

Scorpio



*Prof Lardus on Otto Krause
"may doo. try me"*

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Book I:
Three Places I Know and Love

Tower: Jet Blue 23, use caution, person in a jetpack reported 300 yards south of LA at 3,000 ft.

- Transcription of air traffic control audio, captured Sunday, August 30th, 2020, at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).

I.

Late one night, a strange man approached the checkout desk in the library where I work. Though it was after midnight, I wasn't alone. Widener Library operates with a veritable army of custodial, facilities, and miscellaneous staff. None of these colleagues were in sight just then but I wasn't afraid for my safety. *Securitas* (a cleverly named private security firm) posted guards at all entrances, at all times, and these sorts of closing time interactions are common. Most involved overachieving Harvard undergrads searching out one final source before a term paper deadline, or Professor Emeritus so-and-so wandering down from their honorary office in the upper stacks, ferreting out some mindless midnight conversation from library staff while they stretched their legs or searched for coffee. This night was different.

The figure who entered was hunched over and dragging a leg, ensconced in a fitted pant, which connected in turn to a finely tailored three-piece suit. All black. I could see him even from the substantial distance allowed by the vaulted and tiled lending room. Leather-clad footfalls echoed, faintly, as the visitor moved jerkily across polished marble. Stomp, scrape – stomp, scrape. Columns amplified and projected the sound in random directions throughout the chamber. The man-in-black fit the ballroom-type architecture sartorially, but also *physically*, his tremendous height becoming apparent when he reared up at the desk and distributed his weight across both legs. The overall effect, when he stopped in front of me, was quick and mesmerizing and he commanded full attention.

Curious details became noticeable. His labored gait had caused his hands and the cufflinks of his shirt to arc rhythmically and catch the light, but he shifted both hands behind his back before he was close enough for me to really study what appeared to be engraved markings on the oversized green jewels (emeralds?) that adorned his pressed French cuffs. His hair, or what I could see of it, appeared to be dyed a deep blue-black and was cut short around the ears, accentuating a sickeningly pallid skin tone that

made him appear like some nocturnal creature. In a dream sometime later, I would recollect piercing black eyes, without whites, but I hadn't the nerve to stare at his face too long when we first met.

Black suit; pearlescent white skin; dark eyes and hair; perfectly tailored white shirt. A two-toned study with the faintest glittering green along the edges to better frame such stark contrast. That's all I remember from my first meeting with the *Cryptkeeper*. And a Cryptkeeper is what he had to be, I decided. He was a fundamentally solitary figure sporting a truly ghoulish ensemble, but with too rough a visage for a funeral director or a minister and much too refined a wardrobe for the work of a gravedigger. The tall, gaunt man immediately struck me as a minder of cemeteries. This first speculation turned out to be my only true insight for many weeks to come, and it didn't stop the tragedy that would befall me.

"I'm here to retrieve a volume from the collection," he hissed down at me when he neared, expelling the words with some force from between closed teeth, a sound like hydraulics coming to rest.

The understated force of the inquiry emanating from such a tall frame put me on edge, so I jumped right into the same scripted response that had placated ornery faculty many times before.

"Yes sir, may I have the title, author, or call number for the book?" I responded with practiced neutrality of tone, undoubtedly recognizable to my innumerable service sector comrades.

He stared down at me for a moment without speaking, dark pupils dancing. From inside his jacket, he retrieved a slip of paper without breaking his gaze. I estimated the slip at 3x5 inches, with clipped edges and faint lines. The paper was yellowed with age, but it was roughly the same type as the pages of the Moleskine pocket notebook I carry without fail.

He didn't hand me the paper outright, but lay it down upon the desk between us, at which point I was able to glimpse his hands. The fingers were long, even relative to his towering figure, and they appeared longer still on account of their unnatural skinniness. Long, thin fingers, each complete with a

near talon; fingernails deliberately manicured to a sharpened point. I had seen similar stylings on certain late-night operators on Miami Beach, years ago, so I couldn't bring myself to ascribe malevolence. These combined oddities entranced me, knocking me off script, and it took several seconds after he had pulled his claws to commence my duties.

The call number jotted on the slip in a looping script was recognizable as non-standard cataloging style, but this was not uncommon. Such anachronistic requests harkened to a time at Harvard, ending not long ago, when the venerable institution insisted on a unique instance of each and every cataloging system, scientific method, and taxonomy. In some cases, such idiosyncrasy was justified, as there would have only been a handful of institutions building out such vast object collections in the 17th and 18th centuries, but, as higher-education globalized, historical quirks became real hassles for ground-level workers tasked with retrieving material. My annoyance, still well hidden, was balanced somewhat by the Widener-type call number on the paper, which would have referred to a text that was at least a century old and perhaps much older. This would be interesting.

The collection was by then one of my dearest friends; a psychological fortress where, at midnight and later, I would be mostly left alone to wander. What's more, I knew the collection would outlive me, and the thought was somehow refreshing. So, after consulting our database for a more specific location, I set off without another word or glance in the Cryptkeeper's direction, retreating into the relative darkness and familiar comforts of the collection itself.

The narrowness of the rows and closeness of the ceiling didn't bother me, nor did the darkness of unlit corridors where motion-activated bulbs remained poised but untriggered atop parallel rows. Unlike the vaulted pageantry of the circulation room, the ceilings in the stacks (shelves) were unadorned and

with low ceilings, accommodating more floors than were listed on signage or public schematics, while the smell was that smell we all recognize; a not quite fungal musk (hundreds of monitoring devices and carefully distributed fans, spread throughout the stacks, prevented dampness from lingering). No, this was a subtler cologne, as if still air had settled into a much denser substance all around me. Combined with the natural sound dampening that occurs when one is surrounded by books, this immersive ambiance was like being underwater or walking in a fog through a dense and unfamiliar cityscape, and the overall effect distracted me further from the bizarre character waiting back at the checkout desk. Like many times before, this cut-off atmosphere of the stacks was mesmerizing, and it wasn't until I was standing in front of the correct row of shelving that any sort of practical awareness returned.

Having not seen the requested book on a cursory glance of the shelf, I employed the cross method, and looked at the bindings immediately above and below, then to the right and left of the location where the book was supposed to have been shelved. Nothing. It had to have been misshelved, lost, or stolen. Again, not too surprising. In a collection consisting of some 20 million items, some not-insignificant portion was simply irretrievable. Nevertheless, it was disappointing - and not just from a customer service standpoint, where I did happen to take some small pride, but because the entire building seemed to have let me down personally. There would be no big payoff or gratification at the end of this midnight daydream it seems; nothing to flip through idly on the walk back to circulation.

After a few more seconds, I stepped back away from the shelf and strode purposefully back to the circulation desk. Back to more open air to share my failure with the man, whose real name I hadn't yet gleaned, and who seemed to perceive that failure first from my posture and then by a casual glance at my empty hands. Our interaction was ending and there was precious little time left for formality.

"I'm sorry, sir," I began, tentatively, playing up for him a regret that was authentic.

He seemed to deserve it, the fulfillment of his request, given that air of funereal respectability, not to mention the limp, and, at that moment, I was relieved to be the one on duty rather than an undergraduate, who would most likely stutter or equivocate rather than simply apologize and move on. The man had obviously struggled to make this late-night journey to Widener. *But why pick up the book then, at midnight, I would later wonder? Why not have it shipped to him, as was the prerogative of retired faculty or visiting researchers, which he surely must have been.* There was no time to dwell on such questions then, and, to head off any outbursts, I continued on script.

“Generally, I recommended requesting the book through our paging service, as a follow-up. We can then attempt to interlibrary loan the item, from a partner institution.”

This assumed that the text was printed in duplicate and not a singular specimen produced by hand, and I shut my mouth, raised my eyes, and posed – melodramatic, like an exhausted war hero and so many fellow service-industry-workers-in-arms – for the inevitable retort. But the man only looked at me, unblinking. Or rather, he looked down on me, as his height precluded equal footing, physical or otherwise. But he didn’t seem angry. If anything, he seemed relieved. I could sense then that he had a backup plan, one that might be preferable, and that most likely included a follow-up consultation with another, less discerning employee, or perhaps even less scrupulous means of book retrieval.

He didn’t thank me, but he did give the slightest nod before relinquishing his gaze, and, with surprising quickness, he turned, jacket tails twirling along with the jeweled cuffs. It struck me that he may have been a dervish or a dancer in an earlier life. Even his limp seemed lessened as he made his way back out of the room. The emeralds caught the soft light from the sconce nearest the entryway, gleaming briefly and distracting me as the Cryptkeeper disappeared around the corner and into the night.

As remarkable as this gentlemen's appearance was, strange characters were not unprecedented in my library experience. For example, some years before, when I was still a humble student assistant, at a similar desk but in a different state, I had the opportunity to guide police officers to a series of potential hiding places. The cops were desperate; looking in dusty alcoves and behind ductwork for a convict whose physical description (unfortunately for him) included the fact that a meth lab explosion had taken off the end of his nose along with another man's life. With such an unfortunate identifier, the multi-floor academic library where I was working at the time functioned as an airconditioned hideout with plenty of DVDs to help the felon wait out the summer heat without showing his face. They never caught him.

Another night, a woman who identified herself as "full-blood" Cherokee approached the desk. After some small talk, we began to discuss her academic research, which centered on the mechanics of *ancestor repatriation*. In an anecdote that I knew would never make it to print, she described accompanying deceased tribal members' remains – bones – back across the Trail of Tears, to their ancestral homeland in the woods of Northern Georgia. The re-burial took place in a clearing, in the woods, at dusk and just afterward. During the ritualistic gravedigging and placement of the bones, strobing lights and strange sounds – like strained human voices – began emanating with increasing ferocity from the surrounding tree line. When dirt was shoveled atop the remains, and certain traditional songs were sung, the commotion died down.

Some bones never made it back to Georgia, the woman told me. Some were bought, or stolen, from unguarded archaeological dig sites, by unscrupulous fellow tribesmen, or, on several occasions, by cloaked figures carrying what appeared to be legitimate government identification. FBI. The Smithsonian. Inscrutable government agencies and individuals. Desensitized by these and other such

accounts, and by the thought of the cold beer that awaited me at home, my first interaction with the Cryptkeeper was quickly forgotten.

By 2:02 am I had shut down the desktop computers dedicated to checking out books, grabbed my crumpled shoulder bag from below the desk, and said goodnight to the sleepy guard at the entrance. A simple pleasure greeted me upon exiting from Widener's main door: The moon was high and Harvard Yard was empty. Gravel walkways framed manicured grass and well-tended oaks, some with a century of growth. Of course, they were babies compared to the old growth that the puritans had encountered when they ventured north of the Charles River four centuries before, but it was still an impressive sight.

Everything, including the famed Johnson gate where I made my escape onto Massachusetts Avenue, was bathed in the sort of blue darkness afforded by a slivered moon. It was quiet. Noise still emanated from the bars off the square near the redline subway, not half a block away, but it was somehow muted by the moonlight along my path. Few and easily forgotten are those moments when one is truly alone but without fear of hunger or in anticipation of ruin. Deceivingly rare are such pleasures, I think, especially when weighed against the glamor and riches we see on screens and boards throughout our day.

I made it home, to our studio in Neighborhood Nine, West Cambridge, 20 minutes later. Energized by the brisk walking pace of the return trip and the hues of night, I was quick to retrieve a can of lager from the vegetable crisper at the bottom of the fridge and retreat, back out the front door, substituting my sports coat for my lucky black denim. Half-consciously, I made a move to imitate the whirling choreography of the Cryptkeeper's exit as I made my way back out the door, but my denim was heavier than his silk and it stayed glued to my lanky frame. Oh well.

Our apartment was small but it faced the park, which offset the staggering prices associated with renting in Cambridge. We weren't saving a lot, as a librarian and a high school teacher, but, on nights like that, it felt like we had enough. I waited until the front door was fully closed behind me to crack the can and downed half without taking a breath. Looking around, I could see two other apartment doormats of our ground floor neighbors, less than 20 feet away on either side. Welcome to city living. But no one else was out at 2:30 am, so I took the opportunity to meander up and down our shared walkway, taking in the air. My view of the oaks in the Yard had been replaced by that of the pines bordering the city park's southern boundary. Planted in a neat row, and thriving, despite (or perhaps, because of) the factoid I had learned at Paddy's bar: that their roots fed off a landfill buried not far below the surface. I reached for my phone then, if only to check on the next day's weather, and the slip of paper with the funeral director-type character's request fluttered and then fell to the concrete at my feet.

Not wanting to litter, however small the scrap, I picked up the paper and glanced at the call number jotted in a looping script. That's when something occurred to me: I really hadn't exhausted all the locations where the Cryptkeeper's book may have been. While the paper didn't indicate as much, oversized or *folio* texts were shelved separately, usually at the end of a row sharing the foremost call number with other such volumes (e.g. all of the "A"'s). There were far fewer of these large-format books, and they were generally stacked atop one another. So, if the requested item was taller than 18 inches, it wouldn't fit on a standard shelf and would instead be stacked lengthwise, at the end of the row.

A plan began to form, and, just as I finished that first beer, I resolved to investigate further. To ensure I didn't forget, I wrote the call number in a blank space on my weekly to-do list, in the pocket notebook that I always carried. Then I circled it, essentially escalating it to the top of the list. Even though it was only one lost book of many, the situation had already taken on the air of a detective story,

which I didn't mind at all. Excitement building, I traced the circle with a narrow purple highlighter, which was stored in the notebook along with a pen and small flashlight. Resolve. Something about the man's visage, his attire, and his hands, demanded a quick follow-up; due diligence, or at least that's what I told myself before returning inside to grab another round.

It's a good thing I had notated my new plan so heavily because I woke the next morning without any thought of lost books or grim patrons or end rows. My focus, instead, was *survival*. That single Sapporo had turned into 3, with a whiskey back (all the booze that was left in the house), and the various garbage, delivery, and emergency vehicles - that punctuate day daily in city-suburbs like Cambridge - were operating in post-modern orchestral syncopation by 7 am. Immediately upon waking, I felt the weight and burden the day ahead would be without good sleep. No work that day, at least, which is probably what got me into trouble in the first place. Daniela was up and about, in our small apartment, preparing for her own workday. Public school teachers rarely have days off mid-week.

"Good morning, baby," I said, sounding more strained than I had wanted to. Daniela could sense that I wasn't feeling it.

"Late night?" she replied. This feigned ignorance was a small blessing and permission to begin my day without worrying about a cloud of judgment atop a minor hangover.

"Just got to thinking," I said, forcing a smile.

"You mean got to *drinking*," her tone in return was light enough but I could sense where the conversation was going.

Thankfully, she jumped back into her preparations for work, after seeing the pained look on my face, anxious to change the subject and avoid starting another day with a fight.

“Let’s head to the property this weekend. My fall break starts on Monday and we could get out of Cambridge for a few days. Try some of those new campfire recipes? Smores!” she exclaimed, on her way out the door, apparently giddy with the prospect.

“Sounds great.,” my voice was stronger now, but the tone in response was still only lukewarm.

Certainly, I did want to go to the undeveloped piece of land we owned out past 495, near Groton, but I was hesitant to commit. Caught up in a routine, I guess, or maybe there was something I was forgetting. Work, Paddy’s, and some “adventuring” on the weekend. That was our routine, our rut, and I had no real reason to resent it. Indeed, things were shaping up for what was to be our first unguided caving adventure. It seemed like the thing to do before the baby came. Daniela wasn’t pregnant then, but we planned to start trying in the coming year, and it simply wouldn’t do to risk our lives, post-partum, as amateur spelunkers. Mostly, we just needed to get out of the apartment, both of us together.

Shared time with Daniela is what separated the property experience from Paddy’s, a dive bar across the street, which was its own sort of adventure, although it didn’t require any special gear. In fact, it didn’t even require cash most nights since the locals were quite happy to buy other locals a round or three. The bar had been operating continuously since 1934, the year after prohibition ended, and some of the regulars were so pickled it looked like they had been drinking there (and sleeping under the bar) since the grand opening. Admittedly, Paddy’s was beginning to be a problem for me, and our rural base of operations was an escape from this temptation and other increasingly stressful aspects of city life.

Coffee revived my memories of the encounter with the Cryptkeeper at the circulation desk the night before, and I had a piece of buttered toast to settle my stomach before heading back to campus. It was still early, relative to my late night, but I had it in my mind to see if there was a chance that I might be

able to locate that oversized book whose call number was copied into my notebook. The highlighter annotation had put me over the top; I decided to go in to work on my day off.

I entered the building through the main entrance and managed to avoid getting pulled into any conversations with colleagues. In fact, I don't think anyone recognized me, which was a real trick. I deliberately avoided the public entrance to the stacks. Instead, I made use of my employee ID, which allowed me access to the collection through smaller entrances on multiple levels, most of which were unmonitored by human eyes. The swipe would register, of course, and there were cameras and guards, but such activity wasn't at all uncommon. My library colleagues and I moved throughout the building constantly – we had to – and in multiple directions. It's not realistic to funnel all employees through a single stacks entrance, as we did with library patrons.

The stacks were just as I'd left them: Large and dark and mostly empty. That's what I was counting on, and the dimmed scene helped mitigate the throbbing pressure behind my eyes and in my kneecaps. The text appeared; not in its specified row, but on the end of rows that delimited the call number heading 66b6 from its nearest neighbor. Here the shelving was configured differently, as I mentioned, and allowed for books of larger dimensions. Bingo.

I call it the NYMZA text because that was the first pronounceable character set that I could discern after opening the front cover. The term was inscribed, free-hand and in ink, on the margin of the title page, which was itself an illustration adorned with unrecognizable, hieroglyphics-type markings. And that combination – hieroglyphics and illustrations - made up the majority of the contents in that oversized, leather-bound tomb. While the text inside the mottled binding was largely illegible, at least to me, there were numerous illustrations: Pictures of antiquated flying machines, dirigibles, and assorted

early aircraft that, based on their coloration, seemed to be constructed of wood, moored with hemp rope, and piloted by people in period attire. I couldn't tell for certain the time that they inhabited, but the overcoats and top hats seemed to place them well before the aviation age. *Why this book?* I thought to myself, flipping through pages of anachronistic and aeronautically dubious imagery.

I left, from the same small entrance, with the book sticking out, very obviously, from the top of my shoulder bag. But I didn't leave via the circulation desk, as per protocol, nor did I seek to exit the building right away - that would have required passing security with an unchecked-out book. Instead, I went to a generic office suite, at the ground floor, which had a set of windows that open outwards, onto the Yard. The librarians who worked from that office wouldn't be in until 10 or 11 am, at the earliest, and I would sometimes use their computers to check-in books at the beginning of a shift. A cold breeze blew steadily into the building and across my face while I used a "public" office computer to simulate the checkout of the book to a random faculty member - a Professor Pierce - whose frequent requests for material included books from roughly the same section of the stacks where I had recovered NYMZA.

This was something I had never considered perpetrating on my employer, this deception, and why I did it then I couldn't quite say. It seemed important to be able to study the text, but not to draw the attention of folks like the Cryptkeeper, whose presence was vaguely menacing. Professor Pierce pretty much lived in Widener and had hundreds of books checked out under his name, so he may have had legitimate cause to search out the book, I rationalized. He would never notice. Also, our relationship - Pierce's and mine - wasn't common knowledge, since we rarely interacted except after midnight, when he would come down to check out material before returning to his faculty office in the upper stacks.

This obfuscation turned out to be useful, in the end, but the overall situation was beginning to make me uncomfortable. It wasn't only the Cryptkeeper, or curious contents of the book itself, or even

that two-toned, tinted sedan I saw idling on Mass. Ave, just outside the staff entrance, but rather the possible connections between such things that played like shadows behind my hangover. Paranoia. Fortunately, in a world filled with strange people, there's always someone stranger. In my case, it was my cousin Reggie, so I left Widener - with a fraudulent loan - and sought him out to move things forward.

No one that knew him then still called him Reggie, but I had known him before 3rd grade when his English teacher (who had obviously missed out on a promising literary career, given the nicknames she assigned) shortened Reginald Norbert Frobisher to *Renfro* on the fly. Renfro, as everyone came to know him, was a rarity: A career criminal who had never been arrested. His crimes were too nuanced to provoke snappy headlines, and his earnings – supplemented and obscured by an aboveboard daytime career – too modest to inspire audits or even second glances from our puritan neighbors. He always drove vintage cars though, and when I went to meet him, after leaving Widener with the NYMZA text sticking out of my work bag, it was an oversized Lincoln Continental that occupied the space out front of his strip-mall office. The full-length glass frontage to the office was severely frosted, no business hours were posted, and the door to “Renfro Consulting Services” was locked (as always), so I had to wait until he answered my knock to comment on how much I appreciated the long, straight lines of his ride.

“Is that a ‘74,” I asked him right off, gesturing at the low-slung boat-on-wheels.

“*Original Green Diamond Fire Metallic*, that's actually the listed color - I have printed it on the owner's manual if you don't believe me. How about that shit?” he replied without a pause and with a smile. I could tell he was in a good mood, which would make things easier.

“You're fucking with me, Reggie,” I traded back, stepping inside his place of business.

His eyes flickered at the sound of his given name, but I don't think he really meant to register offense – it was just a quick memory of a time before he had rebuilt his identity to suit his underground lifestyle. I respected my cousin, even though I was one of the few people who knew, or mostly knew, what he did to build up his impressive car, comic book, and half dozen other world-class collections. Most everyone else, including close family, was just happy to see him gainfully employed as a “computer person” of some sort, the jargon behind which Reggie masterfully retreated if an aunt or uncle became a bit too curious about his professional activities at Thanksgiving Dinner or Christmas lunch. He knew tech, which helped maintain the façade. He was especially adept at embedded computing or, more specifically, industrial microcontroller hacking, expertise that Renfro sometimes sold as a service to those who had a soft infrastructure target. He avoided overtly political or bloody business though and instead preferred to interrupt vault timers at national banks or turn on Xfinity hotspots, for free, in underserved Southie neighborhoods. But his real criminal passion was fencing fine art.

It didn't take long to get the NYMZA manuscript out on a chipped dining table he had set up in the back room. The glossiness of the frontispiece was a marvel, even under the sterile fluorescents, and I was reminded of why Reggie's name had come to mind. The work, at least the illustrations, looked like early Disney to me. High contrast, almost cell-like animation (and worth upwards of a grand per frame, for a recognizable scene). Serviceable, from a technical perspective, but representing an immature artist or one, like Mr. Disney himself, who was destined to become a CEO rather than a full-time creative. I didn't need to tell Reggie any of this, nor did I mention the unidentifiable sedan that I saw outside Widener that morning, but I did want him to know that the piece might be in high demand; that there might be competing interests. The prospect of a bidding war would increase his interest and his focus.

“There’s a guy...a real creep...he’s coming back to the library trying to get a hold of this. To steal it, I think. He’s maybe hanging around outside too, in a car you would appreciate, an old sedan. Anyways, Can you tell me what it is and what it might be worth?” I began. I never planned to scam either the library.

“Well, it ain’t Disney, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Renfro drawled.

He was laying it on thick. We are both from rural Missouri, originally, and he would pull out the accent after a few, mostly to tease me. It was working.

“I don’t know what to think, that’s why I came to you,” I feigned a lack of theories, to encourage him to say more. Balance restored, he began to hold forth.

“Looks more like EC comics,” he commented, “You know, *Tales From the Crypt, Vault of Horror, Crypt of Terror*. Ghastly, would be my first hunch.”

I wasn’t following.

“They look OK to me,” I responded flatly.

“No, I mean the graphic artist. You know, Graham Ingels, *Ghastly*, active during the EC golden run in the 50s? C’mon man!”, he implored, suggesting that my knowing this obscure doodler was more important than whatever mess I had gotten myself into. Blank stare.

My bookishness didn’t extend to mid-century comics, so the names Ingels or Ghastly didn’t ring a bell, but the reference clicked as soon as I started looking at the NYMZA text as graphic art. What lay on the table before us wasn’t skeletons with speech bubbles though. Rather, the art resembled *herbaria*; a plant catalog from one of our library collections but illustrated in a mass-market style. And instead of plants, this illustrated guide seemed to be documenting a variety of early aircraft, named and described, I assumed, by the indecipherable symbols circling the margins in a cursive script. The only naturalistic markings were irregular eruptions, from the ground below the flying machines, of what appeared to be

scorpions, scurrying about the surface. Sand-colored and unadorned, those creatures appeared to be mere ornaments, darting to-and-fro across the bottom of some pages. But the primary focus of the text was obviously the flying machines themselves – hot air balloons, mostly, equipped with heavy ropes encapsulating distended bladders, containing what I took to be heated air or perhaps helium.

Yet there was no fire or even an obvious means to produce fire, visible in any of the illustrations. How were people in stovepipe hats and frilly dresses filling these balloons and keeping them aloft? How were they piloting these craft, once airborne, without propellers? The dirigibles did not look especially maneuverable, and the somewhat childish quality of the illustrations nearly caused me to disregard the possibility that these pages documented real events. But the illustrations were from the early 1900s, at the latest, long before the Golden Age of comics. Given the quality of the paper and relative vibrancy of the ink, this could mean that the work was valuable, despite its seemingly nonsensical contents and a mishmash of airborne contraption. Forget comics; aircraft, of any sort, were still relatively rare in the 1800's, and, although I hadn't done my own research, I doubt many were structured or powered in the way depicted on the pages of the NYMZA manuscript.

“Beer?” Reggie chimed in, interrupting my reveries.

He knew me too well. The alley behind his consultancy spanned the block, like most strip malls in the area, and he had a couple of folding chairs set up out there. Nothing fancy. About 8 feet in front of us, across the alley, was a decrepit wood gate and then a residential neighborhood. The nearest house had no second story and we felt safe discussing anything out back without fear of being spied upon. It was too ugly out there; strip-mall liminality was the best operational security, at least that was Reggie's belief.

“I hope you aren't thinking of trying to pawn these,” he began speaking, shortly after we were seated and our cans were popped and clinked.

His tone was more serious than I was expecting; more serious than I had heard from him before in fact. I didn't like it. A sheen of suburban respectability coupled with nonchalance formed the basis for his adopted religion it had served him well, but now he sounded scared. Reggie didn't get scared.

"The call numbers on the binding and the stamp are obvious, cousin – that's a Widener book, and, judging by the age, an old one. I don't want to get involved and you shouldn't either. It's not worth it man," his speech ended with a disconcerting, pleading tone.

He was begging me to return the NYMZA text, in his way. It was hard to resist Reggie, and I could see then that his independence wasn't due only to his technical prowess, but also to his lighthearted conversational approach. Sitting behind his modern day supervillain headquarters, Reggie almost had me convinced to leave the whole thing alone. I should have.

"Just curious is all," I responded without inflection, trying to play it cool. I had no intention of selling the book, but I was anxious to find out more about the Cryptkeeper and his intentions.

Then I got to drinking. Reggie's warning had impacted me, just not in the way he might have wanted. I wasn't drunk when I left his office, not even close. Just a couple of beers to take the edge off, but when I got home things got serious. Whiskey and beer; beer and whiskey. Season to taste. The entire situation was troubling, and by 10 pm I was at Paddy's, on my usual stool near the corner of the bar, where I could quickly jump up and grab a smoke when the air or the banter inside got to be too stifling.

By nightfall, my eyes and my mind were thoroughly unfocused (that was the point). I wanted to turn things off for a bit. Not just the mystery surrounding the NYMZA text and the Cryptkeeper who had requested it, but the prospect of fatherhood and gainful employment and war in the middle east and a million other things that crept in if you let them. Rain was stippling the sidewalk when I first came into

the barroom, and at around 10 pm I began to see the occasional flash of lightning in the distance, through the front windows. Weather had very little impact on the drinking habits of a few locals that I had come to know well, and a half dozen of us were at the bar, in groups of two or three, while a few more sat at the tables behind us, watching the game or the Keno boards on TVs above the bar. JFK's framed inauguration photo was mounted behind glass above the bar, along with assorted Irish-themed bric-a-brac. It was a warm and safe place, and my belly felt similarly warmed shortly after the first few Jamesons. But I also felt vulnerable, like my booziness might be exposing me. It was time for a smoke.

There was an awning out back, and – due to visits from some politically influential clientele throughout its long and storied history – Paddy's was still cleared as a smoker friendly establishment. Outside only, of course, but that was better than 99% of bars these days. Not that the letter of the law was often consulted. If any sort of inspector, liquor or otherwise, had been out to check on that back patio within the last decade I would have been surprised.

Unfinished timber posts held up corrugated steel awning and that was it. The guttering, such as it was, moved what had become a veritable downpour straight into the neighbor's backyard. The holly hedges in between were doing their best to thrive on boozy tobacco water. Upscale rental units surrounded the bar on three sides. I pitied those tenants with children, although the Paddy's crowd was more staid than some of those at drinking establishments across the river in Boston proper. That old-school respectability (most likely just a practiced tolerance for hard liquor) didn't keep things from running late some nights though, nor did it prevent the backyard smokers from getting loud and garrulous. Right then, however, I was alone and feeling it.

One last thing: There was an "emergency exit" out back; a blind alley that most didn't even know about since it was unlabeled. It, the only exit from the patio, cut over to Sherman Street and popped you

out on the sidewalk between two city-owned and therefore generally unmanicured hedges. From there it was a straight shot to the Yard, and I often favored that route, in reverse, if I needed a warm place to exist briefly between work and home. The short cigar I had fired up was invigorating, when coupled with the sheeting rain all around me and the whiskey in my belly, and daydreamed about towering waves being kicked up by the tremendous North Atlantic storm raging just a few miles to the East of us.

The thought of so much power had inspired me to bust back inside and try my luck at the numbers and perhaps another Jameson, but looking through the porthole window on the back kitchen (you had to go through the kitchen, or what was a kitchen, to access the back patio – another violation) I noticed a disturbing lack of boisterous activity coming from the barroom. Looking further, through to the front door, I saw a man. Or at least I saw the shadow of a man. Both his attire and his complexion were remarkably dark and his head was near the ceiling. The Cryptkeeper?

He was looking around, not addressing the patrons but silently challenging them, and the regulars were looking right back, momentarily frozen by the appearance of a black trench coat and boots in a place where denim and flannel were the norm. The only person in motion seemed to be Bobby, who was tending bar that night. Bobby wasn't skittish, but he knew his regulars well enough to know that when the shock wore off, that man wouldn't remain standing in the doorway. He would be offered a drink or thrown out on his ass, or perhaps both in that order. Bobby was trying to save the guy from a beating.

I had maybe 5 seconds to make a move if I wanted to avoid the attention of the man in black who looked to be busy questioning Paddy's regulars with his darting glances. I turned to run in a second and a half. Out from under the awning, I went through the blind alley towards the secret exit, hunched over, waxy hedges catching the cuff of my denim jacket. I had left my umbrella and hadn't paid for a single drink. No matter – home was a block away, and it wasn't the first time I had left without paying.

Wait? That could have been an out-of-towner asking for directions. Rationalizations flooded in once I came out from behind Paddy's and shot across Sherman, rain sheeting. Just across the street from the entrance, facing in the opposite direction to the bar, sat a luxury sedan with its lights off. Long and low, much darker than the night, more like a curbside silhouette, cloaked in darkness like the man in the bar. Despite the rain, this was the best view of the trailing vehicle I had had yet. Some sort of early Cadillac, it looked like, but with no hood ornament and lacking the stark lines of the more current models I had sometimes seen, young money cruising the streets of Kendall Square. A *restomod* or total custom setup - it had to be. There was no dome light, but the lightning that struck as I finally turned the corner, away from the scene, clearly showed a passenger. Whoever was in there was hunched over in the backseat, staring out at me, too tall to sit up straight.

I was home well before midnight, early for me. Daniela had already passed out. I debated waking her up and hitting the road amidst pouring rain or dialing 911, but something – the whiskey, perhaps – had finally kicked in and calmed me down. After all, we were planning to leave for the property first thing. So, I sat up, with the window shades cracked slightly but with the interior lights kept off, so I would see them before they saw us. *Who?* I have no idea.

It's worth mentioning that I own a pistol, for handling snakes and small game out on the vacation property. It was good fun to pretend I was the sheriff of my little acreage, but, huddled upright against the headboard, I couldn't even bring myself to even retrieve it from the safe, which was within arm's reach. That would have made things far too real. I was a librarian. An increasingly paranoid librarian, but still a librarian. Not a tough guy. I told myself, finally drifting to sleep as the sun was rising, there was no way these guys would kill me for an old book, if that was indeed what they were after.

II.

Regular trips to visit Daniela's family in Western Massachusetts is what turned us on to Hexham Village, where we had purchased a small vacation property earlier that same year. It's just West of the Groton Town Forest, but the term "village" is a generous assignment indeed. It's only a rural highway crossroads with a general store and a gas station, the sort we've all passed by a million times without slowing. Groton proper, just down the road, was the "big city" since they had a Dunkin', which is how we found the property; we were looking for coffee, made a wrong turn, and found a second home. The Hexham Village General Store had coffee too, and it wasn't bad, but we weren't feeling especially chatty the first time through. It might have been the season (late Fall), or the situation (visiting in-laws), or the way spindly, second-growth sycamore trees overhung and overshadowed the two-lane roadway. Eventually we would find the whole scene charming, but the first time we just kept moving, eager to see another human being.

On our next trip to the area, we cut up north, past the Mohawk Trail, if only to catch another glimpse of those picturesque crossroads. But by the third trip we were on Zillow, with the "land" filter enabled, researching the going rates for undeveloped property in the area. We never considered it an investment, or at least I didn't. Daniela is really the more forward thinking and responsible one, so perhaps she was humoring me while I waxed on about "hideouts" and "getaways" like a wayward member of the James Gang. I'm sure the only reason she ultimately went along with the purchase was the price, which we could just about make up for in cash savings. 10 acres of undeveloped 2nd and 3rd growth forest complete with an army of eastern white pine, sprouting to fill the sunlit space left when a farmer abandoned their pasture some years before. Sycamore, pine, and oak, mostly, and some maple and ash. No power, sewer, or gas services, but an easement; legal access to a relatively well-maintained county road that led out from a half-mile two-track, winding into what folks down South referred to as a "holler."

Like the rest of Hexham Village, it was often shadowed but always quiet, and, perhaps most importantly. It was stony ground, and nothing of commercial value would grow quickly, given the long shadow cast by those gnarled oaks, but the stillness after snow was hypnotic and it was just such a morning – cold and quiet - that caused us finally to pull the trigger and buy the land. Two kids is what we were then; not yet 25 years old then, but gainfully employed, and looking for somewhere beyond the suburbs to spend the weekends. The Hexham property, along with Paddy's and Widener Library, made up my personal solar system, with the property acting as a grounded base to the other stool legs, which represented booze and honest work respectively.

For Daniela, the booze leg wasn't one on which to stand. She had stopped drinking, in preparation for pregnancy, our first, and she was proportionally more perceptive (and vocal) about my own habits. Nor was I in any state to argue, most mornings, but the motivation for this trip, regardless of the original plan, was *personal safety*. After encountering those dark figures – first the Cryptkeeper, at my workplace, and then a nameless figure and a dark sedan in and around Paddy's the night before - I was running out of places where it felt ok to take deep breaths, much less to sleep. My general mood up to that point was admittedly tainted by a sort of whiskey mania, and the combined edginess I was feeling proving to be problematic. So, the property was to be a sanctuary. Which wasn't to say that I planned to stop drinking. Indeed, I had stowed a cheeky half-pint of Jameson in my overnight pack, and proceeded to nip it as we were unloading the truck on the other end. Just to smooth out the rough edges, you understand. Finally feeling composed, I took in the surroundings.

