

THE MAN/WOMAN WAR

by

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I | Enter the Witch-Doctor

They were the kind of musical notes men and woman once swayed to—even worshiped to—or so Jasper had told him, ground from an instrument called an “organ”—which had once been common, or so he’d said, but had vanished from the face of the world. So, too, were there cymbals, which echoed throughout the crew compartment of the War Wagon like tinsel—if tinsel could be said to have a sound—and mingled with the steely whispers of their muskets and tanks and other gear as the truck rocked and their harnesses held them fast.

“When a *maaan* loves a woman,” sang a hearty and soulful voice both inside and outside the compartment, and Jeremiah knew they were close, else the driver wouldn’t have cued the music, and when he scanned the other Witch Doctors, strapped in six to a bench in the wagon’s cramped confines, he knew that they knew it too. What was more, he knew that, however fearsome they looked in their black jumpsuits and white flame-retardant vests, their goggled respirators, their buckled hats—they were frightened, too.

But then the wagon ground to a halt and there was no time to be feel anything, much less fear, as Jeremiah unbuckled and piled out with the others. And yet, as he paused momentarily to take in the building—a ramshackle six-story brownstone which looked as though it had been built before the Betrayal, much less the Pogrom—a strange thing happened. He thought he heard a voice; not from without but entirely from within—a woman’s voice, a witch’s voice. And it said to him, as faintly as the cymbals at the start of the music, *Why have you come for us, Witch-Doctor?* And he found himself scanning the illuminated windows of the brownstone as if someone had perhaps shouted to him (rather than reaching directly into his mind), and saw behind one of the uppermost panes a figure so small and motionless that he might have thought it a piece of furniture, a lamp, perhaps, had it not slid to one side and vanished.

Then he was activating his musket, which was connected to the tank on his back and shot not just explosive balls but streams of incinerating fire, and charging into the foyer—where a handful of witches already lay, writhing and smoldering. Fifteen minutes. That’s what they had before the Flyer lowered from the vespertine gloom and received them on the roof. He rushed into the first corridor, finding it already busy with Witch Doctors and choked in smoke, and instead of joining in located the door to the stairwell—whose steps he gained quickly, bypassing the second floor entirely (which he knew would be already under siege), and exiting onto the third level, where he was greeted by a gaggle of witches dressed in little more than rags, their white eyes focused solely upon him, their hands already joined, at which instant he raised his musket and fired, holding its trigger down as he swung his arm back and forth so that the women were consumed in flames instants before they were able to cast their spell.

How did it come to this, Witch Doctor? This war between Doctor and witch, man and woman, you and I?

The voice again, slightly louder this time, but still little more than a whisper, still difficult to hear through all the noise and screaming, as well as his own muffled breathing. He willed it away as he approached the first door and triggered his musket, which spat its ball and orange fire, punching out the knob and igniting the wood like dry tinder, causing the occupant of the room to scream so that it seemed the door itself screamed, blackening and shedding its paint which peeled away like rinds of burnt skin. He kicked it open and it fell with a crash, but had hardly levelled his pistol when the witch in the middle of the room launched herself against the ceiling—which she laid upon as though the world itself had flipped upside down—and, opening her mouth wide, vomited a stream of black liquid—which splattered against the floor as he dropped and rolled, tank clanking. The spot hissed as the bile melted through it and he hastened to warn any Witch Doctor below by shouting, “Black bile!”—even as he completed his roll and torched the witch while still on the floor. She

danced wildly against the cracked plaster of the ceiling and a flailing hand smashed out the overhead light, yet still she did not fall, and he squeezed the trigger again. At last she dropped to the floor, arms and legs whipping about in a frenzy, then rolled in an effort to extinguish the flames and fell screeching into the flat below.

Do you presume all of us are such as she? Even so, can you hardly blame her for using all the power at her disposal to simply stay alive? Now that the room had been plunged into darkness, the voice seemed louder, was louder, he was sure of it. So, too, had it become clearer, more resonant, enough so that it had begun to make his every effort to ignore it or to will it away impossible. He clasped his hands to his head as if the pressure alone might suffocate it into silence, and yet it persisted: Jeremiah ... why do you not question the wisdom of your leaders, as I have done? Why do you continue to kill for them, when the very reasons for such killing have long since been forgotten?

He scrambled to his feet, shocked at the utterance of his name, and before he even realized what he was doing he was *responding* to her, forming words in his mind which were as clear and resonant as her own, nor was it just his own interiority he was hearing but rather some previously unimagined facet of himself given voice for the very first time. *Never will it be forgotten. Never will it happen again. Never will a word from anyone of you be believed.*

He burst back out into the hall at the precise moment several witches fled their units, and torched them as they ran. They screamed, bursting into flames, but continued running, vanishing into the far stairwell even as Jeremiah keyed his mic: "Be advised, runners in the east well." Then he pivoted and kicked open the nearest door, not bothering to weaken it first with fire, feeling newly energized by the taunts in his head, feeling a new sense of urgency. "Ten minutes," came a voice through his headset, followed by a squawk.

He fired without even looking, and because of the charging witch's proximity and the fact that their muskets were incendiary projectile

weapons as well as flamethrowers, her head simply exploded, scattering in great bloody chunks and dotting his goggles with blood. And yet the flaming body continued its charge, and before he could fully react it was upon him, tearing at his respirator, knocking off his hat, forcing him backward so that he collided with the opposite wall of the corridor and was pinned. He cried out as her flaming hands wrapped about his neck—then, suddenly, she was off him, she was being propelled across the hall with tremendous force—straight into the opposing wall, where an invisible hand stayed her, pinned her, her arms and legs flailing, her severed neck gouting blood. *That was I*, came the voice. *That was me, Satyena. I have saved you so that you may save me. Hurry, Jeremiah. I am on the 6th floor.*

He straightened his respirator and picked up his wide-brimmed hat, yet did not move further, remaining still instead, weighing the hat in his gloved hands, rubbing a blotch of tissue from its great, gold buckle. It was difficult to see clearly with the blood drying on his goggles; he took off a glove and wiped them clean, noticing as he did so that his hand was shaking—worse, that his entire body had begun to tremble. He looked around the corridor in a daze, first at the headless witch who was now an inanimate corpse, then through the door from which he'd exited, where blood and brains had begun to dry on the wallpaper, which was beginning to warp and to catch fire. That's when he noticed something else, a crude sign on the fallen door—a sign which, when he moved forward to examine it, turned out to be a simple plea: 'Please don't kill the bird.'

