

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Robert J. Hansen

February 27, 2003

Chapter 1

Beginnings

“I don’t know,” I said as I hopped on the motorcycle. “Maybe I’ll be back someday, eh?” I muttered under my breath as I revved the engine and got on the open road. I was in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I was talking to the city, a city I’d called home for the last seven years. A city where I’d fallen in love, where I’d fallen in lust, where I’d fallen into trouble. It and I had a history between us: I grew up in Montreal, but I really became a man here, in Cambridge.

I was saying goodbye to the last ghosts of my life, leaving my present dead and buried in my past. It felt confusing, trading my suits and ties for biker leather, trading one life for another.

I am twenty–six years of age, and I feel like an old man.

My name is Denis Gericault: I come from one of the wealthy families of Montreal originally, but I haven’t been home in years. I am a graduate of Harvard University and Harvard Law. I have passed the bars of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Maybe someday I can practice law: for now I’m more concerned with staying alive. It’s probably paranoia. I have no social security number. I have never been fingerprinted. I exist in no database in the world. I paid for the Honda Hurricane in cash: I own no credit cards. I am dressed like every biker from every bad movie: nobody

will see me coming or going, because everyone knows bikers travel where the day takes them.

The metal shuriken in my pocket cuts into my thigh. I thought that the stainless steel throwing–star would make me look more vagabondish, more like the rogue I was pretending to be. Instead it just cuts me, cuts my jeans. I can see a dark red blot begin to spread: I stop the motorcycle, pull the shuriken out of my pocket and throw it away from me. The irony of the situation is not lost on me: the only time I throw a throwing–star is to throw it away. Amusing to a metaphysician, magician or practicing theorist, or any other student of the irrationalities of life. It makes me smile.

I lift my hand in the air and the shuriken levitates out of the weeds where it landed. It flies to my hand, a bolt of flashing stainless steel slicing through the air so fast there’s an audible hum. It stops neatly in my hand without giving me so much as a scratch.

I’m not much of a ninja. Nor am I much of a metaphysician.

But my name is Denis Gericault, and I am a magician.

The Order of Hermes is an ancient mystickal society that goes back at least a thousand years, to when mythic beasts still walked the earth and a scholar could learn magick by daring to talk to a dragon. Magick has never died: it’s only gone into hiding. It’s had to: society likes a single, stable mold, and magick threatens that mold. Magicians have been persecuted since time began, hunted down for the powers we wield.

Lately, magician has turned against magician. Science and technology are magicks just like the Hermetic secrets I’ve studied. When the Hermetic magus transmute lead into gold with the Philosophers’ Stone, how is that different from a technologickal mage doing the same with a cyclotron? Magick is alive and well and methodically committing suicide.

Scientists are killing sorcerers. It’s the heart of sorcery, after all: whoever controls the paradigm controls reality. If the Order of Hermes were

to ever gain control, the ancient Gates would open and the High King Oberon might lead the elves back from Underhill, the ancient dragons would perch atop the highest mountains, setting nation against nation for nothing more than a game of dragonchess. The Hermetic paradigm is dangerous but vibrant with life: the scientific (technocratic) paradigm is safe but sterile, devoid of life.

Perhaps a word of explanation is in order. Governments lust after power like an addict after his crank. A monarchy (or dictatorship) is based in the power of one individual: the thrust to democracy came about as governments wanted more power, and discovered the easiest way was to “derive their just powers from the consent of the governed”. Another way they hoard power is to hoard magick: magick is power, even more so than money or politics is. Magicians are threats because we wield power, and governments cannot abide the sharing of power. We are hunted by the government, and our paradigm is under assault by technocrats who are preserving their own powers by selling out to the government.

It’s a damned hard life being a sorcerer, let me tell you. After a while paranoia stops being a sign of mental instability and it becomes a sign of a finely-honed survival instinct.

I was a sophomore at Harvard when Dr. Agrapavandi set me on the road I’m currently on—a road that led to magick and a road that’s leading me to Philadelphia. He was a Hindu mystic who held a doctoral degree in physics. On the final day of class he addressed us for a few moments before the final exam, and I’ll never forget his words. “Remember,” he warned us, “Science is the process of measuring the measurable and discerning the discernible. Science asks the question of ‘how’. Once Science attempts to answer the question of ‘why’, it becomes Theology.”

It was a powerful warning. My family had always been Roman Catholic, and this speech was almost enough to make me go to Confession. But no: my family and I had a falling out long ago and the rift hadn’t healed

enough for me to embrace their God. I began searching for something, what I did not know save that it would tell me when I found it. Kurt Vonnegut wrote that Americans try to assemble a life that makes sense out of things they buy in gift shops: well, this Canadian was trying to assemble a metaphysic that made sense out of things he bought in occult shops. The Tarot, the I Ching, the Tibetan Book of the Dead... all sorts of rubbish. Absolute rubbish. I know this now: I did not know it then.

Then I met Suzanne. She was a clerk at an occult shop I spent many hours browsing in. She had more knowledge of things metaphysical than anyone I had ever known. She spoke of paradigmicity, of the importance of finding something you believe in, finding some shard of Truth in a world that values artifice and lie. She was very amused to find that I, a Harvard student with aspirations of being an attorney, felt the same. "Attorneys don't care about Truth," she'd chide me. "They care about what they can make other people believe is the truth."

It was a test, and maybe a trap. A test to see whether or not I understood, a trap to doom me should I fail the test. I answered it anyway. "I care about the truth," I said. "I want to uncover the truth. But the truth really is what we believe it to be. I want to make others believe in the truth, so that truth may exist, so that it may be found."

Suzanne thought about that answer and nodded in agreement. "Maybe there's a place for you after all," she said. And with that I was introduced to the Hermetic College of the Benendantic Aurora.

The Benendanti were all students of the occult, meeting in private under the tutelage of Cameron Tate. He was a taskmaster who required us all to be conversant in Latin and Attic Greek. We studied the expurgated Crowley texts, ancient tomes, puzzles and riddles galore. The New York Times crossword puzzle was a warm-up for us. After six months of probationary membership I was granted full membership as a Fellow of the College.

CHAPTER 1. BEGINNINGS

About that time Suzanne and I became close, although we did not become involved until much later. She was—is—my complement: ying to my yang, black to my white, hot to my cold. She was, and is, a most remarkable woman. I am in love with her: I have been for the last three years. This morning I visited her home, but she was already gone. I used my key to get inside: the place was bare and desolate, everything already packed up and moved out. I traced my fingers over the door of the refrigerator and a memory leaped out at me like a tiger: she and I making love here in the kitchen, her back pushed up against this very door, her back arching with desire and pleasure, the feel of her body quivering against mine.

It had to have happened when we were young, kinky and experimental as only the young are. We both aged tremendously in the last two months: once we were young, but now we only feel old.

I walked into her bedroom, a bedroom that was as much mine as it was hers. The silk sheets I gave her for her birthday were gone: the teddy that she wore as a birthday present for me was still in her dresser. I had better sense than to touch it, lest memories come crashing down on me. I sat on the bed and put my hand down on the bare mattress: another memory struck me, when she was gravely ill with influenza. I remember how worried I was for her, how much it hurt me to see her writhe with abdominal pains. I remembered holding her as she vomited, I remembered crying into her hair.

I stood up from the bed and the memories stopped. The technical term for what happened is 'sympathetic feedback'. Magick resonates with the people or things involved. When it resonates with the magician, a kind of feedback ensues: sympathy into sympathy, building until it overwhelms the willworker.

Suzanne is an enchantress: a remarkable one. A powerful one, with powerful magicks. Sympathetic feedback is vicious enough when only

one party is a mage: when both are mages, and the emotions involve love and sex, the feedback turns into savage psychological torture.

I availed myself of the bathroom before I embarked on my trip. Her lipstick was left beside the sink: I picked it up and put it in my pocket. I left her home in a hurry. It hurt too much to be there, to be with her in our past, to feel her absence in our presence, to be so unsure of our future. I climbed on my motorcycle, looked backwards, said “I don’t know. . . maybe I’ll be back someday, eh?” and rode off.

I love her. And I miss her.

The open road feels good: Cambridge is behind me. I turn the collar of my leather jacket up against the wind, trying to keep the air from rushing in under my helmet. It’s just me and the road, the road and me. I’m avoiding the interstates: U.S. highway is more my speed right now. Long stretches of open space where I can just ride and think.

Think about what happened.

We had been enlightened to magick eighteen months before. Our studies under Mr. Cameron Tate were going well: as far as human beings go he’s—he was—an utter bastard, but as far as teachers go he was superb. We progressed swiftly, our apprenticeship lasting only twelve months instead of the customary eighteen. The other willworkers of the Order were stunned by our progress, and we reveled in their accolades.

Cameron Tate got on the wrong side of someone powerful, though. When the Men In Black came—nameless government agents from a nameless government agency with an unnamed agenda to remove willworkers from society—Cameron Tate fought bravely and boldly, but in the end he was defeated. None of the Benendanti were there: none of us know how he died. All we know is that he is no more: we all felt his passing. Did he die fighting, killed while demonstrating to the Men the power of the Thrashing Tail of Apep? Was he captured, did he die under torture after telling them our names and addresses? We never did find that out.

He died two months ago, and for the last two months we all lived looking over our shoulder. We were hoping that we could continue to live in the Boston area: just go to ground and hope that the Men would go home with the murder of a Master of Fire and Air in the Order of Hermes to their infamy. Yesterday Suzanne had a hunch—and a willworker’s hunch is more trusted than so-called scientific ‘fact’—that she was being followed. We all decided to split up then.

Suzanne left without saying goodbye. I don’t think I can blame her: I didn’t want to say goodbye, either.

I wear a radio transceiver when I travel. So many people have devoted their lives to technomagick that it’s a shame to completely ignore it. It also helps since I can piggyback my magick on theirs: let them do the gruntwork for me. I’m a good ninety miles west of Cambridge now, putting another mile and a half down every minute. My hand reaches into my pocket and pulls out Suzanne’s lipstick.

How could she leave without saying goodbye?

I don’t even realize I’m doing it until I’m half-done, and by that time it seems like a good idea. I draw the Seal of Solomon on the top of the petrol tank with her lipstick: for a moment it feels like I’m writing with magick solidified. I press my fingers against the Seal as I barrel down the highway at ninety miles an hour. I can feel the magick flowing beneath my fingers, through the Seal, my will manipulating radio signals, piggybacking my message on everything from GPS satellite frequencies to Top-40 FM radio.

“Suzanne,” I whisper. My voice chokes unexpectedly: I was prepared for this, but it’s something you can never be prepared for. Breaking up is hard enough when the relationship is dying: how do you do it when the relationship is vibrant? “Suzanne, I’m headed to Philadelphia,” I murmur. I almost pray that she hears me: I almost pray that she doesn’t.