Hardwoods loomed, mostly limbless until 30 and 40 feet off the ground, at which point first branches sprouted acutely over a clearing covered freshly fallen pine needles where a prefabricated shed was set

upon concrete blocks (“the cabin”). That square footage was enough room for a full-sized bed, a small table purchased second-hand, and a bunch of DIY bookshelves. I called the materials stored on the bookshelves my *miscellaneous* collection, and it included all the weird stuff that I would have been embarrassed to explain to library colleagues at a cocktail party at our apartment if we were hosting. We did most of the cooking outside, over a fire, so there was no kitchen to speak of, although there was a woodstove for boiling water to make coffee and for heat.

I’ve found it takes a couple days to get into the swing of vacation, and we were still very much of a city mind when we arrived, so it was all rush-rush until we had put up our supplies in the cabinets opposite the stove near the door and had filled the swamp cooler with steaks and beer. You can’t get drunk off beer - It’s too filling, so Daniela wasn’t overly concerned. She ignored the whiskey. It was nearly twilight – the witching hour - when we finally began to unwind and take better stock of our surroundings. Pinks through the trees to the West of us seemed to deepen in response and cold, steady wind from the East. Welcome to New England. I called out to Daniela.

“Baby, I’m going to take a walk,” I said, feigning innocence.

She smiled, not convinced but accepting. Leatherman in my left hip pocket, beside my Moleskine. On my right hip was the pistol, a Smith and Wesson Governor with .410 (shotgun) shells in all 6 chambers. A shotgun pistol, so to speak. Not that I had planned to shoot anything, really, but there are Rattlesnakes in New England, and I didn’t want to have to aim too closely waste time if one reared up. Supposedly the timber rattler poses no threat, as they are much less aggressive than their desert neighbor, the Western Diamondback, but it’s a good 25 miles to a real hospital from Hexham village. The pistol was a souvenir from my time out West, and it was unregistered. On my back was my lucky

black denim, an altogether more practical piece of gear, as it would protect me from most thorns and barbs as I bushwhacked outward through the woods from the clearing where the cabin sat.

The pistol and the rest of it is no big deal, I have to say, at least when compared to my self-directed meditation regimen, which I had developed my own mindfulness routine, mostly out of boredom, through the haphazard study of various manuscripts that I had stumbled upon in Widener Library during slow hours on the job. Sometimes after midnight, when the fogginess of fatigue met with the isolated atmosphere of the collection, I would find myself thumbing through odd texts, not unlike the NYMZA book, and that was how it had started; fugue states, but deliberately induced.

My commitment to “the path” was very casual, but I wouldn’t want to leave out any important details. In any case, I consider it a charming quirk rather than a moral hazard, to recite, out loud, what to me were meaningless words, from old library books, in clearings in the woods. Think of it as mantra meditation - nothing more, and I left my dear wife that afternoon and ventured into the woods bordering Groton Town Forest to perform just such activities, mostly in hopes of briefly forgetting my troubles and recovering some calm after those recent encounters with the Cryptkeeper and his goons.

The ingredients for my meditation were: 1) a willing practitioner (i.e. myself); 2) an “untainted” natural landscape, and what better than the woods of New England, and; 3) *a fairy circle*. The last and final ingredient wasn’t difficult to achieve when we were near the property. Simply place a few larger stones in a rough circle, clear any bigger detritus in between, and repeat various incantations gleaned from incunabula that one like myself will be naturally drawn to if one spends any considerable amount of time amongst the dim shelves of Harvard Library. Harmless fun, I think you will agree, but, in the immortal words of that syphilitic German, Nietzsche, “The abyss also gazes into you.” Like after a few

whiskeys at Paddy's, I knew I would be vulnerable. But, for a while I was able to relax my thoughts, and concentrate on the words and my own breathing, as was the goal. Then the world came charging back in.

It wasn't that selfsame abyss, but the sharp crack of a snapped twig that startled me. The sound seemed to emanate from some distance away, carried further by the thin air of early autumn. I shifted to face the sound through intermittent gaps in a stand of pine, which were growing legion against an otherwise clear southern horizon. There, between trunks, I saw the briefest lateral movement. The figure was too tall to be a deer, and it appeared to be moving about upright on two legs. I couldn't tell much else. I did know that highway 2A cut across the forest's southern border, so it wasn't a stretch to imagine that hunter or hiker had stumbled across my pageantry, and, embarrassed (I was sitting ramrod straight on the forest floor, so, even without the stereotypical dark cloak, the scene was odd), had made a hasty retreat. *Or*, someone could have deliberately sought out and disturbed me. I buried that thought quickly, not wanting to contemplate the possibility that our homestead, like Widener and Paddy's, had been compromised by those dark silhouettes vaguely resembling men and their cars, or – worse – the looming Cryptkeeper who I presumed to be their leader.

Not that they would have been wrong of them to make their move there, in the woods, with us so isolated and me so inwardly focused. I had brought along the NYMZA book, thinking there might be time to study it in depth. Perhaps to make sense of the strange markings and the fauna that bordered most illustrations. The scorpions were anomalous, if the focus of the text was flying machines. So, what did they signify? Walking back, I pondered this, and then I thought of snakes, which – like scorpions – could also be venomous, and then I thought about the pistol on my hip. My subconscious had finally led me to the real question: *Was I really prepared to employ lethal force against a man or group of men?*

Back at camp, Daniela seemed to be settling in nicely, in stark contrast to my own disconcertment. The coffee was on the woodstove, keeping warm, although the fire itself was by then quite low. October was still too warm a month for a roaring hearth, we both agreed.

“How were your...meditations?” She sounded genuinely curious, but she proceeded to tease.

“Did you mind meld with the Jersey Devil or those guys that disappeared in the Philadelphia Experiment?” she smiled, which steadied me long enough to retrieve the whiskey.

I was shook up from the sighting and the crunch of my boots on brush as I had walked back to the cabin felt like target practice for a nameless evil. The whole episode encouraged me to catch her up on what I had been seeing and hearing at the library, in the bar, and on the streets of Cambridge. It didn't seem right that she was so blissfully unaware of the possibility that we might be in actual physical danger - It didn't seem right that she was enjoying our weekend trip. Once I was finished telling her what had been happening, I offered her the whiskey, which she took but didn't uncap. Nor did she criticize me for having it. She wasn't thinking about those things - she was nervous, as I was, and didn't say anything else for a few moments. Then I sought to reassure her.

“It's probably nothing,” I began, “You know – too many late nights...,” I trailed off, thinking of the pounding rain on the roof at Paddy's the night before.

Such cryptic rationalizations further tightened her seated posture, so I did the sensible thing and pulled out the manuscript instead of rambling on.

“Here, take a look,” I implored Daniela, laying the oversized volume on the undersized cabin table. She sat down, Jameson bottle still in hand, and began intently flipping through the oversized pages.

“This is gorgeous,” she murmured. “Did you steal it?” she asked, looking up suddenly.

“Nope, checked it out fair and square,” I traded back, happy to contradict her but not mentioning that, while it was technically checked out, the book wasn’t checked out *to me*. Right then, she didn’t seem to care one way or another, but the lightness of her question and the innocence I heard in my own voice belied the recklessness of my actions and further amplified my growing paranoia.

Sure, the Widener library records – like all library records – were private. But my student employees, I knew, had very little training in the legality of such matters. It was hard not to think about how one might glean the relevant, incriminating data. A devious patron need only play up an injury and request something you know is in some far-flung corner of the stacks. What innocent college kid wouldn’t help? Even a hapless undergrad deserves to have their book brought to them under certain circumstances. And, whether it’s there or not on the shelves, when the student worker goes to grab it, there’s plenty of time to swivel the computer monitor and peek. The software we employed at Harvard was deliberately designed for ease-of-use with minimal training, so it wouldn’t take long for undergraduate assistants to navigate to the user search tab and retrieve their name and status (e.g. “faculty, staff, student”). We didn’t store home addresses or phone numbers in the database, but there were numerous of off-campus services to accommodate the would-be sleuth, as I would soon find out.

My mood downshifted then, and Daniela sensed the change without mentioning it. Without further prompting, I confessed to my real means of acquiring the book, under the guise of Professor Pierce, and then proceeded to relate my thought process to her concerning the check-out record, and, finally, followed it all up with descriptions of sightings of unmarked sedans and Paddy’s irregulars. Finally, I told her about the Cryptkeeper himself, but found myself struggling to communicate his threatening nature. I don’t think she believed me about his sharpened finger nails and his voice was

beyond imitation. For the strange man in Paddy's, and the dark sedan parked outside, she had no explanation whatsoever and probably thought I was overreacting. She didn't say so though.

It felt better to talk about everything, but the night soon betrayed us, outside, darkness swept across the clearing, as if to punctuate our combined fears. Light rain was pattering the roof 20 minutes later, tin chiming, and within an hour we were inundated, just like at Paddy's the night before. The winds were blowing hard from the East. For the rest of the night we talked little and occupied ourselves by moving from a side-by-side position at the table to seats that allowed us to look outwards, towards the road, which was more than a half-mile away. In bed, we again looked out, but upwards this time, to streaking lights moving across the skylight above. Finally, we slept.

That next morning, a Saturday, we thought ourselves silly and self-absorbed for cowering so pitifully in the cabin when there most likely wasn't another soul within miles. We blamed the rain, ignored the manuscript completely, and resolved to make the most of our weekend. After filling a daypack with water, salted peanuts, and the rest of the whiskey, we headed out. Our first goal was to hike to the general store, for a second coffee and perhaps some local news. We moved quickly, reluctant to linger, and only slowed once, when I veered off to check for tread marks on the side of the highway against the woods where I believed my visitor may have entered the woods the previous evening.

I'm no tracker, and it was hard to tell what was old and what was new, but the ground looked recently disturbed. Immediately, I felt uneasy, but the sun and mild breeze (cool, but not yet cold), as well as Daniela's brisk pace, brought me back to the moment and to our mission for the day. The walk from the cabin to "downtown" Hexham Village is about 5 miles and, by 10:30 am, we had turned the corner and were finally able to see the crossroads and the General Store.

As I mentioned, there were few remaining businesses in Hexham. A combination gas and service station, locally owned, with a junkyard out back, and – diagonally across the intersecting highways – the Hexham Village General Store. The store, like many old houses in the area, was a faded Victorian. It stood a full three stories, although the second and third story were inaccessible from the front, public part of the building. There would have been other Victorians in the neighborhood 100 years ago, and austere, Shaker-style structures a couple centuries before that, but the fickleness of commerce and the harsh winter elements had reduced the once glorious Hexham Village to this single occupied structure.

As if it had gathered height from the debris of its neighbors, the house shot upwards and from above the top floor, a tower-like cupola rose. A dirt driveway semi-circle separated the house from the highway. The chalky dullness of the driveway and the faded siding stood in contrast with gleaming black trim, a recent finish, including all the shutters and the tower as well as the front porch railing, balustrades, and front door. I half expected to see a vintage black sedan in the parking lot, to complement the aesthetic, but there was only a late model pickup truck sticking out from around back. We climbed the front stairs and a real, mechanical bell chimed as we pushed the door.

I was relieved to see Mr. Rindge, the owner and one of two full-time residents (along with Mrs. Rindge) of the building at the crossroads, who we had come to know well since purchasing the property. Rindge wasn't one to stand still, even in what looked to be extreme old age. He would have been 90, at least, that year. But we didn't feel like we knew each other well enough to ask, especially when "well enough" meant 25 years in those more rural parts of Yankee-land. He turned and smiled when he saw us, bedraggled from restless sleep the hike.

"Beer?" he asked, innocently enough.

Mr. Rindge had my number, just like Reggie. Nothing like a cold beer after a hike and I went straight to the little sitting area he had set up against one of the front windows. It wasn't a full-service establishment but Rindge had chastised me before for not allowing him to serve us, and I was glad to take advantage of his neighborliness. I plunked down in a hand-crafted wicker rocker, stained ebony, like the house trim, being careful not to drag any dirt or grime from my boots or body to the rug laid out beneath. He came back with two tall-boy Narragansetts – “Hi, Neighbor,” said the label - and my mood shifted again, to that mix of relief and elation that for me precedes the first sip. Despite the fact that I was holding a pint, nearly half the can was gone before I brought my attention back to the room and Mr. Rindge and Daniela. They were both looking at me, half expecting me to leap up and regale them with a battle report or perhaps to fall down, stone dead, on the polished pine that had once made up a courtly and well-adorned living room. Instead, I smiled. I was back. Up off my heels and ready to take on all comers.

“Say,” I began just as innocently as Rindge himself, perhaps with a bit less gruffness.

“Didn't you say there was a cave nearby?”

Daniela and I had both discussed this before leaving for the property; a mission or goal to drive the trip forward and keep us from lazing about the cabin looking over our shoulders all day. The long-term goal was to gear up and explore the better documented caving routes, not just in Mass, but all around New England; routes that we researched and studied in caving books and on the internet. It wouldn't hurt to peek inside a few less popular cave mouths as well.

“To get a feel for it!” I had argued, basically whining, while Daniela had tried to mask her apprehension at my suggestion that we explore this cave. I had been known to get us into uncomfortable situations; that would be the diplomatic way to put it. Nothing too serious, yet, although we both sensed trouble circling. The problem was that I often took that as a queue to double down on danger. Daniela

was adventurous but also skeptical but kept quiet during my exchange with Rindge. The proprietor had previously mentioned, off-hand, the existence of a small opening accessible atop nearby Winter Hill, bordering the forest. We had yet to hear the specifics, but I was feeling characteristically bold and slightly buzzed; ready for exhausting distraction. It didn't hurt that black sedans wouldn't be able to follow us up.

“Well sure,” he responded. “Everyone knows about Smith’s Cave. That’s where Smith – the elder Smith, mind you, not Young Joseph who went on and on with that damned religious nonsense – that’s where he did some prospecting during a walking tour of New England not long after the American Revolution,” he drawled.

He related these facts as one would communicate local news that had happened last Tuesday, while it was very much the stuff of textbook lore. I glanced at Daniela but she seemed mostly checked out. I was entranced by the seemingly banal comings-and-goings that would come to define the second great awakening, and Rindge could tell as much from my face. He might have been old, but he wasn't old enough to be around when the Smiths toured the colonies. He was eating up my reaction to his references, and let it all sink in before continuing.

“There’s a game trail behind the store, which will take you most of the way up there. Once you hit the old burying ground, about a half mile into the woods, just hook a left around the squared-off boulder set up against the base of Winter Hill, and then follow the trail that way around until you see some exposed rock. If you have a mind to scurry up right around there, you’ll no doubt see the cave entrance, or at least what’s left of it. Probably see some beer cans too, as a marker; those damned teenagers from down Groton are the only ones that make it there anymore. It’s a shame really, to see the mess, but who is going to haul garbage out of the backcountry?” He trailed off, finally losing steam, his gaze settling on unopened pallets set against the wall of the store.

I took Rindge's distraction as a cue to focus on my beer and a plan. Three-quarters done with the can and feeling fine. No thoughts of dark men or dark cars or rare books. Only adventure, like the kind I had been reading about for years in the Widener collection, and long before, in the novels of Stevenson and King. My foot started tapping, and then my leg, and Daniela could no doubt sense our departure.

"Shall we settle up?" I just about leaped out of my seat in uttering the question.

The proprietor only smiled and Daniela re-engaged at the sight of my enthusiasm with a smile and roll of her eyes. Daniela was a good sport, and more than capable, with this as with most things, and she had zero doubts that I had made up my mind and it wouldn't do any good to fight. We paid for our 'Gansetts, tipping generously in lieu of further purchases that might weigh down our packs, and then we left, by the back door, through which Rindge kindly shepherded us, no doubt understanding that even that short distance saved would put me one foot closer to the dark unknown that I so desired.

Through the woods, through the woods. Not unlike the sort that ringed our hollow and shaded our every move when we were out and about on the property, although decidedly less ominous in the light of day. Added to that, my general focus was again regained, with a pale beer blessing and the promise of a cave. I was just about power walking up the imperceptible incline that lead up to the treeline behind the store.

Signs of bygone Hexham Village were scattered across both sides of the footpath, once we entered the shadow of the woods, following a path that may have been an actual roadway recently as the late-19th century. Now it was barely a two-track, but it was recognizable, nonetheless, and we made good time. Within half an hour we had noticed and circumvented the squared-off boulder. The large stone was moss covered and craggy but it looked, to me, as if it had been worked by human hands, although for what purpose I couldn't say, and were it not for the unfinished roughness of a single side (and

presumably, its bottom), I would have tarried longer to inspect it for primitive machine marks or perhaps religious engravings. As it was, I was anxious to see the inside of the cave before the dwindling light of autumn afternoons forced our retreat. So, we hooked left as we were instructed.

“Will you go in, if we find it?” I inquired of Daniela, to pass the time.

She didn’t break stride but turned her head right and left before answering, as if to glean a cue from the forest itself or to search out calm before answering my obviously provocative question. She also seemed aware of something; distracted but still in good spirits.

“Maybe. Did you hear what Rindge said about *scurrying*? I think he meant it might be dangerous, or at least cramped, inside the cave. All of the books recommend sticking to established routes, remember. For safety reasons. What if there’s a cave-in?”

I was annoyed but not surprised. Daniela was a worrier. Sometimes that slowed us down, but I tried to shift my consciousness once again, deliberately this time, to keep the mood light and to remember and acknowledge all the times that her advice saved us trouble or even pain. That’s the problem with being a worrier, I thought to myself - concluding the train of thought as my eyes fell on a clearing where the hillside lay exposed -: you rarely get confirmation when you are right.

Scree and small granite boulders rimmed the transition from flat path to inclined talus field, rising up above the tree line immediately to our right. We had arrived at Winter Hill, deep in the woods of northern Massachusetts. We went a bit further on the path, but upon seeing the closeness of the shrubbery ahead, we retraced our steps to where the land was most exposed and began scrambling upwards once again. I wore steel-toed work boots, leather, and my trusty denim; both heavy and not very flexible, but forgiving in terms of cuts and scratches, which was good given my clumsy walking style. As per usual, I stumbled up the hillside, crashing through whatever would move and bumping my knees and

hips and ankles on everything else. Daniela was wearing lightweight trail-runners, so the landscape demanded from her a bit more finesse. She danced her way through loose rock admirably, but, after stumbling a couple of times, she began rock hopping. This became easier as we reached a section made up of larger boulders. It was beginning to feel more like a mountain than a hill.

Up, up the hill we traveled, like Rip and Dame Van Winkle on “a long ramble of the kind of a fine autumnal day.” At about 150 feet above where the walking path had ended, flat-faced granite boulders, blue-grey and each weighing tons, began to punctuate the landscape, which was broken eventually by a dark shadow that we soon recognized as the cave entrance. It was little more than a gopher hole, from the outside, edged with moss and a thorny bramble that overhung the void like unkempt eyelashes. I took a moment to look backward, down the slope and over top of the woods that reached out in every direction towards the horizon.

Then, with the forearm of my denim sleeve, slightly frayed from my retreat the night before, I parted the thorny brush and peered into oblivion. From my left hip pocket, I retrieved my pocket notebook, and from within that accessory, I took out - and clicked on - a brushed metal penlight. Although it was powered with two AAA batteries only, the LED emitted a powerful beam. With the penlight I was able to see a full 15 feet inside the mouth of the cave, which extended horizontally into the earth that made up Winter Hill. It looked like we would be able to stand, hunched over, once inside.

“Want to go in?” I asked, not bothering to mask my excitement. It was an empty question and one I would soon regret. Daniela glared at me, but didn’t say a word. When she began looking around for a good place to stash her day pack, I knew she would be coming with.

“I won’t leave sight of the entrance,” she stated curtly.

I took that as a fair compromise and a cue to proceed. So, on my hands and knees, I entered the cave hiking up my pistol on my right hip to bend down low enough. Our day packs would stay outside, but my gun was coming with. Gun, knife, jacket.

All manner of cobwebs and debris and detritus greeted me just inside the entrance, and more than a few long, white objects that I took to be animal bones littered the floor. Dirt fell down my shirt collar, causing me to shiver. There didn't seem to be any living thing in there, or perhaps we had scared off whatever happened to be feasting on squirrel and rabbit flesh. Once I had crawled through the opening, I was able to rise to my feet, but not to stand upright unencumbered. Daniela was upright behind me though, gazing past me to the furthest blackness that the narrow beam could penetrate. We were both enthralled by the experience and edged forward to see more.

With the pen light in hand at shoulder level, I began a sort of hunched shuffling down a corridor that led us into the hill. At first the whole cave appeared to be little more than a glorified animal den, but after a few feet, our surroundings took on the same ruinous air that had greeted us on the footpath through old Hexham Village. The walls of the cave were worked by the hands and tools of humans. I even saw a post, of sorts, or what appeared polished tree root, set vertically, upright like a buttress - floor to ceiling. This cave definitely went somewhere.

As within the Widener stacks, the surroundings were hypnotic, and Daniela's ragged breathing was as pronounced as a jetliner over my shoulder. It was that quiet, which shouldn't have been surprising, but the quiet was disconcerting, and I could hear well enough tell that, after those first few steps, her breath was quickening. I saw no immediate cause for alarm. The corridor wasn't lofty enough to require much support, and if it was going to collapse, it would have done so during a storm, or during heavy snowfall last winter. These were all rationalizations, of course, but I kept pushing forward, more slowly,

making the best use of that cavalier mentality I shared with Reggie and the beer in my belly. Then, a sound broke through the stillness.

It was a clunk, or a thud; nothing natural. The sound came from the mouth of the cave, where we had entered, and a fine veil of dust cascaded down from the entrance and surrounded us. Activity was happening back the way we had come. After a few more thuds in quick succession, I knew we were being buried alive. More dust wafted in around us, causing us to cough and rub our eyes, while the noise of a shovel or pick-axe took on a deep bass-driven undertone as it reverberated through the corridor. Like Daniela, I turned and watched the light soften at the cave mouth, and then it begin to fade. We had to act.

“Watch out!” I yelled at Daniela, as I pushed passed her, kneeled, and drew my pistol.

Two shots was all it took to halt our internment. The shovel work ceased after the second shot and there was a shuffling outside the cave entrance, on the hillside. I paused for a few seconds, letting the excruciating echo of the second blast die out in my ears, and then I hastened to the cave entrance. There wasn't enough space left to escape, but I could see through to outside via a six-inch hole in the scree.

A tall man in a dark suit was retreating down the hillside in a dead sprint, and waiting for him, at the base of Winter Hill, was some sort of flying machine. I mean that literally. A tubular, metallic object – like a “#1” helium balloon from the supermarket, laid sideways - was hovering in the clearing at the base of Winter Hill, textured a glittering stainless steel, totally misplaced in the afternoon sunlight.

Once down the hill, the man in black grabbed a hold of - and was soon dangling precariously from – a wood and rope ladder, which was hanging from (and totally juxtaposed with) the streamlined futurism of the craft itself. The man was tall and lean, but I couldn't make out any other features from the distance or the angle. I doubted the Cryptkeeper himself could move with such speed afoot. Whoever it was proceeded to ride the rope ladder up and over the trees – 40 and then 50 feet up as he finally cleared the

crowns of oaks and pine. The craft itself ascended in complete silence, in a near vertical motion, and once again we were left in the company of our own labored breathing, me at the cave entrance and Daniela just behind. The last I saw, the object had picked up speed, and was moving away, much more quickly than the hot air balloons I had seen at festivals or in the movies. It moved as if propelled, past the horizon, despite its seamless appearance and dangling payload. Although she was just a few feet behind me in the cave, Daniela didn't see any of this. In a moment, the craft was out of sight.

We took turns kicking through the loose rock that was meant to seal us and emerged from the cave dusty, tired, dry-mouthed, but physically unharmed. By the time we were able to stand up straight the adrenaline was beginning to fade and shock was beginning to set in. I was shaking. Daniella was silent. We encouraged each other to drink water but it was obvious that we needed more substantial nourishment than salted peanuts to think clearly and process the nature of our attack. Fortunately, the trail back was clear. A bit more than a mile through the forest to the General Store, which we avoided, then a further 3 miles back to the cabin. I was watching the sky most of the way, paranoid, but paused briefly to take in the old burying ground near the base of Winter Hill. Decrepit tombstones lay in ruins to the right and left of our path. It dawned on me, and Daniela as well no doubt, that the events of that afternoon were the closest either of us had been to death in our adult lives.

We finally made it back to the clearing and the cabin at full dark, only to find it ransacked. There was precious little by way of creature comforts to begin with, and precious little storage, but all cabinets were thrown open, their contents strewn across the cabin floor and out the front door. Wrappers and toilet paper had blown somewhat further afield, to the edge of the clearing, and the overall scene was quite bleak. For a few minutes, we sat by the unlit firepit, unwilling to go inside.

Shock had set in fully, by that point, and we were both shaking even though it was a balmy 60 degrees in October. That might have also been the fact that we had skipped both lunch and dinner, having planned to picnic with some summer sausage and fruit from the store on our way home. Since kicking our way out of that hillside cave mouth, neither of us had felt much like picnicking. We realized the importance of eating though and wolfed down some leftover chicken wings. I got a beer in me and immediately felt better. I was tempted to switch to whiskey but decided to check my phone instead.

No calls, but I had gotten an email from Reggie. It had a one-word subject line that made me shudder: “insurance.” Reggie rarely emailed. There was no text in the email body, although there was a set of attachments: scanned pages from the NYMZA text that had just been stolen from my possession. I could have cared less about the book and its strange illustrations but I damn sure cared about Reggie and I sensed a connection between that email and our own near burial on Winter Hill.

III.

We charged through the thickening darkness, me behind the wheel, doubling and tripling the speed limit, slowing only when country highways passed through rural villages. We were back to Cambridge in just over an hour, a speed record that I doubt had been broken in the long history of overland travel for that region. I took little pride in the accomplishment just then and was forced to slow down, eventually, as traffic put up physical barriers that weren't easily ignored.

Our first stop was Reggie's place of business, where I had shown him the NYMZA manuscript not even two days before. We could see blue and red strobes reflecting off yuppie duplexes blocks from the scene. I knew enough then to know that we were too late. Daniela had been silent for most of the ride, a tacit sanction of my frantic driving. Normally, I never would have gotten away with such recklessness,

but she didn't even grip the seat. She knew, as I did, that something terrible had happened. I would have to talk to the cops soon, but I was in no rush to do so, especially with the cave episode so fresh in mind. I was worried that the story of our escape, while seemingly unrelated, might blurt out and compromise us.

Next stop: the Frobisher's. Reggie's mom lived Melrose, a woody suburb just north of Boston, in a single-family home that she had inherited from the legend himself – Reggie's grandfather – Reginald the first. Those homes are going for three quarters of a million bucks now, so, in the long run, grandpa had done alright. Never mind that Melrose was a Boston backwater until the 50's, at least, or that the puritanical liquor laws that forbade gas stations and convenience stores from selling beer.

Melrose was a family community. Lots of strollers and trees and people acting normal. But the sorts of intimations the cops were at that moment telling Francine Frobisher were anything but normal, and the questions they were asking her would have triggered fisticuffs in a bygone era. Nevertheless, my aunt greeted Daniela and I with the same eyes - large, like Reggie's, complemented by her short, full frame, dark hair, and round face. She seemed to be expecting us, or, like us, was in shock and therefore unable to process the "why's" that had popped up in conjunction with her son's death.

As I suspected, Reggie was a person of interest in several ongoing investigations and the BPD assumed he was murdered over a drug deal gone wrong or a bad quote for fenced merchandise. North End Italians, maybe – Who knows. At that point, only Daniela and I had any idea that a missing book from Harvard library might inform the investigation. I barely had time to hug Aunt Francine and gather some basic info before a man, who tersely introducing himself as Detective Slattery, pulled me aside.

"Why are you here?" he asked, skipping any semblance of formality.

He stood a full six inches taller than me and his salt and pepper beard seemed more a result of his stressful job than his age, which I took to be early 40s. He was dressed well, off the rack then tailored, and stood with clear eyes and a too obvious shoulder holster, which swung freely, a testament to the fluidity of the situation more than a sign of power or intimidation, I think. Wedding ring. He was a lifer – an old-fashioned law man – and he was trying desperately to get a hold on the situation in the earliest phases of the investigation. I wasn't a career criminal, like Reggie, who would have dealt with Slattery and his sort more before, but I knew enough to keep my mouth shut on any subject not related to information that I felt I needed to know, and that I could draw from Slattery in a quick exchange.

“Where's Reggie?” I responded, staring slightly upward to meet his gaze dead on.

He softened. The muscles around the eyes and along the corners of his mouth loosened, and I took him immediately to be a friend in whatever events were to transpire. Which isn't to say I had plans to trust him. Reggie's family came first, and the cops might slow things down. No matter their good intentions, folks like Slattery were bureaucrats first and trusted confidants a distant second.

So, we stared at each other without speaking for 5 seconds or more. I had no thought of breaking gaze or backing down. The cave escape had woken me to the seriousness of the situation and had instilled a hardness I didn't know I had. That, and sobriety. Two hours and counting without a drink, which wasn't bad for a Saturday evening. People wanted us dead – that much was also clear. Unnamed people with access to strange flight technologies had followed us into the woods. Were they the same people who had murdered Reggie? Reggie, the smartest and most sophisticated operator I knew had been clipped and the cops were acting desperate, like there were no leads. But the police were the least of my worries and I sought to express that sentiment with taut posture and a clear-eyed glare. Slattery finally backed down. I

call this “trick number one” – righteous confrontation – and it’s what I was forced to learn the evening of Reggie’s murder.

“There’s been a shooting, and your cousin was involved. I’m afraid he didn’t make it,” Slattery seemed genuinely sympathetic, to the extent that was possible given my cousin’s profession and his own, countervailing position in law enforcement.

He was in the suburbs, after all. Fatal violence was rare in Melrose, but none of that mattered to me right then – I wanted to know what happened to Reggie. So, I kept pushing the detective for more. It was a rare opportunity to glean some intel before the lawyers and the DA got involved.

“What happened?” I replied without pause, deepening my voice but loosening my posture as a testament to my willingness to deal. I was just bouncing on the balls of my feet in anticipation, hoping to give Slattery an impression of readiness, like a boxer before the bell who was looking to scrap.

“He was murdered. That’s all we are able to tell you. The investigation is ongoing,” he added, weakly, reverting to a royal “we” that characterized a professional policeman script, not unlike the sort of responses I defaulted to so many times at the circulation desk.

We were both playing our part, but it didn’t diminish the fact that someone was dead. I felt then that the police were unequipped to find Reggie’s killer. Or killers – if they were the same group of men that had been trailing me since I had left Widener with the NYMZA text in my bag. We left Francine’s house shortly after the police took official statements, and after making sure that Mrs. Frobisher was fed and dressed for bed. I didn’t expect she would sleep. The funeral wasn’t scheduled.

I was back to work on Monday morning, 36 hours later but nothing was the same. Everyone around me was carrying on like nothing had happened. And why wouldn’t they? There’re more than 50 homicides a

year in the Boston metro. Most of these homicides occurred in criminal circles, to which Reggie belonged, and upstanding citizens tended to pay very little attention. Cassandra Davis, Cass – my direct supervisor and sometimes mentor within the Harvard library system – knew something was wrong, but not what. For that, and for the latitude she granted me on the job, I appreciated her. She was like the stacks she managed – organized – and a good reason not to quit the job immediately after I found out about what happened to Reggie. She represented consistency, regularity, and, for Harvard, an uncommon lack of bullshit. She found me hunched over the circulation desk the week after Reggie’s murder and shoved a plastic bucket filled with Halloween candy in my face.

“Take something...Take something please.” Her playfully insistent tone told me she was aware that something was wrong, although she wouldn’t dare ask outright.

An undergrad volleyball star, Cass stood right at six feet, and we faced each other eye-to-eye. But accounting for gravitas, Cassie towered over me. Fortunately, she was tactful, unlike Slattery or the Cryptkeeper. Not that she couldn’t have been an effective bouncer. She just had more brains than most of the overgrown door men at Paddy’s (whom I had come to know quite well) and, like me, and many of our colleagues, she held and maintained a wildly divergent set of interests. Hence, *libraries*. What better place for a lapsed athlete with book smarts and a short attention span? Practically speaking, her strength helped too – With six books under her arm, she could shelve faster than any other staff. Whereas I took the long view, Cass seemed intent on tackling her career in library like the championship game. Seconds counted, and she hated to see her teammates lose heart. Catalog the books; shelve the books; check out the books; repeat. When there are 20 million volumes, we’re talking many lifetimes of work.

“Thanks, Cass,” I muttered, taking a Kit-Kat from her jack-o-lantern bucket.

It would have been better with a dip of peanut butter, I thought, ruefully, but the sweetness cheered me up despite myself. I straightened up and took a stab at normal conversation.

“Anything interesting come through the new acquisitions?” I asked.

Despite a shift toward eBooks, and a decades-old reliance on digital journal subscriptions, Harvard Library still took seriously the value of physical collections. Books, that is. The things we used to hold before cell phones. Daniela was all-in on her Kindle, with which she accessed digital novels from the Cambridge Public Library’s online catalog, but I hadn’t taken the plunge, although it would have been easier (and safer) than holding an oversized, leather-bound tome while falling asleep in bed. Nor can I really justify such nostalgia. Fortunately, large academic libraries like Widener are here to accommodate romantic luddites like me. Sure, most of our collections are crammed full of impenetrable academic jargon, but, amongst the sub-disciplinary minutia and technical manuals, in the wayward corners of the stacks, I’ve happened across illustrated travelogues of Southeast Asia, accounts of the Cosa Nostra, and first editions of Poe, and Woolf, and even a signed Roth.

Yes, Widener’s a treasure trove, and that unparalleled size and scope was good for me, since one missing text – one portraying seemingly antiquated flying machines, for example – would hardly be noticed. Of course, I had no intention of sharing that with Cass or anyone else at work. And just to make sure it didn’t come up, I falsely “returned” the NYMZA text – marking it as available again in the computer system. Old Professor Pierce was off the hook. It’s not difficult. Everything in regular circulation had by then been issued a barcode, but older, less popular texts were still checked in and checked-out manually, with title and call number. One would search for their call number and manually click on the “loan” or “discharge” buttons rather than scan the barcode. I simply looked up the call

number, navigated to the discharge tab, copy-pasted that call number in the checkout screen, and “checked-in” the nonexistent book during a late-night shift. Done and done.

There wasn’t the time or the resources available to double-check every return, so no one would notice until another person decided to request the title. Since the Cryptkeeper was the first to ask about the text in at least 100 years, I felt confident that the disappearance wouldn’t lead back to me. And Professor Pierce wasn’t a computer hacker, I assumed, even if someone suspected him of stealing from the very place he spent most of his time. During this train of thought, Cass was listing new acquisitions.

“...and there’s a real interesting new book on Jack the Ripper,” she finished.

She knew I had a soft spot for true crime but thinking about a famous killer seemed a lot less appealing when it was happening to you. I nodded my approval, but she sensed that I had no desire to continue the conversation. The Monday shift ended uneventfully, and I headed home, head down, hoping that no one would engage me.

The next day I awoke to the sound of heavy machinery, and, peering between the blinds I saw a flash of neon, moving about high in a neighbor’s tree. The scene was surreal and incomprehensible, at least for the few seconds after waking, before I processed the sight of a tree-cutter hanging some 40 feet above the street, steadily chipping away at the crown of a gangly maple with a chainsaw. The property was another rental - a condo like ours - and I experienced a sudden dissonance followed by rage. While the skill and bravery of the tree-cutter was undeniable, the casual destruction of years of natural growth was overwhelmingly depressing, especially in the context of Reggie’s murder, which I couldn’t get out of my head. The man above wasn’t just killing the tree – a healthy tree – but dismantling it. And down below, on the street, passersby didn’t register a second glance, or, if they did so, they seemed to be evaluating the

inconvenience of walking directly beside the roaring mulcher that was noisily shredding the healthy foliage the tree-cutter was lowering down branch by branch.

