



# UJ Journal

Unnamed Journal

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## **How to Tell us How Amazing We Are**

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# From the Publisher

Color is a good thing. Variation in color is better still. There's merit to the choice to reduce cover art to a trichromatic De Stijl evocation, and there's merit to saying "Fuck all that, can we have some blue?" So we did the first thing, and now we're doing the second. Deal with it, dorks.

So in this blue and green (and black and white and red) issue, we have continuations of existing series so as not to spook the readers. The star and ship from *Cantilever Jones Lands Hard* a few issues back returns in *Cantilever Jones Swings Low*, in which the hero bickers with his familiar and deals with creepy space monks who may or may not be exploiting a young girl. It's part 1 of 2, so you'll only get a partial answer to that question, which is no answer at all. *Selah*.

There follows two more chapters of our serial novel, *Ulysses and the Fugitive*. Chapter 15 has our two secondary characters drinking to steel their souls for the attempt to detach our protagonist from his plight. In Chapter 16, the protagonist does like protagonists do, and does what he must. It feels very like what they call a Second Plot Point, so keep your eyes peeled.

Ansel Horst closes things out with his third Drunk Vampire Hunter story. This one involves witches. I like this Drunk Vampire Hunter guy. He's got moxie, and a mouth. He doesn't particularly have brains, but if you hang around intellectuals, like I do, you become aware of the limited value of book learnin'. Pretty colors are better.

Enjoy.

Thomas Fitz  
**Publisher**



# Cantilever Jones Swings Low, Part 1

*by Albert Kuhawlik*

I'm sitting in a bar on Tevian-5 that's not really one I enjoy, but it's comfortable enough for people in my line that I can consider myself a regular. It's seedy, but not in an entertaining way. There are some gorks playing Kumba, which is a game I can almost grasp by observation but not quite, and I've no intention of learning to speak the gork language since they're unsightly slimy tentacle creatures who are absolute turds when drunk. I've cruised the odd regions of most of the Galaxy, and seen things that would turn your hair three different colors and back again, and trust me when I tell you this: drunk gorks are something you cannot unsee.

And the rest of the crowd is like me, freighter captains and hotshots with a certain flexibility vis-a-vis the law, either killing time between charters or waiting on one to wander in. I was in the latter camp, and already it was starting to bore me. Sometimes, no matter the multiplicity of adventures and experiences, this job - every job - involves sitting around waiting to be told what to do. There are those who find existential comfort in that kind of universality, but I am not one of them.

I could be in a busier spaceport, like Brana Prime, but I am trying to avoid too much Imperial oversight lately. Recent events have made them not quite suspect me, which in a way is worse than actually suspecting me, because it makes them more paranoid and me less able to see them coming. So I'd rather just not provoke the hammer. Which is why I'm sitting here, in a place that kind of bores me, being bored.

*{Great start to the tale, Rand. "Bored in a bar that's boring." I'm ready to fall asleep, and I lived through this thing.}*

That is my psionic lizard familiar, Norl. He is annoying, and when he's not poaching my food he's off seeking his own, and not being very useful. For example, right now

*{I do not poach, that is complete*

he's flitting about the ceiling of the bar, eating bugs, and giving me no amusement.

*Bullshit}*

Also, he interrupts me in my mind, and so sours the flow of my narrative.

*{Well, if you were a more reliable narrator...}*

*"Oh, really? Why don't you narrate about hyperspace, Norl?"*

*{...}*

*"That's what I thought."*

Anyway, we were in this bar, the Glug, which is the closest translation of it's original Tevian name that makes any

kind of sense, and we were bored, and just starting to get annoyed with each other.

*{Just starting, he says...}*

And that's when Norl drew my attention to the only two people in the place who were looking more uncomfortable than me.

*{I did?}*

*"Let's not get so meta we miss the first plot point, shall we?"*

*{Fine, Fine...}*

They were dressed in dark grey robes and had the air of men who had never before been in such a dive as this before. Their neck muscles recoiled at the very air, and they regard everyone around them like bombs or beasts about to rampage in their directions. Which wasn't wrong per se, and given their obvious lack of experience, really the safest attitude to take. But that didn't make it any less awkward to experience or observe.

They were talking to Graul, a fellow freighter captain and something of a friend. We'd crewed gas-miners together back when we were young enough to have no lives worth saving. He already had a charter hauling orsnip back to Brana and so didn't need the extra work. He pointed me out to them. I waved in acknowledgment. Next time I see him I'll have to thank him for the reference. A quick knee to the groin oughta do it.

They wandered over to the table I sat at near the grainy windows and asked if I was Rand Thrax. I assured them that I was and invited them to sit. I summoned Norl to do his thing, which is to swoop down from the ceiling with a shriek, fly right in between them, and perch on my shoulder. It's a bit hammy, but it never fails to set the right mood when dealing with people who are unused to spaceports and independent contractors.

*{It is not hammy}*

*"Shush"*

"Don't mind him," I say, "He's not been properly fed."

"You have a psionic link with it," said the one on the right. He had dark eyes and a pale face.

"That's correct," I say, offering Norl a bit of fried snack.

"How did you acquire it?" asked the one on the left. He had creepy pale eyes and skin as dark as smoke.

"The lizard, or the link?" I reply.

"Both," they said at the same time. I admired their effort to sound creepy, and considered that what had seemed obvious discomfort to me might have been just unfamiliarity and genuine oddness. I decided that I liked them.

"I got him out of an egg. I got the link with a simple mantra incantation when it was two days hatched. From the

Book of Zinnagun.”

“You are an educated man,” said Pale-Face.

“I am a Galactic Man,” I said, “But how can I be of service?”

“We require transport,” said Dark-Face. “To Senel-4.”

“I know Senel-4,” I say.

“Another captain said you were not otherwise engaged,” said Pale-Face.

“That’s correct. What’s the cargo?”

“Passengers only,” said Dark-Face, “Ourselves and one other.”

“Who’s the other?”

“She is at our lodgings,” they said together. There must be some pattern to that. Obviously some kind of psionic link between them, communal consciousness or some such. They belong to some manner of society, but there robes bear no symbols are garnishment, so whatever they belong to, it’s probably new.

“Why isn’t she here?” I ask.

“This is not a place for her,” said Pale-Face.

“What is your price?” said Dark-Face.

I pretend to look at Norl in a meaningful way, and he makes a filthy joke in my mind while I do so in order to make me crack up, because he thinks that’s funny, and he’s kind of right. But I don’t crack up. Instead I meet their creepy eyes and say “10,000. All in advance”

They look puzzled again.