One prayer is answered and another is denied when my helmet radio crackles a moment later. “I love you,” she whispers back—and then she’s

gone.

I have to stop driving now before I start sobbing and crash at ninety miles an hour. I pull off to the side of the road and fall down over the handlebars, half from exhaustion and half from pain. It seems like I cry for an hour, and then I check my watch and discover that only eight minutes have passed.

Anger rises in me as I wonder which willworker hates me so much that he's willing to inflict the Slow Time on me just to prolong my agony. But the Razor of Logic comes to me through the pain: never attribute to magick what can be explained by simple humanity.

It's simple humanity to inflict the Slow Time on oneself in time of grief.

My name is Denis Gericault. I am the talented apprentice of the master magus, Professor Cameron Tate. I have wrestled lightning bolts and set fire elementals packing. I can telekinetically halt a bullet in mid-flight, kill a man with nothing more than a harsh thought and a Seal to channel my emotion through.

My name is Denis Gericault and I wield power that would guarantee my worship as a deity in any of hundreds of primitive cultures.

My name is Denis Gericault, and I have a broken heart.

Chapter 2

The Science of Magic

The first question most people ask is also the most predictable. What is magic? How do you study it? What are its limits? What are its capabilities? The truth is that nobody really knows the truth; the best anyone can do is to explain by analogy, to illuminate by example.

Think for a moment about the mystery of consciousness. Something as simple as a thought, the basic unit of existence, is so complex as to be forever indecipherable to Science.

Think for a moment about just how much mystery there is in the universe; the entire universe, all umpteen billion cubic light-years of it. I've heard it said that assigning a volume to the universe is analogous to saying how long a circle is; that the universe has no knowable volume, not in any way we can imagine.

If the universe defies our imagination on something as mundane as height times breadth times depth, how much more is there in the universe that defies the imagination of the vast majority who delude themselves into believing that what they perceive is all there is?

The lowest level of magick isn't even magick, not as I now know it to be. The lowest level of magic consists merely of discovering these secret ins and outs of reality, bending one's imagination around unbendable

truths. Why is it that lifting the Chalice of Sanctuary from the fourth vertex of a six-sided inscribed Star will cause a candle placed in the second vertex to be lit, but only if chanting the proper invocation to the Imàtí-Ingàrí? We cannot know, but I assure you, it occurs. My first studies under Cameron Tate were concerned with learning better the “true mold of reality”, becoming a master magician of ninety-nine different arcane rituals, each for a specific task, each one with ninety-nine variations for time of day and phase of moon. It was grueling work to master the almost ten thousand rituals in the space of a single year; by dint of sixteen-hour days and the ever-present imminent wrath of Cameron Tate should we slip in our studies, we achieved what many in the Hermetic Order thought to be impossible.

“Mister Gericault,” Cameron said one day as I was slipping on the traditional white linen robes of the ceremonies. “I think it’s time for you to put this childish play away and enter the world beyond this gossamer fabric you know.” He let me finish my ritual preparations before leading me into the practice-chamber. “Go ahead,” he said, making a broad gesture with his arm. “Sit. Perform the Ritual of Phoebus’ Arrows, if you would. The sixty-fourth variation.”

I gave a mental groan; Phoebus’ Arrows was a notoriously difficult ritual to set up, and performing the sixty-fourth variation required so many candles and incense that the air became noxious. Still, knowing better than to deny Cameron Tate, I underwent the process. First, inscribing the pentacle in India ink upon the marbled ground, then re-inscribing it again and again, seven times in all, until the ink formed a small ridge against the green marble. Then the Monarch Candle, the necessary center of all magic for this ritual, set at the first vertex. And so on, and so on, until three hours later I was kneeling at the third vertex, eyes shut, chanting a benediction to some long-dead god as I lit the Monarch Candle.

I finished the half-hour chant and waited... to discover nothing had

happened. Had I made a mistake somewhere along the line? I opened my eyes in panic to see the Monarch Candle had gone out in mid-ritual. My mouth fell slack; that was not supposed to happen!

Then I saw Cameron Tate standing off in the corner, arms folded, leaning against a wall, a water pistol in one hand. “For all your power, apprentice,” he said, “you were stopped by a lone man with a squirt gun.”

Infuriated, I leaped to my feet, only to sit down cowed once more when Cameron Tate leveled the squirt gun at me; somehow I knew that it would prove to be much more than a mere water pistol if I were to have vented my frustrations upon his person. “You cannot work within the mold, apprentice,” he said finally, putting the squirt gun away. “You must make your own.”

He walked out without explaining what he meant.

I do magic tricks; sleight-of-hand, cardsharpping, all sorts of things. Cameron Tate taught them all to me more as a past-time than anything else; it gave him endless amusement to perform these mundane tricks, and the Benendanti all thought it would be best to remain on Cameron Tate’s good side by learning as well. I’d finally become fairly proficient at the art, and I’d taken to practicing my art in the local hospitals, entertaining children while at the same time honing my skills before an audience.

There was one child, Roy Baldwin, all of thirteen years old and terminally ill with one form of cancer or another—something sarcoma; it had a name as long as my True Name, and almost as unpronounceable. It was Roy who finally taught me what Cameron Tate meant; in hindsight, the price that he paid was too dear for the knowledge I gained.

I first met Roy some three months prior to my encounter with Cameron Tate’s waterpistol; then he was still healthy, although hairless and frail from the chemotherapy. On his good days he’d be able to hold down food, and on those days I’d make sure to do a trick which left a Baby Ruth candy bar underneath his pillow.

As the months went by he grew weaker, until I had to bring him chocolate milkshakes; his body could no longer handle the peanuts in candy bars. Now he was a ghost, with skin so pale it was near translucent; as I entered his hospital room, cards in my hands, I was still stunned at how blazing a smile could come from so frail of a body. “Hello, Dennis,” he murmured weakly; he’d never learned how to pronounce my name in the proper French way, so I let him get by with ‘Dennis’. “Brought me...tricks?” he said, interrupting that short of a sentence for a greedy pull on the oxygen bottle.

I walked over to his bedside IV stand and pulled a neatly folded Baby Ruth wrapper from my pocket. “Something akin to that,” I said, Scotch-taping the wrapper there. If his nutrition could only come from a bottle, it would at least be a bottle labeled with his favorite candy.

We played some card games; I let him win a couple more than he’d really earned, but I didn’t throw any of the games by very much; I had more respect for him than that. After only twenty minutes or so he’d grown too tired to play, so I played some cards for him—magic tricks, not card games.

I left suspecting it would be the last time I’d ever see him alive again. I resolved myself to visiting again before nightfall; he deserved to have someone with him in the last hours.

By the time I returned, just a few hours later, Roy had already gone. I walked up to his room just as they were wheeling his shrouded body out; for a moment I stared at the body, not quite believing that...that anything. My brain knew that he was not far from death; my soul had been in denial of it for the longest time.

As they wheeled the body away something fell from underneath the shroud, a faint piece of white plastic that fluttered to the ground.

A Baby Ruth wrapper, neatly folded.

“Goddamn you, *no!*” I screamed, running out of the hospital as fast

as I could.

Once outside I ran to the almost-deserted parking lot. I kicked in the door on a utility shed and fetched a can of yellow paint and pilfered a paintbrush. In short order I had a yellow hexagram inscribed upon the ground, the absolute basic rudiment of every ritual. I reached into my pocket for the Baby Ruth wrapper and dropped it there in the center.

Had I been bothering to think, I might have noticed that I never picked up the wrapper in the first place.

I stood in the center of the hexagram, arms lifted against the night sky. A thunderstorm was building overhead, winds swirling and lightning visible inside each cloud, casting a ghostly illumination over the entire region. There was an eye to the storm directly overhead, letting in the oddly brilliant argent light of the moon. I could feel every pin-drop of water impacting my face like the sting of a small insect; everything was so present, so real, so now that everything, no matter how small, had an urgency to it.

“By the Silverfish Imperatrix, whose incorrupted eye,” I chanted, using words I’d never spoken before but somehow knowing them past all human knowledge. *“Sees through the charms of doctors and their wives; by Salamander Drake and the powers that are Undine; by those who see with their eyes closed, **I know thee by my black telescope!**”* I screamed up into the night. And yes, I knew my target; I’d locked onto him in the foul black telescope of my rage. It was a perversion of a basic summoning ritual—a perversion? No, a *fulfillment*; I would summon my target because he would not escape me this time. He would not go easy back into his dark night.

This night was mine, and I could feel it flowing through my veins.

Soft hands clasped onto my shoulders and hauled me forcibly from my pentagram; soft hands, academician’s hands, scholar’s hands. Cameron Tate’s hands. He just appeared out of nowhere behind me, without me

being aware of his presence at all.

“What are you doing?!” he demanded, howling out over the wind.

There was a clap of thunder and he appeared.

Death Himself, astride his pale horse.

It was Death who looked over towards us and urged his Deathsteed onwards.

“We are getting out of here!” Tate screamed, hauling me by the arm and trying to pull me away. I resisted as best I could, inscribing the nine mystic sigils of Frannhauser in the air quickly. I harnessed all the anger, all the rage I could and sent it straight towards Death in the most massive levin-bolt I had ever seen, surpassing even the ones Cameron Tate had demonstrated for us in the past.

Death merely pulled his cape in the path of the bolt and it deflected off, striking a nearby Plymouth and detonating it sure as any bomb could. The Deathhorse continued to come my way at a slow trot, Deathshoes clattering sepulchurally upon the tarmac.

The air became fetid and dank in spite of the hideous thunderstorm that surrounded us all. Everything closed in tight; the air felt like the inside of a grave, smelling of soil and rainwater and worms.

My anger turned to stark terror for just a moment, filled with the close and present knowledge of my own mortality. I struggled through it for a moment and found my rage, my anger once more, summoning up all that fury for another levin-bolt, even more powerful than the first, one that Death Himself would have to take notice of—

—and I could get no more than a faint green glow surrounding my fingertips.

I had a great Gift once, oh, yes. But in that heartbeat of terror it vanished, leaving behind only the merest trace.

“Ohgodno, oh God, oh no, ohgodno, *no!*” I screamed pitifully as the Deathhorse continued its slow, unceasing walk towards me. Cameron

Tate slapped the back of my head hard, sending me to the pavement, my face splashing in a puddle.

“Shut up, you mewling child!” he growled. “I’m trying to undo all the mess you’ve created!”

I could only lie there and weep as Cameron Tate stood between me and Death, Death coming closer every moment. Cameron Tate inscribed a mystic sign in the air of such complexity that to this day it boggles me; Death made a simple sign in response and rode through the ornate Ward.

Death is a magus as well, in his own way... and he is more powerful than even Cameron Tate.