Her name was Miriam, and the bird was her only friend. And during her life she was ostracized by everyone, because she was like me, neither fully witch nor fully woman. When the High Sisters came with their judgements and their sentences, it was she who spoke in my defense—only she who would still speak the truth as she saw it.

The birdcage came into view as he rounded the corner to the kitchenette, for he had been moving through the flaming apartment without being consciously aware of it. "Six minutes until dust-off," squawked his

headset. “Doctors Oceanus and Damaris KIA. Mind your thoughts ... there is a Whisperer at work.”

Jeremiah stared at the bird, which flitted about its cage in a frenzy, panicked by the encroaching flames. *Why do you cling to the same old tricks*, he communicated, even as a section of ceiling buckled and collapsed. *When they have not worked for a generation or more?* He looked at the window and back to the cage, which he suddenly picked up. *You seek a window which no longer exists.* He blew out the kitchen window and placed the cage on the sill, then twisted the latch and set the bird free. *I’m coming for you.*

Hurry.

And then he was scrambling, down the hall and toward the stairwell: kicking in doors, drenching the rooms in flame, rushing up the stairs and joining the assault on the third floor, where they stampeded the witches like cattle and roasted them as they ran. But he did not backtrack with the rest of his brothers when the time came to make certain the rooms had been cleared; rather, he pushed forward into the well and continued onto the fourth level ... then the fifth ... and finally, to the sixth.

—which, to his surprise, was almost completely barren of activity. Indeed, if not for the swaying of the roof access door, he would have thought it abandoned for some time. But the whispers of the witches on the roof spoke otherwise, and he reminded himself to watch his back as he moved forward down the hall.

Where are you? he projected—for it wasn’t really thinking nor was it speech, but rather something else, something which emanated from a Third Place—a Third Eye and Tongue—which seemed as though it had always been there, always been a part of him, but had simply not found purchase—until the Whisperer, until Satyena. She called to him now, saying, whispering, *You will find me. You have the gift, Jeremiah. Yes, the very craft that you seek to scour from the earth is in you, right now. Hold out your hand ...*

And, to his surprise, as there were no witches to exterminate and he was alone, he did so, lifting his black, flame-retardant glove and gazing at the palm, which hovered before him still shaking but which looked no different than it ever had, until, again, she almost whispered, *What will you do to me once you find me, Jeremiah?*

And a flame burst forth from his palm—nothing dramatic, just a little flame almost as if he held a candle. Then it was gone, and his headset crackled. “Three minutes until dust-off. Advise all Doctors to begin advancing toward the roof.”

He began moving down the hallway, taking care to glance into the units as he passed, the doors of which hung open, his heart starting to thump in his chest. One door remained closed—the last one on the left: the room he had viewed upon stepping out of the War Wagon. And yet, even as he watched, it lazied open, beckoning him to come.

There was a *thwip-thwip-thwip* which he recognized at once as belonging to a Flyer, and then a volley of shots rang out—the Flyer’s guns, opening fire on the roof witches. So, too, was there a clamor in the stairwells, as the remaining Witch Doctors hurried toward the sixth floor. *Hurry, Jeremiah.* He gripped his musket in both hands and rounded the open door.

And she was there—but not as he had expected. For she lay naked and hogtied in the center of the room, gagged, and looking as though she had not eaten in days, possibly weeks. His eyes darted about the unit immediately—it was a trap, surely, something designed to play upon his emotions and weaken his resolve, for such was the way of the witches, always. That or sex, whose memory had faded with each passing year of the Pogrom.

Do you see now why I have called to you? The person you saw in the window, she was a projection of myself. It’s true I reached out to the others—I did not know who, if any, would respond. But you did, Jeremiah. And for this I owe you my life, even though you have taken the lives of many who were dear to me.

Slowly, he trained his weapon upon her. “One minute to evac,” squawked his headset, “Abort all offensive operations. Repeat, abort all offensive operations. The building will be Daisy-cut—repeat, the building will be Daisy-cut.”

What does that mean, Jeremiah?

He began to squeeze the trigger but hesitated. *It means the assault has failed to clear all the units, and that they will now flatten the entire structure.* Again he began to squeeze the trigger, and again he hesitated. *Why have they done this to you? They say—our proctors tell us—that you are a hivemind; that none of you are capable of individual thought. How then does a witch come to be imprisoned by her own?*

Her body shifted noticeably, enough so that her forehead bumped against the shallow water dish beside her. *A hivemind ...* She seemed almost to laugh. *No, only on the surface. The witches have plotted and schemed to undercut one another from the beginning. Surely it is the same among the men ...*

It is not, he projected. And yet ...

“Thirty seconds until dust-off,” squawked his headset.

Jeremiah ... please.

He eased his finger off the trigger, staring at her. And then he was moving, taking off his respirator and swinging it around behind him, holstering his weapon, hurrying toward her—but pausing before he removed her gag. She didn’t project anything but only looked at him, her large, brown eyes—which were only slightly fogged over with white—passive, resigned. He removed the gag and began untying her bonds, even as she gasped for air and tried to speak.

