

GRAY FINGERS OF DEAD TREES twisting toward the sky warned of just how far he was from civilization. The still water of the Mississippi swamp absorbed the tarry black of the night sky, creating a crater, a void in the earth's surface, bottomless and dangerous. It held secrets, whispered of curses and secret burials. Sticks rose like bones from its muddy surface. A slice of yellow moon, shrouded in wisps of rapidly moving cloud, proved too weak to throw shadows, yet strong enough to reveal the stark landscape.

The man riding in the black chauffeur-driven 1953 Buick Roadmaster's backseat looked away from the water, as if witnessing a secret act he had no business seeing. No business being here. Four hours from the airport, where his private plane had landed. Three hours of nothing but the occasional deserted gas station or dirt roads leading nowhere. He lit a cigarette and smoked it aggressively.

His driver consulted a large foldable map and then monitored the car's odometer, alert for an upcoming turn. It was 1955; handheld cell phones wouldn't be in

use for thirty years; GPS wouldn't be in public use for another forty.

"When we arrive," he instructed the driver, "you are not to leave the car no matter what you may see."

"Yes, sir."

"Doors locked."

"Yes, sir."

"You know these parts?" he asked the man.

"I know *of* them, I guess you could say. Back a couple years—forty-eight, forty-nine it was—a young girl and her mamma went missing out this way. Canoe trip, I believe. God rest their souls."

"Are you scared?"

"I don't scare easily."

"Answer the question."

"I am. Yes, sir. Folks like us, like you and me, are not welcome here. These folks keep to themselves, to their ways. You might say they operate by their own laws. I've heard not even the po-lice travel out this far."

"No heroics."

"No, sir."

"You drop me. Come back in an hour. If you don't see me, leave as quickly as you can."

"Now that just goes against everything in my job description, Mr. Johnson."

The man in the backseat nearly chuckled at hearing

his alias spoken; he'd forgotten his personal secretary had hired the car anonymously for him. This was no typical business trip.

"You tell your dispatcher it was on my orders. My secretary will back you up."

"Yes, sir. I'll do as you say."

The car slowed; the driver flicked the turn signal, its dashboard indicator flashing red throughout the interior. It seemed as much a warning for those in the car as an alert for other vehicles. The car swung right down a potted and puddled lane narrowed by encroaching vines and spiny brambles. A mile passed, the dirt track as tight as a throat, swallowing the car as it passed through.

"No one done come this way in a long, long time. You sure 'bout them directions?" The driver used the wipers to repel the tangles of spiderwebs and insect cocoons covering the windshield.

"The swamp water is what connects these people, not roads. It would have been faster for us in a boat."

"You wouldn't catch me dead in a boat out this way." The driver laughed. "I'm likely wrong 'bout that. Might be the only way you'd find me. Dead, I mean." He slowed the vehicle. The branches scraped the car's exterior, screeching like newborns. "I keep up like this, won't have no paint left."

"Another half mile."

“Won’t be no road, another half mile.”

“Just the same: another half mile.” The man sat back patting the sweat off his brow with a neatly pressed handkerchief.

“Better be someplace to turn around. Ain’t no way I can back up in this kind of dark. Feels like we’ve been eaten by a snake. Jonah and the whale. Know what I mean?”

Exactly half a mile farther they reached a spot where the vines and swamp grasses had been whacked short by a sharp blade. A long, rickety dock connected to a lazily erected tin-roofed shanty the size of a one-car garage. The smell of woodsmoke hung in musty air thick with mosquitoes. The passenger calling himself Mr. Johnson walked the dock’s length as the car perfected a seven-point turn to reverse direction. The car waited, facing out.

The man walking out to the dock believed the smooth brown rocks, arranged like stepping stones alongside, to be a form of environmental decoration. When they moved, his breath caught. Humanoid figures stood up, men and women, silhouetted waist deep in the turbid lake. Their dark skin, yellowed by the light of the moon, looked sickly and grotesque. It took a moment to realize the figures were neither living nor dead, but in a suspended state between the two. Hypnotized, perhaps. Drugged? Or, more likely, long left for dead.

Together, the creatures strode toward the dock,

streaming wakes behind, blocking any chance of the man's return to shore. They pulled themselves up onto the squealing wood, dripping a dark goo too congealed to be water. The man quickened his pace, which only served to aggravate the twelve figures as they moved more urgently toward him.

A wizened, crippled thing appeared in the shanty's open doorway. He? She? It leaned upon a crooked hardwood cane, one shoulder higher than the other, knees buckled. Clumps of what had to be hair hung from its head, covering an animal-skin tunic. Hair beads clattered like dull bells.

The water-things advanced, now so close the passenger could feel cold breath on the back of his neck. A disgusting smell, like old hamburger left too long in the fridge, overcame him.

The beaded, bent creature waved its open palm. The water-things grunted and moaned—dogs denied a meal. They backed away and stepped off the dock, splashing into the water.

"Join me, if you will," said it with the cane. "Youse welcome to set a spell."

