







ARKHAM HORROR™



THE TWILIGHT MAGUS



TIM PRATT



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The TWILIGHT MAGUS

AN ARKHAM HORROR NOVEL

BY TIM PRATT

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sample, you'll love the book...



Exiled occultist Carl Sanford attempts to join a secret society as a stepping stone to even greater power while his old enemies hunt him across Spain in this new installment to the eldritch-rich horror pulp adventure world of *Arkham Horror*.

Carl Sanford, once the Silver Twilight Lodge's great leader and now presumed dead, lives in anonymity in Spain, plotting revenge against those who betrayed him. Alone, he calculates his first move to achieve power abroad is by being initiated into the mysterious ancient society called the Red Coterie to secretly take it over. Despite Sanford's reputation, the Red Coterie demands proof of his occult prowess, sending him on a quest to vanquish the Blood Moon, a reclusive blood magus manipulating humans and monsters alike to achieve their own ends. As Sanford uses every scrap of cunning he possesses to outwit his enemies and prove his worth, old foes from Arkham have discovered his existence and are coming to finish him off once and for all.

CHAPTER ONE

Sanford in Spain

Carl Sanford sat on a bench in one of the small plazas lined by theaters and open-air markets, situated just off Las Ramblas, the bustling pedestrian concourse near the heart of Barcelona, Spain. Once upon a time, that series of streets had been a streambed that regularly transformed into a river of sewage and filth when the seasonal rains flowed down from the hilly Collserola mountain range. Watching the locals and expatriates bustle in their pointless multitudes this dry morning, Carl couldn't help but sneer. The flowing sewage was still here, after all; now it just had arms and legs, hopes and dreams, thoughts and opinions.

The exiled magus, once of the Silver Twilight Lodge, fanned himself with a newspaper, acknowledging the heat made him irritable. Though it wasn't yet noon, the specter of another scorching Mediterranean afternoon loomed. The newspaper was in English and nearly two weeks old. There were international editions of some prominent American papers available in Barcelona, but the *New York Times* didn't tend to cover the fortunes of small cities in Massachusetts, and, frankly,

the *Boston Globe* was only a little better. Importing copies of his hometown paper, the *Arkham Advertiser*, was an irritatingly roundabout process that involved far too many steps, especially since he didn't want anyone back home to know he was in Spain... or, indeed, that he was anywhere at all. Better for them to continue thinking he was dead, at least for now. The time for his glorious resurrection was coming, but the groundwork was not yet in place.

The sorcerer Randall Tillinghast had stolen everything from him: his wealth, his home, and most of all, his control of the Order of the Silver Twilight. But Carl Sanford would be revenged. Tillinghast hadn't worked alone to complete his machinations; he'd co-opted Sanford's bodyguard Altman, his employee Ruby Standish, and even Sarah Van Shaw, the longtime Warden of the Order's Lodge. That last betrayal stung. But those betrayers were just weapons. Tillinghast was the one who wielded them, and Sanford would see the man destroyed for it. After that, he could focus on rebuilding his *own* empire.

Or... perhaps ruling a new one. He'd lost the Silver Twilight Lodge to Tillinghast, but he was done with silver, anyway. These days, he rather fancied red.

Whatever power he acquired in Europe would be used to fuel his return to America. He would not become one of those expatriates who fled the New World for the Continent forevermore. He *would* go home again. Though it wouldn't be the home he'd left behind. Sanford's flow of news from the States was

irregular and sporadic, but he knew that in the year since he'd fled, his beloved Arkham had suffered an apocalyptic flood that destroyed large sections of the city, helped along by frustratingly unspecified "social unrest" and "mass hysteria." Arkham was apparently something of a shambles these days. That was devastating ... but it also gave him a glimmer of dark satisfaction.

See? I leave, and everything promptly falls apart.

It was a shame he couldn't take advantage of the situation to buy up great swaths of distressed property at disaster-area prices. It was too dangerous to arrange that kind of transaction at a distance, even through intermediaries, and his supply of funds was rather diminished these days, anyway. Carl Sanford would never be *poor*, but there were strata of wealth, and he'd tumbled a long way down from the upper crust.

But he had a plan to get back on his feet, hence his presence on this uncomfortable bench. A shirtless young boy in tattered pants lingered near him for a moment too long. Sanford raised an eyebrow, sending the youth scuttling. The pickpockets had tried their luck with him a week ago when he first started coming here in the mornings and he'd allowed them to succeed. They hadn't much liked what they filched, though, and word had spread among the petty thieves that he was a foreigner best avoided. Sometimes he caught the phrase *bruixot malvat* – the Catalan equivalent of the Spanish *brujo malvado*. Evil warlock.

Close enough. At least the locals seemed to understand that magic wasn't inherently evil or good – it was a tool that could be used for anything.

Carl Sanford used it to help himself.

A man sat down on the bench beside him, as pale and insubstantial as a wraith, dressed in a loose white shirt and pants of the thinnest linen. His hair was not so much white as colorless, and the same was true of his eyes and thin lips. He looked like a monochromatic figure from a photograph somehow escaped into real life.

“I see you haven’t eaten today, Fantasma.” Sanford kept fanning himself with the paper. Fantasma looked insubstantial enough that even a slight breeze might send him tumbling from the bench, but looks were deceptive.

The man – at least, he looked like a man, though he wasn’t precisely human – curled his lips into a smile. The first time Sanford met Fantasma, the creature had recently fed, making his lips full, his cheeks ruddy, his hair dark and lustrous. He’d still been a wisp of a figure, though. Fantasma didn’t take up much space in the world. Unlike Fantasma’s brother, Akh, who was invisible but so immense that he would have broken the bench if he’d sat on it. Sanford had met people like them before – the Whateley brothers in Dunwich came to mind, the offspring of mingled human and inhuman parentage, exhibiting... unusual qualities passed down by their Outsider parents. Such people had their uses, and Sanford had a knack for finding them.

“I told you not to come here.” Fantasma’s voice was a whisper on the wind. “You scare away my clients. You distress my employees. You are becoming a problem, Mr Phillips.” He spoke English well, with a hint of Catalan softness in the vowels.

The necessity of a pseudonym rankled Sanford. He’d gone to great lengths to build up his own name over the decades, making it a synonym for power, danger and strength. If this creature knew who he really was... well, it wouldn’t make

much difference. Sanford had lost much of his stature when Tillinghast drove him from Arkham. Fantasma would be delighted to sell him out to an enemy who wanted to make sure Sanford *stayed* dead. Better for this creature to believe he was Mr Phillips, an American magician of no great renown and undetermined power.

The square was clearing out. Fantasma's thieves moved swiftly into the adjoining alleyways while the tourists and locals simply felt a frisson of discomfort they couldn't identify, a feeling strong enough to make them depart without being so overwhelming they were alarmed by the urge to leave.

