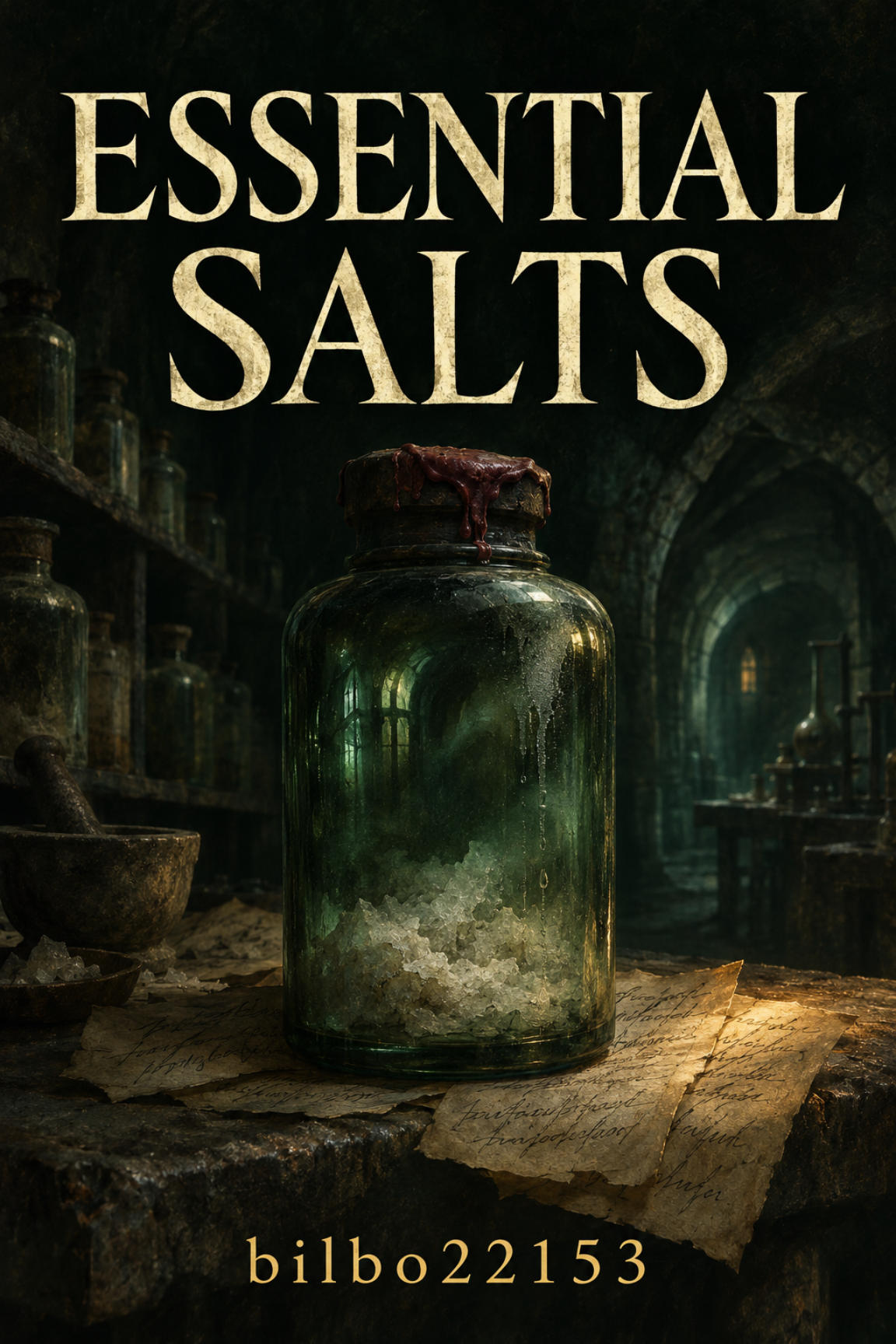
ESSENTIAL SALTS



bilbo22153

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An unofficial sequel to
The Case of Charles Dexter Ward

Content note: graphic violence and scenes set at Auschwitz.

Originally published on Archive of Our Own

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Chapter 1

Providence, Rhode Island; April 12, 1928 - April 15, 1930

Luther Green trudged slowly up the steep, creaking stairs to clean up the mess on the third floor. As the janitor at Dr Waite's private hospital, Luther didn't question the order, although he was surprised that there should be a mess up there. After all, there was only one patient on that floor – Mister Ward – and he was quiet and pleasant and never made any messes. And Luther had cleaned his room that morning, anyway. But Doctor Waite was the boss, and when the boss said "go," Luther went.

An attendant was waiting at the door to Mr Ward's room. One of those big, quiet men in their white coats always unlocked the door and waited outside in the hallway while Luther did his work. Today, though, he simply unlocked the door and said, "Go ahead, Luther. Mr Ward ain't here. Just sweep up all the dust and close the door when you're done," before walking away.

Luther peered into the room, which looked pretty much like it always did – sunny and comfortable, with a bed, table, wardrobe, and cozy armchair. What was different, though, was a pile of dust on the floor, right in front of the table. "Where did that come from?" Luther wondered aloud. "I just cleaned here this morning."

He pulled the door closed slowly to keep any stray breezes from spreading the dust around, and went to the closet at the end of the hallway to get a broom, dustpan, and bucket. He returned to the room and began carefully to sweep up the dust ... and as he worked, he remembered something Mr Ward had told him once while he cleaned the room.

Luther knew he was a little slow, and most people didn't like to talk to him, but Mr Ward was different. While Luther cleaned the room, Mr

Ward usually sat in the chair and talked to him slowly and carefully. He had a really interesting way of talking, too. When Mr Ward talked, his lips didn't move – he just looked at Luther, and Luther heard his voice in his head. It was sort of like the man he'd seen at the county fair, the man who had a painted wooden dummy that talked. Of course, the dummy wasn't talking, the man was talking for the dummy, but his lips didn't move, which was a neat trick. Mr Ward must have been one of those people, even if he didn't have a dummy.

What was he supposed to do if Mr Ward wasn't there and there was a lot of dust?

The memory returned. Luther finished sweeping and poured the dust into the bucket, checking very carefully to make sure he'd gotten it all. He then opened the wardrobe and took out a shirt and a pair of pants, underwear, shoes and socks, which he wrapped into a neat bundle. He took the broom and dustpan back to the closet, then returned and picked up the bucket of dust and the bundle of clothing, which he carried back down to his room in the basement.

On the top shelf of the closet where he kept his few simple possessions were two empty boxes with tightly fitting lids. He took down both boxes and removed the lids, then carefully poured the dust from the bucket into one. He put the lid back on the box and returned it to the shelf, pushing it all the way to the back. He then put the bundle of clothing into the other box, replaced the lid, and put it up on the shelf on top of the first box, rearranging a few other things in front of the boxes to hide them.

Just like Mr Ward had told him to.

Two Years Later
April 13, 1930

Luther Green woke early from a strange dream. He'd forgotten about Charles Ward, the man who had disappeared from the hospital a while back, but darned if Mr Ward hadn't appeared in his dream and

reminded him of things they'd talked about while Luther cleaned his room.

Luther got up and dressed, then opened his closet and reached up to the top shelf and moved things around until he found the two boxes he'd put away long ago. He took down the boxes, put on his coat and hat and, with the boxes under his arm, went out into the early morning chill.

Once beyond the grounds and gates of Dr Waite's hospital, Luther continued down the narrow, fog-shrouded road that wound away through the forest and back to the city. After a few minutes, he turned from the road into the trees and made his way to a small clearing sheltered from view. He set the boxes on the ground and removed the lid from the smaller one, revealing the bluish-gray dust he'd carefully swept up from Mr Ward's room two years before. He stepped away from the box, closed his eyes, and tried to remember what Mr Ward had told him to do next.

Luther began to murmur, softly and hesitantly, then with increasing volume, the words Mr Ward had made him memorize …

Y'ai 'Ng'Ngah,
Yog Sothoth
H'ee – L'Geb
F'ai Throdog
Uaaah!

His eyes still closed, Luther became aware of a strange smell, sort of like the incense the priest sometimes burned in church, but nasty underneath, like eggs gone bad, and then a sudden burst of warmth that drove away the chill of the foggy morning and a strange sound like a low moan. He opened his eyes and saw a cloud of bluish-gray smoke that slowly thinned and drifted away into the surrounding mists. As the smoke cleared, Luther looked on in surprise at the naked figure that emerged.

"Hello, Luther," said Charles Dexter Ward, smiling. "You've done well."

Two Days Later

From the Providence Journal, April 15th, 1930 –

The body of a man identified as Luther Green, a janitor employed at Dr Waite's Hospital for the Insane in Providence, was discovered in a forest on the outskirts of the city early this morning by a group of bird watchers. No cause of death was immediately available, although a police spokesman said it was likely that Mr Green had died of natural causes, possibly a heart attack, owing to the absence of visible injuries on the body. Anyone with relevant information is asked to contact Sergeant Billings of the Providence police's 3rd Precinct.

Chapter 2

Providence, Rhode Island, April 6, 1928

The magician's eyes gradually focused and he looked in surprise as the eyes of the man who stood before him rolled up in his head, and he crumpled to the floor. His mind racing, he staggered to his feet and rolled the man over to get a good look at his face. It was not Joseph Curwen or any of his helpers, but who was it?

He was surprised to find himself with only this one other person … Curwen had always had at least one helper with him when he summoned his prisoner - sometimes the young man who looked so much like Curwen, and sometimes one or more of the hideous "guards." The magician listened carefully, but heard no other sounds to indicate that anyone else was present – only the distant thumping and squealing of the guards, leaping and clawing to escape from their pits. Moving quickly, he pulled down one of the shapeless robes hanging from hooks on the wall and pulled it on to cover his nakedness before searching the unconscious man. In the pockets of the man's pants, he found a small leather pouch containing some paper money and a few loose coins, along with a bundle of keys, and a small folding knife; the pockets of the coat were empty.

What to do? The magician laid his hand on the man's forehead and murmured a few words that would keep him in a deep and dreamless sleep, then sat back to think.

He had no idea where he was, or even *when* he was. He had inferred from the language, dress, and behavior of Curwen and his assistants that he was long out of his own time, but of what he could expect outside of the rooms where he was imprisoned he knew nothing. He could not speak the language and did not know the customs. His only advantages were his magical skills and, paradoxically, the limitations of his new body; he didn't need to eat or drink, so he would not have to interact with other people often, or soon, giving him time to study and learn how

to blend in. It would take a great deal of work to bring himself up to date, and he had to do it quickly.

From the questions Curwen had asked, and the information the evil man had tried to torture from him, he understood the terrible powers they sought. They had to be stopped. But how?

He took the lantern that stood on a nearby table and went in search of decent clothing. After a brief search, he found a room filled with piles of assorted clothing. He rummaged until he found items that would fit him and dressed quickly, tossing aside with disgust his stained and dirty robe before returning to the room where he had awakened.

Where was Joseph Curwen? He considered the man lying unconscious on the floor. Who was this person, how did he get here, and what was his relationship to Curwen? He suspected, based on the unknown man's reaction, that he had been surprised and terrified by what he saw; thus, he was not necessarily an enemy, and possibly an ally. But if the man was not an accomplice of Curwen, how did he know of this place? Was he a competitor or an enemy of Curwen? If an enemy, could he be induced to kill Curwen, knowing what he obviously did of the man's terrible activities?

The magician knelt next to the unconscious stranger and took the man's head in his hands, spreading his fingers widely. He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, clearing his mind of all extraneous thoughts, and murmured a long and complex incantation. The man moaned softly, his head slowly rolling from side to side as the magician sifted through his thoughts and memories, looking for the information he needed.

After a few minutes, he laid the man's head gently back on the floor and sat back to think about what he had learned. Curwen was, indeed, not here; he was locked in some sort of prison in a nearby city, but those who kept him thought he was someone else, someone named Charles Ward – apparently the young man who looked so much like him. The man on the floor was a healer who had been treating this Ward person, and had become concerned over changes in young man's language and behavior. Pondering what he had learned from the man's mind, he

slowly realized what had happened: Curwen and Ward were apparently almost identical in appearance ... Curwen had murdered Ward and tried to assume his identity, but because of his errors of language and behavior, his family believed that Ward suffered from an illness of the mind, and had locked him away for his own protection. This healer ... his name, he saw, was Willett ... had come to this place in search of knowledge which would enable him to treat his patient's illness, not realizing that the man he believed to be his patient was, in fact, the terrible Joseph Curwen.

He then decided to quickly explore his surroundings. He had been dragged among two or three rooms by Curwen and his accomplices, and knew that he was in a large system of catacombs, but he needed a clearer picture of the space, what assets were available to him, and how he might escape. Leaving the man on the floor in a deep sleep, he set out to carefully inspect his prison.

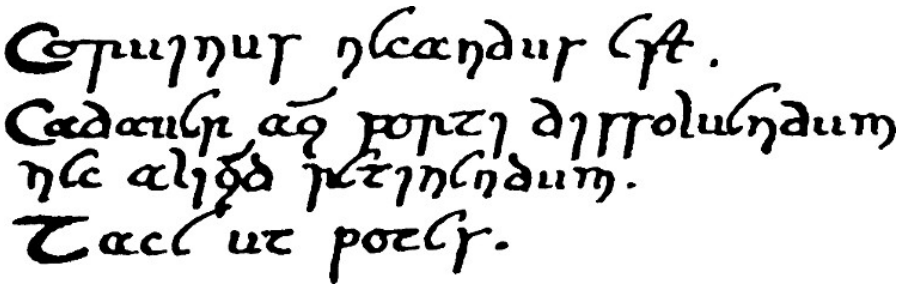
The magician wandered from room to room and found no other persons and nothing of immediate aid or interest. After a time he came to the end of a long tunnel, where an arched door opened onto a narrow stone stair curving steeply upward. He followed the stair until he reached a short ladder anchored to the wall that led to a dark opening above. Climbing through the hole and raising his lantern, he found himself in what appeared to be a dark cellar; across the room, a wooden staircase climbed the wall to a landing where a door stood open. He cautiously crossed the empty space, climbed the stair, and peered through the door into a sparsely-furnished room dimly lit by sunlight entering through small windows. All was silent.

He set the lantern on the floor and systematically explored both floors of the building. All the rooms were empty save for odd pieces of furniture covered with sheets of cloth. The largest room, at the front of the building on the ground floor, had a door to the outside; he cautiously pulled it open and stepped out into a bare expanse of grass and earth surrounded by a dense forest. A narrow dirt road curved away into the trees, and a large, curious metal wagon sat in front of the house, which was a modest, somewhat dilapidated two-story structure. The air was

fresh and cool and the sun warm on his face, and he stood for a moment to relish the feeling before going back into the house and retracing his steps back down into the abyss.

Back in the laboratory room he searched through the large satchel the stranger had apparently been carrying. It was filled with ancient books and manuscripts, notebooks, letters, and loose papers, apparently notes of the experiments Curwen had performed in his unholy work. He removed the contents, snapped the satchel shut, and set it aside.

He made a quick decision. Tearing a page from a cheap paper pad on a nearby table, he used a pencil lying beside it to scrawl a quick message -



“Curwen must be killed. Dissolve his body in aqua fortis, and do not retain anything. Keep silence as best you can.”

He had no idea whether the man would understand the message when he found it, but it was the best he could do. He stuffed the note into the man’s pocket, then stood up and looked around. He would have to remain hidden here long enough to learn to survive in this strange new world, and he would have to hope that the healer would either kill Curwen or keep him confined until the magician gained the strength and knowledge to come forth and kill him himself.

The magician bent down and, not without effort, managed to hoist the unconscious man over his shoulder. He carried the man through the tunnels, up the stairs and ladder to the old house above, and laid him out on a dusty bed in one of the upstairs rooms before returning to the catacombs to retrieve the now-empty satchel, which he set on the floor next to the man.

Laying his hand on the man's head, the magician spoke a few words of power to ensure that he would awaken later without ill effects. He then walked to the window and looked out at the world beyond. He had work to do … but first he would have to learn how to live, move, speak, and survive in this world, so very different from the one he had known.

Turning away from the window, he retraced his path through the house, down to the cellar, and down the ladder to the to the top of the winding stairs to the catacombs beneath. On the top step, he paused and looked back up to where the stone plug sat beside the opening to the basement. He raised a hand and said softly "solidum fiet," at which the plug rotated back into position and settled seamlessly into place, leaving no trace of the opening.

With a sigh, the magician descended the stair to plan his journey into an unknown future.

Chapter 3

Prague, Czechoslovakia - September 26, 1929

The old man dressed in shabby workingman's clothes walked briskly across the Čechuv Bridge toward the city center. Darkness had long fallen and stars twinkled among scudding clouds that shrouded a thin sliver of moon. Few people were about as he strode quickly along, tapping the cobbles with a battered, crooked walking stick as he headed for an address in the city's oldest quarter.

The magician was cautious, but not afraid as he neared the street where he expected to find the man who once was named Simon Orne, but now called himself Josef Nadek. That man might already be aware of the death of Joseph Curwen in far-off Providence. If so, he could have prepared himself well with defenses the magician could only imagine.

After a time, he turned left into a narrow street that branched away from the main boulevard, skirting the high stone walls of the old Jewish synagogue before twisting away into darker and narrower lanes. A few minutes more, and he was approaching his destination - an old, half-timbered house that seemed to lean drunkenly as it brooded over a street that was little more than a narrow, dimly-lit alley. The door was of timbers banded with iron, the windows covered by heavy shutters that blocked any views of the interior. The surrounding buildings wore looks of decay and despair, their broken windows like bloodshot eyes nervously peering at their neighbors. A rat scuttled past and disappeared into a crack in a nearby wall and the sounds of the city were scarcely to be heard, although major streets were but a few blocks away.

The magician considered his options from the shadows of a doorway some distance down the street from his destination. He could easily force his way into the house and prevail against almost any threat within. But he also wanted to learn more about the evil men who had mastered the hideous arts of necromancy for reasons he was only now

beginning to understand. It was dangerous, but a danger he had to face. He made his decision.

He crossed the street, stepping carefully around a puddle in which floated the reeking corpse of a dog, and approached the door of the darkened house. He laid the end of his walking stick against the face of the lock and whispered a few words, after which he heard a soft click and the sound of metal sliding against metal as the bolts withdrew. He gripped the handle, pushed it down, and swung the door open. He stepped in quickly and pulled the door closed behind him.

The difference between the dilapidated outside of the house and the room in which he found himself was startling. He was standing in a handsomely-decorated, softly-lit foyer from which an arched doorway opened into a hallway leading to the rear of the house. To the left and right of this doorway broad staircases climbed to the second floor, where closed doors separated by paintings in gilt frames lined an overlooking balcony. All was quiet.

Deciding to explore the ground floor first, the magician walked slowly down the hall, peering into the rooms that opened to the right and left; all were dark and empty save for pieces of furniture draped with sheets. At the end of the hall, doors decorated with panels of stained glass stood open to reveal a handsome, well-lit library that extended up to the second floor; a balcony reached by staircases at each end of the room ran around its circumference and gave access to more rows of shelves, the books interspersed with niches holding odd carvings and curios. The lower floor of the room was occupied by a handsome desk of dark, polished wood and several small tables piled with books. Logs burned brightly in a stone fireplace flanked by two comfortable wing-back chairs.

A man was seated in the nearer of the chairs, facing the fire, his face hidden behind the wing of the chair. A large, leather-bound book lay open in his lap, and as the visitor stepped into the room, he closed the book, laid it on a small side table, and without turning to face the newcomer said in a deep, resonant voice, “You have come.”

The magician said nothing as he crossed the room and sat in the other chair, turning to face the other man. “Simon Orne,” he said as he sat down.

The man turned to face the magician. “My name is Josef Nadek. Simon Orne is long dead.”

“He lives,” the other man replied. “Evil remains, no matter that it changes its name.”

“Evil?” Orne laughed, the sound of dry leaves rustling in a breeze. “And who are you to decide that I am evil? If you are whom I suspect, you surely have blood on your own hands.”

The visitor met the man’s gaze. “If there is blood on my hands, it is blood that was righteously shed. The very fact that I am here speaks to the depth of your evil, you who would disturb the peace of the dead for your own ends.”

“Evil,” Orne repeated softly. “It is curious that you are here. Where is Joseph Curwen?”

“Dead,” the magician answered. “Not by my hand, but dead nevertheless.”

Orne peered intently at his visitor. “Not by your hand, you say? Then whose?”

The visitor shrugged and fixed his gaze on Orne. “Does it matter? It suffices that he is dead, and that he will never threaten the world again. But you live. Not as Curwen, raised from the grave by his unholy wedding of science and sorcery … you and Edward Hutchinson appear to have mastered the prolongation of life.”

Orne nodded. “That is true. All three of us had beaten death’s hand, and Curwen would have lived on as well had he not been killed by fools who feared his power.”

“They were right to do so,” the magician replied. “It is you who are the fools. Your desire for knowledge and power blinded you to the horrors you would have unleashed. They would have consumed you as well.”

Orne shook his head dismissively. “Do you think we were so ignorant of the powers we sought to harness? We would have prevailed, and we would have taken our place as the rightful rulers of this world. This will still come to pass.”

“Only in your dreams,” the visitor said. “You would have brought Hell into this world, and Hell does not share its dominion and its power. It would have consumed you as it would all else. You must not be allowed to continue.”

“And you propose to stop us?” Orne rose from his chair and glared down at his visitor, anger twisting his gaunt features. “You are a man out of your time and your world, and you have no power here!”

The magician rose and returned Orne’s glare impassively. “There are powers in this world, and there are powers in others. I choose the powers of this one.” In a single, fluid movement he pulled a pistol from the pocket of his jacket, aimed at the center of Orne’s chest, and fired.

Orne staggered back as the bullet struck home, stumbling over his feet and falling to the floor beside his chair. The other man stepped to where Orne lay, carefully aimed the pistol, and fired twice more, again to the heart and then between the eyes. Simon Orne lay still in a pool of slowly-spreading crimson.

The magician examined the pistol, turning it slowly back and forth in his hand. He looked down at Orne and smiled. “One need not always resort to mystical powers.” He slipped the weapon back into his pocket.

He searched the house quickly and methodically, eventually finding a large and well-equipped laboratory in a level below the basement. He carried the books and papers he found back to the library where Orne lay dead and fed them into the fire, stirring the blaze until every page had been reduced to crumbling ashes. He then returned to the laboratory and searched the shelves and cabinets for bottles of acid,

which he took back upstairs and emptied over Orne's body, using the fireplace tools to chop and stir at the corpse to ensure its dissolution was as complete as he could manage.

After a last check to ensure that nothing recognizable remained in the fireplace, the magician went back to the laboratory and methodically wrecked everything he could find, pouring out bottles of reagents and smashing the empty bottles, demolishing chemical and electrical devices, and ensuring nothing usable remained intact. He found no bottles of what he knew to be the "essential salts" that once had been human beings, despite searching every inch of the laboratory and the remainder of the house; he suspected that those he had not destroyed in Curwen's laboratory were kept by Hutchinson, whose hideaway was more isolated and secure.

When he had finished his destruction of the laboratory, the magician returned to the library and used the fireplace shovel to further scatter the remains of Simon Orne, now little more than a thick, smoking sludge. After a final stirring of the ashes in the fireplace, he walked back down the hallway and out the front door into the darkness of the street. He carefully checked for observers, then crossed to the other side and walked to the end of the street before turning to face the silent house where Orne lay dead, his work in ruins. He pointed his walking stick at the house, closed his eyes, and murmured "*Coelo dico vobis descendit ignis*."

A sudden flash lit the street in stark black and white as the front door and every window of Orne's house blew outward on roaring gouts of fire. He flinched at the hungry flames that quickly consumed the façade of the house, crackling and roaring like the breath of the angry dragons of his youth. Within moments the roof fell in with a shower of sparks as the walls baked and crumbled in upon themselves. Soon, little remained of the house except a blazing heap of rubble.

The magician watched the flames for a moment, then turned and walked away, an old man disappearing into the night in search of another figure of shadow.

Chapter 4

Rakos, Transylvania - October 28, 1929

The mountain brooded over the village, the crumbling battlements of Castle Ferenczy clinging to its summit like a battered crown. Although the morning was unusually warm and sunny for late October, the village wore an atmosphere of gloom and depression, its single rutted street silent and deserted.



The old man walked briskly yet cautiously, alert for any sign that his presence had been noted. High above the village, Edward Hutchinson – the man locally known as Baron Ferenczy – was waiting, surely aware by now of the deaths of Joseph Curwen in Providence and Simon Orne in Prague, and of the coming of a deadly nemesis. As with Orne, the magician had no idea what powers or allies Hutchinson could summon, but was prepared for the worst, particularly now that his coming was likely expected.

He passed the last hovel as the dirt road left the village and curved away into the forest where it forked into a main track leading toward Braşov and a narrower path that climbed upwards toward the mountain

summit. Estimating it would take at least an hour to make his way up to the castle, he picked up his pace. Better, he thought, to finish this in daylight.

The road switchbacked up the flanks of the mountain through a dense, unusually quiet forest with none of the birdsong or animal noises he would have expected; instead, there was a sense of foreboding that grew as the track neared the summit. Occasional breaks in the canopy showed glimpses of the looming gray walls and turrets of the castle, with windows like unfriendly eyes glaring at the valley below. Here and there, the bodies of dead birds and small animals lay beside the track.

The sun was halfway to its zenith when the magician rounded the last curve, and the surface beneath his feet changed from beaten dirt to a graveled track that led to the mouth of a tunnel cut through the rough gray stone of the castle wall. He eyed the opening suspiciously, then raised his cupped hands while murmuring a few words of command. A ball of light appeared between his hands and glowed brightly, then drifted slowly down the length of the tunnel, revealing a soot-blackened ceiling dotted with dark, cobweb-laced murder holes.

He followed the light through the echoing passage, which opened into a large, empty courtyard. Directly across from the tunnel exit, a broad stone staircase rose to an ornately-carved wooden door that stood open to a dark interior. He strode across the courtyard briskly but cautiously and climbed the steps to enter a large, dimly lit hall, in the middle of which stood a stocky, bearded man of middle age.

The magician walked into the hall and stopped a prudent distance from the other man. “Hutchinson,” he said simply.

“Here, I am known as Baron Ferenczy,” the other man replied with a smile.

The magician did not return the smile. “Do you know who I am?”

“I know you killed Joseph Curwen and Simon Orne. And I suspect you have come to kill me as well.”

“You are only partly correct,” the visitor answered. “I killed Orne; Curwen was killed by another. But I have, indeed, come for you.”

Hutchinson nodded in thought. “If Curwen is dead, how is it that you live?”

The magician’s mouth twisted into a crooked smile. “You might say it was an accident,” he said.

“How very interesting,” Hutchinson replied. “But before you decide to kill me, perhaps you might consider that it was an accident that could be to our mutual benefit.”

“And how would that be?”

“Curwen, Orne, and I made incredible discoveries,” Hutchinson said, “There was almost no limit to the power we could have wielded, the things we could have done. We were so close to unlocking the ultimate secrets of the universe! My colleagues are gone now, but you and I remain. Why not join with me?”

“Join with you?” the magician scoffed. “Do you take me for a fool?”

“No,” Hutchinson said calmly, “I take you for a seeker of wisdom, a man of learning who would not turn his back on the opportunity to unlock the secrets of life itself!” The magician said nothing, and Hutchinson continued, “Come and let me show you what I have done, and what – together – we can yet accomplish!”

He turned his back on the visitor and walked toward a doorway leading into the depths of the castle. After a moment, the magician warily followed.

The two men walked in silence along passages and stairways that steadily descended into the depths of the castle. The final staircase wound steeply downward between seeping walls and opened out into a broad tunnel carved into the bedrock of the mountain, extending into a dark distance and lit at intervals by torches guttering in ornate brackets. Hutchinson stopped for a moment and turned to the visitor. “I was fortunate to have obtained this place many decades ago. It has the

advantage of remoteness from meddling government officials, although it is equally remote from sources of supplies I require, which must be brought in from Brasov, or even Bucharest." He shrugged and walked on and the other man followed, past openings cut into the walls at random intervals. It reminded the magician of the catacombs beneath Curwen's house in Patuxet; most of the rooms were sealed by doors of heavy timber banded with iron, while others opened into unlit spaces, most of them either empty or filled with boxes, barrels, or assorted bits of furniture. One such space, partially lit by a torch on the wall opposite, contained rows of coffins, most with lids ajar or missing.

After a time, Hutchinson turned into a cross-passage and stopped before an arched door which, unlike most of the others, was fashioned of iron and studded with bolts. He twisted the large, ornate key that protruded from the lock, and swung the door silently inward on well-oiled hinges. He entered, and the magician followed.