“Save your strength,” he said, picking up a garment from the nearby couch, draping it over her shoulders. “And step back, quickly.”

She attempted to and promptly fell, but instead of helping her up he moved to the window—the same one through which he had spied her at the beginning of the raid—and levelled his musket at it, blowing it away. “Ten seconds,” came the voice over his headset as he cleared the shards

of glass from the sill with the barrel of his gun, then gestured for her to come.

She did so, still struggling to walk, and leaned against him as he quickly unwound a rappel line from his utility belt and hooked it to the heater. Then he unbuckled his tank and let it drop to the floor before scrambling out the window and saying, "Climb onto my back, Satyena. Hurry."

And then they were rappelling down the side of the building even as the Flyer lifted off the roof and Jeremiah could only pray that they remained unseen—until they touched down near where the War Wagon had been parked, and, hearing nothing over his headset, he knew them to be safe. *If* they could clear the area before the Daisy Cutter was dropped.

"We must hurry," he said to her. "When they drop the Daisy Cutter everything within three blocks will be destroyed. Quickly!"

And they ran. Nor would they have made it if Satyena had not cast a spell of speed and endurance over them both, causing little flames to erupt beneath their feet each time they impacted against the pavement, so that by the time the Cutter dropped and the building shattered and flattened—the shockwave hurling them to the concrete—they were clear.

Then, together, they watched the flames and the smoke, each lost in their own thoughts, each clinging to the other, each reflecting on the friends they had lost. Until at last Satyena turned to Jeremiah, the fire-light dancing on the side of her face, and repeated, "How did it ever come to this?"

"I have a friend," said Jeremiah. "His name is Jasper. He'll tell you."

And she just looked at him, wanting to ask if he could be trusted, this Jasper, but knowing somehow that he could be. And knowing, too, that none of their lives, neither her own nor Jeremiah's nor Jasper's—if he was to be so bold as to actually harbor her—would ever be the same.

II | The Dagger and the Chalice

The first thing Satyena noticed about the humble flat was that it *was* humble, humble in almost every sense of the word except for the plethora of paintings and books, books which crammed shelves and spilled over tables (which were themselves supported by books), paintings which covered nearly every inch of the walls and leaned in corners like cheval glass mirrors. It was the paintings that struck her the most, with their scenes of romantic interludes between men and women and their graceful studies of the female form—images which would have been burnt summarily, along with their owners (to say nothing of the artists) amongst the witches, but which had found safe harbor here among the men, although it was possible these were illicit and that it was only these two who dared to break the edict.

“You must be weak from your ordeal, please, sit,” said Jeremiah. He cleared a scattering of books from the couch. “I’ll fetch Jasper.” He moved to leave the room but paused. “You must be thirsty.”

He went into the kitchen and poured her a glass of water. “How long has it been since you’ve eaten?”

“I’m not hungry,” she said. She seated herself slowly, tentatively. “Two, maybe three days. Ever since Sister Samain wrested control of the coven from the Council. Thank you ...” She took the glass from Jeremiah, still looking at the paintings. “They’re all done by the same hand, aren’t they?”

He took off his wide-brimmed hat and studied them. “The same eye. Sometimes Jasper’s hand shakes uncontrollably and I have to steady it with my own. Other times I am his hand, and he tells me what to do.” He laughed a little. “He says that I am an artist, just as he. But even I know it’s the eye that sees, not the hands.”

She continued staring at them. “No, I don’t think that’s true. These pictures have lines of grace ... look, see how the fingers are elongated, and tend to curve up or down depending on the position of the body. They

dance upon the canvas ... surely you can see that. I think you paint them together, Jeremiah."

He swung the strap of the respirator over his head and set it on a mantle. "I'm just his hands." He moved to leave the room again.

"Just? But hands are for feeling," she said.

He paused at the entrance to the hall. "And they're for killing, too." Then he disappeared into the dark.

And she thought, *It's the heart that kills, Jeremiah. The hard one by slaying others ... and the soft by slaying itself.* Then she pushed it from her mind.

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AS IT TURNED OUT, SHE had been hungry—enough to eat both chicken breasts Jeremiah had prepared for her and part of a third before he refilled her wine glass and she settled in for what promised to be an interesting conversation. He had changed into comfortable clothing and fetched her some silky, pajama-like garments belonging to Jasper (who was much smaller than Jeremiah, in part because of his build and in part because of his age), and now they sat about the round table in the tiny kitchen as though there'd never been a war between the Witch Doctors and the witches, between men and women, between man and wife and brother and sister.

As for Jasper, he had proven to be an erudite and charming host in spite of his great age, and had regaled her with tales from before the Pogrom and before what men called the Betrayal throughout dinner, until music was heard outside and they looked out the cracked window to see a black War Wagon zoom past with its red lights flashing and its belly (presumably) full of Witch Doctors, after which a silence settled over the room and his tone became more somber. "You want to know what happened ... how women became witches and men became Witch Doctors. And how the sexes became so estranged that they would kill each other on sight rather than suffer another Betrayal or Pogrom. Don't you?"

She nodded slowly.

He dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his napkin and sat back. "Well, I told you how things were, how men and women were. That there weren't any Witch Doctors except the kind you saw on TV, and there weren't—" He paused, noticing how they both looked confused. "TV—television—the boob tube, squawk box, the glass teat. Nevermind. It's not important. The thing is, men and women *liked* each other. Sure, they got to squabbling once in a while—hell, some might say that was half the fun of it. But they didn't fear and mistrust each other to the extent that, that—okay, well, some did—they'd kill each other. The point I'm trying to make is: they were bumper cars that enjoyed ... bumping."

Satyena and Jeremiah looked at each other.