“We got here for less than half that,” said Pale-Face.

“Senel is a Free System,” I said, “Outside of Imperial Jurisdiction. That means there’s no galactic law to appeal to. Plenty of local scumbags and pirates, though. The risk is higher, the price is higher.”

“Half now, half when we arrive,” said Dark-Face.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know you, and have no way to know or reason to trust that you can pay the full amount until I have it in my hand.”

“Our sacred word...” they said together, but I cut them off.

“Is nothing to me. I don’t belong to your creepy star-cult, whatever it is. All I know is you’re not Bindu, because Bindu know what transport costs and don’t haggle over prices. My price is fair. Pay it or stay here.”

They sat there, staring forward like fresh corpses.

“How do we know you will keep your word?” said Pale-Face.

“Because I have an Imperial transport license. If I screw you over, your buddies can complain to the Admiralty about me, and I will be in a world of trouble. Look me up and see how many negatives I have. You can count them on one hand.”

“We will pay you 12,000,” said Dark-Face, “If you wait for our return trip.”

“All three of you?”

“Yes,” said Pale-Face.

“15,000,” I said. “That gives you the return for half-price.”

They didn’t even hesitate: “Agreed.” Then they stood, shook my hand awkwardly, and left by the nearest door.

*“Nor I, I feel like I left money on the table.”*

*{I think you did. But you wanna know what I wonder?}*

*“What?”*

*{Who ‘she’ is, and why they taking her there just to take her back.}*

\* \* \*

No troubles accompanied our departure. I didn’t expect any, because however buggy those two looked, they didn’t act like they were on the run. So whatever house of worship they belong to hasn’t run afoul of the Empire yet. Which means they either have already aligned themselves to the Stygian Ecumenical Guidelines, or they haven’t had to make that choice yet. I’m leaning towards the latter, but you never can tell.

In any case, they kept to themselves for most of the trip. We have a decent galley on board, and I don’t uncharge for food unless you have weird dietary requirements, but I also don’t mind those that bring their own provisions. Once you’ve paid for the trip, it’s very chill aboard the Jones. Easiest way to get along with people is to give them space and needs. Once you’ve agreed upon a price, of course.

The hyperdrive loops were such that we had a little over a standard Galactic Day in transit. I spent most of it reading The Ungoliad in the cockpit while Vin did 90% of the piloting. He occasionally asked me why I was reading a book I had already read several times, and was not satisfied when I explained that I learned something new each time. Not that I would expect a nav-bot to grasp that the inefficiency of literature is part of the point. I keep expecting him to just absorb human behavior as a data point, but I guess they’re not programed for that.

I didn't see the female, being absorbed in readying the Jones for takeoff and making sure the local vassal government won't be levying some kind of fee or surcharge like they sometimes do. But Norl did, and he said she was a youngish female, older than the youngest, but not fully. Something about how she's still in the hiding phase. Lizards don't fully understand human development, so I ignored this.

We pulled out of hyperspace near the polar zone of Senel-6, a big gas giant about half a astronomical unit away from our destination. This was by design. Sure, the most convenient thing is to pop into real space in the equatorial zone of the planet, then slide right down on rocket power. There's even a certain style to it. Newbie pilots especially love that maneuver: in their heads everyone drops whatever they're doing to see the magic spaceship hop into their orbit. But I don't like the risk. Orbit is the most dangerous place in space, precisely because of the concentration of other beings and other spaceships. Two ships coming out of hyperspace in the same spot is rare, even infinitesimally rare, but it's not impossible, and it's not something you ever want to see. Two things colliding their realities together, being punished by the laws of thermodynamics for existing is...well, it's gross. I'd rather hang out with gorks.

Besides, it's handy to approach your planet on regular power and scout it for signs of trouble. Every time you pop into hyperspace, you change the universe around you. You have to be sure you're arriving into the scenario you thought you were.

Senel-4 is a decent-sized Terran-class planet, with a rather high population density. Most of it is huddled around the equatorial zone. Which on the one hand is normal, but the manner of it here is extreme. Once you get past the tropics on either side, the human population falls to almost nothing, and quickly. Something to do with local wildlife being dangerously inhospitable. I never quite understood it, but then I never quite paid too close attention to it. The few odd jobs I've had out here were for mining and agricultural equipment - typical settler needs. I don't think I've ever actually taken anyone there, until this trip.

We made landing at Asport, which is pretty common. Spaceports are spaceports not because you specifically need to take off an land from a specific place - that's the beauty of space travel - but because of the convenience of logistical support. Spaceports are where space equipment is easy to locate and where the locals know what you need and how to use it. Despite the ubiquity of space travel, most people don't leave their home planets, and most that do tend to settle in wherever they arrive, and sit under new stars and forget everything about how they got there. Most humans travel when they have to, and prefer to build their lives where they are if they can.

All of which made me wonder the more about our passengers: obviously not setting up missionary shop, since they were leaving, but obviously not bringing any proselytizing materials to dump and leave either. In fact, as I watched them descend from the ramp of the Jones, it was really quite clear that they didn't figure the local population into their plans in any way. During the entire time, I don't think they asked for anyone's name once. In fact, barely half-an-hour after leaving the Jones, they came back aboard, in exactly the same formation: Pale-Face in front, Dark-Face in rear, and in between them, in a pale blue and orange robe, a girl who couldn't be older than 14 Standard. She peeped bright green eyes out at me and then averted them. I narrowed my eyes in thought.

*"Norl, what did you mean by 'hiding phase'?"*

*{What?}*

*“You said the girl was still in her ‘hiding phase’. What does that mean?”*

*{ You know, the phase when human females are old enough to breed, but they hide it for some reason. }*

*“There are reasons, Norl.”*

*{ Yeah, breeding’s a nightmare for you guys. You should really lay eggs instead. }*

*“I’ll get right on that.”*

I went back into the ship, intending to stop our passengers and get some more details. I didn’t need to pick up another charter since they were already paid up for the trip back, but to me, that was all the more reason to pry. When I’m bought, I like knowing what I’m bought for.

They were already back in their quarters. I knocked at the door, and after some minor shuffling, Pale-Face answered, looking as though he was expecting me. The girl was sitting on the bed, with her robe off, in a plain cloth shift. I felt revulsion.

“What are you doing?” I asked

“We will require transport too the polar zone,” said Dark-Face, in the back of the room.