The room was quite large, the walls to the left and right lined with rows of shelves crowded with bottles and jars of every size and shape. Along the third wall, directly ahead, stood four tall wooden cabinets, two on either side of a huge fireplace in which a gas fire roared. Three of the cabinets were closed, but the doors of the fourth were open to reveal rows of identical, numbered porcelain jars. Several tables were spaced around the floor, one of them covered with a complex arrangement of tubes entering and leaving a flask in which a pale-yellow liquid bubbled over a gas flame. Another, somewhat larger table beside it was draped in stained canvas that covered a suggestive mass beneath. A strange, vaguely unpleasant odor hung in the air. "My laboratory," Hutchinson explained, somewhat needlessly, the magician thought.

Hutchinson crossed the room and turned down the canvas cover from the table, revealing the naked and shriveled body of an old woman, her flesh gray and her eyes sunken beneath closed lids. "It is not easy to obtain research specimens," he said, turning to the magician, "Especially in remote, lightly-populated regions like this one. I would prefer younger, healthier subjects, but one works with what is available." He carefully replaced the canvas, and turned to the apparatus

on the neighboring table. “I have improved greatly on the work done by Borellus, and on my own later work with Curwen and Orne,” he said, gesturing to the liquid that bubbled in the flask. “Borellus's process of reducing a corpse to its essential salts is complicated and time-consuming and requires the complete remains for the best results, but I have made significant discoveries which allow me to produce viable salts more quickly, even from incomplete remains.”

“Viable salts,” the magician echoed softly. “I assume you mean, chemically-prepared remains which can be animated and reunited with the departed spirit?”

“Indeed,” Hutchinson replied. “But as you yourself know, the reanimated body is not truly alive. The quality of the flesh is unnatural, and the bodily processes are not synchronized. It provides a suitable vessel to house the spirit, which is, after all, the desired result. But nevertheless, the ability to regenerate a truly living body would be a great advance. Curwen and Orne were close, but I believe I shall soon achieve that goal.” He looked sideways at his visitor. “Would you not prefer to have your living body again, rather than this imperfect shell?”

“I would prefer to have remained at rest after a long and satisfying life. I would prefer not to have been brought back to an imitation of life for the benefit of foolish men who are ignorant of the dangers with which they toy.”

Hutchinson sniffed derisively. “Immortality is a gift beyond measure,” he said. “Why submit to death when the ability to prolong life and learning is available?”

“And what if that life is prolonged by the murder of others who would doubtless prefer to live?” the magician asked. “What right have you to take the lives of others and corrupt the laws of the universe for your own benefit?”

“Because I can,” Hutchinson spread his arms wide in an encompassing gesture. “Look at the world around you! The natural world is based on

the survival and advancement of those who are strong, who can take what they desire and bend the weak to their own ends."

The magician shook his head sadly. "You have learned nothing, Hutchinson. You and your friends have been corrupted by the sin of pride; worse, your pride will lead to your destruction and the destruction of the world you wish to rule." He gestured toward a small desk that stood in the corner of the room, its top littered with books and papers. "If you had read ... really read, and really understood the writings of Abdul al-Hazred and others ... you would have recognized the danger of your foolish tinkering with powers beyond your comprehension."

Hutchinson laughed out loud. "Did not Satan prefer to reign in Hell rather than serve in heaven?" he asked.

"And when you unleash Hell on the earth, what makes you think Hell will share its dominion with you?" the magician asked in return. "I asked the same of Orne, for did he not write long ago, *'do not call up any that you can not put down; by the which I mean, any that can in turn call up somewhat against you, whereby your powerfullest devices may not be of use'?* Perhaps he saw the danger more clearly than either you or Curwen, though he pressed on regardless."

"And what if there is danger?" Hutchinson asked. "This is why we study, why we experiment with caution but also with energy and determination. This is why we learn – so that we can predict the dangers and master them! This is why you and I should work together and rule together!"

"You have no wish to share power," the magician scoffed. "You do not seem unduly distressed by the deaths of Orne and Curwen, and I doubt my death would bother you once you had obtained all you thought I could provide."

Hutchinson's eyes narrowed. "So you would spurn my offer of friendship?"

“You do not offer friendship,” the magician replied. “You offer only death.”

“Very well, then,” Hutchinson replied. “Let it be death.” He raised his face to the vaulted ceiling and shouted, *“Veni!”*

From the hallway outside the room, the magician heard a horrible, liquid noise like the harsh gargle of a drowning man. A shadow fell through the doorway into the laboratory, followed closely by something vaguely man-like, but horribly … *ruined* … a terrifying figure that shambled in and lurched across the room toward him, staring with watery eyes and reaching out with strong, malformed arms. The magician stood his ground and, keeping one eye on Hutchinson, raised his hand to point at the oncoming creature and shouted, “Abite!”

The terrible thing halted in its tracks, and the man turned to face Hutchinson, who was waving his fingers in cabalistic fashion and chanting the Incantation of Descent, *“Ogthrod Ai’f, Geb’l – ee’h …”*

“Tace!” the magician shouted. Hutchinson’s chant stopped immediately; his mouth worked desperately, but no sound emerged. He spun around and dashed toward the open door, but the other man raised his staff, pointed it at his receding back, and shouted *“Nunc moriatur!”* Hutchinson gasped and stumbled, reeling and staggering, into the laboratory table, knocking glassware to the floor; the flask of yellow liquid tumbled to the floor and shattered, and the gas flame ignited papers and chemicals as it tipped over. Hutchinson gagged and coughed, then slid to the floor where he lay motionless, his eyes wide with surprise.

The magician stared emotionlessly at Hutchinson’s body for a long moment, then waved his hand at the table, extinguishing the fire started by the overturned burner. He then turned his attention to the hideous creature Hutchinson had summoned and intoned the Incantation of Descent. As he shouted the final word, the thing dissolved and fell heavily to the floor as a mass of dark red dust.

This done, he searched among the chemicals ranked on the shelves. He soon found several heavy carboys of acid, which he carried across the room to where Hutchinson lay sprawled on the floor. He carefully removed the stopper from the first container and poured its contents over the corpse, squinting against the acrid, rising vapors. As he had done with Orne a few weeks earlier, he used a shovel he found next to the fireplace to chop and scrape the remains of the body together as they gradually dissolved under the powerful acid, gradually pouring more acid and stirring the remains until nothing remained but a thick, foul sludge.

Once Hutchinson's body had been destroyed, the magician turned his attention to the cabinets containing rows of porcelain jars, each of which bore a numbered label. He took down one of the jars at random and opened the sealed lid to examine the contents, which proved to be fine powder of a light pastel shade. "Essential salts," he muttered to himself, sealing and replacing the jar on the shelf. He then turned his attention to the desk, where he soon found a leather-covered journal whose pages consisted of handwritten rows of numbers followed by names. He recognized some of the names from his recent studies, and shook his head in horror and sadness at the realization that those once-living persons now existed as powder in numbered jars on Hutchinson's shelves, waiting to be recalled to unwilling life.

He returned to the cabinets and moved the jars to an empty work table, where he emptied their contents into glass beakers filled with acid. As the salts dissolved, he poured the contents of the beakers down a drain in the floor.

When the last of the jars was empty, the magician carefully searched through the desk, sorting the books and papers into two piles. One pile, of books dealing with chemistry and medicine, he packed into a leather satchel he found under the desk; the other pile, mainly of handwritten research notes and books of occult lore and practice, he tossed into the fireplace, stirring the blaze until everything had been reduced to ashes.

Finally, he returned to the table where lay the body Hutchinson had shown him. He stripped away the canvas and murmured a quiet prayer before feeding the remains of the old woman into the roaring fire.

By the time the body had been consumed, the magician knew that twilight must be approaching outside the walls of the castle. He was tired, but did not want to spend another hour in this cursed place. He took the bag with Hutchinson's books and retraced his path through the labyrinthine passages back up to the castle. He walked slowly out the door, across the courtyard, through the passage in the outer wall, and back down the mountain to the village below, where lights were showing in windows and smoke rose from chimneys, although there were still no persons to be seen. He passed through the village and walked another mile before turning to face the mountain and the castle looming against the gathering darkness. He set the satchel at his feet and cleared his mind. Drawing himself to his full height, he closed his eyes and raised his arms toward the distant castle, feeling the energy growing within him, willing it to build and focus. When he was ready, he opened his eyes and shouted *"Ego te confringo!"*

He felt a sudden rush of hot wind roar past him toward the mountain, where the castle was lit by a sudden, brilliant flash of light followed by a low rumble that quickly built to a tremendous, earth-shaking blast. When the echoes of the titanic explosion had died away, the landscape was lit by a raging blaze that covered the summit, consuming the last traces of Castle Ferenczy and the legacy of Edward Hutchinson.

The magician watched the flames for a time, then turned, picked up the satchel, and walked away into the night, toward an unknown future.

Chapter 5

Arkham, Massachusetts, April 15, 1930-October 1, 1932

The train squealed to a stop, the doors swung open, and Joseph Curwen stepped down to the platform. He followed the signs to the exit, then to a row of cabs idling at the curb. Climbing into the first, he said to the driver, “Miskatonic University. The library.”

Arriving at the building after a drive of some twenty minutes, Curwen paid the driver with the last of the money he had taken from Luther Green, then climbed the stone steps to tall, intricately carved double doors through which a steady stream of students was passing in and out. Curwen entered and made his way to the information desk, where he asked for the office of the chief librarian. The young woman at the desk gave him directions, and he climbed the stairs to the third floor, where he found a door marked with the name of the individual he sought. He knocked on the door and was rewarded with an invitation to enter.

Curwen swung the door open on silent hinges and entered a large, well-appointed office. An elderly man in a tweed jacket looked him up and down and asked, “How may I help you?”

“Good day, Dr Carter. I am Joseph Curwen, late of Providence, Rhode Island, and I seek your assistance.”

The man frowned slightly before responding. “The library staff is located on the ground floor, sir.”

“I do not seek the help of the library,” Curwen replied. “I come to you as a brother of the Order of the Endless Night.”

The man’s demeanor changed quickly. “Come in, then,” he said, rising and extending a hand which Curwen shook briefly before sitting down in a comfortable chair beside the desk. “How may I be of service to you?” Dr Carter asked as he sat in his own chair.

“My story is unusual,” Curwen replied, and you will no doubt wish verify it through our brothers in Providence.”

“Unusual in what way?”

“They will tell you that I have been dead since 1771.”

The librarian’s eyebrows rose. “Indeed,” he said. “That is curious. I shall have to see what our brothers in Providence have to say. May I offer you something to drink while you wait?”

“No, thank you,” Curwen replied. “But if you have current newspapers or journals I can read while I wait, they would be most welcome.”

Carter indicated a stack of newspapers and magazines on a nearby table. “Please help yourself,” he invited, then added, “You will, of course, remain here while I make the necessary inquiries.” Curwen nodded agreement and the older man walked out, closing the door behind him. The sound of a key turning in the lock was loud in the room.

Curwen was not offended by the measure; the Order had its secrets and its enemies, and caution was always warranted. He had, after all, arrived unannounced and with a scarcely-believable tale. He was not worried about being ultimately accepted, although he hoped he would not have to wait long. He selected a newspaper at random from the stack on the table and began to read.

An hour or more went by before the sound of a key rattling in the lock caused Curwen to look up from the magazine he was reading. The door swung open and Dr Carter came in and resumed his seat behind the desk. He studied Curwen thoughtfully before saying, “I have had an interesting conversation with the head of our lodge in Providence,” he said. “You appear to be in robust health for a man who has been dead more than a hundred and fifty years.”

Curwen smiled thinly. “I have been dead – twice – and I have been alive. I prefer alive.”

“This is hardly a time for jests, Mr Curwen,” Dr Carter said quietly. “You are here, claiming the identity of a member of the Order long believed

dead. I trust you have an explanation that will prevent me from ensuring that you become truly dead."

"I intended no jest," Curwen replied. "As the Order's records show, I was born in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1662. I was deeply involved in experiments designed to extend the human life span and to return the dead to life – experiments which eventually led the ignorant and superstitious locals to rise up and kill me in 1771. Fortunately, I had prepared for the possibility of my death by setting in motion events that would result in one of my descendants recreating my discoveries and returning me to life." Noting the skeptical look on Carter's face, he added, "Two other former brothers of the Providence lodge can confirm this: Simon Orne, who now lives in Prague under the name of Josef Nadek, and Edward Hutchinson, who lives in a remote corner of Romania as Baron Ferenczy. I know that there is an Order lodge in Prague, but I do not know the closest one to the town of Rakus, where Hutchinson lives."

Carter nodded. "As it happens, the head of the Providence lodge told me much the same thing. However, you appear to be unaware that both Orne and Hutchinson are dead."

Curwen cursed under his breath. "I am too late!"

"Too late for what?" Carter asked.

"To warn them of the coming of a vengeful enemy," Curwen said. "The story is long and complicated, but the short of it is – as I have already told you – that last year I was killed for a second time. I foresaw that possibility and made preparations to return again. What I did not foresee was that the same fool who managed to kill me also accidentally brought back a powerful being that I had previously summoned. It saved the foolish man's life and directed him to kill me; then escaped, evidently managing to track down and murder Orne and Hutchinson."

"And just who or what is this 'powerful being?'" Carter asked skeptically.

“He has been known by many names through the years,” Curwen replied, “But the name you would be most likely to recognize is …” he named the individual.

Carter repeated the name in flat, suspicious tones. “You ask me to believe that you have reincarnated a man whose very existence is a matter of legend?”

“Oh, he existed,” Curwen answered, “And he lives again. As long as he is unaware that I have returned, I am safe until we can find and kill him.”

“And you expect the Order help you?” Carter asked. “Why should we do this?”

“Because this man has the power to destroy all we hope to achieve,” Curwen said. “As far as I know, he does not know of the existence of the Order or the fact that I live again. But if he learns either, we will have a terrible and deadly enemy.”

“So you wish us to help you find and kill him?”

“No,” Curwen replied. “I ask only your assistance in recreating my lost research so that I can work toward our mutual goals.”

“What sort of assistance do you require?” Carter asked. “Our resources are great and our reach broad, but neither is unlimited, and we have our own activities to pursue.”

Curwen shrugged. “Isolation. Protection. Laboratory facilities. Chemicals. Access to experimental subjects.”

“By which you are not implying mice and rabbits,” Carter said caustically. “You ask us to provide human beings on whom you can conduct your research?”

“What does it serve our ends to bring back the exploitable shades of mice and rabbits?” Curwen replied with equal scorn. “In times past, it was easy to purchase slaves who would never be missed, or abduct itinerant seamen or soldiers whose fellows would believe they had

simply deserted. I recognize that times have changed, but my needs have not. Can the Order help or not?"

Carter leaned back in his chair and stared for a moment at the ceiling before answering. "As it happens, perhaps we can." He stood and walked across the room to gaze out the window in thought. "We are observing and steering events around the world which will lead to war and chaos, helping to establish the conditions for the return of the Great Old Ones and the new era in which we will rule with their power. In Germany, we are quietly supporting a young populist politician whose rhetoric and writings suggest that his ascent to power would unleash waves of hatred and violence that could produce all the subjects you could ever need. I think, Mr Curwen, that perhaps we should send you to Germany."

Curwen nodded. "I can read the German language well enough, although I do not speak it with fluency. I should be able to master it with some instruction and practice."

Miskatonic University Arkham, Massachusetts

September 25, 1932

For those with the appropriate access, the closed section of the Lovecraft Memorial Library at Miskatonic University offered one of the world's greatest collections of occult books, manuscripts, and artifacts. Joseph Curwen's access to this collection, facilitated by Dr Carter, was proving to be a godsend in helping to reconstruct his lost knowledge, if not his experimental results. In particular, the library had one of the few complete copies of The Neconomicon of Abdul al-Hazred, as well as the complete works of Borellus. In the year and a half since he had arrived from Providence, Curwen had filled dozens of notebooks with information he could not remove from the library, but would need to consult after his relocation to Germany. This, he knew, was being facilitated by members of the Endless Night Order in New York and Germany, and his departure was now less than a week off.

Dr Carter had also arranged for a tutor who was doing a maddeningly thorough job of improving Curwen's fluency in German, insisting that he speak the language at every opportunity and refusing to speak to him in English. But while frustrating, the approach was working, and Curwen was confident of his ability to function well enough once he arrived in Germany.

New York City

October 1, 1932

The passenger liner SS *Albert Ballin* rested at its pier in the harbor of New York as the last passengers came aboard and the last cargo was loaded for the five-day trip to Hamburg, Germany. A First-Class passenger bearing a German passport in the name of Josef Corwinus stood at the rail and watched the final preparations for departure. Joseph Curwen was anxious to get away from New York and resume his interrupted work, but was wary of the threat posed by his nemesis, still roaming free in the world. It was unlikely that the magician could know of his return, but his continued survival was a danger that could not be ignored. Carter had assured him that the members of the Order would attempt to track him down and eliminate him, but Curwen was certain that only he could end the threat for good, using the appropriate incantation to banish the powerful wizard's spirit and return his body to the salts he and Hutchinson had prepared so long ago.

Whistles blew and the gangway slowly swung away from the ship, returning to its place on the dock. A short time later the ship's horn sounded a loud and mournful tone as the vessel shuddered and slowly began to pull away from its berth. Joseph Curwen stood at the rail for a long time, watching New York gradually recede into the distance as the *Albert Ballin* bore him to his new home in distant Germany.

Chapter 6

Providence, Rhode Island - July 12, 1935

Doctor Marinus Willet sat up with a start, awakened by an insistent knocking at his door. It had been a long day, and he had dozed off in his favorite chair after a late dinner. *The curse of a doctor's life* he thought as he heaved himself to his feet and headed for the door. Another trio of insistent knocks echoed in the hallway as he reached for the knob and pulled open the door.

A tall, bearded man in travel-stained clothing stood on the stoop and dipped his head in greeting. "Good evening, Doctor," said the visitor. "May I come in?"

Willet's heart froze in his chest and he gasped involuntarily. "Y ... you!" he stuttered, staggering back from the open door.

"You need not be afraid," his visitor said, stepping across the threshold and pulling the door closed as Willet stumbled backward in fear. "I mean you no harm, and we are allies of a sort, you and I." He walked past Willet into the living room and sat down in a chair. "Please come and sit."

Willet stumbled back to his chair and collapsed, staring at the unexpected visitor. "I ... I ... where did you come from?"

The man smiled. "I have been ... traveling," he said. "I have lately come from my new home in Wales."

Willet slowly managed to master himself. "I ... I brought you back to life in the tunnels under Joseph Curwen's house," he said slowly. "You brought me out and somehow erased all traces of the tunnels."

"Yes, I did that," the magician said. "Did you find the note that I left in your pocket, and did you understand it?"

“Eventually,” Willet replied. “It took some time to find someone who could read the language.” He paused for a few moments, then added, “I did kill Curwen, you know.”

“I had hoped you would,” said his visitor. “How did you kill him?”

“I used the opposite incantation of the one I used when I accidentally brought you back to life. He disintegrated before my eyes.”

“What did you do with the dust that remained?” the visitor asked.

"What? Nothing! With Curwen dead and you gone, there seemed no point in doing anything."

"You did not destroy or scatter it?"

“Destroy the dust?” Willet repeated, confused. “No. I left the room while I could still retain my sanity. The staff later discovered that Curwen was gone, and searched for him for months. As the last person known to have seen him, I was questioned by the police, but said nothing. As far as they are concerned, he is still missing.”

“What happened to the dust?” the other man asked.

“What happened to the dust?” Willet repeated, confused. “I have no idea. I assume it was swept up and discarded.”

The magician sat back and sighed. “Were there any unusual occurrences at the hospital after Curwen’s disappearance?”

Willet thought for a moment, puzzled by the question. “I seem to recall that a hospital employee, a simple-minded man employed as a janitor, was found dead in a forest near the hospital a few years back,” he said. “It would have been a year or two after Curwen's disappearance. The authorities determined he had died of natural causes, most likely a heart attack.”

“A janitor,” the visitor mused, “and simple-minded.” He shook his head in mixed sorrow and anger, and looked closely at Willet. “The poor man did not die a natural death. And regardless of your belief that you killed Curwen, I fear he is not dead after all.”

“Of course he’s dead! I watched him crumble into dust!”

“I do not doubt it,” said the visitor. “But I am sure that, while he was confined at the hospital, Curwen somehow managed to suborn – most likely through hypnosis – the unfortunate janitor. He planted in the man’s simple mind instructions on what he should do in the event that he, Curwen, was gone and the room coated with dust.” The man paused. “I believe he instructed the poor man to carefully sweep up the dust and store it safely away, and then – after a certain period of time – to take the dust to a secluded location and recite the appropriate incantation to reunite spirit and body. Curwen returned, murdered his unfortunate rescuer, and then disappeared.”

Willet looked at his visitor in horror. “How could you possibly know this?”

The man gathered his thoughts for a moment before answering. “After you inadvertently raised me up and I realized that you were not an enemy, my first thought was somehow to kill Curwen and his helpers, but I realized that I was at a tremendous disadvantage. I was naked, alone, in a time, place, culture, and language not my own. I had powers upon which to draw, but I could not go forth and operate in an unknown place and a society I did not yet understand. I took a desperate chance; I brought you out and tried to tell you as best I could to kill Curwen and destroy his body. I then retreated into the catacombs to study and emerge as soon as my knowledge of this new world would allow.”

“When I felt confident enough to come forth, I learned of Curwen’s disappearance and assumed you had killed him. I then set out to track down his associates. From letters I found in his files, I knew that Simon Orne was living in Prague and Edward Hutchinson in a remote town in Romania. I made my way to Europe, and by September I reached Prague, where I found Orne, killed him, and burned his house to the ground. I then made my way to Romania, where Hutchinson was living in a remote castle in the Carpathian mountains, calling himself Baron Ferenczy ... I killed him as well, and completely destroyed the castle and his unholy works.”

Willet nodded. “I suspected you had done that. After you disappeared I engaged a press-cutting service to search for unusual occurrences in Eastern Europe, and they found reports of the mysterious destruction of an old house in Prague and a huge explosion in the mountains of Transylvania near the town of Rakus. I assumed that was your work.”

“It was,” the other replied. “But I did not yet suspect that Joseph Curwen was alive. I assumed he was dead, and with Orne and Hutchinson gone, I found myself adrift in a world in which I did not belong. Not being truly alive, I could not kill myself (although I must admit that I considered trying), and so I made my way to the remote mountains of Wales where I once lived. I have been living there since, engaged in study and reflection.”

“And what made you return here?”

“Through the spring and early summer of this year,” the visitor said, “I had become aware of strange perturbations in the energy that surrounds us, the energy whose manipulation is what you would interpret as ‘magic.’ Its nature was very much like that which I remembered from my own experiments and from the actions and experiments of Curwen, Orne, and Hutchinson. I knew for certain that Orne and Hutchinson were dead, and so I returned here to make certain of Curwen. Now I know that he lives.”

“Dear God,” Willet gasped. “But I killed him … I saw him crumble into dust … he was gone!”

“Gone, yes,” the other man replied sadly, “But not eliminated. Not destroyed. He lives again. And now we must find him.”

Willet went white. “We? Us? Find him? Curwen? I … I …”

Willet’s unexpected and unwanted visitor rose and looked sympathetically at the doctor, who was pale with fear. “I can do this alone, but it would be much easier if I had help,” he said. “You are a man of this time. You have known Joseph Curwen, and you have faced him before. You have seen his works and you understand what he represents. I need your aid.”

Willet swallowed loudly, then rose unsteadily to his feet. “I need to think,” he said in a thin, fearful voice. He turned his back on the other man, walked unsteadily across the room, and sat down at his desk. He opened a drawer, pulled out a revolver, stuck the barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot was loud in the quiet room, and the force of the bullet threw Willet and the chair backwards to tumble onto the floor. The magician, shocked, remained standing. *I underestimated the horror his encounter with Curwen carved into his mind,* he thought, *and now I must find Curwen alone. I could track down Orne and Hutchinson from their correspondence with Curwen, but now he is on his own, out in the world. Where do I begin?*

He walked to the desk, bent over, and confirmed that Dr Willet was dead. He stood up, squared his shoulders, and without another look at the man lying dead on the floor, turned and set out to find one man in a world of millions.

Chapter 7

Auschwitz, German-Occupied Poland - May 9, 1943 - January 3, 1944

SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr. Josef Mengele strode briskly across the open Appellplatz, headed for the hospital located in Block 10. The air was foul, as usual, and filled with the routine noises of the camp: screams, the snarling of dogs, the shouted commands of the guards, an occasional rifle shot.

Reaching the hospital block, Mengele entered and walked through the building to a heavy door in the rear marked with a large sign



An SS guard at the door snapped to attention and saluted before demanding Mengele's identification. Mengele handed over his card, which the guard studied carefully before using a telephone next to the door to announce his arrival. He listened for a moment, then replaced the receiver and pulled the heavy door open, saluting once again as Mengele swept past and into the room beyond.

A tall, thin man in a stained white lab coat, swirling the contents of a glass flask, turned and nodded a wordless greeting.

“A brief word, Herr Doktor?” Mengele asked.

Joseph Curwen placed the flask with its pale red contents gently on a cluttered laboratory table and turned to his visitor. “Good morning, Herr Doktor Mengele. What can I do for you?”

Mengele looked curiously around the room before answering. “I want to discuss your request for additional experimental subjects from the shipment due later today.”

“Is there a problem?”

“No,” Mengele replied as he picked up and toyed with a glass pipette. “But I am curious. Have you already used up those you selected from the previous shipment? As well as those you have culled from the camp population?”

Curwen shrugged. “My research is difficult and complex, and the death rate of the subjects is correspondingly high. Am I using too many subjects, or are you concerned that I am depriving you of the resources you require for your own work?”

Mengele waved a hand airily. “Not at all, Herr Doktor. Unless you need sets of twins, your requirements are quite different from my own. The other researchers may feel differently, but your requests do not affect me. As for the numbers, they are only Jews and criminals after all; they will die in this place one way or another.” He looked around the room and turned back to Curwen. “How does your work progress?”

“Slowly,” Curwen replied. “As you are aware, Herr Doktor, I am attempting to develop advanced medicines and treatments to improve the survival rates of severely injured persons. Obviously, it is necessary to inflict appropriate injuries on the test subjects in order to assess the efficacy of my developmental drugs and procedures. The death rate is quite substantial.”

“Yes, I imagine so,” Mengele said. “I am curious, though, about your selection criteria. One would think that you would be interested in young men of military age, who are most likely to incur injuries in battle. Yet your experimental subjects appear to include a wide age range of adults of both sexes.”

Curwen nodded. “That is true, as far as it goes. But my research does not only concern the treatment of injuries to military personnel. The enemy’s bombing campaign against the Fatherland has resulted in significant numbers of casualties among the civilian population as well. Treating their injuries is important to the maintenance of morale on the home front.”

“Of course,” Mengele replied, then added, “Do racial differences affect your subjects’ response to your experiments?”

“Oddly enough, Herr Doktor, they do not. The main factor affecting responses seems to be the overall health of the injured person, regardless of race. But as you can imagine, the depleted physical condition of the test subjects available to us here magnifies the effect of other injuries and makes it difficult to judge the efficacy of experimental treatments.”

Mengele shrugged. “That can’t be helped. The Reich cannot waste scarce resources on the human scum we deal with here.” He started to ask another question, then decided against it. “Very well, Herr Doktor Corwinus, the new shipment will arrive in a few hours. Will you join me for the selection?”

“Of course, Herr Doktor,” Curwen answered. “It will be an honor.”

Mengele walked out without further comment, and as the door clicked shut behind him Joseph Curwen picked up the flask and resumed swirling its contents, waiting for the hoped-for change in color. As he studied the flask, he considered the problem of Josef Mengele. He had to maintain a good working relationship with the SS doctor, whose support - or, at least, grudging acquiescence - was necessary for his access to facilities and equipment, chemical reagents, and – most importantly – experimental subjects from the trainloads of Jews and other condemned persons arriving regularly from across Nazi-occupied Europe. Unfortunately, though, Mengele was curious and annoyingly persistent, constantly probing for details of Curwen’s work despite the carefully-prepared orders that ensured secrecy and gave him a virtual free hand in most matters not dealing with the actual management of

the camp. Fortunately, the commander, SS Obersturmbahnführer Höss, was completely uninterested in Curwen's activities, and Mengele was both an incompetent physician and a fool, easily distracted and unlikely to understand the true focus and import of Curwen's experiments.

