

Steven Ruell arrived in late May. Heat and humidity oppressed him the moment he stepped out of the airport. Coming from a cool, Vermont spring—smelling of fresh melting snow and, faintly, the promise of new growth—he was unprepared for the clammy dripping closeness of muggy New Orleans. He caught the scent of the not-so-distant ocean, the queasy-sweet smell of magnolias, and, just underneath, old rot.

“How was your flight, Steve?” his friend, Emil, asked.

“Fine. Uneventful,” Steven replied.

They collected Steven’s baggage and walked the short distance to the car.

Steven had met Emil many years earlier at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Steven had become a New Age music producer with a small, private studio in Thetford Center, Vermont. Emil had become the leader of *Xculp*, a fusion band of once-great fame.

They didn’t speak as they stowed Steven’s gear in the trunk of the old Mercedes. Emil paid the parking fee, and then he made his way onto Route 90 and headed south,

towards Houma. The sun was hazy and heavy. They had the windows down and listened to the wind ease by. Emil didn't run the air conditioner, and neither was the radio on.

Emil was a big man, over six and a half feet tall. At college, he had been terribly skinny, but he had since put on weight. His hair was sandy and long. It was just beginning to go thin on top. "How's business?" he asked after a while.

"Good, good." Steven stared out the windshield for a long moment. "Look, I'm not sure exactly what to say. There just aren't any words to convey how bad I feel or how terrible this must be for you. I wish that I could have gotten here sooner. You know—" Steven trailed off, but he held his friend's eyes for a moment.

Emil looked back at the road, which was holding straight and flat. They drove through a wetland of bayous. Wild azaleas bloomed light blue amongst the bald cypress and live oak, trailing great wisps of Spanish moss. Now and again, there appeared the odd splash of red from a belladonna lily. Emil paid no attention to the surroundings, driving only semiconsciously.

"Look, man. It's not your fault that we've kind-of fallen out of touch." Emil appeared to be talking to the windshield.

Sweat had begun to appear on Steven's forehead. He loosened his collar and tugged the heavy cotton shirt away from his body, trying to catch a little of the moist wind that streamed in through the window. Steven was born a New Englander, in Rye, New Hampshire. When he said "car" he pronounced it "cawh." He liked skiing and chopping wood in the crisp autumn air, and he hated the heat. He was stocky and well-muscled with a forehead that reached back over the top of his head. Steven wore his hair—what little remained to him—long, jet-black, and tied into a neat ponytail at the

back. His eyes of diamond-blue presented a stark contrast, peering out over a nose that was broad, but not overly so. Steven's beard was thick and full, groomed well, and touched here and there with crazy strands of gray.

"Well, my guilty feelings shouldn't be the issue," Steven said. "I'm supposed to be comforting you. Tell me what happened, Emil; what happened to Jeanette?"

"Like I said on the phone, she had an accident—one of those freak-of-nature things that you read about or see in the 'odd occurrences' section of the evening news." Emil glanced at Steven, but he didn't make eye contact. He looked back at the road quickly.

"It's so strange just to talk about it. As if it were real," Emil continued, "I mean, I know that it's real, but I can't believe it. I can't accept it. Somehow, I keep thinking that I'm going to wake up and find the whole thing was just a nightmare, a horrible, twisted nightmare." He loosened then tightened his grip on the wheel, unsettled.

Silence. A long breath. Both men looked blankly at the road as it rose to meet them. The land had started to climb, gently.

The ringing of Steven's cell phone broke the lull. Steven reached in the backseat, retrieved the phone from his briefcase, and answered the call.

Emil could hear only Steven's side of the conversation. "Something up at home?" Emil asked when Steven had hung up.

"No," Steven said. "Just a friend calling to make sure I made it. You might remember: I think I mentioned my old army buddy, Roger Gillette."

"You might have," Emil replied. "I'm not sure."

“Well, it’s a strange thing: he’s wound up back in Vermont, as a game warden. Who’d have thought of that?”

“Yeah, sure. I guess.”

“No, you don’t understand: Roger Gillette was a Special Forces guy, someone you’d never peg for settling down to a simple job like game warden.”

“Sure, sure,” Emil offered, and both men fell mute once more.

For a long while they rode, not speaking, not looking at one another. The swamps on the right gave way to drier land that sported sycamores and loblolly pines amongst the numerous cypresses. At a certain point, Emil slowed down. Then he took a side road to the right. The entrance was not graced with a mailbox or any mark that Steven could see. The new road looked disused. Grass grew tall up the middle—tall enough to brush the bumper—between two hard-dirt tracks.

The driveway ran upward, gradually, bearing lazily but consistently to the left. Soon they came to an aging gate of intricately worked wrought iron hung between two great concrete posts, hinged on the left. Emil slowed to a stop.

The vegetation was thick, and Steven had been unable to see the hill upon their approach, but slowly the land had risen on his left, while that on the right had remained flat, or perhaps even fallen away a little. Steven bent forward, looking past Emil through the windshield and the driver’s window. The forest seemed to open up somewhat, and he could see hazy blue sky. Emil pushed a button on his visor, like a garage door opener, and the gate opened obediently.

Steven sat upright as they slid through the gate and followed the road, which turned right and downward into a valley of thick evergreens. Spanish moss hung down in

a dense lacework from the numerous branches above. Emil was driving even more slowly. No breeze came from the open windows. The sound of droning insects filled the air. Trees grew bare under the canopy, although a few low branches hung thick with moss, dry and gray. The floor was littered with needles and scattered leaves, scant fair for the squirrels. Steven wondered whether there were any squirrels. He had been to the house before, but a few times only, and he didn't remember ever seeing wildlife of any kind.

The car was quiet, but the forest was not. Over the engine noise, cracking and snapping sounds came sporadically, from differing distances, sometimes startling and close, other times dull, barely noticeable, as if from far away through dead air.

Although it had grown no cooler, the shadows had gathered around them. To Steven, the air seemed to close in, and the smell of slow decay and mildew grew in his nostrils. He found himself breathing through parted lips.

"I never understood why you built the place down in the valley. On the hill, you would have had a view and a nice breeze all the time." Steven spoke quietly, half to himself. The sound of his words died in the heavy air, but Emil had heard him.

"It's cooler in the shade," he replied.

"Huh? Oh, I said that out loud, didn't I? I thought for a second I had only thought it."

They exchanged a look; then both laughed. It might have relieved the built-up tension and set the two men off on a brighter, clearer note. Instead, their laughter perished. Each had the same feeling: that it was inappropriate to appear cheerful in the

face of the reason for Steven’s visit, especially after several years of few and often stiff conversations.

It hadn’t always been so. When they were both at college, they had been close friends. As Emil’s stardom rose, it went to his head. He started hanging out exclusively with other celebrities and big-shot recording executives. First, there were the national tours, then the international tours, and suddenly, Emil had no time for his old friends, the ones who he was sure were jealous of his success.

Then came the crash.

Emil had come to believe that he was a prodigy, like Mozart or one of the old masters. He dismissed his band and made a solo effort for his fifth album. It was highly experimental. Emil had to call in every favor and make every threat to get the record company to fund his effort. When the album came out, critics called it a “raucous cacophony of unbridled proportions.” The music community turned its back on Emil, resenting certain arrogant comments and the firing of his band. For a time, Emil was ostracized. Very few people bought the album. There was no live tour, either international or domestic; the few people who had bought Emil’s album certainly didn’t want to hear him play it. There was no second solo album.

Emil’s wife, Jeanette, stuck with Emil throughout, no matter what. It took some time, but she finally convinced Emil to swallow his pride and to mend fences with the old band members. The record company had been reticent to produce a comeback album, but, with Jeanette’s help, a new *Xculp* record did come out. Reviews were initially mixed, but it appeared that the band had a chance—if Emil could just keep his ego under control.