It was hard not to see Reggie's life in those terms: He was dismantled, after a fashion, and the figures that moved like shadows in the periphery of his life, even those who were professionally invested in finding out what had happened (e.g. the cops and most of his family) had long since moved on to other, more seemingly pressing business. It was only a week after Reggie's murder when I decided to take matters into my own hands. And it wasn't guilt but a twisted sense of justice – given shape by the destruction of life I was witnessing on that otherwise normal morning – that finally motivated me.

Immediately, I felt better, although I had nothing resembling a plan. I was on the case, and the case was a mission, and people need a mission to keep getting up and doing everything that makes up the humdrum day. Careers and kids, and, in the case of my colleagues, devotion to study all made the more grating aspects of the daily routine bearable. Finding Reggie's killers would be my thing, and imagining his killer, or killers, being led away in handcuffs made brushing my teeth and putting on a belt, and going to work, and figuring out dinner, and doing it all again and again – it made that shit more bearable.

I started with the scans of the NYMZA text that Reggie's computer had emailed me automatically when he failed to sign on the previous Saturday (his "insurance"). It was like the infamous Voynich manuscript to my untrained eyes; nonsensical gobbledygook. But there was a common theme: *Airships*. Flying machines of the most fantastic sort appeared on every page that had an illustration, which was most of the pages. To the cops, that imagery most likely meant nothing, even if they had the technical prowess to hack the email server of the departed. After all, it was most likely just one of hundreds or thousands of automatic "insurance" emails sent out at 6 pm EST the week before and there were presumably far too

few technical analysts on staff at BPD to parse that volume of data. BPD wasn't in the business of *understanding* normal people's lives, much less people like Reggie. They were in the business of solving murder cases, and another email, with another set of images, was just more noise to them. But to me, airships were recent history, signaling collapsed caves and a fear of death that welled up in your throat like the bile after that third cocktail. These weren't just symbols – these images were happening to me.

I Googled “airship sightings 1900,” estimating the age of the manuscript based on others that I had seen in the stacks of a similar material, and taking Reggie's comic book tie, as well as the wardrobes in the illustrations, into account. There were hits. Across southern California, and the desert southwest, befuddled townsfolk had reported seeing an array of fantastic flying machines at the end of the 19th century, well before such things were commonplace. In late 1896, for example, The San Francisco Call – a seemingly reputable daily that ran for nearly a century in various incarnations – reported a “STRANGE CRAFT OF THE SKY” on November 18, 1896, the description of which set the tone for a wave of similar sightings that would take place through to the spring of 1897:

The opinion of the masses is, however, that some Lucky inventor, having solved the mystery of aerial navigation, is, with his companions, testing his invention in secret, with no intent of allowing a curious public to view it until his rights are fully protected by letters patent. They presume that he is traveling by night and laying by in deserted spots during the day. Be that as it may, there can be no possible doubt that an aerial vessel of some kind passed over Sacramento last night, and hundreds of the residents of this city will so testify.

Human-sounding (even *English*) voices; noticeable swaying motions, reminiscent of the “laboring as a seagoing vessel”; and slow, lighter-than-air vertical movement; all these common descriptive elements led the witnesses of the day to assume that an independent, breakaway group of very human inventors had somehow conquered the sky. This was long before the modern UFO era, mind you, and, although some reported close-up interactions with angelic beings, most onlookers were curious of (rather than scared by) the mystery airships, seeing it as a novelty. I soon learned that, from California, the sightings tended

East, and airships were subsequently reported in Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas, all after the new year but before the summer of 1897. It was then, in the April 19, 1897 edition of *The Dallas Morning News* that the last multi-witness sighting of mystery airships was reported. There would be little else like – this airship flap – it until Roswell in '47.

A final search, using the keywords I had been jotting down throughout the research session (“Texas,” “airships,” “1800s”), led me finally to some concrete intel and a way forward in my search for Reggie’s killers. Apparently, a group of art students at a small college in Houston had stumbled across what they labeled “outsider art” while rummaging through estate sale lots in a local antique store. They traced the provenance to a German émigré, one Charles A.A. Dellchau, a man who had spent his life in obscurity, toiling away producing illustrations that he would personally bind into several hand-bound “books,” which were pawned to pay back rent upon his death in the early 1930s. After these students organized a small showing on the campus of the University of St. Thomas, in Houston, his depictions of fantastical flying machines and their 19th century operators (in period attire) found a niche audience.

Dellchau’s illustrations would eventually find their way into private collections, some fetching impressive, 5-figure sales prices, according to public auction records, although this level of appreciation took place long after Widener’s acquisition of the NYMZA text. Nevertheless, undeniable similarities.

Flying machines were featured on every page of Dellchau’s hand-bound manuscripts, and they were drawn in a determined but untrained hand, with flourishes of esoteric writing in the margins. Based on some rudimentary cryptographic analysis that separated the proper nouns from easily deciphered dictionary words, stories were pieced together about Dellchau’s life by technically savvy amateur historians.

It was names, mostly, names of contemporary associates unearthed by imaginative sleuths over the years since the Dellshau books had surfaced. German names. I took the next obvious step and began entering those names, in sets and subsets, back into Google. No results. No results. Result...

The names Goetz, Schoetler, and Franke, entered together, returned a search result that I hadn't been anticipating. It seems that a group of hikers, who liked to document their travels on the blog "Climbing Cali," had set out on a backcountry trail in the Sierras in early 2016. The blog post was about what you'd expect. Like all good weekend warriors, our documentarians left from suburban Sacramento early one Saturday morning. Their target: An 18-mile offshoot loop of the Dragoon Gulch Trail (4.5 stars on All Trails – Nice!). Like Daniela and I, they had stumbled on an old burying ground just off the turnaround point on the trail, which was about 8 miles from the nearest town of Sonora, California. Those names were inscribed on grave markers, which I could in a casual group photo they had snapped before hitting the Sonora Brewing Co and heading back to Sacramento. The image of the graves they posted with the story wasn't even captioned, which led me to believe that some sort of newfangled machine vision magic was at work behind the scenes at Google, and, perhaps more importantly, that the words on the gravestones in the image may have only been discoverable *within the last year*, when that technology had been made searchable. I had good reason to believe that no one had yet connected Mr. Dellschau's obscure artistic corpus with a lost cemetery in rural California.

I fought to break gaze with the flickering blue light of my laptop screen. Almost four hours had passed in Wikipedia wormholes, and I was aware of a dull hunger, physical and mental. I opted for a middle-ground - strong drink, and, after grabbing my trusty black denim, I was out the door and on my way to Paddy's.

Daniela was at work, so I had moved quickly, while there was still no one around to tell me “no.” A no might have been helpful though. I hadn’t been drinking since that beer in the cabin after the cave incident several days before. There was no obvious connection between 100+ year-old flying machines and our attempted murder outside Hexham Village, but – for whatever reason - the situation provoked old cravings. Although I was tempting fate with an unusually low tolerance and an empty stomach, I felt that I needed whiskey to help put the pieces together; to understand what was happening. That, or it was about time to finally forget about the whole goddamn thing.

Paddy’s had that same old Paddy’s glow. Low watt incandescent lightbulbs hidden behind green glass fixtures and 60s-era Budweiser signage all reflected off lacquered wood well-polished by labored human breathing and propped elbows. It was a dive, but a surprisingly clean one. And it was old; coming up on 100 years. Paddy’s, which first opened the year after prohibition ended, sat, unflinching, besides endless row houses for its first few decades; and then it sat beside condos; and now, finally, it sits beside sleek, multi-unit apartment complexes with all the amenities. Forget about the 1930s - most businesses from *the 90s* had since cashed in, buoyed at first, and then willingly engulfed by, a property-value tide that never ebbed: *Harvard*. Polished marble and polished wood. The former set vertically, in the form of classical columns, throughout the interior of what is perhaps the greatest private collection of human knowledge ever assembled, Widener Library. The other – polished wood – set horizontally, not a mile away, and used to support not rows of stacks of books, but a single straight line of haggard humans and their various medicines, malted and hopped.

Since we were within a mile of the Yard, there were some, like me, that moved between these two axes daily. Gene was there too, at the end of the bar nearest the door, far from my usual seat, but I took

the stool next to him anyways. I guess – even though I’d just gotten off work – I wanted to feel closer to work, which was the same building, Widener, where Gene had worked for 50 years before retiring with a generous pension and a penchant for generosity. Indeed, he bought rounds for the house in the hours between one tourist (e.g. yuppie asshole) visit and the next, when Paddy’s featured only regulars. He was still new, as far as that set goes; he’d only been coming to Paddy’s since 1968. From Cambridgeport, where he grew up and had commenced drinking, he had brought a sense of duty and felt he needed to catch up and pay his dues with the locals. He couldn’t afford to buy rounds in Cambridgeport as a younger man, so, again, Harvard was bribing its untouchables – paying off the spiritual debts it had accumulated by employing folks like Gene for years and years; wearing them down with invisible labor that kept the institution afloat, all the while doing very little to further educate or elevate them. I guess it was cheaper this way, to finance his drinking rather than his education. Gene was immune to charity.

Drunk at midnight is a dangerous thing to be when you have the company card in your wallet. But something clicked, on that barstool, and it wasn’t just my ambivalence about the workplace that Gene and I shared, nor the sodden future into which I was destined to follow him. It was that I now had a destination and something to pursue. I was chasing justice for cousin Reggie, yes, but, more than that, I wanted justice for a feeling. When the person you are next to; a person who you’ve known all your life...when you both feel completely at ease in each other’s company. Reggie and I teased each other relentlessly, but we never felt threatened or guilty or remorseful once when parted ways. It was like how I felt around Daniela. And I hardly knew Gene, but I didn’t feel the typical neediness or awkward silences that accompanied most human interactions with one another. The booze helped of course, but that level of comfort was still rare, and worth something. It was time to make a move.

I knew that, off a backcountry trail in Sonora, California, lay the designated *burial ground* of an organization strangely similar to the one whose members had been pursuing me. As recently as March, 2017, our techie hikers had blogged about this overgrown cemetery with markers bearing some of the same, German-sounding names as had appeared in the NYMZA text. I had no credit card and very little by way of liquid assets. It was still a week until payday, but I wasn't willing to wait. I had my employee P-Card (purchasing card) from the library, and it worked just like a personal credit card on the internet. I even had the PIN number. It would go through on any airline website and I could be in Sacramento by mid-morning the next day, according to Google Flights.

The only thing I had to risk was my budding career; my wife's trust. Not to mention my life. It was bald rationalization, but I thought of Reggie whenever my whiskey courage began to waiver. You might think that it would have been Daniela that would have talked some sense into me, but I didn't mention my plan to her and didn't intend to. At least not right then. As it happens, I would be on the ground in California before she knew that I had misappropriated endowment funds and skipped work to go hiking.

IV.

Even the middle seat was expensive on such short notice, but I landed in a state of unusual peacefulness, resulting, I think, from the combination of jet engine roar and a lack of strong coffee rather than any sort of unwarranted bravado. Indeed, I was terrified by the thought of losing my job and my wife and whatever small toehold on that precious stability that had occurred to us in the last few years since college graduation. The ground crew was polite enough though, which sustained the illusion, and my fellow passengers all behaved deplaning, so I remained sanguine until well after picking up the rental car – a

small, foreign crossover – from the rental shop just outside the airport. At that point I knew I couldn't put off calling Daniela any longer. She picked up on the second ring.

“Hey baby, what's up?” she answered breathlessly as if she had been on a run or rushing to get to her phone.

I also could tell she knew something was up and that she had already made up her mind she wasn't going to like it. She hadn't liked much of what had been happening, and I couldn't blame her. Her natural fretfulness compounded by tragic times was a sorry sight to behold but completely justified and I felt the same way, but didn't possess the emotional maturity to express it. All of this went unspoken, but she knew that something was going on. Not only was she perceptive, but we rarely traded voice calls, which was a giveaway that my position was precarious.

“Nothing much,” I answered, distracted by the prospect of lying to her about my present location. I still thought there might be a chance that she wouldn't notice that I was out-of-state until I returned. Three seconds later, I blurted out everything.

“I flew American Airlines,” I added weakly, at the end of the confession, as if it was all planned out – a well-researched business trip. She didn't say anything for a few seconds, but I could hear her labored breathing through the earpiece.

“Does this have to do with Reggie, and what happened in that cave by the property?” she asked, finally, after a stony silence.

The anger was there, in her voice, but it was unusually restrained, like during our crazed drive home to the Frobisher's the previous week. She was fully composed, and I immediately felt guilty for keeping anything from her, now or ever.

“Ya, I just had to check something out. To follow up on some intel I found out about online about local Californian history...people, dead people, that may have been working with the guys I think had something to do with Reggie’s death.”

Intel? And equivocation masquerading as a plan; vague, general, unsubstantiated words. Feelings really. *What was I doing there anyways*, I kept asking myself?

“Sounds interesting,” she responded in a measured tone.

She was really trying to understand, I think. I had expected to be in trouble by then, but we were each grieving in our own way. I guess she recognized that my process involved flights of fancy, and, in some cases, actual jet setting. I still hadn’t told her about what I had seen after kicking through a wall of boulders during our escape from the cave. Couldn’t even tell myself, really; it was too much to comprehend. There was no paradigm. Hovering metallic escape craft executing fantastic maneuvers in the mid-day sun. Until I had a better idea about how our attempted murders and Reggie’s successful murders connected, I would keep holding back. She deserved to know something more though.

“Remember, how we saw an old broken-down cemetery we saw through the trees, on that trail leading to the hill and the cave?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“There’s something like that out here too; another cemetery, also near a trail in the backcountry. Some of the names of the people that worked to produce the book I showed Reggie before he died are buried there, up in the foothills of the Sierras. I think that book is what the men in black are after.”

I wanted her to believe, to know, that this wasn’t just an excuse to leave her and escape to California. To break the rules because someone else had done so and gotten away with it. To skip work. She seemed to be coming around, although the connection wasn’t great. I was passing out of town.

Traffic was spreading apart, on State Highway 99, as I finally exited the metro just past Elk Grove, CA. The central valley opened up before me. There was agricultural development expanding like half-conscious slime mold, outwards in every direction. Outbuildings and irrigation, mostly, was what I could see from the highway, and the grid patterns formed by the crops of almond and apricot that reminded me of the Texas panhandle, where neither of those crops would thrive. It all felt quite wild in comparison to the hemmed-in and hilly Victorian suburbs of Boston and Cambridge. The air was clear; the sky a very pale blue. The talk with Daniela was an important step, and something that I needed to do, even if she hated me at the end of it. That, and the sky, made me push down on the pedal.

“I’m only going to be out here a couple days, baby.” I tried to sound reassuring.

“Ok, but you have to call me, okay?”

She was beginning to sound desperate, as I had at the beginning of the call. I wasn’t good on the phone and at the best of times, and generally preferred to delay chitchat until we were together. Given what I suspected - foul play - this sort of radio silence wouldn’t be acceptable.

“I’ll call every day,” I said to her, and meant it.

She sensed that sincerity and it placated her, and we proceeded to change subjects, chatting briefly about her work day; some drama happening with her sister in Kentucky; and the sorts of dishes she would be cooking for herself in my absence. It was forced but necessary conversation meant to calm us both and we disconnected on good terms. By then, it was mid-afternoon, and I had long since missed my usual shift at Widener. My excuse – illness - was dutifully registered by the powers-that-be, and Cassie had told me to take as much time as I needed. She knew about Reggie. Like with Daniela, it seemed unfair to deceive her, and, if she were to have asked the finance office (as she was authorized to do, as my supervisor), she would have known the truth: That I had charged a flight to California on the

company card and left early Monday morning for a trip to the West Coast, to follow a tenuous lead related to the untimely death of my cousin.

I'm not a certified search and rescuer or a backcountry woodsman, like you see on all those YouTube videos, but I get along fine off-grid. That started young for me, in the 90s, when I would travel to my Grandpa's farm in Elsberry, Missouri, just north of St. Louis. He, my grandfather, had more than 500 acres of bottomland on the Mississippi, which he and his brothers farmed during the first half of the 20th century, and my mom, uncles, and aunt all grew up there. It was about as bucolic a scene as you can imagine, and they left us alone for much of the day.

We would drive in from the city on a Saturday morning, say, and, by the time we parked in the gravel driveway, we were anxious for anything resembling adventure. They turned us loose, the adults. "Back by dinner" was the only rule, oftentimes unspoken, and that was it. Hours and hours without supervision. Mostly we would explore the creek bed behind the farmhouse – pushing further and further upstream – seeing how far we could go before having to turn back. Nor were we afraid, of our parents or of bodily harm, or of any of the myriad fears that grip parents today. We would meander along our route, stopping often look at the fish and the crawfish that swam through hollowed out trees that rimmed the bank. Sometimes we would wander up out of the rocky creek bed, up into wooded pastures that bordered the river. By we, I mean my us cousins. Reggie was there most days.

The Dragoon Gulch Trail was easy by comparison. Well documented online, and, unlike back on the farm, I had a smartphone to track my progress. Nevertheless, I took the standard precautions. Screenshot photos of the trail map, as posted at the trailhead in case I couldn't get a strong enough signal later on; 3 water bottles – one for each hour out on foot; and a small first-aid kit, buried in a single-

shoulder day pack that I favored for day hikes and had thrown into my overnight bag. My phone fully charged, and the pen light in my pocket notebook was equipped fresh batteries that I picked up in the gas station on the way. I could walk out, in any direction, if things got too hairy, and hit civilization by the end of the day. Also, I had some peanuts, for sustenance. I can walk 10 miles on a handful of salted peanuts before slowing down, if I have to. No whiskey though, even though it was light enough to carry and I often did. And no pistol. It wouldn't do to fly to California with a pistol on business, fraudulent or otherwise. So, I was sober, but not quite sure how long that was meant to last, although I didn't look up package stores on my way into Sonora, which was auspicious. Add my lucky jacket and Leatherman, which TSA didn't notice, even though I carried it on, and you have the entirety of my personal effects.

I barely slowed down until I reached the trail head, even though Sonora town center was picturesque. The Sierras weren't displaying their fall colors as dramatically as Boston was in late October, but it was hard not be distracted by the changing of the seasons. The trail itself was damp, the weather blustery, and the combined experience was one of falling leaves when I started out upon broken slate, and then wet gravel as things cleared out around me. Lots of pine and cedar. Like as with our still recent excursion near old Hexham Village, the path appeared to be taking me up and around a hill, towards a mountain unlike those we might see in New England. I could see through gaps in the temperate canopy, occasionally, glimpsing much younger trees had dropped their foliage too early in the season. I passed only a few other people along the trail. Mostly retired couples, it looked like, leading golden retrievers or well-behaved labs, and decked out in Patagonia vests while carrying hiking poles. It reminded me of the California from the movies, a place I had never been. Granted, it was a weekday, so the relative emptiness wasn't surprising, nor was the area surrounding Sonora a bustling metropolis. But I soon felt something: A giddiness bordering on anxiety, the same feeling that used to afflict me before

entering a house party or a high-school classroom where we were to be given a standardized test.

Heightened alertness that wasn't altogether unpleasant but put me on edge nonetheless.

I made my way very quickly, without a travel companion. Every couple of miles I would step to the side of a path and take a couple swigs of bottled water, and, at the 5-mile marker, I retrieved some peanuts from the front pocket of my day pack and ate it while I walked at a slightly slower pace but didn't stop. Immediately after finishing the snack, I was on high alert.

Again, nothing was overtly threatening about my surroundings, and I took it to be a physiological response to food rather than a legitimate concern. At mile 8, the designed turnaround point, I decided to stop and meditate. There was a clearing there; a meadow that hosted some of the most dedicated picnickers on the West Coast and which signaled the end of the marked trail. Scattered throughout that meadow, itself situated high up in the Sierra foothills, were great granite boulders, worn spherical by millennia's rainfall. One boulder, about 50 yards off the main trail, had a notch or cut about half way up its face, where I could comfortably sit and meditate and I pointed my boots in that direction.

This wasn't the breakthrough I was hoping for, I admitted to myself. Instead, this was to be the end of my journey and the end of my first "case" as a self-employed, self-hired, and self-trained (hah!) private investigator. And I had failed my first, already dead client, who happened to be my favorite cousin in the world. This was also to be the end of my grief, or the start of it, but either way it signaled a transition to how I would think about Reggie and the NYMZA text and my role in their simultaneous disappearance. There was nothing there, near Sonora, and I sat for almost an hour, on the boulder deep in Dragoon Gulch, chanting to myself, and probably looking like an idiot.

But I heard a buzzing sound, near the end of the hour. The sound persisted beyond imagination and grew, beginning to sound as if it was echoing inside my ears. Then and now I have managed to

maintain a strict “no crazy” policy about such things, and the sounds I was hearing were threatening that bulwark. So, I opened my eyes just as the feeling of amazement started to crest and overwhelm lucidity. The boulder was some 6 inches below me, and I was hovering in mid-air. It felt like when you awake, startled, during a night’s sleep, and then you tense up and jerk suddenly as if you had just hit the bed from a distance and your stomach was aware of it. *Hynagogia* is how they describe it, I think, but this time it was happening in broad daylight, and I never hit the bed, so to speak. Instead, I gradually hovered back down to the top of the boulder, over the course of a few seconds, eyes open. Once again, the rock pushed up against my pants and bird sounds returned to the meadow and the wind picked up.

Any fatigue was instantly forgotten, and I was sweating noticeably from the excitement. Everything else about the meadow seemed unchanged and I never re-awoke into consciousness, like one sometimes does from one dream into another, which can reveal the original dream. That is to say I wasn’t dreaming. Something was happening, and I hopped down to examine the boulder more closely. Like with the meditation spot, the reverse side of the boulder was cut away. There, certain design details were apparent. The boulder had been worked, by human tools, and the opposite side looked sepulcher. There was no mistaking it. Columns, however simple, framed a lintel piece marked with faded engraving. Everything was pretty well worn away, and you wouldn’t recognize the mausoleum as man-made from a distance, but there was the vague outline of a door visible on the backside of the boulder in the meadow.

There was no chance of making entry, however, and I could see that much pretty quickly. The door, if there was a door, wasn’t hinged, and there were no visible cracks or seams where I might force entry. But, as I began to clear away the dust with a bandana, I saw that the door piece comprised a distinct piece of stone and might be removed. Without power tools a precise excavation would be impossible, but there was something happening in and around that rock and I wasn’t going home completely empty

handed. So, I used another, smaller rock – a handheld piece that may have broken off years before, and that was laying in the grass beside the boulder – to chip away at a corner of the inset doorframe. The door didn't budge, so I pocketed the makeshift tool and headed for home.

My first day back to campus, after California, turned out to be the height of fall color in Massachusetts. Deeply saturated reds and yellows and oranges adorned the Yard, and it briefly resembled the fairytale that high-schoolers imagine when filling out college applications. Walking in from work, I entered campus through the notorious *Porcellian* gate, off Mass Ave and just West of the library. Across the threshold, I became aware that such beauty inevitably preceded a great dying off, and my thoughts turned to winter, which seemed strangely attractive in the moment; an externalized form of the closure that had eluded me until after I had taken the Renfro investigation to the opposite coast. The chunk of charged granite I kept at the bottom my work bag, under a t-shirt, had motivated me to cover up (rather than attempt to atone for) my surreptitious spending. Now that I had a clue, I didn't want to get caught.

If you're intent on defrauding an academic institution, and you aren't greedy, it's alarmingly easy to do so. That's because most people don't want to risk it, having sacrificed so much already to get to that point in their career or education. Despite my experience in Dragoon Gulch, which re-energized my focus on the task of avenging Reggie, I was still unafraid of the inevitable consequences that would follow discovery of my misappropriation. But now, instead of recklessness and desperation, I was fueled by something akin to faith. Faith that I wasn't going crazy, mostly. There *were* sinister forces at work, and they had powerful technologies at their disposal, which, as I found out in California, included the means to induce weightlessness. It was time to double down on my original intuition and move forward with the investigation. I had no idea what to do with my souvenir, the stone, and settled on inaction; throwing it

first on a high shelf, above books in the apartment, and then in the bottom drawer of my office desk. I knew that getting fired would seriously hamper forward progress - I needed Harvard's resources to continue the investigation. I needed to eat.

I forged Cass's signature on a travel request form, retroactively dated, that described my attending a technology conference in Northern California. I should thank Dellshau's compatriots for basing their operation so close to what would come to be known as Silicon Valley. Almost 100 years before Shockley absconded to Mountain View with plans for replicating his Bell Labs transistor, NYMZA was operating 100 miles to the northeast, flying dirigibles across the Sierras. That proximity meant that I could reasonably cite any number of technology workshops, conferences, meetups, and trainings that occurred daily across Northern California. Because I claimed no on-the-ground expenditures, and therefore wasn't required to submit any receipts for purchases like food or accommodation, I simply put down the "3rd Annual Berkeley Makerspace Meetup" as my destination when filling out the form. Easy.

Then, to make up for it, I got to work. Not on the case. As I say, it wasn't clear where to go with the piece of rock without arousing suspicious, and I didn't have the metallurgical training to initiate a thorough analysis myself. No, I decided to take some time to focus on my day job - to reimburse my employer, sort of, while figuring out a plan to track down the Cryptkeeper and his goons. But I thought of Reggie often, and the next month I snuck into a lecture on Plasma-based lift, in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, offered to a class of mechanical engineering undergrads by a visiting fellow from the University of Cologne. Immediately afterward, I retreated to the Library - to the stacks once again - and began researching exotic propulsion technologies. There were hundreds of titles in the collection, some of them reputable.

The woods; the bar; the library. Three places I know and love. Bad people visited all three that October and then they took away someone I love. The fact that it was my cousin who was dead made it sting even more. He wasn't a soft target, and my takeaway was that these people weren't in my league. Despite paper credentials and general interest in research, it was beyond me to track down and apprehend (or even credibly report upon) the Cryptkeeper and his men in black. There was no book in Widener library that laid out a proper course of justice for such a shadowy and well-resourced criminal group. So, I retreated to regular life and numbing routine. I made every effort to pop in at Aunt Frobisher's house in Melrose, to try and cheer her up, but Slattery was less and less interested.

Do good in school and sign papers and you can have whatever you want in this world. At least that's what we're taught, and for some the promise is enough. I took it as a consolation, at best. When those papers they make you sign are student loan applications, and mortgage documents, or police eye witness reports, then you will begin to see the terrifying nature of the tradeoffs that everyday people make to secure a semblance of normality. Right about the time the time such darkness was dawning on me, objects were beginning to move around me on their own in our apartment. Picture frames would slide from pianos and streetlights would flicker and then die when I walked past them on my way home from work. Loud bangs began waking us in the night, without explanation. I had yet to hear voices but I constantly questioned my own sanity, which was especially troubling given my family history.

Book II:
Curse of the Second Born Sons

In my experience, there is much for which one cannot find words even in the confessional; much which springs from weakness, irresolution and timidity, from petty self-centeredness rather than from inclination towards evil or cruelty, from error rather than ill-nature. I shall be as brief as I can...

- Passage from a sealed document, written by T.S. Eliot, which sat unread in the vaults of Harvard University Library for 51 years.

V.

One year later and it was autumn in Boston once again. My mood had stabilized in the interim, due mostly to the singlemindedness I'd achieved after coming back from California with an enchanted piece of gravestone granite in my pocket. But that stability had discouragingly little to do with progress on the case of Reggie Frobisher. Indeed, I was no closer, practically, to tracking down the Cryptkeeper and his goons than I was at the same time the year before. But things had happened to Daniela and I, during that week the previous October, and I had gotten my drinking under control as a result of the trauma. I also had schemes for a potentially useful side job, inspired by my desire for revenge: Investigating disappearances, providing round-the-clock surveillance, and maintaining subscriptions to a handful of specialty databases. Basically, I had it in mind to moonlight as a cut-rate PI, although few of the clichés and none of the glamour applied.

I saw it as a stopgap measure – a way to sharpen my skills and boost my bank account balance for when (if) I caught a lead on my cousin's case. My own research was ongoing, but the BPD, Slattery, Reggie's mom, even Daniela – they were all completely done with it. Done with thinking about what had happened to cousin Refnro. I couldn't blame them; they didn't see what I had seen upon exiting the cave – the glint of polished metal as it floated just above the surface of the Earth, immune to both criminal law and the laws of physics. The sheer impossibility of it was astounding. And institutional contacts, genuine or not, were useless when you had no positive identification, no license plate, no evidence except that which you had stolen from a major research institution. As to that monument fragment sitting in the bottom drawer of my work desk: I was following up with my own material analysis as well as periodic meditations. So, instead of losing a job by admitting any of this, I took on another job. It wasn't much different from librarianship. Just different databases.

First, there was the matter of posting regular advertisements, on Craigslist, in the “Resumes” section, which I had never utilized before that year. I didn’t get a bite for a long while, despite the fact that my first ad made heavy use of words like “bonded,” and “licensed,” and “registered by the state of Massachusetts.” Concerning my purported areas of expertise, the listing was much less specific. “Missing Persons” was another term that appeared in the ads, for example. That was a stretch, and perhaps irresponsible, especially if some poor bastard came to me with an *actual* missing persons case, but that specialization concerned the very same sort of investigative methods that I was attempting to master. The only difference is that my missing person – the Cryptkeeper – was missing on purpose, was capable of murder, and could fly without a propeller or a jet engine or a helium balloon.

There was very little to go on. The car that they drove – the one I’d seen outside of Widener and Paddy’s the year before – was remarkable only insofar as it was totally unrecognizable. It looked like a mere silhouette of Reggie’s *Continental*, and even that comparison was a stretch. The same goes for their clothing. Classic black suits. They would fit in at any time or place, anywhere on the planet, anytime during the past hundred years. I had to admit that was a genius touch, on the part of my adversaries.

What do you wear if you want to make people think you are on your way somewhere, working for a government entity, and couldn’t be interrupted? What outfit will ensure you’re never questioned? Ask yourself that and then you’ll see why I was impressed. Those guys could be walking the Gobi Desert or Grand Central Station, on foot, in the 1930s or 2011, and get passed without a second thought, passersby making them for drainage inspectors or retired military personnel performing some menial bureaucratic task. They are never out of place, but always inapproachable, and that would make them difficult to track and near impossible to apprehend.

It was only when you got up close to these men in black that they were threatening, due to their above average height and lack of affect, of both attire and countenance, and also due to their piercing glare, which precluded casual conversation. I had some clue to Cryptkeeper's origins, given his accent (American), but the only other object of record was the NYMZA book itself and the original was long gone. But that's what connected us. They wanted the book, and they went through Reggie to get it back from me. In it were illustrations and some coded language and scorpion motifs, none of which I could comprehend. Of those around me, including Daniela, only I knew that our adversaries also had access to silent flight technologies that would allow them to get in and out of tight spaces quickly. That bit of information was beyond belief, and I had no intention of sharing it with anyone yet.

So, all of these first PI efforts were intended to further a greater mission, but they mostly just served to keep me moving, and, as always, it was Daniela who suffered most in the interim. It had been a year of out-and-out mania, interspersed with a grotesque catatonia I could sometimes predict but never circumvent, and which it would shock the unknowing observer. It just made Daniela feel helpless, the down times, when she would see me sitting there, staring straight forward, not caring if I lived or died. If only she knew the truth – that I often did want to die, during those moments in the year that followed Reggie's murder, but I didn't have the necessary control over my body to execute the required motions – to pull the trigger - and, eventually, the importance of finding his killer, and, perhaps, of being a dad, would occur to me and I would get up, take a shower, and crack a beer. Or a whiskey.

A slat wood fence separates Silverstar Liquor from a residential block of pretty nice single-family homes about a half mile from our apartment in West Cambridge. Between the fence and the liquor store is an alley. If you happen to purchase, say, a half-pint of John Jameson and Son's Irish whiskey from the

establishment, you can casually slow your pace on your way through the alley and sip the whiskey without fear of being cited for violating open container laws. For the uninitiated, the discovery of this back-alley blind spot felt like a real breakthrough – a budding lush’s double-helix moment. It was also the scene of my first case as a private detective.

Inside Silverstar, I headed straight for the beer cooler, against the far wall, deliberately bypassing the whiskey section while moving against the flow of traffic. At the checkout, I was greeted with two men arguing behind the counter. One was much older, but they looked alike, and I took them as the father and son owners, who I knew sometimes supplied Paddy’s when the trucks were slow to ship their cases of booze across the river. These gentlemen were of medium-height, both of them, but the younger had long, dark hair put up in ponytail. He, the son, was also wearing a leather jacket, scuffed at the wrists like my own. I took the son to be slightly older than me, in his mid-30’s, and he was trying to convince his father of something, and in no uncertain terms.

“We have to call the police,” said the younger man. “There are laws against this and we are legitimate business owners,” he spoke in a raised voice, not caring that there was a customer waiting.

“We don’t call the police,” said the older man, with an air of practiced patience. He had glanced at me and cracked a smile, placating his customer by demonstrating who would make the final decision about whatever their problem happened to be. I waited patiently to purchase my beer.

“Those people, the Hall’s, they are good people, and more importantly, they are our neighbors. If we don’t call the police, they will, and then it is us who will be in trouble.”

The son was obviously frustrated by that point, but getting nowhere with his argument, which seemed to concern assisting someone – *the Hall’s?* – with a mutual problem. I didn’t know the Halls, but took the brief exchange that something unusual or unpleasant needed to be done; something beyond the

scope of the police and, potentially, of the law. Being accustomed to the garrulousness of some customers, both at Paddy's and in the library, I didn't think they would hold it against me to interject my opinion. After all, I was a regular customer, and had spent perhaps thousands of dollars in their establishment over the years. Surely, I had earned the right to be nosy.

"I can look into it for you, if you like." Not knowing at all what "it" was, I nevertheless managed to maintain a straight face while placing the six pack on the barrel head.

The straightforward tone and gaze I had managed to maintain while confronting Slattery the year before – it had stuck with me, and I felt powerful, in a small way, or as if I was getting away with something or had a special power. Like a trick of the sort an amateur hypnotist might use to prime and hook a random punter. They both turned and looked at me, then back at one another, before finally facing me again. They were unreadable, although I believe something meaningful had passed between them in that instant. The younger man then stepped forward, to the counter, and began to ring me up. He loomed somewhat, as if to challenge me, and it was only after handing me my receipt that he finally spoke, satisfied that I wasn't sent there to scam them.

"There are people making trouble for us. They hang out behind the store, after closing time, in the alley," he spoke quickly but with a seriousness that led me to believe he actually thought I could help.

I guess I had passed the first test. Or maybe the first test was not stumbling drunk through the aisles to buy bottom-shelf vodka and then spilling change on the counter. I occasionally bought wine there as well, and they recognized me as a steady paycheck with mildly discerning taste. And I wasn't a cop. We all considered these facts quickly, without speaking, under the glare of florescent lights, and I decided on the soft sell and the safe backup prospect of a night at Paddy's instead. No work tomorrow.

“I’m a certified private investigator.” I spoke evenly, not mentioning distinct lack of experience or my failed Craigslist ad.

This would be my first case, after all. The younger man paused to hear what I had to say next, obviously taken in. The older man, hair cut close, but still quite dark, leaned forward and peered over gold-rimmed spectacles. He looked bemused, as he had arguing with his son, and I felt outnumbered.

“You drink whiskey, yes?” his accent was much more pronounced. Iranian, I think.

