticed me watching her. “I’ve missed you,” she said, lighting her cigarette. She took a drag, exhaled, and leaned through the smoke to reach across the table. The movement put her face within a few inches of mine. I didn’t kiss her, but it was a close thing. She sat back with the leaf in her hand. “Nice leaf.”

“Would you like it?”

“You’d give me your leaf?”

There are times when you need to play it cool. There are moments when you do yourself a disservice by being honest, by revealing your hand too soon. I noticed the way the tip of her nose lifted when she smiled. I thought of waving goodbye to her as she’d walked down the trail months before and how I hadn’t known if I would ever see her again. I decided this wasn’t one of those moments.

“I would.”

Her mouth opened just a little bit when she realized I was talking about a whole lot more than the leaf in her hand. She squinted at me. She saw the truth in my face. Then she kissed me. I could taste smoke on her tongue and mint in her mouth. I tasted the death of all the plans I'd had before she sat down. When we finished kissing, she leaned her forehead against mine. "You're crazy," she said.

"I know."

"I'm a fucking mess."

"So am I." I said, brushing my nose against hers. "Who isn't?"

* * *

We left the coffee shop and camped for a few days outside of town. After that, we traveled south for the winter. We wandered through North and South Carolina, made our way to Georgia, and thumbed rides all the way down to Key West. We stayed there for a couple of months, working and walking and fucking and drinking on the beach.

When the island started feeling too small, we headed north again. It was March and the weather was already getting too hot for me. We managed to make it out of Florida in just over 16 hours, thanks to a series of miraculous rides. Each time we stuck our thumbs out, a car pulled over before five minutes passed. We stopped in Ocala to have dinner. In the restaurant's parking lot, an older couple started up a conversation with us. They'd seen us laughing while we ate our meal and said we looked like sweet kids. They had backpacked in Europe together not long after getting married and were heading to Lake City. Would we like a ride? Briana and I just smiled and nodded and hopped in.

Patricia and Craig let us out at an IHOP just off the exit in Lake City. A travelling salesman, one of the last of his lost tribe still riding the highways, offered us a lift to Valdosta, about twenty miles over the Florida/Georgia line. By the time he dropped us off at a Waffle House next to a large, empty field, it was almost 2 a.m. and the sky was pink from lights reflecting off the low clouds.

We grabbed a booth. I ordered us coffees while Briana went to wash up. Our ancient waitress took the order without comment, her mouth folded down at the ends in a permanent scowl. Two other patrons sat in the dining room, a guy in a Peterbilt cap who most likely belonged to the rig idling outside and an old, black man who hadn't looked up from his coffee since we stepped through the door. Briana came out of the bathroom. As she walked towards me, I thought of the red leaf falling onto my notebook. I stood up, smiling, and kissed her when she got to the table.

"What are you grinning at," she asked after I finished kissing her.

"My favorite mess," I said, pulling away to head towards the bathroom myself. "Don't forget. I want my hash browns covered, smothered, chunked, diced, chopped, lopped, loaded, and doubled."

"Lopped?" She shook her head. Her red hair, shimmering even in the Waffle House lighting, did wonderful things for my eyes. "How about I drink my coffee and wait until you get back, sweetie."

I strolled to the tiny bathroom like a vagabond prince. I pissed and washed my hands. I splashed some water on my face, looking into the scratched mirror. My hair was starting to get scruffy, and my beard was just reaching the itchy phase of its growth cycle. That morning, we had watched the sunrise over turquoise water almost six hundred miles south of where we were

now. I was exhausted, but also as happy as I'd ever been. I dried my hands and face, winked at my reflection, and headed back through the door.

The Peterbilt guy stood at our table talking to Briana when I came back into the dining room. His back was turned to me. White block letters spelled out Covenant Hauling above a cross on his blue, nylon jacket. Psalms 74:20 was written in cursive below. I didn't know the verse. Something about the man's stance bugged me, but when I leaned to the side and saw Briana's face, she was smiling and nodding. I relaxed and kept walking.

"Heya. How's it going?" I said as I neared the table. The trucker turned and stepped back.

"Hey there," he said. "I was just telling your lady here that I'm heading north. Y'all can catch a ride, if you like." The man's face was wide, and laugh-lines webbed out from his eyes. He stuck out his hand, similarly wrinkled. I shook it. His grip was firm but not challenging, and I felt calluses on his fingers. I looked over at Briana. She shrugged, which seemed to mean it was just that kind of day.

When I pumped his hand again and accepted his offer, he seemed to subtly relax, as if relieved.

"I'm Jim. I'll be over there. Y'all eat, and grab me when you're ready," he said and walked back to his table, picking up the newspaper he'd left folded there.

I sat down, and our waitress wandered over. She begrudgingly took our orders and left. I dumped two packets of sugar into my coffee along with two tiny cups of creamer. My hands handled the ritual automatically while I tried to figure out what was bothering me about our newest friend.

Briana, who could be exceptionally patient with me, finally spoke. "Well?"

"Well, what?" The guy was fine. He reminded me of my uncle. Was I being paranoid?

“Hey.” Briana’s voice held enough of an annoyed edge to cut through my churning. She saw I me return and grinned. “What’s up with you? We just got another ride. What do you think?”

I thought it was all very strange.

“I think it’s awesome.”

“He seems nice.”

“He does.” I sipped my coffee. I wondered whether I should share my misgivings.

“Listen, Bri, I think maybe we—”

“Look.”

I followed her gaze. Rain spattered against the restaurant’s window, slashing down at an angle. As we watched, lightning lit the sky outside, illuminating the high spray of water thrown up by a passing car.

Briana held her cup in both hands, covering the lower half of her face, and raised her eyebrows at me. “You were saying?”

I imagined us walking in the rain, even to find a hotel on which we might spend some of our savings from working in Key West. Then I imagined her snoozing in the cab of the truck while we rode further down the line. “Nothing, love,” I said. “Think they’ll get my hash browns right?”

They forgot the chili, but after considering the low-grade angst simmering in our waitress’s eyes, I opted for discretion. Briana told me a story about a drunken night in Guatemala while we ate. My worries pulled a fade. Midway through her story, I realized for the hundredth, perhaps thousandth, time that there was no other place on the planet I would rather be at that

moment than sitting in a Waffle House in South Georgia listening to this woman talk. I always remind myself how lucky I was to have that, to know how good it was as I was living it.

* * *

Jim's rig was clean and comfortable. The short jog from the restaurant soaked our jackets, and as we hung them from hooks in the small sleeping area, a wave of appreciation rolled through me for this man inviting us into what was clearly his home. A photograph was stuck to the dashboard above a profusion of knobs and switches. A plump, smiling woman looked out, one of her arms wrapped around a black Labrador Retriever. She looked happy. A small cross sat next to the photo.

"We really appreciate you giving us a ride," I said.

He waved a hand. "It's my pleasure. This is no night to be walking. Nasty out there."

I got the impression that he wasn't just referring to the rain. The worry I'd let fade in the restaurant stirred a little down in my stomach. I settled into the passenger seat while Briana sat in the tidy little sleeper cabin behind us. Jim seemed like a stand-up guy, but I intended to keep my eyes open, just in case.

The truck rattled and hissed its way out onto the main road. Rather than turning towards the highway, Jim hung a left towards downtown Valdosta. Outside, the rain slanted against sidewalks that hadn't seen much in the way of repairs. Puddles formed here and there, the surfaces dancing with the repeated impacts of the raindrops. We passed a red-roofed place with "Gibson's Furniture and Appliance" written above the doors, a sprawling lumberyard, and block after block of one-story houses in various stages of decay before we reached the red brick

buildings of downtown. At an intersection that hardly seemed wide enough for the maneuver, Jim swung an expansive left turn, and we headed north on Ashley Street, which was also Route 7, which was also US 41 North. The process reversed itself, the downtown fading into strip malls and massive cinemas, which in turn gave way to golf courses as the road widened and divided. By the time we crossed a little creek that the green sign declared was the Withlacoochie River, stoplights had disappeared entirely and the rig moved along at a good clip.

Jim kept up a steady stream of words, which eventually faded into pleasant background noise. He pointed out a few landmarks, talked about the weather, asked if me and my ‘little lady’ were Christian folk. I winced at him calling her that and looked back to see if Briana was going to come out swinging. She didn’t. She was sleeping, snoring softly. She was blessed with the incredible gift to sleep anywhere at any time. She once fell asleep on a couch in a blockhouse where there was, no kidding, a drum and bass party going on around her. As a long suffering insomniac, I hated her sometimes. I watched her, admiring the way she’d pulled the small grey blanket up to cover her chin, so I missed the first part of what Jim said. The last bit snagged my attention, though.

“—off I-75, they’ll be watching the interstate, sure as water’s wet.”

I turned back to him. “What was that?”

Jim looked over at me, moderate concern on his face. “What’s that?” His expression was that of a person who just accidentally told you the way the movie ends. We’d turned off US 41 a few minutes before and an old rural route stretched out ahead.

That worried part of me rose up, stretched, and slid into my limbs. It slid into my head, and I scanned the cab for potential weapons. “Who will be watching the interstate, Jim?” I said, gaze still flickering around the suddenly small space.

The trucker opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and sighed. He kept his voice low when he spoke. “Shit. Alright. I always did talk too much. Listen. You and your lady are lucky I was in that Waffle House.” I didn’t say anything. After a few seconds, he kept going. “Look, I know it sounds crazy. But there’s something bad wrong in that town. Did you know there are more people reported missing around Valdosta than in any other town its size in the whole damned country? More murders and stabbings? The stats don’t lie, boy. We’ve been watching them for—”

“We?” I interrupted. “Who is we, Jim?” I was glad he kept his eyes mostly on the road and his hands on the wheel. He still didn’t seem threatening to me, but he clearly believed what he was saying. And that worried me. I’d had a few conversations with paranoid schizophrenics in my time wandering around the country. The plausibility of their ideas disturbed me more than anything else. You started out in a normal conversation, but if you followed their thread of logic, ten minutes later you’re nodding along while they explain how the Illuminati implanted nanotech listening devices in our bloodstreams via childhood vaccinations.

Jim gestured at the rain-spotted windshield, seeming to indicate the wide emptiness beyond the meager reach of his truck’s headlights. “There’s a lot more going on out there than you know about, kid. More than you want to know about.”

It wasn’t my job to contradict his reality. “Why don’t you tell me about it, Jim? I want to know.”

I guess my placating tone must have come across a little thicker than I’d intended. Jim smacked his palm against the oversized steering wheel. “You arrogant little shithead. You have no idea. You and your girlfriend were about to hitch your way into an early grave, or something worse, and you’re talking to me like I’m the idiot.” His voice was getting louder with each word.

“Don’t you get it? There’s evil out there. Real evil. Not bad people doing bad things. Not just sinners sinning. Evil. Ugly. Other.” His last word was almost a shout.

“Rambler?”

Briana’s soft voice spoke from the sleeping nook. It held just the faintest traces of sleep. I wondered how long she’d been listening.

“Yeah, sweetie.” I glanced back. She sat up. Her face held a question.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re getting out.” I turned back to Jim as I answered her. “Will you grab our jackets, Bri?”

The trucker cursed under his breath and shook his head. I heard Briana slipping into her coat. “You can let us out here, Jim.”

Still muttering to himself, he slowed the rig, downshifting smoothly.

“Dammit,” he said as the truck came to a stop. “I’m not crazy. I’m just trying to help.”

“And we appreciate it, Jim. But I think we’re going to go our own way. Thank you for the ride.” I stood up and stepped close to the driver’s seat so Briana could slip behind me. She handed me my jacket as she went by. Her eyes were wide. I nodded and she opened the door and climbed down. I handed her our backpacks, one at a time. With the door open, the rain pounded down loud enough to compete with diesel engine’s rumble.

I nodded to Jim. He looked old and sad and defeated. He stared out the windshield. I was about to step off the running board when he spoke.

“Sometimes, what sounds insane is just an accurate description of the world. Don’t go back to that town, son.”

“Okay, Jim.”

I stepped down onto the road. Rain ticked against my jacket's hood. It was so loud I barely heard his last words before I swung the door shut.

"I'll be praying for you."

I stood back beside Briana as the brakes released. The truck pulled away slowly. We watched the taillights until they disappeared behind a curtain of rain. When I took in our surroundings, the absurdity of our situation forced a laugh out of me. It sounded a bit like a bark. Briana just tilted her head so she could look at me from under the little bill at the end of her hood. Darkness obscured her features.

"Well," she said. "Not exactly where I would have asked him to stop."

"Bri, I don't know how much you heard, but he was talking crazy."

"I know. I heard some of it. I thought he was nice. And it was dry. But I know you did what you thought was right, even if it was stupid." She kissed me. "Now, let's get to stepping."

We walked for miles in the downpour. Even with waterproof gear, walking in the rain sucks. At night in early spring, with over six-hundred miles behind us, awake and moving for almost 18 hours straight, with Jim's babblings about evil bouncing around in our skulls, lightning casting twisted and skeletal silhouettes against the horizon, and wind whipping from what seemed like every direction at the same goddamned time, this walk sucked on a whole new order of magnitude.

When the tobacco barn loomed out of the darkness, a blacker shape against black skies, we didn't even have to discuss what to do. It was drier in there than it was out here. It encouraged me to see, during the next lightning flash, the nearest house barely visible in the distance, but it wouldn't have mattered if the house were brightly lit and right next door. We were getting out of this bullshit. Now.

We ducked the lashing branches of a few trees and made our way to the barn. I lifted the wooden latch holding the tall doors closed and swung it wide enough for us to slip inside. I felt a mild tingle all over my body as we crossed into the barn, then the door was closed and the aggressive noise of the storm abated. I dug my headlamp out of my pocket, pulled my hood back, and settled the light's elastic band around my forehead.

In contrast to its neglected exterior, the interior of the barn was orderly, clean, and well-maintained. Packed earth formed a floor about fifteen yards across, and a green tractor sat near a wall where tools hung on a pegboard. Several cords of fire wood lined another wall in neat rows. A tool cage made mostly of chicken wire separated the rear third of the barn from the rest. Most importantly, the barn was dry and, without the wind whipping, much warmer than outside.

Briana stayed close to the door. When I looked back at her after taking in the barn, she was slipping her backpack off her shoulders and settling it on the packed earth. Something about the air in the barn felt charged. Despite our circumstance, I was happy, and I couldn't help grinning at her. She pushed her hood back and blew at a chunk of wet hair stuck to her face. She didn't smile.