And those experiments were not advancing as well as Curwen had hoped. The loss of his laboratory in America with his library and extensive research notes, even with his access to the holdings at Arkham University, was severely hampering the recreation of his earlier successes, and the deaths of Orne and Hutchinson deprived him of the collaborators who could most have helped him. And on top of this, time was no longer on his side. After its stunning early victories in the East, Nazi Germany was now in a fight for its life, particularly on this eastern flank of its empire, where Stalin's forces had crushed the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad and were relentlessly pushing the Wehrmacht and its allies back toward the borders of the Reich. Although none of the Nazi leaders were openly worried yet, Curwen could see what was coming and had already begun to make plans for his departure before the red hordes arrived at the gates of Auschwitz.

From one moment to the next, the contents of the flask turned from a thin, pale red liquid to a dark, muddy brown sludge. Curwen looked at it in disgust and resisted the urge to fling it to the floor in anger. He knew he was close to the improved formula he'd developed from the writings of Borellus, but the precise ratios of ingredients and the details of their combination and preparation were proving maddeningly difficult to reconstruct. Not only that, but he had again run out of suitable prisoners on whom to experiment … hence, the need to placate that ignorant fool Mengele.

Curwen went to his desk, opened the thick ledger in which he detailed his experiments, and documented yet another failure. With any luck, some unlucky Untermensch from today's shipment of prisoners would finally yield the breakthrough he had so long sought.

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Steam billowed from the engine as the train pulled to a halt with an iron squeal of brakes and a cascading series of metallic clangs as the cars rocked against each other. When it had fully stopped alongside the concrete platform, the SS guards fanned out, took up their positions at the doors of each car, and waited for the signal to proceed.

Mengele and Curwen, flanked by their bodyguards and staffs, stood and waited until the guards were positioned. When all was ready, Mengele raised the riding crop he carried in his right hand, then slashed it down.

Along the length of the train, the guards removed padlocks, opened hasps, and slid open the heavy doors, jumping back immediately to avoid the stench that billowed from the tightly-packed cattle cars. Kapos rushed forward and reached up into the open doors, pulling people out of the cars and shoving them into rough lines, using their wooden cudgels to beat those who stumbled or failed to move quickly enough. As the lines formed, the SS guards used whips, clubs, and snarling dogs to force the disoriented crowd down the platform, toward where Mengele and Curwen stood waiting.

As each person reached the head of the line, Mengele gave a casual flick with his riding crop, directing them to the right or the left. Occasionally, Curwen would lean toward him and indicate interest in specific individuals; these were pulled out of line by Curwen's assistants and herded into a smaller group.

Before long the selection had been completed, with the children, the elderly, and the sick directed to the gas chambers for immediate disposal, and those strong enough to work herded toward the prison blocks for further processing. Of the few thousand people who had arrived on the train, Curwen had selected a dozen adult men and women, who were marched to the special, high-security barracks adjacent to his laboratory.

November 15, 1943

Joseph Curwen surveyed the row of six stainless steel tubs which had been meticulously prepared for his latest tests. Each tub was marked

with a number, and in each lay a body. Curwen checked the data on his clipboard a final time, reviewing once again the information on this latest set of experimental subjects:

Subject Number	Sex	Age	Cause of Death	Time Since Death
1	M	25	Multiple gunshot wounds	6 hours
2	F	37	Multiple organ failure following interrogation	24 hours
3	F	79	Cardiac arrest	72 hours
4	M	65	Asphyxiation (Xyklon B)	1 week
5	M	48	Suicide by electrocution	10 days
6	F	50	Suicide by hanging	7 months

In truth, most of this information was irrelevant. If his recreation and subsequent modification of the Borellus formula was correct, all that mattered was the amount and condition of the body that was available, and in each of these six cases, he had the entire cadaver. He was particularly interested in Number 6, who had been dead for a longer period and whose corpse, although having been carefully stored for the eventual test, was in a much more deteriorated condition than the others, but he decided to begin with the freshest body, which he judged most likely to respond properly to the process.

Curwen reeled out a hose and used it to cover the body in the first tub with distilled water from a large tank. This done, he replaced the hose and added to the water the clear liquid contents of one of six identical glass flasks that stood on a nearby table.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Then suddenly the clear water turned a pale, transparent red and the body within began rapidly to dissolve, the flesh melting away like butter under a hot sun. In a matter of minutes, the soft tissue had disappeared and only the skeleton remained; another few minutes and this too was gone, leaving only a thick layer of pink sludge in the bottom of the tub.

Curwen carefully documented the result in his journal, noting that the test had thus far proceeded much like hundreds of his previous efforts. He laid down the journal and carefully opened a stopcock in the bottom of the tub, allowing the discolored water to drain out through a series of increasingly fine mesh strainers that captured the dissolved remains of the body. When the tub was empty, he hosed it out with fresh distilled water, again filtering it through the strainer. Satisfied that he had collected all the remains, he removed the strainer assembly and carefully emptied its contents into a shallow tray, spreading the sludge into an even layer before sliding the tray into an empty slot in a gas-fired oven.

Curwen repeated the process with each of the five remaining corpses, and after a few hours he had six numbered trays of prepared remains in the oven. He closed and sealed the door, ignited the oven, set the temperature to 100 degrees Celsius, and turned on the fans that would gently circulate the interior air. Because it would take hours for the remains to dry out and be ready for the final step in their transformation into the essential salts described by Borellus, Curwen decided to invest some of the time in a useless, but politically necessary visit to Mengele. He would learn nothing, but it might head off an unexpected and inopportune visit to his laboratory from the boorish doctor by providing him just enough information to temporarily satisfy his curiosity.

With a last check to make sure the oven was working properly, Curwen locked away his notes, set the alarms, and went in search of the SS doctor.

Ten Hours Later

Each of the six bodies had now been reduced to about a kilo of fine, talcum-like powder, stored in a row of numbered porcelain jars. Curwen opened the jar labeled “#1” and used a tiny spoon to transfer a few grains of powder to a glass examination slide. He covered the grains with a protective sheet of thin glass and slipped the slide onto the table of a powerful microscope.

Curwen carefully studied the magnified sample and noted his observations in his journal. He was pleased to see that the individual grains in the sample were of a uniform texture and color; as he expected, each of the six sets of remains had yielded a powder of identical texture but different color - they reflected a range of pastel shades, and no two were exactly alike.

He sat down at his desk and slipped off the goggles that protected his eyes from the fumes and splatters that were a routine hazard of his experiments. He was cautiously optimistic, but reluctant to be overly excited, having been disappointed too many times before. Just a few more hours would tell whether or not he had finally succeeded.

48 Hours Later

Joseph Curwen perched on a stool, looking intently at the shallow bowl sitting in the center of a cleared space on the laboratory floor. The bowl contained the reddish-pink powder that was the culmination of his latest round of experiments – the essential salts prepared from the body of the young man who had been shot trying to escape a few days before.

This was the critical moment. Curwen was cautiously hopeful, but prepared for another disappointing result like so many others over the past few years. He closed his eyes, cleared his mind of all thoughts except the contents of the bowl, and began to chant the Incantation of Ascent ...

Y'ai 'Ng'Ngah,
Yog-Sothoth
H'ee—L'geb
F'ai Throdog
Uaaah!

When he recited the name of Yog-Sothoth, he felt a nearly electric power build in the room. The light dimmed and spirals of pungent smoke began to rise from the salts in the bowl, growing thicker as the incantation continued. As he shouted the final word there was a sudden burst of heat and a sound like the heaving of a great sigh. The smoke

quickly dissipated, revealing the body of a naked, dark-haired young man curled in a fetal position on the floor.

The young man looked up at Curwen with bulging, horror-stricken eyes and began to scream.

January 3, 1944

SS Obersturmbahnführer Arthur Liebehenschel was in a foul mood as he glared across his desk at Josef Corwinus. He was swamped with work as he tried to keep up with the elimination of the of the Jews and homosexuals and other criminals who arrived by the trainload every day, and he had just learned that in a few months, he would have to process several hundred thousand more Jews who were scheduled for deportation from Hungary to Auschwitz. He had overseen the construction and operation of several new processing facilities, including state-of-the-art gas chambers and high-capacity crematoria, but even so he was barely keeping pace with the ever-increasing numbers of human scum his superiors expected him to eliminate. He did not have time to waste on the SS doctor whose secretive experiments were a source of mystery and fear to the staff and prisoners alike.

“What is it, Corwinus?” he snapped irritably. “I am a very busy man.”

Joseph Curwen concealed his disdain and distaste as he had so many times during his years of work at the camp. He didn’t need to placate the camp commander any longer, but he also didn’t want to unnecessarily anger the man now that he was so close to his goal. “I apologize for the intrusion, Herr Obersturmbahnführer, but I thought you would like to know that I have completed my research here and will be returning to Berlin to report my results to the Reichsführer-SS, and possibly to the Führer himself. I know they will both be pleased with the superb cooperation I have received from you and from Dr Mengele.”

Liebehenschel’s eyes narrowed and he glared suspiciously at Curwen. “I don’t need anyone to tell the Führer how I’m doing my job,” he snapped. Then he calmed a bit. “I’m sorry, Corwinus,” he said. “As you know, we

are in the midst of a major expansion of our operations here and I do not have time to deal with distractions."

"Indeed you do not," Curwen agreed. "I'm glad that my research has come to a satisfactory conclusion and that I can remove at least one distraction from your work."

Liebehenschel grunted what might have been approval. "When do you leave?"

"Within the hour, Herr Obersturmbannführer," Curwen answered. "I have finished closing out my laboratory, and have transferred such equipment and supplies as they can use to Doktor Mengele and the other researchers. My staff is just finishing the loading of our truck for the journey."

"Very well, Corwinus. Carry on."

Curwen clicked his heels and raised his right arm in a sharp salute. "Heil Hitler!"

Liebehenschel, who had already returned to his paperwork, waved a hand toward the door.

Curwen turned smartly and left the commandant's office, headed for Block 10, his feet crunching on snow colored gray by the ash that fell constantly from the crematoria chimneys. A heavy Hanomag cargo truck was waiting, already loaded with his notes, cases of equipment and chemicals, and a few tightly-sealed porcelain jars carefully packed in straw-padded crates.

Curwen knew the war was going badly, and that the Red Army would overrun the Auschwitz complex, probably within a year. His contacts in the Endless Night Order had arranged for his safe passage to a remote installation in Austria where he could wait out the end of the war in relative safety before returning to America. For now, though, he needed simply to put as much distance as possible between himself and the coming threat.

He crossed the Appellplatz quickly but without undue haste to where his truck idled, its exhaust fumes rising to mingle with the ever-present foul stench of the crematoria and the prisoner barracks. The two SS soldiers assigned as his escort snapped to attention and saluted as he approached, then climbed into the back of the truck while Curwen took his place beside the driver. He waved toward the gate and ordered “Fahr los!”

The driver shifted into gear, and the heavy truck lurched forward and drove toward the barbed wire-laced gate, which swung open at their approach. With a throaty roar, the truck rolled through the gate and away from the camp, splashing through the mud and slush as it followed the road into the surrounding forest.

A few hours later, some 50 kilometers west of the Moravian city of Ostrava, Curwen ordered the driver to pull the truck off to the side of the road as it passed through a dense forest. “Let’s take a break,” he said. “I need to piss.”

The driver parked the vehicle and killed the engine, and the four men climbed down from the truck. The three SS soldiers clustered at the back of the truck and lit cigarettes while Curwen walked a short distance into the trees. Once out of the sight of the others, he drew his service pistol from its holster and checked carefully to make sure the magazine was full and the safety off. Holding it at his side, he walked back to the truck, where the three soldiers were smoking casually, their backs to him as he approached.

When he was within an arm’s length of the three men, Curwen swung the pistol up and fired three times, putting a single round into the back of each man’s head. All three fell instantly, and as the sound of the shots echoed away into the forest, Curwen rolled the bodies onto their backs and fired another round into each man’s chest.

Working quickly, Curwen stripped each body of weapons, which he threw into the back of the truck, and cash and identification papers, which he pocketed. He then dragged the bodies into the forest, out of view of the road, covered them with leaves and loose sticks, and did the

best he could to obscure the traces of his work, covering the bloodstains with mud and leaves.

Satisfied that no obvious signs remained of what had happened, Curwen climbed up into the cab of the truck and started the engine. He took a few minutes to review the map and note the new route that would take him not northwest toward Berlin, but southwest toward Vienna and the Austrian Alps. The Order had been unable to provide its own personnel to escort him away from Auschwitz, making it necessary for him to kill the three soldiers who had traveled with him. When he reached Brno, he would stop briefly and pick up a new escort from the Endless Night Order's local lodge, then continue on to the location in Austria, already selected and prepared, where he would wait out the end of the war and his return to America.

Putting the truck into gear, Joseph Curwen pulled back onto the road and headed off in the direction of his future.

Chapter 8

Alexandria, Virginia - June 4, 2018

“We have a visitor, Dave.”

Dave Grant looked up to see Kelly Reynolds, his partner, framed in his office door.

“I thought we didn’t have any appointments this morning,” he said, glancing at his desk calendar.

“We don’t.” Kelly crossed to the desk and handed him a business card. “He’s a walk-in.”

Grant studied the card, which simply bore the ornately engraved name “Merle Arthur” on fine cream-colored stock. No address, phone number, e-mail address, or website. The reverse was blank. “Any impressions?” he asked.

“Looks professional, maybe a banker or lawyer. Late sixties, early seventies maybe. Not bad looking for his age, but seems to have some sort of skin problem. Nice suit. Expensive briefcase.”

Grant closed the file he’d been reading and laid it aside. He opened his working notebook and laid the card at the top of a new blank page. “Well, we can always use the business. Let’s see what the man wants.”

Kelly went back and pushed open the door to the outer office. “Please come in, Mr. Arthur.”

A moment later, a tall, thin man walked in. He wore a well-tailored gray suit with an off-white shirt and dark blue tie. Fashionably long gray hair and a neatly-trimmed gray beard framed a narrow, lined face from which bright blue eyes peered beneath shaggy brows.

“Good Morning, Mr. Arthur.” Grant rose to shake the visitor’s hand. The man’s grip was firm, but his hand seemed unusually cold and dry

despite the warmth of the day. He gave a slight bow as he shook hands first with Dave, then with Kelly. Grant gestured the visitor to a chair, and when all three had taken their seats, he asked, “What can we do for you?”

The visitor crossed one knee over the other and leaned back in his seat. “I am looking for assistance in locating a missing person,” he replied. “I understand this is a service you provide.”

Grant nodded. “We do,” he replied. “Mostly we track down bail jumpers and deadbeat parents. We don’t usually take other missing person cases.”

“And why is that?”

“Most missing persons don’t stay missing for long.” Grant answered. “They get homesick and hungry, they run out of money, they get tired of running, they miss their old lives, and they come back on their own. Anyone missing for more than a month is probably either dead or really doesn’t want to be found, and not many people want to pay what it costs for a long search.”

“I understand,” Arthur replied. “And that is why I wish to engage a firm such as yours. The individual I seek does not wish to be found, and I am prepared to pay handsomely for your assistance in locating him.”

Grant tapped the tip of his pen idly on the open notebook page. “Who is this person, and why are you looking for him?”

“His name is Joseph Curwen, and for the moment let us stipulate that my reasons for wanting him found are my own.” “With all respect, Mr. Arthur,” Kelly spoke up, “That’s not how it works. We need to know why you want him found. I’m sure you can understand that we could be in some difficulty if we find him for you and he ends up dead a few days later. So, like Dave asked - why are you looking for Mr. Curwen?”

The older man shifted in his chair, looking between Grant and Reynolds. “Very well. Without going too deeply into a very long and complicated story, suffice it to say that Mr. Curwen is guilty of multiple murders

going back many years, many as yet undiscovered, as well as many other crimes."

Grant leaned forward. "In that case, Mr. Arthur, you don't need a private investigator, you need the police."

Arthur nodded. "I would usually agree with you, Mr. Grant. However, there are certain aspects of Mr. Curwen's case that make it difficult for me to involve the authorities."

"Humor us, Mr. Arthur," Kelly chimed in. "No legitimate investigator will take a case like that without more than vague accusations. Why can't you go to the police with the story of a man you accuse of multiple murders?"

The visitor sat quietly for a few moments, deep in thought. "Very well," he replied, "If you insist, I will tell you what I know of the story of Joseph Curwen up to this point. It is a tale you will find interesting, but difficult to believe."

Dave nodded, looking sideways to Kelly, who shrugged noncommittally. "Go ahead. We'll decide how much of it to believe."

Mr. Arthur opened his briefcase and extracted a thick folder, from which he took a glossy black-and-white photograph in a plastic sheet protector. He glanced at it briefly, then handed it across the desk. Grant studied the picture, a touched-up version of a much older photograph which showed a serious-looking young man in an old-fashioned dark suit. Light hair tapered to a prominent widow's peak above intense, deep-set eyes. He handed the photo across to Kelly.

"This is Charles Dexter Ward," Arthur began. "He disappeared from his room at a private hospital for the insane in Providence, Rhode Island, on April 13th, 1928, nearly one hundred years ago."

Kelly looked up from the photo. "You say he disappeared in 1928, and in this picture, he looks to be in his early twenties. By now he's surely dead."

Arthur nodded. “Mr. Ward is quite dead. He was murdered approximately six months before he was supposedly committed to the asylum.”

“You’re right,” Grant said. “I don’t believe it, and I don’t like having our time wasted.” He motioned Kelly to give the photo back to their visitor.

“Please bear with me,” Arthur replied, waving back Kelly’s return of the photo. “There is more to the story, and I believe I can convince you that it is not a waste of your time.”

Grant shook his head dismissively. “You’ll need to do a lot of convincing after an introduction like that.”

Arthur leaned back in his chair and continued.

“I told you that you would find the story difficult to believe,” he said. “You must first understand that Charles Ward, the young man in the photograph, was a direct descendent of the man I am seeking. Ward was Joseph Curwen’s great, great, great grandson, and was – according to contemporaneous accounts – all but identical in appearance to Curwen himself.”

Kelly did some mental arithmetic and noted sarcastically, “You want us to find a man who would be over *three hundred years old* if he were alive?”

“Oh, he’s alive,” Arthur said matter-of-factly. “He murdered Charles Ward sometime in February of 1928 and assumed his identity – an act which was not difficult in an age without the administrative and security resources of our present day. As I said before, the two men were virtually indistinguishable from one another, save that Curwen had a large blemish on his chest, which would not have been visible to casual observers, and a small pit or scar above his right eye.”

“And you know he is alive how?” Kelly pressed.

“Ah, Ms Reynolds, this is where the story becomes interesting, and will require you to reconsider your understanding of the world around you.”

Kelly and Dave looked at each other, and Kelly's eyebrows rose in skeptical curiosity. "Well, Mr Arthur," she said, "You may as well go on … but the needle on my bullshit detector isn't moving in your favor."

"Fair enough," their visitor replied with a smile. He laid the portfolio on Dave's desk. "This file contains as much proof of what I am about to tell you as I have been able to assemble. If you choose to accept my commission, you can keep it and read it at your leisure; these are copies; the originals are stored elsewhere. You will believe it or you will not. If you do not, I will leave and seek someone else with whom to work. If you do, you will learn many interesting and … may I say … *disturbing* things." He paused for a moment, then said, "The story of Joseph Curwen involves the intersection of biochemistry and what you would call *magic*."

Silence fell in the room with an almost audible thud. "Magic," Dave repeated flatly.

"Yes, magic," Arthur went on. "Magic exists, Mr. Grant. Not in the sense of sideshow conjuring or sleight-of-hand, not in the sense of pulling rabbits from hats or sawing ladies in half in carnival sideshows. No, Mr. Grant, magic exists in the ability of appropriately gifted individuals to manipulate the unseen energy that surrounds us." He paused for a moment. "Are you familiar with the concept of *dark energy*?"

"I am," Kelly said. "Together with so-called 'dark matter,' it's a theoretical property of the universe that we can't directly observe. It supposedly balances gravity and causes the universe to expand."

"A simplistic description, but essentially correct," Arthur said. "There is, in fact, a form of energy that permeates what we perceive as the empty space around us … scientists do not fully understand it, and call it 'dark energy' for want of any better name." He paused and smiled. "You might even think of it as something akin to '*The Force*' of the popular *Star Wars* films. Magic … *true* magic … is nothing more or less than the ability to manipulate and focus this energy to achieve specific results in the physical world. Only a tiny number of persons is born with the ability to sense that this energy exists around them … of those, only a

tiny fraction can manipulate it, and only a tiny number of *those* ever develop enough skill to usefully employ it."

"How is it that you know this?" Kelly asked.

"Because I have that ability."

"You're a magician?"

"Not as you understand the word *magician*, but yes."

"Bullshit," Grant said flatly.

The visitor looked at him calmly. "I am not talking about cheap parlor tricks, Mr. Grant. I can demonstrate the power at my disposal, but I doubt you can believe, even when you see."

"Try me."

Arthur sighed. He closed his eyes and his lips moved as he softly murmured a few indistinguishable words. A ball of light the size of a soccer ball suddenly appeared, floating in the air in front of his face; it seemed to shimmer, and seen through it, his face seemed to waver and twist. The ball slowly drifted across the desk and settled over Dave's coffee mug, where it sat for a moment before winking out. The mug vanished along with the ball of light.

"Satisfied?" Arthur asked.

"Okay, nice trick," Grant replied, waving his hand through the space where the mug had been. "Where did it go?"

"Somewhere else," said Arthur simply. "Would you like to have it back?"

"I wasn't finished with the coffee yet."

"Very well." Arthur waved a hand casually in the direction of the desk and the mug winked back into its original place ... this time filled not with coffee, but with what appeared to be shiny new dimes. The old man looked at Grant and shrugged dismissively. "Parlor tricks - the crudest and most useless form of magic," he said casually. "You can keep the

coins regardless of whether you accept the case ... you will find that they amount to twenty-five dollars and seventy cents."

Grant picked up the mug and dumped the contents onto the desktop, where he stirred the glittering pile with a finger. "Okay, I'll bite – how did you do it?" he demanded.

Arthur shrugged. "I cannot explain it in terms meaningful to a skeptical man of the twenty-first century," he replied. "I could tell you about the manipulation of unseen natural forces by a trained and disciplined mind, about the use of incantations to focus the mind on a desired outcome, or about the uses of a wand or staff as an antenna to channel and direct energy, but it would mean nothing to you because you do not believe."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it for the time being," Dave said. He looked across at Kelly, who shrugged noncommittally, and then turned back to their visitor. "Go on."

Arthur leaned back in the chair and looked from Dave to Kelly. "The story I'm about to tell you is based partly on a meager documentary record and partly on my own experience, travels, and research. As I said before, you will either believe it or you will not. If you do not, I will find someone else if I can, and pray that it not too late."

He folded his hands on the desk, closed his eyes, and continued his story.

Chapter 9

Alexandria, Virginia - June 4, 2018

“Joseph Curwen – I assume that is his true name, although I have never found a birth record to verify it – was born in Salem, Massachusetts, in February of 1662. He left that city in 1692 at the beginning of the so-called Salem Witchcraft Trials and resettled in the more liberal town of Providence, Rhode Island. His departure from Salem resulted from the attention aroused by his curious chemical experiments and solitary nature. You can imagine the suspicion these might arouse at a time when belief in witchcraft was common.

“In Providence, he made his fortune in the shipping business, a success that often appeared to be facilitated by his possession of information about events long past and persons long dead. This led to considerable attention being paid to his unusual habits and interests, such as frequent visits to cemeteries and the conduct of odd chemical experiments. In addition to this, his tendency to age very slowly – if at all – began gradually to attract attention, and led to his being as much ostracized as a man of his wealth and business standing could be. He eventually sought to minimize this attention by purchasing an isolated farm well outside the town limits and moving his more suspicious activities there.

“In early 1763, by which time he was about a hundred years old but looked like a man not out of his thirties, he tried to salvage his reputation and allay local suspicions by marrying the daughter of a local ship captain and taking a more active role in the community. However, his selected bride had earlier been engaged to a local man who was infuriated when her father broke off the engagement, and that man became Curwen’s bitter enemy.

“The young man, whose name was Ezra Weeden, became what you would today call a stalker, relentlessly following and spying upon the man who had stolen his intended bride. In time, the vengeful Mister

Weeden compiled enough damning information to convince the local leaders that Curwen posed a grave, if unspecified threat to the community that had to be dealt with. In April of 1771 a group of armed citizens attacked Curwen's farm. Exactly what happened during that assault remains a mystery, as every contemporaneous account was destroyed and very little oral history remained. What is known is that Curwen was killed and several local men died in strange and allegedly terrible circumstances. Curwen's body was buried in a secret location, without ceremony and in a lead coffin, and the farmhouse and its outbuildings were burned and all traces of their existence removed.

"The story now ends until the early 1920's, when a young man named Charles Dexter Ward - the man whose picture you just saw - was researching his family's history. In his studies, he found a fragmentary reference to a long-dead ancestor – none other than Joseph Curwen – whose very existence seemed to have been systematically erased from all public records. In his pursuit of information about this mysterious ancestor, Charles Ward gradually changed from a curious young man with an interest in his family's history to a driven young man obsessed with learning everything he could about the life and death of the mysterious Joseph Curwen. After months of searching in public and private records, Ward identified Curwen's original house, still standing in old Providence, where he found a cache of documents and records apparently hidden by Curwen before his death.

"Ward's study of those documents, which he kept carefully hidden from his family and friends, drove him deeper into his Curwen obsession. He set up a laboratory in the attic of his parents' home, where he conducted odd chemical experiments while chanting mysterious incantations, and – above all else – he searched incessantly for Joseph Curwen's unmarked grave."

The visitor paused for a moment and looked across to Grant who, with a sideways glance at Kelly Reynolds, motioned him to continue.

"In April of 1923," Arthur went on, "Charles Ward came of age and inherited some money from his grandfather. He interrupted his

research into Curwen and went to Europe, where he lived and traveled extensively for the next three years. The record shows that he spent time in London, Paris, Prague, and an estate in the remote mountains of Transylvania, and did not return home until May of 1926. Once home, he resumed his research into the life and death of Joseph Curwen and his search for the Curwen grave.

“In April of 1927, several things seem to have happened. First, I believe that Charles Ward finally located the grave of Joseph Curwen and recovered the sealed coffin containing his remains. Second, the secretive experiments Ward had conducted based on the documents he recovered from the Curwen house appeared to have achieved their desired results, if we are to believe contemporaneous reports of changes in his behavior. Not long afterwards, Ward purchased an old farmhouse in Pawtuxet, Rhode Island, to which he moved the entire contents of his laboratory and where he lived with two servants and a companion he introduced to others only as ‘Doctor Allen’ – a man people tended to remember because his full beard was so obviously artificial.”

Arthur looked from Kelly to Grant for a moment before continuing. “I am quite certain that ‘Dr Allen’ was, in fact, Joseph Curwen, recalled to life by Charles Ward as the culmination of plans Curwen set in motion before his death in 1771.

“From this time,” Arthur continued, “Charles Ward appeared to spiral slowly downward into madness, taking on the behavior and speech patterns of a man of the eighteenth century. His parents were beside themselves with worry, and the Wards’ long-time family doctor, a man named Marinus Willett, eventually arranged for him to be institutionalized for his own good at a private hospital for the insane in Providence.”

Kelly suddenly stopped taking notes and looked up sharply at Arthur, then across to Grant. She resumed writing with a puzzled look on her face.

Arthur continued. “Dr Willett began gradually to suspect that Charles Ward had been murdered by the man known as Doctor Allen … who

then, aided by an uncanny resemblance to Ward once his false beard had been removed, masqueraded as the young man. Searching the Pawtuxet farmhouse where Ward had lived and from which he had been taken into custody, Dr Willett discovered a hidden entrance to a very large network of underground tunnels and rooms where he learned the awful truth about the experiments Ward and Allen had conducted – that they had learned to prepare the remains of the dead in such a way that they could be recalled to life and reunited with their disembodied spirits. It was the union of biochemistry and electromagnetic energy – what you would call magic – that I spoke of before.

"While Dr Willett was exploring the catacombs, he found the rooms in which Allen and Ward had stored the prepared remains of their victims – the "essential salts" described by medieval alchemists. Most of these were stored in jars on shelves around the room, but one jar stood open on the floor, with its contents in a pile next to it. It had apparently been left open and unattended on the day Ward was taken away. While investigating this room, Dr Willett noted a pair of inscriptions painted on the wall, and began reciting one of them to himself. Although he didn't realize it, the words he was reciting were the incantation which invoked the magic that reunited remains and spirit; as a result, he brought back to life a man from the dark past of the British Isles, a man many people believed existed only in legend. The man he brought back is remembered today as Merlin, the magician of the legend of King Arthur."

Dave and Kelly looked at each other in astonishment, and Dave burst into laughter. "That's a great story, Mr. Arthur. I'd throw you out right now, but I'm anxious to see how much farther you can spin this fairy tale."