Jeanette had been one of the old crew, attending Boston College when Emil and Steven were at Berklee. Steven was the first to meet Jeanette. They dated for a while, but it became quite clear to both of them that they were just good friends. When Steven introduced Emil to Jeanette, they hit it off immediately. Steven genuinely felt happy for both of them.

All through college, the three of them palled about. It was unusual to see one of them without seeing the other two.

However, even before becoming a star, Emil had begun to grow distant from Steven. To Emil's way of seeing things, Emil had *stolen* Jeanette from Steven. Emil felt guilty about this. He imagined that Steven felt insulted and cheated, then vengeful and angry. For this, Emil came to dislike, even hate Steven, despite the fact that Steven felt nothing but friendship and affection for both Emil and Jeanette.

Jeanette married Emil while he was still a lowly college student, long before his great success. As Emil became more and more prosperous, Jeanette tried to talk to him about how he'd been ignoring their old friends. She had kept up some relationships—especially the one with Steven—through the early years, but after a while, ties grew cold.

Steven hadn't spoken with either Jeanette or Emil since a perfunctory call at Christmas.

The driveway made a slow turn back to the left, then a final turn to the right. Evergreens gave way to mown grass, mulched hedges, and flowering trees. The house beyond was built to resemble an old plantation mansion. There were six columns on each of the three sides visible to Steven as they approached. Inside the columns, a raised wooden porch of hardwood boards, painted a thick, off-white, ran around the building.

The shutters were black. There was a similar porch on the second floor, enclosed with ornate balusters painted to match the shutters. The third story featured no porch or balusters, only windows, shutters closed tight.

The track ran around the side of the house to where Steven knew garages held the other automobiles acquired during Emil's heyday. They parked in front. Emil opened the trunk, and Steven gathered his bags, which were large and heavy. He had packed for an extended stay, figuring that it was better to have and not need, than need and not have.

They took the six steps leading up to the level of the columns and the antiquated wooden porch. Seats and benches of various designs leaned against the building's exterior. Emil opened wide the double doors, and they entered the long main hall. The ceiling was open to the third floor. Toward the back, a hand-carved stairway zigzagged upward to first the second floor and then to the third. Beyond this staircase was the back door which led to the breezeway.

Rooms opened on either side of the main hall. To the left, a huge, formal dining room. To the right, a formal living room, and behind that, Steven remembered, the den and the library. On the second floor, Steven knew that there were a large music studio and an entertainment room, complete with a theater-sized HD-TV and state-of-the-art recording reproduction gear.

Beyond the back door, the breezeway gave access to the large kitchen, as well as the garages and other outbuildings. These buildings formed a courtyard of sorts; open on two sides. Steven had held several large parties there, back when his career was rolling.

Beyond the switchback stairway—just before you left the building to enter the courtyard—there was a door that led downward, to the cellars. The builders had

suggested that they set the foundation on bedrock, which was some thirty-two feet below ground level. The ground had once been marshy, and it tended to shift. Rather than sink posts to anchor the building, Jeanette and Emil had the contractors build the basement down twenty-eight feet. They used the space for an extensive wine cellar, and a soundproof room in which Emil's band had often played. Emil had never bothered to finish the room off, and it wasn't good enough for recoding—the sound echoed dully and oddly off the concrete and flagstone walls—but Emil used to say that it was a great place for kicking back, drinking, and “jamming.”

Steven did not know it, but there was a subbasement below the cellar that ran only half the distance of the first. When Emil and Jeanette first moved into the house, they jokingly referred to the deeper basement as their “vault.”

“Your room's on the third floor, as usual,” Emil said just as a young brunette entered from the living room. She was wearing her hair tied back, loosely, and a tiny pair of cut-off denim shorts. Her T-shirt said “This Bud's For You” above a picture of a marijuana leaf. At least, Steven thought it was a marijuana leaf; so much was cut away that all he could see was her naval and three familiar leafy-green fingers above. Her eyes were the lightest blue, like a Siberian Husky's. Although her hair was quite dark, her skin was a pale, ghostly white.

“You're Steve, Emil's friend,” she said. “We've met before. I'm Tawny.”

Steven remembered. “Tawny” was the daughter of a recording artist who had become famous in the 1960s. She'd attached herself as head groupie during Emil's rock-star days. Steven was surprised to see her—and a little taken aback.

“Yeah, I remember,” he said, wooden. Tawny did not extend her hand for a shake, and his hands being full of luggage, neither did Steven.

Seconds ticked away on an ancient grandfather clock set against the wall. Steven looked at the girl, who met his gaze directly. Her eyes turned up subtly at the corners, like those of a cat or an Egyptian pictured in an ancient glyph.

Emil looked from Steven to Tawny and back again.

“Well,” Emil said to Steven. “Let’s get you settled. Then we can have a talk.” Emil grabbed one of the larger bags and started toward the back of the hall and the stairway. Steven trailed along behind, but Tawny did not follow; she stood and looked at their backs as they walked away.

They turned at the top of the first staircase. A cut-in walkway ran around the second floor, the banister flush with the first-story walls. All the doors stood closed. At the front—directly above the big double doors—there was a large rectangular window where dusky light entered and a view of distant treetops. A wooden bench sat under the window, dust-covered, occupying a lonely gloom.

Although the house was not old, the boards creaked and complained as Emil and Steven climbed to the third floor.

In the suite allotted to Steven, they threw the cases on the bed, then fell into chairs by the room’s only window. As Steven had seen from the driveway, the shutters were closed tight. Light came from a lamp on the antique dresser near the bed. Slightly convex, the mirror attached to the chiffonier reflected the light warmly about the room.

Steven took a long, deep breath. Neither had wanted to make small talk during the ride from the airport. Steven's one attempt to discuss the situation seriously had ended in an awkward silence.

"Emil, what can I do to help?" Steven asked at last.

"You want a drink?" Emil stood and walked to the low dresser. The top was marble, with drawers rising on either side of the hinged, oval mirror. In the depression between the drawers were three crystal decanters and four heavy glasses on a pewter tray. Emil didn't wait for a response. Steven watched Emil's back as Emil carefully, slowly, poured them each a generous quantity of bourbon.

Emil set one of the drinks down on the small coffee table. Sitting down, he took a mouthful of the warm bourbon, swishing it around in his mouth, and grimaced as he swallowed. His lips puckered as he opened his mouth, and took a long breath.

"I didn't want to—I just couldn't talk about it on the phone." He took another long, noisy drink.

Steven sipped his bourbon. He remained silent.

"It was up on that hill you stared at when we drove in; Jeanette's horse threw her." Emil took a deep breath. "Whether it spooked or tripped, I guess we'll never know." He clasped his drink with both hands. He leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees.

"Apparently," he continued, "her head hit the big stone or one of the others placed there long ago." With an absent jerk, one of his hands abandoned the glass, fingers spread wide, as if in supplication. Emil shook his head for a moment then he seized his glass and drained it. He stood up to fetch a refill and pointed at the glass to see whether Steven

wanted more. With a shake of his head, Steven lifted his glass, showing that he had hardly touched it.

“Drink up,” Emil said over his shoulder as he poured. Then, returning, he went on. “She had been gone for a quite a while,” Emil said. “I was alone here at the house, working on something or other in the recording room. When I noticed that it was after six o’clock. I went looking for her. She often goes riding up on the hill; it opens up on the other side, and you can see quite a way.”

Steven didn’t interrupt, although he’d heard this much from Emil on the phone. He sipped his bourbon slowly, breathing in the fumes, thinking that it had an odd under-flavor.

