THE
KINGDOM
A Berkeley Blackfriars Novel
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For your face turns toward all faces that gaze upon it.
Therefore, those who look upon you
with a loving face will find your face
looking on them with love....
Those who look upon you in hate
will similarly find your face hateful.
Those who gaze at you in joy
will find your face joyfully reflected back at them.

—Nicolas of Cusa
:: NON-FICTION BY JOHN R. MABRY ::

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The Tao Te Ching
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THE OLD CATHOLIC ORDER OF ST. RAPHAEL
(THE BERKELEY BLACKFRIARS)
Fr. Richard Kinney, Prior (expert in Goetic Magick)
Fr. Dylan Melanchthon, Sub-prior (expert in Shamanism)
Fr. Terry Milne (expert in Enochian Magick)
Br. Mikael Bloomink (expert in Wicca)

OTHER MEMBERS OF THE FRIARY HOUSEHOLD
Susan Melanchthon, wife of Fr. Dylan (computer expert)
Brian Cohen, partner of Fr. Terry (expert in Kabbalah)
Tobias Melanchthon, Fr. Dylan’s dog

MAGICIANS (LODGE OF THE HAWK & SERPENT)
Stanis Larch (Frater Babylon), Lodge Master
Randall Webber (Frater Benedict)
Frater Charybdis

THE OLD CATHOLIC SYNOD OF THE AMERICAS
Bishop Tom Müller (Bishop for the Blackfriars)
Presiding Bishop Francis Mellert
Bishop Casey Hammet of Texas

DEMONS
Duunel, sixth station demon of Maaluchre’s host
Articiphus, a duke of Hell

OTHER PRINCIPLE CHARACTERS
Kat Webber, sister of Randall Webber, a Wiccan
Jaguar, Fr. Dylan’s power animal
Gregory Dane, a tycoon
Alan Dane, Gregory’s son and heir
John & Connie Swanson, their daughter Jamie
Astrid Pohler, a Swedenborgian skryer
DEDICATION

This book is offered with gratitude
to the memory of
FRATER QUI SITT VENIAT
“Under the Mercy”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & CAVEATS

Grateful thanks to all of my friends who encouraged me in the writing of this novel. Special thanks are due to those who read the first draft carefully and made invaluable suggestions, especially B.J. West, Lola McCrary, Dan & Kathie McClellan, Ric Reed, Liza Lee Miller, Bill Armstrong, Kittredge Cherry, Audrey Lockwood, Lizzy Hull Barnes, Liz Stout, and others who prefer to remain anonymous. I wish to acknowledge my debt to Buffy the Vampire Slayer (the best show in the history of TV), the novels of Charles Williams (oh, when will people discover him?), Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon’s Preacher, and James Blish’s The Devil’s Day (the demonic processions it depicts inspired the one in chapter 65). Liturgical rites are adapted from the Roman Catholic Ritual for Exorcism, the Liturgy of the Liberal Catholic Church, and the UCC Book of Worship. To shield myself from possible litigation, I have changed the names of some institutions, especially in the Gourmet Ghetto neighborhood of Berkeley in which the friars live and work. Those familiar with the area will no doubt sort out what is what fairly easily.
THURSDAY
When the demon appeared Randall Webber nearly jumped out of his skin. He was an experienced magician, but the appearance of an infernal dignitary is never a commonplace event, and it shook him every time. He knew that if he stepped even momentarily outside the circle he had painstakingly burned onto his hardwood floor the demon would be at his throat, in an instant would separate his soul from his body, and devour it—or worse.

Webber mustered his courage, and put on his best poker face. He was in control here, he told himself. He was the magician. He called the shots. He commanded the hosts of Hell. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and upper lip and then put his hand in his back pocket to stop it from shaking.

The demon did not speak, but appeared in its fiery aspect in the form of a dragon. It hovered as an image cast upon a small paper triangle about the size of Webber’s fist, set safely outside the circle on an end table. The dragon uncoiled its tail in slow motion, gold-flecked pupils staring straight into Webber’s own. Webber gulped and willed his voice not to waver as he spoke.

“Greetings, noble Articiphus, commander of many mighty
hosts, Duke of Hell. I acknowledge thee and bid thee welcome. I command thee by the holy Tetragrammaton to assume thy human form and speak with me!”

So far so good, Webber thought. He was still in one piece; the demon was still constrained within the folded paper triangle, and he thought he had just given a flawless performance of a man in command of himself. He fought the urge to run through his mental checklist to make sure he had not forgotten anything. One missing link and the whole house of cards would come tumbling down, and he would be demon chow. He fought the urge. He had been careful, and if he had missed anything it was too late now to do anything about it. Right now, he needed to focus.

The triangle shimmered and a regal looking gentleman hovered in it dressed in ermine and satin. One half of his face was serene, the other horribly scarred. A diadem sat upon his head, and his face bore a look of hard resentment. Nobody likes to be told what to do, Randall thought, least of all a man of power—or a being of power. “Hail, Articiphus, Duke of—”

The demon interrupted him impatiently. “Cut the shit, magician. What do you want?”

Randall’s eyes widened. He pushed a lock of long brown hair out of his eyes and consciously straightened his perpetually stooped shoulders. He was expecting the typical exchange of ritual pleasantries, a ping-pong volley of testy manners conducted in Elizabethan English, but he had never summoned this particular spirit before. This one, apparently, had no time—or patience—for small talk. Very well, Randall thought, let’s just cut to the chase. “Is it true, noble Duke, that you have the power to remove souls and put them in other bodies?”

Whether the demon’s voice was actually audible or whether it merely resonated in his mind, Randall couldn’t
tell. It had an odd quality about it, as if Randall were wearing headphones. There was no room resonance, and so it was hard to tell. He dismissed the thought as irrelevant, and willed himself once more to focus. The words were clear, regardless of their source. The big question had just been asked. And for a demon in a hurry to be rid of this pest of a human, Articiphus was certainly taking his time replying.

The demon’s eyes narrowed and he looked like he was trying to stare past the magician. Randall stole a glance behind him, but there was nothing. Out the window he could see drizzle swirling around a streetlamp, forming wispy ghosts that, he prayed, were neither conscious nor malevolent. In this business, however, one could never be sure.

Randall shifted nervously, noting that the meat of his thigh seemed to have gone numb. He slapped it with the flat of his hand. “What say you, noble Duke?” He called, with a note of impatience.

“I. Can.” The demon let the two words drop like ice. He squinted at the magician. “You want to share a body with another soul.” He spoke it as a statement, but a raised eyebrow indicated that it was more of a question of clarification.

“No. I want to trade bodies.”

Randall saw the demon nodding, understanding. “Man or woman?” he asked.

“Neither one,” Randall said. He forced all the air he could into his lungs, expanding them as far as they would go given the acrid sting of the incense that hung as thick in the air of the apartment as the fog outside. “The being I want to swap bodies with is...not human.”

The demon opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it again, furrowing his brows instead.

“Oh, yeah,” Randall added. “When I go, I need to take this with me.” And he held forth a purplish-green fruit.
“What are you going to do with an avocado?” asked the demon, now truly curious.

Suddenly Webber was not nervous at all. He knew what he had to do, and he knew he had the means at hand to do it. He didn’t answer the demon, but only smiled.
FRIDAY
Fr. Richard Kinney didn’t mind the rain. It was turning out to be Berkeley’s wettest winter in decades, but he smiled as he turned his nose to the sky, quietly relishing the tiny splashes on his nose and cheeks.

It was a cold mid-morning, though, and he thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans as he walked. He cut through to Spruce Street and turned right at All Saints’ Episcopal.

He was a middle-aged friar habited in a black Anglican cassock, yet no one seemed to think his attire out of place—there were plenty of people in the vicinity of the Graduate Theological Union in religious dress. His hair was tonsured—a round bowl of skin poked through his already thinning hair on the very top of his head—and though his frame carried a few extra pounds, he carried them well.

The wind seemed to pick up when he reached busy Shattuck Avenue. So did the rain, and he suddenly wished he’d brought his hat. He didn’t dwell on it, though. The Old Catholic Order of St. Raphael, of which he was the prior, had just finished a very successful series of exorcisms for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Oakland. Not only had they succeeded in banishing a whole host of demons from a
Lafayette orphanage, but they had been well paid for their efforts. Good pay—or even adequate recognition—was a rarity in the exorcism business, and Richard gave himself permission to enjoy the success—for a little while at least. *Beware undue pride*, he reminded himself, but he smiled as he did it.

He felt relieved as he darted in the door of the Gallic Hotel’s café. The smell of coffee wafted over him like a pleasurable veil, and he paused to savor it, filling his lungs.

The line was unusually short, no doubt due to the weather, and he ordered a cappuccino. Passing his hands through the slits in his cassock, he unzipped his fanny pack and felt around for some change. He paid, and, picking up a discarded newspaper, he found a table and waited for Philip to arrive.

He liked Philip. They had met on gaypartners.com about a year ago, and had had an on-again-off-again relationship that was both promising and maddening in equal measure.

They seemed, at least to Richard, to be well matched. Philip was a seminary student, embarking on a second career as an Episcopal priest. They had a lot in common, and where Richard was an extroverted, charge-ahead kind of guy, Philip was quiet, reserved, and cautious. A little too cautious, Richard sometimes thought, but he also realized that Philip’s reserve provided a useful balance.

They were different in other ways, too. Richard was tall, standing a good six feet, with broad, though somewhat stooped shoulders, while Philip was a smaller man, five foot five, with delicate features that often looked pained when he was concentrating on something.

Philip appeared in the doorway and Richard waved at him. Philip flashed a grimacing smile, and sat down without ordering. “I can’t stay,” he said, brushing rain from his coat.

Richard had been expecting a kiss, and Philip’s brusque
demeanor caught him off guard. “Hey, baby. You look worried. What’s up?” He reached out and took Philip’s hand. Philip withdrew his hand from the table and sighed. “Dickey, we need to talk.”

As if mirroring the weather, dark clouds gathered on Richard’s interior horizon, and he didn’t like it at all. “That’s never a good thing to hear,” he said, almost as an aside. “What’s wrong?”

“How can I put this?” Philip softened a bit. He leaned forward and squeezed Richard’s hand. “You’re driving me crazy.”

“Innnn...a good way?” Richard asked hopefully. “Like crazy with lust, or an obsessive fascination with my winning personality?”

The levity didn’t help. Philip blew air through his cheeks and lowered his head. Richard took that moment to admire the full head of hair his lover sported. *Some guys have all the luck*, he thought. His thoughts returned to what seemed to be inevitably coming. *Some guys that are not me.*

“Dickey, for the past month you’ve been playing Batman and Robin, scurrying all over the Bay Area chasing bad guys and...doing your thing.”

“Yeah,” Richard said, realizing his parade, his success, was about to get rained on as well. “My thing. It’s what I do.”

“I know that. I’ve always known that. But in the past month, I’ve seen you exactly twice, and one of those times, I spent the whole evening trying to comfort you while you were having one of your inferiority attacks or whatever they are—inequality, existential anxiety—whatever it was, it was all about you.”

“I’ve been busy,” Richard stammered. “We had a gig, a paying gig. And I had a rough spot. You were wonderful, you helped me through it. You gave me exactly what I needed—”
“Yeah, but at no time during this whole month did I get what I needed—and that’s the thing.” Philip raised his voice, but then lowered it when he realized he was attracting the attention of other patrons. “I need this to work for me, too. And it isn’t. I have crises too. I have times I need to be carried, and held, and...loved. And you’re never there when I need you. So, I’m done. We’ve had some lovely times, Dicky, but it’s over. I’m sorry. I really am, but I can’t continue like this.” He rose from the table and kissed Richard on the cheek. “I’ll miss you,” he said, and he was gone.

Richard sat frozen—activity went on in the coffee shop around him, but he did not notice. “Sweet Jesus,” he finally said out loud, and then lowered his head to the table, a bit more quickly than he’d anticipated. His forehead smacked with unexpected force on the wood, and, in his present state, the sensation seemed appropriate, even pleasurable.

He smacked his forehead on the table again, a little harder this time. Then he did it again. And again. “God hates me,” he said out loud, between head bangs. “The mother-fucker really, really hates me.”

“I not fond of you, too,” a harsh voice said from just behind him. “And if you break table, God will not be only motherfucker on your ass.” Richard raised his head to see Mr. Kim, the Korean owner of the Gallic Hotel—a small man with a thin mustache coloring his lip, and a grimy towel hanging from his belt. His arms were crossed and his jaw was set with a “don’t fuck with me” rigidity. Richard didn’t.

“Sorry, Mr. Kim,” he said and laid his head down on the cool of the table, waiting for the stars to stop spinning in front of his eyes.

“And I don’t want to hear about you fag-monks’ sex lives,” Mr. Kim added, in English that wasn’t quite broken, but was undeniably cracked.

“We’re friars, not monks. And this is Berkeley,” Richard
said, drooling on the table. “Our sex lives are tame by comparison to most of the people in here.”

Mr. Kim looked around, and Richard followed his gaze as well as he could without actually moving his head. There were exactly three other patrons in the joint, all of them elderly.

“Uh-huh, whatever you say, Father,” Mr. Kim said. “And stop spit. It disgusting.”

Just then Richard’s cell phone rang, a cheesy Casio version of the triumphant “Rise Up O Men of God,” which Richard had picked for the double-entendre. Richard raised his head from the table, trailing a string of drool, and flipped open the phone.

Fr. Terry Milne’s reedy voice cut in and out, but it was still comprehensible. “Dicky, drop whatever you’re doing.”

“God hates me,” Richard told him.

“What? You’re breaking up. Listen, get your ass in gear and meet us over in the City. Pacific Heights, corner of Baker and Clay. We’ve got a gig.”

“God hates me,” Richard repeated.

“Dicky, I can’t....I’m sure it’s lovely, whatever you just said. I’ve left messages for Dylan and Mikael as well—we’ve got demon ass to kick and we’re going to need backup. Ciao for now, sweetie.”

:: 3 ::

Lantern in hand, Alan Dane descended the steps of the catacombs beneath his family home. Unforgiving rock, dank and dark, loomed above his head, and he breathed in the familiar cold and musty air. Reaching the bottom, he held his lantern up and surveyed the tomb in which a hundred years
of relatives were buried. The Danes were the closest thing to old money that San Francisco had. At one time they had been rivals of the Sutro clan—and, paradoxically, high-society friends as well.

He was a tall, lean man in his middle thirties, well groomed, and fashionably attired. His hands were large, prone to grand gestures, and sported many rings, among them a large, red jewel on his right hand.

Passing row upon row of shelves cut deep into the rock, he glanced at the mummified remains of his ancestors. He bowed dramatically to the first one, and uttered a very formal, “I trust you are enjoying your stay in Hell, Grandmother Dane.” He shuffled left and bowed again. “And, Uncle John, I hear the worms feasted well on you, and it makes me glad.” He continued to greet his ancestors in this manner all the way down the hall, each time bowing low with a grand sweep of his bejeweled hands, until he had reached the end of the inhabited shelves, at which point he turned to face the hallway and addressed them collectively. “For raising my father in the way that you did, I say to you all, fuck you. You have made him the monster he is.” Or was, he thought to himself, swelling with pride for, at last, having the upper hand.

This was no time to gloat. While it was true that his father would be tormenting no children in the immediate future, it was clear to Alan Dane that his job was far from finished. There were still children suffering, even if not at his father’s hands. There were other fathers, other monsters, other sources of suffering. There were so many children to save.

With a sense of mission he unlatched the large wooden door at the end of the hallway. As it swung open, the lantern light shown upon a richly appointed room, revealing the form of a small boy, sniffling and mewling for his mother.

“Shhhh, it’s okay,” Dane said, closing the door behind him
with a boom that reverberated through the rock. He smiled at the child, revealing true compassion as he withdrew a scalpel case from his breast pocket. “No one will ever, ever hurt you again. I promise.” He said it mechanically, as if he were reciting lines, for it was a ritual he had enacted many times. “I am your savior, and I have come to deliver you. Everything is going to be all right. Your suffering is finally at an end....”

:: 4 ::

As Richard squealed to a stop in front of a Pacific Heights mansion, he saw Terry and Mikael waiting for him on the sidewalk, their arms crossed impatiently.

“Told you it was going to be a few minutes,” Terry called.

Richard said nothing. The traffic had been terrible coming over the Bay Bridge, but he was in no mood to make excuses, or to be concerned about Terry’s legendary nitpicking. He grabbed his kit bag from the trunk and strode over to where his friends were standing.

Terry and Mikael were a study in contrasts. Terry was short, the ring of his tonsure cut so close as to be almost undetectable. The product of a Japanese mother and an Irish father, his black hair and oddly shaped eyes lent him an elfin appearance. He was a nervous, agitated, and extroverted man just nearing forty, his face red with exasperation.

Mikael, on the other hand, was tall—over six feet—with a shock of wild, jet black hair that radiated from his scalp like the rays of a negative sun. He was a calm, quiet man, just barely thirty, the friars’ most recent oblate. His tonsure had been symbolic—a lock of hair was cut at his admission, but allowed to grow back, as befit a struggling power-punk musician.
As Richard approached, Terry’s anger transfigured into concern. “Dicky, what’s the matter?”

Richard stopped within arm’s reach of his friends and struggled to master himself. “God hates me,” he said.

“God can be a right bloody bastard,” Terry agreed. “What did the jerk do this time?”

“Philip...” Richard was proud of himself for having held it together this long—all the way over the bridge, in fact. But the shock was wearing off, and the reality sinking in. He lost it, and buried his face in Terry’s black cassock.

“Shh...honey, there there,” Terry said, stroking his neck and looking up at Mikael with a concerned grimace. Mikael laid his hand on Richard’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze that passed for an acceptable, manly, and decidedly straight display of sympathy. “Did he dump you?”


Richard picked his head up and looked at the gray, brooding sky, sniffing. “No. He deserved better than me. He was totally right. I just haven’t been...available.”

Terry took Richard’s hands in both of his and gave them a good shake. “Dicky, listen to me. We’ve got a demon in there. We’ve got an exorcism to do. Are you up for this? Because if you’re not, I want you to go straight home. I’ll handle it myself—Mikael can help. It’ll be a good learning experience for him, either way. I would really like to have your help in there, but not if you can’t handle it. I don’t need to remind you about the dangers. And if you’re in an emotionally vulnerable place....” he did not finish the sentence. He didn’t have to.

Richard considered. If Terry could see that he was so upset at one glance, then he wasn’t going to fool any demon. And
demons were nothing if not brilliant exploiters of weakness. On the other hand, it might prove even more dangerous for Terry to try it alone. Terry was a good exorcist—certainly he was brave—but his area of occult expertise was Enochian magick, not demon magick. Goetia—the kind of magick in which one summons and manipulates demonic entities—was Richard’s own area of specialized study, and more than once he had saved the Order’s collective ass due to his knowledge of the field’s most excruciating minutiae.

As for Mikael, he was the magickal equivalent of a driver’s ed student. It’s not that he was useless, but he had only seen one exorcism previously, and it was a mild one. He was there to learn, not to help—for his own safety and everyone else’s.

“Where’s Dylan?” Richard asked.

“Under deadline with a big web job, the one he and Susan have been working on all week. It goes live tonight.”

“Shit,” Richard muttered. He considered going home, but the truth was, he simply did not know what he would do with himself when he got there. He didn’t really feel like relating the whole story to the others back at the Friary, and given a choice between being here and beating up on demons, or sitting alone in his room and beating up on himself, it was not a hard decision. Besides, even if he was in a delicate place, the work would be safer if there were two experienced priests on hand. “Let’s kick some demon ass,” he finally said, trying to sound resolute.

“You sure?” Terry looked up at him uncertainly.

“No. So let’s do it while I’m still in shock.” He slung his kit bag over his shoulder, and together they passed through the wrought-iron gates. As they approached the doors of the mansion, it occurred to Richard that surely the likes of them would not be admitted to such an opulent place. They were, after all, on the brink of poverty, and that due to circumstance, not pious adherence to their vows.
“Wait,” Terry said, turning to Mikael. “Do I look buff? ’Cause I don’t wanna face any demons if I don’t look buff.”
He struck a Charles Atlas pose.
Richard answered instead, grateful for an opportunity to lighten his mood. “Ter, you’re not just buff, you’re butch.”
“Fuck butch. Dykes are butch. Fags gotta be buff.”
“Well, actually,” Mikael said, “Your rouge is a little uneven.”
“Oh, thank you,” Terry said, “heavy on the right or left?”
“Left. Your left.”
Terry rubbed at his left cheek while Richard contemplated ringing the bell.
“We don’t belong here,” Richard said, hesitating.
“I feel it,” Terry agreed, “but we do this job, honey, and we may actually get a paycheck.”
“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Richard said, and reached for the button.
“Stop!” a voice forcefully whispered, loud enough for them all to hear. The friars turned, searching out the source of the command. In the shadow of a stand of bushes about a foot away from the house, a slight female figure crouched. Once they had seen her, she put her index finger to her lips, signaling silence. Then she waved them to follow, and turned, disappearing into the shrubbery.
Terry looked at Richard for a decision. Richard shrugged and set out after her. A couple of steps brought them to the shrubbery, and soon they were winding their way along a little path directly beside the mansion.
After about thirty yards, they cleared the bushes and found themselves beside a wooden gate that loomed over them. Fumbling with a ring of keys, an attractive young woman in blue scrubs visibly battled her anxiety. Eventually she found the right key, and pushing her long red hair back with one hand, she peered intently at the lock. She inserted
the key and turned it. The lock responded with a satisfying click, and the gate swung inward. Looking around nervously, she motioned them to enter, and following them, shut the gate behind them.

They were in a small, neatly kept garden with high walls and tasteful Greek statuary. The young woman paused, closed her eyes, and caught her breath. Richard noticed that her hands were shaking.

She, apparently, noticed it, too, and pressed them together. Then, seeming to suddenly remember her manners, she extended her hand to the friar nearest her, which happened to be Terry. “Sorry for the intrigue. I’m Jessica Stahl, Mr. Dane’s resident nurse.”

Terry shook her hand. “Very pleased to meet you in person. I believe you and I spoke on the phone—was that you?” She nodded. “I’m Fr. Terry Milne, these are my colleagues, Fr. Richard Kinney, and Brother Mikael Bloomink of the Old Catholic Order of St. Raphael.”

She shook hands with Richard and Mikael, and seemed to have caught her breath. “I’m sorry about the sneaking around,” she said. “But Mr. Dane—the young Mr. Dane—doesn’t know I called you.”

Terry raised his eyebrows and shot an uncertain look at Richard. Richard cleared his throat. “What, exactly, are we dealing with, here?”

“The elder Mr. Dane is dying—he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer well over a year ago, now,” Nurse Stahl obliged. “He’s in terrible pain. The truth is, I’ve never seen anyone hold on like this. He should have...” she swallowed. “He should be dead. And I don’t understand why he’s not.”

“So why call us?” Richard asked.

She looked around, apparently concerned that she might be observed. “I think—I know it sounds crazy—but I think his holding on—it’s supernatural. And I know this isn’t sci-
entific, but it doesn’t feel good.” Her eyes were large, and she looked at them fiercely, as if daring them not to laugh at her.

Terry pulled a notebook from beneath his cassock and began scribbling in it. “Can you describe the behaviors you’ve observed?”

She nodded. “Sometimes, I think I see his eyes glow—they’re kind of red. At first I thought it was my imagination, but then I was walking through his room in the dark, and...well, I could almost see my way because of it.” She felt at her arms and rubbed them. “Gives me chills just to think about it.”