"I am—"

"Amery Hollingworth."

"Close enough. Astonishing." Amery Hollingsworth had not supplied his name.

“Youse gots youself three young ’uns, all boys, and a missus.”

“Impossible!”

It smiled crookedly. “I’m a boastful sort. You must forgive an old man his small pleasures.” The broken and bent thing indicated a well-worn stump stool, its wood polished by decades of human contact. Firelight caught shadow images on the bare walls in a rapid-fire slide show. There were six such stumps arranged around a small open fire at the room’s center. Nothing larger than twigs crackled as they burned.

Hollingsworth took a seat facing the . . . man. Yes, an old, old black man with slate-gray cataracts for eyes. His voice was rougher than the skin on his hands.

“Your buggy left youse behind, son.”

“He’ll return in an hour,” said Hollingsworth. “It has taken me three years to find you.”

“Me, or a man *like* me?” The crippled man chortled.

“What kind of man is that?”

“Youse the one comin’ here, no invite. Youse best tell me.”

Hollingsworth nodded. “A man with a certain . . . reputation.”

“Such as?”

“Reanimation,” Hollingsworth stated bluntly.

“That right there, a big word. This right here, a simple man.”

“You’ve turned sticks into snakes.”

“So did Moses. Don’t youse make me into no Moses. ’Sides, I done rocks into frogs, never no sticks. Them sticks ain’t living. That right there no easy thing, son. Leave that to them above.”

“Any living thing?”

“Ain’t right to go asking no question you can’t handle.”

“I can handle more than you might think.”

“I don’t do much that there thinking, son. Me is more just a part of things. The nature of things. Ash and water. Blood and wine.” He reached into a shallow pocket on the tunic, hesitated, and then withdrew a four-foot water moccasin, still dripping wet. It could not have fit into that pocket.

He threw it at Hollingsworth, who erupted off the stump and slapped the thing to the side. It clattered to the wooden planks. A leg bone of some kind, bare and bright, no longer a snake.

The old creature chuckled. “Yep. Figured as much.” He shuffled over, picked up the bone, and threw it into the water; a snake swam away on the surface. “Why you here, son?”

Hollingsworth sat down and wiped his brow with

a starched handkerchief. "I propose a partnership," he said.

"Why on God's precious earth should I listen to such poppycock? Mine is not a gift to be bought or sold. That would be sinful."

"Bartered then, negotiated."

"A trade? I think not. Youse come a long way for nothing, Mr. Amery. It is no short walk back down that there road. Your man not coming. I seen it in his heart."

"I offer you your own . . ." Hollingsworth searched for the correct word. "Circle, I believe it's called."

"It's work lonesome. No need no circle."

"A traveler," Hollingsworth said, "can always use sorcerers and sorceresses."

"Words. A man comes into another man's abode, he must be right careful with his words. It's but a humble servant."

Hollingsworth tugged at his suit trousers, unbuttoned his collar, and loosened his tie. "I can provide you witches, warlocks, maids, and servants. Your own kingdom. I can elevate your *reputation* from a shrimp-eating swamp priest to dark lord of your own kingdom. We work together, you and I. We achieve a greatness both of us want. A kingdom, if you will, never before experienced on this earth since the Dark Ages."

The old man's eyes rolled into the back of his head

in an expression of pure pleasure. “Youse keeps on talking, son. A poet, youse is.”

“Imagined, but never realized. Conceived of, but rarely demonstrated. I offer you a kingdom, a circle, comprised not of those dead-eyed stumbling zombies out there, but witches with power, real power. The kind of power it takes centuries to develop. I lack the ability to control such fiends, even if I could create them, reanimate them. You, on the other hand, can do both.”

“It’s done no man’s bidding but me own.”

Hollingsworth took a long, calculated breath. “I don’t venture into such an arrangement lightly. We’ll take a blood oath, me and you. I’m aware you could . . . terminate me and our relationship. You won’t kill someone who shares your blood.”

The strange, bent man examined Hollingsworth, head tilted, clouded eyes roaming. “Youse done exaggerated your powers of persuasiveness, son. If I done wants, I kills you here and now.”

“I could have gone to she of the desert or the great beast of the snows. I came here.”

The man shuddered. “A mouth like yours is trouble.”

“I had a feeling about you,” Hollingsworth said. He met eyes with the Traveler for the first time, well aware he risked a spell being cast. “We travel to the edge of the great sea, to the city of the Angels.”

"It's hears of this place," the man said contemplatively. "Course I do. Whys you think an old bent soul like mine would bother, son?"

"You've dreamed of it," Hollingsworth said. "You've *seen* it in your future."

"My future, unlike youse, stretches far."

"You can see my future?"

"Youse think these old eyes give me vision?" He chortled again. "Youse one ambitious man."

"The Lost Angels."

"I heard youse."

Hollingsworth dipped his hand into a pocket and removed a straightedge razor. He unfolded the blade and it glinted in orange firelight. "Shall we?"