Unseen, the sun had set outside. What little illumination had made its way through the slats of the shutters was dying. The room grew darker, the corners, more pronounced.

“She had a gash on the side of her head,” Emil muttered. “Must’ve come down with her full weight on it because her neck was broken, sharply. When I lifted her, you know, to see if she was all right—” Emil paused, and looked up to meet Steven’s eyes.

“It’s OK.” Steven leaned forward, closer to his friend. “You have to tell someone—get it out of your system.”

Emil looked at Steven for a long moment. “I knew she *wasn’t* all right. I mean, who wouldn’t?” He rushed, as if he had repeated the words before. “I could tell by the way she was lying, the way I saw her as I ran those last few steps; her neck was bent at an impossible angle. God! It was horrible.” He shuddered. “I was holding her arms, and I gave her a little shake. Then her neck made a soft sound, like sand grating. It just rolled

around, and suddenly, as I lifted her, I was looking at the back of her head, all matted and—wet.”

There was a pause. Steven was silent, searching for the right thing to say.

“There was nothing you could have done,” Steven offered. “At least it was fast for her.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Emil replied. He didn’t bother to point out that there was blood. This meant—the doctors had told him—that death had not come instantly. Emil drained his drink and rose to get another. He didn’t bother to ask Steven whether he wanted more. He just said, “Drink up,” and when he returned, he brought the decanter with him, setting it on the table between them.

“There are stones up on the hill. One in particular is shaped like a pyramid, rough and squat, and upside down, you know, like it’s buried balanced on its tip. The doctors said that she must have fallen sideways against that rock. The body would tend to turn toward the ground, but the flat part of the rock would turn the head upward. They actually said that it was a ‘freak accident’; I mean they used *those words*. Can you believe it? Anyway, it all happened in an instant. At least that’s what they said. The trouble is I found her quite a way from the big rock, near one of the smaller ones, the ones that look like regular, normal stones. Maybe she rolled a ways, I don’t know.” Emil leaned back, evidently finished.

“Emil, it was an accident, a horrible accident,” Steven said. He could think of nothing else to say.

They sat in silence. Emil stared at the floor.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said at last. “Look, you must be hungry. You’re sure as hell not very thirsty. Let’s go make a raid on the kitchen.”

They wound their way back down the staircase.

The kitchen was lit brightly, with new paint, tile, and appliances. It seemed incongruous with the old-time theme of the rest of the house. The raucous sound of katydids, locusts, and raging crickets followed them. A huge table of teakwood dominated the center. Steven took a seat while Emil made sandwiches.

They ate for a while without speaking; the background buzz and flicker of the fluorescent bulbs added an unnerving undertone.

“The funeral’s tomorrow?” Steven asked, his sandwich down to the last few bites.

Emil had brought his highball glass with him from upstairs. He drained the glass and looked around for a refill. “Yeah,” he said, setting the empty glass upon the table. “One o’clock.”

“What can I do to help?”

“You’ve been a help already; there’s no one else I can talk to about this.”

Steven put down what remained of his sandwich. “What about Tawny?” he asked.

“Hey! It’s not what you think. Tawny’s, you know—”

“Tawny’s what?” The screen door shut with a slap, and she entered. Instead of the too-short cut-offs, she wore long white pants, but the revealing t-shirt was still in place.

“I was just about to tell Steven that you came to stay just after Jeanette, uh, had her accident.”

“Yeah, Emil called me the day it happened,” she said in Steven’s direction. Then, turning to Emil, “All you’re having for dinner is sandwiches?”

“Oh, sorry,” Emil answered. “I should have called you. Steve and I were talking, and it just slipped my mind. If it hadn’t been for Steve’s hungry look, I wouldn’t have thought about dinner at all.”

“Not to worry, I’ll fix myself something.” She got bread out of a tin box on the counter and retrieved meat, cheese, lettuce, onions, and a tomato from the refrigerator. She moved deftly, comfortably. She seemed to know her way around.

“I’m gonna go and get some more liquor,” Emil declared. “Anybody want anything while I’m in the house?” Although the question seemed to be aimed at everyone, Emil looked at Steven.

“No. Thanks. I’ll find something in the fridge to drink,” Steven replied.

The screen door clapped shut once more; Steven and Tawny were alone.

She sat at the table and nibbled her sandwich. She seemed at ease. She met Steven’s look fully and held it naturally in brief glances.

“Terrible accident,” she said. “Of course, I didn’t know Jeanette that well.”

Emil shook his head. “No, I guess you wouldn’t.” Her t-shirt was low in the front. She rested her right arm on the table, the other on her knee. Where her shoulder dipped, the shirt had pulled away, exposing the vast majority of one breast. Steven couldn’t keep himself from glancing downward, away from her eyes. She watched his glance and didn’t acknowledge it, or if she did, it was only to take a deep breath and lean farther forward.

“Who else is coming tomorrow?” Steven asked, meeting her eyes. His look was casual, even dismissive.

Tawny recited a list of names. Some Steven recognized, and some he didn't. However, he did not fail to recognize the order in which Tawny recounted them: Record executives, mucky-mucks and agents first, family and friends last.

When she had finished picking at her sandwich, she leaned back, throwing one arm over the back of her chair.

“You know, that hill back there is really a complex of mounds from before the time of the Hopewell or Mississippian cultures, maybe as old as five thousand years. Folks always stayed away from the clearing at the top, where the standing stones are.”

“I didn't know you were from around here, Tawny. For some reason I always thought you were from LA.”

“No, my people own land down in the Bayou Cane. I've been staying with them for the past couple of days, driving up here in the morning, spending the day with Emil, then driving home in the afternoon.” She got up and went to the refrigerator. With the door open, she pointed inside, as if to ask Steven whether he wanted anything. Instead of replying, he got up and joined her. After a quick scan inside, he reached by her and freed a root beer from its plastic shackle. Standing up, he brushed by Tawny, who had been holding the door open with her back. He brought his eyes up slowly and held her glance for an instant. She seemed to arch her back slightly, thrusting her chest out almost imperceptibly.

“I wonder,” he said, standing tall, arms hanging relaxed, “has Emil gotten lost?” He popped the top of his soda loudly, then turned and walked back to the table.

Tawny grabbed a bottle of seltzer water and followed him. She resumed her seat at the table and faced Steven. “Anyway,” she continued, assuming a patient timbre and

pace. “People have lived around here for a long time, and folks say that the Muskogean or maybe the Natchitoches tribe placed the big stone on the top of the hill. They say it was a sacrificial altar, or maybe the hill was a burying ground.”

“So?”

“So nothing. Look, I’m just trying to make conversation, give you a little local history.”

“Thanks, but somehow talking about ancient burial grounds and sacrificial altars strikes me as inappropriate.”

“There’s no need to cop an attitude with me. I know what you must be thinking, me alone here with Emil and him being all vulnerable. The truth is, you probably don’t know what really happened here. Maybe if you did, you’d be a little more interested in what I had to say.”

Steven sat still, his face set in hard lines.

“If you have a point, make it,” he said.

“Believe what you want, but Emil is my friend too. You should know what really happened, and I don’t think that he has been able to talk to anyone else about it. Though he might have led you to believe otherwise, Emil *has* been able to talk to me, if only because I was here right after it happened.”

Steven took a breath. He seemed about to speak when the sound of a footstep came from outside.

“Ah yes!” Emil said, opening the screen door. “I had to go all the way back to your room, Steve. Seems all the other liquor cabinets are fresh out of good bourbon, at least as good as what’s upstairs. What have you two been talking about?”

Tawny didn't look over her shoulder at Emil. Instead, she kept her eyes locked on Steven. He looked right by her. Emil's expression was guilty and awkward; his tone had been uneasy.

"I was just telling Steven some of the history of this place."