"They danced," said Jasper. "And when they danced it was something to see. But over time that dance began to sour, mainly because, outside the dance hall, only one side seemed to have all the power. Now, whether that was true or not depends on your point of view, but having read all about it and lived through some of it, I'd say the case could be made. And if you're wondering," He looked at Satyena. "It was your ancestors that felt they didn't have any power. So, steps were taken to even the balance, just as they were with my own ancestors, and I think most would say that those steps were successful."

Again there was the sound of music, and again a War Wagon blew past with its lights flashing.

"The problem with human nature is, it doesn't know when to stop. Eventually, every apparatus designed to right a wrong just becomes a new one—it has to, you see, because once created, its focus becomes its own survival. That's when the ideologues come—like saviors, some would say, while others would say like vampires—who feed off everyone's fear, stoking it and fanning the flames. Our Chairman Kill-sin is a man like that. Perhaps you've a counterpart among the witches ..."

Satyena nodded.

“I thought as much. For the most dangerous time is always *after* the battle; when new enemies must replace the old so that the apparatus, the entire machinery of war, which millions have come to rely upon, can continue to function. Our Chairman Kill-sin, for example, came to power not during the hot war between our two genders but only after it had been won. The status quo had to be maintained, you see, hence, the Pogrom. So it was with the winners of the first gender war—the cold one. The one which led to The Betrayal. They, like Chairman Kill-sin, began to see enemies behind every bush. And what began as a reasonable cause soon begat an entire mythology of thousand-year conspiracies and age-old oppression—every man was the enemy and had been since the dawn of civilization. Why, civilization as they knew it was the invention of men, something designed top to bottom to oppress women at every turn! But now it was their turn to suffer, said the ideologues. If a man had too much power he must be shorn of it, immediately, and by any means necessary, for it had been bequeathed him of privilege and must therefore be returned to the oppressed. And they embarked on a crusade, although some would call it a witch hunt, the weapons of which were accusation and shame, and before they were finished the streets ran with blood—metaphorical blood. They could kill with a word, and soon no man was safe and no man could be safe, that is, if he’d had any interactions with woman at all. And then came the Pestilence, the Great Plague ... which wiped out three-quarters of the world’s population almost overnight, and opened in women a kind of Third Eye, an eye which allowed them, some would even say forced them, to access a realm previously unimagined.”

For the first time, he regarded her almost suspiciously. “But it did something else too, didn’t it? It bound you up into a kind of hive mind; it collectivized you so that, and you would know more about this than I, you became a single entity. A single organism. And it is here that some would say The Betrayal found its genesis, for this organism, just as any other, sought first to protect itself, and its autoimmune response was to

cleanse the world of what its individual cells had been programmed to view as the enemy. And so began a pogrom of treachery and murder the likes of which the world had never seen, as wives turned upon husbands and sisters upon brothers and even mothers themselves killed their male children. Nor were the attacks direct acts of violence but rather whispers, suggestions, misdirects, and illusions; more often than not the men killed themselves, or each other, even as they defended their wives and lovers and mothers and sisters, and their daughters too, all of who's skin had begun to pale and their eyes to turn white, against the mounting calls for a quarantine, which, as more men died—among them the doctors and the scientists—became accusations of deviltry and witchcraft. Until at last the surviving men retreated from their homes and loved ones completely and began to establish their own enclaves, of which New Salem is one. From that point forward it became a hot war, a hot war I dare say the men readily won, for they knew now that war had been waged upon them. But as for the rest I know not, except what has occurred locally in New Salem. And what followed the war here was another outbreak of the Pestilence, which a young preacher named Kill-sin, a child prodigy at the time, blamed on the surviving witches in the cities. And so the Witch Doctors were formed to deal with the matter, and young men drafted into its service. After that, the Pogrom was waged cold or hot over many years depending upon the political climate and the overall health of New Salem's citizens. I'm happy to say it had dwindled almost to nothing ... until again, Kill-sin. And his ascension to the Chair."

"I take it you do not approve of him ... or the Pogrom," said Satyena.

"Fewer do than you might realize," he said. "Especially since the discovery ..." He studied her, his eyes passing over her skin, lingering on her face. "Is it true? That witches are being born half—that is, with fewer signs of the Pestilence?"

"Half-human, you meant to say," said Satyena. "It's okay, no offense is taken. We are viewed far worse by our own. And yes, it is true. Nor are we trusted by the other witches any more than if we were men—Sister

Samain has made certain of that.” She looked at Jeremiah. “That is why I was being held in such a manner, like an animal. And the fact that I had argued before the council that peace should be made with the men. You must understand ... we half-breeds don’t share this, this *bond* you speak of. Indeed, we would have attempted to ... eliminate Sister Samain ... had she not consolidated power so quickly.” She shook her head and then quickly drained her glass. “No, it is lost. So long as she alone can maintain the cloaking spell, her stranglehold on the home coven will be complete.”

She watched as Jasper and Jeremiah exchanged curious glances. “You’d like to know more, wouldn’t you?” Then she lifted her wine glass suddenly and slammed it back down in the middle of the table. “*Fill me ... and I’ll tell you.*”

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THEY WERE ON THEIR third bottle when she finally finished, and at first no one said anything. At last Jasper started to chuckle, quietly at first, then more and more brazenly ... until that too subsided and the silence reasserted itself. At length he said, “We have precisely the same problem.” He reached across the table, still tittering a little, and refilled her glass. “So this, Sister Samain, she’s an extortionist, basically.”

“Essentially, yes,” said Satyena. She swished the wine around gently in her glass. “Her power is unlimited because everyone knows that if anything happens to her, we become visible to your machines.”

“But your covens *have* been visible to our machines,” said Jeremiah.

“*Some of them,*” said Satyena. “Her political power may be unlimited, but her spellcasting is not, and so the protective umbrella waxes and wanes. At least, that’s the Party line. The truth of it, I suspect, is a little more select: the fact is, only the covens who have stepped out of line have found themselves open to attack.”