“I drink whiskey but I take payment in cash,” I responded without a pause, and proceeded to pull the receipt from the hands of the younger man before turning to depart Silverstar. Goodbye case #1, I thought bitterly, already putting the entire interaction out of mind.

“Well, no matter then,” he spoke softly, just barely within earshot, before I had a chance to finally leave the store.

“We shall go to the police, as my son suggests,” he concluded, a bit louder, as if to challenge me.

I knew he wasn’t serious about going to the police, but I also knew that he was interested in seeing what I could do for them, or he wouldn’t have said anything at all. I’m sure they could see I was no tough guy, but I sometimes wore a collared shirt when buying more expensive wine. It was enough to get me thinking, and, perhaps, it was enough to keep me drinking as well.

“Glen Morangie - 23 year,” I spoke up, somewhat louder than the acoustics of the room demanded, turning once again to face the duo from just the beyond threshold. The lights buzzed overhead, and someone came in the front door, setting off the electronic chime while sidestepping me to get past the register. There was no one else in the store at that point and we all waited a few second while the newcomer passed by, barely glancing at us on her way towards the wine. I knew the bottle in question was worth at least \$500, having ogled it on my way through the store. I pegged my new base salary at that

rate, right there on the fly. Both Iranian gentlemen were still looking at me – taking me in. They hadn't even turned to face each other, but it was the younger man, not the father, who eventually responded.

“Deal,” he said, “but only upon satisfactory completion of the job.” He extended his hand across the desk and I took a few steps back into the store to join them.

Manicured fingers again, but this time with normal-length nails. Know your enemy. I reached out to shake. There were millions of dollars of stock in that store, I later realized, and they were getting off cheap. No money out-of-pocket. I was relieved to be on my way as well and considered it a good deal all around. Anyways, we all knew I would be back within 24 hours, for the usual Jameson half-pint that went so well with that second six pack, and I left without taking in any more of the details.

I paced myself, with the couple first beers, and, after dinner with Daniela, I had it in mind to check out Paddy's. She didn't question it, as I had been working pretty much nonstop, at the library and on trying to win my first case, and, as I say, you can't get drunk off beer. You can get drunk at Paddy's though, and I often did. About that possibility, Daniela was much more ambivalent, but I promised her an early night.

“It's for work,” I said, and vaguely described my interaction with Silverstar's ownership.

“You're working for a liquor store now?” she responded.

Her question was mostly rhetorical and wholly skeptical. “Great fit, but do you think that's a good idea?”

She stared at me, this time waiting for a response. I think I may have learned my stare down technique from Daniela, and she wouldn't budge, so I took a turn to speak. I assured her everything was above board, except the actions of whoever was causing these business owners grief, and even managed to get her to make a small toast, with beer in a wineglass, to the appearance of what was to be my first

paying gig as a private investigator. I neglected to mention that the agreed upon form of payment was whiskey. Lucky jacket on my back and out the door.

The scene at Paddy's that night was glorious. All bullshit, from the whole cast of regulars. There was a real warmth about the room, rather than an anger you might feel when it gets late in other bars, or at least I felt that way, having just fallen off the wagon. Dennis was at the bar, and we got along fine. He was a drinker as well as a bartender and hung out at Paddy's before and after his shift, most weeknights, pulling Pabst for himself and a couple of other locals. I wasn't on that list yet, but they let me sit in on the conversation, even though I lived in the architectural monstrosity across the street. Their faces glowed like the wood stain and the brass fixtures.

"Hey, do you guys ever go to Silverstar," I asked, at halftime, trying to turn the conversation to my new business venture. Gene was sitting with us too, and he spoke up first.

"Sure, I go there sometimes when Paddy's is closed," he said, looking at Dennis with a smile on his face. Paddy's was open for these guys even when it wasn't open for everyone else, which was most of the time, so I knew that they were pulling my leg. I took a chance and jumped back in.

"You know anything about the owners?" I asked, trying to keep on topic and not get dragged into the Sunday morning regular's conversation, when the lights stayed off. They were caught off guard by my quick and serious response and Gene even had his mouth open, frozen between sips. But they weren't offended.

"Sure. Persian gentlemen, I believe." Dennis was speaking seriously, even though his patronizing tone suggested otherwise. They were weary of me, even more than they were of Silverstar's owners, who they had most likely known for years or may have even grown up with. My drinking buddies

were diverting my attention from their friends. I hadn't been in Cambridge long enough to earn and learn the scoop, although I did come out that night with a name: *Khayyam*.

"They said they were having problems, the Khayyams. Something having to do with the alley out back of their store."

I let the comment hang, and saw immediately from their averted gazes that they both knew something but weren't going to tell me about it. These weren't shy people, but everyone took a drink before anyone decided to speak, although the question lingered.

"Well, sure, there's Rose, who does business out back, but that's nothing to get worked up about," said Gene.

They glanced at each other, and Dennis went to pull another round for the other end of the bar. I turned fully to face Gene.

"Who is Rose?" I asked, trying not to betray my curiosity. He stared at me until I gave up the question and took a drink, turning my attention to the game playing above the bar. Apparently both Gene and Daniela could outstare me, but I had enough to get started.

Like the Kayyam's, the Halls - whose home abutted the alley on the other side of the alley fence - were in something of a tight spot. Since at least the time of Cotton Mather, laws governing spiritous drink and fortunetelling have been amazingly nebulous legal grey-areas in the towns and cities of New England, and it was therefore hard to regulate either with much specificity, especially after midnight. In this case, the liquor store was a grand enabler, but the oak tree in the alley was where things got interesting. Some enterprising degenerate had carved out a place of business. In a hollow beneath a tree in West Cambridge, a psychic was plying her trade.

As a target of murder, who made regular use of the alley where that same Oak grew, I fit right into the scene, at street level and below, and I think this gave me an advantage that regular law enforcement would never have had in the same situation. In that way, my weaknesses were also my strengths, during that first case, but it took me a few visits (and a few nips) to work up the courage to actually poke my head into the hole, which wasn't lit, except at just around midnight, and then only by candlelight, which is the first thing I saw when I poked my head into the hole. *Rose*, they had said. *Rose operated down there*.

I would soon learn that the tarot cards, spread out across the decrepit root mass growing from the base of the hollow oak, were mainly just for show. And I wasn't the mark, for whatever reason. The women beneath the tree somehow recognized that fact, and shooed me back out the crooked shaped opening that worked as her door before I had a chance to take in the scene. From the start, her intuitiveness complemented her deceptive nature. I was so caught up in strange ambiance, down in the bowels of the oak, that I had one foot back aboveground, back in the alley, before turning around to finally take her in. My eyes then fell upon a much younger woman than I had thought, made to look older with a seemingly haphazard assortment of soiled topcoats and what appeared to be a frizzled white wig. Teased bangs obscured a remarkably smooth complexion. She gazed up at me from across the makeshift card table, roots and clumps of dirt framing her hair. *Was I now doomed to inhabit caves and crevasses every Autumn*, I wondered, briefly, before asking Rose a practical question:

"Would you consider moving your business indoors?" I asked, nodding up and back across the alley to the store, an earnest gesture that caused her to drop her back into her seat, little more than a cloth-covered mass of polished root ball, much like the Tarot-card covered table.

I had it in my mind going in there that there was a compromise to be had – that the Kayyams might be willing to go into business with Rose. Surely, they had a back room and some sort of profit

sharing would benefit both parties, assuming her services weren't satanic or what-have-you. She didn't answer, not on that first visit, but I think she was considering it as she leaned forward and rearranged the cards on the table.

I exited, back into that wind tunnel that was the alley behind Silverstar Liquors only to find another lost soul, this time a gentleman in a ratty grey overcoat, looking every bit his age, and smelling like stale vodka. Discarded jack-o-lanterns lay in the drainage ditch beside the man's feet, decaying remnants of Halloween the week before. A few feet further down the alley, lying unconscious halfway in and out of the ditch, and with one hand in the pooled water that lay at the lowest point of ground, was another, much younger man. I wondered if they were together, these 'next in line' at Rose's, and I began to comprehend this so-called psychic's business plan. From her "office," an endless stream of addicted personalities would scurry like racoons to their own dirt-encrusted hidey-holes to black out, or to drink whatever was left of their stash and then pass out, all the while waiting for the liquor store to re-open again later in the morning. Rose fill the gap of a few minutes between closing time and the next morning; she was profiting off of misery brought on by hard liquor and the dead of night. I made a point to challenge her with that fact during my next visit, again at just after midnight the following day.

"Why are you taking advantage of these people," I asked, my tone much more somber and direct than it had been the night before.

She was unruffled. Flickering candlelight splayed variegated shadows across the roots and mossy dirt that surrounded us in all directions except for from the entrance that lay behind my back. This time, I was somewhat better prepared to take in the scene, and, besides the deceptively young women sitting across from me, I noticed deliberate attempts to buttress and reinforce the hollow – care taken to sustain a small business, which measured all of 6 feet in every direction. It was a dark, spherical void that we

inhabited, with three protuberances – arched roots – comprising the chairs and table. Given that ditches ran along the fence line on either side of the oak, I imagined she dealt with terrible drainage during inclement weather, but the space was quite dry at the time and the crunch of dry loam beneath my feet was satisfying. Despite overhanging detritus, which I believe Rose cultivated for affect, everything was quite clean, even welcoming. This old growth survivor was where she had her business.

“I’m here to help these people,” the voice wasn’t at all raspy or weak, as you might expect from someone purporting to be an old gypsy, or wiccan, or would-be pagan, or whatever she purported to be.

“Someone close to me...My friend...she’s not drinking, nothing except for what you can brew in a jailcell, but there is still hope for others, if you can spell it out for them; the lateness of the hour within which they find themselves if they happen upon my tree. No one comes down here that doesn’t know their lives, their souls, are ebbing – No one joins me who doesn’t want to, deep down. That’s why the deception; that’s why it’s all *death cards*, cobbled together from multiple Tarot sets. I don’t take payment for this – you know that, right? I’m simply here to voice their conscious – to tell them what they want to hear. To tell them that it’s time to quit. What are you trying to quit Mr. Investigator?” she finished with a question that caught me off guard, although it a relief to me that she didn’t see me as just another drunk.

“How do you know what I do?” I questioned her in turn. She answered just as quickly, and without hesitation or any condescension that I could sense.

“You are looking for something, and it’s not me or your reward from this job. And you have also *found* something, but it’s not for you keep. Finally, you have lost someone, recently. This sort of loss is common in your family – too common. Something is floating just behind your left shoulder, Mr.

Investigator – a dark cloud - and it’s been following you and your family for a very long time,” she intoned the last phrase in a sing-song voice that I found to be quite alluring, despite the implications.

“If the Kayyams won’t call the cops, I will,” I responded, sidestepping any mention of my family. I was bluffing again. In recent memory, my only interactions with the police, like Slattery, were useless, and I had no intention of letting a committee of badges interfere with my business and the chance at fine aged Scotch. Rose stared at me until I had calmed down; until my breath had slowed, along with my heartrate, and I could tell, as she could, that this night’s face-off had reached a stalemate. Again, I stood and left. This time it was another young woman that greeted me, just outside the opening to the tree, and one with life in her eyes. What caused such a range of people to seek out such a bleak place, I thought?

By the last time we interacted, Rose knew I wouldn’t be calling the police. So, when she saw me, she said nothing, but instead began to remove the cards from the root mass that made up the table between her and her well lubricated clientele. From her seat to mine was less than 4 feet of void, and the walls – wood, caked with muck and tangled roots – lay well within arm’s reach. This should give you a sense of the closeness of her lair, where we both might have suffocated if she had decided to hang a door. Instead of a door, the salt-streaked but softened denim that made up the back of my lucky jacket added some minimal amount of privacy to our transaction, which had so far included no money changing hands or an agreement on her part to cease and depart.

Beneath her Tarot cards was a knit blanket, child’s size, which she carefully removed as well, this time by folding the corners inward so as not to trap the dirt. The move was practiced, and I imagine she could get in and out of the tree quickly, if some enterprising law enforcement felt inclined to explore the alley behind the liquor store after midnight, which was unlikely. Under the blanket was a remarkably well polished flat wood surface complete with etchings; it was a homemade Ouija board. She had carved it,

meticulously, but she wasn't really much of an artist and the corners veered to oblique angles, making the entire board into the shape of an upright diamond rather than a manufactured game set. Indeed, the surface reminded me more of a bronze age rune than a board game.

That didn't seem to matter to Rose though, and her eyes, having fallen upon the board, seemed to have forgotten I was even there. It took a full 30 seconds before she finally broke her gaze. She didn't look at me, but reached into a small hollow in wood, just behind her left hand. The planchet, like the board, seemed to be carved from a single piece of oak, a knot, and most likely part of the tree itself. She began to speak, and her tone was much more timid; more subdued; more afraid.

"Lots has happened here, and much of it good. Families, like your friends the Halls have grown and loved and shared that love. I've felt that. But there's also been much death, as with your own family. You know, this is very near Tom Cutter's Tavern, where Tom Ruggs and his daughter, Jennie, were last seen? Seen alive at least. That women – the women you saw yesterday, after we spoke – she's seen Jennie Ruggs too, just like I have. Down at the end of the alley, late last week, stepping into a carriage that floated instead of rolled, surrounded by a hazy mist. When is the last time you saw a carriage operating in West Cambridge, Mr. Investigator? Of course, it wasn't always West Cambridge. The Ruggs would have taken that ride many times, and seen many things, including, perhaps, your men in all black."

Finishing this soliloquy, she finally looked up. I wanted to get her out from under the tree and to claim my reward and decided against pursuing this particular line of conversation, although she seemed to have knowledge of the Cryptkeeper and the case of Reggie Frobisher, my cousin.

"I'm here to get you to move, into the store or into a cell at Middlesex County. Slattery, my old buddy in the detective's bureau, owes me a favor," I finished, hesitantly, deliberately evading.

Nor was the threat true. In fact, he – Slattery – most likely felt as if things tended in the opposite direction, but I wanted to spook Rose and get things moving. I’d read mention of old Menotomy in the Widener stacks, in some books describing the history of life in the colonies, but it was too late and too cold to sit around sharing ghost stories, and I was getting sick of her habit of mentioning death and my family history in the same sentence. It didn’t seem relevant.

“Shall we ask Mr. Ruggs who killed your cousin? Or shall we ask Jennie Ruggs who is going to kill you?” her questions were icy, and her voice – suddenly raspy - finally matched her costume.

I was scared. There’s no way she could have really known about Reggie and the Cryptkeeper without doing some serious digging, or if I was vulnerable. I felt the temperature in the hollow drop precipitously in just a few short seconds, and there was also a stink about the place, like rotten eggs.

She placed the planchette on the board, at the center. Her head began to bob on her shoulders. At first the movements were imperceptible, but soon her whole upper body was shaking and she seemed to be exercising great effort to maintain control over the planchette, which suddenly leapt. “N.”.. “Y.”.. “M” ... “Z.”.. “A” it spelled out, in a jumpy, mechanical series of motions. There may have been more that the spirits wanted to tell me, but I rose, and turned, and left. From the alley, seconds later, a low-frequency humming was still audible, and the same sulfurous odor was detectable as far away as the cross street. The light at the intersection was green in both directions, but I sprinted across anyways, narrowly missing the fender of a black sedan that accelerated away from me and out of sight. It had no license plate.

VI.

After 36 hours on the wagon I could barely utter a word or move a muscle. During those times I was frightened by the possibility that, like my cousins and my own dear brother, I was falling victim to the curse of the second born sons, which had afflicted the 4 middle children (all boys) on my mother's side, leading to some combination of intensive psychiatric treatment, death by misadventure, or suicide by gunshot.

Melancholia is what they used to call it, and the word - like the curse - had a literary ring that belied serious psychopathology, not to mention all manner of familial discord. Indeed, I had observed the effect before, in my own dear brother, and had even experienced it, to a limited extent: That blank stare that accompanied a depressive episode and that, left untreated - say, with drink - sometimes led to death.

During these episodes, eye contact was impossible, and I had to plan carefully for detoxification periods knowing that the day would be lost. It was a necessity, everyone once in a while, if only to achieve a goodnight's sleep, which - somewhat counterintuitively - are marked for me by vivid nightmares, which by then regularly featured the unbroken blackness of the Cryptkeeper's eyes. After a day off, I could tell that things were working if I woke up sweating at least once during the night, and if there was a fuzzy pressure behind my eyes in the morning. Overall, I find sobriety to be much more difficult, especially when there's a bottle of good scotch laying around, which the Kayyams had dutifully awarded when Rose cleared out, after our last meeting, without a fight or even another word. The poison byproducts of alcohol metabolism tended to pool in my kneecaps, instead of behind my eyes, as does sobriety, and I could feel my kneecaps throbbing that morning. My mouth was dry and I made my way to the kitchen. There was no coffee, and I took it out on Daniela.

"You know I really can't stand how you're talking to me right now - your partner in life, supposedly," she said, nearly crying, after that very unpleasant interaction.

Those words, and the way they were uttered, stung worse than any of the bad fortune that had afflicted us in the previous year. A year after the incident with Reggie, and Daniela and I were starting to fall apart, despite my industriousness. It was a bad sign when I was actively contemplating alternative lives that I could have lived. Maybe the problem was the booze. Maybe it was not finding Reggie's killer. We decided to take a drive.

Sometimes I think that the great failure in my life so far was that I hadn't pulled the trigger on a 400 square-foot bungalow just off the Pacific Coast Highway south of Yachats, Oregon. The opportunity had presented itself a few years before, when friends of mine, small business owners, proposed a remote-work partnership with their tech startup and I had immediately started looking at off-grid properties on the Northwest Coast. Pure escapism once again, but this place was really something to see. The studio was modestly priced and faced the ocean but abutted the Central Oregon Coastal Range. Great old spruces and pines rose up natural terracing just behind house, facing off against the Pacific. In the end, we made the decision to move East instead, toward more stable employment opportunities. After my third meeting with Psychic Rose, at the tail end of my whiskey bender, we needed to get out of town and away from this and other regrets, so we chose the opposite coast, the Atlantic, as our day-trip destination.

It was and Saturday in mid-November, and we were aiming at Gloucester. The property would have been cheaper, but we hadn't been visiting Hexham with any frequency since the cave-in. This unconscious avoidance was further heightened by the season; autumn, a time when everything looked the same as it did during our hike to Winter Hill and the subsequent near-burial. There was a used bookstore on Cape Ann, in the hamlet of Magnolia, which lay between Gloucester and Manchester-by-the-Sea, roughly Northeast of Lovecraft country, and we thought it might be a good place to look for books on hikes and amateur bouldering routes, which we were then favoring over the previous year's ill-advised

caving experience. We could still get exercise, Danielle and I reasoned, while keeping the sky in sight. I had yet to tell Daniela that the sky was very much NYMZA's domain.

The bookstore, called *The Bindery*, sat on a side street in the business center of Magnolia, which, being a bit bigger than Hexham, featured a Dunkin', a public library *and* a fire station. Mostly, it was single family homes, passed down through generations, and, from the front porch of a similarly homey colonial structure (boxy brick and multiple fireplaces; wrought iron) that comprised the bookstore, you could, in November, see clear to the Atlantic through a gap between Cape-style houses further South towards the beachhead. Parking was easy, compared to Cambridge, and the bookstore would often keep titles on the shelves for weeks and months before selling merchandise or shifting things around. All of this worked in our favor, as we were then yearning for comfort and normality.

We wandered the store, as one does, through narrow, mismatched shelving that reached the ceiling but didn't attach. Instead it loomed over patrons, much like the upstart oaks that ringed our property and the roped-off walkways of Harvard yard. Books and shelving, especially wooden shelving, are by their nature heavy and dangerous, but you could tell that The Bindery didn't put much thought into health and safety, much less the associated aesthetic. Which isn't to say that the place lacked charm. Some of the narrowest hallways petered out entirely, finally punctuated by a leather armchair or an ornate standing lamp complete with antique bulbs whose wattage looked to be in the single digits. The opportunity to sit and read parts of the books that one was considering purchasing (!) was a luxury beyond comprehension in the Amazon era, but such loitering was all but insured by the spiderweb layout of The Bindery, and I was glad, as Daniela was, to know that there were still places like this that existed in the towns between the cities.

Amidst this chaotic layout, there was one particularly well-hidden section that I was especially interested in, since it held “Harvard Lore,” a *sub* subgenre that I later learned had been curated by an ambitious part-time worker and Gloucester local. The student had assembled the small sub-section during the break between their freshman and sophomore year at that very institution, but I would be surprised to hear that this person went on to graduate, given the sorts of books that were featured. The unholy trinity of 20th century Harvard subversives were represented there: Wade Davis, Ram Dass himself, and John Mack. Between them, these affiliates had funneled College monies into researching the ethnobotany of the Haitian *Zombie* phenomenon; performed human subject testing, on undergraduates, using large doses of what then still quasi-legal and poorly understood psychedelic compounds; and - in the case of Mack - had pivoted from a Pulitzer prize-winning career researching child psychology in the medical school to publishing first-hand accounts of alien abductees, including the nature and aims of a hypothesized extraterrestrial “clone program.” I was encouraged to learn, after reading their respective masterworks, that I wasn’t the only one at Harvard who was grappling with high strangeness of the most fantastic sort.

Like with libraries, it’s the wandering and the browsing that makes a bookstore. That, and the “staff picks” section, where Daniela and I would inevitably meet at the end of our solitary ramblings. But there is only so much one can gain from the purchasing (rather than the mere sampling) of books, so we left, empty handed but altogether satisfied, and continued on up the coast. Past Norman’s Woe where the Hesperus had wrecked in fiction and past the *non-fiction* Hammond Castle - a Chartres lookalike - where the father of radio control himself had lived and worked the previous century. We parked, finally, alongside Gloucester’s inner harbor, at the center of town. There, the famous monument paid homage to more than 10,000 fisherman who had sailed from that port (“They that go out to the Sea in Ships”) only

to lose their lives in the Atlantic under god knows what sorts of terrifying conditions. All of this contributed hypnotic atmosphere to another stretch of road and waterfront that was permeated with both human and natural history. Perhaps that – history – is what Daniela and I were seeking out that day, to put our relationship into context.

There were bars in Gloucester, of course, but we chose to quench our thirst under natural light in a brew pub. The patio out back of the establishment jutted right up against the harbor and was framed-in with the lobster traps that – lacking lobster – were mostly empty space. Through the traps we could see boats in the harbor. In and among the more workaday affairs – lobster boats, mostly, weather stripped of any decoration or pretense– were a few charter vessels that were finished with tropical hues reminiscent of blue coral reefs and cherry red Corvettes. Daniela and I decided to sit side-by-side, and take in the scene and drink in the ocean air, and, although it took nearly an hour for our food to arrive, we hardly registered inconvenience, as the view and the beer were both excellent. Finally, we spoke, of the bookstore and the drive up the coast, which had relaxed us both.

“The owner had a sign posted, behind the counter,” said Daniela. “Did you notice?”

I hadn’t. My attention had been monopolized by an especially intriguing bit of Harvard lore: Davis’s startling and controversial conclusion that pufferfish venom, properly extracted, could render a victim helpless to suggestion. Real life zombies, but zombies that could work ATMs on their captor’s behalf. What a world. Looking out from patio at the colorful Caribbean-type trim that adorned some of the vessels cruising the harbor had reminded me of the islands where Davis did his field work. The scene could have been an illustration from his book.

“It looked like someone. Someone you’ve introduced me to last year. One of your coworkers, I think.” She finished tentatively, and I could sense that Daniela was onto at something.

“Would you recognize him if you saw him again,” I asked, trying to hide suddenly supercharged mental gymnastics.

She didn’t sound especially optimistic, but Daniela was perceptive, and wouldn’t have said anything unless she was sure. The peaceful scene before me had already lost relevance and I stared at her.

“He was an older guy, with a mustache,” she continued. “And he was alone, at the departmental party. It was at Trumbull’s house, at the end of the Spring semester last year. Remember?”

I did remember, and I remembered the gentlemen in question’s home department: *Psychology*. Whoever Daniela was referring to - whoever was stealing books from The Bindery - that person may have been faculty member or researcher associated with the Psych department at Harvard. It didn’t make things easy, as the department had several dozen faculty members, but it certainly narrowed things down. Faculty profiles had photos, generally, and some of those photos featured mustachioed men, but I had to read a few CVs before it became obvious who Daniela was referring to. The Peggy and Paul Haynes chair of clinical psychology, Derrick Cowdry, had joined the faculty in the year 2000, and been since pursuing a most curious course of study. But why would a faculty member need to steal secondhand books? I didn’t let my enthusiasm shorten our outing, but I did insist that we stop back by the bookstore on our way home, so I could see for myself the printout and perhaps speak to the proprietor about the potential reward. It was to be my second case and the chance for more training in the hunt for Reggie’s killer.

We were on the road within an hour, after a quiet lunch, and I barely noticed Hammond’s stately castle on the way back past. I did pay special attention to signs for the Magnolia turnoff though, and we were parked in front of the bookstore just as the sun was setting over the Atlantic behind us. Reds in the evening, pinks and purples in the morning. I snapped a photo of the homegrown “Wanted” posted and we were on our way without further delay.

Unlike the unholy trinity, Professor Cowdry was still, if not thriving in his role, then at least still earnestly laboring under the yoke of unfashionable research while unashamedly collecting a paycheck. In his case, the object of study was also altered states of consciousness, like his bookshelf comrades in the Harvard Lore section at The Bindery, but with a slight twist. Preliminary research on my part revealed that he was building on controversial research, conducted some decades before, by the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) in Palo Alto, as well as the scientifically dubious practice of *hypnotic regression*, which had very few upstanding practitioners remaining within contemporary academia. Others, like Dr. Mack, had employed similarly problematic methods, but not for the purpose of objectively verifying information, as remote viewing practitioners at SRI had hoped to do when they had partnered with the US military during the cold war.

He – Cowdry – was further complicating matters by studying remote viewing under hypnosis, to determine what, if any, additional abilities the human mind might comprehend about otherwise inaccessible or imperceptible locations and events, and to recover information via a third party, the *inquisitor* as Cowdry termed the official questioner in these sessions. I didn't agree with his choice of titles, but I fancied myself a willing participant in his studies. It was obvious, a year in, that there was no database that I could use to locate the Cryptkeeper, but if there was anything to Professor Cowdry's research, I would play along, seeing it as the next best thing. I wasn't overly optimistic, but was cognizant that – if it worked – his methods might allow me to target my quarry. Or, I would turn him for the nominal reward offered by the Bindery and put a big fat check mark next to call number two of my moonlit records. I naively saw this situation as a win-win, but I hadn't yet encountered the man himself.

We first met, at my request, in a dungeon-like bar just off the Yard, on Brattle street, *The Blue Boar*. I got there early, coming down the stairs to the dingy barroom during my lunch break at the library, which typically lasted from 9-10 pm on weeknights. Of course, by that time of night there was very little managerial oversight going on at Widener, so I mentally added an extra half hour to the “meeting” to fortify myself with a couple strong, Belgian beers. By the time I got back to work I would be mostly sober, I reasoned, at least sober enough to check in and check out books to the odd undergrad. It wasn’t that I was nervous about speaking with Cowdry, necessarily, but the prospect of using the evidence I had gathered against him - a blurry, black and white photo of him from the “wanted” poster in bookstore - troubled me. If he refused my request, I had plans to blackmail him with that evidence, and the thought of that option was unpalatable. Indeed, asking a psychic to abandon her midnight office space behind a liquor store seemed like a civic duty by comparison.

Forget the fact that I had in mind an innocent enough exchange. I just wanted to be a study participant. I knew that his research was ongoing and that it involved the verification of quite specific questions, asked by the inquisitor, of the participant, in the Cowdry Lab on the Yard. Some of this work had made it to print, over the years, in obscure but peer-reviewed publication venues, like the mouthpieces of Princeton’s *Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research* lab, and the somewhat less prestigious, but even longer standing *American Society for Psychical Research*. These pilot studies were humble and well-researched affairs, but were nevertheless characterized as “psychic Google” by the popular press. I assumed Cowdry would have dealt with professional conflict before - Hence my early arrival and “prep work” at the bar. My new tricks didn’t yet extend to a mastery of extortion.

A strapping gentleman in pressed tweeds and carrying a shoulder pack made his way across the barroom first, and I all but stood at attention to greet who I thought to be the Professor. As it happens,

that wasn't Cowdry at all. Instead, immediately behind this first man was a much shorter person, making his way towards me as well, but with short, quick steps. He glanced around the room as he approached, somewhat furtively, but didn't hesitate to order a drink once he had sat down, only two seats away.

"Have you met Professor Pierce?" he asked me calmly soon after his whiskey rocks was placed down before him, without his asking. I was taken aback by the stranger's unprovoked question and took a few seconds to compose myself, staring at the whiskey. I did know Professor Pierce, of course, but didn't think it wise to communicate the true nature of our recent interactions, so I instead adopted a cooler tact.

"Yes, he works upstairs, in Widener library," I finally answered.

After taking a deep breath I continued.

"I'm there most nights, so we've spoken several times. Medieval history is his specialty, right?" I let the question linger, still unconvinced that I was indeed speaking to Cowdry.

"Yes indeed, but he will sometimes talk to you about rock-and-roll," the stranger answered, and turned to face me as he did. I recognized the mustache first, from the faculty profile, but the rest of Cowdry barely matched. He was short, which would have been difficult to tell from a photograph, but his face was also quite gaunt and the thin grey sweater seemed to hang loose from his shoulders. He wasn't twitchy or fidgety, and he didn't seem overly nervous. No. He was quite composed and continued speaking before I could think of how to respond.

"Think of a moment, a recent moment, where you interacted with Professor Pierce," he spoke softly, staring me directly in the eyes, without blinking, while I processed the sound of his voice.

His utterance had a melodic quality that I hadn't noticed before and it was oddly comforting. He had also begun grinding his rocks glass in a circular fashion on the wood atop the bar. The bartender

didn't care or pretended not to notice as my vision narrowed and the bustle of the waitstaff behind us became imperceptible. It seems I was falling under some sort of spell. Cowdry continued speaking.

“Tell me what you are feeling, when you think of that moment. Tell me how your eyes feel... behind your eyes,” his voice took on a steady, rhythmic cadence, rising and falling, but only within the same range of soothing tones.

I was utterly transfixed by the sound of his voice and glass on wood. But these questions made no sense and I fought to make eye contact and, having finally done so, managed to signal the bartender for another drink, although the beer in front of me was still half full. I ordered whiskey, like Professor Cowdry but I ordered it neat, and my plans for returning to work later that evening began to drift like my hypnotized mind. Turning to face the Professor again, I noticed he had relaxed his posture and had begun sipping his drink, seemingly oblivious to the sudden interruption in our conversation and not at all perturbed. An aluminum attaché was perched on the barstool between us, like one of those things you would see in the IT department of a big technology company, or maybe in an 80s movie about a Wall Street executive. I took the opportunity to ask about that next, to try regain my voice.

“Nice briefcase,” I said, leaning in to examine it closer.

It had a combination latch and seemed well-used, judging by the matte scratches that stood out against the otherwise polished steel surface. I looked up to see Cowdry looking back at me, obviously concerned that I was going to touch his property. But this time he wasn't staring, wide-eyed, like before. Nor was he continuing to grind the rim of his glass into the counter top. Once I sat back on my stool and reached again for my glass, he made up his mind about something, I think, and the conversation continued on much friendlier terms.

“I’m glad you reached out to me, actually. This business about the bookstore could be quite embarrassing,” he was getting out in front of my plan, which I had alluded to in the vaguest terms in email, but he didn’t seem overly concerned. I would soon learn that, in terrestrial matters, Professor Cowdry was unflappable.

“We have much to discuss, about your work in the library. I’ll see that the bookstore is reimbursed, anonymously of course. It a simple matter of forgetting to pay, you see. I’m sad to say it happens all the time. Sometimes I place things, important things, in my briefcase, and walk away without checking to see if its contents are actually mine.” His words, while cryptic were delivered with a nonchalant tone, and I refrained from speaking, if only to keep him talking.

“I spend lots of time in the library, you know, and have relied upon your services more than once,” he spoke these words with a smile and I grew concerned that he was trying to hypnotize me again.

He kept changing topics – interjecting seemingly random words and phrases into the conversation - and I was having difficulty keeping up. Or keeping down. It’s true that, in most ways, Cowdry fit the mold of faculty member, and I might have seen him, face-to-face, on numerous occasions in the library. He stared at me intently, as if inviting me to speak; to continue the façade of conversation as well as the subtext that I hoped would inch closer to my initial demands; to be his study participant and co-opt his unorthodox research methods to help track down Reggie’s killer.

“Yes, I think I remember,” utterly failing to keep the conversation aloft while at the same time losing what little stomach I might have had for blackmail. Nor did I elaborate, and he had the tact to not force the issue. I felt compelled to continue.

“How do you know Professor Pierce?” I asked, to end the silence.

His expression didn't change, but he did turn and take another drink of his whiskey before speaking further. He also glanced at the briefcase between us, briefly. I didn't put much stock into his reaction at the time, but I was beginning to suspect a relationship.

"Robert and I have known each other for a long time," he said, sounding suddenly strained.

"We were roommates, in grad school. Did you happen to know that?"

His question caught me off guard, but I don't think that he was expecting an answer, since he immediately began speaking again, this time somewhat mechanically, as if by rote, his voice still possessed of a certain hypnotic melody.

"Rutgers. Which wasn't the school it is today. In those days, Robert and I were in the academic backwaters. But we could see what was happening, with the ARPANET, which, as I'm sure you know, was a purely Military concern from the start. You see, our primary data handling station, NORAD, deep in Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming, was completely overloaded. When they flipped the switch and turned on the net, radar pings began coming in at an ungodly rate, dozens an hour, and they had to adopt quite questionable escalation standards to avoid alerting fighter squadrons and the public near the base to every seemingly legitimate threat to air space.

Publicly, officials described very real – very tangible – natural phenomena: Swamp gas, birds in formation, ball lighting. For the most part, this smokescreen of bureaucratic sensibility worked. But remember, we're talking about *thousands* of potential bogeys a year, each registering more than a meter in diameter on radar, and each potentially flying a foreign flag. They couldn't differentiate incoming nuclear missiles from flocks of geese, for god's sake, so they decided to ignore a bunch of *good* data to keep everyone calm. There were things moving around up there, and Robert and I picked up on that early

on. After the decision was made by a colonel to ignore the data, we parted ways. Professionally, that is.” the last sentence sounded tacked-on, as if he didn’t want to be heard disparaging Professor Pierce.

He picked up his drink at the end of this soliloquy, and I had to think carefully about what to say and do next. Why was Cowdry telling me this? How did he know I had interactions with his old roommate? I decided to take a drink myself, and it was a long one. A few seconds later we turned back to face one another, with the attaché case still on the barstool between us, polished and gleaming.

“Can I be part of your upcoming study?” I asked, a complete non sequitur.

He didn’t even blink. Nor did he continue on and explain what had happened after him and Professor Pierce had found evidence of anomalous airborne phenomena. But the coincidence – the synchronicity – wasn’t lost on me. Cowdry, and perhaps Pierce as well, knew about the Cryptkeeper and the NYMZA organization he was part of. Both were creatures of the sky.

“Of course you can. Please report to my office Monday morning, at 10am, and we shall initiate the standard intake protocol. You’ll have to agree to a background check, of course, and some non-invasive cognitive testing. I’ll also have my nurses’ assistant draw some blood, but whole process doesn’t usually take more than an hour. I’ll expect you there,” he concluded without hesitation.