"We're staying here, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. We're not going back out into that. If the owners show up before we're gone, I'll offer to pay. What kind of assholes would kick people out in this weather, anyway?"

She looked at me for a second, and I could see her wondering what kind of an asshole gets out of a warm truck in this weather. Instead of sharing her thoughts, she leaned her backpack against a wall and started searching for the best place to put down a sleeping bag. I decided not to push her patience any further and wandered deeper into the barn.

When I reached the wall in the back and my light revealed what was on the other side of the chicken wire, I had trouble making sense of what I saw. It looked like someone had lifted a study out of a Victorian mansion and set it down inside tool cage. An ancient desk made of dark, heavy-looking wood sat against the wall opposite me. Accreted candle wax in every color covered one corner of the desk. Two unlit, black candles jutted up out of the wax. Next to them, leather-bound books were piled in a haphazard stack. Bookshelves made of the same material as the desk dominated the wall to my left. None of the books had print on their spines. The workbench against the wall to my right held what looked like the world's oldest chemistry set and racks lined with jars varying in shape, size, and content. A copper ring, about eight feet across and set into the earthen floor, gleamed in the center of the room. The ring had been set into the earthen floor with about a half inch of the rounded metal protruding.

What the fuck?

A framed door on spring hinges provided the only access to the room. I didn't see any lock. I had my hand against the door, ready to push it open, when Briana gripped my arm.

"What are you doing?" she asked, all traces of patience gone from her voice.

I looked from her to the room on the other side of the door then back to her. "What do you mean?"

"Look, Rambler, I'm tired, okay?" She nodded towards the room. "Let's just lay down and get some sleep, so we can be gone before whoever owns this place shows up. What's in there is none of our business." She pulled on my arm. "Come warm me up. I'm wet and still cold."

See, here's the thing they don't tell you about losing your mind: It doesn't happen all at once. Insanity is like a rockslide. A single stone breaks loose, rattles against the stones closest to

it, sets them into motion, and so on. What appears instantaneous is instead the gradual movement rippling out from this initial impact.

My hand stayed where it was, my fingers against the twisted wire stretched across the door. Jim's words drifted back into my mind. There's a lot more out there than you know about, kid. I heard his voice, and it triggered my idiotic sense of curiosity and my idiotic sense of pride, and like the idiot I was, I pushed the door open. The top edge of the door rattled against something on the other side. A string with tiny bones tied along its length swung down after the door cleared them. The bones clattered against each other like macabre wind chime when they bounced against the top of the doorframe.

When I looked back to confirm that Briana was seeing the same weird shit I was seeing, I felt the first stone in my particular rockslide break free. Behind her, a human shape, darker than the surrounding shadows, coalesced out of the darkness. The light from my headlamp appeared to sink into whatever it was, momentarily giving an impression of rippling muscles. Flame red vertical pupils blazed open a foot above and behind the person I loved most in the world. It reached for her before I could shout a warning. Elongated fingers with too many joints curled around her throat, choking off her attempted scream could escape her open mouth. Her eyes bulged. Her face turned reddish purple. The creature raised its other hand and its fingers lengthened, snapping towards me like segmented snakes of pure darkness. Cold slithered around my neck, contracting like steel cable against my carotid arteries. Each panicked thump from my chest pushed blood against a gate the shade's fingers had shut between my heart and my brain. The moment right before the black splotches started to erase my vision and my thoughts, when I realized what I'd done to her, to us, and remembered my petty reason for doing it, that moment was my stone.

* * *

I woke up with a headache pounding in time with my heartbeat and cold metal pressed against my face. I lunged up, slamming my head against the steel rebar cage I lay inside. I touched my scalp, and found a bit of blood on my fingertips when I pulled them away. The muscles in my neck screamed at me, so I turned my head slowly to look out between the bars of my coffin-sized cage. Briana lay curled in the corner of an identical cage about five feet away, unmoving. I watched the back of her jacket, holding myself perfectly still, straining to see any movement. Just the rise and fall of a shoulder. Something. I lay staring at her this way, willing her to move or breathe, until I realized I was being watched as well. Embarrassment, irrationally, flashed through me.

Weathered deep lines cut across his forehead and out from the skin at the corners of his eyes. Grey stubble shadowed his cheeks. He sat near the desk, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him. He looked at me the way a farmer might look at any large critter he'd caught and now had to dispose of. He wasn't angry at us, per se, but angry in the way anyone roused from bed in a storm and now facing an unpleasant task might be angry.

He noticed me looking at him. His gaze met mine, and his smile at what he saw there transformed his face, dispelling any traces of annoyance or heaviness. A look of pure joy supplanted these lesser emotions and smoothed the lines I'd seen moments before.

"Oh boy. You gonna be fun." He turned fun into a two syllable word with emphasis on the -un. "But not yet. You go on back to sleep, now, hoss."

He unclasped his hands and showed me one of his palms. His fingers danced through a few complex movements too fast for me to track. My eyelids got heavy, and when he flipped his hand to the side as if shooing away a pest, I slid down into darkness again.

* * *

The next time I woke up, the sounds of barking filled the room. Briana was alive, awake, moaning low in her throat, and pushing herself as far back in her cage as she could. Two huge black hounds snarled at us, straining against their leashes, close enough their saliva spattered our skin. Dogs have never scared me, even giant starving ones, so I ignored them and shouted Briana's name again and again, trying to break through her terror, to get her to look at me, to let me tell her it would be okay. I gathered my will and poured every bit of it into her name as I shouted it into the cacophony of barking.

The barking stopped, cut off by two sharp clacks as the dogs' mouths snapped shut. Briana finally looked at me, and when she did, he spoke her name with the same exact inflection I had used when I shouted. "Briana," he said, rolling his voice around the word like a tongue around sweet candy. "That's a real pretty name. Briana." She flinched each time he said her name, but she kept looking at me. Her terror grew more and more obvious as he spoke. "Names got power, Briana. Especially, a true name. And straight from your beloved's lips, too." He shook his head and stood over my cage.

"Thanks, hoss," he said. He left with his hounds, repeating her name as he walked away.

My beloved waited until he closed the barn's door to speak.

"Rambler, what's happening?"

“I don’t know.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

* * *

Maybe he slipped drugs into the water he left for us outside our cages. Maybe he did that hypnotic shit with his fingers again. Somehow, he warped our perception of time. At first, we would talk at night, trying to figure out how long we’d been in the cages, comparing the different ways we’d devised to track the passing of days. Our notes didn’t add up. Eventually, Briana started asking me where we were, who I was. I didn’t have an answer. I kept thinking of rockslides and avalanches. One night, she asked me who she was. I told her she was Briana, the woman I loved, the toughest and smartest woman I knew. She nodded and closed her eyes, and after that she didn’t speak again. I tried everything. I shouted. I pleaded. I cursed at her. Nothing worked, and I could swear I heard rocks sliding and striking against each other inside my head.

At some point, two new cages appeared. The dogs inside them lay panting, quiet except for an occasional whine at the emptiness in their stomachs. Their emptiness echoed my own. I didn’t understand why any of us were still alive. Days or weeks later, I watched our captor binding Briana’s cage to one of the hound’s cages using silver wire, and I listened as he chanted her name and other words while he twisted the wire. He noticed me watching.

“Hey there, hoss. How you feeling today?”

I gave him nothing. No fear. No anger. No expression. I directed all the hate coursing through my body and my mind to a little spot a couple of inches south of my belly button. I had no idea why. It just felt right.

“Full moon coming soon, hoss. Three days. I reckon we gonna have ourselves a little shindig the night she comes up.” The man reached into the back pocket of his overalls, pulled out a pair of snips, and trimmed the twists of wire at the eight points where he’d bound the cages together. “I sure do love a party,” he said. He laughed. And still, I gave him nothing.

When he finished trimming the wires, he stood staring at me for a while before shaking his head. “You don’t get it, do you, hoss? You ain’t got the first clue what’s happening. Wonder if I should tell you?” He slid the snips back into his pocket and wiped his hands on the seat of his coveralls. He walked over and squatted outside my cage. “Nah. Fuck you, boy. I don’t like the way you look at me. Only thing I’m telling you is this: The night of our party, you’re gonna get to be inside your sweet Briana one last time.” He cackled as if he’d said something funny, rose from his crouch, cracked his back, and left.

* * *

Seconds passed. Centuries. I drifted. Sometimes, I lay studying the hound in the cage next to Briana or the patterns in the dirt three inches outside my cage without blinking. Sometimes, I broke free from subjective reality to wander in realms of pure intellect, arguing with multiple versions of myself over obscure questions of semiotics or esoteric systems of symbols.

Sometimes, I walked through forests where mists slithered between the tree trunks thicker than any redwood I'd ever seen and through the ruins of cities I knew had never existed. I lost all sense of what was real. Even when the now familiar environment of my prison surrounded me, colors clung to the edges of every object and fanged shadows tore insubstantial chunks out of Briana and the hounds. To the sounds of stones clattering together, I gave myself over to madness.

* * *

I came back.

Briana lay naked in her cage. Our captor stood inside the copper circle chanting his words. He spoke only petty words, small words, bitter words. Yet, I could feel power sizzling through each one he pronounced. The chanting took his full concentration. While he was thus preoccupied, I pushed my consciousness up through the slime he'd layered over my awareness. The layer was thick, so I used all of my will to push. The slime resisted. I pushed harder, so hard I shot right through what might have been considered ordinary awareness and out the other side. I tore loose the veil that had covered my eyes my entire life and looked on reality for the first time.

She was, of course, the first thing I saw. She burned there. Even starving and caged, she blazed, pushing the darkness so far back that for a too-brief, eternal instant, I only saw her. Then he uttered a short, harsh word, a binding word, but in a tongue where to bind is to crush, to subsume, to enslave. The word arced through the metal of the cage. I watched as he began wrapping her fire in darkness. I watched him rip her spirit out of the body lying in the cage. I

watched him do the same to the hound's spirit, which he cast into the darkness with total disregard.

He wound cord after cord around her, pulling fine black chain out of his crotch like a spider pulling silk from its spinneret. As he wrapped her spirit, he chanted words to make her his. To bind her. For all his knowledge, all his power, he only knew the small words, the small ideas. He couldn't understand anything else. So, he didn't see me whispering a single, quiet strand of soft words, didn't see me extend it just far enough for it to catch on his own frenzied wrapping, didn't see it get pulled into his bonds.

My thread spun out from the center of my chest, and I learned what a bee felt when taking flight after a deep sting. All that was good inside me was being drawn out through an opening tinier than a needle's tip. This thread was woven from the most delicate words. Freedom. Loyalty. Compassion. Love. All the words that could disappear with an errant breath. All the words that could carry ten thousand times their weight. Unbreakable. Never mind that it was impossible. It fucking hurt.

See, the thing they don't tell you about magick is that you have to be insane for it to work.

I could have tried telling myself none of this was real. I could have tried telling myself we were drugged and being held captive by some twisted redneck with a penchant for bondage and bestiality. Or I could tell myself that this asshole was working magick to try and shove my beloved's spirit into a fucking hound's body. And if reality allowed him to do magick, then it had to allow me the same, right?

Fuck it. You never know until you try.

"Briana."

He spoke her name, sending the full weight of his will through the black chains to bind her.

“Briana.”

I spoke her name at the same instant and sent the full measure of my love through the thin thread I’d tangled in his chains, carrying my greatest wish.

His desire to control met my simple wish for her: That she may ever be free.

Let it be known, when these two forces meet, it isn’t even a fucking contest.

“Briana.”

A third voice spoke. Speaking her name, she knew herself. Knowing herself, she remembered. Remembering turned out to be a very bad thing for our host.

Briana’s spirit, lifted free of its flesh, was boundless. In the midst of that roiling flame, her eyes opened and fixed on her captor. One instant, she was wrapped in chains. The next, she held them in one flaring fist, towering over us. We dangled from her grip. I think I was cackling. She was beautiful. She was terrifying. Goddamn, did I love her.

“Let all who dream of freedom, be free,” she said.

The cages fell to dust. I tried to rise, but my joints, swollen with malnutrition and lack of use, refused to support my weight. The pain ripped something like a scream out of my throat, and I fell onto my stomach. The hounds didn’t have the same trouble. The fur along their backs raised in rigid stripes. Their low growls rumbled at the edge of auditory range. Saliva dripped from their bared fangs as they stalked towards the cowering man. Grey ate away at the edges of my vision until I looked through a pinpoint. The last sounds I heard as my awareness fled were breaking chains and his first screams.

* * *

My head rested on her lap and her hands stroked my face when I woke up. She looked at me with her luminous grey eyes full of compassion. For a moment, I couldn't be sure I'd survived. Pain rushed through my body on the heels of that thought, assuring me I was very much alive. "I should have left you in that cage," she said. "I can't believe you didn't listen to me, you idiot. I told you not to open that door." She never stopped touching my face with her fingertips and her eyes never changed. "You're so incredibly stupid. I'm in love with an idiot."

I gave her a manly groan and turned on my side, pushing my cheek against her warm thigh. Her hand tightened and pulled me closer, and my tears soaked her skin. Long after I stopped crying, she jostled my head.

"All right," she said. "Enough of that." I turned onto my back. She looked down at me with a mischievous smile and then at the destruction and scattered books surrounding us. "You're still a fool for opening the door. But, now that it's open, we might as well see what we can learn. Maybe find Jim, so you can apologize. We should get started."

See, here's the thing they don't tell you about love...

Trickster

Coyote needed a new coat. Rain hissed out of the darkness between the buildings above, pattering against the stained, brown fabric. It soaked through immediately, chilling his skin. He increased his pace, passing the few shuffling people still out at this late hour. The Quill would be warm, especially with a whiskey in his hand. Soon, Coyote paused with his hand on the knob of the seventh unmarked door on the sunset side of Tower Street, listening to the cacophony of voices and laughter on the other side. He nodded once, turned the brass knob, and stepped inside.

Coyote scrawled his sigil in the leather-bound guestbook and scanned the room. Scattered among the mismatched antique furniture he saw the usual crowd of lost gods and freaks. Two party spirits sipped oversized drinks at the corner table. A pack of vamps and their Goth feedbags clustered at the far end of the mahogany bar. Two tourists, their nervousness palpable, sat on stools making eye contact with no one. A succubus leaned under dead flowers nailed to the brick wall beside the piano. Coyote could see her nipples harden through her meager black outfit when she felt him looking. She waited a few seconds before turning her head. The flirtatious smile forming on her lips froze when she recognized him. Coyote winked.

