



The weather had turned mild again, and on Wednesday a thick bank of dark clouds brought rain just after lunch. By the time I left work the rain was coming down hard and people were making mad dashes through the parking lots. Herds of students, clustered under umbrellas, clogged the bridges over the Lethe to get to their residences in the second circle.

At home, I changed out of my wet clothes into a cozy sweater and leggings, then headed downstairs early to make myself some tea. The house felt dark and gloomy, as if it was much later in the day.

It seemed all three of us had the same idea of gathering in the kitchen for comfort. Tobias was there adding more wood to the fire and getting the coffee-maker ready, and it looked like Tessa already had dinner ready. I skipped the tea and poured myself a glass of wine instead.

Tessa was setting a platter of chicken paprikash and spaetzle on the kitchen table when a great crash of thunder suddenly shook the house; I gave her points for not dropping her cargo. Wind whipped drops of rain noisily against the window, and some rain even made it down the chimney to sizzle in the hearth.

Tobias automatically lit two hurricane lanterns, leaving one on the counter near the sink and bringing the other with him to the table. "Sounds like this is going to be a good one."

I smiled. "I love storms. Should we light more candles?"

Tessa cocked her head, listening. "There is time to sit and eat, I think. Please, while it's still warm." She dished servings out for each of us, then sat and passed around fresh rolls and a vinegary cucumber salad. I'd become addicted to her food; so much of what she cooked reminded me of what my mom made when she and my dad were home for any length of time.

A mocha roulade followed the meal, and we just had time to finish pouring the coffee before another thunderclap shook the air, and the house went dark. Tobias motioned for us to eat our dessert while he went around lighting candles and lanterns throughout the house.

We helped Tessa clean up quickly in the meager light, and then I took one of the lanterns and another half-mug of coffee with me to my room, where I discovered that Tobias had thoughtfully started a fire. It sent shadows licking around the walls as I changed into sweats and sat down with the Wychwood journal. I'd

neglected it for far too long, and wanted to start making inroads on the contents. Any information I could glean from it would help.

I brought the lantern close and flipped through the pages idly, waiting for something to jump out at me. A new section begun by a Samuel Coventry caught my eye, dated April 13, 1889. It began:

*“It is by strange circumstance that I find myself the new Gatekeeper of a secluded town in what my former acquaintances in England would surely consider the backwoods of a rough and illiterate country.”*

Skimming through the rest of the journal, there was one other Gatekeeper who took over from Samuel, and then the beginning of Alistair’s entries. Returning to Samuel’s first notation, I tucked my feet up under me and began to read, but although at first it gave me some insight into the life of a Roadwright, it turned into something unnerving.

*“I arrived two weeks ago by steamship at Halifax on the eastern coast of Canada, then proceeded by train to Toronto, where eventually, after exploring that burgeoning and bustling city, I was able to secure a ticket on a train to Llithfaen, the small but tidy town where I now reside.*

*The Gate is on a rolling and wooded property on top of a hill situated on the western fringe of the town, which sits in a pretty valley. The entire area is emerging from a thick blanket of snow, which I’m told is usual for this time of the year. I look forward to seeing its vernal coat.*

*But more of that at a later time. It is the events of the past few months that I wish to record now, since they brought me here.*

*In late September of 1888 I had travelled from my home town of Essex in southwest England to the great city of London, at the request of those offices of the Ancient Order of Roadwrights. I was a new recruit, and had recently completed my interim training. Soon I would be ready to be assigned a Gate of my own to oversee.*

*I was quartering with my friend in the city, William Mecham, a cartoonist for the Puck magazine. He had been showing me about town, even the unsavoury section called Whitechapel, which was lately the home of a number of gruesome killings that were terrifying the entire city. William wanted to get a sense of the atmosphere in those blood-soaked streets and alleys.”*

A shiver ran up my spine. Coventry had been in London at the time of the Ripper killings!