“Yes, attack by our own Sister Samain who holds his people hostage, as well,” said Jasper.

"I don't understand," said Satyena.

"Well, don't you see? Surely you're not going to tell me the sudden dearth of heart attacks or flesh-eating bacteria in New Salem is because the witches merely lost interest?"

"No," she said. "Of course not. A shield has been erected, a barrier through which we cannot see and cannot cast. We call it the Transom."

"Precisely. The White-noise Generator. The very source of Kill-sin's power over us: It creates a static field through which curses cannot pass. Nevermind that it requires more power than our little station is able to provide—leaving us in a perpetual state of brownout—nor that it is wired via neural-link directly into Kill-sin's own skull. The fact is, because of it, we are as beholden to him as you are to Samain."

"Indeed, you are," said Satyena, and marveled at the irony. "For not a day goes back that we do not try to penetrate it. Pray that they do not, dear Jasper. For if they do, New Salem will suffer an attack—the likes of which has not been seen since the Hot War." She tossed back her glass, swallowing what remained, then turned it in her hand, studying it. "So, yes: We have precisely the same problem." She added, "Oddly fitting, isn't it? That two camps unable to get along should both wind up victims of their own excess?"

Again, silence lay like a fog over the room.

And then something happened that both terrified and elated Satyena: terrified her because it further reinforced that the one thing unique to witches (beyond their white eyes and pale skin), the only thing which had enabled them to survive—their ability to access the Third Eye—was not so unique, elated her because it further blurred the line between man and witch, which was the only way, she was now convinced, either would survive.

For, amidst the silence and semi-dark of the room, a light began to flicker, a *fire* light, a light whose source was in the palm of Jeremiah's own hand, and which disappeared as he closed his fingers, saying, calmly,

“There is a third way.” He looked at each of them. “Which is that we combine our efforts ... and kill them.”

Nobody said anything. Moments passed and still no one spoke.

At last Jasper said, “The game appears to have changed.” He looked at Satyena. “Did you ...?”

She shook her head. “He did it himself. Nor is it the first time. I merely gave him a push, during the raid.”

“And could you also ... give me a push? The same way you did with him? And do you think it would work?”

She glanced at his paintings. “Yes, to both.”

Jasper arched an eyebrow. At length he stood and approached the window, and remained there for what seemed a very long time. “As Jeremiah knows, I am ... connected to Kill-sin ... and by more than mere racial ancestry. I—I worked for him once. In the very manse he still occupies today. I know its floorplan as well as I know the strokes of my own paintings. So, too, do I know its booby traps and its security codes—the latter of which have undoubtedly been changed, but which can be bypassed.” He spoke slowly as though managing multiple trains of thought. “I was his assistant, you understand, his Eichmann, and in that capacity I coordinated numerous aspects of the Pogrom—from the acquisition of targets to the interrogation of prisoners, when we still took prisoners—I’m sorry, Satyena.”

“We have all done our share of killing, Jasper,” she said. “Please, continue.”

“There’s a machine on his desk which scrambles radio signals; hence, I have never approached Jeremiah about serving as my hand—just as he does with my paintings—in an assassination attempt. Besides, this ... outlook of his, is new. I’ve done what I can to educate him, but the will of the Proctors is strong. Too strong, Satyena, for most men to resist. That is why they kill without question.” He paused, appearing almost to be in a trance. “Ironically, to kill without question is precisely what would be required of you both, if we were to ... bring change. Do you understand?”

“We do,” they said.

“For both would need to be killed at the same time. If Kill-sin is assassinated and the White Noise Generator rendered inert while Samain remains alive, it would leave New Salem utterly helpless before the witches. If Samain alone is killed and her cloaking spell undone, the witches’ Home Coven will be open to attack. Satyena, I must ask: you said the half-breeds do not share the same kind of bond with full-blooded witches as they share amongst themselves. Does this mean your mind is closed to Samain?”

“No, alas. But it does mean she would have a difficult time accessing it. It means she might project to me and that I might project back, but that she wouldn’t be able to see my surroundings or identify my location.”

“And if I projected to you? To monitor your progress? Would she be aware of it?”

“Yes, she would immediately identify you as a masculine presence. But there are certain images, certain feelings, that are thought by the witches to be exclusively feminine, or nearly so. If I were to fill my mind with these I might mask your presence, at least for a time.”

“Very well, then. Therefore, I propose the following: That you give me this ‘push’ you speak of, so that I may communicate with the both of you even when we are separated. Jeremiah, you will start by burning the Doctors’ complex to the ground—at a time when all the War Wagons are out on raids”

And he outlined the plan, which he dubbed “Operation Trust,” until Satyena at last began to nod off.

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SHE AWAKENED WITH A start, her heart hammering, her pulse racing, and threw off the blanket someone had lain over her—probably Jeremiah. A voice had intruded into her dreams, a female voice, *that* voice,

Sister Samain. *Did it work?* she asked, her voice seeming at once familiar and at the same time foreign—alien. *Did the trust spell work as intended?*

Yes, Satyena projected, and glanced down the hall toward Jasper and Jeremiah's rooms. *But this is not a good time. The house is too quiet, and the Witch Doctor has The Way. The old man, too, will have it by morning, for I have promised to push him.*

Why would you do that, Satyena? Samain objected. *The Witch Doctor was inevitable, but another—the old man, especially—what if something goes wrong?*

Spells are not perfect, Sister Samain. You above all should know that. They are men, yes, but they are not fools: the old man will want proof that I am carrying out my part of the bargain. What better proof than unfettered access to what he perceives to be my mind?