This thought lingered in my mind and I was certain it was to be the last thing I ever thought of before Death harvested me personally. Death lifted his scythe up high in the air, beginning a downward sweep towards Cameron Tate, about to cleave him in two.

But Cameron Tate always came through in the clutch.

He cast his hand off towards my hexagram, sending a pilum of green flame a good fifty yards. The flame was so fierce that it vaporized the asphalt as it went along, eradicating the hexagram completely—

—and incinerating the focus which brought all this upon us; a simple piece of plastic food-wraper bearing an innocuous two-word name.

Death vanished in that single heartbeat, his scythe a scant four inches from Cameron Tate’s throat.

The storm cleared seven seconds later.

Cameron Tate and I were there alone, soaked to the bone, an exploded and burning Plymouth nearby and a nine-foot width of asphalt vaporized to a depth of four inches.

“Oh God,” I choked out, “Oh God. I just—I just—”

Cameron didn’t say anything as I lay there in the puddle and whimpered. “I know,” he said after what seems like an eternity, offering me his hand. “I know, brother.”

The first time Cameron Tate shows me any sympathy, any compassion, any mercy, and he does it with three words that hold more compassion than a saint could dream of.

I just lay there in the puddle, whimpering, crying, with the knowledge of great power and the knowledge that great power does not mean not suffering greatly.

Cameron Tate held me there in the puddle, and he waited there with me until dawn.

Chapter 3

Detouring Home

I've taken a detour. I don't know why: maybe I don't want to go to Pennsylvania, or maybe I do want to go to Pennsylvania but I don't want to go there because going there would mean going on with my life. I've been debating that issue with myself for the last six hours: now I am in Schenectady. I've just now arrived, and I feel—

—depressingly the same.

Suzanne is still gone.

For the last six hours I've been trying not to think about that fact, but it keeps on popping up every few minutes. Maybe my mental debate isn't really about whether or not I'm afraid of getting on with my life and starting over: maybe it's just a way to keep from thinking too much about her. If that's what it is, I'm not being too successful.

My thoughts are disjointed, aren't they? Starting from the mere fact that I have taken a detour, I've second-guessed whether I want to move on or not, and I've second-guessed the reasons why I'm second-guessing. I remember one of the first lessons Cameron Tate taught us...

“Mr. Gericault,” he says in his harsh voice, “you have a task to do. A simple, simple task.” He hands me a deck of cards, unopened, still with the factory seal. “You will open this deck

of cards, and then reverse the position of every card in this deck. Are we clear on this?”

“Yes,” I assure him. “Yes, reverse the positions of the cards—but isn’t that a little, well, absurd?”

“Mr. Gericault, you are the student and I am the teacher, and if you wish to learn, you will do as your teacher demands,” he says with a devastating calmness. I’m instantly on edge: Cameron Tate’s temper is legendary. The Benendanti have seen him truly, profoundly angry once, and none of us wish to ever again see the Thrashing Tail of Apep demonstrated. Least of all me. My thoughts drift for only a moment down that path of fear and desperation when he snaps me back. “Mr. Gericault! Are you ignoring me?” he asks, the sneer of vain arrogance in his voice.

“Nossir, I’m not,” I stammer out. “You just said that—that—that you want me to remember that—”

“You fetid piece of head cheese!” he snarls at me. (Cameron Tate always did have a gift for unique invective.) “You were ignoring me, weren’t you? I told you that you are going to be timed, and that your further studies with me will depend on whether or not you pass the test.”

“But—but—I thought that was what the probationary—”

“Are you contradicting me?” he yells in my face from a distance of two inches. When I move my head back, Cameron Tate closes the distance so he’s always two inches away from my nose. “What I say is what goes here: within these four walls, I am your father, I am your priest, *I am your god*. You do not contradict me, *ever!*” he shouts.

“Yes, yes,” I stammer, praying for this to end. “Yes. Timed test. How much time do I have?”

He steps back and looks down at me. “I’m not going to tell you that,” he says simply. “You should have been listening the first time. Now—” he says, looking at his watch and waiting for the second hand to sweep to the twelve o’clock, “—you may begin.” His expression is now calm and serene, completely different from the demeanor he demonstrated. I wish I was as calm.

My hands are sweating as I pick up the box of cards. The laminated cardboard box slips out of my hands and falls under the table: I fall to my hands and knees to pick it up. Once I have it in my hands I stand up, only to conk my head hard against the table. Somehow I crawl out from underneath the table and resume my seat again. I try to score the factory seal, but it won’t permit itself to be torn. In desperation I tear open the top of the box and dump the cards out into my hand. I look at the top card, mentally memorizing its suit and value, then placing it down. The next card is—one more than the first card in value but the same suit—I place it on top of the first card, reversing the order.

The third card—what is this in relation to the first—I get confused. Suits and values swim in my mind and I inadvertently place it underneath the first card, in the proper order instead of reversed.

By the time I’m finished with the deck three minutes have passed: allowing time to get the box open, I have spent three seconds on each card. Sweat has dripped off my brow and formed beads on the hardwood table.

Cameron Tate has an unreadable expression on his face. “That was dismal,” he says.

My heart drops. For six months I’d labored as an appren-

tice to the Benendanti—not even an apprentice to Cameron Tate. I had been accepted as a full member just yesterday, and now I was going to be given the boot?

“You missed the time limit before you had the deck open,” Cameron Tate tells me, his face strangely composed and relaxed. Perhaps even compassionate. “I expected you to.” He reaches into his blazer pocket and pulls out another deck. “It’s a trivial task,” he continues on, “complicated unnecessarily by your enemy.”

“You?” I ask bitterly. Immediately after saying it I realize how insulting I must sound, but most of me doesn’t mind being an ass at this point.

Cameron Tate shakes his head. “No,” he says. “In mathematics they talk about maps—ways of moving from one set to another, ways of translating from one paradigm to another. This is a useful metaphor for life,” he says, his voice strange and reassuring as he turns the unopened deck over in his hands. “We live on a metaphysical map, trying to move from one state to another. To a state of more satisfaction, more contentment, more safety, more happiness. But just as in mathematics, no map is complete: no representation can ever be whole. In the mythic age, cartographers would label unknown parts of their maps with the words, ‘This way be Dragons’. It was a useful warning that you were entering parts unknown, parts that were dangerous for being unknown.”

“You encountered your enemy,” he says after a short pause, continuing on with his train of thought. “And it was you. Now watch,” he says. He presses his thumbnail against the seal on the deck of cards: the seal breaks neatly. He tilts the pack and lets the deck slide out into his hand. “Cards come from

the factory ordered,” he explains. “We all know this: we’ve all bought cards before. So if they come from the factory ordered,” he says, holding the deck in the air, “to reverse the order of cards, you just turn the deck over.”

I stare in amazement as I watch him do this. “How?” I ask. “No, *where?* Where did I go wrong? How could I miss that?”

Cameron Tate sighs. “I frightened you,” he explains, “and you listened to your fear. I doubted you, and you listened to your self-doubts. Beware your fears and self-doubts, apprentice: for these ways be Dragons.”

It took me a good thirty seconds to realize the significance of what he said. “Apprentice?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I failed the test, too, when I was your age. But this is a warning to you, mage-in-training: you must control your fear. You must control your self-doubts. Because if you do not, they shall surely control you.”

All of Cameron Tate’s tests were like that. First he gave you the test, and then he gave you the instruction. He was a bastard. But a gifted teacher.

That lesson comes back to me now as I’m standing outside “Mama Bobbi’s House o’ Food”, a greasy spoon on the outskirts of Schenectady. I turn and look back at my Honda Hurricane: I don’t know how I got here, I certainly don’t remember riding here. Highway hypnosis claims another victim, I suppose. I step into the diner: the stench of sausage grease and fried eggs fills the air.

I walk up to the counter and seat myself, order an orange juice and “Mama Bobbi’s Big Plate o’ Food”. It comes out to me, a heaping plate of grease with meat and eggs and flapjacks. Completely revolting but marginally edible, and God knows I haven’t had anything to eat today.

A woman comes into the diner and sits down next to me. She has dark

brown hair that falls in ringlets to her shoulders, a sunburned face, bandanna tied around her neck and a leather jacket tinted with road dust. Her eyes are hidden behind black Lennon sunglasses. She flashes a smile of perfect, even teeth. She's cute, kind of, I think. She has a nice smile, a pleasing face, a figure that were I in another mood I might find alluring.

But she's not Suzanne.

The thought comes crashing back to me, far too soon for my liking. Dejected, I turn to my food, but hungry as I am I can't get up any enthusiasm for it. I concern myself with moving a link of sausage around on my plate, watching the grease congeal in its wake.

It's truly revolting to think I was going to eat that.

She looks over at me and smiles. "Hi," she says in a soft Southern accent. I find myself wondering where she's from and what she's doing here.

"Hi," I say back, not looking up from the Sausage Grease Olympics.

She has a kind of easygoing charm to her, a friendly charisma that's perfect for getting people to open up. Yeah, right: not me.

"I'm Evelyn," she says, extending her hand to me. I don't take it. "My friends all call me Ev. You from roun' heah?"

I shake my head no.

"Quiet li'l thing, aintcha?" she chuckles. "Well, that's just fine, don't bother me none."

"Look, lady," I say quietly. "I've had a really bad day, I just want to crawl under a rock and die, and would you please not talk to me because I'm really not in the mood?"

She nods understandingly. "That's jus' fine, Denis. Hey, ain't that name s'posed to have two Ns in it?" she asks.

My head jerks up to look at her. "What?" I ask nervously. Anxiously. Scared. Unsaid: *how do you know who I am?*

She touches my wallet on the counter: it's open, my driver's license

visible. “You’re a long way from Montreal. Goin’ home?”

Unsaid: Look, lady. Just leave me be. Leave me alone. “I don’t want to be here.”

She just smiles and leans her head on my shoulder. “Darlin’, believe it or not, this ain’t such a bad place t’ be,” she chuckles before she sits back up again.

Suzanne used to lean her head on my shoulder.

“*Goddammit!* Will you leave me alone, lady? I don’t want to be here! I don’t want to be anywhere, much less sitting here with all the White Trash of Schenectady! This place is hell, it’s like Faulkner and Tennessee Williams and *Deliverance* all rolled into one!” I yell.

The room goes quiet at my outburst.

Nobody speaks.

Nobody even breathes.

She touches my shoulder and says quietly, “Now, Denis, that wasn’t very polite of ya. But I s’pose we can overlook it this time. The important thing is t’ getcha where you need to be. Where’s that?”

“Cambridge,” I whisper, chastened by my outburst. Cambridge, with Suzanne.

“No,” she says. “That’s your past, Denis. It sure as hell ain’t your present, and won’t be your future. Y’ can’t go back to the past. Nobody can. Where were you goin’, now? Honest?”