Kelly looked at the visitor and asked pointedly, "And how is it that you know who this person was?"

Arthur looked her directly in the eye and said, "Because I am he."

"You're *Merlin? King Arthur's magician?*" Dave said incredulously. "You expect us to believe that?"

Arthur shrugged. “You will believe what you will. I can offer only so much proof. You have already seen the very smallest example of what I can do; I can do more spectacular things, but doing so would not be wise, for reasons that will become clear to you as we proceed. The only other thing I can offer as a form of proof is my own body.” He turned to Kelly. “When you told Mr. Grant I was in the office, I believe you described me as having ‘some sort of skin problem,’ did you not?”

Kelly reddened slightly. “I wasn’t aware that I was overheard, but yes.”

“The body that has been recreated from chemically prepared remains and animated by magic is not a fully functioning, living body like yours, Ms. Reynolds,” Arthur said. “What you perceived as a ‘skin problem’ is the nature of the reconstructed flesh.” He turned to Grant and asked, “When you shook my hand, what did you feel?”

Dave thought a moment. “Your hand was cold and dry. Your skin is very rough.”

“Indeed,” Arthur said, then turned back to Kelly. “Do you have a first aid kit with a fever thermometer, by any chance?” When she nodded, he asked, “Would you bring it, please?”

Kelly went to the outer office and returned a few moments later with a plastic box. She opened it and rummaged for a moment before pulling out an infrared thermometer, which she turned on and held close to the visitor’s forehead. The three sat in silence until the thermometer beeped.

Kelly squinted at the reading, then looked in astonishment from Arthur to Grant. “*Eighty-five degrees?*”

Arthur nodded. “I believe that the normal threshold for a diagnosis of hypothermia is a body temperature of *ninety*-five degrees.” He stood up and removed his suit jacket, hanging it carefully on the back of the chair. Sitting down again, he rolled up his left sleeve and extended his arm toward Kelly. “Why not check my pulse as well?” he asked.

With a sideways look at Dave, Kelly took the man's wrist in her fingers. She held his wrist for a moment, then repositioned her grip. After a few seconds, she changed her grip again. A few seconds later, she released Arthur's hand and looked at him in puzzlement before turning to Grant. "He has no pulse," she said softly.

"I do, actually," Arthur said. "But it is quite weak and all but undetectable. I am not quite alive, nor am I quite dead. Through complex experiments that cost the lives of countless innocents, Curwen and his allies learned to reduce mortal remains to what the medieval alchemist Borellus called their 'essential salts,' and to manipulate the energy that surrounds us to unite those salts with the disembodied spirits of the dead, returning persons long dead to a form of life."

"What do you mean, 'a form of life?'" asked Grant. "You seem pretty lively to me ... all things considered."

Arthur smiled sadly. "I would not exactly call it 'life,' Mr. Grant. As you see, I have a body temperature inconsistent with human survival. I do not need to eat or drink, although I can do both; when cut I feel pain, but do not bleed; my rates of circulation and respiration are unusually slow; and my flesh is not warm and supple like yours, but a loose and grainy bag sufficient to contain my consciousness. I retain all the memories and experiences of my long and ... *colorful* life. And before you ask," he added with a wry smile, "I am able to enjoy the pleasures of sex, but ... for obvious reasons ... I seldom have the opportunity.

"Worst of all, however, I cannot die ... at least as you understand death. I have considered killing myself many times over the years, but always turned away. Many dream of immortality, but few consider how tiring it can be." Arthur paused a moment, then went on. "But I fear that I can only die – really die, body and spirit – if someone can reverse the incantation Curwen used to bring me back so many years ago."

"You said you read Curwen's journals and saw the incantations inscribed on the wall of his laboratory," Kelly said. "Why don't you just repeat them?"

“I tried that early on,” Arthur answered sadly. “But it seems that the incantation must be delivered by another. After all, Curwen repeatedly used them himself to call up and put down shades, and he survived.”

“Why not teach someone else to recite the incantations?” Kelly suggested. “After all, you say that Dr Willett was able to use them to raise you and kill Curwen, and I doubt he was a … magician.”

“I have wondered about this myself,” Arthur admitted. “I don’t understand how or why he was able to successfully use the incantations. Perhaps they can be successfully employed by others once the original magic has been invoked - in a letter to Curwen in 1928, Edward Hutchinson suggested that other persons might be able to successfully use the incantations ‘*if just the right words were had*.’ Perhaps he was unknowingly possessed of limited magical capabilities himself.” He spread his hands in a gesture of confusion. “I simply don’t know. What I do know is that I cannot ignore the terrible menace of Joseph Curwen. I need to find him, and I need to destroy him once and for all. But I cannot do it alone.”

He looked from Dave to Kelly, then continued his story.

Chapter 10

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"Curwen was confident that his true identity was unsuspected," Arthur continued, "but he nevertheless prepared an emergency plan for his own protection. I suspect, although I cannot prove, that he escaped from his confinement by suborning a mentally deficient custodian at the asylum. Probably through hypnosis, he planted instructions in the man's mind as to what he should do under certain circumstances. When Dr Willett cornered Curwen and used the incantation he had discovered to return him to his disembodied state, he believed that Curwen had indeed been destroyed, but it was not so. The custodian sent to clean up the mess found in Charles Ward's room carefully swept up the pile of what he thought was dust, but which was in fact the "essential salts" to which Curwen's body had been reduced, and hid it away for two years. After that time, the rest of Curwen's implanted directions came to the fore of the janitor's simple mind … he took the dust he had saved to an isolated location and recited the incantation which reunited Curwen's vital energy with the essential salts and returned him to life once again. He murdered the janitor, disguising the crime as a natural death, and escaped into the world once again."

"From this point, much of my reconstruction of the story is based on a combination of my own experience and research, limited, fragmentary information gleaned from official and unofficial records, newspaper accounts, interviews, and educated conjecture," Arthur continued. "Nevertheless, I believe it is as accurate an history as we are likely ever to find.

Arthur sighed. "Everyone with first-hand knowledge of these events – except for me, of course – is long dead. Luther Green, the hospital custodian, was murdered. Charles Ward's mother died in early 1929, his father later that same year, and Dr Willett committed suicide in 1935. The hospital from which Curwen escaped closed in 1940, was reopened as a convalescent home for wounded soldiers in 1942, then closed

permanently in 1952. The buildings were razed in 1957, and the site is now occupied by a commercial office complex. Needless to say, none of the records of the hospital or its patients still exist."

"So, let us go on."

"After his second reincarnation, Joseph Curwen made his way from Providence to Arkham University in Massachusetts, where he sought aid from the Order of the Endless Night, a secretive fraternal organization to which he had belonged prior to his death in 1771. The Order helped him bring his knowledge of current news and events up to date, polish his speech and behavior for a new age, and assemble the means for his further escape. After much searching, I located a steamship manifest from October of 1932 that shows a passenger named Josef Corwinus traveling from New York to Hamburg, Germany. I suspect that the Order had foreseen the rise of Nazism in Germany and saw in the coming creation of its network of sadistic concentration camps an opportunity for Curwen to access large numbers of victims on whom he could safely renew his experiments and reconstruct his lost knowledge. Of course, none of the members of the staff who helped him at Arkham University are still alive."

Arthur opened the portfolio, sifted through the contents, and extracted a document of a few pages. "I was unable, despite my best efforts, to trace Curwen after his departure from New York and arrival in Germany. All traces of him vanished, thoroughly removed or concealed by those members of the Endless Night Order who were aiding and protecting him. It was not until 1949, when I was reviewing the records of war crimes trials, that I found this transcript of the interrogation of an SS doctor named Alfred Trzebinski, who had conducted inhuman medical experiments on prisoners at several concentration camps." He flipped a few pages and began to read,

*"**Interrogator:** 'Where were you stationed?'*

*"**Trzebinski:** 'I was a Lagerarzt [translator's note: 'camp doctor'] at Auschwitz from July to October 1941, and at Majdanek from October 1941 to September 1943. I was transferred to Neuengamme in*

September 1943 and remained there until the camp was evacuated in July of 1944.'

*"**Interrogator:** 'What other persons did you work with at Auschwitz?'*

*"**Trezebinski:** 'Carl Klauberg, who conducted gynecological research on female prisoners. Helmuth Vetter, Friedrich Entress, and Eduard Wirths, who experimented with vaccines. Josef Mengele, who conducted genetic research on twins. And Josef Corwinus. He kept to himself and didn't share any details of his work."*

*"**Interrogator:** 'What else do you know about this Corwinus?"*

*"**Trezebinski:** "Not much. Everything he did was very secret, and was conducted in a separate, high-security hospital block. I know that he used large numbers of prisoners in his experiments, but none of us knew what he was working on. He was closer to Mengele than to any of the rest of us, so perhaps Mengele knew what he was doing, but if so, he never discussed it with anyone else.'"*

Arthur laid the document on the table and extracted an envelope from his portfolio, opened it, and removed a pair of black-and-white photographs in plastic sheet protectors, one of which he laid on the desk.

"Do you recognize this picture, Mr. Grant?"

Grant studied the photo, somewhat blurred by enlargement, which showed a line of railroad cars, their doors open, at a siding crowded with people. The crowd was hemmed in by uniformed men holding leashed dogs, and was apparently being herded toward the near end of the frame, where two uniformed men stood side by side. "It looks like a trainload of prisoners arriving at a concentration camp during the Holocaust," Dave said.

"Quite so," Arthur replied. He laid the second photo on the desk next to the first. This one, taken from a different angle, clearly showed the two men in SS officer uniforms standing on the platform, gesturing at the crowd. "Both of these pictures were taken at the Auschwitz death camp

in Poland on May 9th, 1943. The man on the right is Doctor Joseph Mengele, the so-called 'Angel of Death' who was infamous for the sadistic medical experiments he conducted on camp inmates. I believe the man on the left is Joseph Curwen."

Grant and Reynolds studied the photo carefully, and compared it to the photograph of Charles Dexter Ward. "It certainly does look like him" Reynolds agreed.

"I am quite sure it is," Arthur said. "I believe – again, on the basis of limited yet compelling evidence, of which the interrogation of Dr Trzebinski and these photos are significant pieces – that Joseph Curwen, under the alias of Josef Corwinus and with the assistance of members of the Endless Night Order in Germany, became an officer in the Nazi German SS and used the power and authority of that role to establish a facility at Auschwitz in which he could conduct his experiments alongside and under the cover of those conducted by Mengele and others.

"I have found no other evidence of Curwen's life in Germany after his arrival in Hamburg, or his activities in the Nazi camp system," Arthur went on. "I suspect he was quite careful about maintaining a low profile and disguising the true nature of his activities, knowing as he did that I was alive and searching for him. The Auschwitz camp was liberated by the Russian army in early 1945, but Curwen had departed a year earlier and disappeared." He paused for a moment. "These photographs", he tapped them for emphasis, "and the reference to the mysterious "Dr Corwinus" in the Trzebinski interrogation report are the only direct evidence of Curwen's presence there; nevertheless, I am certain he used the umbrella crimes of the Nazi 'medical experiments' to conceal his own activities.

"After his departure from Auschwitz, there is no trace of Curwen until late January of 1946, when a man claiming to be a death camp survivor registered at a camp for displaced persons at Wels, Austria, using the name of Joszef Kerwanec. The name appearing on no watch lists of wanted war criminals, he was processed through the system and

released on March 9th, 1949, whereupon he disappeared into the millions of refugees on the move in postwar Europe." Arthur reached again into his portfolio and extracted several sheets of paper, which he handed across to Grant and Reynolds. "These are copies of documents I located in an Austrian government archive."

The faded forms documented the particulars of one Joszef Kerwanec, a citizen of Poland, liberated from the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and included a faded, passport-sized photograph of a man who was unmistakably Joseph Curwen.

"After that day, March ninth, nineteen forty-nine," Arthur went on, "All traces of Joseph Curwen and his Corwinus and Kerwanec aliases vanished. I spent years searching government and private archives in the United States and Europe, travel and immigration records, birth and death notices, and news stories of unusual events that might indicate where he had gone. I noted with some interest that, despite the mention of his presence and experiments at Auschwitz during the interrogation of Dr Trzebinski, there seems to have been no effort to pursue him as a war criminal - I expect that the Endless Night Order has been instrumental in hiding and protecting him over the years. I extended my powers as far as I could to sense anything that might indicate his attempts to employ magic. More than seventy years went by, and I heard and felt nothing. I had dared to hope that he might, in fact, finally be dead. Until a few days ago."

"What happened a few days ago?" Reynolds asked, looking up from her notes.

"I felt a tremor in the energy field," Arthur said, "consistent with the employment of powerful magic."

"And could you tell where these ... tremors ... were coming from?" Dave asked.

"Not precisely," Arthur replied. "I am certain that the source was within the boundaries of the United States, probably west of the Mississippi, but I cannot locate it more accurately than that." In response to a

suspicious look from Dave, he added, “And if *I* cannot do so, no one can. And that is why I need the help of someone like you.”

He stood up and looked from Grant to Reynolds as he put his suit jacket. “And that is the tale of Joseph Curwen to this point. I realize it is a bizarre story, and difficult to accept at face value. I do not ask you to commit yourselves at once, although I believe that time is pressing. I can wait a day or two for your answer … after that, I must seek someone else.” He indicated the folder on Grant’s desk. “You may keep these documents to study unless you decide not to take my case. In that case, I will take them back and seek another potential ally.

“I will be in touch,” said Arthur as he turned to go. “Please remain seated, I can show myself out.”

Kelly quietly said, “Just a moment, Mr. Arthur.”

Arthur stopped and turned to face her. “Another question, Ms. Reynolds?”

Kelly looked at him curiously. “Why did you come to us, Mr. Arthur?” she asked. “There are lots of larger and better known investigative firms.”

“I believe you already know the answer, Ms Reynolds.”

Dave looked at Kelly with a quizzical expression on his face. She nodded and said quietly, “Because Dr. Marinus Willet was my great-grandfather.”

“Indeed,” Arthur replied. “In my research into lives and deaths of Charles Ward and Joseph Curwen, I also looked at the man who had learned Curwen’s secret. The man who brought me back to life, if accidentally, and who thought he had put an end to Joseph Curwen.”

Dave looked at Kelly in astonishment. “Willet was your great-grandfather?” he asked.

“On my mother’s side,” she replied. “Willet’s son Frederick was my grandfather, and Frederick’s daughter Myra married my father, Jim

Reynolds. The mystery of my great-grandfather's suicide is a part of our family history."

"Why was it a mystery?" Dave asked.

"He was a successful, respected doctor with no known problems who suddenly killed himself," she replied. "He led a quiet life looking after his medical practice. He was active in the community both before and after the death of his wife – my great-grandmother – and was known for his generosity and public service. He had no known enemies. And yet he was found one morning at his desk with a bullet in his brain, in a locked house from which nothing appeared to be missing. *And* his will contained a bizarre set of instructions for the disposition of his remains. The police ruled his death a suicide for want of a better explanation." Kelly looked back at Arthur. "But I suspect you know more about that."

Arthur sat back down. "Your great-grandfather accidentally brought me back in April of 1928, and I lived in Curwen's catacombs for more than a year, assembling the knowledge I needed to survive in a strange new world. From studying Curwen's records, I learned the whereabouts of Simon Orne and Edward Hutchinson and the outlines of the terrible work they were pursuing. I decided that, with Curwen dead, I should remove the threat of his partners. By August of 1929 I felt able to reenter the world, and made my way to Europe, where I tracked down and killed Simon Orne in Prague and Edward Hutchinson in Romania ... your great-grandfather assumed I had done so from reviewing press cuttings reporting on unusual events in Eastern Europe which he had ordered. He knew, after all, that I was alive, and he suspected that I would attempt to kill the two men.

"After Orne and Hutchinson were dead, I returned to the British Isles and settled in a remote village in Wales near where I had lived hundreds of years ago. In July of 1932, because of odd tremors in the energy field and news reports of odd disappearances and desecration of old graves, I began to suspect that Curwen might somehow still be alive, I and traveled back to Providence to investigate. Your great-grandfather was, of course, shocked to see me on his doorstep, and horrified when I

explained how I believed Curwen had managed to return. I asked for his help in finding Curwen and killing him once and for all."

He paused for a moment. "I did not appreciate the depth of his horror at the memory of facing Curwen. He went to his desk, drew a pistol from a drawer, and shot himself before I could stop him. I confirmed he was dead, and left to begin the search for Curwen on my own. The rest you know."

"You referenced the bizarre instructions your great grandfather left for the disposition of his remains," Arthur added. "He specified that upon his death, his body should neither be buried nor cremated, but dissolved in acid, and whatever remained poured into the ocean. Certainly an unusual request, but understandable in light of what he knew of the obscene work of Joseph Curwen and his fears of revenge that might reach beyond the grave."

"That still doesn't answer my question, Mr. Arthur," Kelly said. "Dr. Willet may have been my great-grandfather, but I don't see how that connection necessarily leads to me and to our firm."

"But I believe it does, Ms. Reynolds," Arthur replied. "In June, 1927, after Charles Ward brought Curwen back to life, Providence police records documented a case of vandalism in one of the city's old cemeteries. A grave dating to the late 1700's was dug up, the coffin removed, emptied, and wrecked, and the headstone smashed to pieces. The grave was that of Ezra Weeden, the angry young man whose fiancée Curwen had stolen, and whose single-minded pursuit of vengeance led to the attack in which Curwen was killed by the citizens of Providence. I do not think it takes much of a leap of logic to conclude that Curwen reached beyond the grave to avenge himself on the young man he blamed for his own murder at the hands of the mob."

Arthur paused for a moment before continuing. "If I am not mistaken, Ms. Reynolds, you are Dr Willet's only living descendent, following a series of deaths in your family over the years that were … shall we say … other than natural. Your grandfather and grandmother died in 1995 when their house burned down, leaving your mother as their only

surviving child. Your parents died when a gas leak led to the explosion that demolished their house while they slept. You are their only child. Unless Joseph Curwen has uncharacteristically decided to let bygones be bygones, I believe that – whatever else he may be planning - he is seeking revenge upon Dr Marinus Willet's descendants, as the doctor had ensured his own body could never be recovered and abused."

Kelly nodded, her face pale. "We were never a large family, and as far as I know, I have no other relatives. I never thought the deaths of my parents and grandparents were more than horrible accidents. But why am I still alive, then?"

"I believe your career in the Army protected you by ensuring that you were difficult to find and attack during your multiple assignments. It's not that he's given up, it's that that he has all the time in the world to wait until you are easier to reach."

Kelly snorted back a bitter laugh. "Given the assignments I had, it's hard to think of the Army as protecting me from something worse.'

"So, what is Curwen's goal?" Grant asked. "What does he think bringing back and interrogating the dead gain him? Blackmail? Business advantage? What?"

"Raising the dead is simply a means to an end, Mr Grant. When I read through Curwen's documents before I destroyed them, I realized that he was seeking not simply information he could use for common blackmail, although he certainly did that. He and his allies were seeking information that could allow them to call up terrible powers that would allow them to dominate the world."

"And so why did he bring *you* back?" Kelly asked.

"Almost certainly because he learned of a terrible mistake I made many centuries ago, when I was young and foolish and sought knowledge without considering its perils." Merlin replied with a sigh. "I was reaching for ever-greater levels of knowledge, expanding my magic to perform ever-more powerful acts. Of course, back then I thought it really *was* magic, knowing nothing of the nature of the universe and the

energy I was manipulating. I documented my studies and communicated with those few of my fellows I thought might understand.

“But one day I reached too far, and opened a door to something … to someplace … that filled me with horror beyond anything I could have imagined. I barely escaped with my life, and I nearly gave up the practice of magic. I destroyed all my notes and records that had led to that moment, and died hoping that no one else would ever again make my mistake.”

“I believe Curwen and his allies learned of what I had done, possibly by questioning one of those with whom I had shared my knowledge so long ago. He hoped to torture out of me the details of how I opened the door for which they have searched so long. Fortunately I was able to resist long enough to escape when your grandfather gave me the chance.”

Kelly looked back at him in awe. “What was this … door … that you opened?”

Merlin looked at her, his gaze hard and direct, yet infinitely sad. “A portal to the end of all things,” he said quietly. “A doorway to another dimension of beings and powers that would utterly destroy our world and enslave those few they allowed to survive were they to come through. These are the powers Curwen and his allies believe they can summon and control and use to rule our world.” He paused for a moment, rubbing his forehead. “Which is why we *must* destroy Curwen and his allies and enablers once and for all, before they are able to find that door and open it themselves. And, of course, he still wants to kill the last of Dr Willet’s descendants.”

There was silence in the office for a few moments, and then Dave said softly, “It sounds to me, Mr. Arthur, or Merlin, or whoever you are, like you see Kelly as bait to lure Curwen into the open.”

Arthur looked Dave directly in the eye as he responded. “I have considered that, yes.”

Dave turned to Kelly, who was quietly looking down at her notes, tapping idly with the point of her pen. “And what do you think about this?”

Kelly looked up with crooked smile. “Well, it’s a little bit much to absorb all at once, isn’t it?” She laid her notebook on the desk. “Let’s see … a man claiming to be Merlin the Magician tries to hire us and tells me that my great-grandfather brought him back from the dead. And this man who says he’s Merlin is now trying to stop another man named Joseph Curwen - who has returned from the dead twice - from performing some sort of magic that will open the gates of hell and end the world. And this man Curwen, who spent the Second World War as an SS officer torturing people in a laboratory at Auschwitz, has murdered my grandparents and my parents and may want to murder me because my great-grandfather killed him, except he’s not really dead any more.” She looked over at Arthur. “Does that about sum it up?”

“Expressed that way, it sounds like the ravings of a drunken madman,” Arthur said with a thin smile. “Nevertheless, it is an accurate – if overly simple – summation.”

“Okay,” Dave said. “Even if we accept that your story is true, you’re still asking us to find someone so that you can kill him, and I don’t think we can do that.”

“Even if it means saving the life of your partner, not to mention the world as we know it?” Arthur replied. When Dave didn’t answer, Arthur continued, “Curwen will die. One way or another, with or without your help, I will find him and I will kill him. I hope only that I succeed before he kills Ms. Reynolds.”

“I will be in touch.”

He turned and walked out of the office.

Chapter 11

Alexandria, Virginia - June 4, 2018

"Well, that was interesting," Dave said sarcastically.

"That's the understatement of the year," Kelly said. "When I got up this morning, I didn't expect to have Merlin the Magician tell me I'm being threatened by a dead man."

"You don't believe all that, do you?"

"I don't know," Kelly replied. "Between the details he provided and the evidence of his own body, I'm not sure what to think." She pointed to the pile of dimes on Dave's desk. "And he *did* leave a retainer."

Dave stirred the pile of coins with an idle finger, then turned his attention to the folder their visitor had left on the desk. He separated the contents into sets and began to leaf through them, commenting as he went along. "This seems to be a general timeline of his whole story, starting with Curwen's birth and ending," he flipped through the pages, "two days ago." He handed the document across to Kelly and picked up a second sheaf of pages. "This one explains how he tracked down Orne and Hutchinson, and this one," he drew a third, thicker document from the folder and flipped through it, his eyes widening, "is a history of you and your family."

Kelly put down the papers she was reading and took the bundle from Dave's outstretched hand. She leafed rapidly, skimming the pages. "How the hell did he get all this?" she asked. "He has birth, death, and marriage certificates going all the way back to Marinus Willet," she sifted further, "the police report on the fire that killed my grandparents," she riffled through more pages, "and the arson investigator's report from my parents' deaths." She looked up. "And my military service records!" She pulled a manila folder with a wide red border out of the pile and waved it at Dave. "This is a copy of the after-action report we wrote on the BOLO PARADE operation in Mexico

back in ‘12 … this is top secret, and there were only three copies made! I have no idea how the hell he got all this, but he’s thorough and he’s got great sources.”

“Thorough and nuts. Who spends that much time and effort to backstop a crazy story like this?”

“You have to wonder, though,” Kelly mused. “Why go to this much trouble, even for a crazy obsession? If he just wanted us to find Curwen, why not just give us a plain vanilla story, like he’s in line for an inheritance or owes child support or something? Why spin an unbelievable story and admit he wants to kill him?”

“The world’s full of crazy people.”

“Crazy people with no pulse and a body temperature of eighty-five? Crazy people who can get copies of police files and classified military records?”

Dave riffled through the rest of the documents, then laid them on the desk and turned his attention to the heap of dimes, which he carefully sorted into piles. He looked across the desk at Kelly with a crooked smile. “Exactly twenty five dollars and seventy cents,” he said. “I wonder how the hell he did that.”

“I don’t know, but I think I’m interested enough to check out his story,” Kelly said. “If nothing else, I want to know how he learned so much about me and my family.”

Dave picked up the business card Merlin had left. “Well, if he’s got more than twenty-five seventy to throw at his obsession, I guess we can see what we turn up. Problem is,” he said, holding up the card, “he didn’t leave any way to contact him, so we need to wait until he gets back to us.”

“You needn’t wait long.” Dave looked at Kelly, and both looked to the door, where Merle Arthur … Merlin … stood framed, a wry smile on his weathered face. Neither had heard him reenter the office.

“You seem pretty confident that we’d take your case,” Dave observed.

Merlin sat back down in the visitor's chair and shrugged. "I assumed that the offer of a case which had unique aspects and a personal connection," he nodded toward Kelly, "would be attractive. And yes, I am in a position to pay you handsomely for your time and expenses. Less, of course, the retainer I have already provided." He waved a hand at the stacks of dimes Dave had lined up on the desk, which were suddenly accompanied by a cashier's check drawn on a local bank in the amount of $4974.30. "I trust five thousand dollars will do to start?"

"As long as the check's good," said Dave, picking up the document and examining it critically.

"I assure you it is. I have found the ability to move large sums of money rapidly from one place to another to be a most useful sort of modern magic." Dave snorted back a laugh.

"I assume that you have some ideas on where we might start looking for Joseph Curwen," Kelly said.

"I do," Merlin replied, "although they are probably ideas you would have come up with on your own after studying the record." He leaned back in the chair.

"You will find him in or near a major city," he began. "A large city provides a range of sources, both legal and illegal, from which he can obtain the supplies he needs for his work. He can, of course, order much of what he needs online or by mail from anywhere in the world, but I suspect he would prefer to have the option of more direct access to and control over his sources of supply, to be more ... hands-on, as you would say."

Kelly had resumed taking notes. Merlin noted this, and said, "All of this in the files I have provided you."

"I like to organize my thoughts myself."

"As you wish. A major city also offers something else he needs: a large population, particularly one with a large number of homeless or transient persons whose disappearance would not raise interest." Merlin

gestured toward the documents lying on the desk. “As you know from my summary of his history, Curwen does not leave piles of mutilated bodies in his wake that might attract the attention of the authorities or provide evidence for his prosecution … after his experiments, nothing remains but liquids or dust, which are easily disposed of and can only be connected to missing persons by means of sophisticated analyses not generally performed on victims who would otherwise be of little interest to the police.

“A large and transient population also obscures activities that would have raised suspicions in earlier times. In the Salem, Massachusetts of the 1700s, the nosy population of a relatively small city would be quick to spot things that would go unnoticed in a larger and busier town. Along with this, times and mores have changed as well … at a time when belief in witchcraft and sorcery was common, much would be made of a man who spent a great deal of time hanging around cemeteries, particularly if that man was also noted for his conduct of odd chemical experiments. Today, cemeteries are crowded with genealogical and historical researchers, all of them perfectly innocent, and thousands of people conduct scientific experiments at home – often of notable sophistication, if questionable legality.” Merlin allowed himself a smile. “And as long as the house doesn’t explode, and the experiments are not drug- or terrorism-related, the authorities aren’t interested and the neighbors seldom care.”

“Another consideration he may have is proximity to a lodge of the Endless Night Order. You will recall that the Order helped him escape and establish a new identity in Germany after his resurrection in 1930. It probably continues to assist him from a collocated or nearby lodge. The documents I have provided you include a list of all the Order’s lodges I have been able to identify. They do not go out of their way to hide, but neither do they advertise.”

“Finally, my sense that he is somewhere west of the Mississippi reduces our geographical hunting ground. This may not seem like a significant limitation, but when combined with the other filters, it suggests a much smaller number of areas to examine. For instance, if we assume a city

with a population of 500,000 or more, a large homeless or transient population, good sources of scientific and laboratory supplies, and an Endless Night Order lodge, we find the list of potential locations significantly reduced. A list of possible locations is in the files I provided you."

Kelly sifted through the pile of documents until she found the correct one. She scanned the two pages quickly, then turned to Merlin with a wry smile. "Twenty-six possibilities?"

Merlin shrugged. "If it were easy, I would do it myself. I largely have. I have hunted Joseph Curwen alone, across two continents, for more than seventy years. I think I have earned the right to seek some assistance."