With that, he put down his empty whiskey glass, stood up, gripping the attaché forcefully with one hand. With the other hand Professor Cowdry pulled a phone from his pocket and keyed in a password, taking pains to shift his screen away. He scrolled for a bit before putting the device back into his pocket. Then, he gave me the slightest nod and left. Those same short, halted steps echoed as he made his way to the back of the room and up the stairs that led to Brattle street and the October night.

The whiskey and the implications of my first conversation with Cowdry made me quite tired during the second half of my shift at Widener. That is, until Professor Pierce appeared, just after midnight. Unlike the Cryptkeeper's grand entrance, which seemed like a performance, and the contrasting lack presence that Cowdry's supposed visits had registered in memory, Pierce seemed to appear before the desk in an instant, and completely without warning. This despite the fact that he looked much older (and therefore slower) than Cowdry, although I knew now that they had been roommates and must have therefore been roughly the same age.

Despite his drawn appearance – long-ish black hair, parted, framing an aquiline nose and pressed shirt and slacks – gaze was fierce; his jaw set. He stood ramrod straight, sizing me up. He was skinny, but not emaciated and drawn-looking like Cowdry, more like the Cryptkeeper actually. But longer hair, and perhaps the greenest eyes I had ever seen. He spoke confidently, with a melodic tenor, not unlike Cowdry, who seemed in most ways to be his physical opposite. Even then, I was having difficulty knowing who to trust between the two of them, although I was on the opposite side of the desk with Pierce, not sitting side by side, as I had with Cowdry in the Blue Boar. That seemed significant. They – Cowdry and Pierce – already seemed at odds, symbolically. My first extended conversation with Pierce confirmed this.

“Did you know I'm a Beatles fan? Well, more a McCartney fan really, but you can see the difference. I mean, from the books I've checked out over the years. Right, smart boy?” a rising and falling motion defined the sound of his voice and made the question seem quite innocent, despite the condescension, as if he was both taking me into his illustrious confidence and putting me in my place.

Of course, the only way I could have possibly known something so specific is if I had been snooping on his loan records, which were automatically deleted except for the books currently in his

possession. To answer affirmatively would have meant betraying my training, although his sudden approach had caught me off guard. I chose to sidestep the question.

“Good evening, Professor Pierce,” I responded without emotion, continuing my business at the computer, which, at that time happened to include a deep dive into Professor Cowdry’s publications.

It was difficult to pay attention to the obscure writings that made up his iconoclastic career, so I was skimming abstracts, some dating back to the late 70’s, when the remote viewing experiments at Stanford were still very much a going concern. Aside from the general strangeness of this line of inquiry, I hadn’t discerned any clues as to what I might expect when I visited Cowdry’s lab the following Monday.

“Are you able to see my checkout record?” his second question was much more direct, and I broke gaze with the screen to engage with him fully. He was leaning over the desk, by that point, palms placed flat on the countertop surface. His breathing seemed to have increased somewhat, although his gaze was steady. Once again, I demurred.

“No sir. Well, not unless you, the patron, wants to know what you currently have checked out. We keep those records, temporarily, but only while library material is out under your name.”

The exchange was kind of like my first encounter with Slattery, except Professor Pierce didn’t seem bound by the same sensitivity. Ironic, considering Slattery was a murder cop and Pierce studied medieval history. He seemed to be after something very specific. Information.

The light was good, in the chamber where the circulation desk was situated. The marble columns I mentioned, and the tile, but there was also a portal; an entrance to the stacks proper, located just off to the side of the desk. Library staff would see visitors to the stacks coming and going and were instructed to keep an eye on people, as a rule, to ensure material was checked out. A long time ago, there were bright red cards, for visitors, which were to be returned to the librarians upon passing back by the

circulation desk: “ADMIT TO THE BOOK STACK...For this occasion only.” Nowadays, it was all card swipe. I wondered, distractedly, if the Cryptkeeper had any red cards left.

In any case, highly credentialed academics were constantly moving between secure and unsecure spaces at that bottleneck, a crossroads, as were staff. Through the portal, past the keycard swipe, lay what amounted to the world’s knowledge, or at least as far as any academic institution had taken it. But Pierce hadn’t arrived at the circulation desk from the main stacks entrance, or I would have seen him. He was coming to from his office via hitherto unknown doorways and passageways. I chose a line of inquiry; a tact to try to avoid any further conversation on the accessibility of his checkout record.

“I didn’t see you come in, Professor,” I adopted a more playful tone, hoping to lighten the mood.

“It’s hard to hide your footsteps after midnight. I can usually hear the security guard making his rounds in the lobby from here, but I don’t think I heard you. How did you get out so quietly?”

Of the stacks I meant. *How did you get out when there’s only one way out and I was sitting here the whole time?* The question froze time. And of course it wouldn’t do to question him directly, Professor Pierce, so I had to appeal his vanity. He didn’t take the bait or seem flustered in the least.

“There was a book checked out to me. Only for a couple days, based on the timestamp that I noticed online. But the problem is that I didn’t actually check out that particular book. Nor did any of my graduate students or administrative assistants. I checked. With everyone. Personally. No one checked out the book in question under my name, and no one could have. That is, except for you.”

With that, he turned and left. This time he exited through the main entrance to the stacks, swiping his card along the way, following protocol. I sat there, dumbfounded, and couldn’t decide on what to do next. He had me trapped, Professor Pierce. The details of my employment, just like everyone else’s, was a matter of record in the office of the Presidents and Fellows of Harvard College. Professor

Pierce occupied a named chair in his department and therefore had unlimited access to all Fellow business, including the fraudulent paperwork I had submitted after returning from a fake conference in California the previous year.

VII.

Both my brother and I attract - and are attracted to - high strangeness. That's the feeling or atmosphere that accompanies a glimpse of something truly unexplainable. You have experienced these sorts of things and people too, I promise. It's just difficult to remember sometimes, or we don't allow ourselves to remember. The incongruity of the time uncle so-and-so saw something between the trees, or in the sky, just doesn't stick in memory the same way high-school graduation or 9/11 stays with us. These aren't family experiences or cultural events, which can be shared and discussed without embarrassment. Instead, we carefully screen these memories, burying them, and they become quirks in our personalities like bumps in the rug. This is the feeling I had when I entered Cowdry's laboratory for the first time.

It was just across from the library, but only because the Professor's research didn't rely on specialized ventilation, or radiological control, and he didn't have to make accommodations for live animals – only humans. He could also make do with older infrastructure, since his study participants weren't subjected to the effects of exotic chemicals or extremes of force and temperature that typically require controlled dispersal procedures and specialized safety equipment only found in the STEM labs and web labs located north of the Yard. I slipped through an unmarked side door – little more than a narrow gap in the colonial brick; invisible from any angle except head on - only to find myself in a modern-looking waiting room, complete with a service desk not unlike the one that I worked behind

most evenings in the library. A young man sat behind the desk, and greeted me when I came in, and I had a few seconds to take in my surroundings while I made my way towards him.

The plumbing and the duct work were all painted black, as was the ornate radiator that took up a large portion of one brick wall. An antique, I assumed. Small, pre-industrial “industrial” period motifs like these contrasted with the familiar waiting room ambiance that we all encounter visiting the dentist or the DMV. I could hear the deeply pitched throbbing of forced air and water, and the distant screech of what may have been the red line train. All of it moved through old pipes and ducts around me. I remained standing after introducing myself to the receptionist, who I took to be one of Cowdry’s many students.

The colonial foundations of this building apparently went quite deep into the Earth, as the receptionist and I left the desk unattended and took the door at the end of the hallway, leaving the waiting room unattended, and immediately descended a flight of stairs. At foot of the stairs, we were greeted by flagstone – like you might see framing the bottom portion of a local private residence or Paddy’s root cellar - and, although the space was clean and there was actual paneled flooring to accompany the rough walls, the hallway that followed was slightly narrower than I had expected and there was no natural light.

There was a weathered steel door at the end of the hall with a card swipe, and we proceeded through. Generally, these sorts of qualitative research efforts weren’t subject to export control and the like, meaning that three letter agencies were more or less unconcerned if findings were accidentally leaked to the Chinese or the Russians. Most of these studies would be published in publicly accessible journals, or at least that’s what I had assumed. It didn’t occur to me that Cowdry’s research could be any more outlandish than what had already appeared in print, but the enhanced security below his lab in the Yard indicated that a federal entity might have had an interest in the work. The grad student, who hadn’t

offered his name, encouraged me (again without speaking) down another stairway and into a side room before I had a chance to really observe the 2nd lower level. Inside Professor Cowdry sat waiting.

The aluminum attaché was on a small table between us, and in that room were three chairs. Instead of taking a seat with us, the grad student remained standing behind me, with his back to the door, and I suddenly felt quite vulnerable, three floors below the ground, trapped in a box-within-a-box, behind locked doors, with my back to the only exit. Cowdry must have wanted to prove a point.

The room laid out much as it might have been when the building was constructed in the 1800s: dark wood paneling; three upholstered chairs, which matched the coffee table and walls. It's what you might think of when you think of a speakeasy or cigar bar. The centerpiece - in terms of lighting and décor - was a standing lamp, emanating the only light in the room, and it was a low wattage light at that. It stood behind Cowdry, obscuring him with near darkness. He began to speak.

"Tell me about your family," he asked me. "Where does your family come from?"

His voice was soothing again, like when he first began talking to me at the bar in The Blue Boar the week before. I understood this technique was part of the hypnosis – part of his research. He waited.

"Mostly from England and Ireland, but my grandmother's family, on my dad's side, is Sicilian," I responded.

There was very little else I knew to tell and I was fine with sharing the basics, with Cowdry or anyone else who happened to ask. It wasn't unpleasant to think back to those days and those people, long lost, and conversations at Paddy's had often taken this turn, towards ancestry and family lore, which ran deep among the Irish regulars. County Cork. County Durham. The Troubles. But Cowdry seemed to be hinting at something more ancient – he wasn't just warming me up or making idle talk.

"Not Sicily, I think," Cowdry spoke again, interrupting my thoughts.

“Not too far off, mind you, but from up in the boot-heel, in the Province of *Taranto*. And not all of your family either. Just the ones the you happen to think about most often...the ones who’ve been cursed by them before.” He paused again, giving me a moment for the revelation to sink in. I was dumbstruck, mouth fully agape. I couldn’t dispute the details, not without doing my own research, and so I believed him, but I also had no clue to what to make of his interpretation of the curse of the second born, which was never commented upon, even within my own family. I had to assume we were talking about different things and tried to halt a gasp accordingly.

“What else do you know about my family?” I responded with a question, intent on turning the tide of the conversation and discouraging hypnosis. The impact of his history lesson had caused me to snap back, monetarily, from the effects of his voice, and I was genuinely curious and suddenly alert about what he would say. If his unique research methods actually worked, I was witnessing the results. “Psychic Google.” Either that, or he had taken it on himself to investigate my family history, which seemed like quite a hassle, if only because I had very little to offer him in exchange for such specific information.

“A long time ago, your family ran afoul a very bad man, cloaked in all black and possessing strange tricks. Those tricks – that darkness of character - were used against your ancestors. And against you, I’m afraid. We have precious little time to lose.”

Cowdry was breathless at the end of the sentence visibly struggling to maintain his upright posture. Recalling the information seemed to be taking a toll. It was sure as hell taking a toll on me. When he mentioned a man in black I immediately thought of the Cryptkeeper, who, although he didn’t go around cloaked, wore the 20th century equivalent of a hooded shawl: a three-piece black suit. Then I thought of my experience beneath the oak tree with Rose and the pervasiveness of the NYMZA organization, in this time and in times gone by. I couldn’t get away from these guys. The only

consolation, if you want to call it that, was that we were talking about curses. He was talking about a very real encounter from many centuries before while I was hung up on more modern depressive episodes, which were no less deadly but undoubtedly resulted from psychiatric rather than mystical influences.

Cowdry was intently reading the transition of my facial reactions during this thought process, as one would read a book, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn that his interpretation of my thoughts was perfectly accurate. His eyes were really dancing and he was starting to perspire. His square frame, now hunched over the table top between us, was bouncing slightly in the chair across from me, and the grad student finally came around sat down beside us. He put a hand on Professor Cowdry's shoulder, leaned in, and whispered something unintelligible. Cowdry nodded, took a deep breath, and braced himself with a hand on the edge of the table. At that point, I could have easily turned and ran; towards an emergency exit or something. But I decided to stay a little while longer.

"You know this is a great spot," he continued, sitting up straight once again.

He had regained his composure and we were once again speaking as friends rather than as study participant and inquisitor or whatever role he had thrust me into only moments before. The light behind him seemed brighter.

"...you can see a lot from here." He smiled, at his own joke, while parodying a search for the nonexistent window.

The joke revived him and he stood up and pulled the briefcase from off the table to down at his side. It seemed to spring to place in his hand, as if it was on a retractable tether. Cowdry looked at his grad student then and gave a slight nod. I was still seated when Cowdry finally left the room. The receptionist/grad student was still sitting beside me. He turned his chair slightly, to face me more

directly, and I did the same. The room seemed smaller, and it couldn't have been more than 10 foot squared to begin with. I was ready for more family lore – ready for more secrets and “tricks.”

“That concludes the pre-test. Now we will begin the formal study protocols,” the grad announced in a scripted tone without a hint of irony, the first thing he had yet said to me.

I was led back upstairs, in a daze, and subjected to an assortment of standardized tests and a brief medical examination. They were testing things like my ability to mentally rotate objects in space; whether or not I played an instrument or video games regularly; did various types of cancers run in my family; etc. Nothing raised any flags that I could tell and the entire experience was handled very professionally. Aside from receptionist and Cowdry himself - who had accompanied me from the lab's front desk, to the lower level, and back for testing – I interacted only with a physician's assistant and a clinical psychologist. Both were friendly but behaved as if they were in a rush. I was turned loose and back on Harvard Yard by 11:30 am. My shift didn't start until 5 so I decided to hit the stacks.

There's been very little straight reporting about the *Tarantella* dance that Cowdry had mentioned, and even in the vast Widener history collection I found it hard to locate reputable sources. What's clear is that the region of Italy in question was once seen as the slums of Europe, limiting anthropological interest, or access, or both. I was nevertheless struck by the concept of a dancing disorder, feigned or not, especially one that involved my ancestors, according to Cowdry. It seems that, as early as the 11th century, locals had agreed that there was only one possible cure for the bite of a certain scorpion or spider species: A wild, flailing dance, with well-defined accompanying music, which seemed to trigger a frenzy and, eventually, a cure. J.F. Russell had summarized writings about the disorder in the 23rd issue of *Medical History*, published in 1979, and there he had quoted, in turn, from a first-hand account, written by a trusted Neapolitan lawyer in the 15th century:

I remember travelling with some acquaintances in the wide, uneconomical regions which were drying out under the scorching sun. We heard the sound of drums, whistles and flutes in all the towns and villages and upon inquiring as to the meaning of it we were informed that in these regions it was a means of healing the people bitten by the tarantula. Then we went to a village and saw a young man affected by this disease. He seemed to have become insane, singing absentmindedly to the beat of a drum...

It all sounded vaguely familiar, like a composite of stories that I had heard before in European history or Folklore classes as an undergraduate, but none of it made sense in the context of Cowdry and his mesmerisms. Any relation to the Cryptkeeper's people (*...cursed them before*). Given the lack of answers in eh stacks, I resolved to ask him about connection the next time we met and then I got back into the routine of living while waiting for the test results to be processed.

Daniela and I finally made it out on a date the Thursday following my first visit to Cowdry's lab. I caught her up on everything. She was delighted to hear the details of my newly revealed Italian heritage.

"I thought you were Irish, considering how you drink Jameson like water," she quipped.

I couldn't deny that one, and, taking a cue from Cowdry, I pretended to be startled to find a cup of whiskey in my hand. We were at a trattoria in Melrose, near my Aunt's house, and had popped in to see her first. She insisted we stay for tea at least. It was still early in the evening, but the sun was already down over New England, and I was hard-pressed not to think of Reggie, one year on, and the long winter nights that lay ahead for Mrs. Frobisher. But everyone was in a buoyant mood that evening, and I was happy to hear that my brother had been corresponding with my aunt and had promised to visit soon. It would be good to see Paul, perhaps even to share with him the true nature of the mysterious that had overtaken us.

I took another sip of pre-dinner whiskey, looking up to see the food had arrived. I had ordered a *Diavolo* pizza to start, and we were sharing a squid salad dowsed in vinegar and sprinkled with a coarse

sea salt. Everything was delicious, but Daniela looked distracted. Fortunately, things had leveled out between us, after Gloucester. Regardless of our superficial quarrels.

“So, I’m late. Like really late,” she spoke up, finally, between dinner and desert, with that same mischievous smile that she liked to tease me with, but which remained unnaturally fixed while she sat waiting for my response. We were planning this, of course, but I still froze up. Then, I put the glass back on the table and looked at her.

“I love you,” It was the best I could manage on the fly, but I meant it.

And that was it. We were having a baby, and nothing was going to change for a few months anyways. But I did begin to question how I had been spending my time. Wasn’t this, having a baby, enough closure? I had no intention of confronting the Cryptkeeper anyways, and, if I did, I saw no reason why he and his goons wouldn’t emerge victorious, with me in the morgue, most likely, followed shortly thereafter by an indefinite vacation six feet under a headstone, near Reggie at Forest Dale cemetery. My enemy had been operating in the shadows for hundreds of years, according to Cowdry’s intimations, while I checked out books for a living and often drank too much. I wasn’t desperate for a reward or other ways to support the baby that might come from a confrontation either. Nor the glory. We were gainfully employed and even had prospects, at least if Pierce didn’t turn me in. I ordered another whiskey to celebrate. But I saw Cowdry again, a week later, and he would drag me back into the fray.

“Did you finish your Russell,” he began, referring at once to the recent authority on the topic of Tarantism, whose text I had discovered on the shelves of the library the week before.

We were back on the 3rd basement level, where I assumed he kept his personal office, although we met in another side room whose purpose I couldn’t glean given the minimal furnishings and complete

lack of specialized equipment. All the rooms I had seen in the Cowdry lab thus far had the same dark wood paneling and antique fixtures. Restored versions of the original, 18th century interiors, I assumed. Perhaps there was more to it, an ambiance. It was as if we were moving about below the earth to confound my senses, and our interactions could have just as easily taken place in a hall-of-mirrors or hedge maze. But the nature of my surroundings, with their labyrinthine monotony, did serve to focus me on our conversation. He must have known I would be conducting my own research and that I had ready access to very rare source material on the subjects we had been discussing, as part of my job, so I simply nodded, maintained a straight face, and waited for him to continue speaking.

“Their methods have been documented before, you understand, if only by accident,” he continued this way, as if it was clear how it related to my family history in southern Italy.

“There were those, like your 6th great grandfather, who happened to be present when some of the original Taranto music was being played, and who also happened to possess a sharp ear for musical notation. He took something away from that village, from those ‘uneconomical regions’, your ancestor...,” said Cowdry, trailing off and taking on a grave countenance.

“Do you remember what our mutual research partner, Doctor Russell has to say about the people of the Southern coast, where little grew under the hottest sun?” He seemed to be speaking rhetorically, about someone long dead, but I answered anyways, without thinking.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t remember...except that they were prone to fits of frenzy.”

“Yes, that’s right!” he exclaimed, nearly was enthusiastic in his agreement as the frenzied mobs themselves, and then Cowdry began to bob in his chair, feet tapping below the desk. I was beginning to sense how much pleasure he took in his work. In these obscure histories and esoteric folk tales.

“He describes them as a ‘quick-witted people’, your ancestors in Apulia, but ‘very subject to inflammatory distempers, phrensies, melancholy, and the like’. Does that ring any bells?”

It was a vague notion he was pitching me, just the sort of cryptic generalizations that Rose used to sum me up. Cold reading. Perhaps that’s the way these things worked, these vision ceremonies that Cowdry conducted below the Earth in the ivory cellar. I was still very much a skeptic, but, having survived a series extraordinary events the year before, I was more open than most to certain supernatural possibilities or at least magical appearance of advanced technology.

And then there were the men in black, the NYMZA people, who it seems had once gone dressed as a dour troupe of medieval musicians. It was kind of funny to think of them dressed that way, under beating Mediterranean sun. They must have been trying to impress upon the local people the seriousness of their endeavor – they must have been great salesmen and scam artists, those medieval men in black. And, what did they sell? I remembered this part, from Russell just fine, having been encouraged by Cowdry by a spooling thread of narrative, and I attempted to paraphrase:

“If I recall, the townspeople would spend large portions of their income on *musicians*, who journeyed south from all over Europe to profit from the summer madness masked as a spider or scorpion bite,” I said.

“It was ultimately rationalized, by the mainstream, as a sort of *heat delirium*, brought on by too much wine, they said, but in reality, those people – at least the early group, like your ancestors - they were being experimented upon, and by those very same musicians, who I’m afraid to say were made quite wealthy. It was the basest sort of profiteering, but they were still quite young. Soon they left Italy altogether, for Spain, and the inquisition, but that was one of their first tricks... the Sonorans...*NYMZA*,” he finished by pronouncing the term that I had seen engraved on the title page of the Cryptkeeper’s book

from Widener. The name of the group; the Cryptkeeper's murderous thugs and the cause of Reggie's sudden and horrifying departure.

Before I could register my surprise outwardly, Cowdry quoted Russell once more: 'Frustrated individuals would look forward to this annual carnival of summer madness in hopes of solving their daily problems. When they heard the music, they would slowly move their fingers, hands, and feet to the rhythm of the tarantella, and continue until they collapsed, exhausted, to the ground; this was usually all that was needed to suppress or cure tarantism for a year',” he spoke the words verbatim, as if reading from the page hovering in space before his eyes and I once again drew inward. Madness. Family. Wine. These were all things with which I was well familiar. But *experiments* – that was something new.

I would have questions - many questions - but only much later, after I had left Cowdry's lab for the second time. Officially, I would be seeing him once a week, precisely as frequently as the study protocol dictated, and he warned me not to employ any form of electronic correspondence when discussing topic of our conversations, so I struggled to keep from obsessing or contriving ways to cross paths with him on the Yard. Fortunately, there was lots to do at that time of year, before the first big snow of the season, and Daniela and I decided it was long past due to make use of the cabin in Hexham.

Admittedly, I had been inconsistent in my meditations, in the year following Reggie's death, and distracting thoughts began to swirl immediately as a I took a seated position in my hastily constructed fairy circle, attempting to slow my breath. Paranoid imaginings wouldn't abate, despite attempts to clear my mind and focus on the sounds of the forest. It kept coming back to me, what Cowdry had said about NYMZA “experimenting” on people, in Italy, as far back as the time of the ancients, which I knew, from my own research, is how far back history had documented the dancing mania in the region. Given the

other sort of advanced technology I had witnessed in NYMZA's possession – silent flying machines –, and Cowdry's reference to a "trick," I immediately began to consider the fact that both spiders and scorpions in the region might be useful to them, if you they wanted to experiment on unknowing rural populations.

Further late-night research in the library had taken on a scientific air, revealing to me that the genetic makeup of these creatures' venom – and more, the genetic makeup of their venom producing organs – is reproducible. Increasingly common are gene editing therapies, like CRISPR, which can be administered by inoculation for permanent, even *heritable* biological effects. Who benefited the most from the Tarantist pathology; this dancing mania? Who possessed the only known cure? If, as Cowdry suggests, my ancestor had unknowingly transcribed music that was played by an early version of the NYMZA cult, and was punished for it, it made sense they were capable of extracting a sophisticated revenge. What, exactly, was the nature of the punishment – the curse - that my 6th great grandfather, and perhaps all of us who shared his genes would be forced to experience?

It wouldn't do to dwell on such things, I knew, especially lacking the formal training to evaluate the genetic research thoroughly, but there was another parallel. The nature of these seemingly supernatural methods – of flight, and now of biological weaponry – were similarly futuristic, at least for their relative eras, and each were cloaked in natural environment in the form of spiders and scorpions. I recalled the period attire of the people drawn in the NYMZA document and anachronistic descriptions of strange flying machines in the newspaper articles that had led me to California; the scurrying shapes that adorned the illustrated landscapes beneath those people's feet. It was as if this small group of highly secretive individuals was operating at the periphery of civilization, a sort of technological vanguard that would kill to guard its secret technologies, it's "tricks," Cowdry called them.

Amidst these and other most bizarre daydreams, another hour had passed. Then, I decided to make my way back to the cabin. At dusk, I retrieved my lucky black denim, which hung on a sapling in the center of my field of vision, and re-holstered the pistol that I had secreted in the pocket of that garment during my meditations. There were no snaps, or eerie silences, but I could definitely feel the winter cold coming on. It was in the low 40s, within an hour of full dark, and Daniela and I woke the next morning to a true frost. I could see Daniela's breath first, when I woke, and traced it back to her sleeping face. She lay, face up, completely relaxed. I stared at her for a few seconds, reluctant to pull back the zipper of my own sleeping bag. When I did finally get up, to make use of the outhouse, Daniela was beginning to stir. I meditated more, on Saturday evening, and again on Sunday morning, before we drove back to Cambridge, but otherwise the weekend was uneventful. Daniela and I agreed that was the best possible scenario; a complete lack of excitement in a place that had sadly come to represent danger.

We were back in Cambridge Sunday night, although I wasn't working Monday and Daniela could easily have taken off. But I had one more stop to make, before the work week began: The Boston Police Department. I had a bit more to go on. These guys dressed a certain way and drove custom cars and had evidently been hanging around out west since the late 1800's and, before that, in Europe. Surely Slattery or one of his colleagues would have an opinion about the seemingly related "Satanist" hysteria that has gripped American culture in the 20th century, what with the threat of witch cults so angering the bible. Given the dark attire and magic-like activities that Cowdry had mentioned that was about as close a characterization as I could imagine – Witches - and it had local precedent, of course, from nearby Salem. But Salem was a tourist destination and affluent suburb now, but it was undeniable that dark, hooded figures had been operating in the proximity of Boston for some time, and I intended to alert Slattery to the fact that these same individuals may have had something to do with my cousin's death.

We met over coffee, downtown near police HQ, instead of in his office. He said he was doing me a favor with this arrangement, since there was nothing he could tell me ‘officially’ about the state of an ongoing investigation. At least in the coffee shop he wouldn’t have to hammer home that point so quickly while his colleagues listened on. The place sat down a cobblestone alley, watched over by the brahmin banking skyscrapers. But the alley itself was undrivable, and, upon seeing the hand painted signage (*Venezia*), I was again encouraged that Slattery and not someone else in the department was on Reggie’s case. He had to be a romantic, to want to meet a victim’s family member there, somewhere so cozy, instead of at a government office where he could hide behind bureaucracy and his own desk. Either that or he just felt sorry for me, for keeping up the charade that any of us had a chance to bring Reggie’s killers to justice. It turns out, neither of these were his reason for his choice of meeting place.

“You want to be careful around your new friend, Professor Cowdry,” he leaned in and whispered, after we had exchanged brief pleasantries.

I was surprised by his directness, after our confrontational first encounter at the Frobisher’s the year before. I could also see from, his darting glances, that he feared at being overheard. I soon realized that we weren’t there to discuss Reggie at all. He wanted to warn me about Cowdry. Or scare something out of me.

The alleyway outside the glass front of the coffee shop was bustling with foot traffic by that point, and Slattery leaned in closer before continuing, shifting his gaze occasionally to the window, to see if anyone was stopping or slowing down. He looked like he needed a haircut and a shave, and his tie was loose, but his suit was clean and his eyes were sharp. He reminded me of Reggie’s grandfather actually; a square-jawed Irishmen with slicked back black hair, who hailed from County Cork and who made a name

for himself in Boston. Slattery had a little too much white hair around the ears for his age, but otherwise he was steady. Slattery spoke.

“There were some Feds asking questions around in major crimes last week, back at HQ. They talked to homicide too. I know most of the agents at the Boston field office and these didn’t look like locals. I found out later that they were Office of Naval Intelligence. You should know: They were asking about Professor Cowdry. He’s into something and these guys don’t play around. I also know you’ve been interacting with him. They told me that too, the Navy spooks. Their exact comment was something like ‘give us everything you have on the Frobisher murder, from late last year’. Apparently, they had connected Reggie’s murder with Professor Cowdry and I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why. Then I remembered you, and that we didn’t have an interview file on you. But you were in the follow-up reports; calling and asking every week to see if we had made any progress on the case. It seemed worth looking into, so I did some digging and found out where you worked. I think they saw you going into Cowdry’s lab,” he finished with his voice barely above a whisper, obviously exasperated by the whole situation and fearful of being caught out talking to a potential person-of-interest outside of channels.

I sat back and looked out the window, trying to comprehend the situation. Of course, it was intriguing to hear confirmation from the authorities that Cowdry’s research – into my family and our historic encounters with these men in black – might be accurate, or at least accurate enough to be taken seriously by the feds. But, based on the tight security I had seen on the third lower level of Weld Hall, I wouldn’t be surprised if the agents Slattery had described were actually in partnership with Cowdry and had witnessed my movements not from some surveillance van parked in the yard, but from Cowdry’s own security cameras or card swipe data. Another question bothered me more though, at that moment: *Why was Slattery telling me any of this?*

We sat a while longer before continuing. People were coming and going, from the counter, picking up caffeine on the way into the office, glancing at us like you take in décor on their way on the door. Even the staff was content to let us sit, indefinitely, as they themselves were fully occupied, one pulling on the espresso machine and one at the register, smile pasted. Neither staff looked the part of conspiracists, but Slattery would turn his head in that directly regularly, to observe them, as he did with passersby and the only other sitting customer, a young woman at the bistro table across the café from us. She didn't seem to be interested in us either, but I'm no expert. This was only my second case after all.

Finally, I spoke, if only to hurry on the conclusion of our meeting.

“So, you think Reggie's business overlapped with Cowdry's somehow?” I asked, not expecting an answer. Slattery turned to face me.

“Maybe, but it's hard to see how. Professor deals in data; your cousin dealt in real, tangible merchandise, which you well know.”

It would have been easy to take offense, but he was right, even if I wouldn't admit it. Reggie was a fence. Professor Cowdry was a trained psychologist, of sorts, and their only relationship – as far as I could see – was what Cowdry had told me about the strange, dark robed men that seemed to haunt my family. Slattery was fidgeting even more than when we first came in and I could see he was ready to get moving. I still didn't why know he thought it necessary to tell me this though, so I asked him outright. *Why?*

“Those Navy guys, I don't trust. Your friend, Professor Cowdry – don't know him don't trust him. Fuck him. But Reggie didn't seem like a bad guy, or at least like the kind of bad guy that deserved to be killed. Did anyone give you the details of his case. I mean, about the crime scene?” he responded, focused in on me, looking me directly in the eyes. He wasn't trying to rub it in, or to scare me, but he wanted to tell me something else. For a second, it looked like he might reconsider, then he spoke again.

“They cut him up...”, he began. Then Slattery hesitated, looked at me in the eyes for a split-second, and began to pat his pockets as if looking for his keys. There was something he was keeping from me. Finding nothing of interest in his many suit jacket pockets, the detective continued.

“We wouldn’t have even suspected that foul play if our tech guys hadn’t intercepted those “insurance” policy emails. You got one, right?” his eyes took on an imploring look then, as he hunched over the table, the coffee nearly toppling from between his planted elbows. He didn’t want to leave empty handed.

“What happened to Reggie?”, I asked, staring him down.

“I ask again. What happened to my cousin.” This time Slattery clenched his jaw. He wasn’t used to talking with family that wanted to know those kinds of details.

“Your cousin was a live for a while, after they started cutting. God help us.”, he uttered the second sentence almost to himself, gripping the café table. I could feel it rocking on an uneven leg.

“Maybe I can help you” I responded with forced coolness, trying to delay Slattery’s reversion back to cop mode. This could have been why he was here all along; to find out what exactly was in the email Reggie had sent me, automatically, after he was killed. Instead he was cracking up. *They cut him? What the fuck do you mean they cut him?* My mind was screaming but my breath was steady. I was thrust back to that morning with the tree-cutter, shortly after Reggie’s murder. Dismantled.

It could be that Slattery was trying to find out about the NYMZA text so he could solve the case and make rank or collect some kind of reward that I wasn’t aware of. There may never have even been any Navy guys. Slattery could have been following me himself – he could have seen me go into Cowdry’s lab. I didn’t honestly believe that though. His playacting was too sincere and his time too valuable. He seemed genuinely concerned, even remorseful about the circumstances of Reggie’s death.

Slattery was a Boston guy. Reggie was a Boston guy. Or maybe it was Mrs. Frobisher that had made an impression on him. I knew that, like me, she had been calling the BPD every day since Reggie turned up dead, at least for the first few months. Then, I got to practice my own new trick on Slattery, after having pulled off the tough-guy stare and backing him down the year before: I stood up out of my seat suddenly, and I left the café without looking back. The red line train was waiting for me at Downtown Crossing and I was back in West Cambridge and the apartment 25 minutes later. Trick number two.

VIII.

Soon after finding out about Daniela's pregnancy, and about the fact that federal agents were interested in what happened to Reggie, I had my first official hypnosis session with Professor Cowdry. Everything and everyone around me seemed to be coalescing - closing in - and I had a difficult time remaining focused at work. I would disappear for longer and longer periods, into the stacks, especially after midnight, when business was slow at the checkout desk and there was a student employee to sit and tend to occasional business.

For an hour or more at a time I would wander, up and down narrow stairwells and beneath dim bulbs shrouded in mesh cages, listening to the thrum of air handlers and making sure to avoid Pierce's library office, which was very near where I had originally uncovered the NYMZA text. The other shoe was bound to drop, in that regard, and I anticipated - as with my home life, and my PI work, which had somehow evolved into work as a study volunteer - that Pierce would make his move soon. I was worried about losing my job or about being taken into federal custody for withholding evidence.

At my request, the first session was scheduled during my 9pm "lunch break," which the same time that I had met with Cowdry, originally, at The Blue Boar, about a month before. It was nearing

December then, when my pre-testing battery had finally cleared with the institutional review board. I was a certified study participant in Cowdry's still quite opaque research project. The late hour I requested so as to avoid any hustle and bustle on the Yard and to be sure that I would see any surveillance vans before they had a chance to see me, if indeed the lab was being watched by the Office of Naval Intelligence, as Slattery had suggested. Cowdry didn't object. I also wanted to bring the granite piece I had recovered in Sonora, as a good luck charm or maybe to get Cowdry's opinion on its significance, and I took it from my work desk drawer, putting it in my coat pocket before heading out into the night.

There was a marked dearth of nighttime foot traffic on campus when the temperature dipped into the low 30s, although December still retains some the romance of early wintertime in Cambridge, and I walked more slowly than I had through the stacks earlier that evening, delaying what was promising to be a jarring experience. The lab entrance was gas lit, a rare holdover from the 19th century and something I hadn't noticed before, having visited Cowdry's lab space only during daylight hours. The flickering lamplight projected shadows over the top of the stairwell and leafless tree limbs appeared to dance and play like shadow puppets when the light flared. I felt the granite bouncing against my thigh as I began my descent to the antiquated laboratory space two stories below Harvard Yard.

Inside the reception area there was only candlelight and the computer monitor behind the desk emitted no light. So far, I had yet to see anyone, although the front door was unlocked. I made my way across the room and knocked on the door that I knew led to a hallway and the stairwell downward, which would lead to Cowdry in turn. After a few seconds a young woman opened the door and ushered me in, without speaking a word. Like the receptionist from my first visit she was nondescript; another grad no doubt, but dressed in darker earth tones than her daytime counterpart. We descended another level, the two of us, before branching off at the foot of the stairs and entering Cowdry's personal office.