I sigh. “Philadelphia,” I murmur. I’d never realized I was going there, or that there was any reason to go there. But somehow I realize—somehow, someway, there’s something important there. Like maybe the life I need to start over. Maybe I’m supposed to be there.

She nods. “All right, then. Now you go on out there an’ get on your bike an’ drive to Philadelphia. It was a mistake t’ come here, Denis. You were listenin’ to your doubt, not your faith. You were listenin’ to your fear, not your hope. G’wan. Don’t stick around here with the White Trash

of Schenectady. You don't belong here. Here there be Dragons," she says quietly.

I nod and push my plate away from me: somehow I'm not hungry anymore. I leave a ten-dollar bill on the counter. "What did you say your name was?" I ask quietly, not really knowing what to say, just knowing that I won't say goodbye. Not to anybody: not so soon after I've said goodbye to Suzanne.

There she is again.

Evelyn just smiles at me wanly, then takes off her shades and hands them to me. "A gift," she says. "Just a little somethin' to remember me by." Her eyes are gray, filled with experience—experience wrested from pain. The kind of eyes that say she knows what I'm going through and how much it hurts.

I almost start crying again as I take her sunglasses.

"My name's Evelyn. Evelyn Amy Tarr," she says quietly. "You might run into me sometime when you're riding. Just remember me, okay?"

I nod: it's the only thing I can say. I'm choked up again for the second time in a day. I stagger out the door and sit on the Honda Hurricane. I put on my sunglasses, and think about Ev Tarr.

Evelyn Amy Tarr. Ev A. Tarr.

Avatar.

If one considers what it's like to have a mind divided on a subject—if one considers what it means to have a "worse but wiser" self—then one can come close to apprehending the Avatar. The Avatar is not a separate entity from oneself: it is a separate consciousness from oneself. As Saint Paul wrote in his letters, now we but see through a mirror darkly, but there will come a time when we shall see fully. It is convenient, and perhaps even somewhat accurate, to think of a sorcerer as existing on both sides of the mirror at once. I am a man most mortal, with perceptions most limited and abilities most mild, but at the same time there

CHAPTER 3. DETOURING HOME

is an element of me, my Avatar, which is nigh unto a god. A sorcerer and his (or her) Avatar are separate entities that compose a single, larger whole: much as the Christian religion teaches that man and wife, once joined, become but one flesh, the sorcerer and the Avatar are distinct entities that are simultaneously one entity. Encounters between sorcerer and Avatar are oftentimes purely matters of mind and spirit: many will-workers go through their entire lives without ever meeting their Avatar.

I have met my Avatar, and she is a beautiful Southern belle named Evelyn.

I run back into Mama Bobbi's House o' Food, but Evelyn is already gone. I flag down the waitress and ask where she went off to.

The waitress shrugs disinterestedly. "I don't know," she says. "She said she was going with you."

I walk back out to the Honda Hurricane. I rev up the engine and ride off. South, this time. In the direction of Philadelphia.

Evelyn is riding along with me, somehow, somewhere.

Suzanne is still gone.

But I'm not alone.

And somehow that takes a little of the edge off the pain.

Chapter 4

Speaking the Unknown Tongue

I arrive in Philadelphia at nine twenty-two in the evening. It was the morning of July second when I left Cambridge: now it is the night of July third.

How quaint: I shall be in Philadelphia for the Americans' Independence Day. Being Canadian, I never cared much for American holidays or tradition, least of all Independence Day: the Americans, hotheaded as they are, fought a war to establish their self-sufficiency—and then were almost destroyed in 1812 by the Canadians. (They like to point out that no, it was the British who sacked Washington. . . but Canada was a British holding, and that's where the troops came from.) The most crippling blow ever dealt to the Americans was dealt by the Great White North: how's that for a slap in the face?

Americans don't like to think about that very much. They are proud of the War of American Independence. Perhaps they've never bothered to study Canadian history, how we managed to free ourselves of British rule without firing a shot in anger.

Peacefully.

The Americans are an odd bunch. I've said this for years, and I'll continue to say it for years more. They suffer, direly, from a lack of politi-

cal direction. They are too frequently quick with the saber-rattling and saber-drawing, and they rush in where even fools fear to tread.

A lack of political direction, though, is not the same as a lack of political will. Many people have mistaken one for the other throughout the years, most frequently with stunningly dire results. During the Second World War, Japan's military planners decided that a massive strike on Hawaii would result in America withdrawing from the Pacific, since America did not have the political will to fight.

They discovered quickly how horribly wrong they were. When the Americans have direction—or when some external force presents itself to give the Americans direction—the Americans are like raptors, screaming down from the heavens to descend upon their foes.

The American people are insane. They have cultivated a culture where narcotics are a preferred way to escape the horrors that the narcotics trade brings.

I do not respect the Americans.

I fear them, but I do not respect them.

Especially not after what they did to Cameron Tate.

I'm still on the run: I'm still hiding. I don't know if the Men in Black know who I am, that I'm a willworker, that I even exist. I don't think so: my gut tells me no. I think my Avatar—I want to call her Evelyn, but I don't know if that's her name or not—would have warned me had they been, but the only warning she gave me was about listening to my self-doubts.

Avatar, if you're listening to me, I'm still wrangling with this one.

The best, most logical place to hide, it seems, is Camden. All I have to do is find which direction the city worsens in, and go there. Go into the asphalt canyons, where playgrounds are empty lots paved over, with a single basketball hoop nailed to a wall. Go into the dark places that people—most of all governments—like to pretend don't exist. Go into the places where human life is measured in terms of hits on a crack pipe,

the places where the blossoming flower that is human sexuality becomes perverted into the human racks of meat that pass for prostitutes. When I lived in Montreal I tended to hang out on the wrong side of the tracks a lot, more to embarrass my family than anything else: I never went this far to the wrong side, though.

Once you fall this far, it's all over.

My desire reaches out and touches the radio transceiver in my helmet: it starts to search through frequencies until I find a song that's appropriate to my mood as I enter Camden.

Shriekback's "This Big Hush" crackles to life in my earmike. The dark, moody music echoes through my helmet as I go through the strangely deserted streets. Oddly, there's not a soul to be found out walking the streets tonight: perhaps the inhabitants have more sense than I do. Debris—newspapers, crack vials, fast-food bags, beer bottles—sweeps through the street as the wind blows: it's strangely ominous, suggestive that life is cheap here and I have no business being here.

The omen is probably right.

I drive about a quarter-mile into Camden, mentally debating how safe it is to be here. The answer I keep on coming up with is "it's not, but nobody's going to follow you here". The reason why I keep asking myself the question is because I keep hoping I'll think of somewhere else to hide.

No: that's enough. I will not doubt myself like that. It takes an act of will to stifle these thoughts and think of them no more, but I feel... better for it. More focused.

I pull up at a petrol station to put more fuel in the Honda Hurricane. This station, too, is all but deserted. There's a lone boy, no more than seventeen, working alone inside, hidden behind a thick pane of bullet-resistant acrylic. I step off the bike and put the nozzle in the tank: I squeeze the handle, but nothing comes out.

A crackling burst of static comes on over the loudspeaker, and I hear this scared child tell me that I must pay in advance for the fuel I want.

“But I don’t know how much fuel I want,” I yell up at the loudspeaker. “I just want to fill my tank.” I wait for a response and don’t get one: then it occurs to me that the loudspeaker is probably one-way only. I sigh and walk into the building.

“Do you have an ATM?” I ask the child. He nods nervously and points to a dirty, grungy-looking terminal in the corner of the building. There’s a sign over it that says “WARNING: SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS IN USE”, but the surveillance camera itself is destroyed, hanging off of its mount by a few strands of copper wire.

I walk up to it and pull out my wallet. Not a single ATM card in there, but that’s not much of a problem to a willworker. I pull out my driver’s license and swipe it through the magstripe reader, at least giving the impression of legitimate use. Wouldn’t do for people to see magick, after all.

I stare down at the numbers on the keypad. Cameron Tate’s lessons on numerology come back to me: the Tate revision to the expurgated Crowley numerology theory, in specific. Numbers are sigils of infinite power: he who knows the secret tongue of numbers knows the secret tongue of reality.

The Unknown Tongue has been revealed to me.

I murmur the Unknown Tongue in my mind, willing the language out to meet the ATM terminal, manipulating electrons and data flow with the sigils of numerology. The ATM chirps and whines, then spits a thick wad of twenty-dollar bills at me.

I walk up to the scared youth and slide him forty dollars through the tiny pass-through window. “I’m going to fill it up now,” I tell him, then step outside.

I have no more than screwed the petrol cap back on when I’m mugged.

Amazing: not fifteen minutes in Camden and someone's already pointing a gun to my head. It's a stereotypical Camden resident: black, teenaged, wearing gang colors of some kind. The pistol is a South American copy of a .357 revolver, as evidenced by the "Made in Brazil" stamped on the barrel. Taurus Manufacturing makes it.

It occurs to me that I'm seeing this all with truly remarkable clarity, edges sharper, colors brighter, time slowing down. It lasts for just a moment and then passes, with a dark fear surging in my stomach to replace it.

I am a sorcerer, and my braincase is about to be ventilated by some punk with a cheap knockoff pistol. The irony there has to be seen to be believed. Or, rather, hopefully not seen: I doubt that you particularly want to have a .357 pressed into your cheekbone.

It's obvious what he wants from the way his body is twitching. He's going through the first stages of withdrawal: he wants a fix, and he's willing to kill me to get it. No words are spoken for a long moment as I look up at him without moving my face, and he looks down at me with no expression on his face.

I am nothing to him. I am not even *prey* to him. Prey is what you eat: prey is what you need to kill for survival. His goal is another hit on the crack pipe: I just happen to have the money he needs for it.

At first I'm tempted to just give him the money. But then something cold and rational intercedes, saying "He's already violated the Social Contract by putting a gun to your head: do you trust him to let you live should you establish a new Social Contract with him by giving up your wallet?"

I have to confess, I have a point there. And more than that, something dark and angry is welling up in me. For the last two days I have been hunted down by government agents. I have lost Suzanne. I have lost the chance of ever living in Cambridge again. I have lost the Benendenti. I have lost Cameron Tate.

I am pissed off.

No more than a second has passed since he pressed the gun against my face. It seems like more, but I know it's been less. My hand touches the Seal I drew earlier on top of the petrol tank, the one sketched in Suzanne's lipstick. I lick my lips nervously—no, anxiously—as I feel mystick forces take note of who I am and that I legitimately command them.

“You were born on August thirteenth,” I say quietly to the thing which is threatening my existence. My voice is not fearful, for I am not afraid. He is the one who ought be fearful, for I am his destruction. “That was a Friday. Your mother was in labor for nine hours because you were a breech-birth. Born backwards.”