Dave folded his hands and leaned across the desk, resting on his forearms. "We're taking this case as a matter of personal interest," he said, looking from Merlin to Kelly and back. "But I'm worried about how it ends. You've admitted you intend to kill Curwen, and we can't be accessories to murder. If we succeed in finding him, we will decide how and what to tell you of what we've found."

Merlin nodded. "I understand your concern, although I myself have no problem with killing him. I have had more time and experience than you to learn the truth about Joseph Curwen." He paused for a moment, his eyes closed in thought. "I guarantee that by the time we find him, you will understand what he is, and why he must die. I will kill him myself, and I can guarantee that his death will in no way be traceable to you or reflect on the services you provided."

"And how is that?" Dave asked.

Merlin leaned back and looked directly at Dave, his eyes suddenly blank and cold. "Because Joseph Curwen will vanish from the face of the earth. There will be no trace of him, no body to be autopsied, none of the forensic evidence of which your modern police are so enamored. He will be gone as if he had never existed."

Dave and Merlin stared at each other. Kelly looked from one to the other and said into the heavy silence, "Shall we get started?"

Chapter 12

Alexandria, Virginia - October 18, 2018

"Las Vegas?" said Dave skeptically.

"That's what it looks like," Kelly replied. She opened the thick folder that lay on the table in front of her. "I'm pretty sure he's been there, possibly under several aliases, since the late 1990's. Before then, he seems to have moved between different cities every few years, using different names. The details are in my full report, but here are the high points."

She pulled a black and white photo from the folder and handed it across the table to Dave and Merlin. "This picture was taken on a Las Vegas street in the summer of 2002. I found it with an online image search using the Charles Ward photo."

Dave and Merlin looked at the image of a crowd of people on a busy street. Though the picture was slightly out of focus, the circled face of a man in the crowd was clearly the same man who had worn the uniform of a German SS officer in the photos Merlin had originally provided. "This is the earliest evidence I've found that Curwen was there." She pulled a second photo from the folder and passed it across the table. "I downloaded this picture three days ago from the website of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. Meet Doctor Joseph Carson, Associate Professor of Biochemistry."

The clear, sharp color headshot showed a thin-faced man with piercing blue eyes and slightly-graying blond hair brushed back from a prominent widow's peak. Joseph Curwen did not appear to have aged at all from either the Auschwitz photos or the 2002 crowd picture.

"Why would he pick Vegas?" Dave asked.

Kelly shrugged. "It's consistent with Merlin's ideas. It has a population of more than six hundred thousand. There's a large transient population fed by the gambling and professional entertainment industries and lots of major conventions. There are world-class universities that offer the

opportunity to study or teach. And there's a local lodge of the Endless Night Order."

"It makes sense," Merlin said thoughtfully. "With his background and the benefit of his decades of study, he could easily fit into a university faculty, particularly if his way was paved by the Order. He could conduct some of his less questionable research in the open. And Las Vegas offers another advantage that I had not considered before."

"What's that?" Kelly asked, ready to take notes.

"I sensed no trace of his employment of magic for many years, detecting it only recently and then only faintly. I believe it may be explained by this particular location.

"Las Vegas is only about sixty-five miles from the site where the US military exploded dozens of atomic bombs between 1950 and 1991," Merlin replied. "The tremendous amount of energy released during those tests, some of which lingers today and can be felt by those of us attuned to it, would have helped to mask any invocation of magic he conducted during those years. It's a brilliant hiding place."

Dave looked at Merlin suspiciously. "And how does a medieval magician know so much about nuclear testing?"

Merlin chuckled. "Mr. Grant, I have had little to do for the last seventy years but study and learn. If I had many lifetimes, I would never learn everything I would like to know." He turned back to Kelly. "So what else have you found, Ms. Reynolds?"

"I was able to find his residence address," Kelly said. "The owner of the house in public real estate records is a shell company that tracks back through several layers of ownership to the Endless Night Order, but Doctor Joseph Carson's Nevada driver's license shows that house as the residence address."

Kelly pulled several more photos from the folder and fanned them out on the table. "These are Google Earth images of Curwen's home."

Dave and Merlin studied the glossy pictures, which showed a sprawling, two-story house on a large lot ringed by a high, thick wall. The area surrounding the house was neatly landscaped, with a small pond and a walkway that meandered among patches of trees and desert plants. The only visible opening in the wall was blocked by a decorative metal gate preventing access to a driveway that led to a large garage connected to the house. “The house is about average size for that development, although the lot is definitely the largest and the garage is much larger than any others.” Kelly pointed out. “Every house has a wall around it, but his wall looks more substantial than any of the others. Mr. Curwen likes his privacy.” She paused for a moment. “I’m especially interested in that garage. It looks to be a three-car size, which isn’t out of line with the neighborhood, but it’s unusually deep. That may indicate that it contains other rooms.”

Merlin pulled one of the pictures closer and stared at it intently. “That's quite a house for one person. Do you know who else might be living there, in addition to Curwen?”

“No idea,” Kelly answered. “Public records simply cite the shell company as the owner, and the DMV records don’t show anyone other than Curwen with a license at that address. We’d probably have to go there and physically check it out to be sure.”

Merlin nodded agreement. “I also agree that the garage is quite large, especially for a home that seems to have only a single person living there. I suspect that Curwen has done as he did back in old Providence, and moved his more sensitive activities underground. The garage may cover and allow access to lower levels.” He drummed his fingers on the photograph. “Anything else?”

“I looked at the missing persons statistics,” Kelly went on. “The Las Vegas MPD website reports that, on average, five to seven persons are reported missing each day, or over 200 each month. Even if you subtract the numbers that aren’t really missing, return on their own, or don’t want to be found for whatever reason, there are probably around 50 people who disappear each month. The numbers are slightly higher,

but fairly consistent with those of other cities of similar size. Obviously, Curwen's not responsible for all of those disappearances, but the rate is consistent with your idea."

She sat back and looked across the table at Grant and Merlin. "I've been able to gather this with web searches, public document requests, a little creative hacking, and calling in some favors. This is as far as we can take it without checking things out on the ground." She turned to Merlin. "How do you want to proceed?"

"I believe you have found him, but I am sensitive to Mr. Grant's concerns," the older man replied. He tapped his fingers on the table as he sat in silent thought. "I will pay your travel and expenses for a visit to Las Vegas for further investigation to confirm his identity before we decide our next steps."

Kelly nodded. "I can leave as soon as I make the arrangements."

Merlin held up a cautionary hand. "While I have full faith in your abilities, Ms. Reynolds, I do not believe it would be prudent for you to go alone, given my suspicion that Curwen wishes you dead. Mr. Grant should go with you." He turned to Dave. "Can you make the trip as well?"

"Now?" Dave asked.

"The sooner, the better, obviously," Merlin replied. "If Curwen learns we have found him, he will disappear, and I don't want to spend another seventy years tracking him down again. Unless you have other pressing business which would prevent you from being away for a few days, I would like both of you to go as soon as possible. Make your arrangements, and I will transfer the necessary funds for travel and expenses into your account within the hour."

"No conjuring up a check?" Dave asked.

Merlin smiled. "No, Mr. Grant. This time we will employ the magic of online bank transfers." He paused for a moment, and his smile

disappeared. “We will reserve more powerful magic for the moment we must deal with Mr. Curwen in person.”

Chapter 13

Las Vegas, Nevada - October 19, 2018

“Professor, a word?”

Joseph Curwen, known to the faculty and staff of the Department of Biochemistry at the University of Nevada's Las Vegas campus as Professor Joseph Carson, looked up from the ledger in which he was carefully transcribing student grades to see a man standing in his office doorway. “Ah, Brother Slowik,” he greeted the visitor, closing the journal. “Please come in and have a seat.”

The man stepped into the office and closed the door gently, taking the precaution of engaging the lock before sitting down in the uncomfortable wooden chair facing the desk.

Curwen studied the visitor for a moment. “You've never visited me here before. Is there a problem?”

William Slowik nodded. “I’m afraid there is. There have been some unusual recent inquiries into you and your background. It appears that someone has taken a serious interest in you.”

Curwen remained impassive, but seethed inside. After all these years, all the careful planning, only one person might have an interest in an obscure professor of biochemistry. “Who is making the inquiries?” he asked evenly.

Slowik withdrew a small, leather-bound notebook from the inside pocket of his jacket and riffled through the pages. “The inquiries are coming from a woman named Kelly Reynolds, a partner in a private investigation firm in Alexandria, Virginia. So far, she has conducted extensive online searches of local historical websites, newspaper archives, and public real estate records, and has ordered copies of a number of photographs and other public documents. She has also accessed the online database of the Department of Motor Vehicles and obtained your drivers license information. We know her identity and

that of her firm from the credit card used to pay for the legally-requested records. In addition, a computer whose IP address resolves to Grant and Reynolds Confidential Investigations of Alexandria, Virginia, accessed the university's website and searched publicly-available faculty information … a copy of your biography and your photo were downloaded." Slowik closed the notebook and returned it to his pocket. "Why is a private detective making inquiries about you?"

Curwen knew that no one would have had any reason to look into his identity, which had been created and thoroughly backstopped by the Endless Night Order over a period of many years. There was only one person who could have any interest in him.

He had known for decades that Merlin still lived, returned to life by the merest chance when that nosy fool doctor in Providence had unknowingly recited the incantation that called his spirit into the body created from his essential salts. Curwen knew that Merlin had murdered Orne and Hutchinson and destroyed their facilities and records, and he had long assumed that the wizard had surmised from the late and unlamented Dr Willet that he had engineered his return to life.

Merlin had hunted him for decades, but thanks to his relocation to Germany, the tumult of the war years, and the protection of the Order, he had emerged from the war unscathed and returned to the United States - undetected, he had thought, as he moved from city to city to cover his trail and establish his new identity. His foresight in choosing Las Vegas as a permanent home had paid great dividends, being off the beaten path, far from his home in Providence, and – a wonderful and unexpected bonus – close to the site of the atomic tests which had masked his occasional invocation of magic.

But what had happened? Had the energy released by the atomic tests dissipated to the point at which his actions could now be detected? He could think of no other explanation.

And Merlin had sought help cleverly. He had obviously engaged this investigator because of her relationship to Marinus Willet after

somehow learning that Curwen had been murdering Willet's descendants. Who else would believe his crazy story?

So, Merlin had used the Reynolds woman, the last living descendant of Marinus Willet, to track him down. Now what? The woman herself was of no concern; he need only say the word and the Order would see to her prompt removal. Merlin was the *real* danger; he had somehow to be found and eliminated. Since he had been raised from salts, the wizard could be said down with the Incantation of Descent and so be eliminated quickly and forever, but that would require a face-to-face confrontation that could be exceptionally dangerous. What new knowledge and power might he have mastered in the past seventy years?

Slowik, the head of the Endless Night Order's Las Vegas lodge and the Order's Overseer for the western United States, cleared his throat for attention. "I ask you again, brother, why is a private detective from Virginia seeking information about you?"

Curwen forced himself back to the present and looked across the desk at Slowik. "The person asking the questions is of no importance. The larger problem is the person who hired her."

"And who would that be?" Slowik asked.

"I don't know what name he's using at the moment," Curwen answered, "but he has been known by many names in the past. You would know him as Merlin, the wizard of Arthurian legend."

"Merlin is a mythological figure, Brother Curwen," Slowik snorted dismissively. "You must do better than that."

Curwen shook his head angrily. "Merlin is quite real. Randolph Carter, your counterpart at Miskatonic University in Arkham many years ago, came to understand that. Edward Hutchinson located his tomb after decades of research in obscure legends and texts; together we recovered his remains and reduced them to the essential salts which we reanimated using the incantations documented in the Necronomicon. I was taken into custody in March of 1928 as I was preparing to raise him up and interrogate him for the third time; a few weeks later he was

accidentally returned to life by the unknowing actions of a stupid country doctor."

Slowik studied Curwen skeptically. "This would be the same 'stupid country doctor' who was able to send you back to the void?"

"Yes," Curwen admitted. "I underestimated the danger he represented and let my guard down. He was able to say the Incantation of Descent before I could stop him. Fortunately, I had made plans to protect myself and enable my return in case of such an emergency." He paused for a moment, then went on. "When I returned two years later, I learned that Merlin was still loose in the world, and had already killed Orne and Hutchinson. With the help of the Order at Miskatonic University in Massachusetts and in New York, I managed to escape to Europe; you know the rest of the story."

"So … a medieval wizard has hired a private detective to track you down?" Slowik asked sarcastically.

"I have been very careful since my return to the United States after the war," Curwen replied. "I moved frequently and changed my name often before deciding to remain here. Settling here in Las Vegas proved to be an unexpected advantage, as the effects of the nearby atomic tests over the years helped to obscure indications of my work that a sensitive like Merlin might have detected. I believe that the gradual dissipation of that energy over time may have allowed him to sense that I was still alive, but not to precisely locate me. I suppose I am not surprised that he would take advantage of professional services to help in his search." Curwen deliberately did not mention his personal connection to Kelly Reynolds.

Slowik brooded in silence a few moments before continuing. "You should also know that the Reynolds woman and her partner have booked a flight to Las Vegas. They will arrive on Monday night, and have booked a hotel room for three nights. They are clearly intending to validate in person what they believe they have found from a distance. What do you suggest we do?"

Curwen replied immediately. “Do nothing for the moment. Merlin is an ancient and cunning foe we must fight cautiously and carefully.” He thought for a moment. “Have our brothers in Virginia attempt to find where he lives, but do not take any action. Keep me informed of his movements, and I will craft a trap in which he can be eliminated.”

“And the detectives?”

“Let us use their visit to our advantage,” Curwen said after a moment’s thought. “Let them see me, to confirm what they evidently suspect. I will arrange to be out of town for a few days after that, to give them an opportunity to search my property if they choose.”

Slowik nodded. “I will send word to our lodge in Georgetown, which is closest to the office of the investigators in Virginia, and have them surveil … Merlin.” He paused for a moment, then continued. “But is it necessary or wise to allow these people to search the house, given what is there?”

“Of course there is some risk,” Curwen answered, “but it is a risk worth taking. If we let them see enough to report back to Merlin, Merlin will come, and we can eliminate them all.”

“I am not sure it is the best course of action, but for the moment, we will proceed as you suggest,” said Slowik. “If, however, their investigation appears to threaten other activities of the Order, we will take action ourselves.”

Curwen nodded his agreement, but kept his own counsel.

Chapter 14

Las Vegas, Nevada - October 22-24, 2018

The American Airlines flight from Washington Dulles Airport touched down at McCarran Airport in Las Vegas shortly before midnight, ten minutes ahead of schedule. It was only about two-thirds full, so Dave and Kelly were able to deplane and claim their baggage quickly; within a half-hour of landing, they were in their rented car for the brief drive to their hotel near the UNLV campus.

Once they had settled into their rooms, Kelly powered up her laptop and reviewed the plan they had drafted for their visit. “We’ll start with a visit to the university campus tomorrow morning, stake out Curwen’s office and try to get some current pictures of him. In the afternoon we’ll do a drive-by of his house and check out the neighborhood. “Once we establish his schedule, we can go back for a closer look while he’s not home, maybe even get inside.”

Dave nodded agreement. “We need the drive-by to check for alarms and security. The subdivision’s not gated, but it seems to be pretty upscale, so there may be private security patrols or occasional local PD checks. Maybe even a neighborhood watch. I’m guessing that at the very least, all the houses have got alarms and cameras, and on the overheads it looks like there isn’t any place we could park for a stakeout without being obvious.” He compared the overhead images to a local area map. “Curwen’s property is on the western edge of the subdivision, and there’s nothing else behind it … just open desert until you get to this town about a mile or so away. There’s also a service road that runs behind the subdivision. We might be able to get in over the wall from that side if all else fails.”

Kelly snapped the laptop shut and put it, along with her paper notes and the photos, into her backpack. “We’ve got a plan. Let’s get some sleep.”

*****

After the free breakfast in the lobby, Dave and Kelly recovered their car from the hotel's lot and drove to the UNLV campus, only a few minutes away. They parked in a metered visitor space, then used a map downloaded from the school website to walk to the Science and Engineering Building, where Curwen's office was located.

In the pleasantly landscaped area in front of the building, they commandeered a bench with a view of the main entrance, partially screened by a large tree. They settled in to watch, Kelly tapping on her laptop and Dave thumbing a chemistry textbook he'd picked up at a local bookshop before they left Virginia.

Within a few minutes Kelly nudged Dave for attention. "There's our guy," she whispered.

Dave looked up and saw Joseph Curwen striding down the sidewalk toward the building. He wore mirrored sunglasses, was casually dressed in khaki slacks and an open-necked polo shirt, and carried a bulging leather messenger bag in his right hand. He jogged up the steps to the front entrance and walked briskly through the door that slid open as he approached and closed after he passed. He looked exactly like the photo Kelly had downloaded from the university website.

"Well, we know where he is," Dave said. "I'll go inside and make a quick pass by his office." Kelly nodded, poking notes into her laptop. "Be careful."

Grant entered the airy lobby of the Science and Engineering Building and crossed to the stair which led to the second floor. Consulting a directional sign, he turned left and headed toward a wing of faculty offices. Turning into a side hall, he nearly ran into Joseph Curwen, standing in front of a partially-open door and talking with a young woman. "Excuse me," he muttered, stepping around the couple and continuing on. The woman gave him a passing glance; Curwen ignored him.

Dave continued to the end of the hall, thankful that it branched right and left rather than dead-ending. He turned left and ducked into a

convenient men's room to give Curwen time to leave; it wouldn't be good for the man to see him twice in a short time.

After a few minutes, Dave left the lavatory and walked quietly to where the hall branched back toward Curwen's office. Hearing no voices, he peered cautiously around the corner to confirm that the hallway was empty and the door to Curwen's office closed. He hurried past, slowing to read a sign taped neatly to the door:

"I will be attending to personal business in San Francisco for the rest of the week. Classes during that period will be conducted by my teaching assistant. Regular office hours will resume on Monday. J. Carson"

Dave noted the sign and returned to where Kelly waited on the bench.

"Well?" Kelly asked. Dave grimaced. "I turned a corner and almost ran into him. He was standing in the hall at the door to his office, talking to a student."

"Did he notice you?"

"Well, considering that I almost ran into him, I'm sure he noticed," Dave said sourly. "But he didn't react at all - he was pretty deep in conversation with the student. She looked up, but he didn't seem to take any notice."

Kelly frowned in concern. "I don't like that he saw you," she said. "Now we need to make sure he doesn't notice you again, especially since we've agreed that he shouldn't see me."

Dave was less concerned. "He didn't seem to notice me at all. But you're right ... we need to be careful."

*****

In his office, Joseph Curwen was on the telephone with William Slowik. "Yes, I am quite sure. They are the people whose photographs you showed me. They were waiting outside the building when I arrived this morning, and the man Grant followed me inside and walked past while I

was talking with a student outside my office. I made a point of ignoring him. The Reynolds woman remained outside."

"They arrived in Las Vegas last night, as we expected," Slowik replied, "and are staying at a hotel near the campus. They are booked for two more nights at the hotel, and have reservations on a return flight the following morning." He paused before continuing. "They are obviously attempting to confirm your identity and whereabouts on behalf of their employer."

"Of course they are. Has there been any success in tracking down Merlin?"

There was a rustle of papers on the line. "We know that he is using the name of 'Merle Arthur,' but we have been unable to discover where he is living. He is very good at evading surveillance … the last time our team had eyes on him was at the Grant and Reynolds office the day before they flew to Las Vegas. He left their office and our team lost sight of him within a few hundred feet of the door."

Curwen was not surprised. "For the moment, that does not matter," he said. "I made sure that the sign was posted on my door, advertising that I would be out of town. This will suggest it is safe to search the house and grounds. When they discover what is beneath, it will surely draw Merlin out into the open."

There was a long silence before Slowik answered. "As I told you before, I am not comfortable with this," he said. "We have spent years and invested major resources to create what is there, and must not recklessly jeopardize it."

"The danger is worth the risk," Curwen replied. "Let them explore the house. It will confirm their suspicions and draw Merlin into a fight on our own ground. Let them come."

*****

Dave and Kelly sat in a coffee shop a few blocks from the campus, discussing their next move. "Now that Curwen has seen me and

probably already knows what you look like, we need to adjust our plan." Dave tapped his cup idly while he thought. "I think we should avoid asking questions about him ... if word gets back to him, he might get spooked and disappear."

Kelly shook her head. "I agree we shouldn't attract any more attention, but I don't think he'll bolt."

"Why not?" Dave asked.

"Look at it from his point of view," Kelly went on. "He's been hiding in plain sight for decades. He has a big, secure place to live, a job that gives him cover, facilities, and supplies for at least some of his experiments, and a local Endless Night Order lodge that supports and protects him. I don't think he'll give up any of that unless he senses a really grave danger." She took a long swallow of her coffee, and continued. "Besides, he already knows we're here."

"You're talking about the people who've been following us?"

Kelly nodded. "Yep. They're okay, but they're not professionals. There was a man at breakfast who was also at the airport baggage claim last night. He was trying hard to be inconspicuous, but he was obviously watching us. And the woman at the table in the back corner here has been taking pictures of us with her phone."

"Oh, and one other thing," Kelly added. "There's been an inquiry on our business credit report, from a firm that doesn't exist. I'm pretty sure that if we follow it back far enough, we'll find that it's a front for the Endless Night Order, wondering who's interested in Professor Carson."

"Well," Dave said, "that didn't take long."

Kelly nodded. "So we need to decide what to do now, and whatever we do has to be done carefully. Our presence here has been noted and we've been followed or observed by at least two people, almost certainly on behalf of Curwen or the Order. We've confirmed what we already suspected about Curwen, so we can report back to Merlin and let him decide what to do next. The only thing we haven't done is try to check

out the house, and I'm not sure that's a good idea now that we've been fingered. What do you think?"

Dave thought for a moment, then said, "I think we should at least do the drive-by. They already know we're interested in Curwen, so it won't surprise them if we just check out the neighborhood. We can decide later whether or not we want to try to get inside. According to the sign on his office door, he's going to be out of town for the rest of the week. We may not get another chance any time soon."

"I agree. We'll do the drive-by and then decide what to do." She drank the rest of her coffee, then stood up and shouldered her backpack. "Let's get going while we've got most of the day still ahead."

*****

Curwen's house was located in Desert Edge, a collection of large estate-style homes west of Interstate 15, on the edge of the high desert southwest of Las Vegas proper. Traffic was light, and they were soon turning off the Interstate and following their GPS directions to the subdivision. Both Dave and Kelly kept a careful watch, but saw no signs of being followed.

Desert Edge consisted of about 20 properties distributed along both sides of a broad, curving loop; those on the outside of the loop were larger and backed up to the desert that stretched away toward mountains rising in a warm haze on the western horizon. Each property was surrounded by a tall privacy wall painted in varying shades of desert tan, with a gate to permit entrance to the home beyond. Curwen's house occupied a very large lot at the outermost point of the curving street.. The ornate wrought-iron auto gate was closed, and such was the size of the property and the height of the wall that little more than a glimpse of the roof of the house could be seen.

Kelly recorded observations and snapped photos with her smartphone while Dave drove, carefully observing the speed limit. "There is a neighborhood watch alert sign posted at the entrance to the subdivision, and a notice that the area is patrolled by the Las Vegas Metropolitan

Police Department, although we have not seen any police presence. There are no cars parked on the street, there is no designated visitor parking, and there's no place to park that is not covered by multiple video cameras on the surrounding houses. Each house is completely surrounded by a ten-foot wall, and all appear to have video cameras that cover their gates and the street outside. The wall around Curwen's house appears to be half-again as thick as the other walls in the neighborhood. Security measures include a wall-mounted video camera focused on the intercom panel beside the gate and a pole-mounted video camera inside the wall, focused outward on the gate and the street. There are no alarm sensors visible on the wall, although it's difficult to be sure from a quick pass at ground level."

Kelly stopped the filming and commentary as Curwen's property disappeared around the curve of the street. "Should we make another pass?" "No," Dave answered. "This place has more cameras than a Hollywood premiere. Another pass would draw attention."

"Agreed," Kelly said. "Shall we go around and look from the back?"

"There was a turnoff about a mile before the entrance to the neighborhood," Dave replied. "We'll go back and check it out."

The turnoff was not marked, and Dave nearly missed it before making a sharp left turn into the service road that ran parallel to the rear boundary of the subdivision. The exterior walls formed an unbroken arc protecting the homes on the other side. Each property other than Curwen's had a door of steel bars, although the door to Curwen's property was a solid steel panel. Kelly again used her smartphone to film the wall and door and record her observations.

The road continued along the entire perimeter of the subdivision, but Dave turned right onto a new road that branched off shortly after passing the Curwen property and continued west into the desert, toward a small town visible a mile or two distant. Not willing to attract attention by turning back, Dave drove on until they reached the town and pulled into the parking lot of a convenience store.

“Well, that didn’t look very promising,” Dave observed. “It looks pretty secure.”

Kelly nodded. “I agree. On the plus side, though, I didn’t see any alarm sensors along the wall. We may be able to get in through that rear door, but I’d like to get an overhead view better than Google Earth first. Let’s send up the drone to check it out.” Merlin had approved the purchase of a small drone, equipped with a powerful camera, which they had shipped with their luggage.

“Good idea. We can launch it from out in the desert for a couple of high, quick passes over the property, then check out the footage at the hotel before deciding what to do.”

*****

In the hotel that evening, Dave and Kelly studied the video images taken by the drone and downloaded to Kelly’s laptop. They’d flown two passes, one parallel to the street and a second perpendicular to it, both crossing the center of the property at the legally permissible altitude of five hundred feet.

The drone’s camera provided clear, high-definition video that could be blown up for detailed study. “I don’t see any alarm sensors anywhere on the top of the wall,” Dave said, pointing at the screen with the tip of his pen, “and there are lights at the corners of the house … they don’t seem have motion sensors on them.” He used the mouse to rotate and enlarge the image, adding, “I don’t see any cameras covering the rear of the house.”

Kelly nodded. “Well that’s good news,” she said. “We can probably get in and out on the back side, either through the door or over the wall … we just need to be able to see if there’s anyone in the house once Curwen leaves.”

Dave thought for a moment. “Let’s wait until tomorrow night, then send up the drone again and check for lights. If it looks deserted, we can try go in. It’s not ideal, but probably the best we can do.”

*****

The next morning, Kelly called Joseph Curwen's office, identifying herself as a prospective student looking for information about a class. The phone was answered by a woman who identified herself as his teaching assistant and confirmed that Dr Carson was out of town and would return the following week. Dave and Kelly spent the rest of the day resting up for a long night.

*****

The night was dark, lit only by a tiny sliver of moon. Shortly after eleven o'clock, Dave launched the drone from the spot in the desert they'd used earlier, and flew it as close as he dared to the Curwen property to gain an oblique view of the house, which was completely dark and apparently deserted. He recovered the drone and stowed it in the trunk of the car, and he and Kelly set off on foot across the mile of desert to the wall.

At the rear of Curwen's property, Kelly carefully examined the steel door for alarm sensors and the quality of the lock. She was gratified to see no signs of any alarm wiring, and the lock proved to be no match for her lockpicking skills; she thoroughly doused the hinges of the door from a small spray can of WD-40, and within a few minutes they were through the wall and inside the property.

The lawn surrounding the house was beautifully landscaped with desert plants and trees and a large decorative koi pond. A flagstone path meandered from the gate through the property before branching left toward a sliding glass door into the darkened house and right to a side door to the attached garage. Kelly examined the door into the garage, which proved to be unalarmed and secured by a deadbolt lock she was able easily to pick. The garage was, as they had expected, built for three cars, and was half-again as deep as a normal garage, leaving plenty of space behind parked cars. It was completely empty, and three more doors led from it: one led into the house, and an alarm pad next to it indicated that it was armed. In the rear wall of the garage a second, unalarmed, door opened into a descending staircase. The third door was

an industrial style scissor-grate that opened into a roomy freight elevator.

“What do you think?” Dave whispered.

“I wonder that the door into the house is alarmed, but these aren’t,” Kelly replied. “It’s almost as if we’re being invited to check out what’s below the garage.” She thought for a moment. “I imagine that anything worth seeing is probably below, anyhow,” she said. “We may as well check that out first, although I think we should pass on the elevator … there’s no sense risking getting stuck in it.”

Dave nodded his agreement. He flipped an illuminated switch inside the door at the head of the stairs, then took the lead as they stepped down into the unknown.