“What else?”

“Well, sometimes, if I don’t do what he asks fast enough—and that’s another thing, he shouldn’t be talking at all at this stage, let alone asking for things—but, if I don’t, he gets...there’s this other voice...it’s deeper, rougher...scarer. It seems to be coming from everywhere. It’s...not Mr. Dane. It’s someone...something else.”

Terry nodded, glancing at both Mikael and Richard. They all seemed to be on the same page. “Anything else?”

She sniffed and pulled at her hair with a shaky hand. “Yes, once I was attaching a new catheter, and he grabbed my arm so hard I had bruises for a week. Like I said, he shouldn’t be able to do that. And so hard...it’s not natural.”

“How did you hear about us, Ms. Stahl?” Richard asked.

“On my day off, I went to the office of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese. I met with several people—they kept passing me from one office to another. Finally, the bishop’s assistant made sure we were alone and he said to me—really loud, as if he thought someone was listening—that most demonic possessions weren’t real, and that they didn’t have anyone on staff that could help me. Then he handed me your card. And—it was weird—he winked at me.”
“Unfortunately, that’s the way it has to be,” Terry nodded. “We handle most of the Archdiocese’s exorcism work—and every other diocese, Catholic and Episcopal in Northern California. But unofficially, of course. Very few clergy specialize in this sort of thing anymore. We’ve actually been busier than you might think.”

“Father, if anyone believes, I believe.” Her eyes were huge. “Can we see him—Mr. Dane?” Terry asked.

She led them to the sliding glass door and opened it, revealing a dimly lit room. About three times the size of a normal hospital room, it had all of the same accoutrements, yet so spaciously arranged it did not detract from the atmosphere of calm elegance.

For all of its beauty, however, the room was heavy with the stench of bile and disinfectant. Worse than that was a malevolent energy that hit the friars full in the face the moment they entered. Richard cringed at the feel of it, and he glanced at Terry, the most spiritually sensitive of all of them. He could see Terry’s face tighten. If forced to describe the feeling, Richard would have simply said it was wrong. Very, very wrong. The friars looked at one another briefly and wordlessly registered the feeling between them. It was clear that they all felt it. They were in the presence of sentient, discarnate evil.

At the epicenter of the wrongness a withered skeleton of a man lay in a hospital bed, flanked by heart monitors and IV bags.

“It’s been a tough day,” Nurse Stahl said as they gathered around the hospital bed. “The morphine isn’t quite cutting it, today. And it—” she was, Richard gathered, referring to the demon, “—if I could sue it for sexual harassment, I would.”

Richard nodded, and his eyes softened momentarily. “I’m sorry about that. Tell us about his son.”
“The young Mr. Dane is running the family businesses now. He comes up often to check on his father, but there doesn’t seem to be much love between them. In fact, one night I overheard him talking to his father—or that thing inside him, I couldn’t really tell. It didn’t make a lot of sense to me, but that man’s got a lot of anger in him, that’s for sure.”

“Why didn’t you tell him about contacting us?”

“I mentioned the possibility of calling someone in to help him and he laughed at me. Not a nice laugh, either. So I...look, I don’t know anything about the old man. I just know that no matter who he is, or what he’s done, everyone deserves to die with dignity, in peace. So I called you. I thought if there was any way to get that thing inside him out—maybe nature could run its course, and Mr. Dane could find some rest.”

“You did the right thing,” Mikael assured her. Both Terry and Richard looked at him. Blood rose up Mikael’s neck as he realized he was being stared at.

“Well, technically, we can’t do anything without the family’s approval,” Terry said, still looking at Mikael. “But it sounds like we’re not going to get that.” He looked back at the nurse. “Are we?”

She shook her head.

Terry looked at Richard. “And we have an old man needlessly suffering....”

Richard sighed. “What the hell, all he can do is sue us.”

Terry smiled, “And no one has ever won a case on the grounds of unauthorized exorcism.”

Richard met the woman’s eyes. “We’ll do it.”

She was visibly relieved. “I’m afraid he’s got so much morphine in him he won’t be able to speak to you,” she said.

“That’s all right,” said Richard. “We don’t need to speak to him, just the thing inside him. And unless I’m mistaken, the morphine isn’t going to slow it down any.”
“No,” she said, with a frightened and faraway look that was not hard to decipher. “It never does.” She looked at the old man with a mixture of compassion and fear. In a moment she gathered up her courage and addressed them again. “My rooms are just through there,” she pointed to a door opposite the one they had come in. “I always have the monitor on, so just call if you need me.”

Richard smiled grimly at her. “Thank you. But we want you to turn the monitor off. It’s not a request, it’s a requirement. And no matter what you hear coming from this room this afternoon, I need you to promise me you’ll stay put. I don’t care if you hear what sounds like Armageddon coming from this room, for your own safety, and ours, you need to stay put.”

“Do you want me to leave?” she asked, looking skeptical.

“Mr. Dane might need medical assistance if things go wrong. But we’ll come and get you if we need you. Are you okay with that?”

She looked momentarily relieved, and then frightened—but she had obviously seen enough weirdness in tending to the old man that she was prepared to be brave. “I’m okay...with that.”

“Good. Then we’re going to get started.” This was, apparently, her cue to get lost, and after a moment of hesitation, she picked up on it. After a quick check to make sure all was as well with Mr. Dane as she could make it, she retired to her apartment.

Without another word Terry and Richard began carrying all the superfluous furniture out of the room and into the garden. Mikael followed their example. “Hey, if we want a smoke later, we can kick back out here,” Mikael said. He looked a little confused by all the moving.

Terry noticed. “We don’t want you to be hit in the back of the head by a flying samovar, let alone a sofa, do we?”
“Oh,” he mouthed silently, nodding. He went back inside for a lamp. Once everything that wasn’t nailed down or necessary for medical care was safely in the garden, they opened their kit bags and unpacked their vestments. All three donned surplices and pectoral crucifixes, and Terry and Richard put on stoles. Then the priests took their places on either side of the possessed man. Richard lit a charcoal brick for the incense and laid it in a brass thurible.

“Where do you want me?” asked Mikael.

“As far away as possible,” Richard said. “You’re here to observe. I’ll let you know if I need your help. Otherwise, just keep your eyes peeled and learn.”

Mikael swallowed hard and wiped a clump of wild black hair out of his eyes. Terry smiled at his nervousness, and in a quiet compassionate voice, asked him, “Where is the one place on earth you feel most safe, Mikael?”

Mikael’s face screwed up into an almost comical mask of concentration. Then he brightened. “924 Gilman.”

“The Punk club? Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Okay, imagine that you’re there, waiting for a show.”

Mikael closed his eyes and put on the concentrating face again. After a few minutes he opened his eyes again and shook his head. “It’s not working. I’m too nervous.”

“Okay,” Terry said, “let’s try something else. Martin’s first stage of exorcism—what is it?”

“Presence.”

“You feel it?”

“The moment I walked in the room.”

“Good. What’s the second stage?”

“Pretense.”

“Bingo. What does this look like to you?” He waved towards Mr. Dane.
“It looks like a really sick man knocked out on morphine.”

“It does, doesn’t it? Don’t let it fool you, though. Inside this body is a very conscious, very dangerous being. It may try to hide for a while—to pretend it’s just a very sick man knocked out on morphine. But this actually helps us. The demon can’t pretend it’s anything else but an unconscious old guy. If we get any response at all, we’ll know it’s the demon talking, not Mr. Dane, here.”

Richard spooned incense onto the smoking charcoal. Terry quickly set wards for protection, and then erected a crucifix in a stand on the tray table in front of the possessed, where it would be clearly visible should he open his eyes.

Richard said a silent prayer for protection. As the smoke wafted through the room, Richard took out a portable aspersill and began to sprinkle holy water over himself and Terry. He threw a few sprinkles in Mikael’s direction, and then sprinkled the old man.

A violent stirring began. It started with a shudder that ran the length of the body, beginning at the feet and ending with a brief convulsion of the shoulders and head. Then the old man began to shake all over, with shivers that did not subside.

Richard rubbed his thumb across the cotton in his oil stock, wetting it with holy chrism. The moment he touched the old man’s forehead with this thumb, and before he could make the sign of the cross, the eyes snapped open and the sagging face bunched itself up into a taut mask of rage.

“That was quick,” Terry noted.

“Well, what have we here?...” it began, slithering its words like a serpent, “Two magicians...” he cast his eyes to the far side of the room and sized up Mikael quickly, “...and a witch? Masquerading as priests. We’re on the same team, you know, you and me. Just what do you expect to do here?”
“We expect to send your sorry ass back to Hell, bozo,” Terry said, as Richard continued the chrismation. Once the cross of oil was complete, the withered body writhed in pain and the acrid smell of burning flesh cut through the incense.

Richard ignored the demon, and opened his Ritual. He began with the standard litany and prayer of divine invocation. Then he turned and addressed the possessed. “Unclean spirit!” he shouted. “Whoever you are who possess this servant of God, by the mysteries of the incarnation, the sufferings and death, the resurrection, and the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ; by the sending of the Holy Spirit; and by the coming of our Lord into last judgment, I command you to tell me, with some sign, your name, and the day and the hour of your damnation. Obey me in everything, although I am an unworthy servant of God. Do no damage to this possessed creature, or to my assistants, or to any of their goods.”

“Fake priest—fuck off!”

“Demon, I command you, in the name of Yod-He-Vau-He, in the name of Y’Shua the Nazarene, tell me your name!”

“I am Your-Mother-Drinks-Elephant-Cum, you phony bastard!”

“Really? Elephant cum? Is that the best you can do? In the name of the Lord of Hosts—” before Richard could continue, a wind of hurricane force upturned the tray table, and upset the machinery surrounding the bed. Richard and Terry were both thrown against the sliding glass door, and Mikael hugged the wall.

The wind continued to whip at their clothes, pinning them for several minutes. Then, as suddenly as it had erupted, it stopped. Richard fell forward, and caught himself, but Terry was not so lucky, and lay sprawled on the floor. Richard looked at the door where they had hit it, and saw an enormous web of cracks radiating from his point of contact.
Richard helped Terry up and glanced at Mikael to make sure he was all right. Mikael’s eyes were wide, but he nodded—he was okay. “Mikael, call Brian and see if he can get a handle on who we’re dealing with,” Richard barked. “Put him on speakerphone.”

Brian, Terry’s husband, was a Jewish Kabbalah expert—he was also a crack professional researcher at the Graduate Theological Union Library. Mikael speed-dialed Brian and hit the speakerphone button. “Hi, Mikael, what’s up?” Brian’s voice was tinny as it emitted from the cell phone, but cheerful.

“Hi, Sweetie,” called Terry across the room.

The demon looked around uncertainly, clearly not used to such openness and lack of shame in homosexuals. Shame was, after all, the hook demons most often used to snag people. Yet Terry was so open-hearted, so devoid of guilt, that it gave the demon nothing to clutch at or use against him. When the demon turned to look at Richard, however, he broke into a small, evil grin that seemed to be saying, “Here, now, is something to work with.”

“Listen, Brian, we’ve got a beastie here who won’t give up his name,” Richard called.

“Big surprise!”

“No kidding. What do you have for us?”

“Ever since Terry left the Friary I’ve been doing web research on Mr. Dane’s success in business over the last twenty years. I think you’ve got your work cut out for you, guys. I don’t think this is an unwilling possession. I think it’s a partnership.”

Richard was not surprised. The drive for material success was one of the chief reasons people got involved with demons, that and power. This demon no doubt granted Mr. Dane all the riches he lusted after, and in return, got a welcome relief from discarnate existence. Demons love carnal
pleasure, and desire it as much as humans do, but their bod-
ies are too subtle to enjoy food, drink, or sex. Without the
solid bodies of humans, they can only look, but cannot
touch, taste, or feel. This inability to enjoy what they so des-
perately crave is itself a form of damnation, and so such
partnerships were not uncommon.

“Do you know who we’re dealing with?”

“Well, as you know, there are whole hosts of avarice-
demons. But this guy’s M.O. is pretty distinctive. He doesn’t
just defeat his competition, he likes to kill them—in pretty
gross ways, actually—and we’ve only got a handful of beast-
ies who operate that way. The best match is Griandre, but
he’s in Moloch’s host, and Moloch is in the doghouse right
now, according to the demonwatch.com folks. So my best
guess is you’re dealing with either Orak of Alexandria or
Duunel of Maaluchre’s host.”

Richard was watching the possessed like a hawk and saw
his eyes widen at the information. So much for the famed
demonic poker face, Richard thought. He didn’t know which
of Brian’s suggestions were on the money, but he knew one
of them was.

“I’ve got a suggestion,” Brian’s thin voice offered through
the speakerphone.

“I’m listening,” Richard said, still drilling the demon with
his eyes.

“If it’s Duunel, he’s got to have a physical link to
Maaluchre attached to every instrument of evil. Since so
much of Dane’s work is legal, I’d say take a look at his let-
terhead. The corporate logo might yield something interest-
ing.”

Richard nodded and turned to Mikael, “Go ask the nurse
if she’s got any written correspondence, a contract with a
cover letter, anything on Dane’s letterhead.”

Mikael rushed to the door on the far side of the room, and
entered without knocking.
“What if it’s Orak? And why is he in San Francisco and not Alexandria?”

“He just made his name in Alexandria. There’s a good chance he was in Chicago for the better part of the twentieth century. Railroad tycoons and such. If it’s Orak, this is going to be a farsight tougher. He’s rogue.”

Richard nodded. Most demons were arranged into hosts, like military companies, and followed a fairly strict discipline. Rogue demons, though, answered to no one and were extremely unpredictable.

In a moment, Mikael returned with a piece of paper in hand. Richard stepped away from the possessed and snatched it from him. He held it out so that all three of them could see it. The vague nature of Mr. Dane’s industries was not illuminated by anything on his stationary. The corporate logo, as was typical, adorned the upper left corner; a simple geometrical design built around the letter D—for Dane no doubt.

“I think we struck out, here,” Terry said. “I can’t see anything in that design that looks even remotely sigilic.”

Brian’s voice crackled a bit, but was still decipherable. “I have an idea. Is there a water mark?”

Richard turned around to hold the paper between himself and the brightest light in the room, and promptly swore. “Fuck me....”

Both Terry and Mikael jostled around to get a glimpse of what Richard was looking at. There, plain as day, was the ghostly image of what was unmistakably a sigil.

The demon, more agitated than ever, began to shake. “Brian, we’ve got a five-pointed trident, here. The outside tines are intersected by circles—”

“That’s Maaluchre’s sigil, not doubt about it!” Brian’s voice exclaimed tinnily. “You’re dealing with Duunel, or I’ll eat my kippa.”
Richard lowered the paper and gave the demon his best shit-eating grin. “Got you, motherfucker. Anything else we need to know, Brian?”

“Not really...standard sixth station demon. Nasty, but not particularly powerful, politically. But he’s no dummy, and he’s no slouch, either. He’s well connected, and keeps up a wide intelligence circle. According to the demonwatch folks he’s originally a desert-dweller, putting in a couple of centuries on the Sinai Peninsula, and some time in Saudi Arabia. So invocations against jinn would probably be effective if you were Muslim. But no need to deviate from the standard Catholic formulas, guys, since you know them better. Oh yeah, one more thing about the desert stuff—he hates water.”

“Yeah, we figured that one out,” Richard said. “Good work, Bri. Two cookies for you at dessert tonight, laddie.”

“Gee, thanks, Dad.”

“Keep a plate hot for me, babe,” called Terry.

“That’s not all I’m keeping hot for you, honey-pie. It’s shabbas!”

“Okay, okay, down boys,” Richard said. “It’s almost sundown, Brian. Time for you to knock off and light some candles.”

“I’m baruch-an, I’m hato-an, I’m Adonai-an. Good luck, guys.” There was a click and he was gone.

Richard opened his Roman Ritual to the beginning and approached the possessed again. The old man’s body was wracked with convulsions as the demon fought against the limitations of its wizened form.

“Hello, Duunel. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. You either come out now, quietly, and without hurting anybody, or we kick your sorry Satanic ass. Now what’s it gonna be?”
When Kat Webber arrived at her brother’s apartment, she was surprised to find the door locked. She knocked and waited, growing more concerned as the minutes passed and still he did not appear. She looked around—his car was there, and it was the middle of the afternoon. And this was, after all, Alameda, the island-where-time-stands-still, the only crime-free zone in the Bay Area. The screen door should be open to the world. She peered in the front window, but was frustrated by drawn curtains, which also disturbed her. She thought perhaps he had nicked down to the Land’s End market for half-and-half or a midday cookie. So she sat on the curb of the lazy, tree-lined street and smiled at the people strolling with their dogs and baby carriages. But as time passed and he did not appear, her smile faded and she became openly worried.

Eventually she passed the point where propriety had any hold on her and she fished in the bushes for the fake rock with the key in it. The lock yielded easily and she pushed the door in tentatively. “Randy?”

She entered the foyer, and frowned at the stack of gaming magazines that were her brother’s equivalent of professional journals. Most days he was holed up here with a mug of coffee the size of his head, pecking away at his keyboard, programming video games for the Cycore Media Group.

Everything was as it should be. Still, her antennae were up for some reason. Then, when she stepped into the living room, she saw it. Him. Her brother’s body, lying on the floor—surrounded by a roomful of odd accoutrements. She couldn’t process everything she was seeing, and so she zeroed in on the most important thing—him. She rushed to where he lay, hysterically calling his name.
She almost cried out with relief to discover he was warm. She put her ear to his mouth. He was breathing. She felt his neck, he had a pulse. He was utterly unconscious, though, lying in a pool of water which she realized a moment later was saliva.

Tears streamed from her eyes, and she choked back scared, relieved sobs. She fumbled at her cell phone and called 911. She struggled to be calm enough to give the operator the proper information, and then hung up to wait with her brother until the ambulance arrived.

As she held his head in her lap, the rest of the scene came into focus. They were sitting in the middle of a circle, intersected by a larger star, stained—or perhaps burned—into the hardwood floor. The oriental rug that normally covered the floor was rolled up against one wall. Candles had burned down—and out—all over the room. One, a large, thick candle, was still burning, as if it had hung around to bear damning testimony to what had occurred there.

Just outside the circle a triangle was likewise burned into the floor, and on a table within it, a small triangle of white paper. Kat picked it up, and noted the strange symbol written upon it in a blackish-red substance. With horror she recognized that it was probably written in blood. Perhaps Randy’s.

Kat was a Wiccan—a witch, a worshipper of the Goddess—so she was not unfamiliar with the accoutrements of the occult. The magick she practiced was white magick, nature magick, concerned with the perpetuation of natural rhythms, and the mystical attunement of oneself with the cosmos. She was magickally literate enough to know the difference between the kind of religion she practiced and the black magick of Goetic Magicians. And there was no doubt what sort of magick her brother had been doing. She stuffed the paper into the pocket of her jeans, and knelt beside him,
pulling him into her lap. “Holy cow, Randy, what the hell have you been up to?” she whispered, kissing the top of his head.

She realized she was cradling his body like an unholy pieta, surrounded by the instruments of demons, feeling like the bull’s-eye of a target that the demonic host could not miss. She brushed her brother’s stringy hair out of his long, horsy face. Indeed, they had not missed. She said a brief prayer to the Goddess and rocked him until she heard the sirens approach and the thundering boots of paramedics on the stairs.

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The demon had chosen the hard way. Richard knew he would. They always did. The possessed man’s throat opened and the demon emitted a scream that made all of them wince. “You!” It pointed the man’s bony finger at Richard, “You have no authority....”

“I exorcise you, Most Unclean Spirit! Invading Enemy! In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ: Be uprooted and expelled from this Creature of God....”

“You separate yourselves from the True Church because you are willful, and sinful, your appetite for sin overcomes you and will be your undoing, false-priests....” The demon had become unexpectedly articulate, which meant he was scared. Richard knew they were on the right track.

“What’s the next stage, Mikael?” Terry asked.

“Breakpoint? The battle of wills....”

“Yup. We’re there.”

Richard shook the aspergill at the possessed, raining him with holy water as he intoned, “He who commands you is he who ordered you to be thrown down from Heaven into
the depths of Hell. He who commands you is he who dominated the sea, the wind, and the storms...."

The demon writhed at the touch of the water, which stung his skin like acid and filled the air with the sick stench of burning flesh. “You suck the cocks of anonymous men in bathhouses!” The demon howled, and a new voice emerged, one that sounded like the massed buzzing of a billion flies. “Who are you to command me?!”

Richard faltered, and shame rushed in. The demon saw his opening and pounced. “You lust after countless women each day. Your lust is a stain upon your soul that no sacrament can absolve! It is a sickness that ravages you, body and spirit. You’d fuck old men and bunnies if you could! You’d fuck anything that moves!”

Terry clapped his hands to get Richard’s attention, “Dicky! Don’t argue! Don’t listen! Half-truths are the doorways to the Lie! Richard! Focus!”

“The Voice. It’s the Voice....” Mikael breathed, as all color drained from his face.

Richard’s eyes narrowed and he did not refute the demon. He could bear all that was true, he knew, and he could let go of the rest. He did, in fact, find bunnies oddly, even erotically alluring. His voice, once he had cleared the phlegm born of sudden emotion, was commanding. “Hear, therefore, and tremble, Duunel, servant of the enemy of the Earth! Enemy of the Faith! Enemy of the human race! Source of death! Robber of life! Twister of justice! Root of evil!...”

Instantly every glass item in the room shattered. The windows descended in sheets of minute, sharp shards and the plastic IV bags exploded, showering the room in saline solution. Mikael covered his face and dove to avoid the hail of glass. The demon was just reacting, not thinking, Richard thought, as the falling salt water caused it even further distress. He set his face with grim satisfaction and raised his voice above the din.
“In the name of Him who has power to send you into Hell! I command thee, Duunel, depart from this man! Surrender, not to me, but to Christ of whom I am a member. His power forces you. He defeated you by His Cross. Fear the strength of Him who led the souls of the dead to the light of salvation from the darkness of waiting.” Richard smeared the sign of the cross on the old man’s chest. “May the body of this man be a source of fear for you.” He crossed the man’s forehead. “Duunel, demon of the sixth station, servant of the great Duke Maaluchre, I command you to depart! God the Father commands you! God the Son commands you! God the Holy Spirit commands you!”

Richard jumped back as the bed began to float into the air and the old man’s body was wracked by convulsions that would have killed even a hale man. Then the air was pierced by the sound of a heart-monitor alarm—the old man was having a heart attack.

:: 7 ::

When the phone rang, Fr. Dylan Melanchthon looked up from the screen he had been staring at for the past three hours straight and blinked. Everything was out of focus.

“Reality rush!” he and his wife Susan said together. Their workstations faced each other, so a slight tilt of the eyes or the head would give them a good view of their beloved. “Reality rush” was a common phenomenon for those who make their living staring into the unblinking eye of the computer, and naming it when it happened was a bit of a ritual for them.

He picked up the phone. “Holy Apocrypha Friary,” Dylan said distractedly in his Tennessee drawl, hitting “save”
before completely turning his attention. He looked at his wife, her plump, curvaceous form hunched over her keyboard, her pretty face framed by short blond hair. He smiled. It was good to work at home, to work together. The websites they built contributed heavily to the support of the Friary, and they had a sizable nest egg set aside for retirement already, as well. It was, he knew, a very good life indeed.

A man’s voice on the other side was tentative, uncertain. “Can I speak to...is there a priest there?”