"Oh. Don't believe her, Steve. She's got some Cajun witch doctor in her, you know. She'll be casting spells on you if you don't watch it." Emil had come to stand between Tawny and Steven, the third point in a triangle.

"A spell like the one I've cast on you?" Tawny looked at him askance.

Emil grunted, almost laughed. His face smiled, but his eyes looked haunted.

"Emil told me," Steven said, as if replying to an unasked question. "That Jeanette's horse threw her onto a big stone on the top of the hill. He said that her neck was broken. Sounds like a terrible accident to me. I imagine that all kinds of things happen when people fall down stairs, wreck their car, or burn up in a fire. Most people don't talk about how grisly it was or speculate about the horrible things the person might have gone through."

Tawny looked from Steven to Emil, and back again.

"Fine," Tawny said. "Then call me grotesque, but what happened to Jeanette was no accident."

"Tawny is superstitious," Emil said. "She warned me—me and Jeanette—before we built this house."

"I warned you again when you found the 'fossils.' "

"The workers found *remnants*, pieces of pottery, textiles, and the like."

“And bones, bones of people who had their heads turned around, just like Jeanette.”

Steven watched Tawny and Emil as though he were watching a tennis match.

“They were buried facing up,” Tawny declared. “That is, their bodies were facing up, but their heads were facing down. The archaeologists said it was a unique display.”

“Jeanette had an accident, that’s all,” Emil said. “Perhaps it was a *freak accident*. For certain—it was a horrible accident. Besides, when I found her, she was facing up, all of her—”

“Yes,” Tawny interrupted. “It requires human hands to complete the ceremony. Your human hands, Emil.”

“Jesus!” Emil replied. “Would you lay off? You’re giving me the willies, you and your legends. It’s all a bunch of crap, if you ask me.”

“Could be,” Tawny said, turning to Steven. “Did he tell you that he’s going to bury her here, on the property?”

Tawny looked serious and intense. On the other hand, Steven seemed nonplussed, neither shocked nor surprised.

“So?” Emil threw into the pause. “Lots of people have family cemeteries on their property. It was both of our wishes to be buried here, on the grounds. The mausoleum’s already built.”

New Orleans, and much of the surrounding area, is at or below sea level. It was a common custom to bury the dead above ground in Louisiana. Steven was familiar with the practice and had visited several such cemeteries on previous visits: miniature

necropolises (cities of the dead) from the great marble houses that held entire families, to the simple granite sarcophagus that held the remains of a single person.

“Well,” Steven said. “I think this entire conversation is beyond the pale. Emil, how can you sit here and listen to this? I’ll say this once and once only: Jeanette was a dear friend of mine. We might be remembering her right now. We might be celebrating her life. We might be missing her, or we might be thankful that we had her as long as we did, but either way, I don’t want to hear any more about unusual circumstances or macabre burial practices, current or past.”

Steven’s look was recriminating. He shifted it from Emil to Tawny and back again. “Look,” he said. “I’m still on East Coast time, and my body clock says it’s past my bedtime. If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll unpack and go to bed.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll turn in too,” Tawny said. “Can I just take the other spare room? I don’t think I’ll drive home tonight.”

“Well, you both know the way,” Emil replied. “I’m going to sit up for a while.” He tipped his bourbon glass at them, and with the rap of the screen door, they left Emil alone.

“I’m sorry if I spooked you out. I just thought you should know, is all.”

Steven took a couple of steps before replying.

“I don’t spook,” he said at last.

“Look,” Tawny stopped. She took Steven’s arm. “Something is going on here. I don’t know exactly what, but I’ve got a bad feeling—”

“Whatever.” Steven pulled his arm free and continued walking.

“Just stay out of the cellar,” Tawny called after him. “And don’t leave the house during the night. In fact, don’t leave your room, if you can help it.”

In his room at last, Steven shut the door behind him and leaned against it for a second. He was exhausted and on the verge of tears. He rubbed his forehead and his eyes. Then he started unpacking.

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It was the deepest night, long after midnight, when there is as yet no hint of dawn. Steven lay in bed. He was sure he had fallen asleep, but he couldn’t remember waking up. He didn’t know what time it was. The house was still, so quiet that he could hear the tick of the grandfather clock on the first floor. His heart thumped a steady counterpoint.

The drone of insects from outside had abated somewhat, but it still managed to come through the closed window, the walls, and the ceiling: growing and fading, growing and fading. The buzz and whirl of the insects, the lethargic tick, tick, tick of the clock, and the sound of his heartbeat—they all seemed to wax and wane, like footsteps coming from afar, turning corners now and again. The sound grew fainter, only to be reinvigorated at the next turn. Perhaps climbing hills and traversing valleys on their way to, where? Steven felt sure that the sound was getting closer.

He slid back into a troubled, restless doze, somewhere between waking and dreaming.

From deep inside the house came a rasping, scratching sound. It invaded Steven's mind. Steven couldn't ignore it. It was definitely coming from downstairs.

After some moments, he arose, slid into a pair of slippers, and opened his bedroom door. He walked as if in a dream. He climbed down the stairs to the first floor and found the door to the cellars. He lit no lights. Although the house was dark, he didn't stumble or feel his way along. He walked deliberately and directly, as if he had come this way several times before and wasn't thinking consciously about his route.

The sound continued. It seemed to beckon him, to urge him on and down.

He went down to the first basement and walked straight through, without pausing. At the opposite end, he lifted a heavy bulkhead door set in the floor. He latched the door to the back wall and went down the crude stairs. The darkness was complete; no dim light leaked in through any windows, and no lamp was lit. Nonetheless, Steven went sure footed down the rough stairs of concrete. At the bottom, he turned again, and walked to the wall on his left.

A marble tomb stood against the wall. The tomb was more than six feet high and eight feet wide. It extended out from the wall at least ten or twelve feet. It was built to hold more than one person. The heavy marble door was ajar.

Steven stood in front of the mausoleum. On the door was sculpted in bas-relief a woman in mourning. He ran his hands along the cold marble. The woman was wearing some kind of robe; he could feel the folds of it carved in rough, sandy stone. He traced the lines of her shoulder and up the neck. His fingers paused at a deep crack.

There came a snap, loud, like a tree branch breaking, then the sound of water; a wet, sick splash, then a trickle. From inside the tomb came a noise, a noise the like of

which Steven had never heard before. He stood stock-still. His eyes opened, and he awoke.

It was utterly black. Steven couldn't see his hand in front of his face, but he knew where he was, and he knew, somehow, what was in front of him. The noise from within came again, an agonized plea, unworldly. A thin white arm slowly stretched out—and out—and approached Steven's throat.

Steven took one step backward and screamed. He felt something rip in his chest. He could see the arm. It glowed dully, like a luminescent fish from the depths of the sea. His skin crawled, and his hair stood on end, yet he was rooted to the spot. The fingers dangled from the hand, mindlessly clutching at the air where Steven had stood only a moment ago.

She slid out of the tomb. Naked, her body had the same unreal glow: pallid, deathly white.

"Steven," it uttered.

It sounded as if the voice had echoed back from the interior of the marble tomb; Steven realized that although her body faced forward, he was staring at the back of the woman's head.

His voice caught in his throat. Only a sick gargling sound came out. She took another blind step towards Steven, arms extended, fingers clutching. He stared at a huge bloodless gash in the back of her head and her matted hair, a clump of scalp and bone hung loose on one side.

“Steven.” The voice no longer asked, but demanded. Flat, inhuman, the voice echoed off the stone. Steven screamed. The ethereal woman took another step towards the sound of his yell.

The light flicked on, Emil and Tawny rushed down the stairs.