Chapter 15

Las Vegas, Nevada - October 24-25, 2018

The stairway descended in multiple switchbacks until, as Kelly counted the fiftieth step, it opened out into a tunnel about a dozen feet wide and ten high to the center of the arched ceiling. Bulbs in wire cages hanging from the ceiling and spaced along the walls showed doors on either side at regular intervals, and the tunnel ended some distance away in a wide metal double door that was tightly closed. Dave and Kelly slowly walked the length of the tunnel, opening doors on either side as they went. None were locked, and Kelly used her smartphone to carefully photograph the contents of each.

The first room they checked was empty, as was the second. The third was lined with wooden shelves on which were stacked rows of plastic storage bins, cardboard boxes, and wooden crates, each neatly labeled, and all filled with various chemicals and medical supplies. The next room was empty, and the one after it was filled with odd pieces of electrical equipment and laboratory glassware, much of it of antique design and construction, discolored and clearly well-used. Another door, this one of heavy metal sealed with rubber gaskets, opened into a spacious walk-in refrigerator. Shelves held boxes and bottles of medicines and chemical reagents which, according to their labels, required refrigeration; two deep chest freezers, each secured with a padlock, stood along a third wall. Kelly examined and photographed the freezers, but decided not to take the time to pick the locks and check the contents.

The next door, the last on the left side of the tunnel, opened into what seemed to be a small, well-lit library, its walls lined with shelves containing books and scrolls; items apparently of great age stood next to modern texts, and most dealt with various topics of medicine, anatomy, and chemistry. The books represented a range of languages, including Arabic, German, and French, as well as several Oriental scripts. A standing desk with locked drawers stood in the middle of the room, and

a very large, very old book lay open on its top; the exposed pages were hand-written in an alphabet neither Kelly nor Dave recognized.

Across the hall, the last door on the right opened into a hallway lined with small, narrow cells, ten on each side, each of which had a door of heavy steel bars; the doors were offset and recessed deeply from the hall, so that a prisoner in each one would have a view only of a blank wall across the way. Each cell was unfurnished, save for metal cuffs dangling from the ceilings or hanging from chains fixed to rings embedded in the walls. All of the cells were empty, and the floors were heavily stained; one had a few items of woman's clothing scattered on the floor.

"Well," Dave said, "I think we know where some of those fifty people that go missing every month in Vegas end up."

"Let's finish and get out of here," Kelly said quietly. She took several photos of the cells and of the pile of clothing on the floor. "This place gives me the creeps."

Returning to the main tunnel, they turned right to face a double door of heavy steel that would not have been out of place in a bank. Like the other doors they had passed, it was unlocked; Dave pushed it open cautiously and they stepped into a dark, echoing space. Kelly quickly spotted and flipped another illuminated switch, bathing the space with sudden light.

It was the largest room they had yet seen, a circular space about fifty feet across and fifteen high at the center of the vaulted ceiling. In the center of the room stood a large rectangular block of polished black stone with odd, cabalistic letters and symbols carved around its perimeter just below the top. Stains and streaks of a rusty color ran down the sides in several places. Set in a circle around the block were seven columns of the same material with multiple iron rings set in each at the top and bottom. Spotlights in the ceiling pointed down on each column, and three more spots were angled to focus on the center of the stone block; other, dimmer, lights shone from within wire cages around the whitewashed walls. A faint, unpleasant odor was in the air.

The moment the lights came on, a strange animal howling suddenly arose, accompanied by a weird, frantic sound like the damp slapping of meat on a cutting board. Dave and Kelly quickly looked around, but saw no one else in the room. They began to slowly circle the central block, but Kelly suddenly stopped short and pointed to the floor at her feet. “Dave, look at this,” she whispered.

Grant looked down and saw what looked like a heavy, hinged iron cover pierced with inch-wide holes, set in the cement floor. Following Kelly’s pointing finger, he saw numerous other such covers spaced at wide intervals around the room. The noises and howling seemed to be coming from underneath the steel plug at their feet. “What the hell?” he asked. Looking further around the room he spotted, lying on the floor a short distance away, a heavy wooden ladder about fifteen feet long and a large hook with a wooden handle he recognized as a tool for lifting manhole covers.

“What do you think?” he asked Kelly. “What’s down there?”

“I have no idea, but from the sound of it, I’m not sure I want to know.”

Dave grabbed the hook and went to the nearest of the covers set into the floor. “I think we need to see, anyhow” he said, and slipped the end of the hook into a ring set in the cover.

As soon as the hook engaged with the latch, the howling increased in volume, interspersed with guttural grunts and a rapid increase in the slippery thumping sounds. Dave tested the set of the hook, then pulled up the lid with a rusty squeal and let it fall back with a clang to the floor beside the opening.

A nauseating stench welled up from the dark depths of the hole, driving Dave and Kelly away from the opening. The smell was indescribably foul, unlike anything Kelly had ever encountered. During her combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, she’d become used to the smells of war, death, and decay, but this was orders of magnitude worse. It combined the sickening, cloying sweetness of decaying flesh with the chemical stench of the trash-burning pits and the ammonia reek of portable

toilets baking in the desert sun. She fought the urge to throw up as her gorge rose.

Dave steeled himself, then inched slowly to the edge of the hole and shone the high-powered beam of his flashlight into the depths. “Oh, shit!” he cried, stumbling back and falling to the floor; he dropped the flashlight, which rolled away and cast weird shadows along the walls as he crab-walked frantically away from the open hole.

Kelly looked on in amazement, then grabbed the flashlight and carefully approached the edge of the hole and peered in. She recoiled in shock and dropped the flashlight, which bounced once and rolled over the edge into the hole. The howling grew louder, followed by an ugly crunching sound. The flashlight went out.

“Dear God!” Kelly gasped. “What in hell is *that*?”

Dave slowly stood up and walked around the hole, giving it a wide berth. “I don’t think God had anything to do with it,” he said. He fitted the lifting hook back into the steel cover and heaved it back into place, sealing the hole with a loud *clang*. “Let’s finish and get the hell out of here.”

Kelly took photos of the altar-like block, the surrounding pillars, and the closed manhole. She and Dave then made a slow and cautious circle of the room, checking the seven doors evenly spaced around the walls. The first two were locked, but the third opened into a large room about half the size of a tennis court. Kelly located and flipped one of the ubiquitous illuminated switches, turning on banks of bright lights that revealed a well-equipped chemical laboratory. Banks of glassware connected by complicated arrangements of tubing stood on several tables, while glass-fronted cabinets along the walls contained ranks of bottles and jars of chemicals and other supplies. Two powerful electric ovens stood along one wall, and a pair of stainless steel sinks on another. In one corner, looking out of place amid the gleaming glass and steel, stood a large, antique wooden cabinet. Dave pulled it open to reveal shelves of antique porcelain apothecary jars, each one with a number painted on its front. One shelf, containing about a half-dozen jars, was marked with

a hand-lettered sign reading *Custodes*; each of the remaining shelves had a similar sign that read *Materia*.

Kelly systematically photographed the contents of the room before they turned off the lights and moved on to the next door, which was also unlocked. Dave found and flipped the light switch, which revealed a large room with whitewashed stone walls and a stained concrete floor. Spaced at regular intervals around the walls were deep niches with manacles dangling from chains, and the room itself was dotted with crude instruments of torture: a medieval rack, a X-shaped wooden frame of heavy timbers with chains and cuffs hanging from embedded rings, a rack of ugly whips and canes, and several other curious devices clearly intended to inflict pain. Kelly quickly snapped more photos before they left, turning off the lights and closing the door. “We’ve seen enough,” she said firmly. “We need to get out of here *now*.”

“Let’s try one more,” Dave said. He opened the next door and found and flipped the light switch. “Oh, shit …” Kelly gasped.

The room was lined with parallel rows of floor-to-ceiling industrial steel shelves on which were stacked dozens of coffins of a wide range of age, design, and condition. Some still had clots of earth sticking to them; a few of the older wooden boxes were partially collapsed. The smell of decay hung in the still air.



“You’re right,” Dave said as Kelly snapped more pictures. “Let’s get the hell out of here. I don’t want to spend another minute in this place. Merlin can decide what he wants to do now.”

They went quickly back to the main tunnel, turning off the lights and ignoring the frantic howling still echoing from the sealed pit. They climbed the long stair back to the garage and paused, listening for any signs of life. Hearing none, they turned off the lights and carefully closed the door, then retraced their path from the garage and across the landscaped property to the steel door, which Kelly carefully locked behind them. They crossed the distance to the car in half the time it had taken before.

Back in the car, they sat for a moment in shocked silence. “That was … Jesus … that was *awful*,” Kelly commented as her equilibrium slowly returned. “I don’t think I have any more doubts about Merlin’s story.”

“At the very least, Curwen or Carson or whatever his name is a grave robber. He may be a serial killer,” Dave agreed. “I’m still not sure about the whole ‘magic’ thing, but this guy is clearly a menace.”

“What about that … *thing* … we saw in the pit?” Kelly asked. “How can you explain something like that?”

Dave was silent for a long moment. “I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t explain it, but I can tell you it shouldn’t exist. Maybe Merlin knows, but I surely don’t.” He paused for a moment before adding, “I just hope it never gets out of that hole.”

*****

At the San Francisco lodge of the Endless Night Order, Joseph Curwen listened to William Slowik’s report from Las Vegas.

“They searched the property as we expected,” Slowik said. “They came in from the rear gate and ignored the house; they entered the garage and took the stairway to the lower levels. They have seen the library, the cells, the laboratory, the shrine, and the room of inquiry.” He paused for a moment, then added, “They also saw the guard you left in form.”

Curwen nodded silently. “Good. I will return to Vegas immediately. They will report all this to Merlin, and Merlin will come, and we will destroy him. And then I will kill that damned woman and her partner.”

“You have placed us on a dangerous path, Brother Curwen,” Slowik cautioned. “What will you do if they choose to involve the authorities rather than coming themselves? It is, after all, the Order which owns the property and is at risk if what is there is exposed.”

“They will not involve the authorities,” Curwen said confidently. “How could they? They would be admitting to the crime of breaking and entering, and they have no proof to support their allegations. There were no prisoners and no remains there. They have seen one of the guards, but what of it? If they tried to describe it to suspicious authorities, they would be laughed away as fools. The rationality of the modern world and the need of the authorities to follow the law make it most unlikely that we will face problems from official quarters. And in any case, we can easily conceal all traces of the entrance to the tunnels if necessary. No, Brother Slowik, they will notify Merlin and Merlin will come.

“And we will kill them all.”

Chapter 16

Alexandria, Virginia - October 26, 2018

Dave, Kelly, and Merlin sat around the table in Kelly's office, discussing her report on the trip to Las Vegas and the photos she had taken in the tunnels beneath Curwen's house. Merlin was quiet and thoughtful as he scrolled through the pictures she had uploaded to her computer.

"After all these years," Merlin said quietly, "you have found him."

"We found something terrible," Dave said, "but what do we do about it?"

Merlin looked across the table at him. "I guaranteed at our first meeting that you would finally understand what Curwen is and why he must die. Now that you have seen what you have seen, how do you feel?"

"Like I told Kelly," Dave answered, "at the very least he's a grave robber, and he's probably a serial killer. As for that thing we saw in the pit, I … I don't know. I *do* know that nothing like that should exist. What the hell was it, anyway?"

Merlin sighed. "I am not completely sure, but from reading through Curwen's papers and exploring his catacombs after my resurrection, I believe it was once a human being, recalled from improperly prepared salts during Curwen's early, failed experiments to a terrible, ruined version of life. Such creatures could not be questioned for the information Curwen sought, as their minds and memories had been destroyed, but he was able to use them as menial slaves. Edward Hutchinson tried to use one of them to kill me in Transylvania; fortunately, I was able to eliminate it before it could harm me. Curwen had large numbers of such creatures in his catacombs; some of them, like the one you saw, he kept alive in pits ready for use, others he kept in the form of salts to be called forth at need. He called them *guards*, as opposed to the properly prepared salts which could produce real persons, which he called *material*."

Kelly scrolled through the photos and pulled up the image of the wooden cabinet in the laboratory which had contained the porcelain jars. “Look here,” she pointed. “This section of jars is labeled *custodes*, which is Latin for *guards*, and this one is labeled *materia*, or *material*.”



“Exactly like his laboratory in Providence,” Merlin said. “He has constructed a more modern and sophisticated copy of the facility I destroyed in Providence.” He thought for a moment, then went on, “The pits containing the guards, the altar, the laboratory, the torture chamber, the storage rooms, the cells … it is all as I remember. Except, of course, he now has access to electricity, modern equipment, improved chemicals, and the assistance of the Endless Night Order.”

“So, what do we do about it?” Dave asked again.

“We,” Merlin replied, “do nothing. You have done what I asked. You have found Joseph Curwen. I will now do what needs to be done.”

Kelly looked to David, and then across to Merlin. “No,” she said quietly. “I understand Dave’s concerns and I know how long you’ve been waiting for Curwen to answer for his crimes. But I know what I saw in those tunnels. I saw that … that *thing* … in the pit. And I saw a pile of clothes on the floor of one of the cells. I don’t know whose clothes those were,

but I'm sure they belonged to a woman who died in that cellar … probably naked and terrified. And you yourself told me that Curwen has been murdering the members of my family." She paused to collect herself. "I want that bastard dead. Not in court. Not in jail. *Dead*. And I want to be a part of it."

"I understand your feelings, Ms Reynolds," Merlin replied. "And you of all people have earned the right to have your vengeance against him. But you do not understand the danger of facing a creature like Joseph Curwen. He can draw on powers you cannot imagine … indeed, I fear he can call upon powers even *I* cannot imagine. He is an enemy unlike anything you have ever faced, and you must not underestimate the danger he poses."

"Maybe so," Kelly answered. "But there are still things I can do to help bring you him down. At the very least, I'm going with you when you go after him."

Merlin looked at her quietly, nodding slowly. "Very well, Ms Reynolds, I will welcome your aid, as long as you agree to act under my guidance. Nothing you have ever learned or experienced has prepared you for what you are likely to encounter."

"Noted," Kelly said simply. She turned to Dave. "What about you, Dave? Are you in?"

Grant looked up from the desk to Merlin and Kelly. "I can't be a part of anything outside the law," he said quietly. "I won't stand in your way, but I can't help. I saw what Kelly saw, and I understand what Curwen is. But he needs to answer to the law."

"Fair enough," said Merlin. "We must all make our own decisions and live with their consequences. But ask yourself whether any law crafted by men can deal with the horror Curwen represents." He turned to Kelly. "Perhaps you and I should continue our discussion separately so as not to compromise Mr Grant in the eyes of the law."

Kelly looked across at Dave. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I have to do this." Dave said nothing, just nodding sadly. He stood up and walked to the

door. “I’ll hold down the office until you’re done. Good luck,” he said as the door closed behind him.

*****

"Okay, let’s cut to the chase,” Kelly said. “How do you kill a man who’s already dead?’

“I have given that a great deal of thought,” Merlin answered. “I was able to kill Orne and Hutchinson easily enough, as they were mortal men, even though their lifespans had been unnaturally extended by perverted science. I shot Orne with a pistol, and I killed Hutchinson with a powerful curse that stopped his heart.

“Curwen, though, is different. He has been reborn from the essential salts Charles Ward prepared from his mortal remains, and so his body is like mine. As you have seen with me, he does not need to eat or drink, and his metabolism is fundamentally different from yours.” Merlin paused in thought for a moment before continuing. “I believe he has been trying to improve the chemical parts of his work, to improve the … the quality of the essential salts so as to create a more natural and lifelike body. That is, in fact, what Hutchinson was doing when I killed him. I don’t know if Curwen has been successful in that, and if he was, how it might affect his vulnerability.

“I know from my own experience that he can feel pain. You saw the torture devices in his lair, which he uses to extract information from those he has recalled to life.

“But although I know he can feel pain, I do not exactly know how his body will react to deadly violence. I don’t think he can be killed by ordinary means, but perhaps he can be stunned or rendered temporarily helpless. I believe, for example, that we could shoot him or paralyze his nervous system with an electroshock device, giving us time to recite the incantation that would separate his spirit and return his body to the essential salts prepared by Charles Ward long ago. Once that has been done, we can eliminate the remains as should have been done many years ago, by dissolving the salts in acid.”

Merlin pulled his portfolio of documents across the table and searched until he found a page which he pushed across the table to Kelly.





"These," Merlin said, "are the incantations which invoke the magic to unite the prepared essential salts with the disembodied spirit of the summoned individual, and to separate the two when desired."

Kelly theatrically squinted at the paper. "What language is this?" she asked. "How on earth is it pronounced?"

"I have no idea what language it is," Merlin answered. "I saw it in many books and manuscripts in Curwen's catacombs, in the libraries of Orne and Hutchinson, and in books in the secret collection at Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts. I do not believe it is spoken anywhere on Earth except in rituals conducted to summon terrible demons or invoke awful powers."

Kelly sat quietly, absorbing the implications of Merlin's explanation. "So," she finally said, "Curwen and his partners chemically reduced human remains to these 'essential salts,' then used the first incantation to summon spirits from … well … from wherever they were and reunite them with the recreated bodies?" Merlin nodded. "I asked you when you first came to the office and told your story whether one of us could use

those incantations." Merlin nodded again. "Could you or I kill Curwen by using the second incantation on him?"

Merlin leaned back in his chair and stroked his beard. "I believe so," he said. "But it will be very difficult, and not only because of the obvious problems of pronunciation. I do not understand how the speaking of the incantation works. For instance, I can recite the descending node incantation, but it has no effect on me … apparently, it must be said by someone else. What this means in practical terms is that if you and I are together and *you* were to recite the incantation against Curwen, it might kill me as well, although my life for Curwen's would be a good trade."

"Curwen knows we have found him, and he and his protectors are certainly on their guard. I am quite certain he deliberately left Las Vegas to give you the opportunity to search his home. He knew what you would find, he knew that you would report it to me, and he assumes it will draw me heedless into a trap. He knows he must eliminate me, because I am the only person with the knowledge and the power to kill him. I am the only person he fears."

"We suspected as much at the time," Kelly agreed. "It was just too convenient to have the place open and unguarded with so much to be found."

"Indeed," Merlin replied. "You knew that you were being followed in Las Vegas," Merlin said, "and you knew that someone had checked into your business. You have obviously been investigated and surveilled by the Endless Night Order on Curwen's behalf. They could easily have prevented you from gaining access to the house or from leaving once you had entered, but they allowed you to get in and out safely, and see things they would certainly have preferred to keep secret. They have taken a risk, probably at the encouraging of Curwen, in the hopes of drawing me out. And whether he kills me or not, he certainly intends to kill you."

"You aren't making me feel any better about this," Kelly said ruefully.

“I simply want you to understand the danger,” Merlin said. “You have seen one example – likely the smallest example – of the powers he can call forth against us. It does no good either to underestimate his powers, or to cower in fear of them.

“We must be smart. We must prepare. We must not engage Curwen on his own ground if we can possibly help it. We must try to draw *him* out, away from his sources of power and support.”

“And I guess I know how you propose to draw him out,” said Kelly. “You want us to be our own bait.”

Merlin nodded. “We are what he wants,” he said, “me more than you, at least for the moment, but he will take what he can get when he can get it. We must be always on our guard.”

*****

Dave Grant powered down his laptop and secured it in his safe. He locked his office and, with a glance at Kelly’s closed door, behind which he could hear the murmur of voices, headed out of the building. He needed a drink to help get over the events of the last few days, and decided to walk to his favorite brew pub a few blocks away.

As he walked along the street in the gathering darkness, absorbed in his own thoughts, he was approached by a young woman who asked, “Excuse me, but can you tell me how to get to the Harris Teeter store on Broad Street?”

“Sure,” he said, turning to point toward the next cross street. As he turned, the woman reached up and deftly drove a hypodermic needle into his neck. He reacted in shock to the sudden stitch of pain, and the world suddenly went black.

Chapter 17

Alexandria, Virginia and Las Vegas, Nevada - October 27, 2018

"Dave's missing," Kelly said as Merlin entered the office the following morning.

"Are you sure?"

"His car is still in the parking lot. He didn't come in this morning, there's no answer at his apartment, and his cell phone goes straight to voicemail," Kelly answered. "I went over to his place to check; the mailbox hasn't been emptied and his bed hasn't been slept in. That's not like him."

"Might he have gone home with someone last night?" Merlin suggested as he sat down.

"I doubt it," Kelly said. "He's not seeing anyone regularly that he might have gone home with, and he hasn't been to the gym since yesterday. He may have hit his favorite pub after he left here, but they won't open for a few hours yet so I can check. And even if he had picked someone up, he'd still answer his cell. Do you think Curwen may have done something to him?"

Merlin nodded. "If Mr. Grant has in fact gone missing, Curwen's allies from the Endless Night Order are almost certainly responsible. I suspected Curwen might strike out at us, but I assumed he would attack you first. You are, after all, the one against whom he has a personal grudge, although I pose the greater danger." He drummed his fingers on the desk as he pondered the situation. "I expect he hopes to lure us to him by using Mr. Grant as bait."

"Where would they have taken him?" Kelly asked.

"I think we both know, but perhaps we can find out for sure by asking the people who have been following me."

"Following you?" Kelly echoed.

“Oh, yes,” Merlin nodded. “They have been trying very hard to learn where I live, but they are not especially good at it. I’ve enjoyed watching their frustration each day when they realize I’ve evaded them yet again. There is, in fact, a fellow waiting across the street to try again. I think we should ask him.”

“And how do you propose to do that?” Kelly asked.

“Like this …”

*****

Kelly watched from the lobby a few minutes later as Merlin stepped out the door and turned left onto the busy sidewalk. A man at the bus stop across the street folded the newspaper he’d been reading and began to follow the wizard. Kelly gave him a half-block lead, then left the building and joined the parade.

A block ahead, Merlin turned into a book store, and his pursuer sat down on a bench across the street to wait, unfolding his newspaper and pretending to read while keeping an eye on the door. Kelly stopped and watched.

For a few minutes, nothing happened. Then, to her amazement, Kelly saw Merlin step from the door of a shop directly behind the watcher, who still sat gazing intently across the street. Merlin made a subtle motion with the fingers of his right hand, and the man on the bench suddenly stiffened, then relaxed, the newspaper falling from his hands and his head lolling to one side. Kelly saw Merlin’s lips moving as if in silent speech, and the man stood up and walked back down the street toward their office, with Merlin following.

Back in the office, the would-be follower sat slumped in a visitor’s chair, his head drooping forward onto his chest and his arms dangling at his sides. A thin trickle of drool ran from one corner of his mouth and onto his shirt. Merlin sat on a chair facing him, took the man’s head in his hands and stared into the vacant eyes, while Kelly searched through the contents of the man’s wallet and pockets, which revealed no identification and nothing else of interest.

After a time, Merlin released the man's head. Turning to Kelly, he said, "As I suspected, he is a member of the Endless Night Order, from their lodge in Georgetown. His instructions were to observe my movements and determine where I live.

"Fortunately for us, he was also involved in Mr. Grant's disappearance. He was one of a team of three: the first, a young woman, distracted Mr. Grant and injected him with a strong sedative which allowed this man and one other to bundle him into a waiting vehicle. He was taken to a small regional airport not far from here and flown to Las Vegas."

"They've taken him to Curwen's house," Kelly said.

"Almost certainly," Merlin agreed. "As I suspected, Curwen is using him as bait to draw us into a trap on his own ground."

"So, what do we do, now?" Kelly asked.

"First things first," Merlin responded. "We will begin by sending a message to Curwen and his enablers that they cannot ignore. Then we will go to Las Vegas and save Mr. Grant if he is still alive.

"And then we will kill them all."

Merlin turned his attention back to the man slumped in the chair. He again took the man's head in his hands, lifted it up, and stared into the blank eyes as he murmured a few brief words. He released the man's head and sat back in his chair.

The man blinked and shook his head, looking around with a puzzled expression on his face. Ignoring Merlin and Kelly, he stood up and left the room without saying a word.

"What are you doing?" Kelly asked incredulously as the man walked out. "Sending the first part of our message." Merlin replied.

A few moments later a frantic squeal of brakes and a loud crash sounded in the street below. Kelly raced to the window and looked down into the street, where a small crowd was gathering around a body that lay crushed and mangled under the wheels of a passenger bus. She looked

back at Merlin, who shrugged theatrically and said, “He apparently did not look both ways before crossing the street.”

Same Day

Late Evening

A few minutes before midnight in the Georgetown district of Washington, DC, an old man carrying a silver-headed cane stood in the shadows across the street from a handsome brownstone building, set well back from the street behind a decorative wrought iron fence. Lights showed in a few windows, but all was quiet.

Merlin stood in quiet concentration, feeling the power build as he focused on the local lodge of the Endless Night Order. He remembered the night in Prague, almost a century before, when he had stood in front of the home of Simon Orne on a similar mission. Orne was dead, Hutchinson was dead, and soon Curwen would be dead. First, though, he would send his message.

As the power grew and strengthened, a breeze began to stir the dry autumn leaves around his feet, and the decorative street lights dimmed slightly. Merlin raised his arms high, and when he felt the moment of maximum power, aimed the ornate silver head of his cane at the building across the street and murmured *“Coelo dico vobis descendit ignis!”*

And as they had in Prague, the fires of heaven answered his call.

A huge plume of fire lifted the roof from the building and blasted from each window and door. The deafening roar of the explosion was echoed by the crash of the roof falling back to crumble the shattered and burning walls below. Merlin ignored the frantic screams from the flames as he turned and walked without haste to where Kelly waited in her car a few blocks away.

As he climbed into the passenger seat, Kelly looked at him with awed respect. “Remind me never to piss you off,” she said as she pulled away from the curb, anxious to be away before the fire department arrived.

Merlin smiled thinly. “When I send a message, there is no doubt of its meaning.

“And now let us deal with Joseph Curwen.”

Las Vegas, Nevada

Dave Grant slowly drifted back to consciousness, rising through layers of nausea and vague memory. An attractive young woman had asked him for directions. He’d felt the stick of a needle in his neck, and then nothing but occasional brief moments of disorienting wakefulness, and now he was awake and knew he was in desperate trouble.

He was naked, lying on the gritty concrete floor of a tiny, dimly-lit room he recognized as one of the cells he and Kelly had explored in the tunnels under Joseph Curwen’s Las Vegas house. His wrists were handcuffed behind his back, his ankles were connected by steel cuffs, and a heavy steel collar was clamped around his neck and fastened by a short chain to a ringbolt set low in the wall of the cell. He could only lie on the cold floor; the short length of the chain prevented him from sitting or standing. He was alone, but he could hear the howling and the slippery wet thumping of the thing he knew was trapped in a pit not far away.

He pulled at the cuffs on his wrists and ankles, but knew there was no way he could work them off. He was totally, completely helpless.

Dave had no way to measure the passage of time, but after what seemed like hours he heard approaching footsteps and the sound of a key rattling in the door at the end of the hall. He twisted around as much as the chain on his neck would allow, and looked up through the bars into the face of Joseph Curwen.

“So, Mr. Grant, welcome back to my home,” Curwen said pleasantly. He unlocked the door, walked into the cell, and prodded Dave with a toe.

“Just to be clear, Mr. Grant,” Curwen went on, “I have absolutely no interest in you. In your partner, yes. Miss Reynolds is the last living

descendent of a man I have good reason to hate. That man escaped my revenge, but she will not.

“Miss Reynolds is going to come here to rescue you. She will fail, and she will die in the most terrible fashion I can devise. And then I am going to destroy Merlin as I should have done long ago.

“And you are going to die as well. Enjoy the last hours of your life.”

Curwen walked out and locked the door, the lights went out, and Dave lay curled on the cement floor in the darkness.

Curwen retraced his path through the catacombs and up into the garage, from which he entered the house and crossed to the living room where, to his surprise, William Slowik sat with an angry expression on his angular face.

“Brother Slowik,” Curwen greeted him cautiously. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“’Pleasure’ is not the word I would choose, Brother Curwen,” Slowik snapped back. “I have received word of an … accident … at our lodge in Washington. It seems that the building was completely destroyed by explosion and fire earlier tonight. Everyone within has burned to death.”

“A regrettable accident, Brother, but how does this … oh, I see.”

“Yes, I am sure you do,” Slowik said angrily. “At your request and at no small difficulty and expense, we abducted the private detective and brought him here. And now the lodge from which we accomplished this has been destroyed and all of its members are dead. And this after another member of that lodge was killed earlier in the day in an accident that was apparently random, but which now must be viewed with suspicion. What have you unleashed upon us, Brother?”

Curwen struggled to retain control of his anger. “I regret the loss of our people and their lodge,” he said, “but I could not have foreseen that Merlin would react in this way.”

“And yet he has,” Slowik shot back. “You raised him up. You know that he murdered our brothers Orne and Hutchinson, and you know that he has searched relentlessly until he found you. And now he is almost certainly on his way here … this was your intention, was it not? To lure him here so that you could eliminate him? This is not working out as you would have had us believe, Brother.”