“So?” I said.

The girl looked at me with her green eyes and I thought I saw fear. She was skinny and looked cold.

“When can you arrange it?” said Pale-Face.

“I’m a starship captain, not a tour guide,” I said, completely unhinged, utterly bereft of xi. This all felt wrong, and the wrongness was permeating my system down to the digestive level. I wanted to puke on them.

“We will add another five thousand to your fee to act as broker on our behalf,” said Dark-Face. The girl just kept looking at me.

“Save your money and do it yourself,” I said. “I don’t know what sick kalsch you’re up to, but I want no part of it. In fact, you can keep your return fee, I...”

She suddenly stood up. She stood up and padded over to me on skinny bare feet, eyes locked with me as though Pale-Face and Dark-Face were not in the room. I could feel the heat of her skinny body as it stood near me, feel the awareness of her soul and the awareness that she had brought her soul into the presence of mine. I could hardly breathe for the sense of her. I could hear Norl shouting in my ear but couldn’t make out a word he said.

Like a clinging vine in time relapse her hand came up and laid itself gentle on the side of my face. “Please,” came her voice. “Please help us.”

I couldn’t say anything. I’ve been through a thousand pages of sacred wisdom from schools current and forgotten about keeping clear the framework of your mind, of knowing yourself, of purging the poison that comes from

society (“As the filth of their digestion,” speak the Ju-Bodda “so will the thoughts of others contaminate you.”), but against this simple plea I had no heart, no words, no wisdom. I didn’t even say yes. I just nodded dumbly and looked away.

She went back to the bed and sat down.

Pale-Face and Dark-Face began to chant:

*Lord of the House, be a gentle friend to us  
White and tawny beast, baring its fangs,  
As they gleam like diamonds of death  
Fall fast asleep!  
We are love and kindness  
We bear no taint of evil  
Fall fast asleep!  
The ones who rest and the ones who move,  
Close their soft eyes with the light touch  
Like the heavy doors of sleep  
Fall fast asleep  
Fast asleep.*

I knew the incantation, or a version of it. The Bindu have a similar sleep spell. But it was always intended as self-hypnosis among them; never have I seen it used to lull another. But it worked. Their voices had a strange kind of music to them, and the girl’s eyes fluttered, and she drifted down to the bed and they covered her up.

They were controlling her. I could see it. They were using her for something. But I was in.

Pale-Face came back to me.

“Five thousand,” I said.

He nodded.

*To Be Continued...* **UJ**

# Ulysses and the Fugitive

*By Alfred Underhill*

## Chapter 15 - Tired and Sore

The ride back to Giles's flat was silent. The weight of the conversation and the desperate plan hatched inside the diner crushed their collective will for further conversation. Giles parked his car, and the three of them trudged into his apartment.

Giles switched on some lights and put his car keys on the kitchen counter. He pulled a beer out of the fridge and held it up for both Ulysses and Nera to see. It was his way of asking if they wanted one too. They both nodded yes. He grabbed two more, popped the tops off, and handed them to his guests. The three clinked their bottles together. Giles and Ulysses muttered a cheers that Nera joined them in a beat later. Giles moved out of the kitchen and down the hall to his living room.

He turned on the TV and began flipping through channels. Ulysses sat down next to Giles, and Nera sat on Ulysses's opposite side. Giles channel surfed for a minute or two, until he settled on the soccer game that was originally on screen when he first turned on the TV. He sipped his beer.

"When, you reckon?" Said Giles, staring at the TV.

"I don't know yet. Soon probably," said Ulysses, glancing at Nera. "We need to figure it out, quick."

Giles nodded in response. "Can't say I envy either of you," he said, drinking his beer. "Don't feel like you have to rush on account of me. As I said earlier, you're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Thanks, man. That means a lot. Sorry you got tangled up in all this. I'm hoping that when we go...eh, I'm just hoping this is it, as far as hassling you with this stuff goes." Ulysses's felt too tired and scattered to elaborate more.

"No worries, mate," Giles's voice sounded flat. "You should probably still try to see a doctor tomorrow though, yeah?"

"Yeah, you're right. You got one in mind?"

"I'll call my doctor's office now and leave a message," said Giles. He muted the TV and pulled out of his phone. After leaving a voicemail he un-muted the TV. "Probably hear from them early tomorrow."

"Thanks, Giles." Ulysses saw his friend nod once, still staring at the game. He could tell Giles was tired too. Ulysses knew his friend didn't like the idea of him surrendering his freedom with Nera. Giles probably thought it was more than Ulysses owed her. Under a different set of circumstances he'd probably agree with Giles. He trusted his Australian friend's judgment, yet he just couldn't bring himself to leave Nera to face the hyssopshebolith and the U.S. Government alone. Ulysses tilted the bottom of his beer bottle toward the ceiling.

"I think I'm going to finish my drink and go to bed," Ulysses murmured.



"Right, off you go when you're ready, Lee. I'll probably be up awhile watching this turd of a match. "

Ulysses nodded, and looked to Nera. "What about you?"

"I'm not tired. But I can come rest with you, if you like?"

"I'll be good. You don't have to." Ulysses turned his head toward Giles, whose eyes were fixed on the soccer match. One of the players was yellow-carded, prompting Giles to curse. Ulysses looked at Nera. "Just don't interfere with Giles while he's watching the game, okay?"

Nera gave Ulysses her shark-like grin, prompting him to chuckle. She nodded in the affirmative and stroked the side of his head. "I'll come join you when I get tired," she said.

Ulysses watched the game and drank his beer. The silence on the couch was intermittently broken only by Giles muttering or cursing or both. When his bottle was empty, Ulysses excused himself, pausing to kiss Nera. Then he walked down the hall to Giles's spare bedroom.

The excited jabbering of the commentators was the only sound in the living room. Giles's expression was ambivalent. His gaze didn't stray from the TV.

"Giles?" Said Nera. "I know you have something to say. You can talk to me, if you want to."

"Can't hide anything from you, can I?"

"I don't know. You haven't yet," she said with a shrug.

"Then thank you for the chance to say what I have to say out loud," Giles said, looking over at Nera. "Let me start by saying: I do believe the two of you love each other. I don't doubt that. And love is a wonderful thing. I've been in love before, so I do know what it's like. I understand how love was a factor in some of the decisions made earlier this evening. But I think there are still a few facts that need to be addressed despite those decisions." Giles sipped from his beer bottle.