Sanford felt the edge of that discomfort himself, and unlike the mundane people around him, recognized the feeling for what it was: Fantasma's brother Akh had entered the square. Unlike his brother, Akh had inherited more from his inhuman parent than his mortal one, and even though Akh was invisible, there was a sense of wrongness emanating from his presence. Being close to him made your hair stand on end and the back of your mind scream, "Run." Get much closer and you would fall down, gibbering and clawing at your own eyes. Most people would, anyway.

Sanford yawned and kept fanning himself. He observed a disturbance in the air, like a heat shimmer, near the center of the square. "You're going to try to kill me, Fantasma? It would be so much simpler to acquiesce to my request. I am a much better friend than I am an enemy."

"I think I would prefer you as neither. Corpses do not make alliances or hold grudges." Fantasma waved his hand in a gesture of lazy beckoning. The shimmer moved toward them. That urge to run got stronger. Sanford caught a whiff of the

charnel house, though he doubted Akh actually smelled like anything. His brain was simply trying to translate that sense of wrongness in a way that his organic body could understand.

Sanford reached into his suit's inner pocket and withdrew a small leather pouch, then shook a handful of the gray dust inside into his palm.

"What is that?" Fantasma asked, not yet alarmed. "Some American drug? You wish to dull your pain before the end comes?"

The dust came from an apothecary case Sanford had brought with him on the Transatlantic crossing, a satchel packed full of useful items painstakingly collected over the years. He'd lost most of his treasures when Tillinghast ousted him, but he'd always hidden stashes and caches for the possibility of such a fall. "This is the powder of Ibn Ghazi," he said. "Mingled with a paralytic one of my agents brought back from the Amazon, made from toad venom, I believe. Watch." He blew the dust across his palm at the approaching shimmer.

The powder struck him, rendering Fantasma's brother visible. Akh was smaller than Yog Whateley – *that* entity probably had more rarefied parentage – merely the size of a carriage instead of a barn, but the Abomination of Barcelona had similarities to the Horror of Dunwich. His oblate spheroid body was studded with a profusion of eyes of varied sizes, sported uncountable writhing appendages like the trunks of elephants, and possessed scores of slack and drooling mouths. Balanced atop the whole, like a small hat on a large head, was the upper half of a human face, the only trace of humanity in the monster. The face was clearly kin to Fantasma, pink-eyed and pale.

Akh was floating above the ground when the powder struck, but the paralytic agent interfered with his flight, making him stutter before toppling sideways, crashing on the stones of the plaza, drooling now-visible ichors onto the ground.

Sanford rose and drew the sword concealed inside his walking stick and took a few steps toward the mewling monster. He glanced back at Fantasma, saying, “‘Akh.’ The word means ‘brother’ in Arabic, does it not? And something like ‘spirit’ in the language of the ancient Egyptians. Odd choice for a name. I took you for a Spaniard but after some hefty research, I tracked down that your mother perhaps hailed from North Africa, so I suppose that accounts for it.”

Fantasma stared at his fallen sibling, frozen in shock.

Sanford sighed. No one appreciated the work he put into his endeavors. “Shall I put your brother out of his misery?” He set the point of the blade just below the largest of Akh’s eyes. When he glanced over, he was amused to see Fantasma’s face transform into protective fury. “Or have you never seen your brother before? Just touched him, I suppose, and made guesses about his appearance, like that old Indian parable about the blind men trying to work out the nature of an elephant by feeling its various body parts.”

Sanford prodded Akh with his toe, the monster’s flesh gelatinous like an aspic. The powder’s effects also reduced the aura of discomfort the creature emitted. “He does make you look handsome by comparison, doesn’t he, Fantasma? Don’t worry, he’ll vanish from sight again in a moment. The effects of the powder only last for a dozen heartbeats or so but my heart is beating slowly, because, unlike you, I am very calm.”

The monster shimmered back into invisibility, but Sanford's sword didn't waver.

"The paralytic agent, however, should work for an hour or more, even on something your brother's size. That gives me plenty of time to carve him into steaks and chops. This blade has tasted fouler blood, believe me. These stones will be awash with his blood – or whatever flows in his noxious veins. No one will be able to see the mess, of course, so that's all right."

"Stop!" Fantasma said, finally rising. "You are more formidable than I realized, Mr Phillips. And better informed. How did you know about my brother?"

"I make it a point to be the most informed party in any negotiation," Sanford said. That was certainly true these days. He'd let himself slip before last year – had become too complacent, too sure of himself. As a result, he'd been bested by a rival and lost almost everything. He hardly needed to bring this degree of preparation to deal with a lowly figure like Fantasma, but the nice thing about overkill was the people you used it on tended to stay dead. "Now. Do you think you might be able to assist me after all? I'm not asking for so very much. Simply an introduction."

Fantasma licked his lips. "I... yes, of course. I'll make inquiries. Meet me here tomorrow–"

"No, I think not," Sanford mused. "You may call on me at the Hotel España. You know the place? It's not far."

"Si. The people you wish to meet... I can reach them, send your message, but I cannot compel them, you understand?" He stared at the place where his invisible brother lay. "I can only *ask*, Mr Phillips."

“Tell them what I did to compel you to ask, then. Perhaps that will pique their interest.” He sheathed his sword in the walking stick and sauntered away.

There was a flower market nearby he thought he might visit. Perhaps he’d acquire a red blossom to wear in his lapel, to mark this first step on his long road to ascendance. The only jokes he had these days were private ones. He suddenly missed Ruby Standish. They’d never been friends, but they’d had an easy rapport, and she could give as good as she got when it came to verbal sparring.

As he strolled down Las Ramblas, between the plane trees, he allowed himself to be distracted by the sights, his mood uplifted considerably. Barcelona! The city was too hot this time of year, but otherwise not such a terrible place. He appreciated the signs of great age all around him: the ancient churches, the fountains, the sculptures, and the twisted cobbled lanes, some nearly two thousand years old. In the New World, all the cities Sanford had explored were... well, relatively new. There was vigor in that newness, but there was something to be said for the strength of long centuries.

Spain’s neutrality in the Great War had spared it from the devastation that struck other nations on the Continent, many of which Sanford had visited since leaving the shores of Massachusetts. Of course, the country had hardly come out unscathed. The war had brought economic devastation and social unrest. The Spaniards had ample internal quarrels, anyway, from their interminable skirmishes with the Berbers in Morocco to unrest among the Catalan separatists. There’d been a coup, a military dictatorship, and martial law had only just been lifted. The country had abandoned its hereditary

monarchy in favor of leadership by strength of arms. As a strong man of no great lineage himself, Sanford approved of that political shift in principle if not in terms of the specifics.