Steven found himself standing in front of a large marble mausoleum, exactly as he had seen it an instant before, except the door was shut. No luminiferous woman stood clutching at him. For a moment, he couldn’t understand how he came to be in the basement.

“God,” Steven muttered. “I *must* be hallucinating.”

“What? Are you all right?” Emil ran up to Steven.

Tawny stood at the bottom of the stairs. Her head swiveled as she cast her glance quickly about the dank cellar.

“Jesus! How did I end up down here? Must’ve been sleepwalking.” A haze cleared from Steven’s eyes. He found he could move his legs.

“Let’s get you upstairs, buddy. You’ll be fine,” Emil said.

Steven looked again at the mausoleum. His vision had been accurate; carved in relief onto the door was a woman in mourning; a deep crack in the stone ran across her neck.

He shuddered. Emil put an arm around Steven’s shoulders and guided him back to the stairs.

In the kitchen, lights burned brightly. Steven saw that it was nearly four-thirty. Emil bustled about, apparently fixing coffee. Tawny sat at the table, scrutinizing Steven.

“What did you see?” she asked.

“It was a nightmare, probably brought on by all your bizarre stories and a rough day of travel.”

Tawny mumbled something that sounded like gibberish.

“What the hell are you saying?” Steven nearly shouted.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You’re chanting something,” Steven accused. “Look, you can be into any kind of mumbo jumbo that you want. You can eat patchouli-flavored Jell-O and give tarot readings over the phone, for all I care, but I don’t want to know about it. Keep your mystic shit to yourself.”

“Take it easy, Steve,” Emil said, placing a pot of coffee and mugs on the table. “I didn’t hear Tawny say anything. Have some coffee.” He poured Steven a cup, black and strong. Tawny continued to stare at Steven. Her lips appeared to move, but no more words did she utter.

So started the day of Jeanette’s funeral.

Activities moved at a steady pace, but with little to do, Steven felt that time passed like a glacier. People started arriving around midmorning. Celebrities and executives arrived in private planes and helicopters at small airports: Houma, Morgan City, and Donaldsonville. In all, more than three hundred people crowded the house set at the bottom of the ancient hill.

There was no casket stationed in the main hall, and there was no ceremony held in the cellar near the huge marble vessel. People gathered in the rear courtyard. The sun shone down upon the clearing through a muggy haze. Some, like Steven, stood and delivered eulogies. No priest attended or blessed the assemblage.

As the morning became afternoon, caterers arrived and set up a buffet of hot and cold dishes. There was no official start to the meal. Reacting to some unseen signal, people simply began lining up, selecting small china plates and silverware, then gathering in little knots and cliques, muttering and nodding as they ate.

Emil went from group to group, talking softly, grasping an arm or an elbow. He typically would receive a hug or a conciliatory pat on the back. Then he moved on. Steven kept a watchful eye on his friend; Emil seemed to be putting away an excessive quantity of bourbon, even for him.

Finally, the meal was over. Only a few of the guests lingered near the serving trays. The caterers started gathering their equipment. It was apparent that there was to be no formal ceremony, but there was a sense that people were waiting for closure of some kind, a conclusion. The caterers moved among the crowd, folding linens, chairs, and tables.

For the most part, Steven stood near the end of the courtyard, outbuildings to one side, crowd in front. People he knew filtered by and exchanged greetings, but Steven remained stationary. He watched as Emil bumped into one of the caterers, then fell into the table currently under deconstruction. The members of Emil's band rushed to attend to him and got him back on his feet.

Later, Steven noticed a heated exchange between Emil and Jeanette's parents. Steven took a few steps closer, but he could not make out what the argument was about. It went on for only a few moments and then Jeanette's parents turned to leave.

Tawny arrived late, along with two people who could only be her relatives. She wore a short black skirt and a sleeveless blouse. With her, an older man wore what

appeared to be light-woolen pants: black, and a suit coat of similar weave. Only a narrow, maroon tie of silk relieved his starched white shirt. The older man seemed to be the escort, or perhaps husband, to a woman of middle years who wore a long dress of rich black cotton. It shimmered as she moved, suggesting effulgent traces of silk or rayon. She seemed familiar to Tawny, and the two looked alike: perhaps she was an older sister or cousin. Both the older woman and Tawny wore thick, stylish belts of interwoven black feathers.

Steven noted the passage of Jeanette's parents. He watched as Tawny—her people in tow—approached Jeanette's parents at the opposite end of the courtyard and engaged them in conversation. Jeanette's father stopped for only a second. He said something abruptly, and then he took his wife's arm and led her into the house. Tawny turned, met Steven's gaze, and started walking towards him. Tawny's family—if family they were—followed.

Emil dropped the hand of the person he was talking to and watched the exchange between Tawny and Jeanette's father. The smile faded from his lips as he watched Tawny and her people cross the courtyard toward Steven. He saw that Steven was watching him and turned his attention back to his guest.

Jeanette's parents had unconsciously started a subtle movement in the crowd. Around Steven, people began to shake hands with benevolence or peck cheeks with feigned affection.

“This is my sister and her husband,” Tawny said, “Tanais and Robert.” They had worked their way across the courtyard to join Steven.

“I’m Steven Ruell,” Steven said flatly, offering his hand to Robert, who did not move. The woman, Tanais, took up Steven’s hand and turned hers palm down, apparently expecting Steven to kiss her knuckles. Standing erect, Steven clasped her hand loosely between his thumb and fingers and gave it a little shake.

First, by twos and threes, then by fours and fives, people had begun moving toward the house and the cars that waited in the front yard beyond. Emil, now closely chaperoned by his band members, mixed with the wave.

Steven glanced about, looking for a convenient escape. He could see that the crowd was thinning, but there was nothing for it: he was trapped by Tawny and her family.

“Sorry to meet you under such sad circumstances,” Steven said.

“My sister tells me that you’re from back east?”

“Uh, yes,” Steven replied. “You’re from Bayou Cane?”

“After a fashion of speaking.” Tanais turned to her husband. “We’ve lived in this area all our lives.”

Robert only nodded. His hair was black, liberally highlighted with gray. His eyes were an ashen blue, they were clear, but apparently, he was older than Steven had originally thought. He seemed to look through Steven with utter indifference, as if he weren’t there.

“Tanith—Tawny as you call her—also told me that you had a rough night,” Tanais regained Steven’s attention. “Please, tell me what you saw.”

Tanais stood facing Steven. Tawny had positioned herself to Steven’s left, and Robert, next to his wife, stood to the right

“I had a nightmare and did some sleepwalking, brought on by travel and stress, no doubt. There’s really nothing to tell.” Steven watched over Robert’s shoulder as the last of the other attendees filtered into the house.

The courtyard now looked rather large and empty, save only the caterers, who continued cleaning up.

“Tawny said you some kind of apparition, one of the ancient spirits of this place perhaps?”

“I remember nothing of the kind. I’m afraid that your sister has been leaning a bit toward the mystical. Perhaps she had a dream of her own.” Steven turned to Tawny, but she said nothing. There was a pause. Steven watched as a murder of ravens landed in a tree at the end of the lawn, where the forest began.

“In legend,” Tanais continued. “The ancient shamans of this place used staffs topped with the skulls of great cats. The old ones say that the shamans used the scepters to perform sacrifices. They held the victim’s head firmly in the jaws of the cat and wrenched it to the left.”

“I don’t want to be rude,” Steven interrupted. “But Tawny has already been telling me about the local legends. Frankly, I find the subject distasteful, and, well, rude.”

“Yes. Tanith told me that she has tried to speak with you. I’ll be direct: the manner of Jeanette’s death is no coincidence. If you stay here, Mr. Ruell, if anything happens—well, you’ve been warned.”

Tawny stood by as her companions turned abruptly and walked away. She stood and faced Steven until he met her stare.