"To be completely honest, you're poison for Lee. You're no good for him at all. I don't know if you understand that or not. It's apparent to me that Lee doesn't understand how you're wrecking his life. His teary overtures to join you as a permanent guest of the U.S. Government proved it to me." The Australian paused for reaction from Nera, yet saw little and didn't quite know how to interpret what he did see.

He continued. "You must understand, Lee was a mess before you met him. But now, he's actually worse off. Any chance of him getting his life on track is completely wrecked if he goes with you. I don't think he deserves that." Giles paused, once more looking for reaction. Again, he wasn't sure how to interpret what he saw. "You know, I tried to reason with him about you shortly after you showed up at his flat, and he had none of it. Struth."

Giles downed the rest of his beer. "And look, I am sympathetic to your situation. Truly. I am. You're in an unwinnable, loony situation. Even the best case scenario for you looks pretty fucking bleak. I get it. But please don't let Lee go with you. I'm begging you. He's too fucking smitten to know any better." Giles considered the

soccer game for a handful of seconds before continuing. He shook his head.

"I mean, honestly? It's not like they'll even let you two see each other once you're there. You know that, right? Human governments tell people whatever they want to hear to get them to obey. Once they have you two, you'll probably both be held in separate cells, likely in different buildings. Hell, they might just warehouse Lee somewhere across the country for good measure. They'll probably parade him in front of you on occasion, whenever you get too difficult for the fucking spooks and military to control. Maybe they'll put him across a table or on the other side of window so you can lay eyes on each other. They'll threaten to torture him or kill him unless you do what they tell you. Did any of this occur to you?"

Nera stared with sad eyes at Giles. She nodded.

"And what? You're just going to let him go with you anyway?"

"Ulysses doesn't believe the government will ever leave him alone now. No matter what he does."

"He might be on to something there," Giles sighed. "Still, if he just goes home, it might only mean a lifetime of surveillance. That's still much better than being held at a top secret facility somewhere, cut off from the world for the rest of his life."

"I understand that you want me to tell him not to go with me," Nera said in an even tone. "To be honest, I also think that would be the best course of action, but I don't think you and I together can convince Ulysses not to go."

"You're probably right about that. Lee can be a stubborn bastard at times." The muffled noise of the soccer game became the only sound in the room again for a few minutes. Then Giles said, "what if we didn't have to convince him?"

"If you're suggesting I leave when he's seeing the doctor, that won't work," Nera said flatly.

"Right, right," said Giles, palming his face. "He doesn't have his passport with him. Neither he nor I could really afford the airfare to send him back. Living in Australia illegally makes it difficult to find a job. All right, yeah, that won't work."

Nera pursed her lips. Then she said, "I think I may have an idea. I don't like it, but it would get Ulysses back to the U.S. and keep him out of custody."

"Oh? I'm all ears."

Nera's face was somber as she gave Giles the details of her plan. His expression matched hers by the time she finished explaining it.

## Chapter 16 - Surrender

Ulysses and Nera stayed with Giles another 8 days. It hadn't taken long for Ulysses to see Giles's doctor, but the MRI and follow up results took longer. The diagnosis: three cracked ribs on his left side. The doctor told Ulysses there wasn't much to be done about it other than wait. He wrote the young man a script for ibuprofen, advised him to be careful, and suggested as much rest as possible for the next two months. Ulysses booked a follow up appointment that he knew he wouldn't keep.

Being under doctor's orders to take it easy was somewhat comforting. Ulysses had already managed to rest a fair amount while he'd waited on doctors and medical scans. It was the first real opportunity he'd had to catch his breath since Burning Man. Ulysses knew he wouldn't be whole again by the time both he and Nera returned to the U.S., but that didn't matter to him. What mattered was getting time with Nera and Giles while he was still free.

While Giles was at work, Ulysses and Nera spent most of their time talking, cuddling, and having sex. Ulysses thought it was more diplomatic for the two of them to fuck only when Giles wasn't home. He didn't want to annoy Giles anymore than they already had.

Ulysses took Giles out for drinks a few of the nights they stayed with him. The two of them would carry on as though the American was just in town on a social call. He'd brush Giles aside whenever he reminded Ulysses that he didn't have to turn himself in with Nera. Giles would shrug, mutter into his beer, or suddenly exclaim something about what was on the bar's TV in response to Ulysses's dismissals.

It was a Sunday afternoon when he and Nera said goodbye to their host. He drove them to a spot near where Nera had hidden her saucer. The three of them sat in the car for a moment before Giles broke the silence.

"Right, so you've called Special Agent Yank, so he knows you're heading over."

"Yeah," said Ulysses. "I expect there will be some kind of a welcome wagon with him when we get there."

Giles nodded. "I wouldn't expect it to be much of a homecoming. Probably be best to anticipate some rough treatment. I figure they'll be rather strict about how they want things done."

"Seems likely. We'll just follow all of their directions and hope that's good enough, I guess. Not much more we can do going into this kind of situation." Ulysses looked at Nera when he felt her hand on his. Her smile was gentle.

"Right, well, I hope all of this is worth it anyway. Seems like a crazy, bloody fucking mess, but you already know what I think about all this." Giles swallowed and looked out the driver side window. "Maybe you'll get lucky and it won't take long for those things to make their move. If we're all lucky, no more of them show up either."

"Please do not worry, Giles. I will find and kill the remaining hyssopshebolith." Nera sounded a little too cheerful. She quickly added, "And I won't let anything happen to Ulysses."

Giles muttered something to himself, and then said, "Of course, yeah, Nera. Yeah. I know you'll look out for good ol' Lee. No doubt in me mind about that." Nera beamed at Ulysses over the tepid endorsement.

He suppressed a grimace, then said, "Hey, c'mon man. We'll be okay. And I'll see you again someday. Once Nera

deals with the rest of the critters, we'll figure something out."

The Australian shook his head and let out a mean chuckle. "Ever the optimist, aren't we, Lee? I guess it does you credit, under normal circumstances."

Silence permeated Giles's car once more.

"Right, well, cheers you two. Bonzai! Good luck, and all that. If you find yourself outside of government custody for awhile, give us a call."

"Thanks, buddy. Thanks for hosting us for so long and for all your help. And thanks for the ride too." Ulysses said, reaching over to shake hands with his friend. He opened the car and went to the trunk to get his bags.

"Here, I'll get out while you're getting your stuff," said Giles, unbuckling his seat belt. He turned to Nera and said, "You're going to look after him, yeah?" Nera nodded, looking somewhat forlorn. "Good." He nodded to her and then got out of the car.