“Ah’m Father Dylan. How can Ah help you?” Dylan’s back creaked and he rose to stretch it, cradling the phone on his shoulder and pressing his spine with both hands. Neither he nor Susan were small people, due as much to their sedentary occupations as to their genetic predispositions. Brian and Terry called him a “baby bear,” meaning a shortish, burly man with a tendency to be both rotund and hirsute. It was a label Dylan wore with a bit of pride. Even if he wasn’t gay, it was oddly satisfying to know that there were plenty of guys out there who would find him attractive.

“Um...we need to have our baby baptized. Can you do it?”

“Sure, we can do that,” he said in a thick Kentucky drawl. “Why don’t we get together and discuss what you’re looking for?”

“Well, my family is Catholic, and it’s mostly for them.”

Dylan had not sought this information, but apparently the gentleman on the other end thought full disclosure important. “Um...okay. We can talk about that. Can you come to the Friary later tonight? Say, 7:30 or so?”

The man could, and would bring his wife and child.

“Brian’s making cookies,” Susan offered.

“There are cookies in the house tonight!” Dylan told the man, “and we’ll have the kettle on.” Dylan gave him the
address and then hung up and stared at the phone for a second before sitting down again.

“What was that about?”

“Baptism of a child,” he said, but as he did so, a chill ran through him.

Susan cocked her head and took her glasses off, trying to focus on her husband. “So why do you look like you just picked a pubic hair out of your teeth?”

Dylan looked up at her and gazed for a long moment before responding. “Ah’m...not sure.”

:: 8 ::

Bishop Tom Müller shifted in his chair. His left calf had gone to sleep, and he resisted the temptation to punch it. He was sitting in one of the large meeting rooms in the Mercy Center just outside Tucson, Arizona, in the company of his fellow bishops. The annual meeting of the bishops of the Old Catholic Synod of the Americas was in full, sleepy swing, and he fought to remain erect and alert. When he tuned back in, Bishop Walenski of Wisconsin was practically yelling.

“...Christ cannot be represented at the altar by a gay man! Why are we even talking about this? We cannot have gay men—”

“—or women?” interjected Bishop Van Patton, one of the two women bishops present.

“Or women—” he nodded in her direction impatiently, “as representatives of Christ. It doesn’t work!”

“Um, if I may ask a question...” Bishop Tom stood. The Presiding Bishop nodded to him. Tom had only been consecrated a year ago and was one of the youngest and least experienced bishops in the Synod. He had so far managed to
avoid the ire of the more forceful personalities in the episcopate by laying low and keeping quiet. “Why can’t a gay man represent Christ at the altar, Bishop Walenski?”

Bishop Walenski, a plumber in secular life, glared at him as if he were an idiot. “Because Christ wasn’t gay!”

Tom sat down again with a grateful nod to the Presiding Bishop. Tom wasn’t sure how to answer Walenski’s logic. He knew it was wrong, somehow, but he was not keen on making any enemies in the Synod’s leadership.

“If Ah may speak?” Bishop Cornwall of Georgia leaned on his walker and got to his feet. Bishop Cornwall had been a lawyer before retirement, and Tom admired how the man’s still-nimble mind worked.

The Presiding Bishop pointed to the elderly prelate, and the old man continued. “Ah’m no fan of faggots in the pulpit, gentlemen. But if you ah goin’ to keep them out, you best do it by logical means. Walenski, you sorry sow, Christ wasn’t no Polack, either, yet you seem to have no great qualms about seizing upon your own right to represent him—”

Presiding Bishop Mellert sighed and smiled, in spite of himself. When he was not wearing vestments, Bishop Mellert was a referee for the NBA—a job that ideally suited him to herd the cats of the OCSA. “Let’s keep the discourse civil, brothers,” he admonished.

“And sisters!” Bishop Van Patton interjected angrily. Bishop Van Patton taught feminist theory at Midwestern Theological Seminary in Chicago, and seemed to be the self-appointed watchdog of gender balance among the denomination’s leadership.

Mellert nodded, and waved for Cornwall to continue. “This is the same threadbare argument used to keep women out of holy orders. ‘Christ wasn’t no woman, so women can’t represent him,’ was how the argument went. Remember? Ah do. It weren’t that long ago, gentlemen.”
Bishop Van Patton glared at the old man but held her tongue.

“If you ah goin’ to use that argument, then logic says that only unmarried Jewish men in their thirties—and carpenters to boot—can represent Christ at the altar. No, Ah say if you’re goin’ to keep them out—and I hope you do—Ah say do it on moral grounds. The idea of our clergy buggerin’ each other while they’re singin’ ‘Here I Raise My Ebenezer’ jus’ gives me the willies.” He sat down again with all the dignity of a sack of turnips being dropped to the floor.

“If I may?” Bishop Jeffers of New York raised one finger and waited for the Presiding Bishop’s nod. He got it and stood. Jeffers, a one-time actor on Broadway, now served as the maître d’ at Visuvio’s in Manhattan. Everyone knew that Bishop Jeffers was gay, and one could have heard a pin drop in expectation of what he had to say. “May I interject a note of reason, here, gentlemen...and ladies?”

Bishop Van Patton smiled her approval.

“May I recall our 2004 Synod when this question completely stopped the meeting in its tracks? We have so much other business to attend to. Might I suggest that the Presiding Bishop appoint a committee—a fairly-balanced committee, mind you, with bishops on both sides of the issue—to study the issue and make a recommendation to the next Synod meeting?”

Bishop Van Patton raised her hand. “I second that motion, and call for a vote.”

Bishop Walenski shook his head and glowered at Jeffers and Van Patton in turn, longing for the days of the old boys club, where the women stayed in the kitchen and the faggots kept quiet about it.

The vote was cast, and Jeffers’ recommendation carried. The Presiding Bishop wrote, “Appoint gay committee” on his growing to-do list. Then he noted with relief that they
had worked through the last item on the morning’s agenda. He looked at his watch. It was still an hour before dinner. They were doing well. “New business,” he called.

Bishop Hammet of Texas raised his hand. The Presiding Bishop nodded, but not before rolling his eyes. Bishop Hammet headed the Synod’s only Tridentine-rite diocese. He would not ordain women, nor would he allow the Mass to be said in English. He ruled his diocese with an iron fist, and so great were his skills at alienating people that three years ago the Synod had been forced to create a non-geographical diocese to tend to the ministries of disaffected clergy, including women and gays in Texas, as well as those who do not speak Latin, and everyone else Hammet had managed to piss off.

The bishop they had consecrated for this floating diocese, Bishop Tom, felt his flesh crawl and sweat begin to bead up on his forehead as he saw his chief antagonist rise forcefully to his feet. The two men could not have been more different. Hammet was tall, lean, and came across very much like the Marine sergeant he had been before retirement. Tom, by comparison, was soft-spoken and deferential, with a body type that could only be described as doughy. Hammet was deeply resentful of the floating diocese, which he saw as an attempt to undermine his authority in Texas, and he had very nearly split from the Synod over the issue. He still entertained the notion regularly, and publically, especially after a few shots of bourbon.

Thus far Tom’s work had been largely comprised of picking up the pieces of people’s lives and ministries left shattered by Hammet. The image of a bull wearing a mitre rampaging through a Catholic bookstore and icon boutique flashed through Tom’s mind. He shook his head to clear it.

“Gentlemen....” He nodded in Van Patton’s direction, but could not bring himself to say “ladies.” Van Patton once again donned her trademark glower.
“It has come to my attention that there is a religious order attached to our Synod that is the very antithesis of Christian virtue and values. I speak of the so-called Berkeley Blackfriars, the Old Catholic Order of St. Raphael in California....” He spoke the syllables for California as if they were separate, equally detestable words.

Tom grabbed the arms of his chair to quell the vertigo that rushed through him. There was not a drop of afternoon sleepiness in him, now. Only pure, panicked adrenaline. He had been given oversight of the Order of St. Raphael when he had first been consecrated—mostly because none of the other bishops knew what to do with them. They were an ecclesiastical anomaly, an order of exorcists, friars whose entire ministry stood in direct contradiction to everything the modern church holds dear: rationality, psychology, and order.

Certainly Tom agreed that there was nothing orderly about the Order of St. Raphael, but from the moment he met them during his first episcopal visit, he discovered in them kindred spirits. He let them in on his secret fascination with Theosophy, and they had passed him a joint. Thus far, his relationship with the friars had been a marriage made in heaven. They were not just his charges, they were his friends.

“I have it on good authority,” Hammet announced, “that the men in this order have no respect for the Catholic tradition. They are hedonists and perverts, and what’s more, they are Satanists.”

A collective gasp rose up from the assembled bishops, and Tom slunk down in his seat in an unconscious attempt to disappear. It was true they were hedonists, Tom agreed silently. No doubt about that. He had never seen anyone put away as much liquor and weed in one weekend as the Blackfriars had done. Yes, they were addicts and alcoholics, some more than others. And yes, some of them were perverts, if that’s what
you regarded gay men and bisexuals. But Tom didn’t consider them perverted. Terry’s marriage to Brian seemed to him to be one of the healthiest he had ever witnessed, gay or straight. Certainly it was more functional than his own marriage. But Satanists? No, they were not Satanists. Occultists, maybe, perhaps even Theoretical Magicians. But Satanists? No. He struggled with what to say, and how to say it.

Bishop Stolte of Oregon asked to be recognized and stood. “My brother and sister bishops, as many of you know, my son Charlie has suffered from mental illness his entire life. At least we thought it was mental illness. When paranormal phenomena began to accompany his seizures, Bishop Tom Müeller suggested I call on the Order of St. Raphael. They drove up the very same day I called them. They were friendly, respectful, and knowledgeable regarding demonic possession. They quickly ascertained that my son was not epileptic, but possessed. Against their advice, I assisted at the exorcism. I can tell you they are the real thing. They wrestled with that demon for nearly twenty hours, but eventually, they beat that beast, and restored my son to me. They could not have done it if they were not faithful ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As our Lord said, ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ They did not cast that demon out by the power of Satan, but by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

He sat down again, and Bishop Tom was heartened as two more bishops rose and offered testimonies on behalf of the Order’s ministries in their own situations. Each of them spoke glowingly. He was beginning to feel downright confident when Bishop Hammet asked for the floor again. “Yes, yes,” he agreed, “they are very effective at seeming to be on the side of the angels. But the means do not justify the end, gentlemen! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light! We have wolves in sheep’s clothing right here in our own Synod, and they must be rooted out!”
The Presiding Bishop looked at his watch and sighed. “All right, stand down, Bishop Hammet. We will break here for the night. Tomorrow we will consider Bishop Hammet’s evidence against the friars after we have concluded the business already on the agenda. Let us pray....”

The bishops stood and bowed their heads, but Bishop Tom remained seated, too stunned to move. Should he call Richard and the others? Of course he should. There wasn’t anything any of them could do, but they deserved to know what was being said about them. Realizing he was the only seated person in the room, he stood up quickly, sending his chair flying. Every eye in the room shot open and in his direction as the clatter of metal on linoleum echoed through the cavernous hall.

:: 9 ::

Nurse Stahl had, apparently, been listening at her door, since as the heart-monitor alarm sounded, she raced into the room and began shouting, “Back off! You’re killing him!” The friars stood frozen, uncertain how to respond to this intrusion at the very point of expelling the beast.

“It’s just a ruse!” Terry tried to intercept her, but she evaded him like an veteran running back and grabbing the hospital bed now inexplicably hovering a foot or more off the ground. She yanked it down to the floor with a crash of steel. She snatch a syringe from a nearby tray and, quickly filling it, injected the man in the neck. Summoning every ounce of strength, she pounded on the old man’s sternum once, twice, and then pushed upon it rhythmically, without ever taking her eyes off of the green-glowing monitor.

As she worked, the old man stabilized and his breathing
returned to normal. Wiping sweat from her forehead, she turned and faced the friars. “I was afraid this would happen. I don’t care how nasty this demon is, if you try this again, you murder him.”

The friars swallowed and looked at each other, angered by the abrupt *exorcismus interruptus*, but Richard knew in his heart she was right. They would have expelled the demon, all right, but at the expense of the old man’s life. It would have been a shallow victory indeed.

Just then the door at the far side of the room smashed open. A tall, handsome man of about Terry’s age burst through, his mouth open in disbelief. “What the *fuck* is going on here? And who the hell are you?” He was dressed in a dark blue suit, sans jacket. His sleeves were linkless and flapped around, his forearms wet as if he had just been washing. Rings adorned his hands ostentatiously, a large red stone in particular flashed on his right hand.

Nurse Stahl looked around at the disaster area the room had so quickly become, and her horror showed on her face, plain for anyone to read. “Oh, Mr. Dane, I’m so sorry. I had no idea this would happen—”

His rage was evident, but instead of mounting a defense, Richard froze. There was something about the angry young man’s face—something disconcertingly familiar. Then his blood ran cold. He knew him—had known him, he realized with a shock, in the biblical sense. It had been at the Jizz Factory, the gay bathhouse in west Berkeley, only last month. He hadn’t known Dane’s name then, or that he was one of the richest men in the Bay Area, but he remembered every detail of the man’s ass.

“Mr. Dane, these are priests,” Nurse Stahl said quickly, before Dane did anything to hurt the friars. “They’re here to help your father.”

Silence hung in the air as Richard was momentarily paralyzed.
“We’re from the Old Catholic Order of St. Raphael,” Terry jumped in, extending his hand in greeting. “I’m Fr. Terry Milne. These are my colleagues, Fr. Richard Kinney, and Brother Mikael Bloomink, one of our novices.”

Mr. Dane’s eyes locked on him, and Richard knew he was experiencing his own little shock of surprise. “Mr. Dane and I have met before,” Richard admitted, “in a rather...anonymous environment.”

Terry rolled his eyes. “Oh, Jesus Christ. Well, I guess formal introductions are not necessary, then, since you two already know each other intimately.”

Mikael was utterly lost, but did not ask for clarification. Dane’s anger appeared to drain from him, but he seemed uncertain what to say or do. He ran his hands through his hair and breathed deeply, trying to catch his breath. It was obvious he was working hard to master himself.

“So, you’re a priest?” He said, as if Richard were the only other person in the room.

“Yes. I take it you’re a tycoon or something,” Richard answered.

“And we’re both liars,” Dane said, a slight smile beginning to curl his lip.

“When we need to be, I guess that’s true,” Richard conceded.

“Well, it’s nice to see you again, Richard.” He looked around the room at the rest of them, now. Then, staring straight at Nurse Stahl, added, “Although I would have preferred other circumstances.”

“Mr. Dane, Ms. Stahl called us because she was concerned about your father, that he might be possessed by a demon,” Richard interceded. “She did the right thing. He is possessed. We didn’t do any of this,” he said, waving his hand around the wreckage of the room. “The evil being resident in your father did it.”
“And yet,” Dane said, “before you got here, nothing had been smashed in this room for, oh, a hundred years?!” His eyes narrowed, and the anger returned to his face. “Who the hell gave you permission to come in here and do an exorcism?”

None of them spoke. Finally, Richard cleared his throat. “Mr. Dane, surely you wouldn’t want your father to suffer having a dem—”

“I did,” Nurse Stahl stepped forward. “I called them, I told them what I saw, and I asked them to help your father. If you want to fire me, go ahead, but these priests have done nothing wrong. They were just doing...their jobs. And honestly, so was I.” She looked down. “I know I should have asked you about it first. But I was afraid...I was afraid....” She didn’t finish.

Richard had a good idea of what she wanted to say, but couldn’t. She was afraid Dane wanted his father to be possessed, for some unknown, twisted reason of his own that Richard could not begin to guess.

Dane once again mastered his anger. He placed a compassionate hand on the nurse’s shoulder. “I understand. You were just trying to help.” He turned back to Richard. “Did you succeed?”

Richard shook his head. “We met with...a bit of an impasse. We were on the brink of expelling the demon, but in your father’s condition...we almost lost him.”

A satisfied smile passed over Dane’s face, but he quickly covered it up with a look of concern. “I’m sorry you troubled yourself for nothing, then. I will...consult with some experts of my own, and decide what to do. I’m grateful that you brought this issue so forcefully to my attention.” He shook Richard’s hand and gave him a disingenuous nod of thanks. “However, if, in the future, you plan to conduct any rituals that might include members of my family, I will thank
you to consult me first.” With that he walked towards the door and called over his shoulder. “I trust, Nurse Stahl, you can show these monks to the door.”

“Friars,” Terry corrected him, and then jumped at the sound of the slammed door.

:: 10 ::

Kat wandered a foggy street, the cement covered with occult symbols, painted in white and yellow like lane division lines gone horribly awry. She skipped through them as if she were playing hop-scotch, daring not to touch any of the lines. But it was getting harder, because she was aware that she was being pursued—by what she did not know, but she could feel a chill breath on the back of her neck.

Then, suddenly, the lines stopped. A huge circle appeared, empty of the yellow and white symbols, a large white house at the center of it, across the street from where she stood. Floating out to meet her was a scarecrow of a man with wild black hair, his legs gyrating as if pedaling a unicycle, but his feet never touching the ground. He floated straight up to her, and kissed her on the lips—

She awoke, to the embarrassing realization that she was drooling on the seat next to her. She looked around and recognized the place. She was in the waiting area of the emergency room of Alameda Hospital.

Comprehension swarmed in. Randall, comatose, and she had been waiting...how long? She rubbed her eyes and squinted at the clock on the wall. Three hours. Three hours, and the doctors had yet to say one word to her.

She moved her head around to work out the kink that had developed in her neck. She had been dreaming, but had it
been just a dream, or was it a *Dream?* She could never tell—she just knew that sometimes her dreams were portentous. More than that, they were often *true*—sometimes symbolically, often literally.

She pulled out her Blackberry and checked her email. She rolled her eyes at the seven messages devoted solely to her coven’s drama *de jour.* She loved her sisters, but it seemed to her that the Berkeley brand of feminist-eco-pagans were addicted to interpersonal conflict and perpetual emotional processing in a way she had rarely encountered before moving to the area. By comparison, Seattle Wiccans seemed almost sane.

She exhausted her email, and began surfing the Web. Ignoring the sign prohibiting cell-phones, she tried to distract herself. Moving her thumbs like lightning across the buttons, she went to Google and typed in “Satanic Ritual.” Then, in a flash of inspiration, she typed, “investigation.”

The first website on the list belonged to a Christian group. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. *The Order of St. Raphael,* she read, *was dedicated to the expulsion of demons and the investigation of occult phenomena.*... As she continued reading she discovered that they specialized in Satanic ritual and spiritual emergencies of all kinds.

As she read, she battled against an internal aversion to anything even remotely connected to Christianity. She felt anger rise hot in her throat as she thought of the nine million women accused of witchcraft in the past one thousand years that the church had condemned to horrible, grisly deaths. Those women’s stories were her legacy, whether any of them had actually been witches or not. Kat *was* a witch, and proud of it, and an angry defiance welled up within her whenever she encountered Christians.

All Christians were hicks—at least every one she had ever encountered—backward, anti-intellectual bigots who would
stop at nothing, no matter how unethical, to coerce the rest of the nation into sharing their own prejudiced opinions. That was why, as she read the Order’s website, much of what she read simply did not compute. *The friars of St. Raphael were of a liberal theological orientation, and were committed to the well being of peoples of all faith traditions.*

She could hardly believe what she was reading. She was sure she didn’t understand it, perhaps she didn’t want to. She certainly did not want to call them, but where else to turn? It seemed that something like fate was involved when she got to the bottom of the website and discovered that their friary was less than five miles away.

The Holy Apocrypha Friary was in North Berkeley, just a couple of blocks from the original Peet’s Coffee. She knew the neighborhood well, as a former boyfriend had lived just across Shattuck, near Big Apples. The area was informally known as the “Gourmet Ghetto,” as it was home to Chez Panisse and many other fine restaurants. She didn’t know exactly where the Holy Apocrypha Friary was, but she was sure she could find it without too much trouble. She scribbled the address on a piece of paper and chewed on her lip, staring at the TV but not seeing it. As soon as she had news about her brother, she decided, she would pay the friars a visit.

:: 11 ::

When the doorbell rang, Dylan had been in the back yard wrestling with the great golden lab, Tobias. At the sound of it the dog had barked and rushed off to investigate, while Dylan stumbled into the kitchen. Brian was laying a huge handful of kale into a frying pan and a cloud of steam arose, filling the house with the glorious smell of garlic.
Although Brian was about Dylan’s own height, he seemed larger, mostly because he was a hunchback—the large dromedarian hump swelled from just behind his right shoulder, stretching tight the fabric of his flannel shirt. It also forced Brian’s head to cock to the left, creating an illusion of perpetual inquiry. “Smells good, amigo,” Dylan said, swallowing against the rush of saliva.

“You got a meeting?” Brian asked. “Now?”

“Yeah. Baptism.”

“You got grass in your hair.”

“Thanks, dude.” Dylan picked at what was left of his unruly red mane.

“And you reek of marijuana. Altoids are on the fridge.”

“You are mah salvation,” Dylan responded almost liturgically, shoving four of the mints into his mouth and crunching them.

Brian looked up at the clock and shot him a look.

“Dinner’s at eight.” However unsettling his disfigurement might seem to strangers, amongst the friars Brian was the benevolent dictator of the household, a true Jewish mother in all but genitalia.

“Ah’ll make it quick. Start without me if you need to.”

Brian didn’t say anything—a wordless reproach, which, Dylan realized, was justified. An artist deserves to have his friends show up on time to appreciate his art, after all, and Brian’s cooking was high art indeed.

The foyer was at the foot of the chapel, and Tobias was sniffing at the door and making rumbling sounds in his throat. “It’s okay, big boy, they’re nice people.” Dylan realized he had no evidence of this as he opened the door, and then conceded to himself that, indeed, some things needed to be taken on faith. He grinned, swung out the screen door and offered his hand. “You must be the Swansons! Welcome to the Friary, I’m Fr. Dylan.”
A couple in their early thirties stood there, looking like they might cut and run at any moment. Holding on to the end of her father’s arm, a little girl of about four bunched a wad of her blond, curly hair in her fist as she twisted to and fro. “Hello, little one!” he said to her cheerfully. But seeing the surprise registered on the couple’s faces, Dylan realized what a sight he must be after his wrestling match with Tobias. “Sorry about mah appearance—Ah’ve been...working in the yard. Why don’t ya’ll come with me?”

The couple shook his hand and followed him inside the enormous farmhouse that had once been the only structure in North Berkeley for miles around. The two seemed a little spooked by the gaudy excess of the chapel, and gladly followed Dylan to an adjoining room used by the friars for spiritual counseling.

Dylan’s heart melted as he saw that someone—probably Susan—had placed a plate of Brian’s famed snickerdoodles on the little table. “Please have a seat—and a cookie.” The little girl ran up to the plate and snatched one off. She already had it in her mouth when she looked at her mother for permission. Her mother nodded, and the little girl began chewing with gusto.

Dylan ran his hand through his hair in one more pointless attempt to look presentable. “So, we’re doing a baptism for this beauty, eh?” He leaned in and made a funny face at the little girl, who immediately shrank back in horror.

“Well, yes, I suppose so.” The man looked at his wife hesitantly. For a moment indecision played over his face. With a grim look of resolve, he started in. “Look, we’re not sure we should even be here. And I’m afraid that if I just tell you the truth, you’re going to kick us out on our asses.”

“Dude,” Dylan laughed, “you are so speaking mah lan-
guage. Why don’t you just spill the beans and see how it
goes? Ah guarantee you ain’t gonna ask me anything Ah haven’t heard before.”