What bargain? And what do you mean, Satyena, 'You above all should know that?' Nevermind. *We must put the bickering between half-breeds and full-bloods behind. I am sorry that the cloaking spell failed your coven, but remember it was your own coven who imprisoned you! Would you have thought to turn your whispered plea for help into a plan which might save all the witches if I had not reached out to you?*

No! Satyena projected. *But our projections at this moment are endangering the very plan you speak of. Jere—the Witch Doctor—has too much latent power. I tell you now, he could be listening as we speak. Desist this communication at once and I shall make contact with you in the ...*

And then there was silence, a *psychic* silence, and Satyena knew she was gone.

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SHE EASED THE DOOR to Jeremiah's room open as delicately as she could and found him sleeping. How peaceful he looked just now, minus his accouterments as Witch Doctor. How child-like. She had strategic reasons for wanting to visit him, of course, the first being to confirm that he had, indeed, been sleeping during their exchange, and another being

the strengthening of their bond, the building of an intimate trust. But she had a personal reason, as well, one she was afraid to admit even to herself but was as real as he was nonetheless. And that was to know what it was like to lay beside a man.

For something had touched her when the two of them had clung to one another as the coven was flattened and burned, something alien and yet wholly familiar, as though it had always existed and always would, regardless of the war between men and women and regardless of the casualties. Something which repelled and allured all at once. Something which, try as both sides might, would not go quietly.

Something which drew her to him and suggested she lay down by his side, which said, *This is the true Dagger and Chalice*. Not a ceremony, not a ritual—at least not one designed by mortal men and women—but something older than the stars themselves. Something irreducible. And when he put his arm around her she felt as though she were a child once again, and slept. And dreamed of Jasper's paintings and a world in which everything was alive and connected, in which nature itself was the sole author of the divine, a world she'd heard spoken of once by a very old woman, who'd said it was the birthright and belief of the witches of old, of the druids and the Wiccans, she'd said, of the true witches and their splendor.

III | The Shadow, the Siren, and the Sage

It was a night for dreaming and for murder too, a night that would live in infamy or be celebrated for a thousand years, a night which lay over the Witch Doctor's complex like a crisp, black linen. It was also a night for destruction, and for the holding down of triggers, for the flames to flow like water over everything he had ever known and the past to blacken and curl upon itself like so much burning paper. It was, in short, a night for monumental change—and for everything to stay the same—depending on the actions (and the fortune) of a few; a night in which the fates of many would hang in the balance, while the fates of five would be sealed—Chairman Kill-sin and Sister Samain, Jasper, Jeremiah, Satyena—a night that would decide everything from whether the Witch Doctors or the witches (but preferably neither) would at last be dominant to whether there would even be another generation to tell the tale. It was a night through which Jeremiah moved like a wraith—having watched the last of the War Wagons depart with its red lights flashing and its music of yesteryear playing—until he came to the center of the complex ... and paused, for it was from this very spot that he would raze everything to the ground. Nor had he stood for long before Jasper's voice whispered into his ear—but really his mind—saying, simply, *Burn it, Jeremiah. Do not hesitate; show no mercy.*

But he *did* hesitate, if only for an instant. For the truth of it was he felt a sense of comfort here he had not felt since the raid on Satyena's coven. Indeed, here was the very heart of the place's psychical energy—something he was aware of only because of the third eye Satyena had somehow opened in his mind. Here was where the lines of force met—the witches called them ley lines, he somehow knew—where the wings of the complex nearly converged, and where he had taken his oath to uphold the Pogrom and all that it represented. But then the moment passed, and he squeezed the trigger: unleashing a stream of fire as well as an explosive projectile—which punched through one of the ar-

mory's windows and caused white light to flash blindingly—after which he backed away quickly and began to methodically shoot charges into all the remaining buildings, knowing, as Jasper did, that the blasts from the armory (and their falling embers) would do most of the work ... but wanting to make sure, regardless.

Good, said Jasper into his ear. Now, quickly, move onto the east lawn and look up, above the cliff face. You should see an antenna farm and several aircraft warning lights; align yourself with them and continue forward, until you come to the base of the—

A series of enormous explosions rocked the grounds and Jeremiah hit the deck, pieces of glass and other debris raining down upon him, pattering his shoulders. *Thump! Ka-thump! Thump!*

Now it is too late to turn back, he thought to himself, and wondered if Satyena, wherever she was, were laboring under the same yoke: the yoke of wanting to destroy a thing while at the same time yearning (paradoxically) for its embrace. Then he was up and running, running for the base of the cliff, wanting to look back and yet too terrified to do so, a Bible quote from one of Kill-sin's sermons echoing in his ear: But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

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IT HAS BEGUN, Satyena projected as she used an unlock spell to open the door to the service elevator, and stepped in. *The complex of the Witch Doctors is in flames.*

She had returned to Home Coven in secret and accessed the utility floor of what had once been a high-rise hotel; now, as she slid the cage door closed and pressed the button that would take her to the uppermost floor (the former restaurant which was Sister Samain's personal residence), she wondered if she would be able to carry out her end of the deal. For what she hadn't told Jeremiah and Jasper was the true extent of Samain's power: that the witch might, if she became aware of Satyena's presence in Home Coven (and in the service elevator especially!), cast

any manner of spells and misdirects—indeed, that with her power she could make Satyena see things that weren't there or *not* see things that were; that she could freeze her blood and stop her very heart if she so chose; that it all depended on surprise, and above all, luck. It all depended upon Satyena's ability to conceal her physical presence for as long as humanly possible—to keep Samain engaged no matter the level of effort—while at the same time completely masking Jasper's psychical footprint ...