From what Sanford could see now, the Spaniards were doing well. The country had become a beacon for artists and thinkers, both homegrown and from abroad, especially to the west in Madrid. As a whole, the people of the country seemed eager to enjoy the rest of the Twenties, to celebrate the end of the war and their new prosperity along with many others in the world – apart from the Germans, of course, who'd be licking their wounds for a bit, but perhaps they'd learn some valuable lessons from the drubbing they'd taken and proceed with more care in the future.

As Sanford walked, sweat trickled down his back, and he mused on the common image of the "lazy Spaniard" so prevalent in the American imagination: the broad hat pulled down low, the cigarette drooping from the corner of a slack mouth. Now that Sanford had experienced a few weeks of Iberian summer, he understood the truth: in the heat of the late afternoon, it was impossible to do much of anything except wait for the cool evening. The Spaniards were as industrious as anyone else, during those hours when the temperature permitted it. Sanford didn't take naps during the daily siesta when the whole city shut down, but he was not averse to finding a shady spot and allowing his deep thoughts to turn over more slowly than usual.

His stomach grumbled. It was nearly lunchtime by his old standards, but of course these Europeans didn't sit down for that meal until mid-afternoon, and as for the evening repast? They didn't eat until ten or eleven at night, when most good

citizens of Arkham would have been tucked up in bed – Sanford always kept later hours, being in business with so many creatures of the night.

To distract himself from his hunger and the general disorientations of life abroad, he walked first toward the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, pausing to admire the Monumento a Colón, an ornate pedestal and column topped with a statue of the explorer Christopher Columbus, surrounded by immense lions and winged figures of victory. Sanford admired Columbus in certain limited ways; his entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to explore, at least. Sanford had discovered strange countries himself, after all, in the Dreamlands, others sometimes by accident, and always in search of riches and power. Though he'd approached and treated the denizens of his discovered countries better than Columbus had; to read the accounts of how the great explorer had treated the native peoples he encountered, you'd think the man must have been half ghoul.

From there he turned north, walking on to the Barri Gòtic, the Gothic Quarter, the heart of the oldest part of the city and his favorite place here. History was on display everywhere, including remnants of the old Roman wall and monuments dating back to the Medieval era. Even the newer constructions fit into the spirit of the place, notably the restored Gothic façade of the Barcelona Cathedral, and the recently renovated Centre Excursionista de Catalunya. The renowned architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner had taken a humdrum structure of no particular distinction and transformed it into a spectacle with Gothic windows and soaring battlements.

The neighborhood was quiet, even somber, suiting Sanford's general mood. The streets were labyrinthian, twisting and doubling back on themselves, often dead-ending in tiny squares and plazas. Sanford liked to wander there. The warren of streets reminded him of the deep basements beneath the Silver Twilight Lodge, designed to make sure any intruders became irredeemably lost. Sometimes, he sensed magic in the Gothic Quarter and suspected folds in space, hidden pockets of geography, or secret portals to other realms existed here, but he hadn't tried to penetrate any of those yet. He didn't want to tread into secret places uninvited and upset more of the local *bruixots malvats*. At least, not unless he had a good reason.

The hour finally grew late enough to plausibly dine, so he returned to the Hotel España and their lavish dining room, La Pecera, "The Fishbowl." The walls were decorated with sgraffito art by Ramón Casas, depicting frolicking mermaids amid more mundane sea creatures. Sanford had encountered a few of the Deep Ones, the closest thing to the mermaids of folklore, and far less alluring than the *sirenas* depicted on the walls.

The staff led him to a table in the corner, where he could sit with his back to the wall and see the main doors. They'd learned his preferences quickly enough. Despite the hotel's origins as a humble boarding house, this establishment was as comfortable and luxurious as the Excelsior back home in Arkham, if a long step up from the frayed opulence of the Independence Hotel. Sanford wondered if those venerable establishments had survived the floods. It was terrible to imagine dark waters flowing through the Excelsior's ornate lobby. He shook off the dark musings and ordered a plate of fish. He'd permanently lost his taste for fish after an ordeal in

the charmless seaside town of Innsmouth, but when in Rome and all that. He also accepted the inevitable heavy pour of red wine, rougher than the French varietals he favored, but not wholly unpalatable, in a common way.

Sanford never felt lonelier than he did at mealtimes. Back home, he'd often been too busy for a proper meal, choosing to eat at his desk in his study with dishes prepared by the staff at the Silver Twilight Lodge. Other meals were opportunities to use his power: allowing his favored devotees to dine with him, or forcing them to sit and watch while he took his repast and they were served nothing. He thought again of Ruby Standish, and the good-natured way they'd so often traded barbs over lunch or drinks in her favorite booth at The Songbird's Perch. Ruby had stolen from him, then saved his life, then worked for him, then betrayed him for Tillinghast, but he was willing to admit she turned on him only under duress. Yet in these diminished times, he ate alone, and no one clamored for his attention. There were days where he had nothing to decide at all beyond what to order at mealtimes. Such idleness, when he had once effectively ruled the city of Arkham, Massachusetts (or at least the parts that mattered), had wielded influence over much of the East Coast, and even held secret sway in national politics!

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen," he murmured before patting his lips with a napkin and pushing his plate away. He rose and strode out through the airy Modernist lobby, planning to return to his room to wait out the heat, when the desk clerk waved to him. "Señor Phillips! There is a letter for you."

Sanford frowned. Could Fantasma have made arrangements that quickly? Unlikely. Which meant this was something else. Perhaps something welcome, and perhaps not.

He went to the desk and accepted the heavy cream-colored envelope liberally covered with stamps. He expected to see his alias, Ward Phillips, but there was a sigil drawn in reddish brown, and the shape writhed on the paper. Sanford glanced at the clerk, who exhibited no confusion or discomfort, and when he looked back at the envelope, he instead saw neat letters, albeit in the same off-putting hue: Ward Phillips, c/o the Hotel España, Barcelona, Spain.

“Thank you,” Sanford murmured, turning away. Someone had used magic to locate him. That sigil was drawn in a drop or two of his blood mixed with ink. He’d always been careful about keeping his bodily fluids to himself, and even routinely incinerated his fingernail and hair clippings lest a rival use them against him in a ritual. But there at the end, when everything in Arkham fell apart, when the deep basements collapsed on him and the Lodge began to burn... he knew he’d left quite a bit of his blood splashed and smeared. Everyone thought he was dead, with his corpse lost forever in another world, beyond the gates of a closed portal, so why would anyone bother to look for him? Clearly, someone had found a reason.

He wasn’t surprised. The only question was why they’d bothered to send a letter instead of showing up with knives drawn.

Back in the safety of his room with invisible wards drawn on the doors, walls, and windows, he sat down at the small writing desk and considered the envelope. He didn’t open

it right away, of course. If he wanted to kill someone from a distance, he could do it easily with the right symbols carefully inscribed on a piece of paper. There were arrangements of lines and curves that could steal breath, stop hearts, and flense away sanity, and he wasn't the only person who knew how to write them.