The Hierophant, high priest of mysterious cocktails and potions, was bartending tonight. A scotch appeared between the vamps and the tourists as if by magick. No one spoke to him. He wondered if miracles were real. The glass was almost to his lips before a rough, seductive voice shattered his renewed faith.

“Hey.”

Coyote closed his eyes. Instead of sipping the scotch, he drained it. His eyes watered when they opened. The Hierophant looked sympathetic before he looked away.

“Hey, Stone.”

She didn’t respond. Coyote sighed and turned to face her.

Centuries of fury wafted off the short, black haired woman. She wore a black, leather coat and stared at him. Coyote tried on a friendly smile. The fury expanded, filling the room. Conversations quieted. The tourists slipped out.

“Look, Stone. If this is about the blanket, I don’t have it.”

“You know what it’s about, you sonofabitch. You can’t take back a gift.”

“I don’t have it.”

“Liar.”

Her fist doubled him over. Her knee lifted him again. He sagged against her, grabbing her coat to stay up. She shrugged out of it in one movement. He fell, the leather cushioning his fall. Her foot clipped his face. He felt her strip his ragged coat away.

She leaned close, shaking the old blanket she now held. “Mine. Freely given.” Stone then stomped Coyote until he was flat.

Pulling himself back together took time. The Quill was silent when he rose. He walked to the door without meeting anyone’s eyes. Just before opening it, Coyote turned, slipping into his new leather coat. He bowed despite the grinding of his newly healed bones. Grinning, the trickster stepped out into the night.

Bog Hound – Chapter 1

I'd do it again. I only blew up Thoor Ballylee because the two demons in the workshop Yeats had concealed below the tower were seconds from unraveling their bindings and leaving County Galway significantly depopulated in the aftermath of their escape. William Butler Yeats had been a brilliant poet, but his summoning and containment spells were absolute shit. Yet, it was me, Rory Camden, who got exiled. I was the guy who'd been hunted by scholars of poetry and esoteric occult lore for over ten years and, if the emails I received regularly were to be believed, would be hunted far into my miserable future.

Fucking Yeats. What kind of asshole gets to be his age without learning a proper binding ritual? Why hadn't he banished the damned things when he realized the Morrígan was sipping whiskey in his parlor? If even half of what I'd heard was true, he was probably too juiced up on monkey glands and chasing teenage serving girls to concentrate, thinking he'd live forever because he was sixty-five and could still get his willy to stand at attention. Wanker. Great poet, though. Real shame about those hidden manuscripts.

These thoughts and others churned in my head as I walked down St. Claude Avenue on my way to the French Quarter for a pint. Sometimes, my mind worried at the details of that night like a rat gnawing the edges of a rotted sandwich. I turned my memories of what I'd come to call the Yeats Debacle around and around, looking at the situation from every angle, trying to figure out some solution other than the one I'd chosen, which had involved pouring waves of blue flame down the hidden staircase leading to the workshop until the stone melted.

I pushed the thoughts away. It didn't matter. It was over. If I could have done it another way, I would have. Dwelling on that night wasn't going to change my present situation in the

least. Getting lost in the past was, in fact, a significant distraction that could very well cause me to miss important details in the here and now. For instance, two men in trench coats and fedoras tailing me from about fifteen yards back. How long had they been following me? If I'd been focused on my surroundings rather than remembering the two bottles of holy water I'd left sitting on the desk in my cheap hotel room ten years before, I would have noticed them immediately. Nothing screams villain like trench coats and fedoras. They followed me at far too close a distance. I'd first caught their reflection in a deli's window, and each time I spotted them again, they were the same distance away. Perhaps they wanted to be seen.

Fair enough. Either they planned to herd me towards something unpleasant or they wanted to talk. Or they were terrible at their jobs. All the same to me. I could dance to whatever tune they wanted to play. I pushed my fedora back and searched for an establishment displaying a particular symbol. My hands confirmed the contents of several pockets in my long coat. A cool autumn wind and the increased speed of my gait made the coat's hem flutter around my knees. When I spotted the symbol, a stylized gold harp on a black background, through a restaurant's window, I ducked inside.

By the time the two men stepped through the door, I sat in a booth in the corner of the dining room. My waitress, a red-headed lass with freckles clustered atop her cheekbones, set a pint of Guinness on the table while one of my tails spoke to the maître de. The other man scanned the room. My waitress left, giving me a stunning smile as she went. I waved at the scanner and took a sip of my beer.

The scanner tapped his companion on the shoulder, and they threaded their way towards my booth. I studied them as they approached. Expressionless faces, grey coats, herringbone hats,

black suits with white shirts and black ties. They clearly shopped at the same discount men's clothing store. They were halfway to the table when the smell hit me.

It wasn't exactly rot or decay, but rather the smell that precedes such a breakdown by a few minutes. Dead flesh, even before it starts to putrefy, doesn't exude the most appealing bouquet. The odor is subtle, however, and the right combination of oils can mask it to such a degree that only the most rigorous of olfactory investigations can detect its presence. Rather than approach the problem in this manner, the deceased gentlemen walking towards me had followed the same route taken by every zombi I'd ever met. They'd covered themselves in Old Spice.

Why Old Spice? No clue, but they seemed to love the repugnant shit. Maybe it had something to do with their impaired senses, the result of dead olfactory nerves. Perhaps Old Spice was the only smell strong enough to cut through the fog of death. Maybe the dead were sadistic and took great pleasure in assaulting the living with the only scent worse than putrefied flesh. It remained a mystery. My encounters with the walking dead, thus far, hadn't afforded me a single opportunity to exchange grooming tips. I usually dusted them before they could get a word out.

I held up a hand when they were still a few yards from the table. They stopped.

"Look, you lads are obviously looking for me, and if you're looking for me, then you know who I am, and if you know who I am, then you know I can make you really dead before you can blink." They stared at me with their milky white eyes. "If you could blink, that is."

"We are not here to cause you harm, Mr. Camden," said the tall one. The words came without inflection or tone. His features carried no expression. The only thing that distinguished the one on the right from the one on the left was the slight difference in their heights. "Our master has a job that he believes is especially suited for a man with your talents. May we sit?"

I nodded and gestured at the seats across from me. They slid into the booth and kept their hands on the table, palms down. This clearly wasn't their first time carrying a message to someone as cautious as me. I studied the pallid, loose skin on the backs of their hands, wondering who they'd been before their master had turned them into the empty beings sitting across from me.

A zombi in the Vodou tradition bears little resemblance to the reanimated corpses popular in films. They start out as normal people, perhaps a bit depressed, but very much alive. The sorcerer then siphons the soul from their victim's body over the course of days, weeks, months, slowly peeling away their humanity. In the same way a very sick or elderly person sometimes loses the will to live and sinks down into death, a body with the spirit ripped free does the same. Were the zombi across from me truly dead? From where I sat, it certainly appeared that way. The hearts in their chests might occasionally thump, but they might as well be dead.

"Now, why would I work for your master, boys? I know a few good houngans, but I steer clear of bokor. Especially ones who turn people into things like you." Houngan serve as priests in their communities by warding against sickness and harmful spirits. Bokor are mercenary sorcerers. Hexes for cash; no questions asked.

"Our master is a houngan," said the short one. "He freed us from the man who turned us into what we are." I paused in the middle of taking a sip and raised an eyebrow.

"It is true," the one on the right continued. "We lived as bad men. I was a defiler of children." He turned his head to his companion. "He was a man paid to kill other men. Doctor Carrefour offered us rest or service to the loa. We did not want to meet the Baron carrying only the deeds of our lives. We know we cannot wash away the stains of our sins. We work now to balance the scales."

I drank deep from my stout, thinking hard. What they described wasn't impossible. I understood the theoretical framework, the way I'd shape the spell, but I'd never heard of such a thing before. If they spoke truth, this Carrefour was swinging some heavy mojo. I settled back, sipped my beer, slipped the pouch of graveyard dirt I'd been palming under the table into a pocket, and listened to their pitch.

* * *

Dr. Carrefour had lost his hand. Not the collection of digits at the end of his arm he used to pick his nose, but rather his hand in the hoodoo sense of the word, an object that helps its user obtain a desire. A hand is a magical helper. The mojo bag a gambler kept in his hip pocket and rubbed through his jeans before picking up the dice was a hand. The water from a bottle filled with dead wasps that a fighter dabbed on his fists was a hand. A hand could also be an action, like a person walking backwards and counting to ten when someone threw an evil eye their way, but most hands were objects, talisman, little bundles of symbols and will and non-ordinary behaviors charged with the personal energetic signature of the human for which it was created.

Carrefour's stolen hand was called a buzzard rock. I'd heard of them before, although I'd never seen one. According to the lore, a buzzard lays twelve eggs. When a buzzard is sitting on her eggs, she leaves the nest for about half an hour each day to search for food. While she's gone, the person creating the hand sneaks an egg out of the nest, boils it for fifteen minutes, and puts it back before the buzzard returns. All the other eggs will hatch. After nine days, the buzzard flies off to get a rock and uses it to test the egg. No one knows how she uses a rock to test the egg, but that's what she does. After the buzzard realizes the egg is bad, she takes her young ones

away and leaves the bad egg and the rock. The rock becomes a buzzard rock and it supposedly allows the person who created it to go anywhere unseen.

Now, this sort of magick wasn't my forte. When it came to the old ways of root and claw and branch and wing, my reliable knowledge was restricted to the plants and animals native to central Kentucky, where I grew up, and old Ireland, where I'd spent every summer learning from my Aunt Aideen, until I'd turned eighteen and become her full-time apprentice. I'd picked up a passing familiarity with hedge magick in Scotland and England over the years, but when it came to the States, all I had to work with was my understanding of the underlying principles.

Did the buzzard rock change the way light bounced off the user? Did it cloud the minds of everyone in its vicinity so that their brains didn't register the user's presence? With magick, the ways to achieve any goal were limited only by imagination, willpower, and capacity to channel the raw forces of existence. A few inviolable principles also served as hard limits, but folk magick sometimes seemed to violate even those rules. It was primal, rooted in behaviors and beliefs that, in some areas of the world, predated written language. A buzzard brings a rock to a nest, and that act creates an invisibility stone. Why? How? Who fucking cares, mate? You're invisible.

Regardless, someone had broken into Carrefour's shop just outside the French Quarter and taken his buzzard rock. I had to admire the thief's audacity. Breaking into a houngan's workshop was an easy way to wind up dead, or worse, as illustrated by the monsters who related these events from inside their cloud of Old Spice.

When I asked them where they'd been during the break-in, they lowered their heads. Their shame surprised me. Conscientious zombi? We were elsewhere, one of them muttered.

Working for the doctor, the other said. I drank the rest of my beer and waved to the waitress for another. They sat in penitent silence until it arrived and continued.

None of the Doctor's divinations had yielded the thief's image, name, or location.

Tracking the rock should have been as easy for Carrefour as finding his dick in the dark. We magical types are real close with our tools. Anything we used to help us bend the laws of physics and shift the weight of consensus reality tended form a bond. With enough time, I could find my hat even if someone took it halfway across the world and hid it up a miner's ass in the deepest coal pit in China. Carrefour's pet rock couldn't have travelled far before its theft was discovered, yet he hadn't been able to turn up any information regarding its location.

Even stranger, the hand wasn't terribly useful to the thief. A witch's broom was his broom. A wizard's wand was her wand. A gender queer sorcerer's athame was their athame. Using someone else's tools was always a sketchy proposition. Best case, it might allow someone to pull a thin trickle of chi. More likely, it wouldn't function at all. Worst case, it would horribly twist the working. A hand created to reduce the lactic acid in leg muscles instead fills the leg bones with hydrochloric acid. That kind of thing.

None of this made any sense.

Apparently, Doctor Carrefour felt the same way, because he'd cast his palm nuts asking for guidance in finding his stolen buzzard rock. Something he saw there had led him to me, an exiled Bog Hound with a penchant for good whiskey, fist fights, and improvised hermetic spellcasting, who also possessed a tendency to blast perceived threats into particulate matter before assessing the motivations behind their actions or the structural integrity of the buildings in which said threats were confronted. Carrefour's loa were out of their fucking minds. I decided not to mention that point. I sensed we were approaching the topic of compensation.

Tall zombi got right into it.

“Our master is prepared to offer you a substantial reward for the return of his hand.”

“How much we talking, buck?”

“Five thousand dollars.”

“That’s it?”

“And information regarding those responsible for the mishap which occurred ten years ago this past spring.”

I froze.

“Come again.” I said when I could speak again.

“Our master has information regarding those responsible for the—”

“Aye. That’s what I thought you said.” I drank the second half of my beer in one go.

“Give me the address.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The address for your boss’s shop. I assume you’ll want me to take a look there first.”

The zombi looked at each other, and then back at me. “We can show you the way. Doctor Carrefour is not there, but he has instructed us to give you access.”

“No worries on the escort, boyo. The craic’s been surprisingly good, considering you fellows aren’t breathing, but I am, breathing that is, and I need a break from the Old Spice. I’ll meet you there.” I stood up as I spoke. They looked at each other again. Then they gave me the address. On my way across the room, I waved at the waitress and then pointed at the zombi where they still sat in the booth. She smiled that smile again and went to deliver the check. I stepped out the door and into the street, marveling at mundanes’ capacity to ignore anything that didn’t fit into their paradigm.

* * *

I might have been born deep in redneck territory, but a crowded city settled my mind. New Orleans was a great place to wander. I hadn't lied to Carrefour's boys about my need to breathe outside of their cloud, but I'd also scampered because I needed to think. After ten years as a hunted exile, my brain worked better when I was moving. I cast a couple of cantrips as I strolled along. One would raise the hairs on the back of my neck if anyone watched me for longer than a few seconds. Another would tug my hat's brim in the direction of anyone within twenty yards who carried hostile intentions. Satisfied I could fully relax, I slipped into the city's bloodstream and drifted, just another cell pulsing along amidst thousands of other cells.

How much could a New Orleans houngan know about what happened in Éire ten years ago? What was there to know? Yeats and I had both screwed up, but he was dead enough for it not to matter to him. I still had trouble threading it all together. What did the loa want with me? How had they even known I was here? I'd stepped lightly in the three weeks since I'd arrived in the city. I wore enough masking sigils sewn into my clothes and tattooed into my skin to throw a black dog off my trail.