*“One evening near the end of the month, William was occupied in one of his music-hall exhibitions, producing caricatures at the blinding speed he was known for. I had already seen one of these displays, so he suggested I instead visit the infamous Aldgate Pump, once the area’s main attraction for its pure, sweet waters – until they turned sour and contaminated, that is.*

*The well from which the Pump drew its liquid dated back to the time of King John, and as I stood there, next the London & City Midland Bank, in the wan light of the street lamps, I imagined what the city must have looked like back then, before the Great Fire.*

*Just twelve years previously to my visit, however, partakers of the pump’s waters began to sicken and die, in the hundreds, until an investigation uncovered the truth of the matter: the water, on its journey from its source in Hampstead, had begun to acquire calcium and what was called “effete organic matter”, that is,*

detritus from the corpses buried in several newish cemeteries along the pathway. People had been drinking the remains of the dead – little wonder of reports of hauntings in the area!

After surveying the handsome stone housing of the pump, with its long curved handle and the now-defunct spout in the shape of a wolf's head, and aware of the East End's reputation for crime, I gathered my coat about me and set off towards a church nearby that I wanted to see, St. Botolph without Aldgate, as it is dedicated to the patron saint of boundaries and travel. I thought to ask his blessing as I embarked on my new career as a Roadwright.

As I walked along Leadenhall to Mitre Street, a peculiar thing happened that I took little notice of at the time, but its import would soon become clear. Out of the shadows of Mitre, a man stumbled unsteadily towards me. He was of my own height, with dishevelled brown hair and dressed in shabby black clothing. Something had discoloured his left shoe, as though he'd been walking in the new city sewers perhaps.

He didn't notice me at all, but I was struck by him. There was a feverish look in his eyes, and he was alternately wringing his hands and wiping them with a large stained handkerchief. Muttering something continually under his breath, he lurched into an alley to my right and disappeared into the darkness.

I shook my head, feeling sorry for what I assumed was one of the many unfortunates in the city, driven mad by hunger and illness. I continued to the church, which was colourfully living up to its moniker as Church of the Prostitutes; they were soliciting as usual in the vicinity.

After asking for benediction from the saint inside the church, I met my friend at a public house near his lodgings, and thought no more of my encounter until the following day, when news of the murder of a prostitute named Catherine Eddowes -- in Mitre Close mere yards from where I'd seen the anguished man -- was trumpeted in all the rags.

I discussed my suspicions with William -- that I might have seen the perpetrator last evening, and whether I should bring this to the attention of the police. He pointed out to me that I had very little information to impart, and that hundreds of spurious 'tips' had already been frustrating Scotland Yard. And if indeed I had seen the murderer, surely the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee would soon find him themselves.

I worried over the matter for several more weeks, as I completed my graduating studies at Thornelaw House and the atmosphere in London became increasingly charged while the murderer remained uncaught, until one evening when I saw him again, days after the poor brutalized body of Mary Kelly had been discovered in Spitalfields.

I was enjoying a pleasant walk along the Embankment, and had stopped to light my pipe at the base of the famous obelisk from Egypt. The Thames was lapping along the walls as I gazed up at the towering granite block, inscribed with such strangely beautiful markings. I heard heavy, shuffling footsteps coming toward me, and prudently turned to see who was approaching.

It was the man who had tarnished all my waking hours since September. He was looking better this time, clean, groomed and in good if not expensive evening wear, but his face -- his face haunts me to this day! His eyes held a tortured gleam, an appalling mixture of desire and terror, and tears traced tracks down his cheeks. He made no move to wipe them.

He noticed me this time, and when he turned to look at me, I gasped involuntarily. His was the visage of a man who'd looked into the Abyss; who'd survived the experience, perhaps even revelled in it, but at great personal cost.

I didn't know what to do, but my hand in my left coat pocket grasped an iron bar I'd begun carrying with me after dark. Then he spoke, in a whining, raspy voice which set my teeth on edge. "Tell me, sir, do you believe in God's mercy?"