He twisted a monocle into his eye and looked over the missive. The lens revealed many forms of spellwork, and there was nothing magical about this letter, apart from the sigil of seeking inscribed on its front. Even so, he proceeded with caution, slitting the envelope with a letter opener and carefully tipping out thin folded sheets to rest upon the desk.

He used the letter opener to unfold the pages without touching the paper – you could soak paper in poisonous substances, not magical, but no less deadly for that – and

peered at the first lines, written in flowing ink. Sanford teased apart the sheets until he revealed the last page and looked at the signature, which confirmed his suspicions.

This letter was from Ruby Standish.

CHAPTER TWO

A Drink with a Friend

Just a letter, nothing magical at all, but that didn't mean it wasn't dangerous. Sanford began to read.

Ruby's voice was strong and somehow inarguably *her* from the first word, and he felt another pang of homesickness. He'd endured that longing often in the months since he fled the shores of America, of course, but they'd usually been pangs for the things he'd lost: his possessions and his power. He hadn't longed for a person before today, and mere moments after thinking of her, he'd arrived to find a letter. Not all the magic in life came from sorcery. Sometimes it was just serendipity.

As he read the letter, Sanford imagined he was sitting across from Ruby in their booth at the back of The Songbird's Perch, listening to the tone of her voice, which could be as changeable as New England weather.

"Old friend, old foe, old fellow." He imagined Ruby swirling her martini, making the olive bob in the glass like a bit of flotsam. Sanford pictured her glamorous, not in any of her various dressed-down disguises, but wearing a shimmering

knee-length dress, with a black feather fascinator in her hair, dark makeup around her eyes, and berry-red stain on her lips.

“Traitor,” Sanford murmured, but fondly.

Ruby sighed and went on. “First of all, since I know how your mind works, let me set it somewhat at ease. Tillinghast is gone. He left Arkham a disaster, but he *did* leave Arkham. Your precious city is no longer occupied by your enemy. I won’t go into all the ins and outs of his machinations – it’s not as if I understand them all myself. I know what Tillinghast did, at least a large part of it, but I still can’t fathom why he wanted to bring about such destruction. Maybe the destruction was only a side effect. Suffice to say, he gathered magical artifacts, and he attempted a ritual.”

“I know.” Sanford had a glass of good Canadian whiskey in this fantasy, and he took a sip. Europe didn’t suffer under the rigors of Prohibition the way Sanford’s homeland did, but most of the local alcohol didn’t appeal to him: those rough red wines and sickly-sweet ports and sherries. Sometimes a bottle of Scotch managed to drift this far south intact, but not often enough.

Sanford had still been present in Arkham when Tillinghast’s relic hunters came to call – at least the first few. After the man stole some of Sanford’s artifacts – including the Ruby of R’lyeh – Tillinghast let the magical community at large know he was in the market for more relics associated with R’lyeh, the fabled cyclopean city in the sea. What anyone would want with that barnacle-encrusted graveyard from antiquity was beyond Sanford’s understanding. A few objects purportedly from R’lyeh had passed through his hands over the years, mostly bits of statuary and the like, and they were unpleasant

things, chilling and squamous. The lovely Ruby was a rare exception, and he'd personally doubted its provenance was really related to the sunken city.

Sanford even managed to intercept some of Tillinghast's treasure hunters, lurking on the outskirts of the city, offering them money for information and artifacts, back when he'd believed revenge was a dish he might enjoy served hot. But after two meetings – one that went well enough and one that went badly, for the treasure hunter, anyway – he realized he was playing with fire. Sanford didn't learn anything of consequence about Tillinghast's plans after those meetings, just that that man was avaricious and power-hungry, which was hardly news. Sanford feared that if he continued to meddle, word would get back to Tillinghast that he'd survived their prior confrontation, and the old man would use his vastly superior resources to hunt Sanford down and make sure he was *really* dead. So Sanford had reluctantly packed his bags and taken passage to Europe, to recover his strength and plot his *cold* revenge.

But now, it seemed, Tillinghast had departed Arkham, anyway. Could I go home again? he thought, hope fountaining in his chest. But he gestured for Ruby to go on, and she did.

"I don't know if the ritual did whatever Tillinghast intended," she said. "The only obvious result was a terrible flood, and a wave of terror throughout the city. You wouldn't even recognize Arkham now, Sanford. You don't have much of a heart, I know, but what you do have would break if you saw what this place has become."

"Then I need to come home and fix it," he said.

“You probably want to come home.” Her gaze was steady and sad. “I wouldn’t advise it. I’m not the only one who knows you’re alive. I found out because I know you’re the master of the contingency plan. I couldn’t believe you’d allowed yourself to be crushed by rocks and trapped in a broken-off clot of unreality. I poked around, found some of your blood, consulted the relevant texts, and did a minor divination to confirm you were still out there, drawing breath. That made me happy, by the way. I never *wanted* to turn on you and work for Tillinghast. When bribing me didn’t work, Tillinghast threatened me, and at the end, he was much more dangerous than you were. I had no choice but to betray you.”

“The first and foremost concern of Miss Ruby Standish,” Sanford said, “is and always will be the wellbeing of Miss Ruby Standish.” He could hardly fault her for that. He was much the same when it came to the wellbeing of Mr Carl Sanford.

Ruby sipped, swirled, and went on. “I wish I hadn’t sided with him now, though. I didn’t agree with everything you did, Sanford, but you cared about this city. I don’t know what Tillinghast cares about, other than power. He wrecked everything and then disappeared, leaving us stumbling around in the ruins. If you want revenge on him, you won’t find it in Arkham. You won’t find *anything* of value here. The Silver Twilight Lodge... it’s gone. I don’t just mean the house, though that burned and collapsed into a sinkhole. I mean the whole Order. It’s shattered.”

Sanford sighed. His former bodyguard and driver, Altman, had conspired with Tillinghast to kill Sanford, and Altman had been promised leadership of the Order of the Silver Twilight as his reward. It was gratifying, in a way, to know

that Sanford's secret society had not survived without his leadership, but what a waste! The Order possessed real power, and its membership had included luminaries from up and down the East Coast in the higher echelons, and an ample supply of zealous cannon fodder among the rank-and-file.

"Altman tried to seize control of the Order," Ruby said, "but he's not the politician you are. Or the blackmailer, or the manipulator, or the briber, which might be redundant, since I already said 'politician.' High-ranking members of the organization immediately turned on Altman and tried to seize control themselves, all claiming to be your true heirs. Some of them even came up with documents proving that you'd chosen them to be your successors. Everyone accused everyone else of forging their proof."