There were books on all the walls, floor-to-ceiling. From the call numbers on the bindings, I could see that some were checked out from Widener and other Harvard branch libraries. The librarian in me wanted to question him on their due date – to ease the tension of the scene – but the atmosphere precluded such triviality. Across a massive stained desk sat Cowdry himself. He seemed done-up for the occasion, in a dark suit, tailored much like the Cryptkeeper’s, and he sported what appeared to be a new haircut. Grey stubble on a pale cranium. The only light, another standing lamp emanating a blooming, incandescent gold, stood against the wall to my right, above a lounge chair and ottoman that sat empty. There was no window, of course, but the books prevented the space from feeling dungeon-like as with the side rooms. Cowdry spoke first.

“It’s good to see you,” he began, sounding genuinely pleased, as if we were old friends and allies, reuniting, and, if he was indeed under investigation, he didn’t seem at all troubled. No wonder *The Bindery* book theft accusations didn’t faze him – This guy could shrug off the feds.

“I warn you, an hour may not be enough time. For your recovery, that is. The first inquisition can be somewhat traumatic, and I wouldn’t want to jeopardize your employment,” he finished. He paused to allow me time to reply, arching his eyebrows and studying my reaction. I wondered if he knew about my most recent encounter with Professor Pierce, or if he was getting back at me for threatening him about the bookstore affair. The scene called for honesty, so I swallowed my offense and told him straight out.

“Pierce is out to get me, I’m afraid, so it’s him that concerns me – Him and the man I’m searching for; the man in black – not being late to work.” We stared at each other for a few seconds without speaking before he broke my gaze with a slight nod.

“These methods, which we are pioneering in this very lab, they allow us to peer across times and places in a way that may seem strange at first, but I assure you it’s all quite natural.”

His cryptic remarks somewhat lessened my attention, causing me to look around. I could read a few of the bindings of the texts that encircled us. Mostly, it was natural history – geology; catalogues of flora and fauna as described by botanists from all around the world; archaeology – and the rest was anthropology; studies of ancient people, their myths and practices. I could also see the spine of his late colleague Davis’s zombie text and another book binding displayed a serpentine typeface, which reminded me of similar compendiums, in Widener, that dealt with the study of shamanic practices in South and Central America. Overall, Cowdry’s source material was esoteric and extremely diverse. He seemed to have a thing for ethnobotany, especially that of the Americas, and it was clear that Cowdry was also searching for something. But the lamplight betrayed a layer dust, both on the bindings and on the outside edges of the bookshelves themselves, which led me to believe that he had ultimately turned his attention inwards, towards the psyche, as a source of additional data.

“I’m scared, you know. And you should be too.”

The strained gravity of his voice snapped me back to attention and I drew in a breath while my hands gripped the well-worn upholstery. It would take more than a minor victory in a staring contest to get me out of there in one piece. Knowing he had my attention, he continued in the same intense tone.

“I’m scared of what we might see; scared of the power and the reckless ambition that has brought us together. Please take a seat over there,” he gestured, with the graceful gesture reminiscent of a practiced conductor, towards the lounge chair in the corner, swiveling his desk chair to face it.

I stood up, and, before taking my seat again, retrieved the mausoleum fragment that I had recovered from the cemetery in Sonora from my front coat pocket and place it on the corner of the desk. It would be directly between us during the session. There was a thrumming in my ears, but I couldn’t figure out if it was the air handling, or the subway, or something else.

“What an interesting artifact. Is this a lucky charm?” Cowdry was staring at the stone, but leaning back, as if it posed some sort of physical threat; as if it might lurch towards him if he didn’t pay attention. Soon he directed his gaze back where I had sat back in the lounge, feet up.

“The way this works is similar to meditation. Perhaps the stone is part of your meditation routine?” his question sounded to be in earnest, but the way his eyebrows arched again, which suggested that he knew more than he was revealing. I played along.

“Yes, sometimes I focus on the stone – just some techniques of my own design. Nothing too serious,” I answered him, nonchalantly, embarrassed to reveal my own methods, such as they were. He nodded at me, and then at his assistant, the grad student that had let us in, who left the room, closing the door behind her without a word. We were alone, below the Earth, and I was to be hypnotized by a Professor who was both academically controversial and under investigation by the federal government.

“The trick, as you know, is disregarding thoughts, as quickly as they enter your mind, so that the target – your *Cryptkeeper* – can enter and fill up the empty space. Please try this now. Think about what you are thinking about, as simple as that sounds. Think about objects and perceptions. Think about friends and family. Think about obligations and debts. And then wrap them - each of them - in a bubble, and let them float gently away. Behind you, is the direction most people prefer, for letting finally letting go of these worldly thoughts, but some are inclined to *pop* the bubbles, which, I might add, is a fantastic self-improvement method. Also, it may be necessary to close your eyes,” he concluded his direction.

I kept my eyes open and fixed upon the stone piece sitting atop the desk in the near field. Cowdry’s books were out of focus in the background of my vision. So, all around that dark, irregular mass, I saw rectangles of colored lights; the bindings of the books on the shelves across the room, which

contrasted and framed the grave marker I had puzzled over for more than a year. The deeper reds and blues jumped out at me first, and then the faded whites would command my attention. Finally, I could see what looked to be, but which could have only been reflecting lamplight glinting off the granite itself, and at that point I began to feel heavy.

My legs were sinking further into the upholstery of the lounge and then my arms were imperceptible. My neck followed suit, and, finally, my torso sank fully into the depths of the chair. All that was left, it seems, was my head – floating in space like a helium balloon, bouncing against random thought patterns while perceiving the colors and shapes that comprising the room itself. Then Professor Cowdry began to chant or hum in an extremely low octave, just above the threshold of perception.

The sound would have been comical, had I not been so disembodied through the meditative experience. I had basically hypnotized myself, and Cowdry could easily recognize the look. He knew it was time to begin the session proper – to plumb my psyche. I heard him scratching on paper while he hummed, and could just make out the attaché case out of my peripheral vision, standing open, yellow legal pads exposed. The thought of that perception came and went, just like all the others, and I began to recite my own sort of chant, under my breath which, although it wasn't very melodic, seemed to merge and harmonize with Cowdry's more guttural intonations. We were singing together, briefly.

“Think about the last time you saw the man you called the Cryptkeeper. What was he doing; what was he wearing?” Cowdry's question died in my ears, along with our harmony, and without reverberation, the sound being muffled by the books in the room, three stories below the Earth. It took me a few seconds to process to question and then to try to query my memory. I thought back to a night at work the previous Fall, and a chain of events that had led me here. It began to get very cold in the room. It

took a few seconds to realize – to actually perceive the sound of my own robotic voice. That voice I was telling a story...

“After leaving the bootheel - the land of the scorpion - he went disguised as a Jesuit priest and in that capacity had participated in Cortez’s first foray inland from the Mexican coast,” I began speaking, as if from a script or teleprompter, in monotone and without inflection.

These words were coming from my mouth, but I had no idea about their origin or if they held any grounding in reality. Either way, I felt compelled to continue speaking.

“As the advisor to King of Phillip of Spain, year 1520 CE, he personally viewed an early version of the NYMZA process, while conducting an official evaluation of harvestable resources in the new world, and had volunteered for the conquest that was to follow,” I spoke the words, still not comprehending their meaning, while Cowdry continued scribbling in his notebook behind the desk just to my right.

The stone, which couldn’t have been more than three or four inches on any side, seemed to loom over me and the exposed face was dark, almost black, as if the light from the lamp directly behind me couldn’t quite pierce the crags of its surface. I continued speaking, robotically.

“Much later, he was a haberdasher in Whitechapel, before running a hotel near the the 1890 World’s Fair in Chicago. Many died by him. He also managed an airstrip in Guyana in the late 1970’s after a stint at daily reporting on the Tate-La Bianca murders in Southern California. He’s had been at it for nearly 500 years; searching for something and killing along the way to aid that search. But it’s only the most grotesque, bloody rituals that maintain him now. He’s getting desperate. He’s getting old.”

I began to wake to severity of my own utterances while Cowdry continued scribbling furiously. Later, I would think it strange that there wasn’t an electronic recording device in the room. In fact, there was no electronic equipment at all within that room nor any room on the floor. It seems that nearly all of

Cowdry's sessions were transcribed by hand, although some would remain forever unpublished. I continued speaking, but the words were harder to grasp and share, wherever they were coming from.

“He was also a scout for Custer and – in that capacity – surprised three Lakota Sioux on the verge of completing their manhood hunt in the Badlands. None of the three had encountered the sort of long-lived viciousness that the man in black saw fit to inflict. He whipped the boys, mercilessly, until they revealed the location and size of their camp, but the intelligence that the Cryptkeeper eventually communicated back to Custer was merely a sideshow, a distraction. What the man really sought out was the location of the band's medicine man, who had passed-down knowledge concerning the exact path – the *Jornado del Muerto* – that Montezuma's royal court had retreated upon when Cortez's army advanced on the Aztec capital at Tenochtitlan.

The Cryptkeeper finally located the elder he thought might have that information. In a cliff-side overhang, where the village holy man would spend his winters, slow torture by acid was employed to extract information. The shaman was courageous when the old-world chemicals were dripped from a vial onto exposed fingers and toes. His gums. The pain was exquisite. He didn't have any information on the location of the drawings but he did share with the man in black a certain incantation and a bag of local herbs. At that time, even the white man knew of the Skinwalker, and – in the 19th century – legendary *bryjos* in the shape of wolves and bears and a handful of other creatures stalked the scrublands between Taos and what is now Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, where the ingredients for the transformation could be found.” Combined, incantations and the herbs would allow the Cryptkeeper to traverse great distances in animal form, and, perhaps find what he was looking for: the source of the NYMZA text and the directions contained therein; methods for fueling a flight technology completely unattainable to modern man.”

I almost collapsed out of the chair at the end of this recitation and the shadows and temperature fluctuations left the room. The immediate nature of my surroundings returned to me as I regained lucid consciousness. Cowdry hadn't moved, but he had the strangest little smile. The sort of straight reporting he had elicited from my hypnotized mind was astounding, even to him. At that moment of my re-awakening, while I was still looking at him, the stone resting at the corner of Cowdry's desk rolled off slowly and began to drop to the floor. I leapt from the reclining chair in an instant, without a thought, and snatched the stone piece before it hit the ground. With trick number three, the smile immediately left Cowdry's face.

"What did I say?" I questioned him, before he had the opportunity to recover his composure, the granite still sitting heavy in the palm of my hand. He gestured at the notebook in front of him, as if it was all obvious, and took on an innocent look.

"These notes will be transcribed and sent to you as soon as possible, as is the case with all the study participants. Your terms of participation should have made that clear." *Good save*, I thought.

"Likewise," he responded, out loud, and stared at me, smiling once again.

We sat like that for a few seconds, me on the edge of the ottoman, clutching the craggy souvenir from a Sonora graveyard and him in a chair behind the great desk. Soon, Cowdry had loosened his tie and was staring at the door intently. A few seconds later, a graduate student entered, one who I hadn't seen before. Now I knew there were at least three such academic monks, burrowing in these tunnels beneath the Yard and assisting Professor Cowdry in his hypnosis sessions and with lord knows what else.

"Whiskey," said Cowdry to the student, who turned and left at once.

He began to rub his brow, and I sat back in the chair, after placing the rock weight back on the corner of the desk. I had never moved that quickly before, to my knowledge, and it felt like it might have

been an aftereffect of the hypnosis. Maybe I had another trick. After staring down Slattery, and then walking away from him a year later, at the café, his one felt much more useful. Bodies in motion, and the ability to stop or slow them or leave them behind without pause, and all thanks to Reggie and his untimely death. We both took our whiskey neat, in a couple sips, anxious to continue the session, and he encouraged me back into a more relaxed position. It was time to locate the Cryptkeeper, but I felt drained, emotionally and physically. Cowdry recognized that and spoke up.

“Perhaps we should continue another time. It’s almost 10 pm anyways, and you should be getting back, regardless of what Pierce thinks or has planned.” He spoke sympathetically and I believed him.

It was time to go. The rest of the evening at work was uneventful, and I mostly spent it at the desk, relieving the student worker and sending them home at 1 am, and finishing up the shift alone. The walk home, unlike the same walk I took the year before, was depressing. The moonlight seemed to weigh physically on my shoulders, and I passed the alleyway turnoff for Paddy’s without a second glance, despite the fact that noise and light were emanating from the establishment, even at 2:20am, long after closing.

The next day we took off, Daniela and I, and boarded the blue line at the State Street station, bound for Revere Beach. The plan was to discuss the prospect of my pursuing these various investigations to their conclusion and finally confronting Reggie’s killer. She was against my participating in another session with Cowdry, although I felt I was already zeroing in on the Cryptkeeper’s headquarters. New Mexico.

First, we rolled under Boston Harbor, and then past the airport, and finally we exited the subway at Wonderland station; the end of the line. It was brisk, and the holidays were upon us. I knew I could swing 2, maybe 3 weeks off work in the library, factoring in the official winter holidays. And I knew where

I was bound, roughly. Cowdry's transcription of my first session had arrived, via email, late the previous day, and the vast stretches of sparsely populated ranch land, especially in the northeast part of the state, seemed like just the sort of backwater where the Cryptkeeper and his gang might find refuge and continue their search for whatever had haunted them, all without having to face too many questions from few scattered homesteads that occupied the area.

There were also venomous creatures, which I took to be NYMZA's favored means of experimentation and, perhaps, of revenge. In this case I had to plan not just for snakes and spiders, which were extent in abundance throughout the desert southwest, but snakes as well, among which are certain aggressive species – like the Western Diamondback – which are known to actively pursue humans that encroach on their territory. I likened the Cryptkeeper to a cornered rattler, in the wilds of New Mexico, waiting to feel the wrath of my pistol and my blade and it made me feel brave and ready to finally face him. I'd even begun conducting preparatory research on local conditions – weather, terrain, flora - in region of Northeast New Mexico that I felt was the most likely, during the slow hours after midnight in Widener, although it wouldn't do to bring that up to Daniela. Instead, I focused on what might be gained.

“This is it,” I promised her, sincerely, as we sat together on Revere Beach, taking in the view of Nahant to the North and listening to the gentle waves of the North Atlantic braking on shells and brown sand.

“After this trip, I won't be chasing anymore. Either they'll be there, or they won't. If they are there, I'll report them to the local cops and let them do the dirty work. If not, I'll come home, and forget about it. There won't be any more leads. No more investigation.”

We sat for a long time, on that beach, and we didn't have to say anything. It was like being with Reggie, back in the day, all the way back on Grandpa's farm in Missouri. It felt good and I was invigorated

by the sea and the sand and by the general mood of the day. I think Daniela knew that I would be venturing out into the desert, but also that I would be coming home. We ended up leaving the beach around lunchtime, but this time on foot, and, by the time we had made it back to West Cambridge, we had explored together a second-hand clothes store and a book shop with a healthy collection of esoterica and southwestern anthropology. We even held hands, walking down Washington Street, before catching the red line train north at Downtown Crossing and finally exiting at Porter Square. I hated leaving Daniela, but I think she was resigned to letting me conclude the crusade.

But there was something else that was bothering me, even more than the possibility that I might actually find the Cryptkeeper out there in the New Mexican desert. Both Rose and Cowdry had made references to my family, and, in the intervening year – between Reggie’s death and my first hypnosis session beneath Weld Hall – psychosis had been a constant threat. Yes, there was no doubt I had seen what I had seen, on Winter Hill the fall before, and in the meadow above Sonara, and even in Cowdry’s lab, but these experiences – which I shared with no one – weren’t enough. There was no *proof*; no photograph; not even an especially vivid memory at that point. There was just conjecture of the most preposterous sort, bolstered with tenuous connections to books in the stacks and increasingly large quantities of Irish whiskey. I could have gone either way, with my first case, which was to solve Reggie’s murder: I could be a true believer, and follow my hunches and the vagaries offered by Ouija boards and hypnosis, or, I could keep drinking, and see if that didn’t get me where it got my cousins and the guys at Paddy’s, who were the same, night after night.

The third option – that there might be a *connection* between the Cryptkeeper and the time that spanned my Italian ancestry and Reggie’s murder – was too much to bear, but there were hints that my involvement in the situation wasn’t entirely coincidental. My feelings toward Reggie, of bone-deep

camaraderie and absolute trust, the same feelings I shared with Daniela, and the rage and helplessness I felt at his disappearance; those feelings might be wrapped up with the goings and comings of the men in black as well. If this was the case, and I was destined to face off against a timeless evil, in the desert and all alone, then what was the rush? I was better off waiting until baby came, then maybe baby number 2, and let my planning and preparations develop. Learn more about the environment and the enemy. More sessions with Cowdry perhaps. And I could track Rose down, surely. She had a day job, I'm sure, and she might have more information. More specifics. There were good people in the fight as well, although I hadn't been completely honest or even especially proactive in recruiting their support. I was on my own.

Daniela was a good example of the fallout from this self-imposed isolation. She knew we had almost died on Winter Hill, and, perhaps, that our near miss was connected to Reggie's untimely passing. But she didn't have the complete story. Nor did Cowdry or Rose. Pierce was still in play, as a loose end and one that I would have to be particularly careful around. That most confounding aspect of the case, the Cryptkeeper's tricks, of flight and venom induced mania, is what finally put me over the top on New Mexico.

The New York Times broke the following story on December 16th, 2017, on the front page: "Glowing Auras and 'Black Money': The Pentagon's Mysterious U.F.O. Program." Apparently, the so-called Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program had been funded with a black budget of at least \$22 million dollars, over a 5-year period, with the sole purpose of investigating "unidentified aerial phenomena." The authors – Cooper, Blumenthal, and Kean – had some interesting things to say about the materials that comprised these craft:

The company modified buildings in Las Vegas for the storage of metal alloys and other materials that Mr. Elizondo and program contractors said had been recovered from unidentified aerial

phenomena. In addition, researchers also studied people who said that they had experienced physical effects from encounters with the objects and examined them for physiological changes.

Alarm bells were ringing. There was actual material evidence, somewhere in Nevada, of what I had seen in the woods of western Massachusetts the year before and had even brought home with me from California. I sat back, after finishing the story on my work computer, and was surprised to find Cass hovering behind me. She rarely appeared in the evenings, and I was glad that she found me at the desk, instead of out wandering the stacks, shirking my duties, despite what was currently pulled up onscreen. We looked at each other for a second before she spoke.

“How’s the return pile?” she asked, vocalizing authority in a way I’d seldom heard from her.

It was a simple task, for an undergrad assistant, but I got up, if only to see what she had in mind. I didn’t go too far though. Just out of sight behind the corner, where the hallway turns into the elevator lobby, and there I turned around. Peeking back around the corner, I saw Pierce approach the desk from the opposite direction. He looked around briefly and then leaned in, to discuss something with Cass that I couldn’t make out. She nodded intently as Pierce whispered in her ear. At that, I turned around, and went to check the drop for real.

Cass was still at the desk when I returned, although Pierce was nowhere in sight, having slipped out just as quickly and quietly as he had slipped in to confront me the week before.

“I need some time off,” I said, without breaking eye contact or answering her question.

“Take all the time you need,” Cassie responded, without affect.

Book III:
Deep Beneath the Mesa

And now, whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.

- 1 Kings 12:11

IX.

One week later I was utterly exposed, on a rock ledge, approximately 4000 feet above sea level. It was on the side of a mesa that I was climbing, making my way down to a lost graveyard on an ancient riverbed. There was a drone following me, although it was still out of sight and hadn't yet captured a good photo. At least I don't think it had. I was climbing one-handed, having drawn my pistol to take aim at the drone if it did happen to come into contact. At the last second, just before the crescendo drone motors, I ducked behind an ancient dwarf spruce that had taken root on a rock ledge some centuries before.

That wasn't the worst of it. The first week in Tucumcari was a hellishly uncomfortable experience and I found myself constantly questioning the mission. To get my bearings, I spent the first night in town, pointedly mentioning (in loose talk with the grocery clerks, at least) a long weekend with a "fishing at Conchas Lake," which was nearby and frequented by city folks on the weekends. But even the grocery-filled motel room – filled with supplies meant to last a week – was a disappointing sight. The Tucumcari *Best Western* was cheaply constructed, and the clientele stomped through uncarpeted hallways throughout the night, in a rush to and from local drug dealers, or girlfriends, or both. It all served to cheapen what I had originally thought would be a climax of a year-long manhunt and some justice for Renfro, and closure for myself and Aunt Frobisher.

After stocking up and swapping the motel bed for the backseat of a rental SUV, I cruised unpaved ranch roads. I would wake and scramble out of the backseat – uncoordinated in the desert's false dawn. Anything slower than a scramble would have been unfathomable, given the temperature, which wasn't consistently cold like in Massachusetts, but which would swing wildly between night and day. It soon became clear that I was little more than a foolish child, completely unaccustomed to anything less than perfect amenity, and my inability to attain a complete night's sleep was torturous both before and after

the fear of the dark subsided. Life in the suburbs had made me soft, I realized during that first week in the desert, and it was probably a good thing that I hadn't yet found the Cryptkeeper. The aching in my bones, from sleeping on a reclined car seat in the winter would have slowed me down and given him the advantage if we were indeed to cross paths.

Still, I stuck it out for that first week, exploring locations corresponding to my own handwritten markings, which were little more than pencil markings on USGS topo maps. I would fumble and curse the Jet Boil every morning, making coffee before pouring most of a bottle of Aquafina over my head, shuddering violently in the high desert's morning cool. Gazing around at whatever neglected ranch road I had parked on at the end of the previous day's hike, I wondered '*what the fuck I was thinking*' and why had this trip meant more than my beautiful wife or a real winter break, somewhere in the Florida panhandle. Surely revenge – even for Reggie - wasn't worth this level of discomfort.

The only consolation was that my meditations were pretty much uninterrupted, and their length and focus was greatly improved in the absence of city sounds and light pollution and the thought of the next shift at work. Once in the morning, and then again just before bed, I would make my way towards the horizon and whatever spot seemed conducive to ritual breathwork. My prayer circles in New Mexico were made of cacti and loose rocks and lines drawn in sandy soil with dead cholla branches, broken off and dried in the sun for years before. Only then could I tune out the cold or the futility of my mission. Generally, the practice would culminate with nothing more than the sound of my own blood pulsing in my ears, but sometimes it would feel like I was floating, as I had in Sonora the previous fall. After meditation, in the mornings and the evenings – between long drives - I would study maps.

There were quirks on the maps. Tiny symbols and annotations, printed by the geologic survey themselves – but uncommon, and not appearing frequently. One such symbol – a cross – appeared on a

couple quads, in a typeface so small that it could hardly be discerned by the naked eye. The legend was clear as to the meaning, however: graveyard. Of course this in itself wasn't enough to go on. There were backcountry burial grounds on all the big ranches in San Luis County, some dating back hundreds of years. What caught my eye, eventually, was a discrepancy – between the USGS map printed in 1976 and the updated map, printed in 2009. There was a cemetery marker on the earlier map, but not on the later one. Someone had either forgotten to include the annotation or the graveyard itself was so far gone, even in the 70's, that by the turn of the millennium it was not even worth noting. Having encountered cemeteries in proximity to both Hexham and Sonora, I knew that an especially rundown burial site was exactly the sort worth checking out.

So I outfitted for a two-day hike – one day in and one day out. The plan was to camp at the cemetery and see if anything floated. Then, who knows. Perhaps the smartest thing I did was pack a lot of water.

There's some out there, on the thousands upon thousands of acres of private property that make up the cattle ranches in and around Northeast New Mexico, but it was mostly collected in cisterns and shallow gulches or as puddles in dry season streambeds. Such standing water was favored by free-range livestock, but I had little doubt it would put me down for at least a couple days, if I had to resort to drinking it myself. Unlike the woods of Western Mass, there's very little *flowing* water in those furthest northern reaches of the Chihuahua desert.

So, my pack was mostly water – big, heavy gallon jugs, which, coupled with the granite piece from Sonora, weighed me down immensely and slowed movement across the landscape. The distances were vast and valleys that looked like pleasure strolls on Google maps turned out to be nearly impenetrable Martian hellscapes when seen up close. Ditches became ravines, at ground level and on

foot, and Spanish bayonets, cholla cacti, and other all manner of spiny flora actively repelled footfalls. In the end, it took a full two days just to reach the lost graveyard I had identified on the defunct survey map.

There was also a pint of whiskey in my pack, which I had marked with a half-strip of black duct tape, to help space out my drinking over the course of a couple days. It was almost empty along with my bag of peanuts, by the time I was finally camped on the ridge overlooking the old burying ground. That left a couple cans of beans; one for dinner and one for the hike back, which would take at least a day and a half. Water was still ok, especially in proportion to the rationed whiskey. Drinking more whiskey meant drinking more water, and it was a good thing that I hadn't picked up the 750 ml. from the package store in town, although I had stared at it intently for maybe a minute and a half before moving on. Besides that, I had a Leatherman, my pistol – loaded with .410 shot, which flew as checked baggage – and a sleeping bag. No sleeping pad; no extra shirt; no extra pants. A couple pairs of socks and a lighter, to light the jet boil, which is how I would cook my dinner of beans or heat water for tea.

It was the next morning, early, when I heard the drone. Camp was already broken down, and I was planning to climb the steep face of the mesa down to what would have been an ancient riverbed and an irregular rock formation, right nearby, which I took to be the graveyard. The descent looked to be about 100, which doesn't sound like much until you are carrying weight, or tumbling. The sound wasn't loud, at first, but it was unnatural when heard against the near silence that accompanied me throughout the day; a high whirring, buzzing that echoed off sandstone boulders in a way that the occasional shriek of a hawk or lowing that lost cattle couldn't imitate. It could have been a rancher surveying his stock, or the local law enforcement, but I could only think of the Cryptkeeper and his men in black. Once the drone had passed my hiding spot, I completed the climb and made my way across the broken desert floor and dried up riverbed to the half-buried graveyard that lay just beyond.

As decrepit as the Sonora and Hexham cemeteries had been, this one was in by far the worst condition. And, given the dryness of the climate, I knew that its age must have been double or triple the age of those other sites. Only the faintest etchings were visible on fallen markers, quarried from the local sandstone it looked like, while the words themselves were completely illegible. I could make out a couple names, finally, by virtue of high-noon's raking light, and then only after sacrificing some of my water and the hem of my shirt and rubbing clean the sandstone. All German names, like the Sonora site.

I was reminded of the work of the late Mr. Dellshau, and the NYMZA text itself, and I wondered if the Cryptkeeper too had German origins, despite his accent, or if – like my ancestors – him and his colleagues had only glimpsed something, something much darker that may have gotten them killed. If the Cryptkeeper had been roaming the New World as long as my hypnosis session suggested, he would have had plenty of time to perfect the local dialects. It bothered me that there might have been more graveyards like this – perhaps many more – stretching back to old world Europe and even before. I meditated some more, in the middle of the cemetery, but whatever power it had possessed had long since vanished back into the landscape. These weren't like my granite piece, these headstones, although the place was eerily silent and windless. Not even the coyotes were audible at dusk, as they had been on my hike in. I had great difficulty falling asleep, amidst such profound silence and such vast distances.

That night I had a dream. My father was there, or at least the feeling of my father, but he was terribly angry and – with the help of unidentifiable spirits, which surrounded me on all sides – he tore me limb from limb. It was deep beneath the earth, in a cave, where this dismemberment took place, and I was filled with horror, and dread, and anguish. And then, I let my body go, and began to float towards the ceiling of the cave, and through the topsoil above, until I finally arose through the desert floor, in a place not dissimilar from the graveyard that I had fallen asleep in the night before.

From there, I kept rising, up higher than the surrounding mesas, until I finally began to drift with the currents of air that circled high above the Earth. I drifted above and over an unnamed mesa, but not before looking down to see a circuit board, appearing like a city seen from a great distance above. Nested rectangles of pulsing white light. Then, over and above the top of the mesa, I could almost feel the softer winds as they blew the scent of dwarf pine and sage through my disembodied spirit. On the other side of the mesa was an endless chasm – infinite darkness that continued down well below the surface of the Earth. When I was hovering directly above the chasm, my spirit dropped. I could feel the drop in the stomach of my soul, as if I still had a body, and terror gripped me once again.

But that feeling terror was soon overtaken by an encompassing awe, as if I couldn't hope to perceive – much less understand – the infinite blackness that I was entering. For a while I fell, breathless. Then, I was underwater, or under something like water, and looking upwards from just beneath the surface, with the wavelets and currents distorting an otherwise well-defined series of shapes, which appeared fixed in the space above the current while I flowed downstream. An apple shape, then what looked like a rocking chair, and finally streaks of primary color, shimmering just above the surface of the water that my mind was floating through. Things disintegrated fully as I entered a pool of white light.

But the white light from the dream warmed my face to an uncomfortable degree, and I struggled in my sleep to cover my face. Opening my eyes, briefly, I could make out an object hovering above me. I was fully awake in a split second and scrambling for cover. The beam that had transfixed me, and may have even *caused* my dream, was still pointed at my unfurled sleeping bag as I stumbled away, nearly tripping over tombstones and then my own pack. From an angle, I could see the object more clearly, shining down the light. It looked very much like the oblong tube that I had seen on Winter Hill the year before, and, like that object, it was completely silent. But this was no place to try to take me into custody.

I was way off the road at that point, and, unless the craft was prepared to land, I still had some time to get away. The object remained fixed in the sky, hovering totally noiseless, while I made my hasty exit, carrying only my lucky jacket and those things that were in my various pockets on my person.

I hiked out to the nearest public highway instead of back towards the rental car, a route that was only 30 miles according to the map, so I could realistically do it in a day. By noon I was exhausted and stopped to eat the beans cold from a can, using the Leatherman to pry off the lid and dribbling juices across the front of my shirt. It would make hitchhiking more difficult, looking so bedraggled, but I didn't care. The water was running low and the whiskey was long gone. My pistol was on my hip and my lucky denim was on my back. It was a long day – one of the longest - but just when my energy level was really starting to fade, I began to see glints of the setting sun hitting windshields in the distance. A couple more miles and I had my thumb out.

The first vehicle, a minivan, passed me by without slowing down. It looked like a family. Next there was an old beater truck, with NM plates, and he slowed down but didn't stop.

“Where you headed?” the ranch hand asked me, sizing me up.

I had shifted the pistol to a spot behind my back and taken some time to splash water on my face, hoping I could pass as human, at least from a distance. Now, that distance was no more than 6 feet.

“Just back to town,” I tried to catch my breath and show my face, which would have appeared quite desperate by that point.

“Oh ya. Which town?” he still hadn't stopped and we were walking, side-by-side, him in the truck, in drive but not accelerating, and me afoot. I saw something then – shadowed movement - in his driver side mirror, and turned to look.

“There’s someone chasing me,” I spoke as calmly as I could manage, trying to level with the stranger, whose eyes opened wide while his hands audibly squeezed the leather of the steering wheel.

“They are right behind us, and if you don’t let me into your truck right now, and start driving really fast, they are going to kill us both,” I stared at him dead on, exhausted but still upright, making use of one of my tricks, which had worked on Slattery the year before.

This time it wasn’t a bluff though, and I knew that the stranger was in as much danger as I was. We had finally stopped moving, both of us, on the gravel that lined roadside. The glint behind us had turned into the outline of a nondescript black sedan, kicking up tremendous amounts of dust as it approached at well over 100mph. I didn’t force him to let me into his truck, although I could have drawn my pistol taken it and left him there on the roadside to fend for himself. Instead we stared at each other for a couple more seconds, and then he glanced at his rearview one more time to consider the situation.

“Get in,” he spoke firmly, regaining his composure.

The men in black were less than a mile behind us then and we were starting from a dead stop. It was a 1500 V8, he was driving, but one from the 90’s with a lot of miles on it. The good news is that we were at the bottom of a small incline, a rise in elevation that would lead us up and through a cut in the ridgeline. Badger pass to Tucumcari was the route. We were up to 60 mpg when they finally caught up with us, or at least within 25 yards. We could see them then: Two men in dark suits, both staring forward, and what looked like the outline of another, taller man in the back seat, although the windows were heavily tinted. We could see the unmarked sedan from an angle just above, given the incline, and a sunroof opened and whoever was in the back seat rose above the roofline looking through the scope of a large-caliber rifle. It was the Cryptkeeper, the tall passenger in back, and he meant to kill us.

His first shot went wild, but the next three moved progressively forward from the truck bed to the rear window, to a point behind us on the backseat, tossing up plastic, and then glass, and then seat fabric. We were nearing the top of Badger pass then, when the last bullet struck, and our pursuers began to fall back, their engine struggling with the steepest part of the grade. Meanwhile, we were increasing in speed, the ranch hand and I, although not on purpose. The unconscious man sitting next to me had a crumpled foot on the accelerator and one limp hand atop wheel. His whole body was starting to slump and it was veering us towards the edge of the road just as we crested the pass. We were out of rifle range, temporarily, but headed for a ditch at a dangerously high speed.

I shot a hand out towards the wheel and corrected our direction as soon as I noticed his condition, but ended up turning too hard. The truck was starting to flip well before I had a chance to scurry down beneath the driver's seat and get a hand on the brake pedal. We hit the culvert that bordered the road at more than 50 miles per hour. I read that number upside down, feeling us go airborne after the top of the cab bounced on the lip of the drainage ditch. I could hear the wheels spinning after we landed even though they weren't touching the ground.

When I came to, a few seconds later, I noticed that we had crash landed just beyond the tree line, atop Badger pass, and my driver – the stranger who had given me a ride - was finally dead. Bits of bone and flesh peppered the steering wheel and the windshield, remnants on the gaping exit wound that had set our crash in motion. For a couple of seconds, I just stared at him and tried to think about where he might have been coming from, or going to, when he decided to slow down and talk to me. Adrenaline finally overcame concussive daydreams and I fumbled for the seatbelt release.

We had landed upside down, backwards, and I was facing back towards the highway where the black sedan had just pulled up. The gun perch had retracted and it looked just like any other car, at least

from a distance. In seconds, three dark suited figures, including the Cryptkeeper himself, were making their way towards the tree line and the smoking ruin that was the truck. I could see his emerald cuffs and long fingers swinging in rhythm even from that distance.

I was tired and hungry, bruised and bloody, but I wasn't ready to give up. Vengeance for Reggie, and even some sense of justice for Daniela and the baby, these things were all far out-of-mind. My original mission was no longer relevant – I just wanted to survive the day. To stay buckled in, upside down, would have surely been suicide. Bony. Pale. And utterly without affect. They could have been the feds that Slattery had told me about. Maybe. But they most definitely weren't operating within the realm of constitutional law. Surrender to them wouldn't get me a jail cell, it would get me a bullet like my driver, or maybe something worse. I wasn't sticking around. Once they began to descend the ditch, over, I crawled out of the crash took off sprinting. It's amazing what energy reserves you can summon in mortal danger.

Following the ridgeline, I headed down, toward the lake, which I could see in the distance through gaps in the stunted trees that crowned the pass. I knew there was a small settlement on the Southeast side of the lake, and a working ranch to the Northeast, so it would make sense to follow the waterline if I could make it down that far. I had no supplies except what was on my person. My pack I had left in the graveyard, and any remaining supplies were now in flames, which I could just make out when I finally slowed down my pace and glanced backwards towards the setting sun. There were no lights except those from the rising half-moon and the stars. By 9pm I was physically done, but I finally got reception. The phone connected – 3G – at the base of the ridge, where the swampland began.

Four voicemails, and I couldn't imagine that any of them were having to do with something good. The first thing I did was text Daniela "I love you," and before I had a chance to review the messages she was calling. I answered immediately, breathless with joy.