Ulysses pulled his suitcase out of the trunk and set it down. That and his backpack were all that he had with him. Nera's containers of playa dust were stacked on top of his suitcase. He looked at Giles who had come to stand next to him. Ulysses shut the car's trunk. "Well, this is it. Thanks again, Giles." He hugged his friend, then put on his backpack, balanced the containers in one hand, and grabbed his suitcase.

Nera was out of the car. She also gave Giles a hug and told him not to worry. Giles just shook his head at both of them and wished them safe travels and good luck before getting back into his car. Ulysses handed Nera her containers as the two of them watched Giles drive away. Then they started walking.

The flight in Nera's ship was as disorienting as ever. At least I don't feel like I need to be sick, thought Ulysses. Once again, their travel time was impossibly short.

They touched down in a different section of the Nevada desert this time. Unlike all of their prior flights, they were not alone when they landed. Both Ulysses and Nera materialized outside of her saucer in a flash of light.

Agent O'Flannery waived to them. He stood next to a car flanked by armored humvees and what Ulysses was pretty sure were abrams tanks. He could see at least two-dozen soldiers pointing automatic rifles at them. O'Flannery shouted something Ulysses couldn't make out.

"Man, if this is what's it like to be popular, I do not like it," Ulysses said under his breath. Nera gave him a shallow smile. "Here comes O'Flannery with some friends."

The special agent strode toward them with six of the armed soldiers in tow. The approaching group didn't have weapons drawn, but the remaining service members by the vehicles kept their guns trained on the pair.

"If there's anything you want to say to me that's not going to be recorded by the government, you've only got a few seconds."

"I love you, and I am sorry about what will happen next."

"It's okay, Nera. I signed up for this," he said. He held her hand as O'Flannery and his armed escort closed in on them.

"Hello, Nera. Ulysses," said O'Flannery. "I hope you're both ready to go because we're going now."

"Sure, let's go," said Ulysses, surprising himself with how casual he managed to sound.

"I have something I need to discuss with you, Agent O'Flannery, before you take us and I surrender my vehicle."

O'Flannery's face was a mask of barely suppressed irritation. "Fine. What is it?" The soldiers behind him shifted restlessly.

"Can you guarantee that Ulysses will be returned to his home and otherwise left alone if just I come with you? Of course I'll still give up my ship."

"Wait, what?" Ulysses sputtered in unguarded disbelief.

O'Flannery looked thoughtful for a handful of seconds before responding. "I can't say we'll never call him again or request an interview at some later date. But yes, I can make sure he's returned to his home in Denver. That I can promise. We'll need to debrief him first, of course."

"That is acceptable."

"No! No, it's not! Nera, this is not acceptable!" Ulysses shouted, as he tried to get her to look at him.

Nera ignored him. "If he is harmed, I will cease to cooperate. There is no way for you to hide any harm that comes to him from me. Am I clear?"

"Crystal," said O'Flannery with a sigh. "That's fair a condition."

"Nera! What are you talking about? What the fuck?" The panic was naked in Ulysses's voice.

Nera locked eyes with him. "I'm sorry, Ulysses. I don't want to be separated from you. I love you so much. I'm so grateful for the time we've had together." Her sudden immovable grip was on his throat. His pleas for her to stop were only a gurgling sound in his ears. Nera's tear-streaked face was the last thing Ulysses saw before losing consciousness.

O'Flannery shook his head at the two of them. A mixture of pity and disbelief played across his face as he gestured for a couple of the soldiers to carry Ulysses. The agent watched Nera wiping her eyes and working to regain her composure. She nodded to him.

He turned around. "We're done here. Let's head back." He said to his entourage.

The group moved toward the armored vehicles and the rest of the company. Nera's saucer followed silently behind them. **UJ**

# Witch, Please

*By Ansel Horst*

I hop off the bus and I close my flask. Normally I wouldn't be so gauche as to drink on the bus, but the driver was a dick who'd thrown me off a crosstown route once for tussling with a vampire who had announced to everyone the he was going to murder everyone riding in full view of anyone. So I nipped at the vodka with obnoxious flair, right in the view of his mirror, all the while daring him with my eyes to do something about it. He didn't, and so deserved it. Next time someone saves your life from an Cainite, have the decency not to throw him off the bus six blocks from his abode because he loots the corpse afterwards. Mid-Victorian morality has no place in my profession - deal with it.

Anyway, I didn't drink all the vodka. It was just to spite the bus driver, and anyway, I had better things to drink than small-craft Vodka, however trendy. I was about to engage in business with some Lillithites, which was always a chancy endeavor, the more so because as a demonslayer with papers it was kind of outside the scope of my brief. So I needed some element of sobriety to even ensure my situational awareness, such as it was. Also dealing with Lillithites always carried with it the tantalizing possibility of drinking some Honest-to-Moloch Witch's Brew, which I needed a reasonably functional brain to savor properly.

So I closed my flask and pocketed it and inhaled deeply as I trod from the bus stop to Engilda's Magic Shop and Fortunes. It looked as nondescript and slightly dirty as ever, the kind of place who's faded orange sign and brownstone front somehow defied the eye to notice it, yet somehow managed to stay in business as yoga studios and half-gaijin dojos closed around them. Only the H&R Block on the other corner had survived as long as Engilda's.

I open the door gently, take a full inhale of the clove aroma and let the bell ring hard in my wake. A girl who was clearly torturing her hair to look like Fairuza Balk looked up, and was about to greet me with whatever banality was appropriate to greeting customers to a New Age goop and nostrum shop, when she got a good look at me, and sensed in that way that girls that age sense that you're trouble, and not the fun kind. Instead, she said, with a voice full of some kind of school-trained disdain that indicated she possessed a level of social hierarchy she was supposed to mean something to me, "Yes?"

I took advantage of my male obliviousness and pretended to ignore her tone, barking "where's Engilda?" at her.

She did not like that "She's not here," she said.

I might have enjoyed provoking her a little more, but I just wanted to be about my business. "She called me half-an-hour ago, telling her to meet me here."

"Well," she said, cocking her head exactly like the cheerleader she used to be, "she's left."

"No," said a voice coming from the back room, "I haven't. Come in, come in."

## Witch, Please

I smiled and pointed a finger in the direction of the back room. “I’ll just...” I said, and trailed off. She gave me a mocking sneer, so I winked at her wolfishly. Her shock was so pure and innocent that I almost laughed out loud.