My dear aunty Aideen couldn't even find me, and she could draw on the druidic knowledge handed down through our family since before the Danaans landed on Irish shores. Scholars had declared the knowledge lost, the druids gone, but scholars thought everything important could be found in books. I loved my aunt Aideen, but she scared me. Her magick smelled of bogs and peat and dark, mossy forests. She carried prophetic visions in her blood, a gift (or curse) passed from mothers to daughters in her line for centuries. The sidhe, or faeries as

most Americans dare to call them, held her in the highest regard, and those beautiful, deceitful, absolutely insane creatures have no respect for anything human. She had taught me almost everything I knew, and she would be the first in line to flay me for my screw up at Thoor Ballylee. Most of my personal wards had been designed to keep her from scrying my location.

I turned down a side street. Live oaks leaned in from either side, their branches intermingling. Night was falling, and people lounged on their porches in the last light of the day. Laughter and the murmur of conversations drifted out to the buckled and slanted sidewalk. The wet smell, some combination of rotting leaves and salt water, tinged with a slight sour tang of garbage, unique to this city, filled my nose. My footsteps took me to an intersection of two narrow, potholed streets. A cemetery fence held down one corner, and small, close-built houses occupied the other three.

Conscious thought had slipped away while I walked, as always, and when I came back to myself, I stood in the center of the intersection. I turned a complete circle in the crossroads. A smile grew slowly on my face, and I walked back the way I'd come, no longer wandering. I needed to make a stop before I headed to Carrefour's shop.

* * *

An hour later, I found the zombi standing motionless outside a corner store. Most of the time, when people are waiting, they shift their weight back and forth, scratch their asses, watch the traffic as it passes. These two could have been mistaken for finely chiseled statues. I steeled myself for their smell and strolled up.

“Hey boys,” I said. “Sorry to keep you waiting.” I wasn’t, and I didn’t bother to keep it from showing in my voice.

They looked at each other, said nothing, and stepped away from the wall at the same time. The tall one unlocked the door. I followed him into the store’s dim interior. My gaze flicked around the room. On a table to the right of the entrance, tall statues surrounded a small altar nearly concealed it. I pulled out the fireball candy I’d purchased on my way to the shop and set it between a cigar and a clay cup half-filled with rum. I looked up from setting down the candy to find both zombi staring at me. I smiled, shrugged, and stepped past them deeper into the room.

The setup resembled most of the talismonger shops I’d visited. Most of the larger items with high price tags, the statues, daggers, stone bowls, and whatnot, were placed to draw the attention of punters who just wanted to browse. However, scattered here and there were objects that gave off waves of power like heat off a summer road. A tarnished hatpin with two garnets and an empty setting where the third should be gave the distinct impression that its wearer might find conversation with strangers to be a breeze. A chipped stone carving of a Tiki god, no larger than my thumb, filled my head with the sound of rain pounding down on broad leaves when I held my hand over it. A deck of playing cards with worn edges made me want to bet the Old Spice twins a thousand that I could cut to the Ace of Spades. Nothing in the room gave me the impression it was hexed or harmful, and although I knew it would take a more rigorous examination of the place to be certain, Carrefour looked to be a proper houngan, a force for the light and a protector of his people.

I pulled the cards out of their case and shuffled them in my hands. I’d always loved cards; the ritual snap and clatter soothed me. The luck charm, which I sensed in the tiny sigils hidden

within the decorative borders on the back of each card, hummed through me as I shuffled. Homesickness washed through me hard enough to thin my eyes to slits. Luck magick was as vital to Ireland as quality stout. I saw my aunt's cottage, tucked into its little valley with hills rising up on either side. Summer sunlight turned the tiny stream near the house into liquid gold. I shook off my nostalgia and set the cards down on the table where I'd found them. "Alright lads, thanks for the tourist's perspective. You want to show me where he kept the rock before it walked off on him?"

I followed them behind the glass counter and through a door small enough that I had to duck my head. The door opened into the back room where the real mojo lived. Carrefour kept things as neat as an apothecary. Bottles of every size and shape lined most of the room's shelves. Ritual objects occupied a few of the shelves. A low stool on casters sat next to a taller, wooden chair. A rolling table had been pushed against one wall. Carrefour's back room could have belonged to a well-organized country doctor in the 19th century, when doctors kept such rooms in their houses. I felt immediately at ease. Unlike the scattering of powerful objects I'd found in the shop's main room, this room was so full I had trouble separating the auras of power surrounding each object.

I stood in the center of the room and lowered my head. With each breath, I sank deeper into my perception and further from conscious thought. I was eventually able to see the cloud of overlapping energies for what it was: a knot of energetic threads writhing in constant motion. Each thread emerged from the knot in the air above me and led to an item on one of the shelves. It took a few minutes for this image to define itself behind my closed eyes, but once it had, the break in the pattern was obvious. I opened my eyes, breathing slow and deep, and walked to a

shelf on the far wall. The threads overlaid my visual perception of the room, wavering and whipping in a multitude of colors.

The stone had rested between a tall, ornate crystal decanter of some kind of emerald liquid (a part of my mind supplied the information: Les fils d'Emile Pernot absinthe, distilled in Pontarlier, France, 1892) and a shorter rounded bottle of something thick and black (my mind had nothing to say about this bottle's contents). I squinted at the empty space where the stone had rested and felt a twist inside my head as I tuned out the other energies in the room. I peered into the spaces between the wood grains, seeking any trace of the buzzard rock's signature in the place where it had rested for quite some time. I didn't see anything. I blew out a frustrated breath before I remembered the nature of the object I sought.

Another twist inverted the way I saw things. The result resembled the negative of a photograph, and I immediately found what I was looking for. As a tool for remaining unseen, I couldn't search for traces of the buzzard rock. But I could look for an absence where none should have been. To my twisted vision, this absence manifested as a pale off-white glow.

Unfortunately, the shelf was the only place where I could see this absence. The two zombi radiated a similar signature, owing, I suspected, to the absence of their souls, but there was no indication where the rock had gone after it left the shelf. I sighed and let my vision return to the everyday, consensual spectrum of the waking world. Everything looked dull and shabby in comparison to the way it looked only moments earlier. An aching throb formed in the center of my forehead. I closed my eyes and massaged the ache with my middle and ring fingers.

"Do you know where to find the object, Mr. Camden?" the tall, talkative zombi asked.

I rubbing my forehead for a bit before I responded. I kept my eyes closed. “I don’t. But I know what I’m looking for now.” My voice came out rougher than I’d expected. “How can I contact you when I find something out?”

When I opened my eyes, he was holding out a white business card. I took it. The card had “Doctor Carrefour” embossed in simple black print at its center. Someone had scrawled a phone number with a New Orleans area code under the name.

“The Doctor asks that you contact him as soon as you have any information.”

I considered making a quip about missing their scintillating company, but decided instead to slip the card into my wallet and walk away. Fatigue dragged at me as I exited the shop and headed towards home.

* * *

Three days passed before I turned up anything resembling a lead. I worked my way through every tracking spell I knew. I summoned and banished a menagerie of minor spirits, shades, and imps. I reached out to my meager collection of stateside contacts, stared into a crystal ball, and went for a stroll through the astral plane. I was considering the pros and cons of buying a sheep and slaughtering it to read its entrails when I got a call from Thomas, who was the last person I expected to unearth a clue.

I’d never met Thomas face to face. I wasn’t even sure Thomas was his real name. I’d encountered him through Craigslist a year ago. He’d posted a convoluted request for information on banishing a spirit that had taken up residence in an object. His post had included enough details to make me think he might be facing a real deal arcane inhabitation, so I’d tossed him an

email saying I might be able to help for a small fee. In the midst of our exchange he'd revealed his suspicion that the servers he used to host an online stockpile of scanned esoteric texts and webpages had been possessed. It was the first time I'd heard of anything like this, so I took the case out of curiosity. I figured he probably just had a run of the mill virus, but he turned out to be right. We'd collaborated online. I coached him in putting together an IRL banishment spell, and he showed me ways to send magickally charged files through the internet. We'd shared information a few times since.

Thomas had happened upon a darknet site specializing in artifacts. One of the sellers was trying to move an object similar to what I'd described to him. Using his own brand of digital magick, he'd hacked the site and traced the user's IP address. I gathered my gear as he talked. He gave me an address in the neighborhood where I'd stood in the crossroads a few days before. I thanked him, hung up, pulled on my coat, and stood in the doorway of my apartment. I scanned the room to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything, something that had become a ritual since the Yeats Debacle. Satisfied I had everything I needed, I closed the door and activated its wards.

* * *

The house at the address Thomas had given was the most rundown domicile on its block. Green mold covered the upper half of its wooden siding. Yellow paint had peeled away in large patches, giving me the impression that the house suffered from some kind of exotic, architectural leprosy. Plywood covered most of the house's window openings. The few that remained open revealed only darkness. The front door was boarded up, but the back door looked functional. A layer of green moss covered the brick in the backyard. I wandered at a casual pace, just another

pedestrian out for a nighttime stroll. Although the house appeared unoccupied, I saw a few scuffs in the moss, dark streaks against the lighter green.

Two spots on the side of my neck warmed up as I passed. Someone was definitely home. I kept walking until I knew I was out of sight. I stopped in the shadows between two street lights, thinking. I could go about this in a couple of ways. I could use stealth. I could bring diplomacy to bear. I could post up and wait for the thief to leave.

I shook my head and walked around the block, approaching the house the same way as before. As I neared the entrance to the backyard, I reached out with my senses, feeling for any kind of wards on the gate or the back door. Nothing. None of the open windows looked out on the gate, so I lifted the latch and stepped up onto the concrete landing in front of the door.

I shifted my perception into the strange, photo negative range I'd used at Carrefour's shop, reached inside my coat's breast pocket, and brushed the runes inside with a fingertip. I whispered a few words in a Gaelic dialect older than the pyramids, now spoken by fewer than thirty people in the entire world. Then I kicked the door just above the knob, snapping the deadbolt and slamming it against the inside wall. Fuck diplomacy.

I was in the room and searching for threats before the door rebounded with enough force to close it again. Enough light made its way through the dirty windows to show me a small kitchen suffering from gross neglect. Water damaged had warped the exposed subfloor in several places. I drew in heat from my surroundings, gathered it in my right fist and spoke an incantation to light up the room.

Nothing happened.

I pulled on the thermic energy again, but it slipped my grasp before I could use it. My surprise at this registered at about the same moment something hard slammed into the back of my head.

I stumbled towards the kitchen, caught myself on the edge of the sink, and lashed out with one of my feet. The horse kick landed, but there wasn't much power behind it. I heard a grunt. I dropped to a knee and spun towards the sound. I expected to see the thief, but the room was empty. Something flickered through the air a foot above me and hit the wall. Light reflected off a silver blade as the knife bounced away into the darkness.

Motherfucker.

I came up off my knee, crouching low and swiveling my head back and forth, hoping to see some disturbance in the air or hear a scraping foot. I used to box, and I'd been in more scraps outside the ring than inside, so I kept my hands raised to protect my face. They didn't stop the invisible fist from folding my nose sideways onto my cheek. It broke with an all-too-familiar crack. Tears flooded my eyes. Unable to see, I covered up, bringing my hands together in front of my face and ducking my head. I was rewarded with another punch against my jaw and then into my lower abdomen, right above my belt.

Little bursts of color bloomed behind my eyes. The body blow stole most of my breath. I wanted to fall down and curl up on the rotting floor until I stopped hurting. Of course, lying down in midst of an active beating was a good way to get killed.

Growling, I pushed off the counter and threw my arms out wide. Another fist cracked against my temple, splitting the skin, but I bared my teeth when I folded the bastard in my arms. I lifted him and charged blindly across the room, praying my legs would keep us upright. My

prayers were answered when we crashed into the wall and my shoulder drove into his invisible body.

I thought I had him, but the thief was tougher than I'd expected. A doubled fist pounded into my spine. A knee slammed into my chest. I fell to the side and rolled trying to get some distance. I wasn't fast enough. His boot tip connected with my diaphragm, blasting the air from my lungs. I curled around the pain and took two more kicks. I barely noticed, struggling as I was to breathe again.

It must have been a full minute before I registered his laughter in the darkness. Every breath felt like I was pulling it into my lungs through a narrow straw. My chest protested each one as well; he had broken a couple of ribs with his last kicks. The skin under my eyes was swelling from the broken nose, and I could feel blood running down my cheek. I inch-wormed my way into a sitting position, leaned back against the door, and wrapped my arms around my chest. I looked up at the man who had so thoroughly kicked my ass.

I couldn't make out all his features in the room's dim light, but he looked wholly unremarkable. Short brown hair, plain face, jeans, dark t-shirt, hiking boots. He was shaking his head and laughing softly.

"Fucking magical types. You idiots think you can just do whatever you want. But take away your mojo, and you fall apart." He pointed at the doorframe above me. "A few little scratches in the wood, just so, and you're as helpless as a kitten."

In spite of how bad it hurt, I craned my head to look where he was pointing. A small symbol I'd never seen before had been carved into the wood. When I looked back at him, he wore an inauthentic expression of remorse. He tossed a round stone into the air and caught it again. "It's a shame I got to kill you, but this little baby, here." He held the rock up between his

finger and thumb. “This baby is going to bring me enough money that I just can’t afford to risk you talking.” He dropped the rock into the front pocket of his jeans and pulled a large folding knife out of his back pocket. “Sorry, man.”

“Me too,” I said and spit blood to the side. “You were right about us magical types. We rely far too much on spells and whatnot.”

“It’s too bad,” he said, stepping closer, snapping out the blade.

“Yeah. Too bad,” I repeated. Then I pulled the 9mm from inside my jacket and shot him five times in the chest.

* * *

I caught my reflection in the shop’s window on my way inside. I looked like a bloody raccoon. Dark purple bruises ringed each eye, and the lump in the middle of my nose was the most prominent feature on my face. Every breath and step I took sent pain through my body. I would have preferred to stay home for a month or two instead of dragging my sorry ass to the talismonger’s shop, but I wanted to get paid, get my information, and get this shit behind me.

The room looked just as it had the last time I’d been there. I didn’t see anyone inside. I detected no trace of Old Spice in the air, so I felt certain the boys were nowhere near the building. Where the hell was Carrefour? It was the middle of the day, and the door was unlocked. I stopped just past the threshold. I reached inside my jacket and put a hand on my automatic.

A second or two later, I heard wood thump against wood. After a pause, the sound repeated. I heard it once again, and the door to the Doctor’s room opened. An old man wearing jeans and a red and black flannel shirt stepped through. He leaned on a gnarled wooden walking

stick, which he thumped against the floor three times. He met my gaze, and his eyes sparkled amidst the astoundingly wrinkled, dark brown skin of his face. A worn fedora rested atop his head and a smoldering cigar jutted from his mouth. He started laughing and pulled the cigar out of his mouth with his free hand.