"I'm ok, baby. I'm ok," was all I said to start. She was frantic; breathing heavy into the mic.

"Where have you been? Are you sure you're ok?" when she finally spoke she spoke loud in a shrill tone and I almost broke down and cried, missing her.

"They're here. Those same guys that got Reggie," I said after taking a breath and taking a seat at the base of a pine. Temporary shelter.

"Call the cops," was all she said in response. Just then, I saw another call was incoming. Cass. We had traded numbers to help get shifts covered in the past, although she usually texted or sent an email. A bad feeling came over me, sitting there beneath the tree, on a mat of needles that felt like a memory foam mattress after the day I'd had.

"Baby, I gotta go. I gotta keep moving, and someone might be after me." I was breathing heavy, speaking impulsively, and immediately regretted saying that last part, sure that she would be calling the local police immediately once I hung up. Maybe that's what I wanted, subconsciously. I told her I loved her and that I would be home soon, then I hung up without waiting for a response and took Cass's call.

"Everyone is looking for you," Cass said, by way of a greeting. Her tone was all business. As a compromise with sanity, I answered with a question that had been bothering me for days.

"How well do you know Professor Pierce?" I asked her. "Really know him."

There was a pause. I don't think she was expecting that from me, and her tone when she answered had gone from direct to icy.

“Robert is my father,” she said, clipping the sentence between words and audibly swallowing once she had gotten the words out.

She wanted to cry or scream. Knowing Cass, she wasn't going to cry. I couldn't begin to process the implications of her revelation, or the way she was speaking to me, so I stayed quiet, glancing around for flashlight beams, black bears, or mountain lions. It was clear, until I looked up. Just over the dark horizon, from where I looked out across the bottom finger of the lake just below me, a red light was rising from behind the far side of the mesa, the direction from which the black sedan had originated. The light rose far above the mesa, straight up, in a way that only a rocket ship would be able to emulate, if a rocket were able to take off without making a sound. When it reached a zenith and my neck was craned uncomfortably at an angle equal to that of the faintest sliver of moon, I had the sense of to end the call.

There was no good way for me to remove the battery, out there on the patches of wood that separated the lakefront from the desert floor, so I placed the entire handset in a hole in the trunk of the tree, just above my head, beneath a pine bough canopy stretching to marsh. I was a few steps away before the screen went to sleep, and, glancing backwards, it looked like there was someone at home in the tree watching late-night TV. Then darkness. There would be no contact with the illuminated world until I found another human, and that could be half a day or more. Nor could I sit and wait for the sun to rise. Something – a fast-moving light, now lower in the sky – was moving horizontally in as straight a line as it had ascended, towards me from a fixed position on the horizon. I hoped it was moving towards my cell phone. My assumption was that that Cass had been trying to keep me on the line, with her revelations, true or not. In the meantime, the Cryptkeeper and Co. had triangulated my location and were closing in.

Back on my feet, but not too steady, I made my way down from the base of the ridgeline, a considerably steeper descent than I had made at the riverbed cemetery the day before. This time, there

were sheer drops of 20 and 30 feet, and I couldn't make my way straight down, especially not in darkness. Instead, I weaved between the boulders, sometimes backtracking, and staying upright only by the grace of god and some stubborn dwarf cedars growing perpendicular out from the side of what would have been a bulging waterway in the wet season. What sounded like a great number of Coyotes started yipping nearby, just at dusk, and I was scared that I wouldn't be able to fight them off in my weakened state, if they decided to attack *en masse*.

Finally, at midnight, I dragged a muddy boot from a stinking bog, setting booth feet upon the floodplain and the lakeside proper. The hike – my second of the day – had taken hours, and it must have been near dawn. The craft, whose lights had reached my phone call location an hour before, had since flown off, following more jagged trajectories, retreating back behind a massive mesa that loomed in the distance across the lake, a silhouette marking the direction toward the ghost town that I had circled on one the topo maps that were left behind in my pack, in the flaming wreck of a car atop Badger Pass: *Trementina*. There was precious little time to ponder their origin, or the relationship between that light and the craft that I had seen on Winter Hill. Someone was definitely getting around up there, but it was getting cold, which was a much more pressing concern, and I made my way slowly through the cottonwoods that bordered the lake front. Just before dawn, I finally saw artificial light in the distance.

It turns out there were other trailers even closer, but they all had their lights turned off and I dodged between them, not keen to wake the neighborhood. The light I set out towards sat on the far edge of the unincorporated town of Conchas, bordering the man made lake. It was a trailer, and, on the front porch of the trailer, sat a very old women with a shotgun. She saw me before I saw her, but I stopped cold when the squeak of her rocker on the porch wood signaled to me that she was standing up and taking aim. The squeak was a signal to stop moving. She actually didn't point the shotgun at me, at least not dead on.

Instead, she rested it on the porch railing, barrel facing outward and pointed at an angle just to my left and toward the lake. She glanced at the lake as well, or over across it, before we looked at each other. I was breathing with a labored intensity by that point, slightly hunched, and enduring a terrible headache that I took to be the aftereffects of the high-speed crash and subsequent concussion that had occurred only a few hours before. My body was finally breaking down, and she took pity on me.

“How about them fireworks?” was all she said, nodding towards Trementina and grinning, before beckoning me inside the trailer with the barrel of her gun.

X.

I don't care if you live in the city, or the country - If you look out of your window, at a certain time of night, and all the streetlights have dimmed somehow, then you might see the outline of furry creatures scurrying across the roadway. Such fanciful sightings were multiplied 100-fold when seen through a window from the couch in Ms. Aaronson's living room, where I lay for three days completely at her mercy. She protected me, I think, from the monsters on the doorstep. Her or her shotgun, which rarely left her side. But who is to say what was real. The first couple days were little more than a feverish blur, and that's when - between indiscernible gaps in normal consciousness - I saw the most troubling nocturnal silhouettes. Mostly it late at night, after my host had gone through to the single bedroom in the trailer and closed the flimsy wood door.

In Cambridge, on the sidewalk out front of our apartment, it would have been the furtive bunches of scavenging; racoons, and rabbits, and the occasional lynx or coyote down from the fells rummaging through a garbage blown upon by the wind. But during my convalescence, beside Lake Conchas, the figures outside the window were hulking, upright belligerents, peering through windows, not through

the trash. Although I couldn't make out their features in detail, or even whether I was really awake, what I saw wasn't merely a dream. If it was a concussion from the crash, then it must have been worse than I thought, and the subsequent push through the forested ridgeline had finally broken my psyche. So, I sat, and ate canned soup heated on a gas burner by Ms. Aaronson, and I looked out the window from a prone position, out over the no-man's land rock scabble and dirt tracks that made up the space between the trailer and the gently lapping Conchas lakefront, cobalt blue, that lay a few yards beyond the trailer wall.

Ms. Aaronson let me use her landline once I had regained my senses, and I called Daniela again, which proved to be a surprisingly difficult task, since I no longer committed phone numbers to memory. After a couple wrong numbers, Daniela finally picked up.

"Hello?" she answered with a suspicious tone, thinking no doubt that it was just as likely the San Luis County coroner, or the sheriff.

"I'm ok," I whispered softly into the phone. Within seconds we were both sobbing. Ms. Aaronson had the decency to stay in her room, although I'm sure she heard the entire exchange.

"The local cops wouldn't help me!" she nearly screamed in frustration, once we had some time to catch our breath.

"They said there was no sign of you, or your truck, and they weren't in the business of babysitting city boys on scout trips. I don't trust them. Don't go to them, you hear me. Wherever you are, stay there until you are feeling better and then get back to the airport, or at least a bigger city. You flew into Amarillo, right? How far is that?"

"That's two hours, Dani," I responded patiently, knowing that such a retreat would be nearly impossible without a phone, or my credit card, or the rental SUV, which was parked at least a day's hike over the mesa, across the lake, if it hadn't already been seized and disappeared by local authorities.

I glanced up at the bedroom door, considering the many possible loyalties of my host. But it wasn't the time to start running again. If Ms. Aaronson was with them, the Cryptkeeper, and the men in black, and the local sheriff (and I assumed they all had some sort of understanding, this far off the grid) then it was all over. I didn't have the energy to *walk*, much less run any further. Shifting my gaze, without thinking, to the coat rack, I saw my lucky black denim hanging, stiffly, the denim more frayed, mostly along the cuffs, from pushing through thorny brush, and against jagged rock, and god knows what else since arriving in New Mexico. I spoke again to Daniela.

"I'm going to rest here, by the lake, for a couple more days and then I'll get a ride to the local library. If I can login to airlines' website, I can print my boarding pass. I know my driver's license was still in the inside pocket of the jacket, and I also remembered, just then, that the granite fragment from Sonora was stashed in the other front pocket. Why I thought to grab it from the overnight pack that stayed behind in the pickup, favoring it over food and water, I really couldn't say. Aside from my loaded pistol, Leatherman multi-tool, and pocket notebook, it was all I had to my name. That and the charity of my host, who was moving about noisily inside the bedroom, signaling that it was time to end the call.

"I'll be home in a couple days, at the latest," I responded with strength in my voice in an attempt to assure Daniela. She didn't buy it, and, if I wasn't home in a couple days, I knew she would come after me, pregnant or not. Briefly, I thought of calling other family, if only to alert someone as to my presence, but my mind wouldn't focus to recall anyone's number, confirming the increasingly solitary nature of my journey for revenge. I had come out here alone, without a real plan, to enemy territory. Escape was hours in either direction. Confrontation was most likely suicide. I lay back down on Aaronson's couch.

There was no TV, but a transistor radio was within arm's reach. I had been playing it during daytime hours, at a low volume, and Ms. Aaronson didn't seem to mind. There were only a couple

stations that came in. Nothing local; classic rock broadcast from Albuquerque and a couple preachers from out on the Texas panhandle. For that reason, I was surprised to hear the sort of voice you might hear when they are testing the emergency system or interrupting a sitcom broadcast.

“Police are looking for a man who left the scene of a fatal car crash on route 104 Friday evening. The man was wearing a black jacket and carrying a pistol. Please consider him armed and dangerous. If you have any information, please contact the San Luis County Sherriff’s office or Tucumcari police.”

The message repeated, on a loop, and I turned off the radio and sat upright, my brain struggling to cut through the fog of injury and the fear that had defined the previous few days of an increasingly precarious existence. My host was standing in her bedroom doorway, once again holding her shotgun.

“You know I sometimes take long walks, up and around Big Mesa?” she said, not sounding scared or mad, or like she wanted to shoot me.

I took her conversation starter as a good sign, and settled back and waited for her to continue speaking, not thinking about the radio broadcast for the moment, or the gun, which she had set down on the counter separating us.

“Yes, and one time I saw, at a decent distance from the road, two sets of footprints. One was a man’s shoe, but not a boot. A dress shoe, with a fine heel and a mark. I looked it all up later, on a computer in the Tucumcari library – the boot mark, a tight curve with horns or spikes at the point - but couldn’t find reference to the exact make online. A friend of mine, from Highlands University, up the road though, she had seen something similar and was able to dig a little deeper. She’s studying art history, you know, and these ‘makers marks’, she called them – well, they were quite common amongst cobblers. But only up until the 18th or 19th century. The indentation I saw, in the soft sand beside the

lake, looked kind of like a scorpion tail, is what she told me. My friend couldn't find the exact maker, but she said it was most likely European. Italian maybe."

By that point I was far too weak to hide my surprise, at the mention of an apparent scorpion motif emerging from the old world. I didn't care if she noticed. It was the first definitely clue linking the men in black with the NYMZA manuscript, other than the Cryptkeeper himself. It was also the first time, since I had arrived in New Mexico, that I knew I was doing the right thing, if you didn't count my own near abduction and the subsequent gunfire. If I could survive that, maybe I could survive one final encounter with the men in black that had partnered with local law to track me down and kill me. My host read my entire train of thought, made a decision, and proceeded to return the shotgun to a closet in her bedroom before proceeding with her story. She either thought that I wasn't crazy or was relieved to know that I didn't think her story was crazy. She wouldn't have to shoot me or run me off just yet.

"The other set of prints was that of a child. Only one set of prints came back though, from the lakeside over yonder," she gestured toward the lake through the window above my head, "...and it wasn't the child who came back. There are "Missing" posters up all-around Tukumcari, and up in Las Vegas, New Mexico, and I wouldn't be surprised if that kid was on a poster. Kids, adults, pets. You name it. It's a great place to disappear, even if you don't want to. The sheriff won't admit there's a problem, but him and his posse rarely leave town limits. But we both know – the sheriff and I – that there are things happening up behind that big mesa in the distance that ain't right. Would you care to split a beer?" she finished her speech with my favorite question.

We drank beer all night – Ms. Aaronson and I – and it wasn't at all regrettable, because, as I say, you can't really get drunk off beer alone. We talked about other, nicer things, like her family in California

and the birds that would soon return to the lake, and, in the morning, she was up first, cooking breakfast, and that's when she said that she would give me a ride into town. Town, or towards the base.

“What base?” I asked, innocently enough, not wanting to hear the answer but knowing I should.

She stared at me for a couple of seconds, taking her eyes off the eggs in the pan. I knew by then that the propane was getting low and she would have to go back to town to refill it. The perfect excuse to take a drive. We had switched over to solid foods once I started sitting upright and I was finally using the bathroom on my own, without her to lean on to and from. The shades were still drawn though, and I hadn't stepped foot outside in days. Time to make a move.

“The one where those damned men in black hide out,” she responded, without hesitation.

This was a very difficult time for me, you understand. I was under all illusions that my return flight to Boston was imminent. But Ms. Aaronson reminded me once again why I had come: One final confrontation. Fate wasn't ready to release me.

“They won't be expecting that,” she concluded, and I believed her.

We agreed to take a drive up toward the mesa before she picked up the propane and some supplies, in her 4x4, if only to take a better look around before making a final decision. On our way up, we stopped at the gas station, which was the only retail establishment for many miles in any direction, but which rarely had gasoline. It did have snacks though, and I focused intently on what seemed in that weakened state like the hardest choice of my adult life, between Doritos Cool Ranch and Nacho Cheese. After that, we took to the backcountry, on ranch roads at first and then between them, where dust kicked up when you drove more than 10mph, and were finally all the way around what she had been calling “big mesa” sometime before lunch. From there, I could just see across to the desert floor to the lost graveyard where I had camped and the hidden launch pad for whatever strange lights had been circling the area.

I saw Professor Pierce again after lunch that same day, from atop the mesa that Ma Aaronson had led me up on foot. She had left me up on top, and hurried back to her trailer, not wanting to risk the lives of her grandchildren, whom we had discussed along the way. Ma Aaronson was also attracted to (or by) misfortune and misadventure. That's how she ended up living by Lake Conchas, alone, watching the sky at night. But she still had a family, somewhere, and they were at risk of the men in black knew she was helping me. It was of great benefit to me that she had decided to lead me so, and I said as much as we weaved between sandstone boulders up the loose rock that made up a gap between the shrub line at the base of big mesa and the sheer rock face that made up the last 25 feet before the top. *This was a path that I would not have discovered by accident*, I thought to myself, as it zigzagged across scree and then terminated at a crack in the rock that formed the cliff face.

Further up, and set behind a slab of rock that looked connected to the cliff-face but wasn't, lay a narrow staircase-like rock feature, formed centuries before, with natural steps that were a full a yard apart and unevenly sloped, but edging upward and out of sight. It wasn't walking really – it was climbing – but it wasn't technical climbing, and we didn't need any belaying equipment. We were on the mesa by half-past 10. She had a pack and I had snagged a gallon water to complement my meal of chips and jerky, which I crunched on the drive up. We had both splurged on bags of peanut bags as well. I regretted not grabbing any more protein, but my guide pulled out a shrink-wrapped summer sausage when we reached the summit.

“I've been saving it,” she said, without affect, suggesting to me that our partnership was finished. As I made my way across the top of the mesa towards a desert valley on the other side, where Aaronson said their base was located, I glanced back to see her taking out of her own pack a pair of gorgeous

antique field glasses, meticulously maintained. There would have been a sea captain or field artillery commander, 50 or 100 years before, who had cherished the set. Brass, I think, and recently polished. It felt like a counterpart piece to my lucky denim and it gleamed at me from across the mesa as I walked away from her. Under her watch, I felt ready. This was all or nothing. I would find where the Cryptkeeper was hiding, and have my revenge on Reggie's killer, or I would escape on foot across the desert, begging my way back to New England. It was a desperate move I know, but it felt unavoidable.

In less than an hour, I had made it through the mesquite shrub and dwarf pine, to a clearing on the north face of the mesa. I gazed down across the hazy heat waves emanating from the rock and sand that made up the desert floor and immediately noticed activity happening down below, across the valley. Crouching low, against the side of a boulder, I could see a handful of people in full-body, jumpsuit uniforms moving about on the desert floor. The blackness of the material they were wearing stood out against the desert floor. There was also appeared to be a roughed-out landing strip, little more than graded topsoil, beyond where this human activity was taking place, and even further still was what looked like a hanger door, outlined against the face of the next mesa in a chain that stretched, unbroken, from the "Staked Plains" of the Texas panhandle clear West to the plateau at Las Vegas, New Mexico, at the base of the southern Rockies. From the maps, I knew that sizeable city was only about 100 miles away, by air, but the desert here was drier and more isolated than the land you would see if you make it to base of the Sangres. Once again, the men below me were wearing dark suits, totally unsuited to the climate.

There were three of them, that I could make out, and they were straining to ferry a floating, tubular object towards the hanger door. It looks similar to what I had seen on Winter Hill, and upon waking the night before, if smaller. A reflective metal finish, oblong, but more or less in the shape of an

overly inflated balloon. Seamless and unwrinkled, it reflected the sunlight like sparkler. Dazzling, materially, but also in the smoothness of its surface, in a place where everything was rough.

But, like before, there were hemp lines tethering the thing to the Earth. This time they were pulling the craft from above, as if it would float away without the rope netting that the men in black were tugging. There were no obvious openings on the surface of the craft and I could see it swaying slightly, in the wind, as the handlers dragged the object towards the side of the far mesa. From that distance, it looked like they were corralling an ornery, oversized bull, but one without legs and wrapped in tin foil. The doors began sliding open as they approached, and I could just make out a grinding sound from my position. No top-secret silent technology there. Within 5 minutes the craft was inside the bunker and all sound had ceased. That's when Pierce made his second appearance.

He wasn't immediately recognizable, like the government types, with their tailored black suits and unmarked sedans, or the overdressed peons herding the aircraft, but that self-important gait and iron-bar posture was discernable even though I was unable to make out his facial features from that distance. I followed the speck of him, taking my eyes away only to take a drink of water from my gallon hug. There was a large pistol on the opposite hip as the bottle of water, which I had tied high on my waist, so it wouldn't swing to wildly. Even this bare-bones expedition "pack" was cumbersome. Pierce had finished his surveying of the desert floor and had made his way to a small door just to the right of the hanger entrance. It was towards that spot that I ventured.

Soon, my legs were moving on their own and dragging my head along. I veered North, diagonally, across the flat bottomland and creek bed that separated my hiding place from that of my enemy. Undoubtedly, there were cameras at the hanger door, and the smaller door that Pierce had entered not 20 minutes

before, shortly before I made my way down the side of the mesa. One had to assume there were all sorts of pressure sensors and automated detection technologies surrounding their base, unless the men in black were totally unconcerned with worldly consequences. Their dress suggested such indifference, and they had nothing to fear from the local authorities near the lake or in Tucumcari where I was a wanted man.

It was hard to tell, by that point, the reach of their power, since so much of the activity I had witnessed seemed illogical and anachronistic. They operated silent, balloon-type craft, at very high speeds, but which were outfitted in some cases with retro tethers and stored in the desert with the help of a traditional ground crew. They also drove normal – albeit, *unidentifiable*– automobiles. And they fired very real guns, which was terrifying but decidedly out-of-sync with their apparent technological sophistication. But there was much more going on. There was also a history – a history that went back at least to the time of the Romans, and perhaps much further. The only thing I knew was that the Cryptkeeper was at the center of it; that he was behind Reggie’s murder; and, finally, that it was my job to settle the score. I also knew that Pierce was involved, and not on the good guys’ side, like Cowdry and Slattery, that is if those guys were really who they seemed. These were the incongruous thoughts that prevailed upon me as I made my way from the base of one mesa and across a desert floor to another, where an unknown number of sinister characters were hiding out.

It didn’t take long to close the distance, and my infiltration was aided by a setting sun behind my back, which threw long shadows across the desert floor towards the position of my target. Even though the sun was low by the time I reached the rock wall parallel to the hanger door I chose to hunch and sprint the last 100 yards, to close the distance as quickly as possible. It was a painful posture to maintain, after so many days on the road and with the injuries I had sustained along the way, and my whole body felt like it was throbbing with pain when I finally pressed against the large boulders greeted my final approach.

Soon, I was bathed in dusk and shielded by rock on three sides. But, instead of moving directly along the rock wall, towards the hanger door entrance, I decided to climb a bit higher and see if I could find another ingress or some sign of their security system.

At the last hint of sunset, when the reds on the horizon had gone their deepest purple, I began to hear a rhythmic drumming sound coming from the ground beneath my aching feet. I had paused to take a drink, and was sitting on a piece of fallen rock, well up a dry wash that would eventually lead me up to the top of the mesa. The going was steep, and rocky, but there was smaller scree on either side, not to mention cactus, so it was best to stay atop those larger stones, hopping, but not gracefully like Daniela did. When my seat began to vibrate I assumed that I had entered into a hypnotic or meditative state without my knowing, and consciously took a breath, so as to prolong the experience of flight or transcendence, or whatever the fuck was to happen next, but the sounds were irregular. I was hearing not a humming, as during my meditations, or the sort of perceptual swirl that marked my sessions with Cowdry beneath the Yard, but a decidedly *musical* undertone. Regaining my composure, I crept around the ledge, edging closer to the source of the sound.

A few yards up from where I sat, the conical top of a subterranean ventilation duct emerged from the center of a pile of scree. The dusty metal glowed under my penlight when seen against the muted earth tones of red and green that made up the inclined waterway where the duct emerged from the ground. It was from within that pipe that the sounds – real sounds - were emerging.

I pried off the cone piece easily, stirring up dust, and waited a few moments to listen for alarms or chopper blades or darting lights come to take me away. Nothing. Peering down into the pipe I could just make out the faintest glow artificial light down below. Loath to leave my lucky denim, I hooked my jacket to my belt, alongside my pistol. The gallon of water was left at the surface, but I stuff the sausage in the

jacket pocket opposite the gravestone piece. God knows why I was taking that. Then, I lowered myself into the duct, feet first. Although it tilted slightly, the interior surface was polished, and I knew that, like a playground slide, getting down the hole would be easy, but getting back up might be impossible. Even with my jacket off my back and the holster off my hip, the opening was barely able to swallow my emaciated frame. Relying on the balls of my boots, I inched down the ductwork, towards the sounds that were coming from deep within the unnamed mesa.

The thumping was tribal sounding and well-coordinated. Bass drums and toms, in dense rhythm. Repetitive but no less hypnotic, they seemed to be luring me downward. Due to the slope of the pipe, I soon lost sight of the night sky, and it was at that point that I cursed myself for not replacing the cone top to the duct, knowing that it might give away my position to patrols. Half-heartedly, I attempted a couple tiny jump-steps back up the duct, back towards the surface. Arms at my side, I used my calf muscles to force my entire body upward again. It was slow going and I soon gave up. Without admitting it to myself, I had committed to an alternative exit strategy.

Being unable to access the water jug on the surface scared me as well, but, before I could panic, I came out into something that looked like a storage loft. There was dust all around, atop vintage wooden chairs and vinyl paneling, and there were even a couple lamps pushed up against the wall, all turned off. The music was louder there, and, when I was finally back on flat ground inside the mesa, I could hear voices as well. The voices were deep and finely harmonized, like a well-practiced choir. While the sound of the drumming kept up its frantic pace, the voices seemed to be groaning or chanting in unison.

The tones were demonic. It was as if the choirs of hell had congregated beneath the unnamed mesa, and were harmonizing with Satan himself. I can't think of another way to describe it, and it was a sound I wouldn't wish to hear again. Nevertheless, I made my way towards the sound, seeing no other

way out of the loft, after taking a moment to position an old chair beneath the vent from which I had emerged. Standing on the chair, I could just reach the opening of the duct where I had dropped down. I left the vent cover removed and hanging, but I had serious doubts that I possessed the necessary arm strength, or energy, to lift myself back up into the duct, much less to crawl to the safety of the surface high above. It was only a gesture then, a half-hearted acknowledgement of a possible future and to a life, any life, that might come after this final confrontation with the Cryptkeeper.

A spiral staircase of wrought iron led down from the loft to a balcony set high against the inside side of a carved-out rock chamber. The light was dim there too, but there was enough of it to make the sandstone walls glow red by torchlight. The music took on a bewitching effect as primitive sounds reverberated off uneven surfaces.

I had put my jacket and belt back on, and was able to walk upright for the first time since scurrying down the pipe. Moving about unencumbered, with my enemy unaware, it finally felt as if I had the upper hand. But that confidence was zapped again when I peered out over the balcony that separated the landing from a vast open space at the center of the mesa. It was from there that the noises originated. Deep, churning noises, made up of tom-tom banging accompanied by what was now a sickening, wailing chant.

There were maybe 40 of them, down below, and they were no longer wearing suits, or jumpsuits, or anything that could pass for normal in daily life. They were hooded and wearing robes, bobbing in practiced unison like the sea, some wielding long polls carrying hooks with swaying lanterns. Imagine the irregular pulse of maggots on a circle of rotten meat at the bottom of a trashcan in summer and you'll get an idea of what I was witnessing from above. Since the figures were all cloaked in the same loose black fabric, their shape would fade to nothing in the blind spots between moving torchlight and wall-mounted

sconce. There was another, brighter light at the center of the cavern though, and sitting on a throne there, in the cathedral beneath the mesa, sat the Cryptkeeper himself.

I could see, even from that overhead angle that my quarry was seated well above the ground, and his looming figure cast the longest shadow. Like the roof of the cavern, the chamber floor was almost completely black with the writhing motion of hooded sycophants. It was still unclear from where the drums were sounding, my enemy's long fingers being the only object following the rhythms as they percussed the arm of an ornate chair. I was frozen in place, my hands gripping the railing. It was all I could do to bend down at the knees, and then to hang back beneath the balcony rail. Protected by cobwebbed metalwork, I gazed down upon the congregation. I balanced against a vertical piece of iron fence work at the edge of the overlook. Something was happening down below.

From the shadows, at the far side of the cave, someone was wheeling out a calf. The poor creature was tied to a moving dolly, held in place by the sort of ties you might use to secure luggage in a truck bed or tie a bag of groceries to your bike. It was braying loudly, breaking up the perfect synchrony of the finger drums and the grotesque chanting. The newly syncopated melody seemed to be driving the Cryptkeeper into a frenzy in his throne on at stage center, although I had yet to see any of his sycophants had lift their head to take in the scene. It was only I, looking on from above, who could make out the bizarre behavior of the priest in charge.

There in the center of the cavern, buried in the mesa, the lone figure that dominated my view stood up and then begun twitching and jerking his limbs. His suit danced with the seizure, uncoordinated. When then calf finally reached the alter, all sound ceased instantaneously, as did the Cryptkeeper's erratic movements. The cloaked figures surrounding the alter didn't look up, nor did the sycophant who had wheeled the creature to the center of the cavern. Even the calf itself had ceased its

bleating, frozen in a sort of trance, but from the Cryptkeepers own lamplight I could see an ear tag, which meant the animal had been rustled, most likely from a nearby ranch. I looked on.

“Here ye,” proclaimed the Cryptkeeper, his commanding voice echoed off the cavern walls.

“We are gathered here today to ensure proper exhumation of the host and the furtherance of our mission.”

His human limbs hadn't moved, but, suddenly, there was motion. The man, if it was a man, began to change shape before my eyes. A long tail had emerged from the back of the Cryptkeeper's robe, segmented like an insect's, and the appendage pinned the animal to the chamber floor through the torso. It happened so quick to comprehend. Next, his hands then formed a pincer-like grip and shot out towards the animal. In a split-second the calf's head was severed from its body. Blood shot into the air, bathing the nearest members of the congregation in blood, adding a reflective sheen to flat black cloak fabric that danced beneath the lamplight. The tail retracted beneath the robe in an instant, and Cryptkeeper stood upright. His hands relaxed their death grips and he looked around the chamber, seemingly proud of his handiwork, and calmed.

Then it was time to feast. Hoods were pulled back and pinpoints of yellow eyeshine filled the chamber like a constellation. The congregation crawled forward, on all-fours, like beasts, to partake in the feast. The Cryptkeeper edged backwards, towards his throne, his movements still noticeably spasmodic.

Instinctively, the hand that I had been using to hang from the railing moved towards my holstered pistol, which was pushed up against the ironwork. Left hanging with no support, barrel steel banged against iron rail, and the noise echoed through the chamber. There may have been more to see, of the bloodbath and ritualistic feasting below, but I turned to flee, back to an exit I knew could not save me.

It was only a few steps from the balcony to dust and disarray of upper choir loft. Of course, the chair I had set beneath the ventilation duct was still there, and the duct itself was hanging open, but by that point I was sure I couldn't force my way back up. This was to be the final showdown. No more excuses. On the side of Winter Hill, and later, at the cemetery outside Sonora, the undeniable strangeness of the situation, and the feeling that I had a role therein, succeeded in drawing me back in. There, beneath the mesa, I knew I had no choice. So, I explored the rest of the room, and soon found another door, hewn from solid rock, and lit – at regular distances – by mounted torchlight.

XI.

Before I made my way deeper, there was something else to do. When I reached the chair beneath the vent that was to be my escape route, I sat down for a moment to catch my breath. Then, I took the notebook from my pocket, its edges frayed to the point where it formed an oval shape instead of the rectangle that I had purchased. I flipped to a new page and began composing a letter to my unborn daughter. Somehow, I knew that Daniela would be having a girl:

*My daughter,
I've lived too hard for too long and that's why I am dead. But don't worry – it's not important.
What's important is art: the creative and destructive activity that moves us forward as the
thinking, conscious beings that inhabit this world. Look at paintings and listen to good music.
Write a book and plan the perfect crime. Resist, rebel, and start a revolution. Have a long
conversation in a dim barroom. This is art and these are the things I want for you.*

It was a bare paragraph, but – considering my shaking hands - it took up nearly two pages, side-by-side, and I proceeded to rip out the pages and to fold them carefully before bounding them with the rubber bands that I used to keep the penlight and the pen secured inside the notebook binding. Kneeling down, I stuck the paper in a crack underneath the seat of the chair then stood and brushed the dust off my lucky denim. I moved the chair back into the place where I had found it, alongside the other chairs, not

bothering to close the duct. I checked my pistol. Six buckshots. I exited the room, through the only obvious exit that would take me away from their beastly ceremony, a narrow passageway, lamp lit and barely visible against the wall.

There was no sound. Not from ahead, or from behind where the unholy congregation was undoubtedly still feasting on bovine flesh. Running my hand against the tunnel walls, I could feel smooth undulations, which I assumed were formed from the ocean currents that flowed through this landscape millions of years before. It was a strange thought to think just then, but reassuring, as it represented a time before the Cryptkeeper, if there ever was one. Every hundred yards or so, there was a gaslight, flickering, and I knew that the tunnels were maintained, and, most likely, patrolled.

After perhaps a quarter mile of lateral movement through a rough passageway under the Earth I came out into another, larger chamber. It was smaller than the cathedral-like space where I had seen the Cryptkeeper and his sycophants engage in their demonic ritual, but I could still sense activity nearby. Soon, I saw robed figures were retreating into another tunnel, at the far end of the chamber, but they hadn't altered their pace when I came out behind them, crouched down and moving slowly to take in the scene.

There were more doors on either side of the chamber, made of heavy wood and inlaid with floral ironwork, and, after waiting a minute or so to ensure that no one else was coming, I made my way across the open space and tested both door handles. Both were unlocked. And why wouldn't they be? Surely no one, except the men in black, had been inside the mesa since the Cryptkeeper had set up his base; his church. I was looking for a hiding place for when the inevitable search took place. The clanging pistol would have triggered a search party, unless my enemies were truly blinded by their blood lust.

The door on the left the passageway was more storage, like the choir loft where I had entered the mesa interior – mops, and brooms, and various cleaning supplies; all very standard – but the door to the right of the small chamber was something of an armory. But instead of guns and ammunition, long blades like swords were mounted on all the walls. They were oddly shaped. Angled forward at their center, like the *Kukri* that the Nepalese use to cut through dense brush. Inlaid on the metalwork were strange markings, not dissimilar to the designs that ornamented the NYMZA text that I had discovered in the Widener stacks more than a year before. Raised scorpion motifs. I already had a blade though, and, although my Leatherman knife was only about three inches long, it wouldn't do to sneak around with a full-length sword in my belt, so I left the room without disturbing anything so as not to set off any further alarms. A few minutes after entering the chamber, I left down the open passageway in between the doors, following the path of the monks I had seen in front of me.

The next room of any note that I encountered was a library. It too was off the main passageway, a main passage that seemed to be sloping incrementally downwards, and veering slightly to the right, underneath the mesa. I began to suspect that, if I followed the main line, I would end up at the cathedral's ground. I was in no rush to do so, so I took refuge in what was surely the Cryptkeepers personal library.

The room, such as it was, was resplendent with that characteristic ironwork, which this time made up the framing of the shelves, and there were what looked to be Persian rugs, with similar floral patterns, spaced only a foot or so apart on, bare earth, covering what had to be at least 1000 square feet. It was another roughhewn chamber, judging by the walls and ceiling, but this time the decor was more refined. Softer. Instead of gaslight, like along the corridor, flaming torches were lit. They were spaced out along the wall at close intervals of four or five feet, so one could read the texts contained therein. Each was looked to be made of polished hard handles, iron-tipped, carrying flames that leapt 6 or more

inches before tapering in the draught. I couldn't feel breeze but there were ducts to vent the smoke from the torches that resembled my point of ingress. None were within arm's reach. I was already thinking about how to reposition the shelving to reach them and finally make my escape. Even this close to the source of evil, pistol at ready, felt like a fantasy. Whoever had crafted and maintained this lair was surely impervious to the most brazen direct attack that I could muster. Time to eat.

I was hungry, ravenous even, and the sausage that Aaronson had given me served to change my mood considerably. For a whole five minutes after that humble feast in the Cryptkeeper's library, I believed that I was the one with the advantage; the element of surprise. But looking at the situation objectively, it was hard to see things that way. I was essentially trapped, deep beneath the earth, and the beings that surrounded me were quite comfortable with bloodshed, human and animal alike. I sensed that when I found out about Reggie, and the fact was confirmed when they wheeled in the goat. Unspeakable evil was taking place in the New Mexican desert, and those behind it had tried to kill me at least once before, to ensure that I didn't find out more about their methods. Nourished, I was curious once again. So, rather than rushing back out, or attempting to gain access to the ventilation ducts spaced out above me, I began to look around.

On the shelves were esoteric tomes, Grimoires, and spellbooks, from what I could tell. There were many natural histories as well, arranged by subject, and it reminded me somewhat of Cowdry's personal library, but, unlike the Professor's office beneath the Yard, most these texts were long out of print. Yet there were familiar titles, or at least familiar themes. Darwin was represented, side-by-side with Fulcanelli. Interspersed throughout were religious texts. Aquinas. There seemed to be no differentiation, in whatever filing sub-system was being employed, between the sacred and the profane, and hand-written Christian hymnals sat side-by-side with molded demonologies. Incunabla, vellum-

bound, broke up filigreed bindings of sagging leather made from what had to be human skin. The gas light of the chamber flickered, unjudging, across the vulgar, the filthy, the obscene. I browsed while eating my snack, finally slowing pace and standing upright as I turned a corner into an especially narrow alcove not unlike those one would walk in *The Bindery*. There was dust there, in the space between the books, and I had an idea to buy some time. Perhaps I would even stay the night, there in the devil's library!