“Okay,” said the man warily, choosing to take Dylan at his word. “Look, my wife and I are not Catholics—in fact, we’re not Christians. Hell, we’re not even religious. But Connie’s family, they’re rabid. They’ve been calling us every day asking us when we’re going to get Jamie, here, baptized, sending us these horrible articles from these fucking fundamentalist Catholic websites about how our baby is going to spend eternity in Limbo if she dies. We both think this is complete and utter bullshit, but we don’t know how to get her folks off of our back! So we’re giving in....” he trailed off with a look of defeat.

Connie picked up the thread. “You—well, not you, but one of the monks, here—did a wedding for my friend Pam, and she said you were...pretty cool, which I thought was a pretty strange thing to say about monks.” Her voice was unusually rough, as if she had been smoking three packs a day since infancy. “So we thought we would just come and talk to you about it, without making any plans or promises or anything, because we’re just not sure, well, even what we’re doing here, or if we should be here—”

Dylan held his hand up to stop the sentence that didn’t seem to have an end in sight. “First off, we’re friars, not monks—we friars live and work out in the world with regular folk. Second, Ah think Pam is right. Ah think we can probably help. What if we gave your family everything they want—a baptismal liturgy with all the right ritual actions, performed by a qualified Catholic priest—and, at the same time, we craft the words of the liturgy to reflect your spirituality, and your real hopes and desires for little...”

“Jamie,” said Connie.

“...little Jamie, here. What do yuh think?”

They looked at each other, a little surprised.
“Sounds...okay,” the man said.
Dylan glanced at the plate of snickerdoodles—they were calling to him. “Why don’t we start with you two telling me your own understanding of baptism?” He grabbed a snickerdoodle and ate half of it in one bite.

“Well, I—”

“Ah’m sorry, what was your name?” Dylan asked, his mouth full of cookie.

“John.” The man swallowed and started again. “Well...I...I wasn’t raised religious, so I guess I don’t really know....”

“I hate that original sin stuff,” Connie piped up with the ladylike timbre of gravel in a blender. “If baptism is all about wiping away original sin, then we are so out of here.”

Dylan laughed. “Thank you, St. Augustine,” he said, shaking his head. “Well, it’s true that Western Catholicism has tended to focus on the original sin side of things, but that’s not the whole story. The Eastern Orthodox maintain an earlier tradition that says that all babies are born good. Well, morally neutral, actually. They’re good just as every other part of God’s creation is good, but they don’t have any stains on their souls or any nonsense like that.”

Connie relaxed a little. As he talked, Dylan noticed that her features softened a little. Maybe, he allowed himself to hope, they’re starting to like me a little.

“For the Orthodox,” he continued, “Baptism welcomes the child into the Community of God.”

“But...what does that mean?” asked John.

“Well, that’s the million-dollar question!” Dylan laughed. “Some people draw the circle very small—you know, who’s in the circle of grace, and who’s out. Like Christian fundamentalists draw the circle very small, only those who believe exactly like they do are ‘in.’ Some of them even exclude other fundamentalists who don’t belong to their particular sect.
The Orthodox are interesting, because they mean, on one level, the Church, but they also believe that the entire universe is in the process of being transformed into God’s Community. So in the Church they celebrate in miniature the community of grace that is transforming the cosmos into divinity itself.”

“Wow,” said John. “I’m not sure I follow, but it sounds pretty trippy.”

“So...Fr. Dylan, where do you draw the circle?”

Dylan smiled, and it lit up his whole flat, Melungeon face. “I think that everything that is, is in the circle.”

“So, what is baptism about?”

“I like to think of it as a ‘Welcome to Earth’ celebration, because the whole world is God’s Community for those who have their eyes open to it. And my hope is that you’ll be able to bring her up so that she can see that.” He patted Jamie on the head, and handed her another snickerdoodle.

In spite of her obvious efforts not to, Connie began to cry. “Oh my God,” Dylan said, instantly chagrined, “did I say something wrong?” He looked to John for help.

Connie picked up Jamie, and held her in her lap. “No, it’s okay. I’m just...relieved.”

“Awww...bless your heart,” Dylan relaxed. He picked up the plate and held it out to her. “Have a cookie,” he offered.

No sooner had the door shut behind the friars than Alan Dane walked up behind Nurse Stahl. Thinking he had left the room, she gave a little start, then opened her mouth to say something. He held up his hand, and a paternal smile spread across his face like a plague as he spoke. “Not a
word, my dear. Not a single fucking word. You will now return to your room, where you will pack all that you have. Without saying goodbye to myself or my father, you will leave this house in fifteen minutes—less, if you can. Any remaining pay will be forwarded to your permanent address. Go.” He waved her away like a mosquito, and sat on the bed next to his father.

He picked up one age-spotted hand in his own and held it as he talked. “Well, we have had an adventure today, haven’t we? I take it those priests gave you quite a workout.” The red and glowing eyes of the old man pierced him with fierce and impotent rage, but the demon said nothing.

The younger Dane leaned in to whisper conspiratorially. “You didn’t think you’d get out of it as easily as that, did you? Really?” He fixed his father with a malevolent grin. “No, dear father, you will not have your release. Not yet. Not while I live and breathe. Need I remind you what you did to me when I was young and helpless? When I could not escape? Did you have pity on me then? Do you really expect any from me, now? I know this demon is hard to live with, father dear, but it keeps your heart beating so that you can enjoy an interminable string of boring, excruciatingly painful days, world without end.”

He sat upright again, and smoothed out the bedclothes, arranging them neatly. “Don’t look at me like that,” he said, although in truth, his father’s expression had not changed since he sat down. It was frozen in a permanent mask of unmitigated hatred.

“It’s not like I’m the evil one. You were the one who ruined countless lives to build your fortune. You were the one who drove mother to end her own life. You were the one who...did what you did to me. I’m not persecuting you, father dear. I’m simply giving you an opportunity to atone for your own sins. I know, the burden of the flesh is hard,
and it would feel ever so good to let go, to shake off this mortal flesh and let your spirit breathe free, but would that be justice? Oh, it would be kind, no doubt, but would it be right?"

He grinned at the old man. “And I’m not terribly interested in kindness, not now—no, in that you taught me well. But it wouldn’t be fair to let you...expire...without having settled the karmic debt, if only just a little bit, would it?”

The young man shot him a satisfied look. “Oh, no need to thank me, it’s what I do, you know. You savaged people. I save them. Oh, you made me what I am, no question, but I seek to undo all the evil you worked at so tirelessly.”

The younger Dane wiped at his own brow melodramatically. “I don’t expect you to be proud of me, heaven knows. I certainly don’t expect you to love me. I don’t even need you to like me.”

He held aloft the glowing red ring on his right hand and menacingly brought it far too close to the old man for the demon’s comfort. The possessed creature jerked and wrestled against the bedclothes, trying to back away from the ring, but the young man held him fast. “I only require that you fear me. And suffer. And despair. Is that too much to ask?”

:: 13 ::

Susan was buried in a web page she was proofreading when the phone rang. She picked it up absentmindedly. “Holy Apocrypha Friary,” she said almost robotically. “Susan? Bishop Tom here.”

Susan forced herself to break away from the screen. “Tommy! Hey, how’s the day trading going?” Then she
remembered. “Omigod, the synod is on now, isn’t it? Shit, how is the synod going?” The friars had been checking their email every night after dinner for updates. So far there had been nothing terribly exciting.

“Not well, I’m afraid. Is Richard there?”

“No, he’s out getting his pound of demon-flesh with Terry and Mikael.”

“Dylan?”

“Baptismal consultation. Sorry, you’ll just have to speak to a Lutheran,” she said, referring to herself, “or a Jew,” she added, referring to Brian, “or there’s always Tobias. I must warn you, however, that he doesn’t pass on information reliably. And he sheds prodigiously. Possibly even over the phone.”

“Can you have Richard or Dylan call my cell phone when you can? We’re neck-deep in shit, here.”

“What’s going on?” she asked, suddenly serious.

“An objection was raised against the Order during our session today.”

“What kind of objection?”

“Look, Susan, I don’t want to alarm anyone unnecessarily, but we’re actually on the agenda tomorrow.”

“Oh my God! Tom, what are they saying? And who’s accusing them?”

“It’s the conservatives of course. They’ve been out to get the boys for quite some time, and after the Bishop Kaarlson fiasco, they’re seizing their chance.” He breathed a deep sigh. “They’ve been accused of Satanism.”

“That’s crazy! Surely no one is going to take them seriously.”

“Sadly, they are,” Bishop Tom sighed heavily, and the weight of it carried over the phone without any loss of effect or meaning. “Susan, they’re talking about excommunication.”
Dylan knew that he was indeed late for dinner as he saw John, Connie, and little Jamie out. “Ah’ll email a liturgy for you to look over, especially adapted to your situation,” he said. They nodded, and thanked him. “Goodbye, honey,” he waved at Jamie. “You be good!” She pumped her head forward exactly once, and turned to walk down the steps. Dylan closed the door behind them.

He sighed deeply, taking in the enticing aroma of Brian’s cooking, and looked at his watch—ten past. “Ah’m not too late,” he announced at the kitchen’s threshold, hoping Brian would agree. A huge, rough-hewn wooden table took up half of the room, and Brian and Susan, seated on its long benches, ate sullenly, silently.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Before she could answer the front door banged open and Richard, Terry, and Mikael stumbled in, tired and not a little bit hungry. They dropped their kit bags at the chapel door and joined the rest of the Friary family at the table.

As usual, Brian’s cooking was exquisite. The evening’s menu was mostly Middle Eastern, with lamb, falafel, salads, pita bread, steamed greens, and generous helpings of tahini and hummus on top of it all.

But before anyone dug into any of it, Susan announced, “Guys, you need to call Bishop Tom right away.” She filled them in on what Tom had told her, noting painfully the look of shock and anger on her husband’s face. Richard, Terry, and Mikael looked likewise stunned.

“Holy shit,” Richard said, breaking the shocked silence. “Do you know what that means?”

“Hell, yes,” Dylan said. “Ah know what excommunication means. It means we won’t be affiliated with the Old Catholic Synod of America. Big deal.”
“It is a big deal. If we aren’t affiliated, we don’t have a bishop. And if we don’t have a bishop....”

“We’re not Catholics,” Terry finished his sentence, horrified by the implication.

“That’s right,” Richard said.

“So?” asked Susan. “You could be Lutheran friars.”

They all shot her twisted, pained looks. “What?” she protested. “It’s not oxymoronic! They have Lutheran nuns in Germany!”

“If we’re not plugged into the Apostolic Succession,” Richard said, “we lose our priestly mojo—worst of all, we lose any power we might have over demons. We have to have a bishop to be connected to the Succession.”

“Oh,” Susan said. “Is that really true?”

“It is for us,” Richard said.

“That would be the end of the line for us, gents,” Dylan said. “So what can we do?”

“Well, let’s not panic,” Richard said. “After dinner, we’ll call Bishop Tom and get the details.”

“He sounded pretty rattled.” Susan gingerly stuffed a pita. Richard let out a tired sigh. “Let’s hope these things just happen in threes, because, honestly, I don’t think I can take another major disappointment today.”


Terry beat Richard to the punch. “Philip dumped him.”

Susan’s mouth dropped open and she banged the table with a plump fist. Richard scowled at Terry. “No,” Susan said. “I don’t believe it. I like Philip! Did he give a reason?”

Richard was suddenly awash in depression. “He said I didn’t have time for him—or didn’t make time for him.”

“Oh.” Susan picked at her falafel sandwich. “Well, that’s true. I struggle with that one myself.” She glanced sideways at her husband. Dylan shrank noticeably in his seat.

“Thanks a lot,” Richard said, the hurt evident in his voice.
“Well, it is true.” No one at the table disagreed. “I’m really sorry, Dicky,” Susan said after chewing a bite. “You deserve a good person like him.”

Brian reached for the salad and placed a goodly portion on his plate. “What was the second disappointment?”

Terry piped up, “We had what you might call an unsuccessful exit job this afternoon.”

“Well, you’ve had those before,” Brian said philosophically. “What went wrong?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same question,” Richard said, a faraway look in his eyes. “And I honestly don’t know. The demon was responding well, and then at the point of expulsion...well, we stopped it.”

“Why?” asked Susan.

“We were afraid we were going to kill the host,” Terry admitted. “But Dicky’s right. It shouldn’t have been that hard.”

“And then there was the whole Jizz Factory surprise,” Terry continued, kicking Richard under the table. “Okay, I know you’re always down on me for buying into these conspiracy theories, but I wonder if maybe your...encounter with Dane wasn’t an accident?”

All eyes turned to Richard. “Okay, we didn’t hear this bit,” said Brian grinning salaciously. Susan looked at Richard with a complex mixture of compassion and disappointment.

“You did seem more surprised by it than he did,” Mikael noted.

Richard looked down at his plate, hating the feelings suddenly coursing through him. “Maybe Richard was just more ashamed,” said Terry, and the truth of it was evident.

“Maybe he worked some kind of spell on you,” Dylan said. “Or maybe he planted something on you! Dude, were you top or bottom? ‘Cause if you were bottom—”
Richard slammed the table with the flat of his hand. “I am *not* having this conversation!”

“Oh, but honey,” said Susan soothingly, “you *are*. You have to. We’re all in this together, and whatever you did in that bathhouse affects us, too. We’re not blaming you for anything, we’re just talking—”

But Richard had pushed away from the table and was already pounding up the back stairs.

“...and he’s gone,” said Dylan, staring at the space where Richard had been. “That Dane guy could’a planted a bug or something up Dicky’s bunghole, that’s all I was sayin’.”

“Internalized homophobia,” pronounced Brian, gathering dishes. “That’s always been Dicky’s problem.”

“But what do we *do*?” asked Mikael.

“For now, we do dishes,” said Brian. He waved at Dylan and Mikael, “and it’s youze guyses turn.”

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Dylan washed and placed the dishes in the right hand sink for Mikael to rinse and dry.

“Do you really think we’ll get excommunicated?” Mikael asked sullenly.

“’Sa good question, amigo,” Dylan said. “I just wanna know where the charges are comin’ from. We never had any trouble before. In fact, we’ve been commended by the Synod more’n once.”

“We should have sent a delegate,” Mikael said. “Nobody is there to represent us.”

“Bishop Tom is there,” Dylan said. “But I take your point. Bishop Tom is about as aggressive as a baby chick.” He shook his head. “His heart’s in the right place, but he ain’t
gonna stand up to the bastards. He has a thing against rockin’ the boat.”

“Fucking Bible-belt pricks,” Mikael muttered. “I’ll bet my ass it’s those Tridentine Mass nutcases in Texas. They hate us.”

“Eh, the feeling is kind of mutual,” Dylan admitted. “Their bishop don’t ordain women, and thinks that all sexual minorities are headed straight to Hell, except for the celibates, o’ course.”

“Yeah, but we’ve never tried to excommunicate their fundamentalist asses!” Mikael said hotly.

Dylan chuckled. “They’re still brothers, even if they do...have it all wrong.”

Just then, out the window above the sink, a young woman strode into view across the street. She was slight, dressed in a short poodle skirt and a black leather biker jacket, her long black hair waving in the wind. She appeared to be pacing, and, it seemed, staring right at their house. “I sure like her style,” Mikael whistled. “Do you see her?”

“Huh? Who, ‘her’?”

“Her,” Mikael pointed out the window, but the woman had gone out of sight again. In a moment, though, she was back. “There,” he nudged at Dylan.

The portly priest squinted. “Oh, yeah. Cool jacket. Is she looking at us?”

“That’s what I was thinking. She looks kind of upset.”

Dylan nodded. She did. “If she was spying on us,” he reasoned, “she’d be more careful ‘bout it. Maybe she’s still makin’ up her mind whether to come across....” Then it hit him. “Wait! She’s tryin’ to approach the house and can’t. Terry!” He yelled.

Terry came running from the living room. “What? What’s wrong?”

“That girl out there—the one looking at us but definitely
“not crossin’ the street. Do you see anything we don’t see?”

“What?” asked Mikael. “Do you think she might be possessed—and can’t approach the house because of the warding?”

“Possessed or oppressed,” Dylan answered.

“Her aura is distressed, that’s for sure,” Terry said, squinting. “I can tell that even by the light of the streetlamp. “Wait...yeah, she’s got something else hanging around her. Not possession. Not even oppression, really. But Presence. As if something is watching her. Maybe even lying in wait.”

“I could go talk to her,” offered Mikael.

There was something in his tone. Dylan looked at Terry and they both grinned. “She’s your type,” said Terry.

“Yup, gothy-punk style, complexion like a corpse. She’s his type, all right.” Dylan shook his head. “Okay, Loverboy, go see what she’s up to. Take some gall, in case she’s really on her way in here and we need to send that demon packin’.”

Mikael dried his hands hurriedly, rummaged in the sacristy cabinet for a moment, and rushed out the front door. He slowed his pace as soon as he reached the street, and tried to look nonchalant.

Kat saw a tall, lanky goth guy emerge from the house at a sprint, and wisely slow down at the street. He seemed to grow even taller as he approached, and she noted how fine his features were, how angular and severe. He was painfully skinny, and his black clothes hung on him like a scarecrow. He reminded her of Morpheus, the Sandman, from the comic books series. So dark, so brooding, so...smiling.

“Hi,” he said. “We couldn’t help noticing you out here. Can I help you? I’m Mikael.” He offered his hand.

“Kat,” she said, a little flustered by the fact that this vision was actually speaking to her. “Webber. Kat Webber. That’s. My name. Hi.” She grinned back and felt like an idiot.
He didn’t seem to notice. “What’cha doing out here? I mean, other than looking at our house?” He realized how that might sound, and added. “Not that we mind—it’s a cool old house. One of the oldest in Berkeley. Maybe the oldest. But, I guess, I mean, is there a reason you’re looking at our house?”

“I was looking for the Holy Apocrypha Friary.”

“You found it.”

“You don’t look like a friar,” she said, noticing with not a little awe the prodigious inkwork covering his arms. “Not that I’m all that clear on what, exactly, a friar is in the first place.”

“I’m a novice, here, actually,” he said. “I’ll be a friar next month, Frith willing.”

“Frith?”

“Never read Watership Down?”

She had, actually, a long time ago. What an odd guy, she thought. “I need to talk to you guys,” she said, but then looked a little scared. “But for some reason, I can’t seem to cross the street.”

“We figured. The house is warded.” Oddly, the young man sat down on the sidewalk cross-legged, and pulled out of a shoulder bag a large abalone shell, and what looked like a midget-sized hockey puck.

“Warded? Like, as in magick? Warded against what?”

“Demons, of course.”

He said it so matter-of-factly, she was a little taken aback. But she knew he was right. “It’s my brother. I think he was doing demon-magick. I found this,” she pulled out the little paper triangle with the strange symbol on it.

Mikael studied it closely for a few long seconds. “That’s a sigil, all right,” he said. “Put it away, now. And don’t pull it out again. If your brother was doing what I think he was doing with that thing, we’re both in danger, now.”
“What? I’m not doing magick. Not demon magick, anyway.”

“No, but there’s magick associated with that thing, and it could put us all in danger.” He struck a lighter and held the flame to the side of the hockey puck. Then Kat recognized the object—a brick of self-lighting charcoal, the kind some of the women in her coven used for incense.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“We’re going to separate you from that beastie so that you can cross the street.”

“Your warding works pretty damn well.”

“It’s not us, it’s angelic warding, actually. And it does work pretty well.” He pulled out a plastic bag that looked like it was filled with the bloody entrails of an animal. Mikael blew on the charcoal to speed it along. “But we are pretty good at what we do, if I do say so myself. Everyone here has a specialty. Terry’s thing is the angel magick, you know, Enochian stuff. You’d be surprised how many thieves and homeless people are possessed or oppressed. The warding keeps the house pretty safe from petty thieves and opportunists. Kind of a positive side effect.”

He was too chatty, she thought. Perhaps he’s nervous. Perhaps, she dared to allow herself to think it, he’s as smitten with me as I am him. She told herself she was being silly and tried to suppress the thought.

Then, with gross fascination, she watched as he pulled some nameless, bloody organ from the plastic bag, and placed it on the charcoal. It fizzled and spat, and a noxious cloud of smoke erupted into the air. Mikael jumped to his feet and began waving the abalone shell around in front of her.

She had been smudged many times, especially before coven rituals. But she had always found sage a pleasant, cleansing odor. This was ghastly. She screwed up her face
and went into automatic, holding her arms up, and cooper-
ating with the smudging in due form, despite the acrid and
obnoxious stench.
“You’ve done this before!” Mikael said, delighted. She
turned and he began smudging her back.
“Yes, but it was never so unpleasant.”
“Unpleasant beasties require unpleasant means, I’m
afraid.”
He shot a glance toward the window, caught Terry’s eye
and gave an exaggerated shrug, a question: Is it safe?
Terry nodded vigorously, and waved his hand for Mikael
to hurry.
“Let’s go,” he said, and waved her after him. He held the
smoking abalone shell at her back all the way to the front
door. He placed the shell on the porch, and held the door
shut as he yelled through it. “Dudes, sigil alert! I need a
warded envelope, pronto!”
He heard scrambling from within, and in a few seconds, a
dark brown envelope was fed through the mail slot. He
turned to Kat and held open the envelope, “Okay, put the
sigil in here.”
“The paper-triangle-thingy?”
“Yeah, quick! Before the gall burns up.”
She nodded and dug in her jeans pocket for the paper. She
dropped it into the envelope, and Mikael sealed it fast. He
then dropped it in the mailbox. “You can pick it up on your
way out,” he said, “but I don’t recommend opening it
again.” He pushed open the door, then, and waved her
inside.
Tobias greeted her first, his tail moving in quick, happy
circles. And then suddenly she was surrounded by a gaggle
of men, most of whom looked like they would have felt right
at home at a science fiction convention or a Pink Floyd
reunion concert. Kat noted that most of the men were in
their late thirties or early forties, and balding—except for Mikael, who was younger with a head of insanely wild hair.

“Tobias is our guest master,” Mikael said, in what seemed a kind of apology for the dog’s exuberance. “His hospitality is unparalleled.”

Richard emerged from the front staircase, and Mikael proceeded to make further introductions. He then led Kat to the big table in the kitchen where the friars sat while Dylan put the kettle on and grabbed mugs for them all.

“How can we help?” asked Terry.

This wasn’t at all what Kat had been expecting. Except for the black robes, there was nothing even remotely monkish about the men seated around the table. Nor was there an air of saintliness hanging over the place. Indeed, it seemed like at any time they might grab a big bowl of potato chips and gather around the TV for a football game.

Hesitantly at first, and then in great gushes of emotion, she described the condition in which she had found her brother. They hung on every word, and one of them, the small, effeminate guy, took notes on a laptop. She was grateful for their attention, and felt better just talking about it to someone—someone who wouldn’t think she was crazy, that is.

“Where is your brother, now?” asked Dylan, pouring hot water into the mugs.

“In the hospital. They say that there’s nothing physically wrong with him, but they’re going to hold him overnight for observation.” Despite her best efforts, she started to cry. “What happened to him? Is he going to be okay?”

The friars looked at each other, and back at her with concern.

Richard spoke first. “I don’t know. But we’re going to find out. If there is anything we can do to return your brother to you, we will. We promise.” He offered her a grim smile that
betrayed more determination than certainty. “The first thing we need to do is inspect the ritual site. Do you still have the key to your brother’s house?”

She nodded.

“Dylan, Terry, let’s go.”

A throat cleared behind him. In the doorway to the kitchen stood Susan and Brian, arms crossed over their chests.