“Ooh, boy. You look like you been drug through both sides of a big old shit pile.”

“Aye, mate. Huge pile.”

He dragged on the cigar and puffed a cloud out into the room. For a moment, I thought I saw faces in the smoke. People I knew. Then they were gone. “You know who I am, boy?”

“You aren’t Carrefour.”

He nodded, and shifted the cigar into the hand resting on his cane. Reaching into his flannel’s breast pocket, he extracted the fireball candy I’d left for him the day before. He unwrapped the candy and popped it into his mouth, sucking on it with clear pleasure. He moved the ball to the side of his mouth and grinned.

“I like your style, boy. You don’t do it pretty, but you get it done. I see a lot of things coming together around you.”

I stayed silent.

“You get the rock?”

I nodded and pulled the buzzard rock out my shirt’s breast pocket, imitating the motions he’d used when he pulled out the fireball moments before. The old man laughed, and I couldn’t help but smile as I limped over. I dropped the stone, grey and plain, onto the unlined palm of the hand he extended. I took care not to touch his skin. His smile told me that he saw my caution and that it amused him. He slipped the buzzard rock into his pocket.

“What do you think of this?” I asked, showing him the object I’d found in the thief’s pocket the night before. He snatched the coin from me so fast that he was holding it up before I noticed it was gone. He studied the coin silently for a long time, turning it between his fingers.

“You know what this is?” he asked.

“I figure it had something to do with him being able to use Carrefour’s hand.”

The old man nodded, clearly distracted. A minute later, he shook himself and handed the coin back to me. “You hold onto this real tight, son.” He passed me a wad of cash. “Well, all right then,” he said. He turned and thumped his way back to the door.

I stood there, trying to figure out what I should do next. I was about to leave when he turned back around. “Oh yeah. I almost forgot. You want to know about what happened ten years ago?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, you better call your aunt, then,” he said. The look on my face started him laughing again. Papa Legba was still laughing when he walked into the darkness and slammed the door behind him.

Technosocial Subject

In a one bedroom apartment near the warehouse district of the city, a cyborg knelt before his altar. At this point in time, most people could be considered cyborgs, augmented as they were by objects allowing them near instantaneous communication and the ability to sift through more information than at any other point in human history. Technology and flesh were closer than they'd ever been before, and this cyborg, who went by the name Cloudraker Camshaft, spent most of his time in the purely intellectual realm of cyberspace.

On the table in front of the cyborg, dual widescreen monitors displayed a continuous zoom into the Mandelbrot set. The table was covered with a silk cloth printed with circuitry diagrams. In front of the monitors, braided copper, iron, and gold wire formed a pentagram. Different objects sat at each of the star's points. A mug of boiling clear liquid represented the element of water. The makeshift stinger (an electrical cord with the positive and negative wires stripped and wrapped around heavy pieces of metal) caused the water to leap in the mug. A ceramic dish mounted atop a battery sat at another of the star's points. A wire ran from the positive terminal of the battery, up through a hole in the dish and down through another hole to attach to the negative terminal. The wire glowed red from its resistance to the electricity flowing through its length. The cyborg dropped a handful of cedar shavings into the dish, burying the wire. Thick smoke drifted up immediately, and a few seconds later the wood shavings caught, giving birth to a wavering flame edged with black smoke. The dish represented the element of fire. The flame reflected off the layered ebony surface of a hunk of raw silicon the cyborg had set at another of the star's points. The silicon represented earth. The cooling fan from a desktop computer spun at the point of the star symbolic of air. A small pigeon feather, tied to the fan,

danced in the wind that rushed up towards the apartment's stained ceiling. At the fifth point of the star, the one at the top of the pattern, closest to the screens and farthest from the cyborg, rested a vaguely humanoid sculpture formed from twisted and bent metal. The sculpture, representing spirit and the cyborg himself, served as a functioning wireless router, sending and receiving signals, connecting the cyborg to a global network of information.

Camshaft, his eyes focused on the screens, let the rest of the cedar shavings tumble through his fingers and onto the disk. The smoke redoubled, lifting in threads to pile against the ceiling, spreading outward in erratic rings. His hand settled back onto his naked thigh, and he drew a deep breath into his lungs. The scent of burning cedar filled his nostrils while his alveoli pulled oxygen from the inhaled air and expelled carbon dioxide.

The exhalation that followed marked Cam's 252,394,888th breath since emerging into the frigid air of a delivery room in Bridgewater, New Jersey over 30 years before. The sound of this breath escaping had all of the characteristics of a sigh. It didn't matter that Cloudraker Camshaft considered himself the sort of being wholly incapable of sighing. The fact remained: Cloudraker Camshaft had sighed. Why had he released that most ambiguous and annoying sound? The answer was as simple as it was terrifying. Cloudraker Camshaft was in love.

He sat in front of the altar, divorced from thought, his mind disappearing as minds are wont to do during deep meditation, sinking more fully into the pure present. His awareness harvested information from the room. He could feel the pliable mat under his knees and a trickle of air moving across his back on its journey from under his front door to the window he'd cracked open before sitting in front of the altar. The last rays of the autumn sun came through the window's smudged glass to lie warm against the left side of his face. Crowded bookshelves registered in his peripheral vision, and his ears caught the hum of the fan on the altar, the

bubbling of the water, traffic sounds from outside, voices from two doors down the hall raised in argument, and the rhythmic thumping of the people upstairs fucking for the third time that day. He sighed again. This unexpected sound, combined with the noisy sex upstairs, shook Camshaft out of his meditative state. His love's face flashed into his mind, carrying with it all of the hopes, desires, and possibilities he'd come to attach to her hazel eyes, pointed nose, and full lips. He struggled to recover his calm, but her face refused to go away and his cock started to get hard.

Well, so much for meditation, he thought, rising to his feet. He bent to flip the switch on the power strip into which the stinger leading to the mason jar, the electric burner, and the computer fan were plugged. The lights in the rest of the apartment grew brighter.

His clothes were piled on the ergonomic chair in front of his workstation. He pulled on his jeans, adjusting himself as he did so, an image of her body rising in his mind in the short instant when his fingertips brushed his flesh. He shook his head and slipped into a plain grey t-shirt, adding a sweater after a moment's consideration. The thumping upstairs increased in tempo as Cam crossed the room. He filled his kettle with water from the tap, dropped it onto the stove, twisted a knob on the front, and used a lighter to spark the burner. Blue flames leapt up, and he shifted the kettle into place. The fucking upstairs reached a frenzied speed. Cam looked at the ceiling, his expression a mixture of amusement and frustration. The thumping stopped while he was staring upward. He sighed again and continued with his coffee preparations. It was going to be a long night.

It is worth noting that while Cloudraker Camshaft stood in his kitchen on the second floor imagining a passionate couple basking in post-coital bliss above him, Julie Chelblaine lay beneath the crushing weight of her boyfriend on the third floor. For the third time that day, he had failed to bring her to orgasm before he finished and collapsed, sweating, on top of her. For

the fifth time that day, she considered stabbing her pretty boyfriend in the neck, whether she should try to fuck the new guy in the production department at her office, and whether or not the batteries in her vibrator still held enough charge to deliver what her boyfriend could not. All of which goes to show that things are seldom how they appear to outside observers.

* * *

Four hours later, Kaliburst Runamok wandered along the sidewalk, taking her time, passing under Cloudraker Camshaft's window just as she had each night for the previous two weeks. Her black skirt fell to the middle of her thighs. The skirt's hem bounced with each step, a movement Kaliburst encouraged with her hips, delighting in the brush of fabric against the backs of her thighs and the occasional head that turned to watch her pass. She wore an asymmetrical wraparound jacket with long, loose sleeves over her tank top. The tightness of the jacket pushed her breasts together, leaving an alluring amount of cleavage on display, and the sleeves concealed two matching knives strapped to her forearms while still allowing her easy access to both of them. She couldn't decide which part of her outfit she liked more, the skirt or the knives.

In the clear night sky overhead, stars shined down, their sharp, bright sparkles slicing through the city's light pollution in a way Kaliburst couldn't remember seeing before. Wind tickled her behind her knees, making her shiver, before it grabbed ahold of fallen leaves and litter, spinning all of it into colorful little swirls against the steps leading up to Cloudraker's apartment building. It made her want to spin, and the normally quite serious woman gave in to the urge, turning in place with her face tilted up at the sky. On her second revolution, Ms. Runamok noticed a face looking down at her from a second floor window. On her third, she

confirmed that it was Cloudraker Camshaft watching her. She remembered where and who she was, and upon completing her spin, she continued down the street. A flush rose up her neck to burn in her cheeks. What had the assassin so flustered? What could make a woman armed with two razor sharp knives flee so quickly? The answer was as simple as it was terrifying. Kaliburst Runamok was in love.

Berating herself for being so stupid, she turned right at the end of the block and kicked the first trashcan she saw, denting it with the her boot's steel toe. She thought back to her training, the lessons in social engineering, target manipulation, and infiltration theory she'd absorbed so thoroughly they formed a core part of her involuntary programming, as close to her instincts as blinking or breathing. At least, she'd thought they were embedded that deep. The past week had forced her to reconsider.

Ever since she had started her surveillance, nothing had gone according to plan. She'd climbed down from the roof while he was out partying, intending to silently enter his second floor apartment via an exterior window. Her route took her past the open window of his upstairs neighbors. She paused there long enough to watch a well-muscled ass thrusting away atop a woman whose bored face she could see over the man's shoulder. Even as she clung to the side of the building, the man's ass cheeks tightened, and a shiver worked its way up his back. He emitted an odd whimper, while the woman's expression shifted from boredom to annoyance. Kali bit her tongue to keep from making any sound and kept climbing down until she could work Camshaft's unlocked window open and lower herself through. She laughed on the floor of his apartment for longer than was professional or safe.

After recovering, she began her examination of the target's space, starting with the bizarre altar. With each strange discovery she made, her fascination with the target grew. She

thought the altar was beautiful, the blend of technology and organic matter perfect for a cyborg like Cloudraker Camshaft. Many of the books on his shelves matched those in her own small apartment, but his collection expanded on hers. She pulled his copy of Rilke's *The Sonnets to Orpheus* down and opened it to one of its many dog-eared pages. He'd underlined the first four lines of the seventh sonnet:

Will transformation. Oh be inspired for the flame
in which a Thing disappears and bursts into something else;
the spirit of re-creation which masters this earthly form
loves most the pivoting point where you are no longer yourself.

She'd shaken after reading those lines for the first time, when she was just a young girl who still thought she might be able to shape her future wholly along a course of her own choosing, before the Institute had found her and trained her to kill men for money. She shivered once again upon reading the words, this time underlined by her target, in the apartment she'd broken into.

A brute force attack provided her with access to the "CC" account on his computer, but nothing she tried could get her admin access. It didn't matter. His digital habits only intensified her interest. Half-finished drafts of his writing made her angry that there wasn't more to read. The photographs in his pictures folder made her tilt her head as she considered each shot's composition. Their porn habits were even the same. Instead of compiling a list of vulnerabilities and evidence to support her decision to take on the contract for ending his life, she lost track of time, wandering around the apartment in a speculative drift between objects that grabbed her attention until she heard his footsteps in the hallway.

By the time he drunkenly fumbled the locks on his doors open, she hung upside down outside his closed window. She watched him move straight into his bedroom and fall on the bed without getting undressed. After he used his feet to push off his shoes and it became apparent

that he was sinking down into sleep, Kaliburst climbed up to the building's roof and lay on her back looking at the sky for a long time.

She hadn't gone back into the apartment, but she had been observing Camshaft each night, using the access she'd given herself to his computer's webcam and microphone. At first, she convinced herself that her urge to watch him was professionally motivated. She needed to gather intelligence on her target, and this was the best way to accomplish that part of the mission. However, that justification became somewhat suspect after she'd given herself her first orgasm watching him masturbate. His release had triggered hers. Afterwards, when her eyes opened again, with her wet thighs still shaking, she'd been forced to admit that there might be a few issues with her current mission.

Letting him see her face, though, this was a breach of protocol so fundamental it frightened her. This work was all she knew. Ten confirmed kills. Each death was incontrovertibly an accident. Each death had removed a Bad Person from the ranks of the living. She'd never once needed to take direct action, and she'd never felt the slightest doubt that the world was a better place without her target in it. Just before heading out to make her nightly pass, she had decided not to abbreviate Cloudraker's life.

It didn't matter that he'd been targeted or that all of her previous targets had deserved killing. She could turn down the contract. This would be her gift to him. The decision continued giving her joy, even after her blunder. So what if he'd seen her face? She wanted him to see more than that before it was all said and done. She wanted to hold his face between her palms and look into his blue eyes with her own, and when he saw what was there and understood it, she would kiss him harder than he'd ever been kissed before. Kaliburst smiled and kicked another trashcan. She kept walking, her skirt bouncing with each step, the sounds of the city weaving

themselves into a song, thinking a drink might be just the thing, wholly unaware that Cloudraker Camshaft was having a difficult time seeing anything other than her face.

* * *

He stood at the window long after she passed.

He knew he should run. Vanish. It was how he had survived this long. Five times in the past eight years, he'd spotted their surveillance, and each time he'd slipped away after encrypting his locally stored data, shredding it, drilling through the hard drives, microwaving the platters, and dropping everything into the hottest fire he could find or build. The critical part was to act as soon as he detected them. The beauty of his enemies sending professionals after him was that professionals are thorough. They make certain they've found their target. They make certain they know the best way to eliminate their target. All of this verification required research and observation, and it was during this phase that Camshaft discovered his pursuers.

Cloudraker was a cyborg, which was as close to being a wizard as you could get in the 21st century. His understanding of networking, security, data science, software design, and social patterning augmented his perception in ways he was only beginning to understand. His scripts crawled through data like digital spiders, laying a web that shook as soon as someone started searching for information anywhere close to areas he considered to be his territory. This woman, this short-haired brunette with muscular thighs that his cameras had recorded crawling through his window and collapsing in laughter, was the first to ever make it into his home.

He stood at the window, thinking of the way she'd moved around the room, her muscles playing beneath the taut fabric of her tights, the look of concentration on her face when she'd sat

at his workstation and cracked into his surface user profile, her smile when she'd looked through his browser history, the way her eyes had seemed to flare in that moment. She had set his camera and mics up to broadcast to her terminal. It took him less than half an hour to trace the hack back to every device she used to receive his feeds and gain control of the cameras on her laptop and cell phone. At the workstation behind him, he could hear the street sounds from where she was walking, only a few blocks away. The camera feed showed the darkness inside her pocket. A map window displayed her route from the nearby apartment she'd rented for her surveillance, past his window, around the corner, now approaching The Sleepless Daemon, Cloudraker's favorite club.