"I do," I said carefully. "Why do you ask?"

He blinked, and replied, "Do you believe he will forgive all sins?"

"I do not know – that is something we only find out when it is too late to correct them."

I do not know what impelled me to make that bold answer, and I tensed in case he became more agitated, but he nodded, and shook his head. "I believe there are sins that can never be corrected – even if we did not choose to make them."

Very gently, I asked him what he meant.

He gripped my right arm with painful strength, and leaned in close enough that I could smell a disturbing corruption rising from his skin. "There are certain questions that should never be asked of the universe. The answer is a trap from which there is no escape, no autonomy, no redemption. I have done things so terrible..." he trailed off, and licked his lips repulsively.

I had the wild thought that William would have found much material here to caricature, then forced my mind back to concern for my own safety. I unobtrusively brought my left hand out of my coat, still containing the makeshift weapon tucked partly down my sleeve, and said, "I am sorry for you, sir."

He laughed recklessly and said, "Do not be. It was a possession of my own seeking, and I must pay whatever price comes due. But I thank you for listening to me." With that, he bowed, and in the light from the lamps I could see the gleaming tip of a blade which had pierced the stitching of his left coat pocket and was protruding. I was flooded with horror, immobilized, as he lurched away along the river.

I went to the police and told them what I had experienced. They duly recorded everything during a lengthy interview, by the end of which I was exhausted and dispirited. The details I had provided about his appearance seemed to match any of hundreds of men in London, and without the benefit of daylight to show any more helpful details, such as eye colour or scars, I felt singularly useless.

The following day I went to Thornelow House and asked to be assigned abroad. And so in February I found myself making preparations to travel to Canada – and here I am, distanced from those awful memories but not free of them. Perhaps in time they will fade, in this new dominion which is so unlike the country I once loved."

That was the end of the page I held in now-quivering hands. Thunder continued to rumble as I sat there in shock, and my lantern flame danced fitfully.

Mother of God, Coventry had met Jack the Ripper, the most infamous serial killer in history, and his description of the man was nothing like I would have expected. The murderer had been possessed by some

force it seemed he had no control over, and looked conflicted, moving between terror and lust in the turn of seconds.

I turned the page, and found an annotation, dated four months later:

“I received a letter from Horace Engelhart, my mentor at the London guild office. Before I left the city, I had confided in him regarding my experience with the man now referred to as Jack the Ripper, and he thought I would want to know this additional information: within the Order there have been murmurings of an ancient evil who promises death and desire to its followers, and once they succumb to the temptation they lose control of their lives, saving brief flashes of lucidity and despair.

Horace has not been able to trace the source of the rumours, either within or without of our guild, but he bids me beware. The ‘Ripper’ has suddenly ceased his terrors, and if anyone knows why, they are not forthcoming with the information. The case remains without resolution, and many within the guild have fears of more activity in the future, not necessarily confined to the south of England. In Manningham just days after Christmas a poor boy named John Gill was found in similar mangled fashion, and there has been speculation of a link between cases, but no proof.

It seems my wish for my memories to fade is not to be.”

Coventry’s fear permeated his writing, and I couldn’t blame him. His story reminded me of an old episode from the original *Star Trek* television series, “A Wolf in the Fold”. It was one of my favourites, although its version of Jack the Ripper was an entity that transferred itself between hosts. Enjoyably creepy, it was fun to watch as fiction – not so much in a real-life iteration.

The thought of the ‘ancient evil’ out there poisoning people and driving them to acts of horror was terrifying. I shivered again, and pulled my lap blanket up to my chin. The sounds of the storm, pounding away outside while I sat in darkness broken only by the light from the fire and the lantern, weren’t helping.

Was this the evil that the Jackals served? Was it that dark enemy of my bloodline father, Thoth, and the beings who’d come to Earth with him? I wanted to ask him, and wondered for the first time if I might track *him* down through one of *my* dreams? I’d never tried lucid dreaming, but I knew it was possible. I would attempt it that night.