“Oh,” Richard said thinly, like the sound of air being emitted from a tire. He looked at his watch. “It’s almost 9:30 and we’ve all had a long day. Why don’t we investigate at your brother’s house first thing in the morning? We’ll all be fresh.”

Everyone smiled knowingly and nodded, pushing their chairs back.

“Except...” she began, and they all rested their elbows once more on the table. “Well, I’m a little freaked out. I don’t really want to go home. Not alone.”

“We have a guest room. You’re welcome to stay there,” Mikael offered. “In fact, it’s a really good idea, what with the sigil thingy and all. You’ll be safe here. The house is wa—”

“I know, the house is warded,” she smiled at him. “I know how well that works. Are you sure it won’t be any trouble?”

“Sure it’s trouble,” Richard said, getting up and carrying his tea with him. “Guests are always trouble. People are always trouble,” but before she could suspect a spirit of misanthropy, he winked at her. “But they’re almost always worth it.”

“Come on,” Mikael said, “I’ll show you to your room.”

She was secretly delighted to be staying in this enormous and unusual house, and longed to see more of it. She followed Mikael out the back door of the kitchen to a narrow set of stairs. At the top, they walked past several bedrooms that must have belonged to the friars. At the end of the hall,
they turned left and entered a small room with a large picture window. A single bed was there, made up and inviting. “That’s just the bedspread,” said Mikael. “I’ll get some fresh linens.”

While he was out, she took in the rest of the room. A small desk was set against the far wall, and a single low bookcase was set near the door. Above it hung a large mirror in a rough wooden frame. There were several hooks in the wall, but no closet.

In a moment he was back and together they set to making the bed. “Can I ask you a question?” Her voice was soft, tentative.

“Sure,” he answered.

“What was that all about? About starting tomorrow? Because if it was really about getting a good night’s rest, I’ll eat my pointed witch’s cap.”

Mikael laughed a hearty, throaty laugh. “You don’t miss a thing, do you?”

He straddled the desk’s chair backwards, and leaned his arms on its back while she settled in on the freshly-made bed.

“Well, it’s Shabbat.”

“Isn’t that a Jewish thing?”

“Yes, and since Terry’s partner is Jewish, we have adopted some of his tradition. Partly to accommodate him, and partly because it just makes good sense.”

“So what’s the significance of Shabbat? Not working? I thought we were going to go over there tomorrow? Doesn’t the Sabbath extend to sundown the next day?”

“Yeah, but we’re not that strict. We try to take Saturdays off, but when something major is up, we do what we need to do. After all, Jesus said, ‘When your ass falls into a hole on the Sabbath, don’t you pull it out?’”

“Great, so I’m an ass you’re pulling out of a hole.” She mock-pouted.
“We’re all asses, and we all have holes,” he grinned.
“So what’s it really about? The Sabbath thing?”
“Well, see, Old Catholics like ourselves are not required to be celibate, and some of us are partnered. Like Dylan and Terry....”
“Oh....” she smiled and her eyes grew large with comprehension. “Friday night is nooky night.”
“Bingo,” he said.
SATURDAY
Kat awoke to the inviting smell of frying bacon. She slipped on her jeans and headed to the bathroom. There was someone in it, of course. What did I expect, she thought, in a house with so many people? She padded down the back stairs in search of another, which she found just off the kitchen.

When she finished, Brian greeted her with a warm mug of coffee. “Hi, sweetie,” he said, without even a hint of impropriety to his familiar address. “Catch Susan in the shower up there?”

She nodded, and he rolled his eyes. “We tease her that she should just move a bed into the bathroom. How do you like your eggs?”

“Um...just fried, I guess.”

He nodded. “Yolks hard or runny?”

She smiled. “Runny, please.”

“Coming right up.”

She watched him as he worked. He was assembled with fine, bony parts that didn’t quite fit together right. He had a slight hunch in his back, and he moved with more pain than she had noticed last night. She wanted to ask him about it, but didn’t know how to do it without being rude. She mentally put it on her list of things to ask Mikael about the next time they were alone.
“I need to check in on my brother...” she began.
He waved towards the phone on the wall with his spatula.
Her fingers shook slightly as she dialed, and she sipped at the coffee as a conscious gesture of normalcy. She was connected to the nurses’ station quickly, and asked for an update on Randall Webber’s condition.
“No change,” a nurse told her, matter-of-factly. “He’s stable, but he’s not conscious.”
She thanked the nurse and fought back twin waves of panic and depression. “Where is everyone?” she asked Brian.
“Chapel—morning prayer. Why don’t you go in and see? They’ll be done soon, and I’ll serve you all together.”
“Can I take my coffee?”
He smiled big at her. “Why not? I hear Jesus loves coffee.”
She furrowed her brow at this silliness and tentatively walked out of the kitchen. A plaque beside the door announced that she was entering the Montague Summers Memorial Chapel. She gasped. Last night, it had been dark, and she had not noticed it at all. But with the sun streaming through the window above the altar, she was almost paralyzed by its gaudy glory. Just below the window was what appeared to be a community altar, with more candles and sacred objects than she could count: crucifixes, scrolls, icons of saints as varied as St. John of the Cross and Harvey Milk, a framed Rolling Stone cover of Jimi Hendrix, statues of Shiva and Ganesha, and even a posable figurine of Homer Simpson were positioned lovingly on the deep blue altar cloth.
Just in front of this was a free-standing altar, dressed but uncluttered except for two candles on its right and left sides. The friars were seated in chairs lining the walls to her right and left, facing each other, fully vested in albs, with some in stoles as well.
She slipped into one of the empty chairs on her left, and raised her head at Mikael’s nod of greeting. The friars were singing a chant in what seemed to be Latin. She found the music relaxing, and was surprised to find she felt warm and at home.

On the wall that faced her she noticed an enormous collage that almost dominated the room. It was the face of Jesus, looking odd and almost deformed. As she looked closer she saw that his face was an impressionistic collage of many photos, most of them, it seemed, cut from magazines. His left eye was definitely the dark and almond shape of someone from the east; his nose, exaggeratedly Semitic, was made up of a sandy beach scene; his mouth was framed by a dark and curly beard made out of a picture of a large black poodle. His right ear was lily-white and delicate, like a child’s or that of a petite woman. A hundred scenes, creatures, and faces seemed to have been pilfered to form this one face.

Kat couldn’t decide if the Frankensteinian icon was horrible or beautiful, but then she noted with a start the words that hung above it. Cut from large capital letters of many different fonts, the banner read, “THIS MAN EATS WITH FUCKUPS AND SINNERS.”

In spite of herself, a sob arose from deep within her and threatened to spill out into the quiet air. She choked it back and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. What was that all about? she thought, embarrassed, hoping none of the friars had noticed her rush of emotion. If they had, they didn’t show it. They kept up their chant until it trailed to a natural end.

Then Mikael rose, reverenced the altar with a brief bow, and removing a snuffer from its hook at the side of the altar, extinguished the candles.

“God is great, God is neat. Good God! Let’s eat!” announced Dylan, heading for the kitchen.
“Dylan, that doesn’t even work as a poem,” said Terry, shaking his head.

“In magick, as in religion, it’s the intention that counts, not the execution.”

“Do not listen to this man” Richard protested, catching Mikael’s eye. “That kind of talk will make you demon fodder and he knows it.”

“Ah know Ah’m hungry, that’s what Ah know.”

“Maybe it’s true in shamanism,” Terry offered, ever the conciliator.

“Good morning, Kat,” said Mikael, sitting down next to her. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did.” The words caught in her throat, and she felt another rush of unwelcome emotion. “That was really beautiful,” she finally managed. “Your singing.”

“That’s how we pray, here. ‘He who sings prays twice,’ said Augustine. He’s not my favorite saint by a long shot, but he did have a few good one-liners.” He noticed the blush in her cheeks and the wetness in the corners of her eyes. “You okay?”

“Yes...well, I think so. I’m...moved. I just need a moment.”

“Okay, well, I’m going to disrobe, and I’ll see you in the kitchen. Let me know if you need to talk, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” He left the room and she fished in her pocket for a tissue. As she blew her nose, her gaze returned to the face of the patchwork Christ. His black mouth was open as if he were about to speak.

She stood and shoved the tissue into her back pocket. Then she went and stood directly in front of the collage. In spite of herself, she spoke to it aloud. “You’re weird, but I’m listening,” she said, and then went in for breakfast.

Brian had managed to keep everyone’s eggs warm without ruining them, and even Susan had emerged from the bath-
room in time to get hers while still hot. Everyone tucked in but Richard, who leaned on his elbows and felt at his beard nervously.

“Dude, you doin’ okay?” Dylan leaned into Richard affectionately.

Mikael whispered to Kat, a little too loudly, “His boyfriend dumped him yesterday.”

Richard drilled Mikael with an evil eye and ignored the subject altogether. “Okay, this isn’t going to be a popular suggestion,” he said, “but we need to deal with the whole sigil situation.”

Mikael’s shoulders sagged. He had been afraid of this.

“What?” asked Kat, “Do you mean that paper-thingy with the symbol on it?”

“Yes,” Richard said. “It’s a sigil that has been demonically empowered. Whatever the demon was called up to do is mystically connected with that piece of paper. And whoever has seen it, besides the operating magician—that’s your brother, Kat—is susceptible to attack. That’s why you couldn’t approach the house last night.”

“Because there was a demon....”

“Riding your ass. Yes.”

“Well, what can we do about it? Isn’t there some spell—”

“We’re exorcists, not magicians,” Richard explained. “We study magick, but we don’t do magick. I can explain at another time, but for now, no, there’s nothing we can do as long as the working is in effect.”

“What do you mean, in effect?”

“I mean that whatever your brother employed the demon to do, it’s probably still doing it. Your brother is in no position right now to release the demon from his command.”

“But what does that mean? What is going to happen to me...or to you?” She pointed at Mikael, since she had shown him the sigil.
“It means that whatever happened to your brother is likely to happen to you if...well, if you leave the safety of a warded place. Like...this place.”

“You’re saying I have to stay here? I have a job! I have a life!”

“Well, you won’t have much of a life if you end up catatonic like your brother,” Richard said, a little harshly. “And you won’t be able to work, either.”

“So I’m trapped?”

“Of course not,” Dylan said with real compassion. “You’re free to go anytime you want. We’re just saying...it isn’t really safe to do so. We’re suggesting you hole up here for a while until we can investigate and see what we’re up against.”

“It’s not so bad,” Susan said. “Just call in sick. Consider it being down with the flu for a few days. You have your own room, you’ve got internet access, and Brian’s a hell of a cook. And the company’s not so bad, is it?”

Kat looked at Mikael and tried not to blush. “Looks like I’m camping out.”

“Could be worse,” Mikael smiled a weak smile. “It could be, yeah.”

“What about me? I saw the sigil, too,” Mikael said.

“That’s complicated,” said Richard. “We’ve got to figure out what Kat’s brother was up to. I think Dylan and I should go check out the scene of the ritual at Kat’s brother’s house. I don’t want to go in there alone in case there’s still demonic activity. Terry, can you go and visit...what’s your brother’s name again?”

“Randy...Randall.”

“Terry, you visit Randy, and see what kind of reading you can get off of him. See if he’s in there, the condition of his soul—whatever you can glean.”

“Will do.”
“What about me?” whined Mikael.
“You and Kat can give Brian a detailed description—verbally, mind you—of that sigil. Then you and Brian hit the books. If we’re lucky, we can find out which demon we’re dealing with here. Then, I want you to run down whatever addresses we uncover at the scene. I want to find out who Randall Webber was working with and where to find them.”
“But wait, he can’t leave the house. He’s in as much danger as Kat.”
“Terry, how hard would it be to ward Mikael’s car?”
“Not very. I could do it in about ten minutes.”
“Fine. Mikael, burn gall to get out to your car, and keep that shit handy just in case. You cannot leave that car, you hear me? If you have to stop for gas, burn the gall. If you have to pee, use a Snapple bottle—make sure to take one with you. If you have to shit, burn the gall all the way in to the gas station loo and all the way out, devil may care who sees or what they think of it. You got it?”
“Got it, chief.”
“All right. Mikael, you could be gone all day, make sure to phone Susan every hour on the hour to check in. The rest of us, shall we meet back for lunch?”
Nods all around. “Then let’s get cracking.”

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Dylan turned the key in the lock, and entered the room tentatively. “Should we do a banishing?” He asked.
“Good question,” said Richard as they hovered on the threshold. “If we do, we clear out the space of any negative energy and protect ourselves, and that’s good....”
“But we also dispel any readable energy as well,” Dylan finished his sentence. “What do you want to do?”
“I say we preserve the scene and risk it,” Richard decided.

“Imitatio Christi, dude. Let’s sacrifice ourselves!”

“You know, for a straight man, you’re absolutely the biggest damn drama queen in the Order.”

“Ah well take that as a cahmpliment,” Dylan drawled exaggeratedly, his best Scarlett O’Hara impersonation.

They entered and waited a moment for their eyes to adjust. At first it seemed to be a typical single-man’s home, except for the clammy feeling of cosmic dread that hung heavy in the place. “You feel that?” Richard asked.

“Oh, yeah. Heavy nasties goin’ on in here, that’s fer damn sure.”

Dylan went off to the right to investigate the bedrooms. Richard glanced at the piles of gaming magazines, the less-than-tidy kitchen. Then he rounded the corner into the living room. “Fuck...” he breathed.

Dylan caught up to him in a moment. “Hey, dude, bedrooms are a disaster, but nothing paranormal—whoa....”

Together they stared in awe. It was, in their eyes, a thing of beauty. The Circles of Evocation had been literally burned into the hardwood floors, creating a permanent working space that was both functional and elegant.

“God, how many hours must this have taken?” Richard wondered aloud, squatting to get a closer look. “It looks like it was done with a pen wood-burner.”

“Some project, that’s for sure.”

The outer circle was about nine feet in diameter, a second circle set within it about a foot all around. Within the second, smaller circle, four Stars of David were set in each of the cardinal directions. The bottom tips of each of the Stars formed the corner of a square in the center of the circle, each side of which was inscribed with one of the four letters of the Tetragrammaton. Just to the East of the circle was a triangle, each side about three feet long, with the flat side facing
the circle. Within it was a little table containing a small white triangle of paper propped up behind a censer.

“Ain’t no question what this guy was doing here.” Dylan said, walking around the circle, still in awe.

“No, and he wasn’t taking the easy way, either.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, most magicians who know what they’re doing use the *Heptameron* grimoire—it’s the simplest and most fool-proof method. But this isn’t the circle described in the *Heptameron*. This is the one from the *Clavicula Salomonis*, which is outrageously complex. Most people who use it are dabblers, and of course it always backfires on them because they’re just after kicks. They don’t want to do five years of preparation for a simple ritual, and so they cut corners, and end up frying their livers when their evocation only results in a partial manifestation of the demon.”

Using a handkerchief, Richard picked up a wand from the floor and studied it. “This is almond wood. This guy did the prep, all right. He knew *exactly* what he was doing. And he was definitely raising demons, but to what end? What was he *up to*?”

Dylan wandered to the bookcase, and whistled. “Quite a library, here, dude.” There were new, critical editions of all the major grimoires, and some ancient-looking leather-bound volumes he did not recognize.

Richard continued to study the circle, noting that just inside the circle was a table, and beside it on the floor, a crumpled tablecloth. In his mind’s eye Richard reconstructed the scene—the evocation, the magician passing out, catching the tablecloth on his way down, pulling it all to the floor. Gently, he parted the folds in the tablecloth. A boat containing the Perfume of Art—otherwise known as incense, and a metal censor. “He’s lucky the house didn’t catch fire when this shit fell,” Richard said aloud.
Dylan was still studying the library. “Dude, Ah shouldn’t be looking at the books on the shelves—but the ones off the shelves!” He picked one of them up. “Milton,” he said, “Opened to the scene of Satan’s initial oration in Pandemonium.”

Richard nodded and continued to study the triangle. “Here’s another one, dude,” Dylan said, moving to the sofa. “This one is describing...holy cow...it’s in Latin, but Ah think it says, ‘The Displacement of Souls.’”

He had Richard’s full attention now. He vaulted over the wreckage of the room to where Dylan was standing, hunched over a volume on the couch. The text was in Latin, but was pretty standard stuff and Richard was able to scan it pretty easily. It wasn’t a spell or a collection of spells, exactly. More of an analysis of the possibility of removing a soul from one body in order to reside in another. Near the bottom of the page, the names of two demons leaped out at him.

“It looks like our boy might have raised a demon—either Cephrastes of Crete or Articiphus—to remove his soul from his body and place it in another,” Richard said.

“So...if his soul was separated from his body, wouldn’t it be dead—the soul, I mean?”

Richard continued scanning the text but didn’t find anything relevant to Dylan’s question. “I would think so, but perhaps he’s running some kind of maintenance spell, to keep the body going even if no one is home.”

“That sounds plausible.”

“So the question is: whose body is he in? And what’s happening with that person’s soul? Is it just being pushed aside? Or is Randy just sitting inside his or her brain, watching?”

“New adventures in espionage?” Dylan asked, carefully setting the book on the desk beside the Milton. He then reached for another text that was laying open. “Swedenborg,
eh? Heaven and Hell. At least it’s in translation. Ah always loved Swedenborg.” He looked over the page.

Richard looked over his shoulder. It seemed to be a description of a particular neighborhood in Heaven—standard Swedenborgian vision stuff.

“What’s he interested in the geography of Heaven for?” Richard asked, moseying back to finish his investigation of the triangle.

“Ah don’t know, dude, but this section seems to be describing the downtown, civic center area of Heaven.”

Richard picked up a cloth crumpled on the floor and shook it out. With a clatter, a cell phone fell from its folds to the floor. “Bingo,” said Richard.

“What’cha got?” Dylan said. He marked places in all three books and put them in his shoulder bag before joining Richard in the circle and kneeling to examine the find. “Oh, it’s one of them old LG jobbers—Susan calls them ‘Barbie’s laptop.’ Was it flipped open like that when you found it?”

“Yeah. What does that mean?” Richard asked.

“Well, dude, that means that either he was text messaging someone during the ritual—highly unlikely, as you really don’t want to take your eyes off the demon, as you well know—or he was in speakerphone mode.”

They looked at each other. “Dyl, he wasn’t in this alone.” Richard fumbled with the controls. “I’m sure we can see what numbers he called just before the working, but—”

“Dude, if you don’t know what you’re doing, you better let me handle it—or better yet, Susan. Don’t want to erase anything accidentally, and this is a pretty weird phone. As Ah recall the reviews Ah read said the controls were not exactly intuitive. Let’s just take it home and pull up a pdf of the instruction manual and get at the info the right way. But yer right, we should be able to see who he called—or who called him. Might even give us the name, if it was a number he called regularly.”
“Okay. I think we’ve got enough for now,” said Richard, putting the phone in Dylan’s jacket pocket and fastening it. He patted it and they both nodded—it was safe, and they both knew just where it was. “Let’s do one final sweep of the house to make sure we didn’t miss anything obvious,” Richard said. “But let’s take different rooms this time—I’ll take the bedrooms and bath, you take the garage and kitchen.”

“Check.”

Just as Richard emerged from the bedrooms after a fruitless sweep, he waited in the foyer for Dylan and felt a rush of excitement. Between the phone and the books—and the evidence at the scene—they actually had a lot to go on. As he was musing, Dylan wandered out from the kitchen, an odd and curious expression on his face. “Dude, what’s with all the avocados in the fridge?”

:: 18 ::

Terry arrived at the hospital in full clerical dress. He was always amazed at the nearly unlimited access his priestly uniform afforded him in such places. As long as he was wearing his priest’s collar, no one questioned him, no one stopped him, and nearly everyone gave him a deferential nod whenever he caught their eye. Only occasionally did someone look close enough to notice his earrings, and he always enjoyed the double-take that precipitated.

He strode confidently to the information desk. “Randall Webber, please.”

The young student volunteer set her hand tentatively on her computer mouse like it was a dangerous beast she did not know how to control. “Uh...let me see...Webber...
Webber...oh, here he is. Room 2107. The elevators are right through there.”

“Thank you.”

Terry found the room without any trouble, and went inside. He had been curious to see what the magician looked like. They all seemed to be of a type, in his experience. Randall was no exception, he was not surprised to note. Skinny, malnourished, usually asthmatic. But this magician was also unconscious. Terry took a seat as he studied him.

With an effort of will, he softened the focus of his eyes, and summoned forth his second sight. The web of energy that was what all things were actually made of became visible to him, and he marveled at the beauty and intricacy of it.

His jaw dropped however, as his gaze was drawn to the magician’s head. His crown chakra seemed to be spitting blue fire like the back end of a rocket. The force of it seemed positively violent, and Terry wondered how such a stream of energy could possibly be maintained. He saw the drain on the magician’s body, but also intuited that much of the energy came from another source. And not a good one, he thought.

He approached the body, and laid hands upon it, feeling for the presence of some entity within, human or demonic. He was expecting to detect the presence of the magician’s soul, incapacitated by a chakra system blown to shit, like so many exploded fuses from one end of his torso to the other.

What he found made him pull his hands back in shock. What he sensed within was not human, nor demonic. He looked again at the blue light and noted a slight violet tinge to it. “Holy shit...” he whispered to himself.

Terry laid hands on the magician’s body once more and felt into him with the energy of his own body. The doctors apparently had been quite correct. Except for the deterioration one would expect from a body as sedentary as a com-
puter programmer’s, one that subsists almost entirely on Pringles and Coca-Cola, he was perfectly healthy. Terry detected two minor cysts, and a few cancerous cells that were, even as he detected them, being adequately defeated by the magician’s immune system. As normal as normal could be.

Except, of course, for the energetic anomaly, and that was quite a thing to behold. Terry felt around for the presence of some entity, and was beginning to think that the body was vacant, being kept alive by some sort of demonic life support when he encountered the Sleeper.

It was a subtle presence, almost undetectable. He thought at first that it might be a very weak demon, but the energy was all wrong. He surrounded the Presence with his own energy and examined its nebulous edges, its interface with the body. This, he found, was nonexistent.

Terry was not sure what to do. Should he leave the Sleeper as he was, unconscious and trapped in the magician’s body? Or should he try to connect the two, give the being a chance to emerge into consciousness? The image he got was of a fetus curled into a ball, protected from the wild world in a womb of alien flesh.

Terry hesitated. Who was he to bring forth this life into consciousness? Could he even do it? Should he? Terry considered phoning Richard or Brian, but then he glanced out at the hallway and wondered just how long he had before his presence would be detected, and perhaps challenged. He could hardly justify a pastoral visit to an unconscious patient that lasted more than five minutes. His mind raced—what to do?

He swallowed and made his decision. He laid hands upon the magician once again, and felt out for that place where the seat of the soul connects to the meat of the body. With quick but uncertain movements of his mind he joined the two, and then fell back on his ass as the magician’s mouth snapped
open and emitted an overpowering and unearthly howl of pain.

:: 19 ::

Kat looked up from where she was seated at Dylan’s computer station, and stared for a long moment at Susan, who was up to her eyeballs in a web design project. She admired the older woman’s style—full figured, yet with an awareness of her beauty, her hair cut short and her glasses set into thick black retro frames. Kat smiled as she realized just how hot Susan would be considered by most of the dykes she knew. In fact, she thought she was pretty hot herself.

Susan sensed her eyes upon her and with effort dragged her gaze from her screen. “What? Do I have spinach in my teeth?”

“No, I’m just...admiring how pretty you are.”