Sanford smiled. They weren't forgeries. He'd promised to make various powerful people his heirs over the years to inspire their loyalty and had drawn up all sorts of beribboned and calligraphed proclamations to that effect. He'd expected to outlive all those useful idiots, so he'd never worried about his deceptions coming to light, but it was amusing to know how his old plots had muddied Altman's waters.

"At this point, there are at least five different organizations claiming to be the true Order," Ruby said. "There's one called the First Order of the Silver Twilight, and another called the Eternal Order of the Silver Twilight, and the Argent Brotherhood, and the Fraternity of Dusk, and the Clan Crepuscular – I think that last one only has two members, and they hate each other's guts. These offshoots and sects are all more or less at war with one another, squabbling in the muddy flooded streets. You might think you could come

back and impose order on the various Orders, but they've all had a taste of power now, and they *all* resent you for ruling them. Every one of them suffered various indignities and humiliations at your hands, and now that they're out from under your thumb, they're never going back. I think the only thing that could make those factions join forces is if they found out you were still alive. Then they'd forge an alliance long enough to kill you."

Sanford tut-tutted. "Ungrateful. Foolish. Typical."

Ruby smirked. "On the bright side, the only person the assorted Orders hate as much as you is Altman, who tried to take over the whole shebang even though he doesn't even know the real secret handshakes. They laughed him out of every room. He even got roughed up a couple of times. Altman thought he could buy his way into power, but Tillinghast took most of your money when he left town, even though he'd promised it to Altman. The poor sap is just squatting in some townhouse these days, occasionally scraping through the ashes of the Lodge to look for anything that survived the fire and sinkhole. The Warden is with him."

Sanford gritted his teeth. Sarah Van Shaw, the Warden of the Silver Twilight Lodge, had allied with Tillinghast to betray him, too. Ruby was an adventuress, loyal only to herself. Altman was a hired thug who'd developed pretensions above his station. But the Warden... she'd been as devoted to the Order as Sanford was. More, perhaps, since she was bound by powerful oaths to protect the Order at all costs and endowed with supernatural powers to help her do so. Tillinghast had convinced the Warden that fulfilling that oath meant getting rid of Sanford, that the Order would be better off without

him. Ha. How had *that* turned out? “She must be suffering.” He sighed.

“The Warden is not well,” Ruby said. “Her oath to protect the Order is killing her, now that the ‘true’ Order has been reduced to her, Altman, a house burned to the foundations, and a handful of singed grimoires they mostly don’t know how to read.”

Sanford had managed to smuggle out many of his treasures, the relics he’d gathered assiduously over the years, before the Lodge house fell, but he’d been forced to leave behind most of his impressive magical library. He hated the idea of Altman having even scraps of that much power.

Ruby took a deep drink, then set her glass down carefully on the table. “The Warden and Altman are desperate, Sanford, and you should know... they’re coming for you.”

Sanford sat up straight and smiled. They were, were they?

“I didn’t tell them you were alive. Altman has gotten paranoid, convinced you were lurking in the shadows, orchestrating his downfall, like he couldn’t fail comprehensively all on his own. He scraped up some of your beard hairs and did the same sort of divination I did, and now they know you’re in Europe. The Warden thinks you can release her from her oath since you’re the one who administered it.”

“Oh, does she? How nice for her.”

“Altman wants revenge, though when I asked, ‘Revenge for what?’ he just said, ‘For not dying like he was supposed to.’ He also has this idea that he can force you to declare him the one true heir and rightful ruler of the Order. I don’t understand him anymore. He’s gotten strange, Sanford. I think he... did something with your books, some rite that was meant to give

him power, to help him vanquish his enemies. I don't dabble in that kind of magic, and I didn't want to know the details, but he's a lot more dangerous than he used to be."

"It's amazing he survived, if he performed such a ritual without supervision," Sanford said. "Oh dear, he didn't use *that* book, did he? It's the only one of any value he could have possibly recovered, so he must have. Hmm. How much time do I have before they arrive?"

"They're making preparations to leave now. Altman managed to borrow or steal enough funds for a voyage, and they expect to take passage on a ship in the next few days. They asked me to come along, thinking I'm still part of their merry little band, or that I have some ill feelings toward you, but all I have is ambivalence. After what I've been through these past months, the things Tillinghast demanded of me, I can't face getting on another ship. This letter is all the help I can give you, and the closest I can come to making an apology. I'll send this tonight, so it will reach you before Altman and the Warden do, by a few days, at least. You might want to hide. Or set a trap, knowing you." She pushed the glass away and stood up from the table. "Goodbye, Sanford. I can't say it was nice knowing you, exactly, but it sure was interesting. And after all the time I've spent working for Tillinghast, I can say with certainty: you aren't so bad after all, old man." She disappeared into the gloom that surrounded their booth.

The salutation was a simple "Ruby."

Sanford let the fantasy withdraw and looked around his hotel room with a sigh. He folded up the pages and started to slip them back into the envelope, then thought better of it and rose to burn them in the washbasin instead, along with

the envelope. He wasn't going to leave a sigil that could reveal his present location lying around.

So, Altman and the Warden were coming. Most of his security lately had come from obscurity: no one came looking for the dead, so he'd been effectively hidden. But the letter had found him, and that meant his old employees could, too. The Warden was formidable, but if she was weak and dying, he was confident he could best her. Without Tillinghast's backing, Altman was just a professional killer and liar. Sanford had tangled with many of those. Even in his reduced circumstances, he was equal to the challenge.

Unless Altman had found something truly powerful in those books... and he might have. It was possible.

Overconfidence had led to Sanford's downfall at the hands of Tillinghast last year, and he resolved not to let himself fall prey to such hubris again. Even so, forewarned was forearmed; he was cautiously confident that he could cope with this development in a satisfactory way. It was all happening faster than he'd intended, true, but he was nothing if not versatile. His plans would go on.

Ruby's warning had altered the details of those plans, but not the essential substance. His goal was to acquire power here in Europe and to create a network that would rival the Order of the Silver Twilight. Once he was more formidable with the proper allies, he'd planned to return to Arkham and destroy Tillinghast. Now that Tillinghast was in the wind, he'd need to add an extra step: tracking down the old man and *then* destroying him. But that would be easier with a new organization under Sanford's command, anyway, so none of his immediate plans needed to change.

Of course, it would take years to build such an organization from the ground up, and Sanford wasn't that patient. He could serve his revenge cold, but not frozen. Fortunately, there was a shortcut: he simply needed to join an existing mystical organization, take it over, and twist its goals to his own purposes. Sanford had done that before, after all. Even the Order of the Silver Twilight had begun life as someone else's little cult before Sanford came along to seize control and improve it.

That loathsome Fantasma was going to introduce him to a leading figure in one such organization, and from there, Sanford would work his way in and up, all the way to the top.