Past the string bead door a woman well into her sixties was sitting at a faded blue metal desk collecting receipts. She waved me over. “Thank you for coming,” said Engilda (no, that isn’t her birth name, and no I’m not telling you what that is. She’s been Engilda for decades).

I sat down in a plastic chair on the side of her desk. It was surprisingly comfortable. I smiled.

“So,” I said.

“So,” she said, and looked away. She appeared to be deep in thought. “Connie,” she says. The girl from the front came back past the string beads and stood in the doorway, struggling not to pout.

“I need to have privacy,” Engilda said. “Close the shop up and take a 15-minute coffee break.”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon,” said Connie.

“I do not wish to repeat my instructions,” said Engilda. Connie froze like a frightened deer, and then with an almost reverent manner, retreated, making no sound until closing the door and locking it behind her.

“She thinks I have The Voice,” said Engilda, with a grin.

“An impression you’ve carefully sewn, no doubt,” I replied.

“Most Carefully.”

“And so long as she thinks it, you kind of do.”

“Only up to a point, unfortunately,” she replied, and briefly closing her eyes, pushed her palms into her desk, and took a very deep breath. She snapped her eyes open and looked directly at me, as though she were in a very deep pain. I waited.

“We have a Rogue,” she said.

I folded my hands together and considered the gravity of this. “Who?” I said.

“This pains me, you understand?”

“I understand.”

“It’s one of our most promising. Well, she’s been with us for a while. I had faith in her skill, her wisdom. I thought that one day, she would take over the coven...”

“Her name?”

“Gany.”

“Gany?”

“Short for Ganymede. Her birth name is as inconsequential as mine. But she has violated the Accord. And in order to spare the coven I’ve built with my hands...”

Lemme pause here for a history lesson. Lillithians and the Church spent the Early Modern period in a savage little shadow war known among both as The Burning. More or less everything you heard about the witch-trials of that era was real, except for the fact that there were real god-damned (pun so very intended) witches being hunted. Yes, Virginia, there was a witch at Salem. I won’t tell you who it was, except to say that she not only survived the Trials, she was the cause of them. Greatest trick the devil ever pulled and all that.

Anyway, not long after Waterloo, a meeting between a Council of Lillithians and the Church was held, in secret, at Montevideo. The records of this meeting were burned in their entirety after their presentation at Rome, but the Accords that came out of it are, I am reliably told, still held in the Secret Archives. Under these accords, covens of witches would be allowed to live in peace, unmolested by the Holy Office, provided they 1) registered themselves and 2) kept their activities confined. Witches who went rogue and interfered with Church activities in any way, had to be handed over or the coven could be destroyed by Hospitallers (I’ve mentioned that the Sovereign Military Order of Malta is really the Vatican’s demon-hunting arm, and not just a charitable organization doing Crusader cosplay, right? I feel like I’ve mentioned that.). According to the ones I’ve known, Hospitallers enjoy nothing so much as going all *Malleus Maleficium* on a witch coven. Apparently the Order was really against the Accord, and agreed only on condition that they be given the task of enforcing it.

“So what you need me for? You know who to call.”

Engilda pursed her lips. “I do not have good relations with the Hospitallers. They suspect me.”

“Okay. So what’s this Gany got herself involved in?”

“She has enslaved a local minister.”

“Minister. Not priest?”

“No, not priest. He’s a...Methodist?” she shrugged.

“Close enough.”

And it was. When it came to the Accord, the Hospitallers took a progressively ecumenical view of what constituted “the Church”. Orthodox, Protestants, even Jehovah’s Witnesses counted. Pretty much everyone counted. Except Unitarians.

“So to be clear, you’re calling in a hit on this Gany, and you want me to do it.”

“That... is correct.”



“Okay. I’ll take any info you have on her: address, SSN, anything to track her down.”

She nodded, and flipping through a rolodex like a secretary in an old movie, procured for me the information I needed. She wrote it down on an index card with a blue ballpoint and gave it to me. Her handwriting was neat and pleasing to the eye. I put the card in my jacket pocket and smiled at her. “So how’s the brew this season?” I said.

“It’s all right. The strength is good, anyway.” She allowed herself to smile for the first time since I’d seen her. “Do you want some?”

“You could pay me in that, if you wanted to.”

She smirked. “How about I write you a check?”

“How about cash? And you can pay me after. I’ll just take a flagon of your finest, and be on my way.”

Five minutes later, I was staggering back to the bus, singing a song I’d forgotten, generally at peace with the cosmos.

\* \* \*

This Gany person was not at all hard to track down. She’d been living in the same address for a few years, a split-level just on the edge of the exurbs, for some time. Her yard was well-kept and the belladonna pretty. I sat in a rented grey Hyundai and watched her actions for a few days, got a sense of her routine. She was a morning person, her and the minister, commuting together in a sensible blue Chevy Malibu, and they arrived together as well. He drove and she wore a scarf around her hair like a photograph from fifty years ago. I chuckled as I wonder if that was an ironic affectation or a genuine attempt to fit in. Among witches, neither could be ruled out. They love to display their uniqueness, and they’re generally clueless about what other humans do and understand. Each of these feeds the other, really.

On the third day they stepped out of the Malibu and walked around the begonias along the walk past the belladonna and found me sitting on their porch like I owned the place. “Good evening,” I said.

She said nothing. He said “Can I help you?” I looked at him with his chocolate-brown button-down shirt and his khaki pants and sensible shoes and his stamped-metal cross, just too small to be garish, hanging on his chest, and I pitied him deeply.

“No,” I said. “I’m here to help you.”

“Help me with what?”

“I’m sorry, I misspoke. Not you, Reverend.” And then I gave Gany a look right through her oversized oval sunglasses.

“I don’t know you,” she said.

“No, but I promise you’ve heard of me. Engilda has, anyway.”

His face darkened at that. “I will have you know that we have police in this neighborhood...”

So he did know. “And if I’d done what I was hired to do, they’d have done you no good. I come in peace, Reverend. I am not what I am.”

She removed her sunglasses and her scarf, and handed them to him. He looked as though he’d been slapped. He leaned into her and said in a low voice, as though I could not hear him “I don’t want you dealing with these people without me.”

She replied at equal volume “I understand your concern, and I appreciate it. But it is unwarranted. Please.” And he, steaming, took her things and without giving me a look strode into the house. She sat down in the plush wicker wingback identical to the one I sat in.