Susan scowled at this, an odd compliment coming from a woman nearly twenty years her junior, seventy pounds lighter, and, she was very much aware, much more conventionally attractive than herself. “Uh...thanks, I guess. You able to log on to your email okay?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s just a Yahoo account. No sweat.”

Susan turned back to her screen.

“I’m really grateful,” Kat said.

Susan looked up at her again, this time with a real turn of attention. “Grateful?”

“Yesterday at this time, you didn’t know me from Adam—or Eve I suppose. And now, well, I may be trapped in your home, but nobody seems to mind. I feel so welcome, so...strangely at home. It might have been very different. Not everyone would have made me feel so welcome. So...thank you.”
“You’re welcome,” Susan said. She removed her glasses and smiled at Kat with real feeling and sincerity. “It’s part of what we are called to do, you know? We were all strangers once, and God makes of us a family. Hospitality is part of religious life. The guys here would hardly be good friars if they didn’t welcome the stranger as if he or she were Jesus himself.” She stretched. “My eyes are getting crossed, staring at that screen. I need a break. How’s about we get some tea?”

They moved to the kitchen and Susan put the kettle on.
“I’ve never been to a monastery before,” Kat said.
“It’s a friary, not a monastery,” Susan corrected with a smile. “But it’s a common mistake.”
“What’s the difference?” Kat asked, sliding onto one of the benches at the table.
“Friars live in friaries, so they have a communal religious life, but they work out there—” she pointed out the window, “—you know, in the world, side by side with ordinary folks. Monks live shut up in monasteries, by and large.”
“So that’s what I am now that I can’t leave—a monk!”
“Well, technically, I think you’d be a nun—it’s genitalia-specific,” Susan giggled.
“Okay, a friary, then. Still, I gotta say, I didn’t expect it to be anything like this. I mean...” she pointed to an enormous bong on the shelf next to the fridge. “These guys aren’t like any priests I’ve ever met. Not that I’ve ever actually met any before, to my knowledge at least. Still, they’re not what I....” She trailed off, her face screwing into a look of confusion.
“Now, just how is it they are...friars...at all? I mean, some of them are Catholic priests, right? Like your husband?”
“Yup,” Susan smiled. She had had this conversation many times, and knew where it was going.
“But priests are supposed to be celibate, aren’t they?”
“This order is Old Catholic, not Roman Catholic.”
“I’ve never heard of ‘Old Catholic.’”
“Yeah, not many people have. It’s the best-kept secret in Catholicism. But there are lots of Old Catholics around.”
“And they’re allowed to be married? Or gay?”
“Most of them. It depends upon the bishop. It’s a pretty chaotic movement in the States. The bishop makes the rules. Some bishops are more conservative than Rome, and some are more liberal than Annie Sprinkle.”
“St. Annie!” Kat exclaimed.
“Hey, I’d pray to her!” Susan announced. They had a good laugh. “Really, there are lots of different kinds of Catholics. Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Anglicans, Old Catholics, they’re all Catholic, just not Roman. And the Romans are the only Catholics in the world that require their clergy to be celibate. It’s a crazy rule, put into effect in the Middle Ages only to prevent the sons of priests from inheriting the church’s property.” The kettle began to squeal.
“You’re shitting me.”
“I shit you not.” Susan poured the hot water into their cups.
Kat bobbed her teabag up and down considering this.
“You keep saying, ‘them.’ So does that mean you’re not Old Catholic?”
“No. I’m Lutheran—cradle to grave.” She smiled. “I even did my Master’s in Theology at PLTS—that’s the Lutheran Seminary up on the hill. That’s where Dylan and I met, actually.”
“And the other spousal unit around here, Brian?”
“He’s Jewish.”
“But he lives here? He’s not a friar, is he?”
“No. Jews don’t have friars. He’s just married to one.”
Kat’s head swam, but in a delightful, intoxicating way. “Okay, here’s what I don’t get. When I think of Christians, I don’t think of cool people who love gays and smoke doobies.
I think of uptight assholes trying to hijack American politics.”

“Yeah, so do we, actually. It’s kind of a shame.”

“So why be Christian?”

Susan squeezed out her teabag and set it down on the table, her face taut with careful consideration. “Okay, you’re Wiccan, right?”

“Yeah. Although I mostly work with a Yoruban pantheon right now.”

“Okay. Well, know any asshole Wiccans?”

“Who doesn’t?”

Susan laughed. “Got that right! Anyway, so what are you going to do? Just walk away and hand over your religion to the assholes? Or are you going to live it the way you think it’s supposed to be lived, even if you’re the only one doing it? If you have this beautiful thing that gives your life structure and meaning, why should you just walk away from it because some assholes are trying to hijack it? Are you going to do that?”

“Fuck no, I’d fight like hell for it.”

“Welcome to the front lines, babe.”

Kat sipped at her tea and wondered at this. “Okay, so what about Jesus? I mean, okay, I can see how you can ignore all the horrible people doing all this evil shit in his name and all, but what’s so great about him?”

“Let me tell you about Jesus—”

Kat never thought she would ever hear those words in a way she would be receptive to, and it surprised her that she was genuinely curious about what Susan was going to say.

“Jesus was a guy who really got it. He got that God loves everyone, no matter who they are, how much money they have—or don’t, how talented they are—or aren’t, or what wonderful or terrible things they’ve done in their lives. God loves everyone, period. And he lived in a society where
everyone divided themselves by their ideas of who’s acceptable and who’s not—"

“That sounds familiar.”

“Yeah, except that he treated everyone the same. He sat down and ate dinner with rich people and poor people, with religious people and criminals, with high society ladies and prostitutes. And he loved every one of them, just like God does. And that changed people’s lives. The people who had been socialized to feel like nothings, he made them feel like something. The ones who felt like people should bow and scrape at their feet, he treated them as equals and pissed them off royally. In biblical language, he raised up the valleys and made the mountains low.”

“Oh...is that what that means?”

“The vision of Jesus is a simple one: to create the Community of God—or in traditional language, the Kingdom of God—where everyone is welcome, where none go hungry or homeless, where no one is lonely or afraid. Where there are no ‘have-nots,’ only ‘haves.’”

“That’s a pretty rocking vision. But it’s pretty unrealistic.”

“Sure it is, on a global scale. So we do it in pockets. This house, to the best of our ability, is a little pocket of the Kingdom of God. If you got enough little pockets, then you can change the world. That’s what churches—or religious orders, or anywhere that people of faith try to live as if the Kingdom were already here—that’s what they are supposed to be about. Not getting people ‘saved,’ not coercing them to believe exactly like we do, but embracing people just as they are and loving each other the way God loves.” She stared at her teacup for a moment. “So, yeah. We know this world is a long way from the Kingdom, from the way God wants it to be. But we believe we are faithful to the vision so long as we live as if it were already here.”

“That’s kind of beautiful—and eccentrically quixotic!”
Susan laughed. “It sure the hell is.”
Kat looked down, and a reflective hush descended over the room. Susan blew on her tea and gave her the space she needed. Eventually, she cocked her head, looking at Susan through her hair with one eye. “Can I tell you something...well, kind of weird.”
“My dear, I’ve been filling the air with weirdness for fifteen minutes. Don’t you think it’s your turn?”
Kat smiled and looked down again. “I saw this place before I came here. I...dream things....”

:: 20 ::

When Terry got home, the others were just sitting down to lunch. His hands were shaking as he joined them and picked up his sandwich.
“Hi, Baby,” Brian, bustling around the table, leaned in and kissed him. “You okay?”
“I am physically unharmed, honey, but I am not okay.”
“What’s up, Terry?” asked Richard, taking a bite.
Terry looked over at Kat. Her face was ashen, obviously desperate for news. “Your brother’s body is in the hospital, but your brother is not there.”
Richard nodded gravely, as if expecting this news.
“But someone else is,” Terry finished.
“What does that mean?” Kat asked.
“Is he possessed?” asked Brian.
“Yes, he’s possessed, but not by a demon.” Suddenly Terry realized every eye in the place was on him. “I think there’s an angel in there.”
“He’s possessed by an angel?” Dylan sputtered. “Is that even possible?”
“The angel is not comfortable, and he’s certainly not there of his own free will. When I detected him, he wasn’t....” he searched for the words, “...well, he wasn’t hooked up to Randall’s nervous system. So...I hooked him up.”

Every eye was wide.

“Was that a good idea?” asked Dylan.

“I’m not sure, because he screamed bloody murder for about an hour,” Terry felt a little sick.

“How do you know it’s an angel in there?” asked Richard.

Terry pointed to the top of his head. “Purple lights. Very rare. Well, not rare for an angel, but you sure don’t see it very often.”

Kat looked like she was about to cry. “So he’s in pain? We have to stop it!”

Susan reached out and grabbed her hand. “Kat, it’s not your brother in pain.” She turned to Terry. “What can we do?”

“I disconnected it again before I left. The doctors were not happy about the whole incident. They still want to hold him for observation.”

“Is it—he—in any shape to communicate?” Richard asked.

“Well, not when I left. They’d sedated him, and gave me a pretty nasty look, too, as if I’d done something to him.”

“Well, dude, you did,” noted Dylan. Kat looked alarmed, but bit her lips and kept silent.

“How did you guys make out?” asked Susan, turning to Richard and Dylan.

A twinkle came into Dylan’s eye. “Waal, he slipped me a little tongue and we petted a bit,” he deadpanned. A collective groan rose from the table.

“We actually did pretty well,” said Richard, refilling his iced tea. “We figured out what grimoire he was using—the Lesser Key of Solomon.”
“Is that bad?” asked Kat.
“Honey, they’re all bad,” said Terry with his mouth full.
“And we found this—” Dylan set the cell phone on the table.
“That’s Randall’s phone!” said Kat.
“Yup, that’s what we figgered,” said Dylan. “Its controls are a little odd. You know how to work it?”
“Yeah, I had one like it. I thought it was too bulky and so I traded it in,” Kat said, examining it.
“Good,” said Richard. “After lunch, you pull the numbers off of it. We need everything you can find. Numbers in, numbers out, along with times and dates. Also, his whole phone book. Mikael on the road already? Good. Phone him with whatever addresses you can run down.”

At first Kat bristled at being given orders, but nobody else seemed to notice or mind. Then she got it. It was kind of like Star Trek. Under stress, the friars seemed to operate in a semi-military fashion, and Richard was like Captain Picard. He wasn’t being despotic, but someone had to call the shots or there would be chaos. She was in. “Aye-aye,” she saluted, and gave him a tired smile.

“So what do we think is going on here?” asked Susan.
Richard’s brow furrowed. “Dylan found a book detailing a ritual for taking a soul and putting it in another body. We’ve got a magician with what appears to be an angel inhabiting his body, so that ritual appeared to work. And we’ve got a major Goetic working, so we know it was performed by demonic means.”

“We’ve also know that Kat’s brother was trying to get the lay of the land in Heaven—we found a copy of Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* opened to the description of a very specific neighborhood,” Dylan added. “So if you want mah guess, and Ah reckon you do, what we got is an angel in a magician’s body in the hospital, and a magician in an angel’s body in Heaven.”
For a moment, nobody said anything. It was simply too strange to take in all at once. “Why would Randy want to go to Heaven?” asked Kat, then realizing how that sounded, qualified it. “Well, who wouldn’t want to go to Heaven? But I mean, why work demon-magick to do it?”

“Good question, honey,” said Terry. “Let’s say we do have a magician who has snuck into Heaven wearing an angel’s body—what’s he up to?”

“I think we need to see what he’s doing,” Richard said.

“Can we do that?” asked Kat.

“Well, call me crazy,” said Dylan, “but Ah think it has something to do with avocadas.”

Alan Dane watched the little girl closely as her mother scolded her. He couldn’t hear her words, but he recognized the rage, the hand raised in threat, the blood rising into her face. He remembered his own father’s abuse as if it were yesterday. If ever there were a child in need of rescue, this little girl was one.

The girl looked poor, possibly Hispanic or Middle Eastern. Dane’s eyes darted from one end of the street to the other. The mother, still pontificating and gesticulating, went back inside an apartment building. The little girl sat on the steps, head in her hands, her face a hard mask determined not to cry.

Dane’s heart went out to her. What could this sweet child have done to warrant such a response? It was criminal. He sat patiently, waiting for her to act.

He had been on edge ever since he discovered those priests in his house attempting to subvert his justice. He normally
wouldn’t need to liberate another child again, not for several weeks. But he had been so shaken by the exorcism that the itch had started early, and started big.

He despaired that there was so little he could do. Saving one child hardly seemed worth the risk and effort when he thought about the statistics—about the millions of children every year that suffer from abuse. *If only I could save them all,* he thought. He shook his head and sighed. *If only....*

The little girl got up and smoothed out her dress. It was olive green, accenting the color of her skin in a most appealing way, hanging almost long enough to reach her ankles. She turned and stuck her tongue out at the door of her house, and began to pound defiantly down the street away from Dane’s car.

Dane tapped on the glass separating himself from his driver. “When she gets to the corner, pull up and keep her in sight.”

He did enjoy the hunt, though. There was always the possibility of detection, of getting caught. It added spice to what was already a very satisfying dish.

His cell phone rang, a sprightly reggae version of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” He glanced at the screen—Sweeney. He flipped it open.

“Dane here,” he said.

“I got something, here, Mr. Dane.”

He had called Sweeney less than an hour after the aborted attempt to exorcise his father. He had been surprised by those priests, and he was damned if he were going to let it happen again. “What did you find?”

“They’re real priests, all right. But they’re not Roman Catholic.” Sweeney’s voice betrayed his New York origins, rough from years of cigarettes and Giants games. “They’re called the Old Catholic Order of St. Raphael. Even have a web page. They do exorcisms and shit for a living.”
“Old Catholic?”
“Yeah, some breakaway group, goes back a few hundred years, apparently. Anyhow, turns out there’s an FBI file on them, and not a little bit of dirt.”
“An FBI file? How did you get—”
“Mr. Dane, that is why you pay me the big bucks.”
Alan Dane smiled grimly and watched as the little girl rounded another corner. He tapped on the glass and motioned the driver to pull up to the next corner.
“Anything damning?”
“Well, not legally. Not to you and me. Not to the cops. But...” Dane could almost hear an evil grin creep over the cell phone. “If you wanted to, you could probably cause these guys a shitload of trouble.”
“I’m listening.”
“Their denomination is holding their annual meeting this weekend in Texas. If these FBI files ended up in the right hands....”
“I think I see where you’re going with this, Sweeney. It’s payback, and I like it. Make it happen. What’s the score as far as keeping an eye on them? I don’t want any more surprises.”
“They’re holed up in their place in Berkeley for the time being, except for the guy you referred to as Goth Boy. I got Jamison on him now.”
“I wonder....”
“What’s that, Mr. Dane?”
“I’d like to talk to this Goth Boy. Think we could set that up?”
“Ha! Nothin’ like nabbing a fella to put the fear of God into him. Yeah, I think we could arrange that.”
“Good. Gotta go.” Dane flipped his cell phone closed and watched as the little girl walked into a park.
“Mr. Pell,” Dane said, tapping on the glass. “Would that little girl like to help us look for our lost puppy?”
The driver looked from side to side nervously. Dane noticed he was sweating. “I don’t know about this, Mr. Dane. I can’t do this again. I’ve had nightmares ever since...” He trailed off, and made a vague whimpering sound.

Dane closed his eyes and fought to maintain his temper. He checked to make sure all the windows were closed, then spoke in as even a voice as possible. “Is the car in ‘park,’ Pell?”

“Y-yes, sir. Yes, it is.”

“Good.” Dane leveled the revolver at the back of the seat and pulled the trigger. He was amazed at how loud it was. He put one finger into his ear and wiggled it back and forth. Shit, he thought, that really hurt.

He looked through the window to see Pell slumped over and unmoving. “I hate having to do things myself,” Dane said out loud to himself.

It occurred to him that there were demons that could drive as well as humans, and they would have no qualms about his activities. Even if they did, they would have no choice in the matter. And he had to employ a new driver, anyway. Well, then, a demon it was. He also realized that he could probably get them to do some of Sweeney’s surveillance work as well, and for free at that. He pursed his lips and gave a satisfied nod. Then he opened the door of the car and walked into the park, calling for his imaginary dog.

:: 22 ::

Mikael was beginning to think it was not such a bad assignment. He rolled into the lower Haight at a leisurely
pace. A scrap of paper in his lap bore a hastily scrawled address he had just received from Susan. Mornings were always chilly in San Francisco, especially in February, which he didn’t mind at all since it meant he could keep the windows up and blast a Black Flag album as loud as he wanted to with impunity to all but his future hearing.

He followed the numbers on the buildings, and realized he had another couple of blocks to go. His thoughts kept drifting to Kat, and as he played unconsciously with his long black hair, he imagined it was her fingers running through it. He was excited to discover she was Wiccan, since that was the tradition he actually practiced, albeit with a Christian spin, and he had found out the hard way that it was always best to date someone he could connect with spiritually.

“2617...2619...there it is,” he said out loud to himself. He noticed a parking space on the street across from the target building, which was nothing short of a minor miracle in almost any part of San Francisco. He spun the wheel, completing an illegal Y turn in the middle of a business district and almost tossed a bicycle messenger in the process. “Ope...sorry, guy...” he said out loud again, completing his parallel park. He turned off the engine and surveyed the building. It was a grand but dilapidated Victorian that looked like it hadn’t been painted in fifty years. Black felt covered the windows, blocking out every possible scrap of light.

The house was quiet, but any knowledge of those coming in or out could be useful, so he reached in the back seat for his camera, attached the telephoto lens, and settled in for a lengthy wait. “Now, where is that Snapple bottle?” he asked himself aloud.
Astrid had sounded groggy when Richard had called. And, indeed, she had been taking a nap. He had apologized profusely, and she had called him a cunt. Still, after he explained what they were up against, she agreed to come right over. “I can’t stay long, though,” she had said. “I have a date at six.”

Richard said that was fine, but it really wasn’t. He had had a crush on her from the moment they had met at one of the socials hosted by the Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies at the Graduate Theological Union. Astrid had been Andrew at the time, and Richard’s interest had not been swayed by her transexuality. He had never betrayed his feelings, but he was certain that his mooning over her could not possibly go unnoticed. He just hoped it also did not go completely unappreciated.

In the kitchen, Kat found Susan and the friars gathered around a steaming French press of enormous dimensions. She took a place at the table and soon Susan was sliding a large mug of steaming Italian roast under her nose. “Oh, my, that’s decadent,” she said, waving the fragrant steam into her face.

She looked up to see Richard come in, an oddly mesmerized look on his face.

“What’s the scoop, dude?” asked Dylan. “Was Astrid home?”

“Yeah, she’s on her way over,” Richard said.

“Who is this chick?” asked Kat, a little absently as she was really debating whether or not to add half-and-half to what was already such a wondrous treat.

“Well, she used to be a dude,” Dylan answered. “Ah guess technically she still is. Dicky’s got a thing for her.”

“I do not—”
“Unfortunately for him,” Dylan ignored him, “she only dates lesbians.”

“Wait, how does that even work?” Kat asked, confused.

“She also used to be a professor at the Swedenborgian House of Studies,” Susan swatted her husband on the back of the head, “until her little ‘talent’ became common knowledge.”

“Transexuality is a talent?”

“Astrid is a scryer,” Richard said, taking a seat and reaching for a cup.

“You mean like, crystal balls and such?” Asked Kat incredulously.

“Well, she uses a seer’s stone, but yeah, it’s pretty much the same thing.”

“Why did that get her into trouble?” asked Kat, and then thought better of it. “Oh, this is Christians we’re talking about, isn’t it? Stupid question.”

At this comment, every eye in the room locked on her, accompanied by a look of shock and a little hurt. Brian laughed out loud.

“Oh my God,” Kat said, covering her mouth and turning red in a rush. “I am so sorry. That was really, really insensitive of me. Please forgive me.”

Then the moment passed and most everyone chuckled.

“Why don’t you tell us how you really feel, Kat?” invited Dylan.

“Actually,” said Susan, “the Swedenborgians are technically heretics, so they’re not your average Christians. They’re pretty cool, by and large.”

“The congregational Swedenborgians, you mean,” corrected Dylan. “The episcopal Swedenborgians are pretty fundamentalist.”

“Wait, this is getting confusing,” said Kat. “What the hell is a Sweden...I can’t even say it.”
Brian made an “O” with his right finger and thumb and threw his arm back so that his palm cupped the right side of his face, creating a little monocle with spider fingers spread over his cheek. “We. Are. The Sweden-Borg,” he said in his best mechanical Stephen Hawking impersonation. “Comprehension. Is. Futile.”

Everyone laughed, but Kat was utterly lost.

“Sorry,” said Brian, “It’s a Star Trek thing.”

“Emmanuel Swedenborg was the eighteenth century’s greatest scientist, certainly the greatest Sweden has ever known,” Richard explained. “He mastered every one of the sciences in his day, but when he entered middle age, he had a mystical experience that compelled him to drop everything and pursue spiritual investigation full time.”

“Yeah,” continued Dylan, “He used to go into these trances, and travel to Heaven and Hell and all, and talk to the angels. He wrote about thirty books detailing his conversations with angelic beings. It’s pretty trippy shit.”

“Swedenborg gave us some very explicit descriptions of the other side, most of which have been corroborated by folks who have had near-death experiences,” Richard said.

“And so the Sweden...borgians, they’re the people who believe in his writings?” asked Kat.

“Yup,” said Dylan, pouring himself some coffee. “But he never intended to start a church—just to reform the old one.”

“Where have we heard that one before?” moaned Terry.

“Of course, none of the established churches would listen,” Richard picked up the tale again. “Swedenborg was a Modal Monarchian, which was condemned as a heresy fifteen hundred years ago.”

“Do I want to know what that is?” asked Kat.

“Probably not,” laughed Susan, “It’s one of the pettier, hair-splitting proclamations of heresy that make even conservative Christians roll their eyes.”
“Mah theory is that most Christians are Modals,” said Dylan, wiping coffee from where he had just spilled it down the front of his shirt. “They just don’t know what to call it.”

“Okay, so why is this Astrid on the outs with the Swedenborg people? Isn’t she basically doing the same thing with her crystal ba...stone that Mr. Swedenborg was doing in trance?”

“Well, yes, exactly,” answered Susan, handing her husband a wet washcloth to better tend to his shirt. “And let that be a lesson to you ladies out there in TV Land—don’t try at home those things that are the reservéd domain of Old Dead White Guys.”

“Lest you be kicked out on yo’ asses,” added Dylan, wipping at his shirt.

“Amen,” agreed Terry liturgically, and poured himself a final cup from the dregs.

Just then the doorbell rang and Richard froze. Of course, this was not lost on anyone. “Get yourself together, lover-boy,” Susan said to him, heading for the door, “I’ll let her in.”

Kat, intrigued, extracted her legs from the bench and followed. Susan opened the door and Astrid swept into the foyer like a goddess. She was the closest thing to a Swedish Amazon Kat had ever seen, her shining gold hair hanging knee-length and her body veiled in enough sequins and gauze to instigate all-out war between Liberace and the gypsies. Kat also noted that she had an adam’s apple that could choke a llama.

“Hey, Tobers,” Astrid said, hugging the dog.

“Astrid, meet Kat,” Susan said. Kat rose and shook her hand, wondering at its size, and also at how anyone could actually get away with dressing in such a fashion in California.

“Hey, assholes!” she waved through the kitchen door. Kat
squinted at Richard—was he drooling? It appeared that he was. Astrid set down a bowling bag. “Where’s Morpheus?”