“No, it is not,” Curwen admitted. “But we now know more of his threat. We can be on our guard. With the advantage of being on our own ground, we can defeat him. We must not give up now, because he is an existential threat to all we would accomplish.”

“In this, you are surely correct, Brother Curwen. And he is a threat that *you* have unleashed upon us.” Slowik glared at Curwen with undisguised fury. “We will continue to support you because we now have no choice. But you must be perfectly straightforward with us. There can be no secrets. We are in a fight for our lives and all that we have achieved and hope to achieve in the future. You *must* not fail.”

Chapter 18

Las Vegas, Nevada - October 28-30, 2018

The rented vehicle rolled through the darkness, west and south toward Las Vegas, at a steady ten miles over the speed limit, a rate Kelly calculated to be the upper boundary of official tolerance. She took her attention briefly from the road ahead and looked across at Merlin, who was quietly observing the passing landscape. “What’s it like to be dead?” she asked.

Merlin looked across at Kelly, who had returned her attention to the road ahead. “I wondered when you would ask,” he said. He thought for a moment, then asked, “When you sleep, do you dream?”

Kelly looked at him briefly and said, “Sometimes. Not always.”

“When you awaken after sleep without dreams, what do you remember of the past night?”

Kelly furrowed her brow in thought before answering. “Nothing.”

“Nothing,” Merlin echoed. “So it is with death.”

Kelly looked back at him, a puzzled and disappointed look on her face. “Nothing?”

Merlin sighed. “I understand your disappointment. It is natural to hope that something waits beyond death’s veil. I believe it does,” he went on, “but we cannot know.”

“What do you mean?” Kelly asked.

“The fact that I am here proves that death is not the end,” Merlin continued. “But I understand now that while the consciousness somehow lives on, it must reside in a structure which allows it to interact with the physical world. When there is no body, there is nothing to give form to the wandering consciousness. Death is thus like a deep and dreamless sleep, from which we rise only when the consciousness is reunited with the body.”

“So …” Kelly mused, “Where does the consciousness go when we die?”

“I have no idea where it goes, or what it does while it is there. It has no home, no vessel, no body in which to exist. It simply *is*. I have no memories of anything that may have happened between my death and the moment I found myself in Curwen’s laboratory. It’s as if I were asleep until Curwen created this body and somehow summoned my consciousness back to it.” Merlin shrugged theatrically. “And yet, here I am … a man dead for many hundreds of years, discussing the unknowable with you.”

Kelly drove on through the night, wondering about what would happen when they faced Joseph Curwen, and whether she would live to remember it.

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Hours later, Kelly flipped on the turn signal and slowed as she took the ramp from Interstate 15 to the Moapa Paiute Travel Plaza, about 35 miles north of Las Vegas. She rolled the rented RV into a parking spot as far from other cars as possible, and got out to stretch her legs. Merlin exited from the passenger’s side and came to stand beside her.

“Geez, my ass hurts,” Kelly said, twisting and stretching to relieve the soreness in her muscles. She had done most of the driving since they had left Virginia two days before, unwilling to let Merlin behind the wheel any more than necessary. Although to her complete surprise he had a valid drivers license, he had never driven such a large vehicle before, and she found it safer to let him take the wheel only on the longest and straightest stretches of the highways, never when they passed through cities with heavier traffic.

Although they were anxious to reach Las Vegas as quickly as possible, they had agreed it would be safer, if slower, to travel by road rather than air, which those watching for them would probably expect. Merlin, displaying an understanding of modern life that never ceased to amaze, had recommended they rent an RV in which they could travel comfortably and carry whatever they might need while avoiding hotels

where their names would be recorded and might be discovered by digital searchers. She had been even more surprised when he produced a Platinum American Express card in a name that matched his drivers license, neither of which matched his Merle Arthur alias. “As Joseph Curwen learned long ago, and I have also found, it useful to have more than one identity,” Merlin had commented dryly.

When they passed through Kansas the previous evening, Merlin suggested they stop at a busy truck stop where, with a few movements of his hands and some whispered words, he changed the license plates on their vehicle from a Virginia to a Kansas registration. “If Curwen’s associates in the Endless Night Order somehow manage to discover that we have rented a vehicle,” he explained, “they will be looking for a license plate other than this one.”

Kelly went into the rest stop to use the bathroom and get something to eat while Merlin waited at the vehicle, not needing to do either. When she returned some time later, they climbed into the RV and sat at the table in the rear while Kelly devoured her lunch.

“So,” she said between mouthfuls, “We’re almost to Vegas. I assume you have a plan?”

Merlin shook his head. “Not as such,” he replied. “We must evaluate the situation on the ground when we arrive before making any firm plans.”

Kelly shook her head. “Dave’s in terrible danger if he’s not dead already. We’ve wasted too much time as it is!”

“I agree that Mr. Grant is in danger, but we have not wasted the time. We increase the threat to all of us by moving too quickly. We are going into great danger, and it will be that much greater if we are not careful.” He folded his hands and rested his forearms on the table, leaning closer to Kelly as he continued.

“Consider the positions of Curwen and his enablers,” Merlin went on. “Curwen knows we have found him, and that you have penetrated his lair ... as he certainly allowed you to do to bait a hook for me.

“The Endless Night Order has suffered a deadly and unexpected setback in its attempt on Curwen’s behalf to find and eliminate me, a setback that has cost them lives and valuable real estate and has almost certainly shaken their confidence and their trust in Curwen. They do not know the extent of my power, and that will make them much more cautious and fearful.

“Next, they have lost track of us, which will certainly worry them. Because we moved quickly, and because we are not using identification or making financial transactions they can trace, they remain nervous and on their guard. It has been more than two full days since they have had any firm idea of where we are or what we are doing. They know we are coming, and they certainly suspect by now that we are coming by road, but they do not know when we will arrive, or what to expect when we do.

“And finally, I am quite sure that they are very angry with Curwen for exposing them to a threat they did not expect and for which they were not prepared. They have lost one of their lodges and an unknown number of people. Were I William Slowik, I would be furious with Curwen, and we may be able to use the mistrust between them to our advantage.”

“Who is William Slowik?” Kelly asked, puzzled.

“He is a regional leader of the Endless Night Order,” Merlin replied, one who maneuvers behind the scenes of world events to steer them to outcomes that will advance their interests. I learned Mr. Slowik's name from searching the mind of the man we questioned in your office. Curwen’s first contact with the Order after his resurrection in 1930 was with another such senior leader, a man named Randolph Carter at Miskatonic University in Massachusetts, who paved the way for his escape to Germany before World War II.”

Kelly pondered this information for a moment, then asked, “And exactly what *are* the interests of the Endless Night Order?”

“From what I have learned,” Merlin answered, “they seek to establish the conditions for a return to the earth of a race of beings from another dimension who would rule the world with the members of the Order as their instruments, and the people of the earth as their slaves. They seek the doorway of which I spoke in our earlier conversation.”

Kelly stared at him blankly. *“What?”*

Merlin turned his palms up in an expression of uncertainty. “Curwen and the Endless Night Order are uneasy allies following different paths to the same end. Curwen uses chemistry and the exploitation of dark energy … magic … to reanimate the dead and, through them, learn how to locate and open the door between the dimensions. The Endless Night Order is trying to use other physical and mystical means described in ancient texts to open such a gateway. Both seek an end the dangers of which they do not understand, being blinded by their lust for power. As I warned Simon Orne many years ago, Hell does not share its dominion and its power. The deluded members of the Order will be enslaved and exploited just like the rest of humanity if their efforts succeed.”

“So, we have to defeat not just one, but *both*?” Kelly said.

Merlin shook his head. “Not for the moment. The task of defeating the Endless Night Order must wait until we have eliminated the present danger, although whatever we do now will contribute to that end. We must concentrate on killing Joseph Curwen. Whatever damage we do to the Order in that effort is … to use your quaint modern expression … icing on the cake.”

“Well, shit!” Kelly sighed, crumpling the wrappers from her takeout lunch and tossing them to the floor of the RV. “Let’s go save the world. I’ll drive. You figure out how we’re going to do it.”

*****

“What do you mean, you can’t find them?” said Curwen incredulously. “Merlin, I could perhaps understand, but how can the Reynolds woman just vanish?”

William Slowik and another man sat across a table from Curwen at the Endless Night Order's Las Vegas lodge.

"Footage from a security camera shows a car registered to Kelly Reynolds parked a few blocks from the scene of the explosion that destroyed our Georgetown lodge," said Daniel Schneider, the Order's local head of security, "although the images do not show either Reynolds or Merlin themselves. There's nothing left of the lodge but a crater full of rubble still too hot to search." He passed two photographs across to Curwen, one showing the rear of a car in the distance with a circle drawn around the license plate, the other showing a heap of blackened wreckage surrounded with crime scene tape, with tendrils of smoke still rising from it. "Oddly enough," he added, "although the brothers who followed Merlin in Virginia claimed to have taken a large number of photographs of him, he does not appear on any of the images. And with their deaths, we now have no idea what he looks like.

"A small team from our lodge in Baltimore traveled to Virginia the morning after the destruction of the Georgetown lodge and examined Reynolds' and Grant's office, which was locked and deserted. Grant's car was still parked outside. They also checked Reynolds' apartment, but she was not there. As you know, the Georgetown brothers had had no success in locating where Merlin himself was living.

"They found Reynolds' car in a remote corner of the long-term parking lot at Washington Dulles Airport," he continued, "but there is no record of Reynolds or of Merle Arthur, Merlin's known alias, departing on any flight from Dulles Airport that day or since. Or, for that matter, from Reagan National Airport in DC or BWI Airport in Baltimore."

Schneider turned a page in his notebook and continued. "The team also checked bookings on Amtrak trains leaving from the Washington area, and our digital experts have checked the records of all the major car rental companies and the credit cards in Reynolds' or their firm's name. There is no record of a Kelly Reynolds or a Merle Arthur booking flights, trains, or bus tickets, drawing cash from ATMs, or renting vehicles, at least under their own names. They have simply vanished."

Slowik glared across the table at Curwen, who glared back at him and said nothing. Slowik turned back to Schneider and asked, “What is your assessment? What do you think they are doing?”

“They know we’ve taken Grant, and they’ll figure we’re holding him here,” he began. “The murder of our brother who had been following Merlin, and the destruction of the Georgetown lodge, are his way of telling us he’s declared war.

“Merlin and Reynolds are on their way here, and have used excellent operational security to cover their tracks … the woman apparently served in the Army Military Police’s Criminal Investigation Division, including undercover assignments in the United States and overseas. She learned her lessons well. They have obviously used alias documents and credit cards to rent a vehicle that we can’t trace.”

“How soon could they be here?” Slowik asked.

Schneider had already calculated the answer. “It would take a minimum of thirty-six hours to drive from the Washington area to Las Vegas by the most direct route, assuming typical traffic and minimum stops for rest and gas. If they both drive and make fewer stops, it could be a bit less. They destroyed the Georgetown lodge at midnight, three days ago. If they abandoned Reynolds’ car the same night, rented a vehicle and set out early the following morning, and shared the driving, they could be here by tonight.”

Slowik turned back to Curwen. “So, Brother Curwen, your nemesis is on his way. In addition to murdering our Brothers Orne and Hutchinson, he has destroyed our Georgetown lodge and killed all of its members. What do you suggest we do?”

Curwen sat silently, his mind racing. “At the moment, there is little we *can* do,” he said quietly. “I may be able to sense Merlin if he is nearby, but not from any significant distance.

“He obviously knows the location of the house, and I expect he knows the location of this facility as well. He will not attack the house outright, because they will wish to rescue Grant and kill me, so the house and

what lies beneath are probably safe for the moment." He took a breath and continued. "But given his destruction of the lodge in Georgetown, I suggest you temporarily abandon this facility and send the local brothers to other locations until the danger has passed."

"You want us to run and hide?" Schneider asked incredulously.

"You've seen what he can do," said Curwen. "Discretion is the better part of valor. I don't know if Merlin can be stopped, but I *do* know that you cannot do it unless you are extraordinarily lucky. It serves no purpose to sacrifice your people unnecessarily, even if the lodge itself is lost. Let me draw him to the catacombs beneath my house, where I can face him on my own ground and have a better chance to kill him."

Schneider looked to Slowik, who sat drumming his fingers nervously on the table, an angry frown twisting his lean features. "I'm afraid Brother Curwen is right," Slowik said. "There is nothing here that is vital to our other efforts, should it be lost, but we must protect our brothers and sisters from harm." He turned to Curwen.

"Very well, we will proceed on our present course." Turning to Schneider, he said, "Order all the members who live or work in this building to disperse. If they choose to go to local hotels, the Order will pay for their lodging, but I suggest they go to lodges in other cities if possible."

Schneider nodded, but added, "Dispersing the members is a good idea, but we should keep a security team in place to protect both facilities if possible."

"Do as you think best," Slowik said, "but make sure as many of our people as possible are safe." Schneider nodded and closed his notebook, then stood up and left the room without acknowledging Curwen.

Slowik turned back to Curwen. "While I am willing to continue following your advice for the moment, Brother, I have diminishing confidence in your abilities. You have done brilliant work in the exploitation of the dead toward our mutual goals, but you have also unleashed a terrible danger you have not proven able to predict or control. I am placing a

great deal of trust in you that I am no longer sure is warranted. If you fail to eliminate the threat Merlin poses, you threaten to destroy all that the Order has worked to achieve down the centuries."

He looked directly into Curwen's dead eyes, his own hard and cold. "If you fail to eliminate Merlin, and survive the attempt, I will kill you myself."

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Joseph Curwen was seething with rage as he pulled his car through the gate, which rolled closed behind him as he drove into the garage, parked, and reset the alarms. He sat in the car for a few minutes, listening to the ticking of the cooling engine and calming himself as he considered what to do. He had been shocked by the destruction of the Georgetown facility; although he knew Merlin had murdered Orne and Hutchinson and destroyed their homes, he had never seen evidence of what had actually happened, and the reduction of the Georgetown mansion to smoldering wreckage was terrifying. As he gradually calmed, he considered his options.

Despite what he had told Slowik, his confidence in his ability to defeat Merlin was low. His knowledge of magic was deep, but limited in scope when compared to what Merlin had demonstrated. He could manipulate the energy of the universe to recreate the bodies of the dead and unite them with the disembodied shades of their owners, but this was of little use in defending himself against the awesome power Merlin had shown he could wield.

He could call up more guards from the imperfect salts he had created early in his work and stored against later need. They were hideous and brutal allies; useful, to be sure, but difficult to control and probably of little use against Merlin and, other than shock value, against Reynolds.

At the most extreme need, he could summon powers from Outside, as he had in 1771 when the mob had stormed his Pawtuxet farm. But that had, of course, backfired when the creature which had appeared in answer to his frantic plea, rather than saving him from the mob, had killed many

of the rioters before turning on Curwen himself. The terror and agony of death at the hands of the hideous being angered at being called upon for aid it was unwilling to give was not something he wished to experience again.

Curwen followed the stairs from the garage to the catacombs, to the hallway of cells where Dave Ewing was imprisoned. He unlocked the outer door, turned on the lights, and walked slowly to the last cell, where his naked prisoner lay curled in chains on the floor, shivering in a pool of urine.

He kicked Ewing savagely, rolling the helpless man onto his back so he could look into his eyes.

“Your friends are on the way to rescue you,” he hissed. “They will fail. I will destroy Merlin and have my revenge on your friend

“And you will watch it all before you die."

Curwen kicked Ewing once again and walked out, shutting off the lights and leaving his prisoner in darkness once again.

Chapter 19

Las Vegas, Nevada - October 30-31, 2018

Upon arriving late the previous evening, Kelly and Merlin had driven directly to an RV park in Boulder City, southeast of Las Vegas. They had booked a spot from the road, using Merlin's alias name and credit card, after deciding they would need to rest from the long drive before trying to move against Curwen and his enablers. Kelly had slept fitfully while Merlin, who did not need to sleep, remained awake and on guard.

Early the following morning they sat across the table from each other in the back of the RV, considering their next move.

The park, among its other amenities, offered free WiFi, and Kelly used her laptop to call up maps of the area. She was familiar with the area around Curwen's house, but now called up a map to locate the Endless Night Order's lodge from the address Merlin had provided. It proved to be located on the edge of Seven Hills, an upscale area south of Las Vegas proper and roughly halfway between where they were parked and Curwen's home in Desert Edge. The lodge was at the outermost edge of the development at the end of a cul-de-sac, backing up to the Sloan Canyon Conservation Area.

Merlin studied the map carefully, and sat back. "Mr. Grant is surely being held at Curwen's house, but I think we should evaluate and negate the threat of his allies' lodge first," he said. "This must be done carefully, as they certainly know what you look like. Can you disguise your appearance?"

"No problem," Kelly answered. "I won't need anything too exotic - a wig and glasses should do. What do you have in mind?"

"We should see what it looks like from the ground," Merlin said. "But not from this vehicle ... it's too big and would attract too much attention. Let's check with the office and see if they can arrange a cheap rental car for a day or two."

Kelly nodded and stood up, but Merlin motioned her to sit down. “Let me,” he said, and ducked quickly out of the RV. He was back a few minutes later. “No problem,” he reported. “There’s a used car dealer just down the road, within walking distance, and they offer low-cost rentals for local use ... I believe the term he used was ‘rent-a-wreck.’ I will see to renting a wreck while you alter your appearance.”

“I can get the car,” Kelly offered.

“It’s better if I do it,” Merlin replied. “Your license and credit card are traceable, while mine are not. In any case,” he added, “Those with whom I deal will not remember me after the transaction.”

“Good point,” Kelly said, “Go for it.”

Merlin returned about an hour later, driving a nondescript midsized sedan. He entered the RV and stopped suddenly, surprised by a stranger who asked, “Well, what do you think?”

Kelly had tucked her thick chestnut hair under a blond wig and filled out her face with padding in her cheeks. “Very nice!” Merlin said admiringly. “I didn’t expect you to be able to change so much so quickly.”

Kelly shrugged and pointed to a small case that lay open on the table. “I always have a few things I might need for a quick disguise. Shall I make a few changes for you, too?”

"No need,” Merlin answered. “Curwen may or may not recognize me after all these years, but it does not matter. It is more important right now to confuse his allies. They surely have photos of you sent from Virginia, but none of them has seen me. Their members in Virginia who have seen me are all dead, and by now they have learned that none of the photographs they have actually show my image ... a benefit of my ability to manipulate light and energy. I won’t need a disguise.”

“Okay,” Kelly said. “Shall we go?”
Traffic was light, and they reached the Seven Hills neighborhood less than twenty minutes later. Because the lodge was situated at the end of a

long cul-de-sac with only a few other buildings, they had planned for a single quick pass at the speed limit, without stopping.

Kelly made the final turn into the winding street, which ended in a turnaround loop after about a half-mile. The lodge was at the very end of the street, hidden behind a tall stone wall pierced by a wide, decorative wrought-iron gate; it was similar to the layout of Curwen's property.

As they circled the cul de sac, they had a brief glimpse through the gate of a multi-story building in the graceful southwest style. No cars were visible in the driveway, and there were no other signs of life.

"What do you think?" Kelly asked as they returned to the RV.

"There didn't seem to be anyone there, but it was impossible to tell from such a quick pass," Merlin replied. Kelly nodded agreement, then added, "After you destroyed their lodge in Georgetown, they won't want to draw any threat to this one. If I were planning security and knew we were on the way, I'd send all of my non-essential personnel away for their protection until they've disposed of us. We don't know if this location has any particular value to the Order other than a social and administrative one, but we *do* know that there's a valuable facility beneath Curwen's property."

"The question is which of the two properties it is more important to protect." Merlin turned to Kelly. "Your thoughts?"

"As you said, Dave is almost certainly being held at Curwen's place, and Curwen will stay close to home while he has a hostage. He won't want to abandon everything we saw down there." She thought for a moment. "I think the Order will hunker down and protect its own interests and let Curwen deal with us on his own. They'll help with security, but they'll leave the heavy lifting to Curwen."

"I agree," Merlin said. "We will deal with Joseph Curwen tonight. But we will not leave without reminding his friends that they have chosen the wrong enemy." He paused for a moment, then asked, "Did you bring the drone you purchased before your last trip?"

“Yes,” Kelly answered. “It was still packed and ready to go, so I loaded it along with everything else.”

“Good,” said Merlin. “I believe we can make use of it again.”

*****

Kelly removed her pistol from its lock box and ejected the magazine. Confirming that it was full, she slammed it back into the pistol, racked a round into the chamber, and engaged the safety before sliding the weapon into her shoulder holster. She slipped two more fully-loaded magazines into each of the cargo pockets on her pants, and a can of pepper spray and a small, powerful flashlight into loops on her belt. She was dressed completely in black, with a black knit cap covering her hair. Beside her in the rear of the RV, Merlin had also dressed in black, but carried only his cane with the ornate silver head. Kelly had darkened her face with greasepaint, although Merlin declined to do so.

Earlier that afternoon, Kelly had carefully checked their preparations for the assault on the Curwen house and the Endless Night Order’s lodge. She verified that the batteries of the drone and its control unit were fully charged, then checked the box of high-intensity highway flares, coils of nylon rope, heavy-duty bolt cutter, and rolls of duct tape Merlin had bought earlier in the day at three different hardware stores and stowed in the trunk. She had also instructed the wizard to stop at a gas station and make sure the tank was topped off.

Merlin was sitting silently with his eyes closed when Kelly came back into the RV. She sat across from him and waited until his eyes opened. “Everything’s ready,” she said. “How about you?”

“Yes,” the magician said simply. He looked at Kelly’s pistol in its holster. “It’s a good idea to bring your weapon,” he said, “although it may be of less use than it otherwise might.”

“I qualified as a marksman with every weapon I trained on in the Army,” Kelly replied. “I hit what I aim at.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Merlin replied, “but your gun may not be of use against all the dangers we will face.” He paused, then said, “Do not shoot at anything that is not human.”

“Why not?” Kelly asked.

“For one thing,” Merlin replied, “I do not know what effect bullets will have on a target that is not alive, like the creature you saw on your earlier visit, or Curwen himself. As for Curwen, if bullets don’t kill him, they will surely distract him with the shock of impact. If you shoot him, do not shoot only once … shoot as often as you can to knock him down and distract him long enough for me to say him down with the Incantation of Descent. His servants like the thing you saw in the pit are similar. Bullets are probably useless against them; fire is better, but sadly, we neglected to bring a flamethrower. Save your bullets for guard dogs or human guards who may be present. If you can distract Curwen with bullets, do it, but do not assume you can kill him. Leave everything else to me.”

“All you have is that cane,” Kelly observed.

“It’s all I need,” Merlin said. “As an antenna, it will serve to focus energy. And at need, it can break the hardest head. I daresay our opponents will have as much need to fear my cane as your gun.”

“We’ll see,” said Kelly skeptically. She looked at the clock, which showed a few minutes after two AM. It was October 31st … Halloween … she realized. She looked across to Merlin. “Ready?”

“I am,” he answered. “Let’s go save the world.”

*****

Gary Boyle waited impatiently in the darkness behind the lodge, sitting on a camp chair under a spreading tree. Dan Schneider and Dave Hornicheck were stationed at other locations on the grounds, waiting for the arrival of a dangerous enemy of whom they knew little.

Boyle was pissed. He was pissed at that secretive bastard Curwen, safe in the tunnels under his house with secret experiments to which only

Slowik and Schneider were privy, and he was especially pissed at Slowik for supporting Curwen's work. Maybe it was important to the Order in some way, but his team was responsible for the security of *this* lodge, and Schneider's report on what had happened in Georgetown had shaken him. Not being able to locate that fucking magician and his accomplice worried him still more. He was sure they would soon be here, if they were not here already, and although he wasn't particularly worried about the woman, the power this Merlin bastard had demonstrated had him spooked.

The earpiece of his radio crackled with Schneider's voice from his position on the other side of the grounds. "Gary and Dave, check in."

"Gary here, all quiet," Boyle said.

"Dave here, all quiet," came Hornicheck's voice from his position near the gate.

Boyle adjusted the volume on his radio, and stood up to stretch his tired muscles. He was in mid-stretch when he suddenly became aware of a low, whirring noise.

He keyed the radio again and looked around carefully as the sound grew louder. "Dan, Dave, strange noise here. Checking it out."

Boyle checked to ensure the safety on his automatic rifle was off. He was scanning the area carefully when his peripheral vision spotted movement above him. He looked up and immediately saw the source of the sound – a small drone flying slowly around the second floor of the house, pausing at each window before gliding on to the next.

"Shit!" he muttered. He keyed the radio again. "Dan, Dave, there's a drone circling the house, second floor level. It's stopping at each window … looks like it's carrying a camera."

"Keep eyes on it," crackled Schneider's voice in his earpiece. "I'm coming. Dave, hold your position and wait for instructions."

The drone had stopped moving and was hovering in front of a window Boyle knew opened into Slowik's office. Slowik was not there, of course; he was with Curwen.

Schneider rounded the corner of the house, and Boyle pointed up at the hovering drone. "Whattaya think?" he asked.

"They're casing the place, what do *you* think?" Schneider replied curtly.

The drone slowly began to rotate, and the men could see the aperture of the camera hung beneath it depress to point at them.

"Yeah, fucker, we see you, too!" Boyle muttered, and lifted a middle finger in salute.

The drone hovered for a moment, then the whirring noise suddenly increased in pitch as the craft tipped forward and zoomed toward the two men, aiming straight for Boyle's head.

"Son of a bitch!" he shouted, stumbling backward as the whirling rotors of the drone sliced past his face before the little craft sped back upward and stopped, hovering watchfully above them. Dave Hornicheck came running from his position, his pistol drawn, and Schneider shouted, "Don't shoot!"

Hornicheck lowered his gun as the three men stared up at the drone hovering above them. "They can't be controlling it from very far away," he said. "I'll check the street out front."

As Hornicheck ran back around the house toward the gate, Schneider pulled out his cell phone and thumbed the stored number for Wilhelm Slowik. When Slowik answered, Schneider quickly summarized the situation and asked for instructions.

"The drone's a diversion," Slowik said. "See if you can locate them nearby; if not, they may be on the way here. Report back when you know more."

Schneider broke the connection and put the phone away. The drone still hovered overhead, motionlessly watching. He keyed his radio. “Dave, what do you see out front?”

There was no answer.

“Shit!” Schneider spat. “Dave, check in now!”

There was still no answer. He turned to Boyle. “Go see where Hornicheck is … carefully.”

Boyle headed toward the gate with his rifle at the ready, going around the house to approach the gate from the opposite direction to that taken by Hornicheck. The drone sat unmoving, its camera still looking down at Schneider, who stared back at it, equally unmoving.

Boyle reached the front corner of the house and peered cautiously around it toward the gate, which was still closed. There was no sign of the other man. “Dave!” he hissed loudly. “Where the fuck are you?”

“I don’t think he can hear you,” a woman’s voice said from behind him.

Boyle whirled around and caught a brief glimpse of a figure dressed all in black in the split second before he felt blaze of pain, and his world went dark.

Behind the house, Schneider glanced worriedly from the hovering drone to the two corners of the house around which his men had gone. Neither Boyle nor Hornicheck was now answering his calls. As he wondered what to do, the drone suddenly started to move, drifting away first slowly, then with increasing speed until it vanished over the wall and into the darkness.

Schneider jogged to the rear door of the house and was about to pull it open when he felt something cold and hard press into the back of his neck, and a woman’s voice said, “You’re the security? You’re not very good, are you?” The pressure on his neck increased and the voice said, “Face the wall, lean forward, and spread your hands and feet. Any other move and you die.”

He complied, and felt a hand expertly take his gun, radio, and cell phone, as well as the switchblade knife tucked into his sock. A moment later he felt the gun being withdrawn from his neck, and the disembodied voice said, “On the ground, face down, hands behind your back. Do it now.” He did, and felt thick plastic flexcuffs zip tightly around his wrists.

“Up on your knees.”

Schneider rolled over with some effort and struggled to his knees, and for the first time saw his assailant. “Kelly Reynolds,” he said. “You’re dead, bitch.”

“I’m not the one that’s kneeling,” Kelly said. She pulled out a cell phone from a pocket of her cargo pants and punched in a number. “Come on in,” she said.

She stared silently and expressionlessly at Schneider for a few minutes, until the sound of footsteps announced the approach of Merlin, who stood beside her and peered down at the captive. “I loved flying the drone,” he said to Kelly. “Sometimes your modern technology is so much more entertaining than magic.” He turned to the man who knelt sullenly in the grass, glaring at them. “So, my friend,” he said pleasantly. “Let us discuss the whereabouts of Mr. Grant.”

“Fuck you!” Schneider spat.