“You know who I am,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied, gazing comfortably at me with deep blue eyes, fingering her scalp in a gesture that was supposed to look unconscious, “but I couldn’t let David know that. He doesn’t understand the world we come from.”

“Is that meant to imply past tense?”

“Yes, it is. What did Engilda tell you?”

“That you went rogue and enslaved a minister, hence earning yourself a death-sentence under the Accords.” Her eyes narrowed. “You’re no Hospitaller.”

“She seemed reticent to go to the Hospitallers. Wanted it done quietly, I think.” She let this pass. “But you don’t believe her.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I know you. You’ve got plenty of blood on your hands.”

“Never killed a witch.”

“Would you hesitate, though? In the course of the job?” Somehow she said this in a way that sounded flirtatious. Which was unnecessary — I’m not dumb enough to be taken in by those displays, and besides, she was right. Killing a witch who had it coming wouldn’t bother me at all. Well, maybe a little. They’re still human, not vampires or some other kind of demonic creature. But they’re on the wrong side, and humans get killed for far less. So I just said “No, I guess not.”

“So the only reason I and my husband...”

I checked for a ring when she said this, and sure enough, she had a golden circlet on her finger. No diamond though. He must be one of those.

“...Aren’t dead is because you want to know what the real story is.”

I smiled and didn't say anything.

"All right," she said, "Have it then. I was part of the coven. I had talent. Some might even have called it The Gift. But there was a step I couldn't take..."

So far this checked out. One of the reasons witches hide so well is that very few of them are actually good at witchcraft. You can learn the lore okay, master the alchemy stuff, but to really go all the way, you need to take that step into communing with demonic energy. You need to sell your soul. And a lot of them aren't willing to serve a demon for the same reason they aren't willing to serve God - it involves serving. They're strong independent black-clothed women who don't need no ethereal being.

"So better to serve Heaven than Hell?"

"That's the funny thing about discovering the Devil is real. It proves other things as well."

"How much does he know?"

"Most of it, actually. That's the thing with these divinity grads. They love reclaiming lost souls."

"All right," I say, "but that doesn't explain why Engilda wants you dead. Witches aren't usually this possessive. She'd punish you her own way, not hire the likes of me. Assassination is too... cold for mere treason."

"Who knows why Engilda does anything. She had high hopes for me. She's put in so much time, but she wasn't any more willing to serve a demon than I was. Demons make it hard to keep the Accord, you know. They don't give a damn if we're burned at the stake."

"Pun intended?"

She smirked. "Anyway, she was disappointed in my refusal, but my departure. Well, it hurt. She must have gotten territorial."

"Uh huh. You sure you didn't take one too many souvenirs before you took up with His Holiness?" She clicked her tongue. "Nothing she had any use for."

"Okay," I said, standing up, "You don't wanna talks to me, don't talk to me."

"I am talking to you."

"I'm not the only one she can send. The next one might not have my scruples about home invasions. Whatever your beef with Engilda is, you've got until she figures that out to settle it. Or, you could take me into your confidence, and maybe I could buy you some time."

"How?"

"Maybe there's a way that doesn't end with someone having to die. I'd have to know more to know that, though." "I don't know what you think your game is here, Slim," she said, standing herself, "But I have about as much reason

to trust you as I do Engilda. And that's none at all. And before you think of trying anything, just remember: before David was a minister, he was fighting in Fallujah. With the Marines."

"Really. Wouldn't have guessed that..." I said, looking up at the casement window on the second floor which had just opened inward. It was dark inside, which would make it the perfect place for a sniper to double-tap me with an AR-15, if he should have the training and the equipment. Onward, Christian Soldiers.

"Purple Heart and everything. He doesn't like to talk about it."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't brag much about being a successful target, either."

"Ha ha. You can show yourself out," she said, and walked to the door.

I smiled quietly to myself and then headed on back to my rental car. Where I sat for a long time. I sat watching the gloaming, as the light faded and the deep colors of night crept into the sky and all that shit. And then she came out, got back in her husband's car, pulled out of the driveway, and headed west on road. I followed.

\* \* \*

You're probably wondering why I'm doing any of this. Why I tipped my hand instead of doing the job Engilda hired me for, and why I'm following the person I'm supposed to kill after she already knows I've been hired to kill her. Why I bothered taking the gig in the first place under false pretenses, and all the rest of it.

The answer is simple. Witches are liars.

They cannot help it. You've got a collection of women living a semi-secret embrace of the dark arts (yes, sometimes witches are male, and they're really insistent about being called "warlocks" and they're also full of shit in general. Happy now?). Keeping neighbors and society in general from poking their noses in means their daily lives are misdirection and deception. And they engage in the usual infighting among each other, honing their skill. And they have to figure out how not to bring the wrath of demonic agents on them, while dabbling in their realm. They pretty much forget what honesty even feels like.

So yeah, when they tell you things, the safest course of action is to assume there's a universe of detail they're leaving out. And it's even wiser to assume that direct answers to direct questions will be largely false.

I mean, did Engilda really think that I would believe that someone lasts as long as she has running a coven of witches, and has bad relations with the local Hospitallers? Or that, if one of her girls went rogue, she'd prefer me, of all people, instead of the local knights, to deal with it? Am I really supposed to be that stupid?

And by the same token, what does "nothing she had any use for" mean? Does that mean "nothing she'd want" or does it mean "something she could have learned how to use, except for, you know, not wanting to actually commune with the Devil"? And honestly, Engilda isn't gonna want you dead just because you found Jesus and decided to canoodle with a minister. I'm not gonna say witches are never like that, but I've never known Engilda to be like that.

So my guess is, Engilda wanted me to take a shot at Gany, tangle with Marine Minister, and one or both of us ends

up seriously injured. This spooks Gany and she attempts to escape, where the rest of the coven chases after her or something. I'm cannon fodder for whatever the Maguffin happens to be.

I mean, I could be wrong, but now I'm on the road to finding out. Literally.

She drives to a playground and parks. I drive past, double-back and observe her reaching under the bottom of a post office box. The night must have been getting cool, because she was having a hard time getting whatever it was she had put there. Probably she'd used packing tape instead of duct tape. Probably she hadn't considered getting something as simple as a box cutter to help her. Witches never think of stuff like that.

But eventually she stands up and shoves a big tape-covered something into a recycled canvas bag. She's not looking around to see if she's being followed, which could mean she's ignored the possibility, or it could mean she's already decided the wolves are after her, so why stress over it. I could admire that level of poise, even as she confirmed that she'd lie to me. I could hardly take so personally something I'd expected.