“Mikael’s on stakeout,” Richard said.

“Got a hot one, huh?” she asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. “Where do you want me to set up? In the chapel, like last time?”

“That’ll do,” said Terry, and rushed ahead of her to clear the candlesticks from the main altar to make a space for her. He paused to give her a kiss. She had to lean down to do it.

“Hi, you big tranny.”

“Hi, faggot. Hey, I’m having a housewarming next weekend. Can you and your bottom half come?”

“We’ll look at the calendar. I’ll let you know. But we’d love to if we can. Will we be the only testosterone in the room—besides your estrogen-addled self, I mean?”

“You’ll be the tokens.”

“Bully for us, then.”

Richard brought a stool from the kitchen for Astrid to sit on. He set it in the place where he and the other priests usually stood to say mass, and then watched as Astrid opened her bag and took out a large black tablecloth. She spread it over the altar and then removed a leather case. She unlocked it, and Kat saw a flash of red velvet as she opened it. Inside was a shiny black rock, polished flat and smooth on one side until it shone like glass.

Astrid placed the stone in the middle of the altar, and turned it so the shiny side was angled towards her face. Then she took another black sheet of cloth and threw it over her shoulders like a stole.

“Okay, gents, what am I looking for?”

“We think Kat’s brother used demon magick to trade bodies with an angel, and he is now roaming Heaven. And he’s probably up to no good.”

“You’re shitting me.”
“God’s honest truth,” Dylan said, settling into one of the chairs on the side to enjoy the show.

“What do you think he’s doing?” asked Astrid.

“That’s what we called you to find out,” said Richard.

“You know for sure he’s in Heaven?”

“No. But we found one of his books open to the passage in *Heaven and Hell* where the ’Borg describes the Akashic records neighborhood.”

“He doesn’t call it that, dufus,” said Astrid.

“No, but you know the general vicinity I mean.”

“I know it. That’s helpful. Do you know what this angel’s body he’s in looks like?”

Richard shuffled nervously. “No.”

Dylan piped up helpfully. “He *will* be totin’ an avocado.”

Richard rolled his eyes, but Astrid nodded vigorously.

“Good, that’s really good. Can’t be too many angels carrying avocados around. I’ll tune in to that.” Then she paused, her face screwed up into a puzzle. “Why an avocado?”

“Beats us,” said Dylan. “But he had a whole fridge full of the suckers. Gotta be involved somehow.”

“Speaking of avocados, I’ll go make some snacks. Guacamole, anyone?” asked Brian. A cheer went up all around. Brian smiled and headed for the kitchen.

Astrid turned to Kat. “What can you tell me about your brother’s energy?”

Kat considered a moment. “He’s got horrendous ADD. He’s a computer programmer, but can’t sit still for a moment. He works at home—”

“’Nuff said,” Astrid proclaimed, dismissing her with a wave. “Let’s take a look.”

She pulled over her head one edge of the cloth draped around her neck until the corners of it met the black cloth covering the altar. Like a hill of bumpy blackness, she quivered beneath the cloth as she entered into her ecstasy.
The others waited breathlessly. Skrying was often a lengthy process. Sometimes access was easy, sometimes it was not. Planetary alignments and the skryer’s own emotional equilibrium all must conspire to make a session successful. If something was off it could complicate or even frustrate the effort. But apparently neither the astrological orientations nor her excitement over her upcoming date prevented her. Within minutes, a muffled voice called out from beneath the black cloth. “Got something....”

Kat was beside herself with anxiety. She was concerned about her brother, but also nervous and a little ashamed of what he was doing. She wanted to help him, she realized, but also wanted to stop him.

“What do you see?” Terry had his omnipresent laptop open and clacking as she spoke.

“I see a teeming crowd in a huge city square. Fountains, enormous buildings on every side of the square. We’re in the neighborhood, just as Swedenborg described it. A few new additions since his time, nothing dramatic. Lots of angels. Typical Sabbath in Heaven.”

“Are there people there? Or only angels?” Kat asked.

“According to Swedenborg, people become angels when they pass over,” Dylan explained.

“Ah...” she nodded. “Do people become demons, too?”


“Yes,” called Astrid from beneath her blanket.

“Yes, demons are actually of human origin?” Richard asked.

“Some of them. Some are Nephilim.”


“Nephilim?” asked Kat.

“The offspring of God’s original angels and human women,” Richard explained. “Also known as giants.”
“This sounds like myth,” said Kat.
“Yeah, and so do angels, demons, jinn, faeries, and a whole host of other allegedly ‘mythological’ beings we deal with every day around here,” said Dylan with a chuckle.
“Okay, I’ve located the Hall of Records,” called Astrid.
“Did you say that was where the Akashic records are kept, Richard?” Kat asked.
“Swedenborg didn’t call it that,” Astrid said again with an irritated lilt to her voice. “Blavatsky did.”
“Whatever you call it, yeah, that’s where everything that has ever happened in this or any other universe is stored,” Richard answered.
“Makes the Smithsonian pale by comparison,” Susan commented.
“What I wouldn’t give to browse that place,” said Terry wistfully.
“Ah heard that,” agreed Dylan.
“Eat your Wheaties and say your rosary, little boy, and someday you will,” Richard grinned.
“Wait! I think I see your guy!” Astrid’s voice raised up several notches in excitement. “He’s limping—obviously, he doesn’t quite know how to work that body he’s in. And he’s carrying an avocado—very hard to do, I’d imagine, given the gross, heavy nature of an earthly object and the subtle form of an angelic body. It’s gotta be like lugging an anvil around! No doubt about it, though, this is your guy.”
“What’s he doing?” asked Kat. “I mean, besides struggling with the avocado?”
“Well, he’s not going into the Hall of Records. He’s headed toward another building. God! It’s hard work. My heart would go out to him if he weren’t up to no good!”
“Well, we don’t actually have any evidence that he’s intending any evil, do we?” asked Kat hopefully.
“You mean aside from the demon-magick conspiracy, the
violence to an angel, and breaking and entering Heaven?” Terry asked, mock-bitchily.

“Okay, okay...” Kat trailed off, feeling a little pathetic for her lunge at hope.

“Hey, gang,” called Brian, “chips, salsa, and my famous guacamole are on the kitchen table when you need a break.”

“Thanks, honey,” said Terry. He leaned over and grabbed Brian’s pant leg and pulled him towards him, wrapping his arm around Brian’s legs and holding him still as everyone concentrated on Astrid. Brian played with Terry’s tonsure and waited with them.

“He’s going into another building. It’s still large, but not as large. It’s very old, though, older than the Hall of Records, or as old at least. I can’t see a sign yet....”

They all waited breathlessly.

“Okay, there’s one. It’s in Enochian, of course. Aziazior—that mean anything to you, Terry?”

“Yeah, it means ‘forms,’” Terry answered quickly. “A pretty common word, actually, as the angels use it in a number of different contexts. It’s synonymous with our words ‘likeness,’ ‘image,’ ‘archetype,’ ‘symbol,’ ‘shape,’ ‘projection,’ and a whole bunch of others, but you get the idea.”

“Yeah,” said Richard. “Is he going in?”

“It looks like he is...yes, he’s headed up the stairs. Not gracefully, mind you. In fact, as I get closer to him, he looks like he’s in a lot of pain.”

Susan reached over and squeezed Kat’s hand.

“But he’s soldiering on,” Astrid said. “I’m going to try to follow him into the building. Sometimes I can and sometimes I can’t....”

“Do your best,” Richard implored.

“So what is this ‘Forms’ place?” Kat asked, trying to cap the hysteria that threatened to overwhelm her.
“The Hall of Forms is where the archetypes for all things are enshrined,” Astrid called from beneath her cloth. “Huh?” Kat shot Richard a confused look. “Ever studied Plato?” he asked. “I always preferred Silly-Putty, why?” she answered, without a trace of humor.

Brian burst out with such a forceful guffaw that he accidentally farted. “Good one, dude,” called Dylan, holding up his hand to Brian for a high-five. “Ugh, Jew-fart. Glad I’m under here and properly filtered,” came Astrid’s voice. “Wait, how did you know that was even me?” Brian asked, pretending to be wounded. “Remote viewing of your gaping anus, you voracious bottom whore,” said Astrid.

“He is pretty voracious,” agreed Terry, smiling up at his partner. “I’m not taking this from the only man in Berkeley suffering from lesbian bed-death,” retorted Brian. Astrid stuck one hand out from under the blanket and gave him the finger. “Not Play-Doh,” corrected Richard, ignoring the exchange of queer barbs, “Plato, the philosopher.” “Oh, him,” Kat’s features betrayed a faint distaste. “I failed Intro to Philosophy. It was the beginning of the end of my college career.”

“Well, had you stuck it out, you would have learned about Plato’s World of Forms, the place where the archetypes for all earthly things reside. Plato was being typically grandiose—the Forms don’t require an entire world of their own. A glorified museum obviously suffices to house them.” “What are the Forms?” asked Kat.

“Well, they’re more ideas than anything else, but in Heaven I imagine they must have some visible presence. Let’s
say you come across a spider in your yard. How do you know it’s a spider?”

“Uh, because I know what a spider looks like?”

“But you’ve never seen this particular spider, how do you know it is a spider at all?”

“Because all spiders have eight legs?” Kat suddenly felt on thin ice in this conversation.

“Exactly. You have in your mind a familiarity with the archetypal spider, the perfect spider, from which all earthly spiders draw their form and reality. Because you are acquainted with ‘spiderness’ when you encounter ‘spiderness’ in an actual being, you recognize it, even though it may look nothing at all like the last spider you encountered.”

“Okay, but isn’t that just something in my head?”

“Solipsism alert!” called Dylan, and Terry laughed with him.

“How could it be just in your head, when we all share the same archetypal knowledge?” asked Richard, also enjoying the joke.

“Okay, he’s in,” Astrid called. “I’m going to try to enter...it’s dim, but I’m still getting something. Pretty hazy...okay, it’s clearing now. He roaming aisles, he’s obviously having an attack of wonder. And I don’t blame him. It’s pretty glorious.”

“What do you see?” asked Richard.

“Everything in the hall is in motion, ghostly images, all interacting. It’s pretty chaotic...no, there’s order, but it’s complex. It’s like everything here is participating in an enormous ritual. The forms seem to be arranged in symbolic relationships to one another, and they’re all moving. It’s kind of like being in the middle of a huge clockworks, with everything around you whirring and spinning in a regulated way...wow, it’s really, really trippy.”

“Did Swedenborg write about this?” Brian asked.
“He called them ‘correspondences,’” answered Richard.
“Another fine translation of the Enochian *aziaziar,*” noted Terry.
“He wrote about them as realities, but not about a hall as such,” Richard said.
“You have to go to the apocryphal Swedenborgian writings for that,” corrected Astrid, “but it’s there.”
Richard shrugged, obviously surprised. “Who knew there was a Swedenborgian apocrypha?”
“How could there not be?” asked Astrid.
“Good point,” said Dylan. “If you can imagine it, it must exist somewhere.”
“God, that’s a whole conversation I don’t want to have right now,” Richard shook his head. “What’s the magician doing now?”
“What’s Randy doing?”
“He looks like he’s just trying to get his bearings. I can just imagine the vertigo he’s feeling. I feel it and I’m holding onto a table. He’s standing in free space in an alien body with all these ghostly forms whizzing by him. I’m amazed he’s still standing up.”
“Stay with him,” Richard said.
“Don’t tell me what to do, Dicky,” said Astrid testily. “I’m not one of your minions.”
Richard sighed.
“Minions?” Dylan shot Susan an amused look. “Is we minions?”
“It’s a *womenion,*” retorted Susan, kissing him on the nose.
“Now he’s looking around, like he’s searching for something specific. There’s a whole host of foodstuffs in an orbit around Eva Kadmon—”
“The archetypal human,” explained Richard. “The Kabbalists posited Adam Kadmon, but they were wrong. Man isn’t the default form of the human, woman is.”
“We could have told you that,” said Susan, winking at Kat.

“Oh my God, oh my God...” called Astrid.

“What?” Kat almost screamed.

“He’s found the orbit of the archetypal avocado. He’s holding the one he brought with him up into its path....”

“Holy shit!” breathed Dylan. And then they all jumped as a single earthquake jolt shook the house.

“And it’s gone....”

“What’s gone?” asked Richard. “What’s gone?!”

“The avocado is gone. And so is its form. When they collided, they both...disappeared.”

“Like matter and anti-matter...” breathed Dylan.

“We just witnessed something huge, gang,” Richard said.

“That generated a shock wave. I felt it.”

“It could have really been an earthquake, you know, a coincidence,” said Dylan.

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” Richard said.

Astrid pulled her head out from under the cloth, her hair wild and tangled. “It was worse in Heaven. Knocked Kat’s brother on his ass, and half of Heaven with him.”

“Well, now we know what he was up to,” Dylan said.

“Yes, but we don’t know why,” Richard countered.

“Well, you gents have your work cut out for you. And I have a date.” Astrid began to pack her things.

Brian eased himself out of Terry’s nervous grasp and headed to the kitchen. Everyone else seemed to be lost in a state of bewildered shock.

“Uh, guys—” called Brian. Everyone looked toward the kitchen and he leaned his head through the doorway. “I’ve got bad news. The guacamole—it’s gone.”
Mikael was beginning to fight the midafternoon nods. Watching a house with no activity is not the most stimulating of chores, and he fought against his own internal rhythms to keep himself awake. He was accustomed to an afternoon nap, and his body, like a faithful dog, did not understand being denied.

He had tried staying awake by girl-watching, and indeed, the lower Haight provided ample opportunity for such an activity. But inexplicably, the appeal of this, enticing as it often was, did not serve to override his body’s horizontal drag. He had taken to bending his fingers at unnatural angles until they threatened to snap, using the pain to jolt him back to a momentary state of full wakefulness.

Eventually, he noticed that he really needed to shit. Just down the block was a coffee shop. He knew the place well, as he had once spent a good deal of time there several years ago when he had first come out to California and had been couch surfing for nearly a year.

He opened his kit bag and thought through how to go about this. He could set the burning gall in the planter just to the left of the door. The plant in it was dead, anyway. And he would bring more with him in case someone decided to play good Samaritan and put it out while he was in the can. He could also get a sandwich and a good, tall cup of coffee to help with the afternoon lethargy. It was a plan.

He blew on the charcoal until it was glowing red and then placed the fish entrails on it. Opening the car door, he jumped out and made for the shop door halfway down the block, a noxious cloud of black smoke trailing behind him.

He placed the abalone shell in the planter and then stepped through the door, trying to appear nonchalant. He
needn’t have worked at it, however. Every eye in the place
was glued to the television set.

How odd, Mikael thought, and looked around. The place
was a little dingy, half coffee shop, half used bookstore, with
tattered living room furniture set at odd angles everywhere.
Usually the place was sprinkled with twenty- and thirty-
somethings, huddled over laptops or faces buried in text-
books. Occasionally a lively conversation would emerge
from one corner.

But not today. Today, you could have heard a pin drop
were it not for the news commentator’s voice crackling tin-
nily from the tiny television speaker. Mikael set his bag down
on the counter and leaned in to listen.

“...seems able to explain the sudden disappearance of avo-
cados world-wide. Food and Drug representatives have not
yet issued any statements, and agriculture stocks are plum-
meting in a shocking upset that utterly blindsided the mar-
ket. Let’s go now to Alison Dana live outside the Tres
Marillos Taqueria. Alison?”

“Thanks, Pete. I’m here with the proprietor of Tres
Marillos, Dolores Wang. Mrs. Wang, how will the sudden
disappearance of avocados affect your business?”

The obviously hysterical Mrs. Wang could not calm her-
sel enough to respond in English, and assaulted the reporter
with a flurry of Mandarin.

Mikael furrowed his brow. He remembered Richard and
Dylan saying something about Kat’s brother using avocados
in a magical working and a cold chill descended his spine.
This had the ultimate effect of aggravating the urgency of the
bulk in his bowels and he remembered why he was there and
headed to the bathroom, completely unnoticed by anyone
else in the place.

Bowels once voided, he reminded himself that the burning
gall at the doorway would not long be an effective deterrent
to any demonic nasties, especially since there were windows and a back door to the place. He made for the counter and waved to get the counter-person’s attention. A stocky, butch girl behind the counter with a nose ring and a Maori pattern tattooed on her forehead pried her eyes from the screen unwillingly and glanced at him for no more than a split second before returning to the television. “Yeah? What do you want?”

“Barbeque Beef sandwich on a sourdough roll, please. And a bag of salt and vinegar chips. Oh, and a large coffee.”

Silently, without looking away from the television, the young woman went into action. Mikael was actually impressed with how much she was able to do on complete auto-pilot.

“What do you think it means?” she said to no one in particular.

He looked around and realized he was the only person she could reasonably be speaking to. “I...I don’t know.” It wasn’t a lie. He probably knew more than most people in the world about it, but he didn’t know what it meant, philosophically. He hadn’t really thought about it. And probably wouldn’t. “I’ll bet it’s a trick,” he said with a burst of inspiration.

“What do you mean?” she said, actually looking at him for the first time.

“Oh, you know, everyone takes avocados for granted. They’re nothing special, you know?” Mikael posited, warming to his idea. “So, if you’re the National Avocado Board, and you’re smart, you know that people don’t really know what they have until it’s gone. You make all the avocados disappear, suddenly everyone wonders how they could live without them. You bring them back, and voilà! People love avocados like never before.”
“So you think it’s a publicity stunt...” she said it as a statement, not a question, and mulled it over, nodding. “You must be right. It’s just the sort of thing those assholes would do.”

“Yeah, and it’s not hard to see where they got the idea, either,” Mikael said. “Just look at their acronym, ‘National Avocado Board’—eh? Eh?”

“NAB,” she breathed.

“Nab those motherfucking avocados,” Mikael said with certainty. “I’m just shocked they didn’t try something like this years ago.”

“You are so right....”

She put his order in a bag and slid it in front of him. A moment later she handed him a large cup of coffee. “How much?” he asked.

“My treat,” she said. “I think you just solved the mystery of the century.” She flipped open her cell phone and began texting messaging.

“Thanks!” Mikael said and gave her a wave that went completely ignored. When he got to the door he found the charcoal still white and spitting, but the gall gone. He placed some more of the slimy innards in the shell and as soon as the smoke began to emerge, he made for the car.

On the way, he glanced at the house. Nothing. He didn’t actually expect to see any activity. He looked at his watch and realized he was five minutes late checking in with Susan. He set the shell on top of the car’s roof along with his lunch and felt in his pockets for his keys. And that was when he noted, to his horror, that they were still inside the car.

Panic swept over him and he felt a wave of vertigo. He clutched at the roof of the car to steady himself, and looked around. No sign of baddies, but then, unless you were Terry, there never were. Demons, like most spiritual beings, were usually invisible unless they chose to be otherwise. He
looked back at the keys dangling from the ignition and forced himself to be calm, to think rationally. Check the other doors, he told himself, and ran around the car, futilely pulling at all the handles. No good—all were locked.

He considered breaking a window and wondered if Terry’s warding would still be effective. He decided it was his best option, given the circumstances, and cast around for a rock. As on most city streets, rocks were in short supply. Fighting panic, he looked around up and down the street and tried not to think about what would happen if the sigilic backlash caught up with him. If the demon Kat’s brother had employed began to siphon off his own soul, he would be powerless to do anything to stop it.

The urge to cry came over him, but he recognized it as a manifestation of panic and closed his eyes, forcing himself to do a couple seconds of zazen meditation right where he was standing to focus and calm himself. Opening his eyes, he thought, First things first, and placed the last of his fish gall on the dying coal. Then, carrying it above his head like the lamp of Diogenes, he marched down the street looking for a large heavy object with which to smash a window.

Suddenly, he saw it. A twisted metal pole about the length of his forearm sticking out of a block of cement that had obviously been recently uprooted from the ground. Perhaps part of a fence that had been knocked over by a car? he wondered, and picked it up with resolve.

He marched back toward the car, but before he got there he saw, to his great dismay, an obviously homeless man leaning towards the roof of his car, helping himself to Mikael’s lunch. “Goddammit!” Mikael spat, “Hey, you!” He yelled, “Back off my lunch!”

The homeless guy looked straight at him, and noticing the heavy pole and its obvious aggressive potential, backed off from the car momentarily. But then the man smiled, reached up, and grabbed the sandwich.
“You little shit!” Mikael screamed and wielded the pole as if to strike the man. He wouldn’t, of course, but he wasn’t above utilizing its potential to scare the man. He had swung it under his left arm, which was still holding the now-dormant abalone shell aloft, readying the bar for a feigned blow when a hard, dull pain caught him at the base of his neck, and he faded quickly into darkness. He was unconscious before the abalone shell clattered to the ground.

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Except for Astrid, they rushed past Brian into the kitchen en masse. On the table was a bowl of chips and beside it a bowl with a little salsa in it. Every bit of the avocado that had been mixed up in it was gone.

“Brian, you’re sure—” Richard began.

Brian held up a hand to stop him. “Full of guac. Trust me.”

“This is tragic,” said Richard.

“You got that right,” Dylan agreed. “I was really lookin’ forward to Brian’s guacamole.”

“Dylan, this isn’t just about Brian’s guacamole. If what I’m thinking is right, every avocado on the face of the earth just disappeared.”

“Holy shit...” said Dylan, staring off into space and contemplating the horror of a world without guacamole. “I need a joint, man.”

“Make it a fatty,” said Brian.

“Ah heard that,” agreed Dylan. He turned towards Kat. “What did your brother have against ’cadas, anyway?”

Kat shrugged, and then grimaced a little as she said, “He always hated guacamole.”
“No hatred of foodstuffs runs that deep,” Dylan countered.
“I don’t think this is really about avocados,” said Richard. “There’s too much we don’t know. Avocados might actually just be a random choice of fruit for whatever Randy was trying to accomplish.”
“Well, it was certainly one he wouldn’t miss,” offered Kat.
“So, if he had to pick something, why not pick something he didn’t like?” Richard nodded. “Makes sense. But why obliterate a fruit at all?”
Brian was studying the salsa left in the bottom of the bowl. Wordlessly he went to the refrigerator and pulled out a tub of sour cream. Grabbing a spoon, he put several dollops into the bowl, followed by a couple dashes of soy sauce, and stirred the mixture. Then he set the bowl back on the table and tried the mixture on the end of a chip. Apparently satisfied, he turned to the sink and started putting dishes away.
Dylan grabbed a chip and tried the new mixture. “Huh...” he said, and then tried another, and another.
“This is big,” said Terry. “We gotta figure out who’s working this side of things, and how to reverse it. Who knows how this might affect the world?”
“A Butterfly Effect kind of thing?” asked Susan.
“Exactly.”
Tobias’ nose was touching the bowl of Brian’s new dip, sniffing eagerly. Richard pushed it back further from the edge. “Okay, let’s follow up on those numbers we got off of Randy’s phone. Kat, what did you get?”
“We got about five numbers I don’t recognize in the past two days.”
“What about calls made around the time of the ritual?” asked Richard, trying the new dip himself. His eyebrows lifted in surprise as the tangy taste registered. He reached for another chip.
“There was one call, over an hour long, at midnight the evening before Kat found him,” Susan said. “That was the last call received.”

“That’s the one, I’ll wager,” Richard said.

“I used the online reverse directory, and got an address. It’s in San Francisco, on Haight Street.”

“One of mah favorite neighborhoods!” Dylan announced to no one in particular.

“Not the upper Haight, this is nowhere near Ashbury. It’s in the lower Haight—”

“That’s not nearly as cool,” said Dylan darkly. “Ah always imagine magicians doin’ their thing in really cool places.”