“Is that some kind of threat?” he asked.

A crash came from within the house and then a heavy sound of breaking glass. Tanais and Robert had taken only a few steps. Without waiting for Tawny to answer, Steven turned and followed them.

Steven rushed to see what had happened inside the house. He quickly overtook Tawny's family. Tawny had followed, but she slowed and walked with her sister and brother-in-law. Steven approached the entrance alone. He took a couple of steps inside and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. At the front of the house, a few people stood around Emil, who lay amidst the remnants of a large clay vase. Steven walked through the house. By the time he got to the front doors, members of Emil's band had helped him regain his feet, if not his dignity. Emil was apparently quite drunk, yet not drunk enough to be indifferent to, or unconscious of, his state.

"Sorry," he said as Steven approached. "I'm afraid I've had too much to drink."

"Quite understandable, old man, given the circumstances." One of the record executives stood upon the threshold. Evidently, Emil had fallen into the vase while saying goodbye to the man, who stood as if interrupted and unable to regain the initiative.

"If you need anything, anything at all, you know you can call me," the man said at last.

Emil shook his hand and thanked him for coming. When the door closed, he turned and brushed dust and bits of pottery from his backside.

"Who needs a drink?" Emil asked, his voice clear, the slur gone.

The afternoon turned into a drunken jam session. What remained of the funeral attendees—Emil and his band, Tawny, and Steven—wound up in the basement music room. Steven could have joined in; there was a spare set of keyboards, and he was an

accomplished player, but he had no interest in carousing and playing at different tunes.

He also didn't feel like getting drunk, so he took a walk instead.

He walked behind the house and circumnavigated the hill where Jeanette had reportedly had her accident. The insects were, as far as he could tell, his only companions. The sun was riding low, and the woods were dark. The canopy of leaves and pine needles diffused what light remained, throwing the entire area into deep shadow. Steven could see that it grew lighter toward the top of the hill, where the trees thinned and the land rose steeply.

Usually, a person tends to walk downhill, subconsciously, unless following a path, but perhaps the light called his feet because when Steven looked up, he saw that the sky was clear overhead and the ground had become covered with thick wisps of grass. The tall trees had given way to stunted hazels, sumacs, and dogwoods. He had started to sweat with the exertion of climbing.

He could see the crown of the hill.

He had started out walking behind the house, but he must have circled around. Below him, he saw the driveway and the automatic gate. Above, he could see what might be the stone upon which Jeanette had fallen.

The afternoon had waned, although still warm and humid. Steven stood for a moment, listening to the sudden quiet. The constant droning of insects, to which he had grown almost accustomed, had ceased. From the forest below came only the sound of a soft breeze that blew through the leaves and amongst the smaller branches.

Steven cast one more glance upward, towards the top of the hill. He thought, for just a moment, that he caught the movement of two figures: A woman and a man, both

dressed in black. He stood and stared for a while then he took out his cell phone and placed a call back home.

“Warden Gillette,” was the answer.

“Hello Roger,” Steven said. “It’s Steven. Steven Ruell.”

“Of course it is! Hello, Steven! How is it going out in New Orleans? How’s your friend holding up?”

“Look, Roger, things have taken a turn for the weird out here. If I didn’t know better, I’d say I was right in the middle of one of your paranormal stories.”

“Oh? Tell me everything.”

Steven recounted the entire story, all that had happened to him since arriving. Roger listened carefully, interrupting only a couple of times to clarify a point or two.

“Okay,” Roger Gillette said when Steven had apparently finished, “for starters, don’t drink anything from a bottle, or a can, or from any container unless you open it and it has its seal in place—”

“What? Why is that?” Steven interrupted.

“Just a suspicion. Indulge me, OK? Now I’ll get on a plane as soon as I can, but coming from Vermont, there’s no way I can be there until tomorrow, probably not before late afternoon. So you’re on your own until then, and more’n likely, if anything is going to happen, it’s going to happen tonight.”

“What do you think might happen? Roger, if you’ve got some idea what’s going on here—”

“How could I know any more than you? I’ve only heard what *you* told me. Besides, if you act as though you have your guard up, things might just get tougher rather

than easier for you. Just do this: Act as though everything is fine. Pay close attention without drawing attention to yourself. You know what I mean? Maybe things'll hold tight until I get there. In the meantime, be careful, the way we were careful in Yemen.”

After college, Steven had served in the Army Reserves. Coming from New England, Steven was something of a patriot, and being in good shape and having some time on his hands, Steven had felt that it was his duty to serve a tour or two, at least in the Guards. He hadn't really expected that his unit would see action. Steven met Roger Gillette then. Roger was serving in the Army Rangers at the time, and he and a few of his squad-mates had helped train Steven's unit in hand-to-hand, as well as guerrilla, combat techniques.

The Saudis had discovered a terrorist training camp near the soft border with Yemen. The Saudis might have handled the situation on their own, but it served their political purposes to call in a swift, secret, and utterly overpowering strike. Although the Americans were not supposed to be fighting there, either in Saudi Arabia or in Yemen, for whatever high-level reason, there they were.

Steven and Roger became close friends, mostly because they were both from little towns in northern New England. Together, they successfully raided the terrorist training camp. Subsequently, for reasons inexplicable, at least to Steven, Roger Gillette turned up in northern Vermont as a game warden. He and Steven renewed their acquaintanceship. They went hunting and fishing together, and Roger recounted some rather strange tales to Steven.

Steven looked about the hillside, and thought about those days. He mused upon the raid on the terrorists.

“Yeah,” he said, “I remember Yemen.”

“All right then. Just stay sharp.”

“That’s all you can tell me? Stay sharp?”

“Sure. What more do you want, some kind-a magic spell or somethin’? Look, I’m just the game warden, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Remember: Don’t drink anything unless you open it, understand? And make sure that the seal is in place.”

“I heard you. You think someone drugged me last night.”

“It would explain a lot. Judging from what you said, I’d say you took a trip without leaving the farm, so to speak.”

“All right. Thanks, Roger.”

Steven hung up. And even though Roger hadn’t given him any plan, Steven felt better, more in control.

He stood for a moment, considering his conversation with his friend. Steven thought about the things that Roger had asked him and the things that Roger had told him, and Steven also thought about the things Roger hadn’t said.

After a moment, Steven came to a decision. He turned and descended to the road below. He didn’t want to be caught wandering in the woods after dark, and the allure of the hilltop seemed to have vanished with the sunlight.

By the time he arrived at the house, the day’s last gloaming was in the west, and a full moon was rising in the east. The sound of carousing and music continued to waft up through the floor. Steven stood and listened for a moment. Someone, most likely Emil,

would start playing a melody, and the others would pick it up, only to have its creator move on to something else. Steven bypassed the cellar and went through the house to the kitchen. He made a light snack of leftovers from the funeral and then retired without venturing downstairs or wishing anyone goodnight. He planned to read for a while and then go to sleep early. He climbed the stairs one at a time, the length of the day and its activities telling in his heavy step.

After a hot shower, Steven poured himself a drink from one of the decanters on the antique dresser. For a moment, he felt relief from the muggy, close air. He got into bed with his book and his drink. He read a few pages, picked up his glass to take a drink and then, with a shake of his head, replaced it on the nightstand untouched. He tried to read some more, but his eyes kept closing.

He awoke hours later with the lamp still burning and the book lying open on his chest.

He sat straight up and looked around the room. He had the feeling that someone had called his name. He looked at the clock on the nightstand; it was three-thirty.

The house was quiet; no bass beat shivered the beams. Again, Steven heard the tick of the grandfather clock, then the chimes at the half-hour. The buzz of the insects waxed and waned.

Steven closed the book and set it aside. He lay still, listening.