I can see his eyes grow a little wider at my announcement of his birth. The thing is slow on the uptake. I have been the Sword of Damocles over his head ever since he laid eyes on me, and he is just now realizing the slenderness of the thread.

“Orion wasn't visible in the sky at the hour of your birth,” I go on, my fingers tracing out the Seal. “You hunt people on these streets, child, but the Hunter has nothing to do with you.” I stand up, off the bike, my fingers still touching the lipstick Seal. “You were born under a bad sign, child, Friday-the-thirteenth breech-birth, and you came into this world the wrong way.” I am not whispering now; whispers are louder, and carry less weight. “It is your destiny to have one Very Bad Day in your life, DuShawn Winter.” His eyes are now like dinner platters, his body quivering, as I recite his name. There is power in names. There are names to conjure with. Speak not a child's Christian name before his christening, lest the faeries steal him. There are names of demons and names of angels. I hold DuShawn Winter's name in my hand, and I crush it with each syllable that falls off my tongue. “When this Very Bad Day comes, you will pray God to kill you and deliver you to the Pit, for eternity living in a lake of molten sulfur, being sodomized by the thorn-cocked Håągentĭ,

CHAPTER 4. SPEAKING THE UNKNOWN TONGUE

will be preferable to one more minute of mortal suffering.” A pause, beat beat. DuShawn Winter is trying to speak, trying to pull the trigger, trying to send me to Hell, but he is caught in the grip of a power beyond his comprehension. “Your one gift, DuShawn Winter, is that you may choose when your Very Bad Day comes. Do you wish it to come tonight?”

DuShawn Winter does not answer me. He has already dropped the pistol and is running off into the night, plagued by visions of the Håågentors coming for his corrupted soul.

I climb on my bike and ride off in the other direction, but not before picking up the revolver and stuffing it in my jacket.

Camden can be such a very dangerous place, don't you know.

CHAPTER 4. SPEAKING THE UNKNOWN TONGUE

Chapter 5

Meet the Neighbors

I look around the room I've just rented. It's a stinking cesspool: the walls are bare and stained, tatters of wallpaper still attached in bits and pieces throughout the room, no two shreds matching. The floor is hardwood, half-rotted and of questionable stability. The roof leaks. The windows are broken, and the jagged shards that remain in the windowframes are stained brownish-yellow.

It looks like the Left Armpit of the Abyss.

"I'll take it," I find myself telling the landlady. I turn around and hand her an envelope stuffed with twenty dollar bills. She's an elderly woman, diabetic and of poor hearing, thin and frail but still mentally sharp and determined. "Where's the bedroom?"

She laughs, something surprisingly pure and mirthful for living in a hive of human wreckage. "This is the bedroom, sir," she replies. "An' next room over is the kitchen."

I look briefly through the doorway into the next room: fire has swept through it, charring everything. I turn away quickly: I have no desire to look at more destruction than I have to. This place is nothing like Montreal: there, slumming was... it was actually enjoyable. But not here.

Not without Suzanne.

“I’m mighty sorry about that there fire damage, sir,” she explains in a voice that holds a degree of shame over it. “If I’d have known they was—then I’d—I’d have—well, I suppose I’d have done nothin’ about it, sir. Not much I could have done.” She shrugs, takes my money. “Thank you kindly, Mr. . . .”

“Gericault,” I say. “Denis Gericault.”

She smiles broadly. “Oh, is that where you come from?”

I smile for the first time in several days. It’s nice to remember Montreal from time to time. “Yes, yes, it is.”

She smiles. “I always loved your country,” she says. “I visited there once as a little girl, you know. The River Jordan was so beautiful. And I even fell in love in Tel Aviv.”

I just look at her for a moment, uncomprehending. . . Tel Aviv? She doesn’t notice my confusion. “Anyway, I’ll be leaving you t’ move in. Have a good day, Mr. Jericho.”

Jericho. Gericault.

Ah, what the hell, it’s the best these Americans will ever do. Jericho will work for now.

The first thing that I do, of course, is see about getting this place fixed up. It’s common knowledge that the world is composed of the four Aristotelean elements: fire, air, earth and water. By knowing the elements, how they combine and interact, no end of physical effects are possible. Nothing existing in our world is immune to the interactions of the four elements. The first two elements, Fire and Air, represent the masculine aspects of reality. The latter two elements, Earth and Water, represent the feminine nature of reality.

Socrates did not realize how truthfully he spoke in the Symposium: the ultimate goal of existence is for male and female to meet, to exist in harmony, to counterbalance each other. This apartment is in disharmony and discord: the Furies are imbalanced.

I fetch a Magic Marker and draw a great Seal of Solomon on the floorboards, inscribing Latin inscriptions around it. Latin is used for magery because Latin is a language of infinite subtlety and finesse, both of which are vital to the ebb and flow of magick. I step into the Great Seal and drop matches at each angle of the Seal. My preparations take the better part of thirty minutes: ritual magick is a lengthy process, even for the trivial task of fixing up a room. Ritual offers a degree of protection against the untoward tendency of reality to smack one upside the head, though—so ritual magick is always a wise move if one has the time.

I concentrate and focus. Standing in the center of the Seal, I can feel the magickal energies around me flow through me, a river waiting to be diverted as I see fit. I have become an antenna, an emitter array for magick. I reach out with magick-enhanced senses, seeing where Masculine has run rampant over Feminine, where Fire and Air have overtaken Earth and Water. The matches I have dropped burst into magnesium-flare brilliance as my Will stretches out through the room. But they do not burn out: they do not set the wooden floor afire.

I send forth eddy-currents of feminine magick into the damaged places, strengthening the damaged physical aspect by so doing. My eyes are closed for this: magick works best if one doesn't look at it while it's happening. The sign that I've succeeded comes when I feel the chill hand of Reality grip me, chiding me for meddling in its affairs.

There is doubt in my mind as to the wisdom of interfering with Reality. It seems an awful big entity to mess with for trivial purposes. I fight on through this frigidity nonetheless, though: the Paradox befalls me when I'm in the process of magick, and it ceases when I'm finished with magick. Once this icy saber goes away, leaves my presence all but for a single lingering electric touch in the back of my mind, then it's time to stop diverting the magickal flow. Then it's time to open my eyes.

The room looks as if it's new. The floors are hardwood, polished and

waxed to a fine finish. The windows are so clear that I doubt for a moment that they're even there. The walls have been freshly wallpapered, with some subtle design. Even the kitchen has been remade: the rust and scorch marks have been banished from the appliances, the stains and charring is but a fading memory.

Such is the power of magick. I look at the wall clock: more than an hour has passed. Such is the time-scale of ritual magick, even for when it's something as trivial as the housecleaning trick from Fantasia.

Which is, essentially, what I did. Without the ridiculousness of dancing brooms.

The air is fragrant: the faint smell of rosepetals is in the air. I smile gently to myself, my second smile in a day, over the finesse I'm achieving with my magick. The progress I'm making. Just a year ago this trick would have me resting in bed the rest of the day and fighting off the violent effects of Paradox. But now? Now I only have a long road to go ahead of me, instead of an impossibly long one.

I turn around and see a dozen roses on the counter, a white bouquet with a single red rose in the center. I pick them up hesitantly, not knowing what to expect. There's a card taped to the tissue-paper surrounding them: handwriting in a neat, feminine hand.

Home is where you wear your hat.

I smile. Again. It surprises me. "Buckaroo Banzai," I respond. The handwriting bursts into flames on the card, vanishing without a trace. A moment passes and flames burst out on the card again, this time leaving more neat, feminine handwriting.

Your Welcome Wagon representative is:

Ms. Evelyn Amy Tarr

The card bursts into flames now, consuming itself without heat. Someday Evelyn has to teach me how to do that trick. I'm left holding a bouquet of roses, standing in a recently refurbished apartment.

Yes, I do think that this could be a reasonable home.

I walk into the kitchen and open the fridge: it's stocked with milk, lunchmeats, a loaf of fresh-baked French bread, even a bottle of a good Merlot. A card inside reads, "Compliments of the Welcome Wagon." I smile, grab the loaf of bread and tear myself off a hearty chunk. I search through the cabinets until I find a kettle, and go about making myself some tea.

(The more perceptive among you might wonder, "How is it that this fire-ravaged kitchen had a cabinet full of cooking implements?" The answer is that the best magick inhabits the margins of reality instead of going completely off the page. By working magick that could somehow fit into reality, reality pays considerably less attention to me when I work my craft. It is, of course, at least plausible to believe that there were assorted cooking supplies left by the prior tenant. Was it magick that caused these implements to appear? Absolutely. Can anyone prove it? I certainly hope not.)

I'm about to turn on the stove and put the kettle on when the last remnants of my rapidly-fading magicksenses pick up something—a little bit of something in the periphery of my mind, a silver phosgene swimming across the corner of my magesight.

This stove has been exposed to magick before.

The realization confuses and stuns me: magick is so rare in our modern day that to come across it is Providence. I try to get a whiff of it before my magesight vanishes altogether: I smell the slight charge in the air, see the ley-lines of magickal flux surrounding the stove and carrying the magickal charge.

It's a unique effect, and one I'm not quite certain of. My best guess, the only hunch I have, is that this stove was present for powerful magick: just as a powerful magnet can magnetize nearby objects to match its own polarity, powerful magick can enchant nearby objects to resonate with

its own resonances. My magick strikes a different note, and I'm hearing, seeing, smelling the disharmonic combination of the two magicks.

It is the only explanation I have, which does not diminish the fact that its total bullshit and I know it. Cameron Tate would know the truth, of course, but he's dead and I am all I have.

This explanation will have to do.

Three hours pass: I spend most of it on the telephone, calling around to purchase such knickknacks as a television set, a videocassette recorder, the nonessential home electronics that make life somewhat more enjoyable. I buy a Flag of Israel from the B'nai Brith league, and pass the time waiting for my electronics to arrive by doing embroidery. The Star of David is known within the Hermetic Order as the Seal of Solomon: the larger the Seal, the more raw magickal energy it can focus. By embroidering sigils in the Seal, using thread that matches the flag, the Seal becomes even stronger. I'm in the middle of hanging the flag on the wall when there's a knock at the door.

I look over at my satchel. The .357 that I took from the gang child is still in it, but it's across the room on a couch. Should I take the chance...?

Yes.

"Come in," I say in the friendliest voice I can muster.

The door opens a crack, and a young Hispanic woman's face appears. "Mr. Jericho?" she asks quietly, her voice demonstrating that she's more than just some uneducated street rat.

I don't look over at her, or at least not much. "Come in," I say as I attach the flag to the last bit of doublesided tape. I touch the flag with fingertips, rubbing it firmly against the tape. As I do this, I reach out with my will, focusing through this Grand Seal. My desire touches the flag, the wall: an adhesion forms. This flag will not slip, not fall down.