Why wasn't he running? What was he doing? The cyborg stared out the window, while his augmented mind toiled away at its myriad tasks at the workstation behind him. His human mind, the one encased in bone and flesh and a shock of ginger hair, was working just as hard behind his eyes, showing him the expression she wore when she'd come, believing herself to be spying when, in truth he had been performing for her. Just knowing that this gorgeous stranger's eyes were on him was enough to elicit a physiological response. His breath quickened. His heart sped up. Blood rushed up into his brain and out to other extremities.

He felt his body responding as he stood there considering the strange madness of his current situation. Absent mindedly adjusting himself, he turned from the window. His gaze landed on his altar. He saw the fractal patterns. He saw the body-shaped router, the representation for spirit he'd built for himself, the crossroads through which he accessed the world. He looked at his hands. He remembered a line from an essay he'd read years ago: "Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies." His feet carried him to his bookshelf and his hand pulled his battered copy of *The Sonnets to Orpheus* off the shelf. His

mind tried to remember who had written that line about bodies while he saw her eyes close and her nose wrinkle in the moment when she'd come. Body and mind clicked together, and he ran his hands over the cover. He reveled in holding an object she had touched, flipped it open.

XVIII

Master, do you hear the New
quiver and rumble?
Harbingers step forth who
blare their approval.

Surely no ear is whole
amid this noise,
yet the machine-part still
asks for our praise.

Look, the machine:
rears up and takes revenge,
brings us to crawl and cringe.

Since all its strength is from us,
let it, desireless,
serve and remain.

Cloudraker Camshaft snapped the book closed, looked around his apartment like a man shocked awake and walked to his workstation. He tossed the book onto the cluttered desk. He bent forward and saw that her signal was stationary, a blue dot hovering over a satellite image of The Sleeping Daemon's roof. He grabbed his long wool coat, shrugging into it as he collected his keys, his wallet, his smartphone, and his stun-gun. When the items were tucked away in their appropriate places, he took a final look around his apartment and uttered that phrase spoken by generals, poets, madmen, and lovers for well over five hundred years when facing situations where the choice that felt right was perhaps not so rational a choice:

"Fuck it."

After the door closed behind him, the only light in the room was a narrow yellow rectangle on the ceiling cast by the street light bleeding in through the window and the pulsing wink of the green light emitting diodes behind the eyes of the human-shaped router on the altar.

* * *

Kaliburst Runamok sat at the bar with her back to the Daemon's dimly lit main room. Her buzz had dulled the persistent, jabbering urge of her instincts to a low murmur. She finished the whiskey in her glass and raised it to the bartender. He raised his eyebrows, perhaps a commentary on how quickly she'd finished her second. She didn't acknowledge his unasked question. She just stared at him until he turned to collect a glass. He smiled when he sat the drink in front of her, but she could tell something in her stare had made him nervous. It happened all the time. To hell with it, she thought, lifting the glass to her lips.

At that moment, unseen by the normally vigilant assassin, Cloudraker Camshaft stepped through the front doors. He nodded to the doorman, spotted Kaliburst at bar, took a deep breath, and started making his way to where she sat. He kept his right hand on the stun-gun in his pocket. Music thumped through the room, a sensual tune with the kind of urgent beat that added a bit of swagger to his steps as he slid between swaying dancers. He reached the stairs to the slightly-elevated bar area and used the metal handrail to pull himself up them two at a time. He hoped that he wasn't about to die as he approached the bar.

Regardless of Kaliburst's buzz, one doesn't survive for long as a career killer by letting anyone approach them from behind unnoticed. She first felt the tingle that came when she felt attention focused specifically at her. In the mirror above the bottles of liquor, she saw Cloudraker

Camshaft walking directly to her. It took every bit of her training to keep from spinning around. Her buzz disappeared, and her thoughts raced through possible escapes. There were none. She faced forward, raised the glass to her lips. He slid into her peripheral vision and leaned against the bar to her right.

Camshaft kept his eyes focused on the bartender, but he could feel her tension beside him. He ordered a double Jameson and water. He sat on the stool next to her. His body thrummed. Attraction and fear spun with each other in his gut and his chest, bumping against his glands, scattering adrenaline and dopamine through his system. He tilted a splash of water into his whiskey glass and drank half of it down. He steeled himself and turned to face her.

She was staring at him. They locked gazes and lost themselves. Runamok opened her mouth. Closed it again. Camshaft did the same. They kept looking. His hand was still on his stun-gun. Her hand was on the handle of the knife strapped to her left wrist. Neither paid the slightest attention to the other's hands, or their own. For both of them, the volume turned down on everything beyond the four feet of space they shared. The bartender watched them for a moment and then wandered down to the far end of the bar.

Kaliburst found her voice first. "I've been watching you."

Cloudraker nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. "I know."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"You know why?"

"Yes."

She closed her eyes, shook her head. When she opened them again, she looked furious. "Then why are you here? Are you crazy?"

He smiled. “Maybe. Probably. I’ve been watching you, too.”

Kaliburst froze. “You what?”

“I’ve been watching you. You missed my cameras when you broke into my house. When you hacked my webcam, you led me to your laptop. I figured since you were watching me, I might as well watch you.”

She blushed, thinking of what she’d done while watching him. He saw her face redden and knew the reason. His smile deepened. She saw it and scowled.

“When you...when I..?”

He nodded. Anger flashed through her, but something else followed on its heels. She shook and squeezed her thighs together. The whiskey, the endorphins, his smile, his presence here, close enough for her to touch him if she wanted to, all of it combined to make her feel as if her consciousness were floating blissfully at the front of her head, above her eyes, just watching everything play out.

He watched her take in this information, saw it affect her, the anger, but also the way her legs moved and the unconscious pass of her tongue over her upper lip. His body responded to hers, and before he could think about it, he lifted his hand to touch her face. She flinched and half-pulled her knife before she realized what she was doing. Light reflected off the blade’s sharpened edge and into Cloudraker Camshaft’s eyes. He glanced down and saw the knife halfway out of its sheath. His hand was only inches from her cheek.

“Are you going to kill me? Is that why you let me see your face?”

“No.” She let out a shaky breath, slid the knife back into its sheath. She turned her body to face him. “It’s just that no one has...I haven’t felt...” Words kept failing her. She blew out a

breath that flipped the short black hair above her eyes away from her face. In the end, she just dropped her hands into her lap and closed her eyes.

He took this as permission and ran his fingertips down her cheek, tracing them along the swell of her jawbone, trailing them down to the tip of her chin. He pulled his hand away before she could feel it start shaking.

He collected his whiskey and sighed before taking a sip. She stayed still for a few seconds after he pulled his hand away, feeling the memory of his touch on her skin. She opened her eyes, a smile quirking her lips as she reached for her own glass.

“So what are we going to do?” he asked.

He couldn't stop shaking. He wasn't accustomed to being in the presence of anyone he cared about. His family was gone, and IRL friendships weren't something he'd taken the time to cultivate, since he never knew when he might have to disappear without a word. Every meaningful relationship in his life took place in the virtual, amidst the subjective cybernetic space of pure intellect. Even the experience of watching the woman beside him naked and pleasuring herself while she watched him do the same had occurred via a two-dimensional display of digital information. Seeing her in ecstasy, knowing the face she made when in the midst of orgasm or that she had a scar close to the nipple on her right breast, in no way prepared him for the reality of the three-dimensional woman in the short skirt next to him. Their bodies in close proximity negated his every intellectual augmentation. Touching her cheek had banished his thinking mind. He poured whiskey into the organic transport he was riding in, trying to get some grasp on its twisting, thudding, shuddering propulsion system. It had been foolish to come here.

Kaliburst, on the other hand, had recovered from the shock of him walking up to her, telling her he'd turned her surveillance, and touching her face. She knew her body. She could hack three dimensional spaces as easily as he infiltrated virtual systems. She watched him sipping his whiskey, his eyes turned away and looking like he was about to explode. His shoulders were curled forward. His hands were shaking. She thought he might be hyperventilating.

“Hey.”

She could see the despair in his face when he looked over. She picked up his hand from where it gripped the edge of the bar, kissed it, and lowered it to her thigh while she reached for his face with her other hand.

“This is the first thing we do,” she said. She pulled him towards her and kissed him. His lips were soft and yielding, responsive to hers. When she asked a question with her tongue, he answered with his and a low growling moan. The hand on her leg squeezed and slid higher, his fingers under the hem of her skirt. His other hand slipped up her neck, curling to hold the back of her head, pulling her tight against his mouth.

By the time they pulled apart, their bodies had reached equilibrium. His panic had shifted into the kind of steady desire that overtook him when he was working on a particularly difficult piece of software. Her concern had shifted into a fiery hunger. Before, she had wanted to protect him. Now, she wanted to both tear him apart and swallow him whole. His hand was still on her thigh. She wanted him to slide it higher. She wanted him to take her right here in the club. They gasped and looked at each other's faces and marveled at the matching smiles growing there.

“Come on,” she said. She slid off her stool. This caused his hand to slide along the outside of her thigh and up to her ass before he drew it back, startled. A hundred landed on the

bar. She waved at the bartender and gestured to the money and then to the two of them. He gave her a thumbs up and a big smile. She surprised herself by returning it. Then she grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the door.

Outside, the waxing crescent moon grinned down on the city. At this time of night, the traffic had all but disappeared. A few taxis cruised the streets, occasionally driving through clouds of steam drifting up from the tunnels below. A tomcat with a missing eye crept closer to a pigeon sleeping on the roof of The Sleepless Daemon. He was only a pounce away when the door below opened hard enough to slam the rubber stoppers on the wall. The pigeon shifted and cracked open an eye. It spotted the cat and exploded into motion, leaping up and away before dropping down into the open canyon between the buildings to look for a more secure place to sleep.

Kaliburst Runamok and Cloudraker Camshaft looked up to see the pigeon glide over them. They walked hand in hand down the sidewalk, and they watched the bird until it disappeared into the darkness. Cloudraker glanced at the woman beside him. She was still looking up in the direction the bird had been heading. He struggled to process her beauty, but they needed to figure this out.

“Seriously, though. What are we doing?” he asked.

She looked back at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” His voice trailed off and they continued walking in silence. She let him think. “Well,” he continued after a minute, “I hate to even bring this up, but didn’t someone pay you to kill me?”

She laughed. “Not really. The money’s in escrow. I wouldn’t get paid until after I killed you. But I’m not going to kill you.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “I am going to fuck you half to death, though,” she added after they walked a few more steps.

He shook his head, partially in exasperation and partially to help him see past his imaginings of that. “But someone wants me dead. Doesn’t that bother you? Don’t you want to know why?”

“Well, yeah. It bothers me that anyone would want you to die. They don’t really tell me why they want a person to go away. Normally, I figure out why when I’m figuring out how to make that happen. With you, though, everything I found made me want to know you more. I figured it was about money. It’s almost always about money.”

It was about money, of course. The problem was determining which money had led to someone hiring a professional. In the past eight years, Cloudraker had stolen money here and there, but more than likely, the angered party had lost money due to his actions. Moving like a ghost through every system connected to the internet meant that the cyborg saw a lot of things that people worked very hard to keep hidden. When he found evidence of the shit that really offended him, human trafficking, child pornography, automatic weapons, that sort of thing, he shut it down, wiped it out, or fired off an anonymous tip. He might be a criminal, but fuck those people.

She was watching him. “It wasn’t anything bad, was it? Are you a Bad Person?”

He could hear the capital letters in her words. At this point, he felt no surprise being asked this sort of question by a woman people paid to kill other people. “No. I’m not a Bad Person. I hate Bad People.”

“Good. Me too.”

They kept walking. Kaliburst thought of all the things she wanted to do to him, places she wanted to lick and parts she wanted to suck. Cloudraker, cursed as he was to live most of his life inside his head, couldn't stop thinking that none of this should be happening. He was supposed to be fleeing from this woman instead of holding her hand. What was he doing holding hands anyway? Like sighing, hand-holding wasn't the sort of thing he did. Should he trust her just because she happened to have the most gorgeous hazel eyes he'd ever seen and, also, he was pretty sure, the best ass he'd ever seen? Was that a reasonable basis for trusting a killer not to kill him? Was that even a reasonable basis for a relationship? Was this going to be a relationship? Did he want a relationship?

With each question he asked himself, his grip on Kaliburst's hand tightened. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, the way his brow furrowed as he looked at the ground. When his grip became painful, she pulled it towards her back and caught his throat in her other hand, using his lack of balance to push him backwards. His feet churned until his back slammed against the brick wall of an apartment building. She kept her hand on his throat, but didn't apply any pressure. His eyes grew wide and afraid.

"Do I have your attention?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Good. Now, listen to me. I know you're scared. I know you have no idea what's going on. I know there are a thousand reasons why this is a bad idea. But none of that shit matters right now." She let go of his hand to caress his lower back. She molded her body to his and felt him wrap his arm around her shoulders. She still held his throat in her other hand. Her face was only a few inches from his.

"I want you," she said. "Do you want me?"

He answered with a nod and also with a twitch she felt against her abdominal muscles. She leaned close, sliding her body up and down his. His eyes rolled and half closed.

“Then let’s go back to your place and do what we both want to do. Tomorrow, if you want to run away so you can keep being a lonely, sexually frustrated otaku, you can do that. If you want to do something different, we can figure that out, too. But for the rest of this walk—” Her hand wandered down to grip him through his jeans. “—I only want you thinking about what you’re going to do when you get me out of these clothes. Can you do that?”

He considered her question. Briefly. But it was true. Life is lived through bodies. And her hand was working on his cock through his jeans. So he leaned forward, pushing his throat against her callused hand, and kissed her. He slid his hand from her shoulder down to her ass, pulling her against him and lifting her up towards his mouth. She let go of his throat and his cock and put her arms around him.

They stayed there until it was time to keep going, and then they walked home through the quiet, sleeping city. Together.