Do you hear me, Sister Samain? she repeated as the elevator rattled steadily upward. *I tell you that your plan has worked, and that the Witch Doctors will soon be no more. Why do you not answer?*

I am here, came her reply at considerable length, causing Satyena to jump, for its closeness and clarity were startling. *And yes, I know ... I am monitoring the situation through the Transom.*

Satyena's heart skipped a beat. *Through the Transom?* She seized upon the thought as soon as it manifested, taking care to shield what followed from Samain's certain inspection. If that were true, then it meant it was at least possible that Samain had eavesdropped upon their entire conversation; that she perhaps even knew of Satyena's intent to kill her—and *that* meant she could be walking directly into a trap. *But how is that possible, Sister Samain? No witch has ever penetrated the Transom ... what wellspring of power have you drawn upon that you could do such a thing?*

Again, there was a silence, which gave Satyena the impression that penetrating the Transom might be coming at a terrible cost to her old nemesis; and she immediately sought to exploit her condition by pressing her with further questions: *Is it something that you can teach us, Samain? Something you can teach all the witches? Why, if—*

Silence, Satyena! Why do you carry on in such a way, when you know, surely, that penetrating the Transom requires all of my attention? Besides, we have other matters to discuss—you and I, alone—when the time is right. What matters now is that you stay as close to the Witch Doctor, our fool,

our Puck, our King for a Day, as possible, and push the trust spell as needed. There can be no further contact between us until it is over—do you understand?

Satyena watched as the numbers above the door winked on and off.
11 ... 12 ... 13 ...

Our fool, our Puck, our King for a Day, she thought, ensuring her interior was well-hidden from Samain's view. Ah, but Puck was a trickster as well as a servant, Sister Samain, and the night is young. Who can yet say who will be the fool, nor King or Queen for a Day?

Then to Samain she projected: *I understand. When it is over, my High Priestess.*

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AS IT TURNED OUT, JEREMIAH need not have looked back anyway, for the burning complex was reflected perfectly in the elevator's glass walls as he faced the control panel and reached out to Jasper: *It's no good ... the panel's been sealed with an iron plate. I fear that my musket will not penetrate it. Even if it could, the blast would surely damage the controls.*

Jasper wasted no time: *Then you must be my hand in a way you never have before, Jeremiah. You must burn as you did at the kitchen table, only hotter, more intense. You must paint with fire so that the seal is broken while the controls remain undamaged. And you must hurry! I sense a presence—yes, Witch Doctors, approaching across the east lawn ... a War Wagon has returned. Do not look! Instead, look inward, to that place you saw while at the kitchen table. Draw upon it, Jeremiah, but do not fear. Time will stretch for us ...*

And Jeremiah did so, bracing himself against the panel with one hand as he holstered his musket and looked down at the other, ignoring the sound of cursing and the clanking of tanks as the men approached, closing his eyes, opening his Third Eye, accessing the Realm, whatever it was, snapping his wrist and reopening his lids as the white flames flick-

ered from his fingertips and were extinguished one by one until only his index finger remained alight, which he used to trace the edge of the plate.

That's it, my friend, projected Jasper somewhat breathlessly, *yes, move as though you were guiding my hand across the canvas.*

"There he is," someone called from a couple hundred feet back. "He's at the elevator!"

And the plate fell away.

Now, said Jasper quickly. *The security override. It's 1—1—0—8—3—0—0.*

Jeremiah's heart thudded as he keyed in the code and the door slid aside, leaving him just enough time to slip inside and duck before one of the Witch Doctors opened fire, shattering the glass of the rear wall and setting fire to the shaft's insulation. He poked his head and shoulders around the door as it closed and squeezed off a round, a lucky shot which punched through the man's chest and struck the Witch Doctor behind him, setting both aflame and causing them to fall, where they writhed and screamed on the grass. Then he was climbing; the lift was ascending with a hiss, and it was all over, at least for the moment. But this time he did look back—through the glass at the collapsing complex below—realizing that the group of buildings had been laid out in the form of the Christian cross, which burned in the night no different than the hate symbols of old (for Jasper had shown him pictures in books), and knew with certainty that he and Satyena and Jasper were doing the right thing; that it was time for the fear and the killing to stop, and to stop forever, that even if he did not survive to see it, there would be a new world, a world in which men and women both would be free to thrive and to love—perchance to even make children again!—and that what they did now was the only thing to do.

• • • •

SATYENA WAVED A HAND before her as the elevator reached the top, willing its machinery and its bells silent, then froze in position as

its doors rolled open, revealing a lengthy kitchen which was the size of the common room in their old coven building, the building which now lay smoldering amidst its slums—a fact she could blame upon the Witch Doctors but which she really blamed on Samain, for having let it fall outside her sphere of protection, purposely, Satyena was convinced. And that's when she realized that Samain was right in front of her, that she had been all along, only cloaked—a façade she now dropped—and before Satyena could respond the older woman had opened her mouth and launched a stream of black bile directly at her head, which Satyena narrowly avoided by ducking and rolling, after which she sat up on one elbow and responded in kind, also missing but causing the Master Witch to lose her balance briefly before she was able to cast a spell of protection about herself, which crackled and sizzled and spat blue sparks. "Oh, Satyena, surely you did not expect to just waltz right in here and find me sitting cross-legged in the center of a pentagram, completely oblivious, did you?"

"I expected to find you exerting at least some effort toward maintaining the cloaking spell," said Satyena. "For *all* the covens. Or is it that it requires no effort? Is it that you control it easily and at will, and that you purposefully turn out those who would defy you, even a little?"

Samain's white eyes seemed to dance. "The outer covens have become weak," she said. "Even you, a half-breed—and there are more of you spell-birthed every year—must know this and fear for our future." She circled Satyena slowly. "What would you have us do? Make peace with the men and return us all to the exploitation and abuse of the past? If so, that is because you are too young to remember the way things were before the Pestilence."

"I know how things were before the Pestilence," said Satyena, and stood. "I mean, how things really were, not as they are portrayed by you, and by others like you. Men and woman danced. They courted and competed and completed each other, they even made love!"