From the first floor came the sound of a door closing on its hinges, then the creak of a floorboard. A night breeze swept the house and gusted by the window, leaving in its wake a moment of white noise. Again came the sound of the clock ticking and footsteps coming up the stairs.

Steven forced himself out of bed and to the bedroom door. He stood in front of it for a moment and opened it wide. He went out to look over the banister. He saw nothing in the gloom, but a whispered voice reached him from below.

“Steven.”

He turned and reentered his room. Without shutting the door, he put on his slippers, saying, “That’s enough of this shit.”

He walked out, back into the hallway, and turned directly to go downstairs. At the top of the stairway, he hit a switch that controlled the chandelier positioned on the first floor to light the stairway. He went back to the banister and peered down. He saw nothing, but, because of his position, he couldn’t see the stairway directly beneath.

He straightened the collar of his pajama shirt, as if it were the collar of a uniform, and went down the stairs. He didn’t deliberately make noise, but neither did he go quietly.

At the second floor, he looked below once more, but again saw nothing. He turned and took the last staircase.

The chandelier lit the first floor brightly from the stairs to the entrance at the front of the house. Steven stood for a moment and reconnoitered. Perhaps Emil was passed out. Steven had made enough noise coming down the stairs to have awoken both Emil and Tawny, but the house remained quiet; there was no noise from the third floor bedrooms.

Steven shivered. It had grown cold and clammy. He turned to go back upstairs, but he heard the sound of fingers scratching, scratching, scratching, each time growing more insistent. There was a soft gurgling sound coming from the back of the house and then what sounded like a single wet footstep.

Steven didn't hesitate; he walked toward the back of the house and the entrance to the cellar. He opened the door and turned on the light. He took three or four steps into the basement and then stooped to peer beneath the ceiling. Seeing nothing, he continued down, and then he walked the length of the first cellar to the hatchway that led to the subbasement.

Steven flicked the switch that turned on the single bulb that was the subbasement's only light. Then he lifted the door and latched it to the wall.

He kept his right hand against the wall and descended a couple of steps. He could see only the stairs below him. He stooped, and ducking his head low, he gazed around the subbasement.

The corners were dark, but he could see the mausoleum standing against the back wall. He stood erect and took the stairs without looking again. At the bottom, he turned and considered the tomb of Jeanette.

*Someone's been playing tricks, Steven thought. I'm going to find out who, and when I do, I wouldn't want to be them.*

In the shadows to the side of the marble tomb, Steven thought that he caught movement. Then the light went out, and the door above slammed shut.

He was cast into darkness. There were no windows this far underground, and from above, only enough light came through to identify the crack of the door. Steven took a couple of blind steps back up the stairs, when again he heard a gurgle, this time close at hand, and the sound of clammy flesh against stone.

"Steven." A voice came, this time, somewhat muffled, but with no otherworldly overtone.

“Tawny?”

“I’m over here, against the wall.”

Steven felt his way, one hand tracing the air above the stairs until he felt the wall, then the corner.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked. “Is this some kind of fucked-up joke?”

“Not for me, it isn’t,” Tawny mumbled. Steven walked toward the sound of her voice. “I’m tied up next to the damn mausoleum. Pull the rest of this duct tape off of my mouth.”

Steven, feeling along the wall, brushed Tawny’s shoulder. By touch, he found and removed the gag she had worked somewhat loose. Then he traced her outline downward, until he had her elbow. He felt cords across her bicep. He ran his hand along those, across her naked breasts; she was wearing no shirt or pajama top. He felt at least one set of knots, and started prying blindly.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Emil must’ve drugged me. He’s quite an expert, you know. He keeps a stock that most any pharmacy would be proud of.”

“Why would he do something like that? Why would he tie you up down here?”

“As an offering, maybe. I don’t know. I came when Emil called me because I was afraid that he had gotten in over his head. I think he’s deliberately awakened the spirits of this place. I think he may have lost control.”

Steven had worked the knot into several small ones, and he continued prying and pulling with his fingers. In the dark, he stood in front of Tawny with his head cocked to one side, as if he were blind.

“Well, it’s possible that he believes what you’ve been saying,” Steven said, “and maybe that’s what’s making him act this way, but in my book, that would only mean he’s delusional. Whether you’re right, or I am, I suppose the result is the same. There. That’s got it.”

The cord binding Tawny came undone, and she could move her arms and torso.

“My feet,” she said and reached down to the cords at her ankles. Steven also bent down, and they collided. In the pitch-black, they both exclaimed, “Ow!” Then, despite their surroundings, or perhaps because of them, they started to laugh.

From inside the tomb came a thud and then the sound of water in a sick gush. Steven remembered from his brief glimpse in the light that the door had stood slightly ajar. Both he and Tawny sat rigid as a horrible glow started to build from inside the marble edifice.

*“Ta nah chee, cum nah ta chee!”* Tawny said.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m afraid that I may have been right,” she replied.

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Emil had returned to lay in darkness—all the lights extinguished—on the floor of the cellar, and listened at the bulkhead door. It was nearly time for the grand finale. He lifted the hatch slowly, as quietly as he could, although he hoped that the occupants below—the “living” occupants—would be more than a little distracted and wouldn’t

notice the noise. After he'd latched the door open, he crept down a few stairs so that he could watch the show.

Steven had renewed his effort to free Tawny's feet. He worked at the knot as the pale glow grew slowly, emanating from the opening in the door of the tomb. Free at last, Tawny stood up and stepped out of the cords. Steven stood, and with Tawny behind him, he backed away from the tomb, towards the stairs.

While the sickly light reached its zenith, noises continued to come from the mausoleum's interior: gurgling, wet sounds and the sound of whispered voices, perhaps speaking backwards. Steven could make out the shape of the marble tomb. The glow extended itself from the opening in the doorway in the shape of a pasty-white arm. The body of a woman followed it, moving out on ghostly legs that did not move or step.

"I have something to show you," it said in the same dead voice Steven remembered from his "dream" the previous night. Again, the sound of it seemed to echo out from within the tomb, as if bouncing off the inner marble walls.

Tawny continued to chant incoherently, terrified beyond reason.

Steven turned his head and said to her over his shoulder, "Stay here." His hands, which had clasped Tawny's bare hips behind him, came forward. He then stepped away from Tawny, directly toward the apparition.

He walked up to it, its pallid arm now searching, seemingly blind. He brought his hand forward to grasp that ethereal arm, but his hand passed clear through. As he had thought, the image was a projection. Ignoring the cadaverous likeness, he grasped the door of the tomb and pushed it fully open. From within, the light of ultraviolet and filtered incandescent bulbs shown forth, illuminating the basement and Tawny standing

alone in the middle of the floor, covering herself as best she could. In the carefully crafted light, Steven saw speakers as well as projection equipment.

“Game’s up, Emil!” he said.

The single bulb hanging on a cord from the ceiling burst into life with a click. Steven had to shield his eyes for a moment in the relative bright.

“Now you’ve gone and spoiled everything,” a petulant voice came from the stairway.

Steven looked up to see Emil coming down the stairs in a crouch. Steven took a couple of angry steps in that direction and then saw that four other men accompanied Emil, the members of his band.

“Now things are going to have to get ugly,” Emil said. By the time he reached the floor he had straightened, and now stood tall, towering above Steven and Tawny.

He wore a costume of black and dark-crimson feathers. A similar headdress terminated in a kind-of beak above his eyebrows. He held a staff, perhaps six feet in length, terminated at the top with the head of a great cat, one with canines perhaps six inches long or more.

“What’s with the ridiculous getup?” Steven asked. He looked around the cellar for anything that he could use as a weapon. “I thought you didn’t go in for the ‘Cajun witch doctor’ routine.”