Everyone Has Their Daemons

As the janitor responsible for floors B7 (Constructs) through B13 (Conjuration) at the downtown headquarters of Contemporary Thaumaturgical Solutions, one of George Stinson's tasks was to empty the waste baskets in every office and lab on his floors. He moved through the gleaming stainless steel and glass rooms at what appeared to be a lazy drift, mumbling to himself. Any supervisor watching a worker move in such a way might admonish said worker to pick up their pace. However, George Stinson knew that the array of electronic sensors that tracked his movements from the moment he entered the building at 1430 hours each afternoon to the moment he left the building at 0230 hours each morning showed his speed as acceptable. Algorithms had determined exactly how long it took to clean each room, and deviation beyond the established thresholds resulted in reduced pay and a series of warnings. Continued deviation would lead to termination of employment. Stinson didn't want either of those things to occur, so he moved at the lower limit of the speed required by the machine and not a bit faster.

After ten years as a janitor at CTS, George's tasks consumed only a small fraction of his brainpower and attention. The rest he used to think about magick. George was old enough to remember a time before native elders danced earthquakes across their ancestral lands and fire elementals safeguarded high-ranking politicians. His first encounters with such things had occurred between the covers of fantasy novels as a youngster, so when magick returned to the world he became obsessed. He devoured every text he could find on the subject as soon as it was published. He combed message boards in remote corners of the Net, reading rumors and theories about the next big thing in thaumaturgical practice. He experimented and meditated and focused his will until it felt like his brain was going to melt and run out of his ears. All of this study and

work and investigation led George to one incontrovertible fact: he was as mundane as a grocery list.

His utter lack of any magickal talent whatsoever didn't stop him from turning the beautiful impossibility of magickal theory over and over in his mind as he not-quite-sauntered through the research labs of one of the most successful magicorps in the world. When he crossed the threshold into Mason Handley's office at 0158 hours, he was muttering his way through tables of standard symbolic pairings for novice-grade sympathetic magick.

"...though blood from the subject is the most stable symbolic link, hair or nail clippings will serve almost as well, provided one establishes the link quickly before the subject, say, shaves their body. Inanimate objects, being far more static, allow for more solid symbolic linking. For example, a splinter from the bench upon which one wishes to cast a standard clairaudience cantrip would..."

George scanned the room, taking in the abundance of half full, uncapped beakers at the alchemical station and the papers haphazardly scattered across Handley's desk. Several more papers lay on the floor near the copper summoning circle in the back corner of the office. He shook his head. Handley was supposedly a brilliant conjurer, specializing in post-modern arcanist theory, but to George, the man's workspace indicated a distracted mind with little concern for basic safety practices. George pushed his cart, with its brazier of smoldering white sage and its small, shielded portal to whichever plane of existence CTS deemed safe to dump its office waste, into the messy room.

He plucked a half-empty disposable cup stamped with CTS's stylized unicorn emblem from the midst of the uncorked alchemical vials and tossed it through the wastegate, wondering again how he might reverse engineer the gate to find out where it led. He grabbed the metal

trashcan beside Handley's desk. The can seemed unusually heavy, but George was distracted by the papers lying across a portion of the inset copper circle in the corner. Exasperated, he dropped the trashcan and squatted to gather the fallen papers. He stacked them in a neat pile on top of the chaotic spread that covered the desk. How sloppy could you get? These circles could contain even the fiercest of extraplanar entities, but only if the circle was unbroken and clear of obstructions. He picked up the trashcan using more force than necessary. Magick was wasted on mages. He upended the can over the wastegate, noting again its unusual heaviness. Papers covered with formulae written in cramped script fluttered down into the portal's opaque silvered surface, passing through without causing the slightest ripple. He had expected something larger to fall free, considering the can's weight, but the rain of paper ended with no such occurrence. He shook the can a few times before he set it down and peered inside.

At first, he only saw the metal mesh bottom of an office wastepaper basket, but after a few seconds, a small humanoid shape faded into George's awareness. Huge black eyes looked up into George's own. The eyes dominated the face into which they were set, significantly larger than the tiny nose and mouth. The creature's head was disproportionately large in comparison to its emaciated body, as were its hands and feet. Its fingers and toes ended in sharp-looking claws, which it had dug into the sides of the metal basket, presumably to keep itself from falling into the gate when George emptied the basket. With its arms and legs spread, the creature's chest displayed prominent ribs pushing against nearly translucent skin. Scribbled words, similar to those written on Hadley's papers, writhed across the creature's skin, along with occasional rudimentary images. As George watched, tears gathered in the corners of the creature's eyes and it sniffled before whispering three words in a small, raspy voice.

"Please help me."

The time was 0200 hours, and leaning over the wastebasket where a small creature wept and begged for his help, George Stinson made a choice and, though he did not yet know it, became a father. At 0230 hours, he stepped out of the employee entrance of CTS's downtown headquarters with the daemon, who was once again invisible, clinging to the front strap of his messenger bag, and so became a thief. The crescent moon seemed to grin at George and his daemon as they made their way through the empty streets towards the nearest subway entrance. "I'll call you Gentry," George said just before he started down the stairs.

* * *

Back at George's simple apartment, the daemon sat on the kitchen table and related the events which had led to his escape. Handley turned out to be just as brilliant and oblivious as George had suspected. Rather than being called in from another realm, the way most entities are summoned, Handley had conjured Gentry by drawing on the artistic energy generated by every person present in the CTS building at 1608 hours the day before. The mage had refined the energy by directing it through an arrangement of symbols and ritual objects and into the circle. George understood the basic theories and underlying principles involved, but Handley's genius left him far behind.

The daemon knew all of information this because Handley had explained it to him in the first moments of his existence. To George, the creature's starved appearance served as a scathing commentary on the lack of artistry present in the hearts and heads of CTS employees. To Handley, Gentry's ugly, emaciated body had indicated a spell failure. He decided to leave the spirit incarnated overnight to see if any changes manifested but expressed to Gentry his doubts

about such a thing happening. He made a note to pick up holy water from the supply vault the next morning and left for the day. On his way to the door, he had bumped his desk. The papers had seesawed through the air, coming to rest on top of the ring.

The mage had been lucky. Many of the entities summoned in CTS's basement labs were older than humanity. Almost all of them understood enough about summoning circles that they would have climbed into Handley before he made it out the door. Whether they did it through possession or by virtue of tearing an opening in his chest their claws, Handley wouldn't have survived his mistake. Gentry, being new to the whole existence thing, hadn't realized his freedom until long after the mage left, less than ten minutes before George pushed his cart into the room.

"I'm hungry," Gentry said at the end of his story. He flopped over, curled his body around his distended belly, and moaned. George walked to the refrigerator and opened the door before he remembered he was dealing with an entity comprised entirely of ideas. What the hell does an art daemon eat? He felt like an idiot when the answer came. George went into his bedroom, heading straight to the small bookshelf next to his dresser. He grabbed the only fiction books on the shelf and carried them back to where the small daemon lay moaning. He helped Gentry sit up.

When the daemon saw the books in George's hand, he went completely still. George put them on the table and stepped back. The book on top, a battered copy of Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, lifted into the air. It hovered in front of Gentry's oversized eyes, opened, and fanned its pages. As the pages neared the end, the book appeared to break into tiny dots, as if pixelating. The particles flowed into the daemon's eyes, nose, and mouth as if they were being

inhaled. When the book was gone, Gentry closed his eyes and made appreciative cooing sounds. He was smiling when he opened his eyes. “Thou art God,” he said, and loosed a loud burp.

George laughed, despite the pang he felt at the book’s destruction. He remembered buying it one warm spring Friday when he was twenty years old and staying up until dawn on Monday to finish it.

He felt nothing when the remaining book, a copy of D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* from his freshman literature class, received the same treatment as Heinlein’s masterpiece. However, Gentry’s large eyes, when they opened, held a look of betrayal. “Why would you feed me that?” he asked, settling back like a man with bad indigestion.

“Oh, buddy,” George said. “It was all I could find. Let me see what else I can scare up for you.”

It turned out there wasn’t much. George made very little money working as a janitor, and since he spent most of his free time plugged into the Net, reading the newest texts on magical theory, he hadn’t invested much time or money in art for his home. Gentry consumed a thrift-store landscape painting of an unknown beach at sunset, a forgotten sketch of George drawn by an old girlfriend, and two photographic prints as if eating candy. After the last print was gone, George sat down in front of the little daemon, whose ribs seemed to be less visible than when they’d arrived home.

“That’s it, buddy. I’ll have to pick some more up tomorrow before I go to work.” The daemon pushed himself to his feet and wobbled over to George. He arrived at the edge of the table and jumped, landing against George’s chest. Gentry clung there and laid his head on George’s shoulder.

“Thanks, Dad.”

George hugged the daemon close and stared at the apartment's bare walls. He had never seriously considered having children with any of his exes. The timing never seemed right. He was thirty-nine. He worked a job that paid him just enough to survive. He didn't even know *what* Gentry was. George stared at the blank wall above his kitchen sink and discovered a new kind of worry.

* * *

Handley approached George shortly after the janitor arrived at work the next day. The mage wore a nervous smile and wrinkled corporate robes in the same black and gold motif as George's uniform. He also wore a pair of enchanted, Borges brand spectacles that would let him see into the astral plane at will. He studied George silently through the glasses for a long moment before speaking.

"How did things look in my office when you cleaned it last night?"

George fought down a surprising flush of rage. The man in front of him had come into the CTS building this morning intending to kill Gentry. The bastard had told the daemon he was going to do it. Thankfully, Gentry had informed George about the illusions he'd cast in Handley's office to hide their meeting from the cameras and sensors scattered throughout the building. "I had to pick some papers up off floor."

"Where on the floor?"

George tried unsuccessfully to keep the contempt out of his voice. "Oh, in the back corner. A couple pages were on the ring. You really should be more careful."

“Ah, yes, I will. Thank you.” The mage cleared his throat. “Was there anything else out of place?”

George pretended to think about it. “No. Nothing else. Why do you ask?”

The mage glanced around the hallway.

“Oh nothing, nothing. No reason. Thank you for your work.” Handley ducked his shoulder and walked past George. The janitor turned to watch him go and worried.

After that, life fell into a rhythm of sorts. George went out each morning and bought enough paperbacks to fill his backpack, paying special attention to the works he selected. A growing boy deserves the best nourishment possible, and after buying cheap paintings and prints of the classics a few times, George determined that novels provided the greatest sustenance for the cost. He left the books on the table with Gentry while he got ready for work. Afterwards, they sat together for as long they could. They discussed what the daemon had devoured that day while George lingered over his more conventional breakfast. Gentry’s voice shifted to that of a learned academic when he spoke about art. The rest of the time, he talked like a kid.

Weeks and then months passed in this way. George didn’t see Handley. The only change in George’s work was that he now muttered lines of poetry and passages from novels instead of arcane formulae and Neo-Latin incantations. He turned the literary theories Gentry developed at their kitchen table around and around in his head, tucking the most exciting ideas away to discuss with Gentry the next day.

George showed his daemon how to access the Net. Although Gentry, who lacked a nervous system in any kind of biological sense, couldn’t jack into the Net like most users, he could still use an archaic keyboard and monitor system. George’s hope that he had found a way to provide virtually infinite sustenance for his child was shattered when they discovered Gentry

could only feed on physical books. Similarly, even the highest resolution images of masterpiece paintings and sculptures were useless to the daemon for anything other than stimulating his hunger. It felt like watching a NetVid of a gourmet cooking show with a starving refugee.

They learned about Gentry's dietary needs through experimentation. The quality of the work determined its nutritional value. He could only gain sustenance by consuming inanimate art objects, George was glad to learn. Dancers were safe from the daemon's hunger, as were tattooed people. He enjoyed music, though it didn't fill his belly. And he could only consume an artistic work a single time. If he ate *The Martian Chronicles* in trade paperback form, a hardcover edition wouldn't work. The same principle applied to later editions of the same book.

Despite the challenges, a steady diet of literature seemed to meet Gentry's needs. The daemon filled out and grew from the size of a large infant to that of short 2-year-old in only four months. Gentry's intellectual growth outstripped the physical by an order of magnitude. The fact that the daemon's compassion and kindness grew with similar rapidity helped temper George's alarm when he realized how fast his boy was learning.

Twain, Woolf, King, Heinlein, Le Guin, Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Miller, Austin, the Brontës: Gentry devoured them all. The Russians provided an interesting week, as did Joyce. *Delta of Venus* prompted a few awkward questions and a stimulating discussion about how Lawrence could have benefited from meeting someone like Anaïs Nin early in his life. The daemon held fickle tastes when it came to poetry. He drank down Rumi, Bukowski, Oliver, and Whitman, but Stein resulted in the only case of vomiting George witnessed.

The father and son led a peaceful life, finding a rhythm and settling comfortably into their schedule.

* * *

George returned to the apartment one cold February morning with a heavy heart and only three books in his backpack. He shook the snow from his winter jacket and hung it on one of the hooks near a small, but faithful, replication of *Starry Nights* Gentry had painted for him. Whereas the apartment's walls had once been bare, every square inch was now adorned with works of art that ranged in style from Renaissance to Surrealism. The daemon jumped down from his perch at the Net terminal when he heard his father enter, but stopped in the doorway to the kitchen when he caught the look on his father's face.

"What's wrong, Dad?" he asked.

George pulled the books out of his bag.

"Only three?"

George heard the disappointment in the young daemon's voice. He nodded, sat down at the kitchen table, leaned his forehead against his hands, and fought back tears. A few seconds later, he felt Gentry's hand on his back.

"It's all right. I've been eating well lately."

Gentry's reassurance only made George feel worse. What had made him think he could provide for someone else when he could barely take care of himself? He was a janitor who was obsessed with magick even though he couldn't cast the barest whisper of a cantrip.

His bank account rested close to empty despite the 60 hours of work he put in at CTS each week. He'd combed every used bookstore in the city, searching the shelves for anything new. A tattered copy of *The Stainless Steel Rat*, a battered paperback edition of *The Asphalt Jungle*, and a cheap reprint of *The Best American Short Stories: 2047* constituted his entire haul.

People just didn't read physical copies of books anymore. Shit, he might as well face it, few people read at all. George wiped his eyes. He reached down and patted his son on the head. He decided to pretend he knew what he was doing.

"Listen, son. These are just a snack. I'm going out to hunt you down a real meal." As he said the words, he believed them. Resolve rolled in and helped him to his feet. George shrugged into his wet jacket on his way to the door.

"What about work?"

George looked back. His wore concern plainly on his young face. "I'll deal with work," he said. "Don't worry. I'll be back soon." He strode out the door with purpose, pulling it closed behind him hard enough that the sound boomed down the hallway of the apartment complex.