He checked his pocket watch. Barcelona was still slumbering, which made this a good time to handle certain necessary arrangements. Sanford spent time in the bathroom pulling strands of hair from his head and gathering copious drops of his own blood. He cut the back of his hand, of course, to acquire the latter. Neophytes often sliced across their palms while doing blood magic, a sure sign of an amateur. The palm was much more sensitive, and there were numerous nerves there, and every time you curled your fingers, you'd reopen the wounds.

He had a few empty vials among his personal effects, and for good measure he rinsed out a few marmalade jars he'd collected from his breakfasts. He dripped his blood and nestled his hairs inside the small vessels, sealing the tops with candle wax and inscribing the appropriate sigils on the seals with the end of a needle. With a bit of effort, he pulled up a floorboard and hid one of the jars underneath, restoring the board and covering it with a rug.

Then he set out into the city with a satchel over his shoulder, roaming far and wide, walking for hours with no particular plan, and hiding the jars of blood and hair inside drains, gutter spouts, behind loose bricks, and even throwing one into the shallows of the sea.

The blood, hair, and a bit of sympathetic magic made each and every one of those jars the mystical equivalent of Sanford himself, a series of doubles. Anyone attempting to divine his location would now see a dozen results scattered across Barcelona. All that remained was making sure they couldn't locate the *real* him.

He returned to the hotel and went to the front desk. The young man working behind the counter was vaguely familiar, but Sanford had never gotten the knack of learning the names of nobodies. "May I help you, señor?" the man asked in adequate English.

Sanford extended his right hand across the counter. "I just wish to say, I have stayed in many of the finest establishments in the United States of America, and none of them can rival the luxury and attentiveness I have experienced in your exemplary hotel. I wish to congratulate you and shake your hand."

The clerk looked a bit dazed, doubtless more accustomed to complaints than compliments, then smiled and extended his hand. Sanford took his hand and *squeezed*. The clerk looked at first puzzled and then slightly pained. Sanford withdrew his hand, tipped his hat, said, "Keep up the good work," and then went toward the stairs that led to his room.

He glanced down at his hand as he walked. He wore a ring on his right hand, a hollow one with a tiny needle protruding

from the bottom, like the poison rings favored by the Borgias, but this one had a different purpose: it drained blood, just a drop, but that was enough for a skilled magician. And Sanford was no mere magician, he was a magus.

A hotel clerk's blood wasn't much use to anyone in the normal course of things, but it would serve perfectly well for Sanford's purposes. He paused on the landing of the stairs, made sure no one was ascending or descending, then put the drop of mundane blood in a tiny vial sealed with wax and inscribed with a different sigil. He hung the vial around his neck from a thin silver chain.

There. Now his magical personhood was muddled with that of the clerk's. Any divination meant to find Sanford would slide right off the obfuscation. The effect wouldn't last forever, or stand up to sufficiently strong scrutiny, but he wasn't too worried. It was only Altman and the Warden coming for him, after all. The Warden didn't do spellwork; she *was* magical, her powers inherent and granted through a ritual long ago. And Altman was a dilettante at best.

Sanford tut-tutted at himself as he continued up the stairs. That overconfidence again! No, it was best to treat the two of them like a real threat. An abundance of caution would do no harm and could conceivably do some good. He should leave the hotel soon and take different lodgings. A shame – he'd finally gotten the rooms arranged to his liking – but moving on was a basic precaution. He couldn't leave quite yet, though. He had to wait for Fantasma to send him a message first. With luck, he wouldn't have to wait long.

Sanford opened the door to this room and stepped inside.

Fantasma sat in the same chair where Sanford had read

Ruby's letter, one leg crossed casually over the other, a pistol pointed straight at Sanford's heart.

"Do come in," the pale man said, baring his teeth.

CHAPTER THREE

Altman at Sea

Altman tossed and turned in his bunk on the ocean liner *Ebon Lion*, his mind filled with visions of black fire. The Warden sat in a small chair in the corner, watching him as he moaned, writhed, and sweated. He hated being weak in front of her, but she insisted on keeping watch. She was significantly diminished from her peak, but she was still powerful by human standards and did not need to sleep. The small black dog curled up at her feet was the only creature truly resting in this berth tonight.

The *Lion* was a faded glory, its once-opulent rugs now threadbare, its wallpaper scratched in places, rust showing through the paintwork even on the upper decks. They'd chosen this vessel because it was the first passenger ship departing from Boston for Portugal after they'd discovered Sanford was alive and tracked him to Spain. Altman had... acquired... enough funds to purchase a cabin in first class; they could hardly bunk in a room with ten other people in steerage, even if that was more appropriate for their financial situation. They required privacy to make their preparations and for Altman to come to terms with his new condition.

He turned over on the bunk, facing the metal wall, unable to bear the Warden's steady gaze any longer. He knew she was watching to see if he was going to be trouble. She had a pistol in the purse on her lap and a knife hidden in her boot. She knew what he wrestled with, and if the thing he fought with won, she was prepared to take the necessary steps. She could cut his throat and easily use her vestiges of power to hide from sight while she threw his body overboard to feed the fish and Deep Ones below the waves.

But he wouldn't lose this battle. He would win. He would master the thing inside him—

Altman blinked.

He was no longer in the bunk, no longer in their cabin at all, but back in Arkham, standing amid the ruins of the burned Lodge on French Hill. The once great mansion had been entirely lost, the foundation cracked, the basement rooms partially collapsed and infested with ghouls, but he'd returned anyway, with a shotgun and a flashlight, to see if anything could be salvaged. He'd moved aside fallen timbers and entered the remains of the basement, finding his way to a room that contained a few mystic tomes, stained by soot and smoke but largely unharmed. Most of the Order's impressive collection of magical books was lost. The more common items upstairs burned when the house went up in flames, along with the truly valuable ones lost forever in the deep basements, an extradimensional space that had been cut off from the mundane world, impossible to access ever again.

But there were a few volumes that survived, recent acquisitions picked up by the Order's roaming scouts, brought

to this room for Initiates and Seekers gifted in languages to sort, inventory, and translate. A scant dozen titles of unknown value, but they were the only assets left to the Order of the Silver Twilight, and thus to Altman as the new head of the Order. So, he gathered those books up, put them in a satchel, and trudged through the crunching coals back up into the light.

See? A voice seethed in Altman's head. *You chose this. No one made you do this.*

Altman whimpered and slapped himself in the face, trying to return to consciousness, to come back to the ship making its weeks' long trip across the Atlantic. However, he remained steadfastly trapped in this memory – if it was a memory, and not some sort of mental projection, sending his present mind into his past body. That sort of thing was possible. Sanford had imprisoned a mental time traveler like that in the deep basements, a woman with the mind of an inhuman creature from the far future lurking behind her eyes. She'd escaped in the chaos, though. Another of the Order's once-great resources, lost.