“I texted the address to Mikael about an hour ago. He should be there now,” Susan continued. “Mikael should have checked in about fifteen minutes ago.” She checked her cell phone for messages. There were none. She checked the log for missed calls. None. “I’ll give him a call now,” she punched the numbers with her thumb. “Maybe he just fell asleep.”

“He’s on a stakeout,” said Richard, imploring heaven with exaggerated arm movements. “Of course he fell asleep.”

Susan held her hand up for silence and they all watched her with mounting anxiety in spite of the good sense of Susan’s assessment of the situation. He probably had dozed off. Still....

A gruff voice answered the cell phone. “What the fuck??” the voice barked. Susan’s eyes widened and she hit the button for speakerphone. “Who the fuck is this?” the gruff voice came again, but this time they could all hear it.

“Who the fuck is this?” Richard yelled in the direction of the phone. “Where’s Mikael?”

“Fuck Mikael. Don’t call me again, asshole.” And with a click, the strange voice was gone.
Bishop Tom was beginning to worry when lunch came and went, and he had not yet heard back from the friars. He had no doubt that Susan had passed on his message, and he wondered what might be going on that was so important that they neglected to call him. He gave his friends the benefit of the doubt, and resolved to keep them updated whether they had time to speak to him or not.

Tom had no trouble that day keeping the afternoon sleepies at bay. Everything in him dreaded the completion of the day’s agenda, when the Synod would once again take up the matter of the Order’s excommunication.

But to his great relief, that moment never came. The afternoon’s business had been tied up with an argument about liturgy and local variation, which Tom would have found engaging anyway, even if he had not been on needles and pins. But by the end of business that day, the argument was still raging, and the matter of the Order’s expulsion would have to wait another day.

“Let us rise and bless our meal before adjourning to the dining hall,” announced Bishop Mellert. The blessing was mercifully brief, and in moments the gathered bishops were stretching their atrophied episcopal limbs and shuffling towards the cafeteria.

Tom was quiet as he picked up a tray and helped himself to what was really quite a sumptuous spread. The Sisters of Mercy apparently took no vows of epicurean chastity, because the meals were uniformly well prepared, healthy, and attractively presented. Tom helped himself to rather more lasagna than his wife would have approved, and made his way to a table with a few empty places. He was glad to see that one of people already there was Bishop Jeffers. He took a spot next to him, saying, “Is this taken?”
Jeffers looked up and smiled to see Tom. “Not at all. Please.” He motioned toward the empty place. Tom slid his tray into place and pulled up to the table. Bishop Van Patton cocked her head, intending to say something, but waiting to swallow first. “Tom,” she finally managed, “I was so sorry about what Hammet tried to pull yesterday.”

Jeffers bobbed his head in agreement. “That was low. I’m sorry I wasn’t more forceful, but coming on the heels of the gay clergy motion—I was a bit shell-shocked already.”

“Thanks, Andy, and thank you, Leslie. I quite understand. It certainly took me by surprise.” Tom noted that the Presiding Bishop had taken a seat at the next table, and resolved to keep his voice down. “The thing is, I know my boys,” he said in a near-whisper. Jeffers and Van Patton leaned in conspiratorially. “I know what they’re capable of, and I know what they’ve been up to. This whole thing just smacks of another one of Hammet’s witch hunts.”

“The man certainly needs to have someone to hate,” Jeffers agreed.

“More like, he has to make someone else out to be wrong so that he can feel like he is right,” Van Patton interjected. Tom remembered that she was a psychologist in her working life, and that added weight to her observation.

“That’s just sad,” said Tom, remembering to pay attention to the truly excellent lasagna.

Just then one of the sisters made her way across the cafeteria and tapped Presiding Bishop Mellert on the shoulder. Tom watched as he leaned back and spoke to her. A moment later he was folding his napkin and making apologetic gestures. He then followed the nun out of the hall.

“—what do you think?” Jeffers caught his eye. Tom realized he had tuned out the conversation.

“I’m sorry. I’m a bit distracted today. What was that, Andy?”
“Is there something else bothering you, Tom?” Van Patton inquired.

“No. Well, maybe. The Order...the Order in question...should have called me last night after I left a message about what was going on here.” He took a drink of apple cider. “I figured they should know what’s happening. But they haven’t called back.”

“That does seem strange,” Jeffers agreed. “What do you think it means?”

“I think it probably means they’re too busy doing God’s work to give much weight to the blow-hard speculations of old men in funny hats—and I do mean the men, Leslie.”

She gave him a wry smile, and Jeffers chuckled. “Knowing what I do about that Order of yours, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that’s exactly on the money,” Jeffers slapped Tom on the shoulder.

There was free time after dinner, and Tom considered his options as they filed out of the cafeteria. Several of the bishops were carpooling into Houston for a concert of sacred choral works at the Episcopal cathedral, while some were planning to gather in one of the common rooms to watch a DVD and, no doubt, consume more port than was good for them.

Tom was leaning towards the concert when one of the local clergy, a deacon, approached him. Tom fumbled in his addled brain for his name. What was it? Ah, yes, there it was. Eldritch, of all things. “Rev. Eldritch, nice to see you again.” He shook the man’s hand.

“Bishop Müeller, the Presiding Bishop requests a meeting with you. It’s urgent.”

What now? Tom thought, then he wondered if he had said it aloud. Just in case, he said it again, changing the emphasis. “What? Now?”

“Right now, please. I’ll show you to his room.” With that
the deacon turned and made his way towards the dormitory. Tom had no choice but to follow. Within a few minutes he found himself outside one of the doors, exactly like the hundreds of others on the three floors of dorm rooms the convent made available for retreatants and conference attendees.

Bishop Mellert opened the door and waved Tom inside. “Thank you, Eldritch,” he said to the deacon. “I won’t be needing you for the rest of the evening. Thank you for all your hard work today.” He shook the young man’s hand, and scanned the hallway suspiciously before closing the door and turning to his guest.

Tom was quite impressed with the room. His own could reasonably be described as a cell. It was hardly large enough to turn around in, and contained nothing more than a small single bed, a sink, a desk, and a small wardrobe, all in a mere five-by-eight-foot area. But this room was much larger—obviously designed for married couples, the room sported a full-sized bed, a book case, and enough room to actually dress oneself in comfortably. Lucky bastard, Tom thought.

“Tom, have a seat.” Tom did, appreciating the fact that the room also contained chairs, which had never seemed such a luxury before.

Bishop Mellert sat on the bed and sighed.

“What’s going on?” Tom asked.

Mellert picked up a FedEx package and handed it to him. Tom took it and peered inside.

“I just picked this up at the front desk, halfway through dinner. I warn you, Tom, it’s disturbing.”

Tom shook the contents out onto his lap and swallowed. They were an assortment of papers and photos, he noted, all of them either mentioning or showing members of the Order of St. Raphael—none of them in a good light.

As Tom turned page after page, his face lost color, and he felt a cold sweat begin to break out on his forehead. By the time he turned the last one over, he felt faint.
“It’s pretty damning stuff, Tom,” Mellert said, though he didn’t need to say it. It was painfully obvious.
“Yes. Yes it is.” Tom wiped his forehead with his sleeve.
“What...what do you plan to do with this?”
Mellert scowled at him. “That’s a very good question. Bishop Hammet would be chomping at the bit to get hold of these,” he said. “It would prove his case.”
“I’m not sure it proves anything,” Tom noted.
“It might be all he needs to stack the deck in his favor, though,” Mellert said. “But that’s not my problem. My problem is, what do I do with these?”
Tom’s head was spinning. “You can’t give them to Hammet! Aaron, promise me you’re not even considering that!”
“Why not? I don’t have a stake in this one way or the other. It is the business of the House of Bishops to weigh the evidence and make decisions. How can we do that if I deliberately withhold evidence? And why shouldn’t Hammet have it for his arguments? For that matter, isn’t it equally fair that I give you fair warning, like I’m doing now?”
“You haven’t already shown this to Hammet!?”
“No. But should I? That’s the question.” Mellert looked at his shoes and brooded. “What do you think I should do, Tom?”
Tom chewed on his lip and willed himself to relax. “First of all, these pictures don’t actually prove anything. They are circumstantial, and nothing more.”
“And the documents?”
“They don’t prove any of Hammet’s charges, either.”
“So?”
“So, they’re not relevant. I think you should shred them.”
Mellert’s brow furrowed. “I doubt Casey Hammet would see it that way.”
“I’m sure you’re right about that.” He looked Mellert in the eye. “What are you going to do?”
“What any Bishop worth his salt would do in my position,” Mellert said. “Pray.”

Tom turned the FedEx package over, and in a moment of clarity, took note of the sender. Committing it to memory, he handed the envelope back to Mellert.

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” he said.

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“Who the hell was that?” asked Terry.

“Ah didn’t recognize ‘im,” Dylan offered. “Did any of ya’ll?” No one had. The voice had been low, gruff, and hard.

“I don’t think we can waste any time,” Richard announced. “I’m not going to believe that Mikael is dead until I see it. Until then, we have one lead. Let’s follow it up.”

“What do you propose?” asked Terry.

“I say we go to this address, knock on the door, and ask for our friar back,” Richard answered testily.

“It’s not a subtle plan,” noted Terry.

“Fuck subtle. For all we know, Mikael’s in danger. Even if he hasn’t been physically harmed, he’s probably not in a warded environment, which means that whatever happened to Kat’s brother—”

“Is happening to him,” finished Kat. “Oh, God!”

“Dylan, Terry, let’s go,” said Richard, grabbing a coat.

Dylan gave Susan a peck and in moments the friars were winding their way through the Berkeley neighborhoods towards the I-80. It was a grim and quiet ride, but it passed quickly and within three-quarters of an hour they were pulling into the lower Haight.

Terry looked up from the address on the scrap of paper. “2620...” he mused aloud. “Next block.” Dylan drove slow-
ly, passing numerous liquor stores, sleeping winos, trendy coffee bistros—“That’s it, there.” Almost rolling to a stop, the three looked up from the driver’s side windows at a criminally neglected Victorian. Its paint—which had probably been salmon color in the distant past—was peeling, and black cloth adorned the inside of its windows.

“Okay, let’s park,” said Richard, feeling his heart rate pick up the pace. Dylan jabbed the accelerator to circle the block, when Terry squealed.

“If you must be such a sissy, can you please do it at further remove from my ear?” Richard complained, shaking his ear canal with his finger.

“It’s Mikael’s car, look!”

Plainly, it was his battered Tercel. Dylan turned to look both of them in the face, his eyes registering concern. “Don’t panic. Just park,” Richard said. “Let’s check it out.”

“There’s a place, half a block up, on the left. Quick!”

“Ah see it,” said Dylan, speeding up and whipping an illegal U in the middle of the street. “Thank you, Jesus.”

“No,” corrected Terry impishly, “Thank you, baby Jesus.”

Dylan parked in the narrow space in one try, and Richard silently marveled at his prowess as they jogged to Mikael’s car. Terry peered in and squinted. Then he tried the doors, but they were locked. “Holy Christ,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Well, the doors are locked, but the keys are inside. See?”

Dylan leaned over and peered through the glass. Sure enough, the keys were hanging from the ignition.

“What do you think happened?” asked Richard.

“Well, knowing Mikael,” Terry straightened up and made a face. “I’d say he went to the john, and accidentally locked his keys in the car. Then, when he ran out of fish gall, he went into a dissociative state—”

“From the demon activity,” added Dylan.
“Exactly. He probably fainted, and, well, my guess is that someone called an ambulance.”

“Right,” Richard snapped open his cell phone and speed dialed the Friary. Susan picked up the phone. “Susan, we found Mikael’s car. It’s empty. We think he succumbed to the demon, and fainted. Our best guess is that he’s in a coma in some hospital. Can you call the emergency rooms in San Francisco in the vicinity of the lower Haight? Atta girl.” He snapped the phone closed and replaced it in his pocket. “She and Kat are gonna cover the whole city.”

“Good move,” nodded Dylan, still peering into the car. “Terry, these wards still in effect?”

Terry ran a hand along the side of the car, perambulating it with his eyes closed. “They’re fading now, but they’re intact.”

Richard was standing on the edge of the sidewalk, staring across the street at the moldy Victorian. Terry noticed and went to stand by him, taking his arm. “You doin’ okay?”

Richard looked down at him, and nodded. He returned his gaze to the house, and his eyes narrowed. “We gotta go in.”

Dylan joined them, placing his own hand on Richard’s shoulder. “Hey dude, whatcha’ thinking?”

“I’m thinking of doing some serious hurt to someone.”

“Waal, let’s find out what we’re dealing with first. Maybe we oughta—”

Without another word, Richard strode off across the street towards the Victorian. His tall strides had Terry nearly jogging, and Dylan puffing a few steps behind. In a few moments, however, they were all standing on the porch, rotted timber beneath their feet groaning slightly, exposed nails threatening tetanus.

Richard pounded on the door, and hopped up and down on the balls of his feet. “Dude, maybe we oughta think this through a little, first?” Dylan continued. “We can still ditch—”
But then they couldn’t. The door swung open, and a young man roughly their own age stuck his head out. His hair was midnight black, and as unruly as Mikael’s typically was. A scar split his cheek, and his eyes widened at the sight of three tonsured friars in black habit. “I’m sorry,” he said, “we don’t give to religious institutions.” He made to close the door.

Richard thrust his foot in the door, blocking its closure. “We’re not an institution,” he said, his eyes steely and hard. “We’re a motherfucking force of nature and you would do well to fear us.”

The young man froze, uncertain. Richard took advantage of his surprise, and leveled a shoulder into the door, knocking the man backwards. Richard didn’t hesitate for a moment, but forced his way in, kneeling on the steps by the young man’s head, taking his collar in his fists. Dylan and Terry edged themselves inside and closed the door behind them to avoid curious onlookers.

“Dude,” Dylan began, but Richard was hearing none of it. He knocked the young man’s black-tousled head against the painted wooden steps, not hard enough to hurt him, but plenty hard enough to get his attention. “I wanna know where my friar is, shit-fucker.”

“What?” the young man wailed, clearly scared now.

“We got a novice friar who’s been watching your house. He’s gone missing. I wanna know where...he...is.” He punctuated the final three words by slamming the young man’s head against the step.

“Please, I don’t know what—who—”

A voice called from the top of the stairs. “You’re Richard Kinney.”

Richard stopped and looked up. At the top of the steep and narrow staircase, a lone figure hovered. “Who wants to know?”
“I...I never thought I’d meet you. I’m so pleased.”

Richard looked at Dylan and Terry. Dylan shrugged. “I didn’t know you had fans, dude.”

The voice called down again. “If you can find it within yourself to leave off assaulting my frater there, please come up and have a drink. I’ve been dying to talk to you for the longest time.”

Richard released the shirt, and the young man curled into the fetal position to protect himself. Standing up, Richard nodded at Dylan and Terry and took to the stairs.

At the top of the stairs, Richard held the rail and stood still to let his eyes adjust. Gradually the room came into focus: a motley assembly of threadbare couches and overstuffed Victorian-era chairs stood against the walls, while opposite him stood a tall, antique desk, the kind that was raised up about two feet higher than regular desks and required a barstool to sit at it properly. Near the desk, the blacked-out window was adorned with velvet curtains, dusty and faded pink with age.

In a moment, Terry was by his side. He squinted. “Whoa, good thing I’ve got Molly Maids on speed dial.”

Sitting so still Richard did not notice him until that moment, a thin, tall figure unfolded from one of the chairs. He strode across the room with the grace of a cat, despite his height. In sharp contrast to the shabbiness of the room, he was nattily dressed, a fine-featured man in his late fifties, with a kindly face and eyes gleaming with excitement and intelligence.

He extended a hand to Richard. “At long last. I have looked forward to this for a long time, sir.”

Richard shook his hand, and introduced Terry. A moment later he introduced Dylan, who had just reached the top of the stairs and was puffing audibly.
“I am Stanis Larch...” he paused to see if there would be a reaction, and smiled to see the gleam of recognition in Terry’s face.

“Larch? Where do I know that name?” Terry snapped his fingers. “Wait! You’re Ourobouros93!”

“Really?” Richard said, a new appreciation transformed his face. “I loved your essay on Kazantzakis’ *Saviors of God* as a companion testament to *The Book of the Law*—‘He Crouceth in Our Bones,’ I think it was called. What was that, ten years ago? Fuckin’ great paper.”

Larch made a little bow, “The very same.” He then waved towards the furniture. “Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

Closer up, Richard could see that the bookshelf was packed with paperback Weiser editions, and, on the lower shelves, ancient-looking tomes bound in leather. No titles adorned their spines, but Richard could guess what they were: grimoires. Just then he noticed the hand-painted plaster Baphomet staring down from the top of the bookshelf. “Howdy to you, too,” he winked at the statue. *Yup,* he thought to himself, *this is a magician’s den, no doubt it.*

Richard ignored the smell of mold emanating from the armchair, and forced himself to sit. Terry and Dylan took places beside one another on one of the couches, and Larch planted himself in another armchair directly across from Richard. Just then, the shock-haired young man who had answered the door emerged from the stairwell, holding the back of his head and grimacing. “Oh, it seems you’ve met Frater Charybdis.”

“Sorry about the head-thing,” Richard said, without any real remorse.

“Fuck you,” said Charybdis.

“Frater, some tea for our guests, if you please.”
Charybdis sneered, but turned and limped towards what Richard assumed must be the kitchen.

“Richard Kinney,” Larch shook his head. “My, my. You know, I’ve been reading your posts since the early WELL days.”

“Then we’ve been mutual admirers,” Richard returned, a real smile emerging.

“Well?” asked Dylan.

“A very popular computer bulletin board in the Bay Area back in the ’90s,” Terry explained. “The first real internet community for most of us.”

“Just so,” smiled Larch. “I still remember how you put those Temple of Set bastards in their place on the Ceremonial Magick list.”

Richard couldn’t help a smile himself. “Oh, yeah. That was intense.” Despite himself, Richard found he was warming to Larch. He told himself it was the result of intentional flattery and to stay on guard. “Listen, Mr. Larch, we’re here on business.”

Larch’s smile lessened somewhat, but did not disappear.

“And pray, what would that be?”

“One of our friars has gone missing. We want him back.”

“And you think he might be here? Why?”

“He was staking out your house earlier today.”

Real surprise registered on Larch’s face. “No. My God, no. Fr. Kinney, you may feel free to scour every inch of this house. I’m sure you and your companions are familiar with the paraphernalia of the magician’s craft, it will hold no surprises for you. Your friar is not here.”

“Then where is he?”

“I’m as clueless as you seem to be, I’m afraid.”

“We’ll see about that. Look, we have one of your brothers.”
Larch’s eyebrows shot up. “You know where Randall Webber is?”
“I do. He’s safe, but we’re not disclosing his location. You want him back, we want our friar back.”
“You’re holding him hostage?”
“Not at all. He’s gravely ill, and his sister is tending to him.” It wasn’t exactly true, but Larch didn’t need to know that. “She has employed us to find out what happened to him. In the course of our investigation, our friar disappeared.”
Terry passed Larch an ipod, a photo of Mikael grinning stupidly on its screen. “That’s Mikael Bloomink, a member of our order,” Richard said deliberately. “You sure you haven’t seen him?”
“I swear to God, Mr. Kinney, I have not.”
Richard looked at Terry and gave an almost imperceptible nod.
After a few moments, Terry rose. “Excuse me, may I use your restroom? You only rent coffee, you know.”
“Oh, of course. Through this door here,” Larch indicated with a wave, “down the hall, to your left.”
“Thank you,” Terry said and excused himself.
Richard stared at Larch. An uncomfortable silence stretched out between them. Finally, Richard cleared his throat. “Mr. Larch, we inspected Webber’s house. We saw the sigils. We know which demon was summoned and we know what he did.”
Larch looked at them with admiration and wonder. “Do you really?”
“Really. What we don’t understand is why.”
Larch cocked his head. “What part of it don’t you understand?”
“Why avocados?”
Larch grinned, and let a few chuckles fall into his lap.
“Well, the avocados aren’t the important thing, obviously.”
“I’m certain there are a few thousand avocado growers and probably thousands more migrant workers that would disagree with you, there.”
“What I mean to say is that we have no real interest in avocados. It was...an experiment. To see if it could be done.”
“Well, congratulations, I suppose.”
“Don’t expect me to thank you fellers for depriving the world of guacamole,” Dylan sniffed.
“I’m missing that a bit myself, I must admit,” Larch feigned a pained look.
“So what’s this really about?” Richard asked.
Just then Charybdis came through the door with an antique tea tray, hastily arranged with yellowed and cracked china. He set the tray down on a cracked fiberboard coffee table, and then turned and walked back to the kitchen, letting the door swing behind him.
“Please excuse Charybdis’ rudeness.” Larch reached over and filled the four cups. “And just to put your minds at ease, I’ll drink whichever one you gentlemen don’t choose.”
“Thank you,” said Richard with a nod. He did not reach for a cup. “What was the experiment intending to prove? Why did you do it?”
Larch’s eyes narrowed. “Come now, Mr. Kinney, as you well know, every order has its secrets.”
Richard did know about that, and in lieu of responding, he picked up one of the cracked china cups and swirled tea into its stained and ancient bowl.
Just then Terry emerged from the hallway and winked at Richard. Richard took a sip of the tea, momentarily amazed at how good simple things can be, especially when one is not expecting them.
“Mr. Larch—”
“Please, I’d always so hoped we could be friends. Call me Stanis, won’t you?”

“Let’s work up to that, why don’t we? Yes, we’re on a case. But what’s more important to me—to us—is our friend being missing. We want him back, and we will stop at nothing to get him back.”

“Why, Richard,” Larch said with a smile, “that could be taken as a threat.”

“Take it any way you like. Finding Mikael is our priority, but second on our list is the whole missing avocados thing. We know you and your order mates are up to something—something dangerous, something that got your friend hurt very badly. What I don’t understand is why you’re not more concerned about him.”

Richard watched Larch closely as Terry slid back into his seat beside Dylan.

“I think you misjudge me, Richard...” Larch paused and looked away, pausing to think through his next words, or perhaps to master his emotions. When he looked back at Richard, he was master of his features.

“I love Randall as much as you love your order mates. You don’t need to believe me. I don’t care what you think...well, not much.” He looked down at his tea for another thoughtful moment. “Tell, me, Richard, have you ever put yourself or one of your order mates in danger to achieve something important? Something you believed in? Maybe to save someone, to save a lot of people?”

Richard nodded. Of course I have. Almost every fucking day, he thought.

“Then you know. You know the risks, you know what can be at stake. You know how you must keep a stiff upper lip. You know how you must maintain the pretense of having it all together, because you’re the leader.”
Terry snorted. If he had been drinking milk, it would have sprayed. Richard pretended not to notice. “I’m not so good at the last part, but yes, I know what you mean.”

“There are no such things as ‘acceptable losses,’ Richard, but there sure as hell are losses.” He stared back down at his cup.

“What are you trying to do that could justify such a loss?” Richard asked, finishing the tea in his cup.

“Saving the world, of course.”

“From what?”

“From the greatest tyrant it has ever known. From the cause of every evil, every blight, the source of all disease and pain.”

“Satan?” asked Dylan.

“No, not Satan. Satan’s the fall guy, the patsy, the dupe, the straw man. He’s the one that was set up to take all the heat off of the real perpetrator.

“And who would that be?” asked Terry.

Larch stared at him for a long moment before responding.

“Why, God of course.”