Two hours later, his fingers and toes frozen from wandering through the city's wintry streets, George admitted to himself that he had no idea what he was going to do. He walked with his hood up, but little flecks of ice fell against his face. The usual daytime traffic raised low spumes of slush as they passed on the street. George shared the sidewalk with those few souls willing to brave the weather. Occasionally, he caught a flicker of color and motion at the upper edge of his vision, but he didn't look up at the advertising illusions overhead. The lounging dragons, swooping gargoyles, and animating flaming marquees usually fascinated him. Today, they held no interest.

The public library came into view, a monstrosity of glass and steel. George ducked inside, hoping to thaw his fingers and toes. He chose an aisle at random and wandered through the stacks brushing his fingertips over the books' spines. He passed enough food in the first aisle to keep Gentry fed for a long time. How long? With the question in his mind, George climbed the stairs up to a balcony that afforded him an elevated view of the library's main floor. He made

some estimates, ran a few rough calculations through his mind, and concluded that this library could sustain Gentry for close to ten years if his appetite remained as it was. If his appetite grew as he got bigger, that estimate would shrink significantly.

It didn't matter. They couldn't access these books. The library had been considered early on, and discarded as unsustainable. It was a one-shot deal. Gentry couldn't return the books he consumed, and if they didn't bring back the books they checked out, then they couldn't get more books. Never mind the ungodly late fees.

Understanding that he faced a bigger problem than getting his son a proper meal for the day, George considered praying to a god he didn't believe existed. He looked up towards the library's domed glass ceiling, and there he saw a sign. The sign was mounted above a door on the library's uppermost level. The door was set into a wire-reinforced, glass wall. The sign read: Special Collections.

* * *

Much later, at 0230 hours, the time he normally clocked out at CTS, George clung to the outside of the library's domed roof. Rain and sleet lashed down around him, but the elements couldn't touch him. The steel felt pleasantly cool under his hands, which he had locked around a steel girder.

"You don't have to hold on so tight, Dad," Gentry said. "You won't fall off."

George looked back and saw the daemon standing with absolute confidence on a slope that should have sent him sliding towards the roof's edge and the 60-foot drop beyond. Seeing his son standing there, confident in the midst of a storm, ignoring both the weather and the

supposed laws of physics, George flushed with pride. He also felt stupid hugging himself against the roof. He stood up, still expecting the wind to pull him loose, but his footing seemed solid. He grinned at Gentry, who grinned back. He might not be able to cast a single spell, but his boy could, and that was damned well good enough.

Gentry had assured him that they would be both invisible and silent from the moment they left the apartment to the moment they returned from the mission. He'd called it that, their "mission." It had made George smile and also wonder if he was making a terrible mistake. Either way, they were now committed.

George jogged to the point he'd noted before leaving the library earlier in the day. Sure enough, he looked down through the glass between his feet into an area of Special Collections that was inside the reinforced security wall separating it from the rest of the library. Gentry crouched in front of his father. He looked George up and down twice before sinking the claws of one hand into the glass. The daemon used his other hand to scribe a large circle. He lifted the glass from the hole he'd carved and set it aside.

"Don't worry, Dad. I'm holding the air inside to keep a sudden change in temperature and air pressure from setting off any alarms."

George, who hadn't considered such a thing until his son mentioned it, nodded in what he hoped was a wise fashion. He waited until the silence stretched to an uncomfortable length before he asked, "Okay, what's next?"

Gentry smiled. "Next comes the fun part."

Gentry seemed to think the fun part was when George hugged his son to his chest and stepped through a hole forty feet above the floor. George thought the fun part was the moment at

the end of their slow descent when his feet once again touched a level surface. He lowered his son to the floor, unslung a messenger bag, and handed it to the daemon.

“Knock yourself out, kid. Put anything you can’t eat into the bag. Come get me if you have any questions.” George could have sworn his son’s eyes grew physically bigger. The daemon took off at a sprint. Multiple books flew off of the shelves, trailing behind Gentry as he disappeared deeper into the Special Collections section. George followed more slowly, picking up a signed first edition copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* that had tumbled free when its matching copies of *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* flew after Gentry. He had no idea how much money the book was worth, but he suspected its value was about to go up. He slipped it into a small bag he’d worn to carry any rare editions Gentry had already consumed in their more humble forms.

He caught up with his son in time to see a faded, yellowed copy of a book called *The Maltese Falcon* dissolve into particles and rush towards Gentry’s face in a swirling cloud. Books circled through the air around the daemon, bursting in rapid succession and flowing into him. In less than two minutes, several hundred rare copies and first imprints offered themselves to Gentry. The books gave the impression that they were fighting with each other for the privilege of disappearing into the daemon.

For a brief instant, as the glowing clouds flowed into his son’s eyes and painted the room with colors like a fireworks display, George saw the scene as it might appear to a librarian. He saw the daemon’s destructive hunger, temporarily relieved, grow stronger as each one-of-a-kind relic winked out of existence. He worried that there might not be enough art left in the world to sustain this daemoniac child he had claimed as his own. However, when the glow faded and he saw the smile on his son’s face, he forgot about those worries. His boy looked sated, satisfied for

perhaps the first time since coming into George's life. He also looked about a foot taller than when they'd dropped through the hole in the roof. George realized he'd destroy far more than books to make Gentry smile like that again.

* * *

And so, with the help of a *spiritus artem*, George Stinson became an art thief.

When he sold their haul from Special Collections to a fence named Koi, he received enough money that returning to work as a janitor was unappealing. George told CTS he was leaving to "explore other opportunities."

These other opportunities turned out to be quite lucrative. Koi introduced George to a fixer who specialized in obtaining highly-secured objects from private collections. Some of these jobs required the thieves to leave no trace of their infiltration behind, and these jobs were difficult for Gentry because of his eating habits. However, he could run for much longer on rare and one-of-a-kind art objects than the paperback novels he'd consumed in the early stages of his life, so he was able to resist temptation when the mission called for it. These missions were the exception. The sudden disappearance of multiple items in a collection made most of the jobs easier. The marks had a hard time determining which item had been the actual target.

In the case of one glorious night in Italy, the simultaneous disappearance of 14 marble sculptures from a private collection led to an extensive investigation that involved the brightest minds in forensic thaumaturgy. George, who still kept up with current trends in magickal theory, tried to figure out how the feat could have been accomplished without the art metaphysically joining an art daemon's body, but he gave it up after a week. That expedition's target had been a

matching pair of bronze Persian daggers. The daggers were never listed as stolen as far as they could tell. The client gave George a bonus, promising an even more substantial reward if he would only share the secret of how the sculptures were stolen. George merely smiled and collected the small bonus along with the original payment.

Occasionally, George thought about Handley's expression at the end of their only conversation. He hadn't heard from Contemporary Thaumaturgical Solutions since the call that ended his career as a janitor, but the global corporation maintained offices on every continent.

Gentry grew larger than George but still called him Dad. At a certain point, the daemon's size appeared to stabilize, but George suspected that Gentry kept his physical body constrained to avoid frightening the human he'd designated as his father. In truth, the former janitor had stopped fearing his son after their first heist. He had a pretty good idea what he was unleashing on humanity, and he didn't care. Humanity and all of the art it had produced in the past 50,000 years of its bumbling could fuck right off if it meant his boy had to go hungry.

The pair stole from museums and private estates. They stole from heads of state and government buildings. They stole from corporations and individuals. Although modern security systems factored magicians and summoned spirits into their design, none of them accounted for a completely mundane human working in concert with an entity wholly formed from an idea as elusive as art.

* * *

George relaxed in his study. Books lined two of the walls from floor to ceiling. He'd dedicated the room to texts on magickal theory, and it included everything from grimoires dating back to

1100 AD to manuscripts detailing the latest innovations in the craft of animating statuary to provide subtle and decorative home defense. Every chair was comfortable and suited to different modes of study or conversation. George sipped inexpensive, delicious Bordeaux while he read. Through the tall, slender windows, he could see a sliver of the crescent moon rising over the wall that enclosed the estate's garden. He looked up from his book periodically to track the moon's progress.

"Dad, you have to go."

Gentry's voice thundered through the room, loud enough to cause ripples on the surface of the wine in George's glass. Judging by the echoes, the daemon had shouted into every room of the entire estate at the same time.

"Gentry, what are you talking about?" George asked. He stood up and set his wine on the table next to him.

"Dad, they're coming, and you can't be here when they arrive." Again, the voice filled the room, although it sounded more localized this time.

"Stop shouting, boy. Get your ass in here if you want to talk to me." Despite his stern words, George grew increasingly nervous with each breath. His son wasn't prone to exaggeration or panic.

Gentry appeared in front of his father with his head bowed. "I don't know how they found us, but it's CTS. It's Handley. He's coming to collect me."

"Handley?" George said, stupidly. He thought of the suspicion he'd seen in the mage's eyes.

“He’s almost here.” The daemon closed his eyes. “Multiple teams in position for coordinated assault. Mages with support spirits waiting in the astral. They cast a circle around the entire block.”

Chills crept up George’s spine. He imagined the kind of muscle CTS could bring to bear on something like this. Handley might be a scatterbrained conjurer, but he wouldn’t have planned the assault. That would fall to the professionals, deadly operatives trained in eliminating magickal threats. He and Gentry were hosed, pure and simple. With that realization, the chills fell away, and a grin found its way to his lips. “Fuck it. Gentry; combat gear.”

“Dad, it isn’t—”

“Gentry. Now.”

A warm wind swept through the room. In the space between one inhalation and the next, lightweight ballistic armor replaced the comfortable clothes George normally wore around the house. The weight of his semiautomatic and five loaded magazines pulled at his belt. Gentry watched him check the pistol and chamber the first round. George holstered the automatic and scooped up the assault shotgun his son had left on the table next to the glass of wine. The ex-janitor racked a shell, leaned the shotgun on his shoulder, and reached for his wine.

“Dad. Stop.”

“Gentry, they’ve got us. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let them lay a finger on you without fighting back. Maybe I can put a slug in Handley before they take us out.”

“You have to stop. This is ridiculous. You’re the worst shot I’ve ever seen.” George opened his mouth to protest, but Gentry spoke over him. “They aren’t going to kill us, Dad.”

George closed his mouth.

“They’re going to capture me and subdue you. And then they’re going to torture you until I cooperate with them.” Gentry paused long enough to ensure he had his father’s attention. “But that doesn’t have to happen. I set up a bolt hole when we first bought the place, a hidden back door into a pocket dimension.”

Relief flooded through George. “Well, shit. Why didn’t you say so? Lead the way.”

“I’m too big. I won’t fit. Not anymore.”

George shook his head. No way. If his son couldn’t go, he wasn’t going, either.

“Listen, Dad, you don’t get to make the choice on this one.” George closed his eyes, still shaking his head. Gentry’s hand gripped his shoulders, and George felt the tremendous strength the daemon contained.

“Look at me,” his son commanded. When George didn’t comply, the boy’s grip tightened until it hurt. “Look at me,” he repeated.

George opened his eyes. And for the first time in many years, he saw his son as he truly existed. The daemon towered over him. Tremendous wings stretched above and behind an impossibly muscled form whose skin swirled black with the words of a hundred thousand stories. The daemon’s wings brushed the skylights in the ceiling. Fire, as bright as inspiration, danced across those wings. The daemon leaned down until his face was level with George’s. Despite the terrible beauty of the entity before him, it had Gentry’s eyes, the same expressive, oversized eyes he’d seen staring up at him years before and over three thousand miles away. They had traveled so far.

“Okay, son. Tell me what to do.”

As Gentry opened his mouth to respond, the skylights shattered and heavily armored men dropped through the openings, already firing their weapons. Gentry growled and everything

other than the two of them just sort of...stopped. The raining glass froze in the air, as did the men and the projectiles from their weapons.

George understood magick as thoroughly as was possible for someone who couldn't feel it moving through them. The rules were clear. It was impossible, flat out impossible, for anyone or anything to alter time's flow. Yet his son did just that. He threw the weight of his will and all the magick he contained against the gears of existence itself and forced them to halt. It cost him. George could feel and hear those gears tearing away his son's essence like an angle grinder chewing through metal layer by layer.

Gentry took advantage of the moment he'd forced out of reality to speak a short sentence into his father's ear. Before George could begin processing the words, his son flung him at a painting of a cave that hung on the den's walls. The cave gained three dimensions before George hit the painting's surface and passed through. He landed awkwardly on the cave's stone floor, scraping skin from his hands and bruising his shoulder. He looked back the way he'd come.

A rectangle floated in the darkness, but it was already fading. Gentry held onto the edge of the table where George's wine glass still sat. The daemon was on one knee. Bleeding stumps jutted where time's relentless assault had torn his wings away. The words on his skin lifted in black threads that ripped loose and dissolved as they floated skyward. Gentry was watching him, and when their gazes met, the daemon smiled. The rectangle faded entirely, leaving George alone in unrelenting darkness.

He wasn't sure how long he lay on the stone and wept. By the time he could make himself think about his son's final words, George's throat felt raw and he'd run out of tears. He couldn't understand what Gentry had whispered to him in the moment he'd pulled his father close. But he trusted his son, so he thought about it.

He thought on all that the two of them had experienced together since coming into each other's lives. He thought of the paintings and sculptures he'd seen because of Gentry. He thought of the stories, the way they could make the impossible real. Eventually, he considered his current situation. As a mundane in a pocket dimension, he was trapped here. And with that, it made sense. Gentry wouldn't lock him somewhere without giving him a key.

George repeated his son's words before he got started.

"Real magick is an art, not a science."

George gathered a few of the theories he'd studied for more than half of his life and broke the ideas into pieces until he couldn't recognize them anymore. He let memories of his son flicker through his mind. He felt the energy gathering in his heart and in his head. He discovered that he wasn't entirely out of tears. When he felt like he was going to burst from the pain and beauty coursing through his body, he called up the image of Gentry's smile on the night of their first heist. He released everything he'd been holding and snapped his fingers. Red flames danced along his palm and grew higher as he watched. He got to his feet, and using the flame to light his path, he began the long climb up out of the darkness.

VITA

Travis Bowman was born in Elizabethtown, Kentucky and completed his B.A. in Writing and Literature from the Jack Kerouac School at Naropa University. He served as a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point and has worked as a bouncer, security specialist, data analyst, wedding planner, carpenter, and once as a cook in a pub in Cambridge, England. For a few years, he made his living writing prayers and incantations for a magical and metaphysical wholesale company. He currently lives in Asheville, North Carolina and divides his time between creating web content for people who prefer to remain anonymous and helping to produce events for up to 35,000 people.