If Altman's mind *was* being projected into the past, then he could change things, couldn't he? He could make different decisions. He didn't have to take these books with him, didn't have to blackmail that linguist at Miskatonic University into translating them for him, didn't have to perform the Rite of Invitation–

Why would you want to change any of that? the thing sharing his brain whispered. Altman recoiled, but how could you recoil from something inside you? He tried to hurl the satchel of books to the ground, but then the world

twitched

and he was suddenly sitting in the back room of the shack he and the Warden had rented by the river, a shack that was gone now, utterly obliterated by the floodwaters, but he didn't want to think about that either.

Tillinghast had promised him money, no, *wealth* in the form of access to all of Carl Sanford's and the Order's accounts, but there were legal delays, logistical problems, and somehow the funds never materialized. For a time, Altman and the Warden had stayed in the home of Tillinghast's departed assistant Gloria Dyer, but then a man from the bank came and told them the house had been foreclosed, and they'd been forced to move on. Around that time, Tillinghast stopped communicating with them entirely, more interested in whatever grand ritual he was performing.

Altman had eventually been forced to sell the Rolls Royce that Tillinghast had given him just to afford food and housing. And what meager housing it was! That car remained the only real asset he'd ever gotten, and it was poor payment for Altman's role in assassinating Carl Sanford. Who wasn't even dead, although Altman hadn't realized that until later.

He'd only found out the magus was alive because he discovered one of Sanford's rings in the ashes of the Lodge where the old man's study had been. Altman sat at the table in that horrible shack, holding the ring up to the lamplight, and asked the Warden if she knew anything about it.

Altman didn't will himself to speak, it simply happened: he was trapped in this vision. He tried to rise from the table, to fling the ring aside, to break the chain of causality that led from the past to the present, but nothing happened. It

seemed he was merely a passenger in the past now, observing the memory but unable to change it.

The Warden was seated in a chair against the wall, her head tipped back and a cold wet cloth draped across her eyes. She'd been getting terrible headaches lately. Her wellbeing was tied to that of the Order of the Silver Twilight, and as the Order suffered, so did she. "I know about everything," Van Shaw said querulously. "The ring has a bodiless servitor bound to it. A sort of spirit, but a brute of a thing, invisible but tangible, only really useful for carrying heavy things, or frightening fools, I suppose."

"I need any resource I can get," Altman said. Feeling his mouth move without his volition repulsed him. He twisted the ring onto his little finger, the only one it would fit. "How do I summon the thing?"

"Simply command it to appear." The Warden always spoke to him like he was a child who hadn't yet learned to tie his own shoes.

Altman cleared his throat and said, "I command you to appear, servitor!"

The ring trembled on his finger, like the vibration of a tuning fork, and a faint shimmer appeared in the air before him. "I do not serve you," a groaning voice said. "I am bound to another."

"What other?" Had Tillinghast somehow stolen this, too? "I wear the ring, so I possess you."

"No. Carl Sanford is my master," the shimmer said.

"Sanford? He's dead, creature, and death breaks all bindings."

"Not all bindings," the thing said. "But that is of no consequence, for my master is not dead."

Altman froze. "What do you mean?"

“My master is not dead,” the servitor said again. “I await his summons, not yours.” The shimmer vanished, and the ring began to grow hot, so hot that Altman tore it from his finger and flung it away, cursing. He stared at the Warden, hiding his confusion with fury, as was his custom. “Did you hear that? That thing says the old bastard is still alive!”

“Yes.” The Warden removed the cloth and looked at him slowly. “I suspected Sanford had survived.”

“You might have said something!” Altman roared.

The Warden winced, not from fear – she didn’t fear him at all, which was part of the problem – but doubtless because of her aching head.

“I knew nothing for certain.” Her voice was low and hoarse, not the commanding tones she’d once used for nearly every utterance. “But Carl Sanford is not easily killed, and we did not see his body.”

“The ceiling fell on him,” Altman said. “He was buried in rubble. And then the place where he was buried in rubble was torn away from this reality. So what if he’s alive? He’s surely lost, floating in a pocket-sized world in an endless void full of monsters, beyond the back of the stars, slowly starving to death.”

The Warden barely shrugged, lifting one shoulder and then letting it drop. “Perhaps. But he is Carl Sanford. Such a situation would be an inconvenience at most for such a magus. Don’t forget that Tillinghast exiled Sanford to the Dreamlands, and he made his way back home. Even Tillinghast seemed impressed by that.”

“If Sanford is alive and at liberty, why hasn’t he come back here?” Altman looked over his shoulder, as if afraid Sanford

might be lurking beyond one of the shoddily glassed windows.

"Tillinghast is ascendant here," the Warden said. "Arkham belongs to him. If he believes Sanford is dead, that allows the magus time to regroup, marshal his powers, gather resources and allies, and return with a plan. Sanford underestimated Tillinghast once. He won't do so again. When he returns, it will be in strength."

Altman licked his lips. "We should tell Tillinghast that Sanford still lives."

Van Shaw scoffed. "Run along to daddy, then, and ask for his help? Remind me, has Tillinghast been returning your calls? Do you even know where his shop is now?" Tillinghast Exotics and Esoterica had a disconcerting tendency to move around, and its last known location was an abandoned dusty storefront now. "We barely ever met with him directly anyway. He always sent his assistant, or apprentice Gloria, and *she's* disappeared, too."

"He still works closely with Ruby," Altman said. "If we can reach out to her—"

The Warden shook her head, slow and ponderous. "She is gone. Tillinghast has sent her on some mission. I do not know where. She told me she was going on an expedition with a group of people Tillinghast put together. They are out working on the next step to achieving his Great Work, whatever that might be. We are *alone*, Altman. Tillinghast used us and cast us aside. We were only ever a method to remove Carl Sanford, the one person who might have been a threat to Tillinghast's machinations."

Altman rose from the table and looked out the window at the squalid night. The mental passenger – the delirious, fever-dreamed Altman of the future, locked inside this memory – stared, too. The moon was high and bright, which made the churned mud of the street and the bowed roofs of the sagging warehouses dreadfully visible.

Then a wall of churning water burst from between two warehouses, tearing the structures down as it came rushing straight for their shack. The inner Altman gasped, but the body at the window seemed to take no notice, even though they were going to be washed away, obliterated–

He lurched upright in the ship bunk, looking around wildly, but there was no threat, only a dimmed lamp and the Warden sitting upright against the wall.

That inundation... that hadn't happened. When the flood – the Great Flood – came, he and the Warden had been up on French Hill, sifting through the ruins of the Lodge again in search of valuables. From their high vantage, they'd seen the wall of water wash in from the sea and watched it smash apart the poorest parts of the city. They'd also seen... *things*... moving in the water, and then–

But that whole time was a jumble in his mind. Altman had spent dark months in Afghanistan working as a mercenary, and he had clear memories of every atrocity he'd witnessed there. But for some reason, the day of the flood, and the hectic, desperate, drowning time that followed, was all smoke and fog fragments. His mind refused to order or collate those experiences, and something fundamental to his psyche recoiled every time he tried. He was left with a vague

impression of something immense and rotting, dragging itself forward...