Merlin shook his head. “I am offended that you would use such language in front of a lady,” he said. Schneider started to say something else, but Merlin made a waving motion with his fingers and the words turned to a harsh gargling noise in the man’s throat. He turned to Kelly. “Where are the others?”

“Around front. They’re both a little out of sorts at the moment,” she said.

“I see,” Merlin nodded. “Can you bring them here?”

“It’ll take a few minutes,” Kelly said. “Neither one is in any condition to walk.”

“No matter,” the magician said. “I’ll fetch them.” He walked around the house and returned a few minutes later with Hornicheck and Boyle. The two unconscious men lay on their backs, sliding feet-first along the ground behind Merlin, their heads bouncing over the uneven ground. The wizard steered them with gestures of his cane to lie near the kneeling Schneider.

Kelly used plastic flexcuffs to fasten each man’s bound wrists to his ankles in a brutally tight hogtie. When she was done, she stood back and made a gesture of invitation to Merlin. “All yours,” she said.

Merlin knelt on one knee next to one of the men and took his head in his hands in a gesture Kelly had seen before. He remained there for a moment, then moved to the other man and did the same. He then sat down on the ground in front of the kneeling Schneider.

“We do not have a great deal of time,” he said, “and I have no particular desire to spend any more of it than necessary dealing with you. You will tell me where Mr. Grant is being held. I will know if you lie, and you will regret it. So … where is Mr. Grant?” He waved his fingers again, and Schneider promptly spat at him and again shouted, “Fuck you!”

Merlin stood up and pointed the head of his cane at Schneider’s chest. The man’s eyes bulged and he began to shake, and screams turned to strangled gargles in his throat. He fell to the ground, thrashing and rolling as he tried to scream.

After a few moments, Merlin waved a hand and Schneider lay still, gasping for breath. Merlin stood up and held his hand above the man; he turned his hand palm-up and raised it slowly upward. Schneider rose into the air and stopped with his feet dangling a few inches above the ground. He vomited spectacularly, missing both Merlin and Kelly, who watched from a safe distance.

“I ask you again, where is Mr. Grant?” Merlin said patiently, then added, “I suggest you not answer with any more obscenities.”

Schneider hung gasping in the air, “F…”

Merlin shook his head and again waved his fingers again for silence. “I have not lived so long and endured all I have to listen to such language.” He stretched his hand out toward the dangling man and slowly clenched his fingers into a tight fist. Schneider’s face turned purple and he gagged and choked, eyes bulging. After a few moments, Merlin opened the fist and Schneider coughed and gasped as he struggled to breathe. Merlin stepped forward, reached out and gripped Schneider’s head in his hands, and the man instantly stopped struggling and hung limp in the air. Merlin looked into the man’s unfocused eyes for a few long moments, then released his head and stepped back. Schneider fell heavily to the ground and lay still.

Merlin turned to Kelly. “As we suspected, Mr. Grant is at Curwen’s home, along with Curwen and Slowik. There are three more armed men there as well. The other members of the local order have dispersed for their safety; Mr. Schneider, here, is their local chief of security, and the others work for him.”

“They aren’t very good,” Kelly observed.

“Indeed,” Merlin agreed. He looked down at the three unconscious men and considered his options. “For the moment, these three represent no threat. We will leave them and deal with Curwen and recover Mr. Grant.”

“And then?” Kelly asked.

Merlin shrugged. “They have chosen their side poorly. Once we have killed Joseph Curwen, we will see to these men and this place. I will make sure the lesson of Georgetown is clearly understood.”

Merlin floated their prisoners to the back door of the house, which Kelly opened with a hard kick from her booted foot. Once they had been placed in different rooms, Kelly used lengths of nylon rope to fasten a tight noose around each man’s neck, which she then secured to his bound feet so that any movement would tighten the noose.

This done, she joined Merlin and the two of them walked out into the night.

Chapter 20

Las Vegas, Nevada - October 31, 2018

Kelly pulled the car to a crunching stop on the gravel berm of the road behind Curwen's home, a few hundred yards beyond the steel door through which she and Dave had entered only a few nights before. The desert night was slowly drawing toward morning, still some hours away, and the moon and stars were obscured by clouds that scudded across the sky. All was quiet.

She turned to Merlin. "How do you want to play this?"

"There's no point in stealth," he answered. "Curwen knows we are here, and he knows by now that the men at the other location are lost. He's ready for us. The good news is that we know there are only five enemies here: Curwen and Slowik and their three guards. I suspect all three guards are up here, either roaming the grounds or hiding in the garage. Curwen and Slowik are almost certainly below and on their own ground, but we have a small advantage in that we know the layout, thanks to your earlier visit.

"I know we can handle the guards, and I am not concerned with Slowik, who almost certainly has no magical abilities, although I expect he will be armed. How capable he is, we cannot know."

"I don't know how Curwen will try to defend himself," Merlin went on. "He has some magical skill, but I doubt it is as well-developed and exercised as my own, and I expect that it is focused more on the needs of his necromancy than on broader capabilities. I think he will depend on Slowik and his nonhuman guards to distract us long enough for him to try to kill me with the Incantation of Descent. I also believe that if that fails, he will try to save himself the way he did when the mob stormed his farm in 1771, by calling down forces from other dimensions. This did not work well for him then, and might not this time, either, but there is no telling what aid a man like him may try to call upon in the most dire need … nor can we depend on it to turn on Curwen now as it did then."

Merlin turned to Kelly and asked, “Have you practiced the incantation as I asked?”

“I have,” Kelly answered, “but I have no idea if my pronunciation is any good. It’s all gobbledygook.” She reached into a pocket on the front of her vest and pulled out the laminated index card on which she had printed

Ogthrod Ai’f

Geb’l – ee’h

Yog-Sothoth

‘Ngah’ng ai’y

Zhro

“Your great grandfather pronounced it well enough to reduce Curwen to dust,” Merlin replied, “and a simple-minded, uneducated janitor was able to say it well enough to bring him back. I found a letter from Edward Hutchinson in Curwen’s files in which he alluded to Curwen’s ability to craft the incantations so that another person could use them successfully … whether or not that person needed any magical abilities, he did not say. In any event, I believe it is less important to pronounce the incantation properly than to focus on the intended result.” He paused for a moment, then asked, “Have you read the Harry Potter stories?”

“Harry Potter? The boy who was a wizard? Yes, of course!” Kelly answered, puzzled. “Why on earth do you ask that?”

Merlin answered with a rare, broad grin. “I have greatly enjoyed reading your stories of magic and magicians, most of which are laughable. But I believe that the author of the Harry Potter stories stumbled unwittingly on a grain of truth. There was a scene in one of the stories in which young Harry attempted to cast a so-called “unforgiveable curse,” which would cause intense pain in the person at whom it was aimed. He was unsuccessful, and his target laughingly told him it would only work if he *really meant it*, not if he just mouthed the words. I believe that may well

be the case with Curwen's incantations ... that the *intent* is at least as important as the words that are spoken.

"But no matter what happens, one of us *must* say the words. I believe the best case would be if you could distract Curwen so that I can recite the incantation myself. But should anything happen to me, you *must* be prepared to do it on your own. Do not wait. Do not give him a chance to defend himself. Do not allow him to speak or listen to anything he says. Do not allow your desire to save your friend to delay your instant action. You may be sure that Curwen will not hesitate." He paused for a moment, then added, "Remember that this man has methodically eliminated every other member of your family, and knows that you and I have caused him and his allies much destruction and death. Should he take you alive, you can be sure that you will meet a most unpleasant end."

"Well, that puts things in perspective," Kelly said. "What about the other guy ... Slowik?"

"Kill him on sight. He may be angry with Curwen, but he has every reason to protect him, and he will certainly try to kill us." Merlin smiled thinly and added, "In any case, when we have finished our work, he will have nothing to return to."

Kelly drew her pistol, released the safety, and slid it back into its holster. She was silent for a moment, then looked hard at Merlin before extending her hand. "If things go south, I want you to kill me. Deal?"

Merlin took her warm hand in his cold one and gave it a firm shake. "Agreed. But I am quite sure it is not you who will die."

"And now let us go and kill Joseph Curwen once and for all."

*****

The steel door was locked, as it had been before, but before Kelly could jimmy the lock, Merlin signaled her to wait. He put his forehead and right hand against the wall and stood quietly for a few moments, then turned to her and said softly, "There are two men in the yard - one is

watching this door, and the other is on the far side of the house, watching the front gate. They appear to be rather heavily armed." He smiled and said, "I believe I will handle them myself this time, if you don't mind." Kelly cocked her head questioningly and Merlin said, "It's time they saw what I can do." He smiled again, and said, "I'll be back shortly." He turned back to the wall and, without breaking his pace, stepped straight through it and disappeared. Kelly, no longer surprised by things he was able to do, drew her pistol and waited.

A few minutes went by, during which Kelly listened closely for any sounds beyond the wall. All was quiet until she heard the sound of the door being unlatched and swung open. Merlin poked his head through the opening and motioned her to come in; he closed the door softly behind her and pointed to a spot near the house, where two figures lay motionless on the ground. "They are no longer a threat," he said, then added, "I believe the third man is in the garage."

Rather than entering the garage as she and Dave had before, Kelly circled the yard in a low crouch, leading Merlin toward the sliding glass door into the house proper. She flattened herself against the wall and gently tested the handle, not entirely surprised when the door slid quietly open without resistance. Studying the way ahead in the dim light from outside, she crept quickly but carefully through the door and into the house, with Merlin close behind.

They were in a spacious and comfortably appointed living room. Across the room, stairs led to a second-floor balcony while a hallway led toward the front of the house. To their right was a formal dining room, beyond which a modern kitchen could be seen. They headed to the right, Kelly slowly swinging her pistol left and right as they crept toward the dining room and the kitchen.

"The third guard is here," Merlin suddenly whispered.

Merlin's warning had no sooner registered when an alarm suddenly went off in Kelly's brain as she heard a furtive movement behind and above them. Shoving Merlin to one side, she dived, rolled and fired twice in a single, fluid motion. On the second floor balcony, a man clad

in black and carrying a military-style rifle flew backward, hit the wall, and slid to the floor, leaving a streak of blood in his wake.

Merlin clambered back to his feet as Kelly ran quickly up the stairs to check the man she'd shot. He was dead, her bullets having shredded his heart. Kelly picked up the man's rifle, searched his body quickly for other weapons, then went back down the stairs to where Merlin waited, leaning on his cane. "I thought you said he was in the garage," she said accusingly.

"He was," Merlin replied. "Perhaps he heard my dispatch of his friends and decided to change position. That was quite nice shooting, in any event" he commented.

Kelly shrugged. "He was noisy, and he was standing in full view on the landing," she said dismissively. "And like I told you before, I hit what I aim at."

She slung the dead man's rifle over her shoulder and led the way through the dining room and kitchen and into a small utility room beyond, where the door to the garage stood open. The huge garage was no longer empty, but partly occupied by a candy-red Chevy Corvette Kelly assumed was Curwen's. The door which led to the descending staircase was open, and the lights were on. Kelly turned to Merlin and whispered, "They've left the welcome mat out."

Merlin stood for a moment with his eyes closed and his brow furrowed. Finally he opened his eyes and said, "I don't sense anyone or anything close by. We can proceed."

Kelly led the way to the top of the stairs, where Merlin stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "I believe I should go first until we reach the lower level." They switched places, and Merlin started down the stairs, moving slowly and carefully, his cane stretched out before him; Kelly followed with her pistol in her right hand and her left hand lightly resting on the wizard's shoulder.

They reached the bottom without incident and stepped into the broad passage that led to the larger chamber; the tunnel was empty and the door at the far end was closed.

“We need to clear each room along this tunnel,” Kelly whispered, and Merlin nodded agreement.

Together they moved from door to door along the way, carefully checking each room in turn. If anything had changed from her previous visit, Kelly couldn’t see it. They finally came to the last door on the right, which led to the cells. Merlin pulled it open and Kelly stepped through with her pistol at the ready, but there was no one in the hallway and the cells were empty, although one had a drying puddle on the floor. The smell of urine was strong.

Back in the main tunnel, Kelly and Merlin stood before the door to the chamber beyond. “They are here,” said Merlin softly. “We must be ready for anything when the door opens. You remember your instructions?” Kelly nodded and said, “You remember your promise?” Merlin nodded back, then reached down and shoved open the door.

The large, vaulted room was as Kelly remembered it, with its dim lighting around the edges and the spotlights focused on the altar and the seven pillars that surrounded it. What was different was that the pit in which she and Dave had seen the … *guard*, Merlin had called it … was open, the heavy steel lid lying on the floor. Beside the open pit stood a tall, gaunt man she assumed was Wilhelm Slowik. Dave Grant, naked and gagged, his hands fastened behind his back, stood in front of him, his toes at the edge of the opening and Slowik’s left arm tight around his neck, right arm holding a large knife with its point dimpling the flesh at Dave’s neck.

“One step closer and I push him into the pit!” the man hissed. From the opening, the squealing and thumping noises grew louder and more shrill. Dave was bathed in sweat, and his eyes bulged in horror.

Kelly kept her gun pointed at the level of Slowik’s hidden chest while Merlin calmly tapped his silver-headed walking stick on the floor. “Mr.

Slowik," he said quietly. "You should step away from Mr. Grant and leave while you still can."

"I think not," Slowik hissed, shaking Grant menacingly. "You know what happens if I push him in."

"I know very well," Merlin replied calmly. "I also know that if Mr. Grant should fall into the pit, you will be right behind him."

"You would not sacrifice his life for my death," Slowik sneered.

Kelly kept her pistol trained on Slowik, waiting for a clear shot. Suddenly she heard Merlin's voice in her head, although his lips had not moved and his gaze remained focused on Slowik. *He will step to his right ... be ready.*

She automatically shifted her aim as Slowik suddenly stiffened and appeared to struggle with himself. As if fighting an unwanted impulse, he released his grip on Dave, dropped the knife, stepped slightly to his right, and Kelly fired.

Slowik spun around and staggered as the shot took him in the shoulder, but as he started to fall, he threw himself forward against Dave Grant, who teetered on the edge of the pit and pitched forward. His head struck the rim of the opening with an ugly sound, and he slid over the edge and disappeared with a muffled scream of terror. From the bottom of the pit, the squealing sounds changed to a terrifying roar.

"Dave!" Kelly screamed, and rushed toward the open pit. Merlin ignored her, instead scanning the seven doors spaced around the room, all save one of which were tightly closed. Kelly threw herself to the floor next to the opening and pointed her pistol into the pit. When she saw what was happening below, she emptied the magazine, screaming all the while. She was still screaming and pulling the trigger on the empty pistol as Merlin pulled her away from the opening and shook her roughly.

"Kelly! *Kelly!*" he shouted. "Your friend is gone! We must protect ourselves! We must find Curwen."

Kelly stopped screaming, and the only sound was a horrible wet tearing noise from the depths of the pit. She looked at Merlin, her eyes blank, then turned to where Slowik writhed on the floor, a gaping wound in his shoulder. Without saying a word, she dropped the empty pistol, grabbed the wounded man by a leg and dragged him screaming across the stones toward the pit.

Merlin seized Kelly by her other arm and pulled her away from Slowik, who curled into a fetal bundle. “Leave him!” the wizard hissed. “You can deal with him after we find Curwen – you must *focus*!” She swayed drunkenly for a moment, then picked up the pistol, ejected the empty magazine, and slapped another into place. She racked the first round into the chamber, then turned back to Merlin. “Where is that fucking bastard?”

*****

Crouched low on the other side of the altar, Joseph Curwen cursed at the gunshot and the screams. He had intended to use Slowik’s threat to distract Merlin and Reynolds, allowing him to get close enough to use the Incantation of Descent to eliminate the wizard. He had long ago learned that the incantation had to be delivered as close as possible to the subject; not only that, but it had to be delivered in a live human voice – for some reason he had never been able to determine, a recording which could be delivered from a safe distance had no effect. Alone now and with two enemies closing in, Curwen made a sudden and desperate decision. The loss of his allies and guards and the evidence of the wizard’s power made him grasp for a last, desperate option. He took a deep breath, spread his arms wide, and began the rhythmic chant of a desperate call for help from the most terrible of his potential allies …

“Per Adonai Eloim, Adonai Jehova,

Adonai Sabaoth, Metraton on Agla Mathon

Verbum pythonicum, mysterium salamandrae,

Conventus sylvorum, antra gnomorum

Daemonia Coeli Gad, Almousin, Gibor, Jehosua,

Evam, Zariatnatnik –

Veni, Veni, Veni …"

There was a moment of silence, then suddenly the world seemed to shake as a mighty voice answered, thundering like the deepest register of the world's biggest organ from a distance both unimaginably distant and terrifyingly close,

DIES MIES JESCHET BOENE DOESEF DOUVEMA ENITEMAUS

In the center of the room, halfway between the surface of the altar and the curving vault of the ceiling, a sphere of total darkness sprang into existence against the dim light cast from fixtures in the walls, ceiling, and the surrounding pillars. It was the deepest black Kelly believed could ever exist, the unimaginably intense black of a hole torn in the very fabric of reality. The sphere slowly expanded and as it grew, a wind began to blow toward it, slowly at first and with increasing power; soon she was forced to lean back against the roaring pressure to remain on her feet. Beside her, Merlin stood braced on his walking stick, his hair and beard blowing toward the growing darkness.

Behind the altar, beyond the growing void, Joseph Curwen stood, his arms outstretched, his chanting barely audible above the growing roar of the wind pouring into the void. "Shoot!" Merlin shouted. "Shoot him!"

Kelly fired three quick rounds at Curwen, fighting to hold her aim against the increasing strength of the wind. On the other side of the altar, Curwen stood unmoving and unhurt, his chanting continuing. Merlin sidled haltingly around to his right, trying to move around the corner of the altar to face Curwen directly even as the other man moved in the opposite direction to maintain distance between them. Kelly fired again, and this time appeared to strike Curwen, who staggered slightly and stopped chanting, but remained upright.

The sphere continued to grow, faster, now more than a yard in diameter, and within it tiny lights appeared against the intense darkness, like stars glimmering in an alien universe. The wind increased in its ferocity, and Kelly was blown off her feet, although Merlin remained upright.

The force of the wind began to push Kelly across the floor, and she grabbed for one of the iron rings set in the bottom of a stone pillar to arrest her slide. A few feet away, Slowik screamed and scrabbled desperately as the wind pushed him slowly toward the open pit, blood trailing from his wound.

Kelly looked up at the sphere, now more than six feet across and still growing, and saw that a new, wavering shape was growing within, gradually obscuring the distant stars. It was a strange darkness, blacker even than the impossible ebony against which it grew, and within it lights in colors she could not describe shimmered and pulsed in weird shapes and patterns. The new shape gradually filled the expanding sphere and suddenly the lights within twisted and morphed into new shapes, and her brain shut down in terror.

The once-black sphere was now a writhing tangle of ghastly, pulsing, ever-changing organic elements that twisted and melted into one another, changing, re-forming, and changing again in an insane kaleidoscope of horror. Eyes, tentacles, teeth, arms, wings, tongues, and claws flowed fluidly into each other, morphing in an endlessly chaotic display. Lightning in colors no spectrum ever envisioned flared among the forms, adding a bizarrely stroboscopic effect to the terrifying mix.

Merlin forced his way back against the howling wind as oily, glistening tentacles suddenly spilled out of the sphere, and Kelly dragged herself frantically away, trying to put the pillar between her and the grasping fingers. One of the tentacles landed on the floor with a ugly wet slap and groped blindly along, finding and wrapping itself around Slowik's leg and flipping the injured man into the air. Slowik kept screaming hoarsely, blood flying from his shattered shoulder as he whipped through the air at the end of the tentacle. As Kelly watched in horror, the tentacle suddenly snapped back toward the sphere, hurling the man into

a terrifying maw lined with rows of razor-like teeth that suddenly yawned in the ever-shifting tangle of monstrous parts. Slowik's frantic screams faded away into an infinite distance.

Another tentacle groped out of the darkness and reached for Merlin, who pointed the silver head of his walking stick at it and shouted a few words; the tentacle recoiled and dissolved in a splash of thick, foul liquid. On the other side of the altar, Curwen was backing quickly away toward a door that stood open in the far wall of the room. Merlin swung his cane toward the escaping man and shouted a new command; the door slammed shut with a heavy bang and Curwen staggered and fell to the floor as his legs tangled beneath him.

A new bundle of tentacles burst from the pulsing sphere and lashed out toward Curwen, coiling around his arms and legs, waist and throat. The man screamed and flailed as he was lifted toward the ceiling, the tentacles visibly tightening as they swung him back and forth. Suddenly the tentacles stopped moving and held the struggling man spreadeagled in the air as a new shape emerged from the pulsing horror.

Kelly's bowels and bladder let go with a hot rush as she watched something new grow out of the hideous tangle. She could not identify a discrete figure, only an ever-shifting suggestion of leathery wings, wickedly hooked claws, and clusters of bulging, reptilian eyes that stared at Curwen with seething hatred. She stared in mindless terror as the tentacles suddenly pulled in all directions, ripping the screaming man to pieces in a shower of blood and bits of flesh. The tentacles, still holding quivering chunks of Curwen's body, snapped back into the writhing mass which was slowly appearing to dissolve back into the utter blackness from which it came. The horrible thing turned its blazing eyes gradually around the room, stopping briefly to stare at Merlin. The wizard stood his ground, the head of his cane pointed at the awful creature. The thing opened a mouth that seemed to contain an infinite number of teeth and roared, then turned to look down at Kelly, still cowering behind the pillar. It roared again and turned back to Merlin, who stared back at it and shouted something in a guttural language Kelly could not understand. The monstrous thing reared up, its head

brushing the ceiling, loosening chunks of stone and plaster and knocking down several of the suspended lights ...

And vanished.

The room was suddenly completely silent except for ugly, wet noises from the open pit in the floor. The sphere of darkness was gone, and the wind had stopped.

Merlin slumped slightly and leaned on his cane, then turned and walked haltingly to where Kelly crouched behind the pillar. He stretched out a hand to help her to her feet. “It is over,” he said simply.

Kelly slumped back against the pillar and looked at him uncomprehendingly. “What in God’s name was *that*?” She gasped.

Merlin shook his head. “It is the smallest part of what Curwen and the Endless Night Order would have brought into the world,” he said. “Curwen believed he could control it and call upon it for aid, but it serves no master.”

“But what *was* it?” Kelly pressed.

“I believe it was a being from another dimension called Azathoth in old texts,” Merlin replied. “The *Necronomicon*, a book written in the Middle Ages by an Arab mystic named Abdul al Hazred, described it as *“an amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the center of all infinity.”* He shuddered. “A rather hyperbolic description, but accurate enough.”

“What did you do to make it disappear?” Kelly gasped. “I thought we were dead.”

“It was the incantation with which I saved myself many years ago,” Merlin answered, “when I called the thing forth, not realizing what I was doing. I wasn’t sure it would work again, but fortunately it did.”

Kelly leaned weakly against the pillar. She began to sob, but choked the tears back with an effort. “What about Dave?” she whispered.

Merlin reached out and put an arm around her shoulder. “Mr. Grant is beyond our aid. If it consoles you, I believe he was dead before he could be harmed by the thing in the pit.”

Kelly shook his arm away. “I can’t leave him down there.”

“Let me see if there is anything I can do,” Merlin said softly. He walked to the pit and stared into the red-stained depths where the thing was worrying at the red wreckage that was all that remained of Dave Grant. The wizard drew himself up and shouted the Incantation of Descent into the pit,

Ogthrod Ai’f

Geb’l – ee’h

Yog-Sothoth

‘Ngah’ng ai’y

Zhro

As the words echoed away, the creature below suddenly vanished in a puff of pale red powder that settled quickly to the bottom of the pit. Merlin studied the depths, then turned back to Kelly.

“I am truly sorry, Ms Reynolds,” he said softly. “There is nothing you can do, and you do not want to see this.”

Kelly shook her head violently. “Yes, I do!” she hissed. She stumbled on unsteady legs to the edge of the pit and looked down. She was silent for a moment, then turned and stared at Merlin with flat and pitiless eyes. “We are going to destroy this place,” she said quietly. “And then we are going to go back to the other house and destroy that, too.” She drew a deep breath, and added,

“And those three men there are going to answer for Dave.”

Chapter 21 - Epilog

Las Vegas, Nevada and Alexandria, Virginia - November 1, 2018 - May, 2019

From the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 1, 2018, page 1A:

Major Fires in South Vegas

Las Vegas Fire and Rescue teams responded last night to two major incidents in the southern part of the metro area. In the first and largest, a home in the upscale neighborhood of Desert Edge was completely destroyed by an explosion and fire that took hours to bring under control and was described by neighbors as "cataclysmic." According to investigators at the scene, the blaze appeared to have started when faulty wiring ignited propane tanks and other flammable materials - possibly a store of illegal explosives - stored in the home's garage. The resulting explosion spread the blaze to the house, which was totally consumed. Apparently no one was home at the time. Federal officials have been called in to investigate possible terrorism connections, given the enormous size of the explosion.

A short time later, emergency services responded to another incident in which a home in the Seven Hills neighborhood, a few miles from the scene of the earlier fire, burned to the ground in a spectacular blaze that, fortunately, did not spread to neighboring properties. Police are investigating this latter blaze as arson and murder because of the discovery of the remains of three bodies in the debris, each of which appeared to have been bound hand and foot.

Public records indicate that the Desert Edge property was owned by a commercial entity registered outside Nevada, and neighbors reported that the sole occupant of the home was Dr Joseph Carson, a professor of biochemistry at UNLV. The telephone at Dr Carson's office was answered by a teaching assistant who declined to comment, while a UNLV spokesman said only that Dr Carson was not available. The Seven Hills property is owned by the Endless Night Order, a private

fraternal organization, and no local representatives of that group could be reached for comment.

There appears to be no connection between the two incidents, although the investigation is ongoing.

From the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, November 1, 2018, page 1B:

Local Animals Mark Halloween with Odd Behavior

Dogs around the metro area marked Halloween with an unusual display of loud and sustained howling, while many cat owners reported that their feline friends seemed agitated and fearful. The unusual behavior lasted about ten minutes and took place around the time of two major blazes in the area (See "Fires," Page 1A), although the incidents do not appear to be related.

Alexandria, Virginia

November 30, 2018

Kelly Reynolds leaned back in her chair and stared across the desk at Merlin. "What are you going to do, now?" she asked.

The wizard shrugged. "I have nowhere to go and nothing in particular to do. I'm sure I will find something." He looked back at Kelly. "What about you?"

Kelly sighed and shook her head. "I don't know, either," she admitted. "After what I saw in Vegas, I don't think I can go back to anything like a normal life. I can't even give Dave a decent burial, and I'm ashamed of the story we've been spinning to his friends."

On their return from Las Vegas, Kelly and Merlin had decided to tell any of Ewing's friends who asked that he had gone on to Oregon to work a new, long-term case, while Kelly returned to manage their office in Alexandria. The family was easier to handle, as Dave's parents were both dead and his only sibling, a brother serving in the Army Special Forces, had been killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan the previous year. The legal and administrative aspects of his disappearance would

be more complicated to resolve, but between Kelly's intelligence and law enforcement experience and Merlin's ability to make unusual things happen, they felt confident that they could gradually and permanently manage Dave's disappearance.

"'Normal' is not a word you will ever again understand the same way," Merlin said gently. And I fear that we still have unfinished business in the affair of Joseph Curwen."

Kelly nodded sadly. "I think we can agree that Curwen is gone for good," she said, "but there's still the Endless Night Order. They're out there, and I'm sure they're still trying to open the way to the things we saw in Vegas." After a brief pause, she continued, "And they're not likely to forget that I'm responsible for killing a lot of their people and destroying two of their lodges."

"I don't think you can claim full credit, Ms Reynolds," Merlin said. "I like to think I had some small part in that."

"Of course you do," Kelly replied. "But you have protection I don't, and I'm not just talking about your … um … *weird* skill set. Let's not forget that they have no idea what you look like … there were no images of you on any of the pictures they took, and every one of their people who actually *saw* you is dead. On the other hand, they know all about Dave and I. They may not know that Dave is dead, and I think they'll probably be holding a pretty serious grudge against me for a long time."

"Very true," Merlin said. "But you need not deal with the Endless Night Order alone." As Kelly cocked her head quizzically at him, Merlin smiled and said enigmatically, "I have a few ideas …"

Alexandria, Virginia

Six Months Later

Kelly nodded approvingly at the office door, where a newly painted sign advertised "Reynolds and Arthur Confidential Investigations" in bold silver letters on the frosted glass. Beside her Merlin, his hair and beard

neatly trimmed and a new, casual wardrobe making him look considerably younger, nodded agreement.

“Well, partner,” she said, running a hand through hair that had grown in completely white after the events of the previous year, “Let’s save the world.”