Emil didn’t reply. The four men joined him at the bottom of the stairs in silence. They were five against two, and Tawny didn’t look up to a fight.

“It doesn’t matter now if you know the truth,” Emil said. “Neither of you will ever get a chance to tell anyone.”

Steven took a step in front of Tawny, and again, he guided her with his hands on her hips. He took a step backwards, toward the mausoleum.

“Let me see if I can guess,” Steven said. “You murdered Jeanette, and you’re using the so-called ‘legends’ of this place just in case there’s any suspicion.”

“You’re pretty smart, Steve. You know, I used to like that about you.” Emil started walking slowly toward Steven. “If a ‘deed most foul’ were suspected, the authorities would immediately turn to the little witch doctor here and her relatives down in the swamps. Everyone knows they practice black magic, a rumor I’ve encouraged ever since the band started to go downhill.”

Emil advanced into the room and his men fanned out, two on either side. Steven continued to back up slowly toward the open tomb.

“Unfortunately, Tawny has been a little more proactive than I had hoped. I thought her ramblings would only tend to confirm the supposition. Instead, Tanais and Robert went to the authorities with ‘concerns and issues.’ ”

“I assume you are the beneficiary of a large life insurance policy,” Steven said.

“How very droll of you, pal. Yeah, I stand to gain financially from Jeanette’s death, but if I can stick the blame on little Tawny here, I stand to gain even more from a wrongful death suit. After all, you’ve got quite a trust fund, now don’t you, my dear?” Emil tried to look over Steven’s shoulder at Tawny.

“But it’s more than the money,” Emil continued. “The whole thing was a publicity gimmick to get Xculp back on top: the failed solo album, a humbled Emil returning to the fold, only to have his long-suffering wife murdered in some satanic cult ritual. Our next album will go platinum, and we’ll be back on top.”

“Then why trap us down here, and why all this showbiz crap?”

“Like I said, the authorities are getting nosy, and they aren’t looking at Tawny and her mysterious relatives, as I had intended. I had hoped that you would batter yourselves unconscious down here in an effort to escape the ghost of poor Jeanette, and in the dark, when the time was right, I’d appear in the costume and maybe, just maybe, one or both of you would lose your fucking mind. You’d be raving about a man in feathers, like the old legends. Ah well. It was a lot to hope for, I know, but think about the headlines: Tawny tied up naked. You raving mad. As it is, you had to be the practical one, Steve. You had to go and spoil the fun. I should have drugged you, as I did last night, but alas, the teetotaler just couldn’t stoop to take a drink from his decanter. Oh well. Just means there’s little chance of anything unusual showing up if there’s an autopsy.

“And besides, there’s always plan B.”

Steve continued to back up just as Emil and his men advanced. They were within reach of the marble door now. Steven hoped for just a few more steps.

“Let me guess,” Steven egged. “We get our heads twisted for us, and somehow it’s going to look like Tanais and Robert’s doing.”

“No. Tawny gets her head twisted, and it looks like your doing, Stevie boy. The media will paint it as some kind of sex scandal. You’re possessed, or psychotic, or whatever; it doesn’t much matter. Anyway, I can say that you always were jealous over Jeanette and me. For whatever reason, you go nuts, and I’m forced to kill you; I imagine cracking your goddamn skull open will suffice.”

Emil took a quick step forward. Steven pushed Tawny hard and away to the side. He took a nimble step backwards, into the tomb. In the back, lying on the floor, was a medium-sized marble coffin. In front of that were two solid metal poles standing on small tripods. These metal poles held lights and speakers and all the gear Emil needed to create his ghostly illusion.

Steven disregarded the coffin. He grasped the metal poles, one in each hand, and with a jerk, he dislodged them from their stands. Then he stepped forward to face Emil and his gang of four.

Emil stepped forward, his boys right behind.

Steven marched to meet them.

At the last moment, Steven spun about. As he turned, he pivoted on his hips, and swung both of the metal poles, bringing them to bear on Emil's head. Steven swung with all his strength and the force of his turn. The first pole struck Emil on the side of the head. An ultraviolet bulb smashed in a burst of sparks. A fraction of a second later, the blow from the second pole glanced off the top of Emil's head as he fell down and away.

Swiftly, Steven lunged forward. As his left foot landed on the ground, he brought his right leg up in a classic front kick. The ball of Steven's right foot connected smartly with Emil's jaw. The force of Emil's weight coming down met the snap of Steven's kick, and Emil's head whipped violently back. Steven landed his right foot on the floor and at the same instant brought his left up in a roundhouse kick. The force spun Emil in midair. He landed in a heap to one side.

Steven crossed the metal light poles in front of him, then pointed one forward while he swung the other back. He advanced on Emil's group. For an instant, they stood transfixed and then fanned out to come at Steven all at once.

The pole flashed out and around; Steven moved in a whirl. With two quick kicks, two of the men lay on the floor, their hands shielding the backs of their heads. The third was struck several times in rapid succession with the poles. The fourth turned and ran.

"Out, all of you, up the stairs! Follow your cowardly buddy!" Steven held the poles in the middle, twirling them absently back and forth. He stopped with one tight against his upper arm, the other planted on the ground in front of him.

The three remaining members of Emil's band got dizzily to their feet, all bleeding from various face wounds. Then, responding to Steven's gesture, they started heading back up the concrete steps.

"Come on, Tawny. We'll get you into some clothes, and then we'll call the police."

"What about Emil?" Tawny had sheltered herself from the flurry to one side of the mausoleum. She clutched her breasts to her with one arm, and with her knees locked together, came forward toward Steven.

Steven knelt down by the heap that was Emil.

"He's breathing," Steven said. "I imagine he's got a simple concussion. He should be fine, although he's not gonna much like his future prospects. We'll just lock him down here until the cops and the paramedics get here."

It took the authorities more than an hour to make the ride from the nearby town. Two local parish deputies arrived and then two state police cars. Discomfited, Emil's

band members simply gave up. It seemed most likely that they hadn't expected much of a fight from Steven, and when push came to shove, they'd rather beat up on musical instruments than duke it out with a trained martial artist. Besides, they said that they hadn't had anything to do with Jeanette's murder, that Emil had told them that the whole thing was just a hoax and that Jeanette was in on the scheme, that she was, in fact, alive and staying with relatives.

"Nobody is that stupid; they're as guilty as Emil," Tawny said to the police. "What about the death certificate? I saw Jeanette's body myself."

"Where is the body, Tawny? Where's Jeanette?" Steven asked.

"She's in the mausoleum, in that marble casket. I saw the coroner deliver her body."

The state police officers handcuffed the former members of Xculp and locked them in the patrol cars until an ambulance could arrive. As the officers reentered the house, from below they heard a muffled, but bloodcurdling scream and then silence. They rushed to retrieve Emil from the subbasement.

They found him lying on his back in the tomb. His head had been turned completely around, and now he lay with his nose buried against the marble floor. A great bald gash on the side of his head was oozing blood, and a puddle of thick jam like substance spread out around it.

One of the police officers knelt and placed two fingers on Emil's neck.

"He's dead," the office said, although surely no one could live with their head turned completely around and their brains seeping out.

Steven peered inside the tomb. Behind where the lights and other special effect gear had been, Jeanette's marble coffin lay. It was as it had been before, except that the lid was pushed open to one side, towards the wall.

"That coffin was closed," Steven declared. "I'm sure of it."

Slowly, Steven and Tawny approached the sarcophagus. Leaning over as far as they could, they tentatively peered inside.

Tawny screamed and huddled in Steven's arms.

Jeanette's body lay on its stomach. The head, facing upwards, displayed a dark and satisfied smile. In her right hand was a bloody tuft of Emil's long, sandy hair.