"Warden," he croaked. "What were those things we saw in the water? When the flood came?"

"I don't know," she said from her chair. "Sanford would have known. But I think Tillinghast called them up. Summoned them. The flood was a result of his Great Work."

Altman swept sweat from his brow. He was feeling lucid, at last. The past released its grip on him. Why was he so feverish? He'd never suffered much on sea voyages before. Had he eaten tainted fish, or caught something from another passenger? He'd survived the Spanish Flu, and even that hadn't addled him like this. He remembered something, candles and blood and chanting, but his mind recoiled from that, too. He tried to focus. "Why would Tillinghast want to wipe Arkham from the map?"

"I don't know if he did," she said. "If that was his goal, he didn't quite succeed. Arkham is battered, but it still stands. For all we know, the flood might have been a side effect, or an unintended consequence, or perhaps his ritual simply went wrong. All we know is that his plans were grand and complex, and when grand and complex rituals fail, the consequences can be disastrous."

"When... when the Order is mine, properly mine, we can help rebuild." A great weight seemed to settle on Altman's shoulders, and he sank into the mattress. "Once Sanford... gives me what he stole, the treasures... once he's really dead... once he names me his heir... then I'll be... I'll have... what Tillinghast promised."

"Tillinghast's promises are moonbeams and fairy dust," the

Warden said. “You should know that by now. He promised me freedom. But I’m still bound and dying. All because you ...”

Her voice faded away, everything

twitched

and darkness rushed in. When that darkness receded, Altman knelt on the warped boards of the place they’d squatted in after the flood, a townhouse devastated by mold and mildew. The rightful inhabitants were among the missing, presumed dead, no doubt pulled by currents out to sea – or worse, judging by the body parts that sometimes washed up on the banks of the Miskatonic River. Some of them were covered in bite marks. The theory was that the flood waters brought in sharks. Altman found that more comforting than the various alternatives that occurred to him.

Now Altman was surrounded by candles, waiting for the paint on the floor to dry. He’d painstakingly copied the sigils from the book, the single book of true power he’d successfully recovered from the basement in the Lodge. The title of this grimoire was partly obscured, scratched off the leather cover and eradicated from the interior as well; the only part that was still legible read “serpentum nocturnorum,” with words on either side that were impossible to make out. Something – Serpent of the Night – Something. The missing words were somehow even more evocative, as mysteries were often more compelling than facts.

Altman only knew this book had value because the Warden told him so. She had an affinity for magic – she was, in fact, more than half magic herself, her life sustained by her connection to the Order. Altman had found a linguist willing

to translate the relevant portions for him, and he was finally ready to perform the ritual.

Don't, his feverish mind willed his past self, but it was too late. Immutable.

A brass bowl sat in the center of the sigil, filled with samples of his blood, hair, spit, and fingernail clippings, even one of his teeth wrenched from the back where it wouldn't be much missed. His jaw still ached. The roots had come out bloody. There were other things in the bowl, too: herbs procured from a witch in the woods of New Hampshire, and ground-up mushrooms, and a rare cactus small enough to fit in his palm.

He poured brandy into the bowl and lit the whole mess on fire with a long match. The smoke that rose was vile. He sat down in the circle and chanted, slow and even, having practiced the words over and over. He barely understood what they meant, memorizing them phonetically, but after weeks of practice, the Warden had grudgingly said his pronunciation was adequate. If he said the words wrong, he didn't know what would happen, but as the Warden said – or would say? – incorrectly performing a ritual could lead to disaster.

Correctly performing a ritual could lead to that, too, though.

Altman chanted, and the smoke took on a shape – were those arms, legs, and a head on a long and writhing neck? He breathed in a deep lungful of the smoke, and his vision blurred. He fell back, twitching. In the center of the symbol on the floor, the smoke figure hovered over him, looking down at him, and then he was somehow looking down at himself, at his weak human flesh, and then he was rushing down into the

mouth, through the nostrils in through the eyes and ears and every other opening, into *everything*—

The world

twitched

again, and his surroundings writhed into a blur before settling into a new configuration.

“I just need power,” Altman told the Warden, back in their little shack, after discovering that Sanford had survived but before the flood changed their world for the worse, before the ritual broke his mind. “Strength enough to show those fools that I’m the rightful ruler of the Order.”

“You *are* the Order.” The Warden’s voice was dull. “An Order of one. Two, if you count me, but I’m more ... part of the infrastructure. I must free myself of this binding, or I will die with you.”

“If I’m stronger, will it make you stronger?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps. I don’t expect that situation to arise. Now that the servitor has confirmed Sanford is alive, I have other options. If I find the magus, he can free me from my oath. He laid these bindings upon me, tied my life to the Order, and he can sever those ties. I’m sure of it.”

She didn’t sound even remotely sure of it.

“If I can find him, I can make him give me back the treasures he stole. Make him name me his heir. I can bring his head back here and show it to the traitors and upstarts, and make them realize *I* am the only rightful Grand Magus.”

“You? Make Carl Sanford do anything? Pah.”

“Maybe I couldn’t now,” Altman admitted. “But we found that grimoire. There’s a spell there, and it promises great power. The power to destroy one’s enemies.”

“You speak of things you do not understand.”

“Look at us.” He spread his hands. “We live in squalor. If we go on like this, neither of us will survive. Or worse, we will, and we’ll have to go on living like this forever. Or else I can give up my dream of ruling the Order... resign, renounce my claim... and then what would happen to you? When the Order of the Silver Twilight is truly gone?”

“I do not know.” The Warden shuddered. “Agony at worst. Death at best.”

“Then isn’t it worth a try?” Altman said. The plan appeared in his mind. Like some sort of divine, or infernal, inspiration. “I’ll perform this ritual and gain great power. Then, we’ll track down Sanford, force him to free you, and give me all that I was promised. Are you with me?”

“I have no choice,” Van Shaw said and turned her face away. Smoke began to pour in through the windows, black and acrid. It smelled like the pyres they’d made in Afghanistan, the stink filling the room—

Altman screamed and sat up in bed again, kicking the blankets off. Light streamed in through the tiny porthole window. The Warden stood by the door.

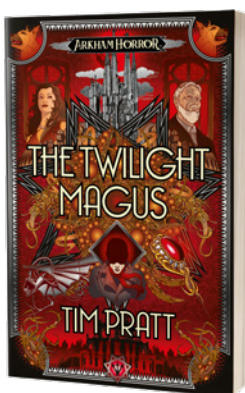
“Where are we?” he asked, panicked. How long had he been dreaming?

“Lisbon,” she said quietly and turned away again.

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