Samain reared back as if struck across the face. “*Made love?*” Her shield seemed to sputter and weaken, if only for an instant, then she laughed. “And by this you mean the act of rape, which all women had to endure. Oh, Satyena, not even you could be so naïve ... by the goddess, look around you! Look at the animals in their kingdoms—tell me, do they make love? And do you think our Third Eye would have even been opened if we had not first closed ourselves off to men completely? Oh, Satyena! You are far worse than a mere half-breed if you believe these things, you are a fully human woman, as trapped in the binary of old as any precious mother.”

She raised her hand suddenly and Satyena was propelled across the room, where she collided with the shelves violently and caused the china to shatter and cascade all around her as she crumpled to the floor. But it wasn’t until the younger woman had regained herself and was preparing to counterattack that she realized the full extent of Samain’s assault, for when she moved to curse blindness upon her she found she hadn’t the tongue to do it, that Samain had used her superior powers to seal up her mouth completely. Nor did the Master Witch stop there but immediately cast a spell of paralysis upon Satyena so that she could not even defend herself by conjuring with her hands. And then Samain approached for what would certainly be the killing blow and Satyena could only wonder how Jeremiah was fairing and if Jasper were aware of her plight and what they would think of her when the White Noise barrier fell but the cloaking spell remained intact.

• • • •

WAIT, DO NOT ENTER, projected Jasper even as Kill-sin came into view around the half-opened office door. *It’s Satyena, and she’s in trouble.* It was too late. Kill-sin had already looked up—forcing Jeremiah to push the door the rest of the way open and to level his musket.

Do not fire, I say! I repeat: Satyena is in trouble.

“Well, well,” said Kill-sin at length, and exhaled. “I would say that this doesn’t make any sense ... but in fact it’s the only thing that does. And now you wait. Why?”

Jeremiah ...

A voice, not Jasper’s, sounding as though it were a million miles away.

Jeremiah ... help me. See me.

Satyena. *I hear you*, he projected, keeping a close eye on Kill-sin. *But I cannot see you.*

“*Jeremiah*,” crooned Kill-sin—calmly, mellifluously. “It is you, isn’t it? You have survived.” He pushed back in his chair slowly.

“Don’t move,” warned Jeremiah, and inched forward. “Your fate has not yet been decided.”

“Just so,” said Kill-sin, and placed his hands on the armrests of his chair. “But then ... neither has yours.” He pushed against the rests and stood. “Else you would have already killed me ... is this not correct? Tell me, Jeremiah ... why is it you have not yet killed me?”

He began circling the desk even as Satyena projected to Jeremiah once more: *Push me, Jeremiah. Push me as I once pushed you. Dip your dagger into my chalice. Fill me with those things that can only be felt between a man and a woman and help me to focus them outward.*

“I’m warning you, Kill-sin,” said Jeremiah, tracking him with his pistol. “I’ll act alone if necessary.”

Don’t do it, Jeremiah, not yet—Jasper again, sounding quietly desperate. *Help Satyena. Fill her as you would an empty vessel ...*

“You mean, without the council of the witches?” Kill-sin nodded calmly, knowingly, as he continued his advance. “I know you commune with them. It’s all right. You are not the first Witch Doctor to become possessed ... nor, I suspect, will you be the last. The important thing is that you allow me to help you. Will you allow me to help you, Jeremiah?”

Fill me, Jeremiah, urged Satyena. *And you too, Jasper. Fill me with your visions and your canvases, your love of the female heart and form. Fill me with everything you have ever felt and dreamed regarding*

woman—with your passion for their physical symmetry, your desire to please and to comfort, your will to protect them even at the cost of your own life. Show me the void you have felt in their absence ... the void you feel in their presence ... the intolerable darkness of being an incomplete equation, a half-entity, a thing alone but so full of love!

Jeremiah felt a sweaty palm on his forehead—Kill-sin's— even as he channeled all his energy through his third eye and into Satyena's, whom he suddenly loved as though he had never known a day without her—never awakened from a dream of reunification to the dull vacuum of reality. And suddenly they were together, the three of them, projecting as a single beam, a single beacon, and they entered Samain like a lightning bolt and filled her with something akin to love, which for her was pure, undiluted poison.

So, too, was Kill-sin effected, for having taken off Jeremiah's hat and pressed his palm against his forehead, he had unwittingly entered the circle of their spell, and now began to shake and sweat profusely—for he was trapped, Jeremiah knew, just as Samain was trapped, as all of them were. They were bound together now like a single whirring entity—an entity at war with itself—each knowing what the other knew, each feeling what the other felt, as Witch Doctors gathered outside the office door and looked on (for Jeremiah had forgotten to secure the elevator) and witches, having sensed a great disturbance and broken in, gathered in the room next to Samain's kitchen. And what those witches saw was the two women standing with their hands on each other's foreheads, just as the Witch Doctors saw the same (for Jeremiah had dropped his musket and placed his palm against Kill-sin's forehead, as well).

And then each group saw their leader burst into flames as Jeremiah and Satyena and Jasper performed one final push; and Kill-sin and Samain fell writhing to their respective floors, screaming as they had caused others to scream, burning as they had caused others to burn.

IT WAS A NIGHT FOR dreaming and for murder too, a night that would be celebrated for a thousand years, a night which lay over the Witch Doctor's burning complex like a crisp, black linen. It was also a night for destruction, and for the holding down of triggers, for the flames to flow like water over what remained of the Pogrom's apparatus, its documents and its War Wagons, and the past to blacken and curl upon itself like so much burning paper.

It was, in short, a night for monumental change, a night in which the fates of many had hung in the balance, while the fates of five had been sealed—Kill-sin and Samain, dead, Jeremiah and Satyena and Jasper reluctant leaders—a night that had decided everything from whether the Witch Doctors or the witches would at last be dominant (neither would be) to whether there would even be another generation to tell the tale ...

The End