One part of me finds it ironic. "Here you are," it says, "a sorcerer of the ancient House of Bonisagus of the Order of Hermes, and yet your powers

are limited to household chores.”

While I’m chiding myself, she steps in and looks around. “Wow,” she says softly. “How’d you fix this place up so fast?” she asks, a bit of incredulity in her voice.

I step down from the stepladder and turn around to look at her. Somewhere between seventeen and twenty: dark hair that falls just below her shoulders, held in a ponytail by a rubber band. A gray T-shirt and old, faded bluejeans clothe a figure that many women spend thousands of dollars at the gym trying to emulate. Her jeans are ripped, after the current fashion: but something about the tears tells me that her jeans are torn from work, not fashion. The jeans are cheap Levi’s, and the T-shirt is devoid of designer labels. The true evidence, though, comes from her shoes: canvas All-Stars, white, low-top. Working poor: uninvolved with gangs: trying to make an honest living.

(Cameron Tate taught me how to read clothes. “If the clothes make the man,” he said, “then the clothes define the man: if the clothes define the man, then the clothes tell of the man.”)

I realize I still haven’t answered her question.

“Industrious, I suppose,” I shrug. I extend a hand to her. “Denis Jericho.”

She takes the hand, gives it a firm shake. “Holly Loyola.”

“Like the saint?”

She chuckles. It’s a small chuckle, but definitely not a girlish giggle. “Saint Ignatius? Something like that. Umm—where are you from, Mr. Jericho? You don’t talk like you’re from around here.” Her eyes glance up at the flag. “Israel?”

I grin. “Haifa.” These Americans can’t even tell when someone speaks with a French accent. “Small city, halfway between sea and mountain. It’s called the ‘gateway to the north.’”

She looks a bit perplexed. “Oh. You don’t sound like—well—”

“Have you ever met an Israeli before?”

She has the good sense not to pretend like she has to think it over. “No,” she admits with a shake of her head.

I smile. “Well, some people in Haifa think I talk funny, too. My parents were in the diplomatic corps. I lived in France until I was ten years old. Never lost the accent.”

She smiles back. “Oh.”

There’s a few moments of pause. “Would you like some tea?” I ask abruptly, trying to get something to talk about. “I can put a pot of Earl Grey on without any difficulty.”

Her brow furrows. “Earl . . . what?”

“Earl Grey. It’s a kind of tea.”

She shakes her head no. “Water’s fine. Or Pepsi.”

How appropriate. She’s a member of the Pepsi Generation. For some reason this amuses me as I go into the kitchen. For her, a glass of water. For me, a bottle of Merlot. I hand her the glass, and gesture for her to sit down.

“I really—I’m really impressed with what you’ve done here,” she says, turning around to look at the room. “I wouldn’t have believed. . . .”

I cut her off with a smile. “Seeing is believing.” Disbelief is an adversary to magick. Too much disbelief can cause it to unravel. I must cut off the disbelief before it starts.

“I guess it is,” she says, feeling the fabric of the newly-upholstered couch underneath her. “So why’re you here?”

“Eh?”

She blushes a little bit. “Sorry. Don’t meant to intrude. But . . . well, you aren’t the kind of person I’d expect to find living in Camden.”

I nod. All right, I think: time for a convincing, yet simple, spiel, one that I can remember wholly if someone asks me again in the future. “I attended the University of Haifa,” I say quietly, slowly, making as if it’s

something I don't care to recall, which gives me time to "recall" it. "Political Science. My views were unpopular. After college, I had a choice of going into the military—Israel has mandatory military service—or leaving the country. So I left."

She nods. "Were you pro-Arab or something?"

I have to think quickly. "No," I say. I don't know why, really: only that it's not the answer she's expecting, which might give my answer more verisimilitude. "My views were decidedly neutral. In a country where everyone has fervent convictions, it's dangerous not to share those passions."

She nods. "To be of no church is dangerous."

My head pops up and I look over at her. "Eh?"

She looks a bit startled. "Umm, that's John Milton. *The Lives of the Poets*. Have you ever... read..." she says, the sentence trailing off as she reads my expression. "...I guess not."

Inadvertently, she's given me a solution to my identity crisis. "Exactly. Yes. To be of no church is dangerous. You read Milton?"

She shrugs. "Some. *Paradise Lost*, *Samson Agnostices*, *The Lives of the Poets*. I'm trying to get into school, study English and Journalism."

"Trying to get into where?"

"Anywhere. But—why did you leave?"

I smile in spite of myself. This young woman has good instincts for journalism. Always pursue the story. Then my smile fades as I remember that she's pursuing a story that I'm making up on the fly, and she's intelligent enough to catch me up in inconsistencies.

"I was raised in France, you see. France is an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country. I was a Jew, though—at least that's what my parents were trying to make me. But I was young. Impressionable. Being exposed to the grandeur of Catholicism spoiled me to the simpler life of Judaism." She nods. She doesn't say anything, but I can almost see those mental

gears turning, filing everything to memory. “I grew up more or less agnostic. Was Christ the Messiah? My teachers said yes, my parents said no. This ambiguity led me to a studied disregard of organized religion. I suppose I’m still a Jew, or a failed Catholic. Take your pick.”

She nods.

“France also has a large immigrant population from North Africa. Some of my closest friends were Muslims. When I returned home to Israel, it was a major shock. This land that I was taught to love, to cherish, was embroiled in shortsighted self-righteousness. The Jewish hated the Arabs, the Arabs hated the Jews, and nobody was—nobody was listening to anyone but themselves.”

She interrupts me. “The Jewish hated the Arabs? Why did you say it like that?” she asks.

“Eh?”

“Before you always said Jew and Muslim. Not Jewish and Arab.”

I knew she was going to do it to me. I have to think a mile a minute to keep up with her. “I—don’t think they were Jews or Muslims,” I say, making a bold assertion to buy time. “They had the semblance of it. But they weren’t faithful to the religion. They weren’t Jews, they were Jew-*ish*. They weren’t Muslims, they were Arabs.” I hope she doesn’t grill me more.

She doesn’t, and I continue. “I tried not to take sides in this cultural holocaust. I tried to keep a neutral position, favoring neither Jew nor—” I’m about to say ‘Arab’, but I catch myself in time to say “—Muslim. But like you said, to be of no church is dangerous. All that happened was people on both sides hated me.”

She nods. “So why’d you leave?”

I sigh and shrug. “It was getting harder and harder to stay in the middle. So I left. When I came here, to America, well, what better place to go in America than Philadelphia, the city where the government itself was founded? Philadelphia is the American Jerusalem. But I couldn’t afford

to live in Philadelphia, so I came here.” I look around the room and shrug. “Furnished apartment, cheap rent.”

“High crime.”

“Hey, I lived in the West Bank for five years as part of a settler family. At least you don’t have to worry about suicide bombers filling the sewers with blood.”

She shrugs. “There is that.” She looks around again. “I really like what you’ve done with this place, Mr. Jericho.”

I smile. “Please, call me—” I think for a moment. “Joshua.” A good Hebrew name. *O, merde*: Joshua was the Israelite hero who prevailed at the Battle of Jericho. How stupid of me to have picked that as a name!

Her eyes lock on mine. “I thought you said your name was Denny.”

O, c’est magnifique. I’m even stupider than I gave myself credit for. “Joshua Denis Jericho. My parents had a quirky sense of humor. I was born in France, so they gave me a French name for French-speakers to use. But they also gave me a Hebrew name, since I am, after all, Hebrew.”

“Oh.” She looks around the room again, at the freshly-painted walls, the polished hardwood floor, the way the walls are unscuffed by any bullet holes or knife scars. “I’m surprised Mrs. Lansky was able to get this place cleaned up.”

I smile and don’t say anything. “Say. You wouldn’t know anything about the last tenant, would you?”

She makes a sour face. “Yes. Everyone did.”

“What was so bad about him?” I ask, the smile gone.

“Her. She was a dope dealer. Lots of crack coming out of this place.”

This place, a crack lab? “I thought they used homes for that. Not apartment buildings.”

“Hey, so did I. But she was... I dunno. I never saw anything going into this place, but I saw a lot of really bad shit come out of this place. Nobody looked too close. People who did wound up with accidents. Bad, weird

accidents. One guy got hit by lightning when he was out in a thunderstorm. Another was a total health-and-fitness nut, and keeled over dead from a heart attack. It was weird. Nobody wanted anything t' do with this entire floor."

Oh, no. The magick in the kitchen.

I lick my lips: they've suddenly gone dry. "You wouldn't... umm... know what her name was, would you?"

She shrugs. "Barbie Doll. Leastways, that's what she told me her name was. I came up here once, when she first moved in. Said hi, you know. Being hospitable. When I asked who she was, she just said 'I'm Barbie Doll'. So I figured that was a nickname or something, like everyone around here has."

O, my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

My heart stops beating for a few moments. It starts again, pounding like a jackrabbit on crystal meth. I try to cover it. "Oh. Okay." I stand up. "Sorry to have to boot you out, Holly, but I've still got plenty to do."

She nods, stands, smiles at me. "Sure. If you want t' talk, I live on the fifteenth floor with my family. Take care of yourself, Josh."

She leaves, and I collapse into the couch.

When Holly asked what her name was, she didn't say "I'm Barbie Doll". She said, "I'm *barabbi*, doll."

Chapter 6

The Stormmaiden

Most myths surrounding sorcerers are just that. Myth, conjured up by ignorant peasants who came up with their own explanations for how will-workers practiced their craft. Contrary to rumour (and Mercedes Lackey books), magick can withstand Cold Iron with ease. Mages rely more on their intellect than their sorcery. And there are forces which even wizards—sane ones, at least—dare not tamper with.

Unfortunately, the myths are dead-on accurate when they speak of Infernal pacts and dark alliances. It's a perversion of magick, but one which has a certain seductiveness to it. The Great Paradox is a philosophical question: in the process of giving to reality, does a magus receive a greater share? In the process of stealing from reality, does it require a magus to give up a greater share? None have a definitive answer to the question: it is an article of faith, shared universally among all magi, that by giving we receive and by stealing we sacrifice.

It is shared universally among all magi. Save, of course, those who do not accept it. These are the Nephandus, corrupt sorcerers who work corrupt sorcery in opposition to the Great Paradox. Sorcerers who have bartered their souls to Dark Forces in exchange for *carte blanche* to rape reality, as they see fit. They are the self-styled Incarnations of Evil. Their

rationale for serving Entropy makes sense only to their twisted minds: none can hope to understand them, who is not one of them.

There is a specific term used for one of us (one who believes in the Great Paradox) who ‘converts’ to the other side. That word is *barabbi*.