She returned to her car and I let her drive by me and then I turned my engine back on and then I made a quiet turn around and followed at a distance. She wasn't the only car on the street at this hour, but I kept up with her, blending into the traffic. She turned off past an abandoned railroad house and passed through a tunnel of sycamore trees. I followed at a safe distance, and was lucky to catch her turning onto a dirt driveway. I kept going, found a clearing, parked, and doubled back on foot. When I got to the driveway I could see a number of cars parked in it, but no one in the driveway or outside the house. That told me a few things, and after a cursory visual examination of the dumpy A-frame brown house, I decided to go a roundabout path and reconnoiter before making my move.

I can see through the windows along the roof that the lights are on upstairs, but when I get around to the slider I see they aren't on downstairs. That gives me an idea. I examine the slider and discover that it has a plain single lock, of the kind that has a key. This would be easy. I bent down to figure out how many pins I'd need to pick it when a hard lump crashed into my back just above my left shoulder blade and I fell thick and dark and dead all the way down.

Because I am nowhere near as smart as I think I am.

\* \* \*

I wasn't out long. In real life, if you're out long, you go into a coma. You'll probably die. I was out maybe thirty seconds, but that blow took the fight out of me. I looked up and a guy with a old wooden club like police used to carry was standing over me. He had a pinched face and a wispy mustache and he was small and lean but looked like he enjoyed beating men bigger than him. Witches tend to keep guys like that in their orbit - little asteroids that have no purpose but to smash into other things hard.

"Get up, you asshole," he said, and I did. He put his club in my face like he was planning where to crack my skull with it and then he reached past me and opened the slider. Then he lifted his dirty green t-shirt to reveal the butt of a snub-nose revolver in his pants. Then he put it back down, and with his chin, told me to go inside, and I did. The basement was still dark but there was an embedded light in the ceiling at the landing of a carpeted staircase that went up. So when I felt a hand in my back I decided that he wanted me to go there. He didn't object and we ascended the stairs making muffled stomps with our feet. I couldn't hear any other sound, so I knew I was in for it now. The whole thing had been an elaborate ruse, a meta-lie that I didn't pick up on because I was too enamored of

Engilda's brew. I'm starting to think my alcohol consumption is gonna be the death of me.

At the top of the stairs I am pushed to the left into a dining room with scored plaster walls, painted that shade of off-white that no one likes but that can be relied upon to look the exact same for twenty-five years. Around the smallish circular table are five or six cosplay dorks in burgundy robes and Eyes Wide Shut masks. On the table is a bronze dagger and a book bound in green leather with grotesque ripples and an iron lock.

Great. Somebody dug a grimoire out of an old castle or monastery somewhere, and have been trying to open it. I'd guess they ran through the usual rounds of incantations and settled on blood sacrifice. I'd guess the whole stupid business up to this point was an elaborate ruse to pull me into this. I hate it when I underestimate darklings.

"So what's that supposed to be?" I said, because I'm tired of guessing.

"It is," says a voice that sounds close enough to Gany's, "the Necronomicon."

"Fuck you," I said, "That doesn't exist."

"You watch your language," said Pinch-Face, still behind me. I turn my head and say "Really?" but I don't say "Make me," because I'm trying to be less stupid right now.

"It does exist," says a male voice, that kind of sounds like David, which really makes me feel extra stupid, "and we have found it. And your blood will open it."

"Your blood will open it," they all say in unison, which is supposed to be hypnotic or creepy but just sounds like cosplayers cosplaying.

"Lovecraft made it up," I said, "It's fiction. It's a B-movie. You can't be this stupid."

"That's what he wanted everyone to think," said a voice I don't recognize.

"The greatest trick the devil ever pulled," I say, snottily. "Much subversive. Very surprise. Wow."

One of them raises a hand and Pinch-Face pushes me towards the table. Which was what I was hoping for. I lurch forward like I've stumbled and I grab the bronze dagger and as everyone gasp-screams I swing it round in a haymaker arc and catch Pinch-Face on the forehead above the eye. Bronze is a softer metal than iron or steel but I still feel it bite. He yells and falls backward and drops his club and I reach into his pants with my left hand as he grabs his face and yoink his pistol and give him a kick. Then I spin round, aiming the pistol in a stupid movie fashion at the rest of them.

"Hands up," I say. And I corral them all, Pinch-Face included, to the far corner of the room, and tell them to get on their knees, hands on their heads.

"Masks off," I say. And lo and behold, I was right for a change. There's Gany, and there's David, and right there is Engilda, and hey, it's Connie, looking sour as ever. Plus there's two other kids who look like they're still working out the difference between Emo and Goth.

Keeping the pistol trained on them, I back up to the table where their stupid freaky book is. I look down on it. There's the image of some manner of monster in the relief. It looks original enough to not be a crappy horror-trop knockoff. Someone put some care into making it. Someone loved it.

I raised the dagger, still in my right hand, and as their protests and shouts poured over I stabbed it down into the cover of the book, and through the pages, and down into the table. No unholy lights or otherworldly shrieks came. Nothing happened at all. I just grinned at them.

"You will pay for this," Engilda said.

"He's a corrupted minister," I replied, pointing to David "and you didn't call it in."

"I technically did," said Engilda.

"You can explain that to Hospitallers when they get here, if you think they'll buy that. Or you can leave now. I'll give you a five-minute head start. Less if you don't tell me where your brew is."

"We don't have any-" Engilda started.

"The fridge," Gany said.

"Get going," I say.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later I'm sitting at the table on my second flagon when I hear a vehicle come up up the driveway. I don't here them enter the house because they're creepily good at silence. One second I'm alone, and the next I'm surrounded by them. Possibly the brew affected that.

I happen to know the sergeant who's running the op, and he shakes his head and tells me I should have called them from the beginning. I smile and say that we both know I'm too dumb for that. He nods and, as his troops secure the house, he lifts the skewered book by the handle of the dagger and puts it down again. "Nice touch," he said.

"What'll you do with it?"

"The dagger will be cleansed and put in the armory. Might be useful someday. The book gets burned."

"It's fake," I said.

"Probably," he said, "But if idiots think it's real, it's trouble."

"Waddya mean, 'Probably'? There is no Necronomicon."

The sergeant just looks at me. I feel stupid again and then go back to drinking. **UJ**