The temperature was mild, and necessary oxygen was circulating through ductwork that led out to the surface of the mesa, although it would do me little good to try escape without first regaining my strength. The roof was at least 20 feet, and, even standing tippy-toes atop a bookshelf, it would difficult to brush the surface of the vent with my outstretched fingertips. Since the few ducts there were concentrated in the center of the chamber, at the highest point, there would be nothing to push or pull myself against to aid an escape and the shelving itself was solid hardwood and filled with heavy tomes. Rearranging them as a makeshift ladder would be immensely time consuming, if not impossible.

Other than the door I came in, and the vents, there was no exit. Outside the library, I could just make out robed figures passing by the library entrance. And I could hear their shuffling steps. They would come only as close as the main passageway, which lay outside of the room that housed the collection, but they never came in. Perhaps it was off limits. Yes. I would stay the night, get some rest, and then make my way home in the morning. Surely I had seen enough.

But why were the lamps lit? It was hard not to ponder that question, after I had some time to settle down in between those narrow stacks. If the library was really unused, there was no reason to light it constantly. I soon decided that it wouldn't do to fall asleep right away. Instead, I leaned up against a shelf bearing a row of ancient texts illustrating ancient sea life in the most minute detail. Greek lettering,

mostly, is what the texts were written in, but I only used my pen light for a few seconds. After a short time, I sat down and put my back against the shelf. There were shelves on three sides and the open side pointed towards another, similar arrangement. Back against the shelf, knees up, I began to doze.

From the center of the library, to my left, was where the sound came from that woke me. It was two footsteps and then a dragging sound, quite unlike the furtive footfalls muffled by long cloaks that I had been hearing receding down the passageway all evening.

“You can live forever in timeless slumber,” said the Cryptkeeper from a few feet away.

I recognized that creaking voice from our brief interaction in Widener more than a year before, but the tone seemed to have deepened significantly since then, as had the sound of body movement across the room, seemingly indicating that a much larger person was calling out.

“It’s just a little prick. It doesn’t hurt,” he continued, in a guttural growl, after I failed to answer his first announcement and give my position away.

Was he going to drug me, the Cryptkeeper? What could he be bring with him, as he moved from the doorway to the shelves? In any case, I doubted our encounter would be as painless as he suggested, especially after learning the gruesome details of Reggie’s death from Slattery.

“Come out and let’s discuss the possibilities,” he continued the beckoning, the sound continually deepening as he spoke.

By then, he sounded like an old motorcycle engine, not a man. And the overall effect was a sound like a record slowing down on a turntable. both the tone and the cadence were becoming undeterrably alien. As quality of the voice began to muffle, my thoughts were getting cloudy, even as the hairs on my

arm stood up and adrenaline flooded my system. I decided to make a break for it before he hypnotized me completely and stuck me with whatever implement he was carrying.

Moving from a seated position against the shelf to a low crouch, I peeked around the edge of the shelving that faced towards the center of the room. From that perspective, I could see a shadow across the chamber's uneven ceiling. The flames of the torches didn't quite reach to the other corner of the room, near the entrance, so as to illuminate him completely. That, or his dark attire was sucking up the light somehow. In any case, the tall figure that I recalled from the lending room in Widener appeared at least twice his already substantial height with a head hunched so as not to strike the ceiling as it tapered down towards the entrance wall. The silhouette was still gaunt, as I remembered him, but his movements were shuffling and he somehow was able to see above the shelves. I assumed he was climbing shelves in the corners of the library, to surveil the entire space. Hence, the amazingly long shadows. But there was a terrific banging and scraping as he moved from point to point, as if his lower body was bumping into the stacks either side. It wasn't until he cleared the shelving at the opposite side of the room that I first saw the true form of my enemy.

Ancient scorpion magic - from the Tarantella and his medicine man torture session and god knows what other evil - had changed the Cryptkeeper. After all those centuries, he could no longer maintain his human form. From between two center shelves emerged a figure whose upper body resembled the pale gentlemen I had met the year before. But below his black jacket - the funeral suit - his torso bulged outward, ripping fabric at the belt line. The pant legs frayed even more prominently and, at the ankles, the pants were stretched until they had ripped apart completely. His legs were no longer visible. Instead of legs I could just make out the scaly carapace that arched backwards, tapering to form a long scorpion tail, which touched the ceiling of the rock chamber. That's what had been banging into the

furniture of the library beneath the mesa; the Cryptkeeper had taken on the shape of his venomous spirit animal, the scorpion, the same scurrying creature which had dotted the pages of the NYMZA text.

It must have weighted half a ton or more, the creature patrolling the bookshelves between us. His human head and torso were more or less intact, but his arms, like the legs, were transformed. What were once delicate, manicured hands, ended in pincers now; pincers flaked with calf blood. Insect legs with pointed tips *clack-clak'ed* against the bare stone between carpets. Beneath the mottled, copper-colored plates that made up his lower body, I could count six of those legs with scaled joints moving together with sickening precision, causing the creature to shift and turn effortlessly. It was during that circling, when the Cryptkeeper's attention had shifted away from my side of the library, that I pulled out my pistol.

From that distance of a few yards my buckshot loads wouldn't do much damage to his face or upper body, and I was certain those rounds wouldn't even penetrate his anthropoid lower half, but I took steady aim regardless. If he saw me – if he had at that moment decided to come towards me – I would have opened fire and fired all six rounds in a few short seconds. But it didn't come to that, at least not then. Instead, robed figure appeared from the library entrance and, without crossing the threshold, he began to hiss a status report.

“We found something. How he got in. In the loft, there's an air vent. The latch has marks,” the man-in-black lieutenant spoke quietly but forcefully, as if they were scared to disturb the scorpion creature but knew the report had to be delivered nonetheless. A single scorpion leg clicked out a Morse code of impatience while the robed figure was speaking.

At the end of the update, the Cryptkeeper whipped around and made its way at great speed towards the opening of the library, spiny legs taking on a less coordinated staccato rhythm. He pulled up quickly, and paused before the sycophant, but, before speaking, he spun around again, to survey the

interior of the library one last time. My pistol was still drawn, and aimed, but his gaze didn't stop on me, although he looked briefly in my general direction. While he was scanning, his scorpion tail was moving on its own. First dancing, to some imperceptible rhythm, and then it rose up, to nearly the full height of the ceiling, before plunging a six-inch spike through the front of the head of the figure in a robe.

The force of the tail pinned the servant to the wood on the doorjamb, clear through the back of their skull, and they writhed, briefly, feet kicking a foot or more above the floor. The unwitting messenger's movements soon became jerky, while at the same time the scorpion's tail appeared to be shaking or pulsing, and I had a thought that there was poison being injected. That must be the prick he mentioned. Finally, the robe, with the figure inside, crumpled the floor and moved no longer. It was only then that the Cryptkeeper finally left the library, pulling shut the door behind him with a pincer through the oversized latch.

As it happens, I was right about the rounds in my pistol not being powerful enough to pierce the scorpion man's shell. After snapping out of a daze, and pacing the library for a couple minutes to process what I had just seen, I went out after the Cryptkeeper. Our showdown couldn't be put off any longer. He hadn't gone far. I could still hear the dragging sound from a direction further down the main corridor that I had been tracing since entering the mesa from the vent above the auditorium. And I don't think he could hear me coming. When I was 15 paces behind the creature, I took a shooter's stance and opened fire.

All six rounds connected, to a degree, but the wounds I managed to inflict on his distended tail were disturbingly superficial. Shell-like material had chipped off the creature's carapace and ricocheted against the rock walls of the cave tunnel, but there was little damage. My chosen bulls-eye – the stinger – was left untouched by the spread shot at that distance, which felt close only to me. Damn. The

Cryptkeeper had begun to turn around immediately after the second shot, so I managed to get some buckshot into his more human-like arms and face too. This provoked a reaction. His voice, which had retained its deepened tone from in the library began to growl. The monster was enraged.

I dropped the pistol and went for the only other thing on my person resembling a weapon: the Leatherman multitool. The entire time I was backing up, towards the somewhat larger antechamber outside the library, but, after some struggle turning, the creature before me was much faster in the tunnels and it knew them was what's more. 10 feet. 5 feet. The Cryptkeeper closed the distance in a heartbeat, and soon I could see its eyes, glaring down on me with an unholy shine. Enlarged pupils, pulsing with hate. Only his mouth – twisted into the devil's smile – betrayed any human emotion. The scorpion would take pleasure in killing me as would the remnants of the man - I could see it quite clearly.

Just then I stopped my retreat and stood upright. Trick number one. I stared back at the creature as it reared up. When my attacker was within arm's length - striking distance - I crouched slightly on my back foot and swung the blade hard, like a hook punch, my right hand making a wide arc as the knife turned inwards, towards the still human torso that would have been at least six feet off the ground after the Cryptkeeper's transformation. It felt like a futile effort, but I acted with resolve and without fear.

The stinger, though functional, was trapped behind him in the corridor, but his pincer hands shot out. One arm pushed me up against the roughly hewn wall. The other pincer pinned my outstretched arm to the wall of the cave before it connected, but it caught my denim sleeve instead of the soft flesh of my wrist. Throughout the clash, the creature had been emitting something between a hiss and a growl; a terrifying sound. He didn't cut off my hand, although he could have, but his weight provided enough force for the tips of his pincers to dig into the brittle sandstone and completely isolate

my knife hand against the wall. There was only one thing to do, and I did it fast, just like that time I had caught the granite grave piece, which was still in my pocket. I dropped the knife. Trick number two.

Without the knife, my hand could slip through the pincers, like a Chinese finger trap, and while the blade tumbled against the creature's stuck lower limbs I was in constant motion. Pivoting off my front foot this time, I pushed my body backwards, spun, and was looking over my right shoulder when I finally caught the blade again, very near to the floor. I caught it knife down, but quickly flipped it upwards in my hand without looking, and a moment later all three inches were in the Cryptkeeper's ribs. By some miracle, the tip of the blade managed to breach his scaly armor, though an undimmed force of rage and the hatred was still strong in its eyes. The scorpion creature shot out the other pincer, capturing me at the midsection and, stirring up a cloud of dust. This time, it was my torso pinned to the tunnel wall.

But the jacket held fast. Like as with a suit of armor, I was stuck but not punctured. Although the Cryptkeeper's pincer was large enough to circle my stomach on either side and reach the wall behind me, it wasn't strong or sharp enough to pierce my lucky denim.

There was only one thing left on my person: The granite piece. Reaching around his smooth exoskeleton pincer, I felt around in my jacket pocket for the stone I had recovered in Sonora. The first, best grip I could manage was one that I had never thought about before. It was a squared off end, about the width of my hand and connected to an elongated section of granite that could act like a knife. I pulled it out and plunged it down into the Cryptkeeper's head, the only part of him that still looked human. The stone penetrated his skull just above the brow line and the creature dropped with a thud to the cave floor.

I left the blade handle protruding from the massive, scabbed carcass and stepped over the body, continuing down the hallway without looking back. Trick number three and it was done. My revenge was complete, Reggie was avenged, and all that was left was a descending corridor the lifeless insectoid husk

at my feet. The creature had hissed menacingly until its last breath, from unknown orifices, before deflating completely, bereft of stolen life. And, when it finally died, the Cryptkeeper looked once again like a man. A very old man; much older than he had appeared to me at the Widener circulation desk. He looked then as I imagine a person who had lived for hundreds of years might look. Dry. I stepped over the remains and made my way further down the passageway.

Even without the boss, the Sonora Aero Club was continuing its regular operations. That was obvious when I stepped foot into the next room of any significant dimensions: An archaeological dig site. At the center of this chamber, down the slope of the main passageway from the library, sat a strange machine that looked very much like a seesaw, but measured some 40 feet in length and brushed the equally tall ceilings at either apex of its rocking movement. It rocked, back and forth, with men in black clinging to its wooden surface. But the rocking didn't stop at the floor. The mechanism somehow moved on *through* the broken stone and debris that seemed to litter the ground. It was as if an invisible portal opened up every time the large, wooden contraption encountered the surface, allowing those holding on to move through the ground and into some unknown realm. When they returned, back from beneath the floor, the men in black were clinging desperately to holds with one hand and holding what looked like pieces of fog or miniature clouds with the other.

I looked more closely at the cavern where the activity was taking place and saw that Pierce was directing operations. He was shouting out orders from against the cavern wall.

“C'mon you brutes – grab something. That's our payday, you fools – hold on to them!” he screamed.

Pierce's harried shouts echoed off the cavern interior, lending authority to the Professor's wishes. The congregation that I had seen eating raw calf flesh on the floor above was now harvesting even from beneath the floor of the cave, although their methods were bizarre and the recovered material was unrecognizable. But the rocker device kept on moving, with about five men in black clinging to its top-most extremity. The figures seemed less sure – less in control – than they had acted during the black mass mere hours before or at any time that I had faced them. They seemed to be desperately guarding for their own lives during the retrieval. It appeared to be *ectoplasm* they were plucking from beneath the earth, with each plunge, and I began to suspect that we were directly above a much older cemetery than those I had encountered outside Sonora, and Tucumcari, or even Winter Hill. This was the fuel that Pierce was hollering about down below. This was the source of their power.

The machine creaked forward once again, pushing sycophants beneath the earth. On the next descent, five went into the vortex, and only 4 came out, but all four were grasping ectoplasm; blocs of nebulous matter – like bundled steam – firmly against their robes. They would jump off the rig then, and retreat to a suction device against one wall, very near Pierce, depositing material in the tube before retreating to the rocker and risking another journey into the afterlife. They were harvesting souls, and I edged around the opposite wall, in shadow, to see where that suction device might lead.

I came out – not into the auditorium where I had witnessed the animal sacrifice, as I expected – but behind the hanger door that I had seen from across the desert floor. There were floating aircraft all around me, tethered to the floor of the hanger with the sort of ropes and fasteners that you could easily find in the hardware store or, in the case of some of the older rigs, on the pages of the NYMZA text. But the craft themselves were hardly earthly contrivances. Like the bulbous escape vehicle that had fled from

off of Winter Hill after failing to kill Daniela and I, these objects were completely seamless, and highly reflective, resembling oblong balloons, or cigars wrapped in polished foil. There was no one else in the chamber, but I knew that wouldn't be the case for long, especially after the other men in black had some time to process the sound of my fatal showdown with the Cryptkeeper and to see for themselves the hulking carcass left in the passageway. So, I sought refuge between two identical craft, relatively small, perhaps only large enough to carry a single passenger, if that was in fact their function.

I couldn't find a door to get inside the craft though. I hunched down and caught my breath. Moments later, when the blood stopped pumping in my ears, I could make out a voice in the chamber.

"Find him. Find him immediately!" the voice was screaming, from up the corridor and the direction I had come.

It was Pierce again. Whether from the battle, or in the course of their normal operations, they had come across the creature's body – the body of their master – and it sounded like Pierce was taking charge. It didn't take long before a half-dozen men in black were in the hanger, scanning the space, looking much more like the determined government men that I had come to know them as then the humble worshippers who had kneeled before the Cryptkeeper. The group spread out, to search the chamber, and I became more desperate for a means to escape.

I noticed another whirring, buzzing sound, and wondered if I was slipping into a meditative state as a result of the continuous trauma that had befallen me during the previous days. But when the small craft to my left and right started glowing faintly in the torchlight of the cave, I knew that my only possible means of escape would be by air, like them. The craft seemed to be responding to the combination of my mental state and the granite piece in my pocket, which felt suddenly cold, as if it were made of dry ice. When a kurki-wielding figure advanced to within a few feet of me, like a camera aperture, the exterior

surface of the ship nearest revealed an oval entrance just large enough for me to step through. I glanced up once more, towards the still-closed hanger door, and then dove into the craft, which lay directly between me and the nearest member of the search party. The other robed figures had noticed the behavior of the craft in the interim – the startup - and were making their way across the hall to investigate.

Somehow, I could see outwards from inside the vehicle, although the craft appeared completely opaque from outside. It was like sitting inside a 1-way mirror bubble. I stumbled towards a seat-like protrusion that emerged from the center of the floor of the craft, much like the circular opening had appeared, without warning, against the outside wall. There was literally nowhere else to sit or hold on, as the sides of the craft curved up on all sides from the base of the molded furniture, so the purpose was clear. Nor was any equipment or controls discernable. It was a completely formless interior, with a seat but no obvious controls, and I took great pains to formulate and maintain a thought that it was time to go.

Fortunately, that thought and the stone in my pocket was all it took. I was shot forward, encountering terrific g-forces on my way towards a steel hanger door. The laws of physics still applied, I guess, because I hit the door with a *crunch* but my speed had picked up considerably in the interim. In the few feet from the craft's parking spot to the door, I had managed to reach triple-digits-per-hour and the globular escape pod crashed through the hanger door. At dawn on December 23, just as the sun was breaching the Eastern horizon, I emerged from the unnamed mesa. Pinks and purples in the morning. I couldn't help but marvel at the beauty around me, despite my bruised and bloodied state.

Pierce shot through after me, in the other single-person craft, exactly through the hole I had made in the hanger door, and maintaining his speed by doing so. We raced in tandem across the desert floor, so close to the ground that dust shot out from three sides behind us, like the wake from behind a speed boat. By that point it was obvious: The craft seemed to be responding to my intentions, and I

directed my gaze and my thoughts towards the mesa wall across the valley, to a point from where I had scouted my ingress the day before. How I would slow down didn't seem to matter at that point, but the sheer rock face of the terrain was unavoidable.

Soon a sheer rock wall was looming. I was speaking out loud by that point, shouting really.

“Up, up, UP!” I screamed at myself and the ship, willing the craft to change direction.

Amazingly, it was only Pierce who hit the mesa wall opposite the Cryptkeeper's base. I shot upwards, my ship changing direction at the last moment while suffering no ill effect, protected by the g-forces by the bubble craft technology. Pierce's attempt at movement was much less precise. He skimmed the boulders at the base of the mesa, breaking off chunks of rock the size of basketballs, then beachballs, before he lost control completely, crashing head-on into a jutting slab that he couldn't skirt or destroy. The transparent fuselage of his craft finally cracked, on impact, and something resembling steam – those salvaged phantasms – emerged from his flaming hull before dissipating in the New Mexican sun. I changed direction again, one more time, when I crested the edge of the summit. My speed decreased then, aided by the sight of a homing beacon; the glint of morning sunlight off a set of brass binoculars.

XII.

I had a hard time adjusting to civilian life after being alone out in the desert for all that time. In the weeks that followed my return from New Mexico - after Ma Aaronson had smuggled me back East to safety - I would walk with Daniela to the little free library boxes in and around the neighborhood and drop off or pick up the latest thriller. Anything more strenuous would have been impossible. My documented injuries, all told, included two cracked ribs and a hairline fracture of the ankle. In the week between December 17 and Christmas Eve, 2017, I had traversed nearly 300 miles on foot, I later calculated.

But mostly things were good. The baby was nearly due, which kept our minds occupied, and Slattery came by a couple times. Officially, it was to record my statement, but I don't think he could process the story I was telling him, or perhaps he wanted to see if I slipped up telling it again and again. He had lost control of the investigation, officially, once state lines were crossed, and I managed to get a few "off the record" details out of him as a result. Most curious was his characterization of the hooded figures I had seen beneath the mesa.

"They were all old men; the ones who they finally took into custody. And there weren't many. A dozen maybe, who will ultimately be convicted for a handful of ritualistic missing-persons that have been sitting on the books in San Luis County. And even stranger, all through that tunnel system, corpses – old and new – looked like they had crumpled and died where they stood. Something sucked the life out of them, some more than others." He spoke haltingly, as if he was telling me only to help himself process.

Professor Cowdry came by the apartment once too, just before the baby was born. We sat down together. Him at the kitchen table and me in an armchair; our respective statuses quite reversed. The valet rested atop the table.

"Pierce is back in Cambridge," he began, sounding by his tone as if it was a trivial matter, an aside. He was deliberately trying not to upset me, I think. He was warming me up. I played along, but I was increasingly weary of the faculty at Harvard, friend or foe.

"Have you spoken with him?" I asked, staring at him. He didn't flinch, of course. He had his own tricks.

"I speak to Robert on occasion, but we haven't yet discussed this matter. These...developments. He did look quite shaken up though, and he carried a noticeable limp."

I smiled at the revelation. So, Pierce hadn't gotten out unscathed from our dash across the desert. Guess they better install seatbelts in those things. Nor had he come calling, or *gunning*, after me, which means we were locked into something of a stalemate. A truce. After all, Slattery and the entire BPD Major Crimes unit was following up on leads that had emerged from the slaughter on the mesa. They had unearthed only a handful of bodies, and some – deep in the tunnels – were hundreds of years old, but that was enough to force the local sheriff to yield jurisdiction to the state. The state had strong ties to the feds, and the Boston-based feds are known to be tough motherfuckers. Cowdry continued his explanation while I kept something resembling a smile pasted on my face. My ribs were feeling better already.

“There's more...More that that you should know. I'm sorry for not saying anything before,” his gaze faltered and he looked around the apartment before continuing. There were birth announcements on the fridge, under magnets, and that's what finally held his attention. He sat upright and looked at me again. My smile had disappeared.

“The Sonorans, who you met, were one of the first groups that Pierce and I stumbled upon, back in grad school. Or rather I should say, they stumbled upon us. There were clusters of activity in the Southwest, you see. Radar hits corresponding to missing persons cases that didn't line up with the statistical average, like we discussed. We went in, on the ground, in 1980. To dig.” The recounting seemed to exhaust Professor Cowdry, and it was my turn to offer a drink.

“Beer or whiskey,” I asked. He didn't miss a beat.

“Whiskey.”

He continued speaking.

“This was their second big breakthrough, we would learn. The Sonora group, after their experiments with genetic engineering in the old world, had somehow learned to fly. But that early work

that was still very much grounded in the sort of empirical science that you and I know and can understand. The ascendance of measure and number that we take for granted, at the University, but which were originally the product of mystical visions, imparted to Descartes, and others, in dreams..”

I had lost him, and he noticed. Cowdry took a slug of neat rye and continued.

“But none of that matters. What matters is that they – the man you knew as the Cryptkeeper and his followers – they were centuries ahead of us in their research, but still playing the same game that we play now, at the University and in government laboratories. But now the game has changed, young man. What you saw, beneath the mesa – that derrick-like device is known in some circles a *soul pump*, and it doesn’t operate exclusively in our dimension. That’s new magic, my friend. That’s new types of tricks. Ones that we can’t easily defend against, with our fragile monkey minds.”

I had never heard him speak like this, so candidly, and none of it sounded like particularly good news. A breakaway civilization – or group, as he had called them – light years beyond us, technologically, but now seemed to be reverting back, to primitive ritual. *What the fuck is a soul pump?*, I kept repeating to myself. I began to see the graveyard connection in a new light. It wasn’t their burying grounds; it was their fuel source. I didn’t say anything about these speculations to Cowdry, who was looking around the apartment, before standing up and making his way over to the bookshelf centered against one wall.

It all seemed commonplace to him, I’m sure, but I had told noone the full extent of my observations; my experiences beneath the Earth. All the detective knew was that Reggie’s killers were hiding out in New Mexico and that they were into some fiendish shit. I knew the cops who he alerted would ignore the sort of paranormal ramblings that Cowdry was now relaying. They were looking for bodies – corporeal flesh that could be catalogued and used to build a case. But Cowdry and Pierce knew what was really happening out there.

“He’s dead, the Cryptkeeper,” I spoke.

“I know,” he responded, putting a book back into its place on the shelf and turning to me.

“We had someone under hypnosis late that afternoon, the 23rd, soon after you killed it.”

Neither of us spoke for a few seconds, and I wasn’t about to implicate myself further, but our eye contact betrayed a further understanding. He knew. Through his crazy methods. He knew. That’s when he dropped the bombshell.

“There are other groups,” he stated flatly, finally building up the nerve to come to his point and the real reason for his visiting me at home.

“I thought you should know. That’s why I came by, you see. It’s not worth dwelling on. If they want to, they’ll kill you. But maybe they won’t. At least not right away.”

I thought about the pistol, cleaned and reloaded, in the small safe behind the bed. Then I glanced at the window. The pine boughs were swaying, causing shadows to play against the blinds, but I couldn’t see anything resembling an attack. I guess avenging Reggie wouldn’t be so simple as killing one man. Or beast. Or whatever the Cryptkeeper became in the end. But it was worth it, I thought, with some hesitation, as my gaze finally came to rest on the bassinet that we had out to get ready for baby.

And so our conversation continued, on into the night. Daniela had long since gone to bed when we finally finished the bottle. Cowdry said he was walking home and I didn’t question it. But before he grabbed his metallic attaché from atop the barstool he had dragged over from across the room, he issued a surprising request.

“Talk to Pierce,” he implored me.

“Robert is dying.”

The conversation with Pierce, when it happened, at a psychology department function in the late Spring, wasn't much better than I had anticipated. I finally had gained some small measure of maturity, from everything that had happened, to finally see the eminent Professor for what he was: A very frail human being, and one who had been feasting off death for too long. Indeed, he was by that time quite decrepit, splayed out on a large reclining chair, desperately avoiding the scores of guests circling the open bar or enjoying the sunny cool of the patio, defined in late March by 50-degree days.

Both Daniela and the baby were outside the house taking in the sunshine and mingling with faculty, and grad students, and the odd research subject, the category by which I had secured and invitation, courtesy of Dr. Cowdry. Despite his obviously weakened state, Pierce was furious. Mad as a hornet, in fact, to the point where he began the conversation with a question designed, no doubt, to scare me.

"Have you heard the knocks yet, young man?" he hissed, turning the question into a combination challenge and accusation.

I had in fact been hearing knocks, although no one else had been around when it happened. Daniela had seen things – picture frames and the like – fall from high shelves the year before, when the granite piece I had salvaged from Sonora was still in our apartment, but she hadn't been home when I had heard the knocks. Sharp taps, right against the inside of the drywall, below the showerhead when I was soaking in the bathtub only a week before. I had been gazing at the scars that had accumulated on my legs and arms during my time in New Mexico; pink and jagged, like the sun coming over broken mesa but without the sweet smell of sagebrush to make up for it. The climbs, and the car crash, and my journey inside the caves and tunnels of the Cryptkeeper's lair had left what appeared as permanent sunrise tattoos up and down my body, and I was fully entranced when the knocking had begun.

And no one can tell me otherwise because, you see, *I knocked back*. Not with the same *tap-tap* double sing-song rhythm emanating from behind the wall, but with a single tap, against the lip of the tub, using my index finger. Pierce interrupted my thoughts.

“You know, you really shouldn’t engage with the other side,” he said, softening somewhat, fully aware that he had succeeded in unnerving me, his mortal enemy, and in setting me adrift, which was easy in the weeks and months following my return from the desert. Recovering my composure more quickly than he may have thought possible, I took the opportunity to ask Pierce about something I had seen beneath the mesa. something that bothered me still.

“Why the calf?” I asked, “Why the blood? I get the steam – it powers the ships, right?” not really comprehending how such technology could actually function, but merely speculating, having spent many night replaying my time in those chambers instead of sleeping.

“But why all the blood?” The implication - that I knew about human sacrifices as well – was clear.

“The devil’s work requires the devil’s sustenance,” was all he said, dismissively, as if I would never understand. I didn’t want to understand, and we separated a few minutes later, nothing much resolved, although he didn’t seem to be a threat. Indeed, I didn’t expect he would make it through the winter, as frail as he was by then, after his crash and following the death of his master.

By the time the baby finally came, in April, I was sipping red wine as a palate cleanser and drinking whiskey only on the weekends. There was much to be done. Craigslist had finally paid off and a real case came in. It was in the backcountry, and that was generally where I would like to be. And, after my battle with the Sonora Aero Club, I knew that I could handle it. But there were other things going on that I wasn’t sure I could handle at all.

Pierce's warning about the knocks stuck with me more than his anger or his sharp physical decline. We had been discussing the possibility of buying a house, Daniela and I, to grow the family even more, and I went ahead and suggested we move the search up a year. What I didn't tell her about was the knocks, and I never again knocked back. The rest of it I chalked up to *hypnagogia*, which was a fully functional rationalization when the sun was up. The rest of the time I was quite manic. That old family curse seems like it was all that was left beyond, from the Cryptkeeper. Generations of serotonergic instability filled the space previously spent at Paddy's, where the red wine was barely tolerable.

It was only the baby, and my new case, that kept me from spiraling completely once again. And Daniela. She was a picture, with the baby in tow, both of them traversing a foot of late snowpack as they made their way to the park, or the bakery, or just out to circle the block. I was still weak from my injuries at that point, and got to watch her – really watch her – with the baby. The only other thing I watched with any interest was my back, for the sudden appearance of a knife or bullet hole. Cowdry and Pierce were done with me, for now at least – they had no use for me. But there were other groups, I knew, and Cassie was still in the mix. Pierce's daughter. I didn't see her again until late April, when my sick leave finally ran out. So, in the meantime, we were house hunting; a fine distraction.

We finally found one - a house – and it's a good thing we did, because by then the rental scene was getting to be quite grim in old Cambridge town. More so than usual. And it wasn't just me who thought so. Eyes were downcast, on the street and in the stores. Even at the park, where we took the baby on walks near the new house, feet were dragging noticeably. It was May and winter wouldn't quit. Yet I felt the best that I had in many months, and my new case was shaping up. It was a land dispute, in New Mexico, not too far from where I had encountered the Sonora Aero Club. Certain local residents were concerned about a business – an *inn* – that was operating in a legal grey area. The property could only be

approached only on foot, and the locals had banded together to hire me, after seeing the story of the “Mesa Murders” on the local evening news on the CBS affiliate out of Albuquerque. Of course, I played up my east coast credentials to the max, such as they were, and packed a bag for Spring Break.

Before settling into the house or heading back out on the road for what would be case number three (after Silverstar’s Psychic and Renfro’s murder), I met with Cassie. She wasn’t mad, like her father the Professor, whose physical state was by then far gone. Rather, Cassie sounded hesitant, when we finally spoke, at the circulation desk where everything had started.

“It’s good to see you back in one piece,” she began, sounding sincere, but glancing around to make sure no one else was within earshot. She had something to say.

I was weary, and I didn’t respond. I wanted more from her – a real apology, after the way she set me up on top of Badger Pass after the car crash. She took my silence as a sign to continue speaking.

“You know, I would tag along, when I was a little girl, alongside my father and Dr. Cowdry, when they were still doing fieldwork for the government. On digs. It would be strange to see them together now, but back then they were inseparable. For many years after their grad schooling in New Jersey, they were research partners and good friends, although very little of their work from that time has been declassified. I’ve read some of it, but only in shorthand. In their notes.”

Digs. Again? I thought to myself. Cowdry had mentioned something about this. But why were psychologists doing archaeology for the government? Why were they interested in missing persons? It had to be something related to what Cowdry had told me, about airspace violations – radar pings - in the 70s, when they set up the tracking network. I still hadn’t said anything aloud to Cassie, but she had my attention and she knew it. It was beginning to feel like a confession as she continued.

“That’s where we met him. Well, I saw him first, outside a bar in Arroyo Secco, near Taos, where my dad and Professor Cowdry were celebrating the end of a dig. I still have no idea what they unearthed out there, if anything, but I knew they were happy with the results. So happy, in fact, that I was left to my own devices while they got drunk with the crew. Behind the patio where their core research team sat laughing, I was frantically searching the asphalt for cigarette butts. I was about 14. The man that approached me in the alley behind the cantina appeared as a drifter. Someone down and out, you know. He was wearing dark clothes, tattered, which I thought was unusual for New Mexico, even at that age. But his voice was hypnotic, and he told me things, sweet and beautiful things, and I believed the things he said. The man all in black. I believed him. Strange...I can’t remember the substance of the conversation. But soon after, he went around, back out of the alleyway and in through the front door of the cantina where he took up a seat near a local fixer; a man of questionable morals who subcontracted for the dig team. Soon, the man in black was leading the group, my father’s group. But they were digging deeper by then, and in unusual places, using new techniques.”

Towards the end of the monologue, I drifted off to my own angry place. It was the call on the mesa, when Cassie had set me up, which had me suddenly infuriated. And as she droned on, rationalizing her duplicity, a piece of statuary began to slide towards the edge of the circulation desk. It was only a paperweight, but one of historic significance. Shaped like a pyramid; onyx set atop a walnut base, with a plaque affixed commemorating a long-forgotten Harvard University Librarian. Then, the statue jumped off the checkout desk, as a small-bodied songbird might alight, suddenly, when a house cat comes outside. It moved horizontally, unnaturally, out from the edge of desk, before quickly losing momentum. Before the paperweight could hit the floor, I caught it. Cassie stopped talking. Trick number three. I

wouldn't live forever, but my reflexes weren't bad. Whatever magic had moved the piece was still uncontrollable, but the entire effect was enough to capture and keep someone's attention.

It was the beginning of my shift; the end of hers. I noticed then that She was dressed up in a long dress the color of red clay and excess fabric pooled on the tile around her feet. Her hands were drawn behind her back and her hair was pulled up into a tight bun. She seemed gaunt, but perhaps that was just the months of winter darkness settling into her, like it had with all of us at that latitude. Everyone seemed to respond differently, to the cold and the darkness (mostly the darkness) and I thought nothing of it until she turned to leave, deciding not to continue her story.

I noticed then that her dress was bobbing slightly, in the back, as if something was swaying beneath the fabric. Her hands, which she unclasped to grab her bag on her way out, were rigid, and locked into a pincer-like grasp. Fingers together, curved slightly, opposite her outstretched thumbs, as if she was forcefully holding an invisible can. Her movements on the way out of the circulation room were as timid as any I had ever seen from her, a slow and tedious shuffling, and not the graceful movements of a star athlete with boundless energy. Something was happening to Cassie. She was changing.

But, like her dad, she didn't want a fight. At least not right then, which was good considering my still tenuous mental and physical health. In fact, her entire demeanor was one of humble supplication, once she saw how angrily I had responded to her story, and with my tricks. I wondered, idly, if she had the same killer instinct her father had, or of his former employer: the late Cryptkeeper. She had certainly been in contact with the souls of the restless dead, dredged up from the other world that lay just beyond the surface of our own. Now, she was suffering for it.

The book lending business was slow that night, my first night back, and I took the opportunity to revisit the stacks, which was rejuvenating like always. It was an isolation tank for the mind, just as I had

remembered it. At 2 am sharp, I shut down the computers and hit the main lights. I opted once again for the front entrance to exit the building, so I could stroll the Yard. I was a good half-mile down Mass Ave, thinking of Reggie, when it occurred to me that Daniela and I had since moved. But I didn't turn around right away. Instead, I paused for a moment and considered last call at Paddy's. It was a long moment. Then I did turn, to tread the cobbles back toward the square where a red line train would take me home.

Bouncing between a nightshift job at an Ivy League library and the corner stool at a neighborhood dive, our would-be hero is burned out and hungover.

Then, late one night, the routine is interrupted by a looming man-in-black who requests a bizarre book depicting anachronistic flying machines. Uncharacteristically, our librarian absconds with the manuscript himself, triggering murder.

The story moves quickly, from underground campus laboratories, to the mesa lands of northeastern New Mexico, to a final confrontation with a shapeshifting mastermind whose centuries-long search for power has spawned nightmarish creatures.

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