A *barabbi* was here, in my flat, the prior occupant before me.

And I thought my life sucked when it was just the Men In Black who were after me.

I settle down in the couch that Holly just vacated, occasionally nursing the bottle of Merlot as I sit and ponder my fate. I want to run: I should run, I know this. I am but a minor apprentice to the late Cameron Tate. Oh, my apprenticeship has been over for a good year, yes. I am a sorcerer. But I am the student, the pupil, the apprentice of the late Cameron Tate.

The late Cameron Tate, who still bore on his body scars from an encounter with a *barabbi* years ago.

There’s a knock at the door and I jump back to alertness with a start. I reach out my hand, and the pistol across the room leaps into my hand. I conceal it under a throw pillow. “Come in,” I say in a voice filled with false bravado.

The door opens to reveal an employee of Schneider’s TV and Radio, here with my equipment. My finger convulses on the trigger instinctively, so tightly-wound am I. The gun almost goes off. “Wouldn’t that be amusing?” my worse-but-wiser self chuckles. “Less than a day in Camden, and you already a murderer?”

No, I tell that fickle part of me: I didn’t shoot, the gun didn’t go off, nobody died.

My worse self shrugs. “Dame Fortune’s a fickle bitch, ain’t she?”

The TV-and-radio deliveryman has been gone for an hour now. I’m slightly sloshed from Merlot. Looking at the massive-frame pistol gleaming in my hand, I can see my reflection distorted in the curves of stainless steel, the fluting of the cylinder, the roundness of the barrel.

“Sometimes,” I can remember hearing myself say a long time ago, “life seems like too much effort, until you consider the alternative.”

I was a fool then. If death was the worst thing I could think of then, I’m ashamed of how poor my imagination was. Losing Suzanne. Losing Cameron Tate. Losing the Benendenti. Losing Cambridge. Moving to Camden, the most wretched hive of malcontents in existence. What was it that I had told myself upon entering Camden? “Once you fall this far, it’s all over”?

I have fallen this far.

It’s all over.

Life. It’s a fate worse than death.

I’m holding a .357 hollowpoint in my hand, rolling it around and feeling the weight when there’s another knock at the door. “Come in,” I say, still feeling the heft and weight of the bullet in my palm. It’s strangely reassuring to have the method of your death in your hand: to know that at any time it can be ended, the pain, the loneliness, the desperation.

I wonder if Suzanne is feeling the same way right now.

Evelyn, where are you? Why have you walked away from me?

I need you.

The door opens. I don’t look up as someone enters. “Howdy.” It’s a woman’s voice. I look up, into a vision of harsh beauty. Beautiful in the same way a samurai sword is beautiful, something of grace and precision and temper and lethality. Raven–dark hair pulled back into a braid, eyes like dusty jade. A smattering of freckles, a body to die for.

“Howdy.”

“You’re the new tenant?”

I nod, somberly. She’s seen the pistol, of course. Doesn’t seem surprised by it. I doubt anyone in Camden would be. “Yeah.”

She nods. “I’m Lora. Pleased, for sure.” She sits down opposite me, in a chair poised on the other side of the coffeetable from my couch. “Hav-

ing a rough day?”

I shrug and drop the bullet in the cylinder, then swing the cylinder shut. “Could say that.” Pause. I know who this woman is. I should’ve known already. “So where’d you go wrong?”

She smiles, something friendly and guileless. “What do you mean?”

I shrug. “Someone like you must have a good reason to be peddling dope. What’s your story?” I ask, waving the barrel of the gun as I ask. She’s not frightened of me: she shouldn’t be. She’s a sorceress, after all, and I am but a rank apprentice to a dead master.

She settles back into her chair. “Oh. That,” she says. “I could say it’s a tragic tale of woe for which I deserve only pity and solidarity, but—let’s be honest. It’s a tale of personal triumph over colossal forces of my own stupidity.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Eh?”

Her smile is genuine. Not saccharin, not deceptive. Honest. Honest, I have to remember, for a barabbi. “You’re going to die anyway, so there’s no reason to not tell you. Let’s be frank. We both know what each other are. So I’ll skip the bullshit, and give you credit for being an intelligent, rational human being.”

I say nothing.

“I grew up on a small town about ten miles away from a Navajo reservation. No need telling you where: the place doesn’t exist now anyway.” She pauses, reflecting for a moment. “I destroyed the place during my Becoming.” She doesn’t explain the term, but goes on with her story. “I was always entranced by Amerind spirituality. That kind of shit fascinated me. Communing with spirits, the Great Spirit, all that. I believed in it. Still do. I just believe in more now. Then I went off to college. Penn State. Biggest thing I’d ever done before that was some peyote buttons in ritual ceremony. Some hashish for big summonings. Penny-ante shit.”

I nod. “And you got mixed up with drugs.” It’s a statement, not a ques-

tion.

She laughs, something clear and beautiful and pure. “Oh, love, no. I mixed other people up with drugs.” She goes somber for a moment. “Ritual reasons. I had my own students, my own apprentices.”

I had my own students rings in my ears like a siren. She knows enough to teach. She’s out of my league, by—by orders of magnitude.

“We started doing peyote, en masse, for ritual shit. Summonings, spirits. Then we uncovered the power of sex. Sex is wonderful. Great way to contact Euphoria and Pain. Pain could do more than Euphoria could, though. Euphoria just makes people loopy. Pain is a motivator: a motivator gets things done. The way I saw it, the way I see it, Mother Nature doesn’t use backrubs and blowjobs to get us to do things her way. She smites us, hard, if we don’t. If Pain’s good enough for Nature, it’s good enough for me.”

My God, this woman is completely insane.

“Pain got a little finicky. And I didn’t have enough power to get the last little bit of juice from him. Then it occurred to me, pow, bolt from the blue. If I make Pain starve, if I make Pain feel pain, then he’ll be more ‘agreeable’ to me.”

I nod, slowly getting the hang of this. “So you went back to backrubs and blowjobs.”

She laughs and touches my forearm intimately. “Oh, dearest, no. You’ve heard it said that life is pain, right?”

We are born broken, and by living we are healed. That’s an axiom of Lifeways.

“Well—if Pain was so dependent on the lives of my students, then all I had to do was deprive him of those lives. So I killed them, all of them. With pleasure.” She giggles slightly, like a schoolgirl, at the recollection. “Not just sexual, either. I mean—well, for what I get out of it, which is power, I don’t give a shit if it’s male, female or other, you know? Power,

naked and raw power, is no respecter of gender. But one of my female apprentices wasn't quite so easygoing there. So I had to come up with another way. Well... I found one. She died happy. Poof. Life is pain, and the absence of life makes Pain starve. So after a while, Pain decided to do things my way. And then he and I made an agreement. I give him magickal souls, and he gives me—" She smiles. "Power. Power is the biggest aphrodisiac there is. Given me a perpetual horniness. Which doesn't bother me too much, love, because sex can be Pain easily enough. And then I figured out how to make it even better."

I don't say anything. Every time I've guessed something so far, it's been wrong.

"Drugs."

I was going to guess that, you know.

She doesn't notice the look of me second-guessing myself. She continues on. "I'd done enough dope to know the effect it can have on sex. But if you want pain, you go to the hard shit. Watch people beg for crank. See the crack zombies on the street, see the heroin sluts selling themselves for ten bucks' worth. I mean—well, shit. That's pain for you. And with the stuff I put out, the stuff I make special for Pain... Pain gets to eat the magickal soul of whoever takes my shit."

She has made a pact with an Infernal Power. To feed him Avatars by the tens of thousands. Avatars who never woke up from their slumber. Avatars who never had the chance to enlighten their corporeal partners, the chance to awaken. Her Demon Lord, Pain, eats Avatars by the tens of thousands.

And she's deluded herself into believing that it serves her?

She looks around the room. "Like what you've done with the room. Not bad for an amateur." She looks back at me, locks gazes with me. Somehow, on a feral, animalistic level, I can't break it off. "Pain or pleasure?" she asks. "You're going to die. You should at least have a say in

how.”

Don't listen to a word she says she's a barabb for Chrissake! my worse-but-wiser self screams. But the person that it screams at is no longer there. No longer listening.

She continues on, a voice of honey and smoke. “As a last gift to you. Come on. You're not like everyone else. You actually know what it's like. Don't you?”

From Suzanne, I knew pleasure.

From Suzanne, I now know pain.

“Yes,” I say weakly. “Yes.”

She nods. “Then go out in style. On sex and speedball,” she says, placing a single syringe in front of me on the table. “Pure pleasure. You'll be gone before you know it. Your Avatar wiped from existence.”

Evelyn has abandoned me.

The syringe has a fearfully long needle, and it glows like the metal on the edge of a knife.

She stands up and walks over to the Seal of Solomon hanging on my wall. “Cute,” she says with a solemn voice. She snaps her fingers and the Seal begins to burn. The focus of my magick is gone.

I am alone.

She walks back over to her chair and sits down as my flag burns itself to a cinder. She sits there and watches it with me for a while. Then, wordlessly, she pushes the coffee table out of the way and crawls into my lap.

All I can do is lean back and close my eyes. It's been so long since I've been held. Since someone has understood my pain, shared it. Since someone has placed their lips on mine, the faintest soft brushing kiss that seems like it lasts forever when it's only for the briefest of seconds. A kiss that moves down to the hollow at the base of my neck, fingers that move lightly over my chest, arms wrapping around my waist, hands join-

ing back there.

It's the hurt that makes us all human, I suppose.

It's the hurt that gives us all the obligation to console one another, I suppose.

Death and Gilgul, the destruction of one's Avatar: somehow it's a consolation to the pains of life. I can feel her face against my stomach, fingers on my belt.

I think of the life I've had. The happier moments. Something appropriate to go out on.

The first time I got drunk.

Entering Harvard.

Dr. Agrapavandi's Physics course.

Suzanne—but not too long on her, lest the pain return.

The rest of the Benendenti.

Getting Cameron Tate addicted to cartoons.

I chuckle at that last one. Cameron Tate felt that radio was a toy for barbarians and Visigoths, with television one step beneath that. His idea of "modern fiction" was H.G. Wells. *The Time Machine* was his favorite. He said that he knew H.G. Wells, but none of us believed him. But Theo, our self-described "Scott Weiland wannabe" (he said later that Weiland was a "grunge rock star") and lover of Japanese cartoons, got Cameron Tate hooked.

She has my belt undone, and I can feel her fingers undoing my fly, her face pressed against my trousers as she works her magic.

What was it? Oh, yes. Theo was watching some bizarre science-fiction show with giant robots in space. Theo was singing along in English with the ludicrous Japanese technopop theme song when Cameron Tate walked through. When Cameron Tate heard one particular line that our own Scott Weiland wannabe was singing, he stopped dead in his tracks and looked at Theo as if he had just discovered an authentic manuscript of

Tobin's Spirit Guide with the complete footnotes.

I can feel her hiking my trousers down.

What was that line? Oh, yes. I can't help but chuckle at how Cameron Tate responded. He looked at Theo as if he'd just stumbled, by complete accident, on an Underpinning of True Magick. The verse was, "If a man knows that he will die today, his only hope is to dream of tomorrow."

Dreaming of tomorrow.

His only hope is to dream of tomorrow. . .

My only hope is to dream of tomorrow.

My hope.

Suzanne. Theo. Cameron Tate. They are my yesterday: they aren't my tomorrow. Of course life is hopeless, if I live my life forever in yesterday.

It's only tomorrow that is worth living for.

Tomorrow!

Suzanne, Theo and Cameron Tate are not my hopes. Hope is what has not yet been received, but is nevertheless believed to be coming. I received my gifts: and now they are gone. They are not hopes. They were once. But now I have new hopes.

Hopes of tomorrow.

I don't know what my hopes of tomorrow are for. But tomorrow is something worth hoping about.

I snap back to alertness like a lightning-bolt has gone through my body. I throw Lora to the floor and stand up, taking the time to hike up my trousers and button my trousers. Modesty, modesty. She looks at me like a wounded deer, but somehow I can't hear her words. All I can hear is the blood pounding in my ears as I lift the .357, line it up on her forehead, and pull the trigger.

My blood is pounding so loud that I can't even hear the gunshot. I can hear the wind howl through my room, though, buffeting me back against the wall. The bullet has been stopped in mid-flight, held up by a

screaming nexus of wind which I know can only be an air elemental.

A powerful one, to be able to do that.

Lora stands and screams at me over the roaring of the winds. I can't hear very much, only scattered words and phrases. But it's very easy to fill in the blanks. "You bastard! What do you want, mercy? Justice? Fairness? The world's not—!" She's ranting. Raving.

She is Lora, and she is completely insane.

"You're fucking nuts, lady!" I scream back.

She makes a gesture and the air elemental sends the bullet flying, plowing through my shoulder. The pain is excruciating and my left arm goes limp: the bullet has fractured my scapula as it has exited my back. I scream, and collapse to my knees. Suddenly, the storm in my room subsides, leaving only an eerie silence. She picks up the .357, and walks over to where I lie collapsed.

She puts the gun to my temple. "You should have taken me up on my offer," she says simply. Her voice, once sweet and intimate, has become cold. Harsh. Embittered. She thumbs the hammer back. "You pathetic rank fucking apprentice," she says, a spray of saliva spattering my hair. "You think you're some hot shit, you and your Great Paradox? It's shit! I tried to show you this, I tried to open your fucking eyes, and this is what you do? Try to fucking kill me?"

Hey, up until ten minutes ago you were the one trying to kill me, hell-bitch. I have better sense than to speak aloud my thoughts.

She has burned my Great Seal. But didn't I sketch another one on the floor, in Magic Marker? I begin to crawl towards the center of the room, but she stamps her foot on my broken collarbone and I take a break from my crawling in order to scream in agony. Somewhere in the back of my mind I realize that my agony is feeding Pain, her demon lord, the Eater of Avatars.

I don't like being an hors d'oeuvre!

She has the gun at the base of my skull. The pistol is at full cock. The same pistol that a gangbanger almost killed me with not twenty-four hours ago is currently being used by a barabbi to kill me.

I wonder if it's cursed. Or if what they say is true, and you really are more likely to be killed by your own gun than saved by it.

"Your magick's gone, Little Hermes," she taunts. "No Seal, no solution." She mocks the maxim all Hermetic students learn, that 'a Grand Seal is the first step to a Grand Solution'.

"No remorse, no retribution," I gasp.

She stops dead in her tracks. "What?"

I laugh. It's all I can do. The Devil cannot stand to be laughed at, Martin Luther said. I'm betting that it applies to Infernalists, too. And besides—"You're such a *fool*." And I laugh, and I laugh because it's all I can do.

If I laugh, I deny Pain his victory.

If I laugh, I give Euphoria a breather.

And besides. It feels better to laugh than to be engulfed by the pain of my shattered shoulderblade.

She's wrong, incidentally. Wrong about the Seal. I have something better than a Seal, something better than a Grand Seal, something better than the Great Seal of the Hermetic Order which is housed off in the distant realm of Horizon. I have hope again.

I have hope that I will endure.

I have hope that I will prevail.

I have hope that my Will will prevail, with or without a Seal.

With that single revelation, the Revelation of Hope, my present and future are both irrevocably changed. For a crystalline moment I see through the mirror fully and the Benendantic Mysteries coalesce into a single interlocking whole, the entire cosmos cradled tenderly in the lover's-arms of Hermetic thought. The Thrashing Tail of Apep is within my cognition,

the Frozen Gates of the Ninth Hell unlocked before my very Will. It lasts for an hour or an eyeblink, I know not which, before the angel passes and the mirror darkens once more. The Thrashing Tail is the last Mystery to be obscured: instead of hurriedly unleashing it upon the world, I let it go with a friendly wave, secure in the knowledge that I will unlock its myriad puzzles one day.

I do not need the Thrashing Tail or the Frozen Gates to defeat Lora. I do not need to mold myself in the image of Cameron Tate, that blessed old codger who taught me everything I will ever know about magick.

I have my sorcery; I have my hope; I have my Will.

It is ten thousand times enough.

I stretch out tendrils of masculine magick. “Know something kind of funny about magickal paradigma?” I ask her. Stalling.

She takes the bait, the gun still at the base of my skull. “What?”

“Hermetic fire elementals get along well with technologickal elementals.”

I can hear concern in her voice. “What are you talking about, Little Hermes?”

I smile a feral grin of imminent victory. “Why, is that natural gas I smell?”

A flash of red, white, yellow, orange, all the colors of flame washes over my eyes, yet I am not burned. To her credit, nor is she.

We are forcibly blown out the eighteenth floor of the tenement, though. I panic, and try to convince Gravity that my proper place belongs in the Sphere of Air as opposed to the Sphere of Lead. (Gravity is not entirely convinced: I still fall to Earth, but not as hard as I otherwise would have.) I can hear Lora calling out to the Origin of Storms for deliverance upon the winds, but the Origin seems to think she’s been asking too many favors as of late. She, too, hits ground—a little harder than I do. But not much.

We lie there on the sidewalk, bleeding profusely, half the bones in our bodies cracked and broken. It takes all the willpower I have just to crawl over to her body and check her pulse. Alive. A strong pulse in spite of it all, steady respiration. But quite unconscious.

I reach my hand out to the side, conjuring up some kind of weapon suitable for ending this with. A feminine hand clasps mine, and when I look over at my side I see Evelyn. She hands me the syringe from upstairs. The one Lora tried to make me kill Evelyn with.

“Revenge for my brothers,” Evelyn says with a degree of hatred that chills me to the bone. Revenge. And she is right.

I roll Lora over onto her stomach, then jab the syringe into her perfectly-formed hip. My magesenses can hear some great Dark Power laughing in the remote distance as Lora’s own corrupted Avatar is fed to the voracious Eater.

Lora is an enchantress no more, nor will she ever be. When she wakes up, she will find herself devoid of everything she once valued.

“Kill her,” Evelyn says. “Kill her like she tried to kill you.”

I shake my head no. Using reserves of character that I didn’t know I had, I pull myself to my feet. Evelyn catches me before I can fall again.

“Come on,” she says. “Let’s get someplace private.”

I don’t remember where she took me, only that we traveled by magick of the most exquisite sort: a cloud-chariot across the heavens, pulled by the Apollo’s own horses. Adrift in that clear blue expanse of sky, hidden in a cloudbank from prying eyes, Evelyn lies me down upon the floor of the cloud-carriage and sets about ministering to my wounds. Her touch is gentle, delicate, fine: I can feel magick of a subtle flavor flow into me, mending broken bone and sinew.

“I was so scared,” she says after a long moment, delicate fingers setting my bones without pain. “I was so scared of losing you. You weren’t alone, you know.”

I nod. "I know."

"I'm not going to leave you. Or abandon you."

I nod.

A long silence ensues. "I'm sorry about Suzanne, Denis," she says simply, lying down beside me and looking me in the eyes. "I don't want you to hurt."

I nod. "I know, Evelyn. I know."

"Do you?"

I smile and use my one good (well—better) arm to pull out a pair of sunglasses. Now broken and shattered, they only bear a superficial resemblance to what they once were. "You gave me your sunglasses," I say. "It must be love."

She laughs, something pure, something fun, something enjoyable—something exactly like Lora's laugh, but with one additional trait: something *real*. She moves in closer to me, not in a manner like a lover but rather like an intimate friend. Someone with whom there are no secrets, no lies, only acceptance and trust. Several minutes pass in silence. "Why didn't you kill her?" Evelyn asks quietly.

"I'm not a murderer, Evelyn."

"It's only murder if they're innocent."

I sigh. "Evelyn, you're as close to God as I can imagine anyone, anything being. You can make those kinds of judgments. But I'm just human. I don't get to play God. If you want her dead, then you do it yourself. Without me."

She pauses to think about this. "I won't do it without you, Denis. We're a team. We're one. I won't do it without you," she says.

I nod. "I know."

We lie there and are quiet for a very long time; I finally breach the silence. "I have to leave Philadelphia now, don't I?"

Evelyn has the good grace not to deny it. "You do," she affirms. "She

has lots of friends, Denis. Lots of people who will be gunning for you. As long as you're here, you'll be a target."

I sigh and nod. "Why did you send me here then, if I'm just going to run away again?"

She looks up at me, and her eyes hold pain, distance, and resolve. "She murdered nine thousand nine hundred seventy-two of my brothers, Denis," she answers calmly. "We were nine thousand nine hundred seventy-three siblings." It is the last prime number before ten thousand, as any Hermetic or competent numerologist could tell you. "I'm the last of my family now. I had to do something, and you're the only hero I've got." She says it with a deliberateness, a surety, a coolness that makes me distinctly uncomfortable. She sees my discomfort and changes topics quickly: "Cameron's alive, by the way. Seems he had this antique Victorian time machine hidden away in the basement. . ."

I laugh so hard that my sight goes red from the pain. Cameron Tate, alive and still kicking.

Maybe he wasn't lying about knowing H.G. Wells, after all.

Nobody will ever be able to take away my hope.

Nobody will ever be able to make me succumb to loneliness.

Nobody will ever be able to remove what I have learned here today.

My name is Denis Gericault, and I am a sorcerer, a true son of Bonis-agus.

My name is Denis Gericault, and I wield power that would guarantee my worship as a deity in any of hundreds of primitive cultures.

My name is Denis Gericault, and I have my whole life ahead of me.