

Can't You See It?

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The light rapping from downstairs came around one in the morning. Norris had always been a light sleeper, so it took only a set of knocks to rouse him. All his neighbors and friends knew it; this must not have been any of them.

Before he fully donned his nightgown another flurry of taps beat against his door. He paused. It hadn't been but a moment since the first knock; he was halfway down the stairs when more hard strikes illuminated the night quiet.

Who was at his door? He grew worried, then afraid. He was never one to yell down that he was on his way; Norris was a quiet man. As he approached the door and a fourth set of knocks, now harder and in quicker succession, he grabbed the poker from the nearby fireplace.

He opened the door, just a crack, and looked to this night visitor, with his poker ready to thrust should this visitor turn assailant. But that wasn't necessary, for this midnight caller was his old friend Gorran.

"Norris!" exclaimed Gorran.

"Gorran, old chap! Come in, come in!" He hurried his friend in and shut the door. As Gorran passed, Norris caught a whiff of exotic flowers.

He seated Gorran in the parlor and went to lighting the fireplace. As the fire before him sprang to life Norris looked back to Gorran, and noticed his queer choice of clothing.

Gorran was wearing a white Chinese *paofu*, on its surface were various snaking paths of purple. The white part of the *paofu* depicted ghosts swirling around the purple paths, who themselves depicted men in robes of purple, gold, and red, raising staffs and/or chanting. At the waist it was cinched with pure black silk ribbon.

"You sent no notice ahead, otherwise I would have arranged dinner," said Norris.

Behind him his friend croaked, "I apologize, I couldn't send word ahead or come during the day."

"Huh," Norris quietly wondered. "Now my friend, what brings you here?"

Gorran cleared his throat, "I don't mean to be rude, we uh-" He paused. "W- we should discuss it over some of your imported Nilgiri tea, or that Turkish coffee you keep."

"Very well." Norris stood up, "I'll prepare some tea" He said as he walked to the kitchen.

While the water in the kettle came to steam Norris wondered, as he scooped leaves into the infuser, how Gorran knew where he imported tea from.

Gorran had been Norris' childhood friend. Gorran's parents were Slavic immigrants, but he'd gotten along just as well with the other children if not for a few cultural oddities, though more than often those made him more interesting than the other

kids. They kept close to each other until twenty years ago, when Gorran vanished without as much as a word to his friends, parents, or fiancée.

Back in the parlor, Gorran was bowed over with his face in his hands. Norris took a step into the room and Gorran looked to him. Norris held his gaze for a moment, then considered that there was something behind him, he looked, but nothing. All he saw was the baby cherub wallpaper in his kitchen. There was a crazed look there. A look of unmistakable madness and fear surely greater than what he could know. Norris saw the palm of his right hand when he did this.

It was gnarled, textured and colored like jerky, pinched in the midst of this were three bulging shimmering pustules, one ran up and down the palm, the other was a splotch under the pinky, the third was right under that, it was a splotch with a thin spiral around it. They looked like they'd pop any moment, the large one was translucent and orange in the center.

Norris cleared his throat. Gorran jumped. Norris strode to the chairs and set his tray on the small table between them. Norris peered at Gorran as he poured water into the teacups. Gorran met him directly, staring with bloodshot eyes into his very soul it seemed.

“So what brings you back after so long?” asked Norris.

“Ah yes.” Gorran grabbed his teacup, blew on it, and took a long sip from it as he leaned back into the great parlor chair. He seemed so small in it. His flesh was thin and it clung closely to his bones. As long as Norris knew him he'd never had hair or at least he'd kept it nearly shorn; at this degree of emaciation it accentuated his ghoulish appearance.

Gorran cupped the cup with both hands, seemingly trying to draw its warmth out, and stared into the fire. “I came to discuss the-” He paused, “-the purpose for my disappearance.”

Norris unconsciously leaned in, nearly spilling his tea.

“Twenty years ago, this day, we'd run from old man Henry's garden.”

Norris interjected “Oh yes, the one with the old Roman statue tha-”

“That now has a snake den under the right foot that bit a carpenter a year ago, yes. We departed from one another and I recall being in a good mood but as I look back the memory is soured.”

Norris remembered that night vividly. It was only a month or so, maybe less, before they were to head to college. The night was filled with drinking. The two were part of a larger group; after they all split off to return home they were still full of energy. So they decided to do something that always made their hearts race, sneak into Old Man Henry's garden.

Old Man Henry lived at the foot of a hill in an old colonial house shaded by huge bloated maple trees. The garden itself used to be full of rose bushes and lavender and foxglove, but that was before the two were born. For decades then the garden was dead, now an intricate bramble with a necromantic canopy. In the center of the garden was a statue of a Roman general, his left arm was missing but his right was held forward; the arm had been covered in moss and dead vines.

Norris was more afraid of the garden than Gorran, who'd always thought it was visually appealing, even in death. The real thrill however wasn't the garden but the threat of getting caught. Eight times they'd snuck in, only four of those times they'd been discovered, no times caught.

Only a few moments after they entered the garden that screams erupted from the house. Norris had looked to the upstairs window and saw the waving light of fire with the silhouette of Old Man Henry with his arms raised pressed against the stained glass mosaic window.

Suddenly the silhouette had disappeared from the window and they fled.

"I got home, electing to go straight to bed." Gorran continued, now breathing heavily, "but as I laid down on my bed I looked to the wall and between two trumpeting cherubs, their backs turned, I saw *it*." His voice dripped with a concoction of fear and dreadful venom, "An eye, The Eye! A human, or so it looked, eye on my wall. I lied frozen on my bed by a primordial fear as it stared at me; it blinked and was gone! In its place was an image of Christ where the wallpaper met itself, His left side was on His right and vice versa. Just like that I too was gone."

"I ran blindly until I made it to the docks on the northern side of town. I stowed away in a merchant vessel that left the next day. I had to leave. I had to be as far removed from this town as possible."

"I dared not sleep. I snuck about at night, pinching food and water, but about a week into the voyage Hypnos stole me and I was discovered. They made me pay my way as a cabin boy then at the first dock we reached they tossed me out."

"The next three years I spent as a beggar. By day and night I hid in alleys, I dared not be seen, I dared not think even; for the moment I tried to think of The Eye I would feel madness enveloping me, but it was all I could do. When I thought of hiding it was because I thought of The Eye, when I thought of running from sleep it was because I thought I couldn't run from The Eye. Oh Norris, why did it have to look upon me this terrible night?"

"But this wretched state would not last as in December of the third year of my life as a tramp I was found by Joan, her angelic face among the freezing snow was like the warm beam of a lighthouse among the vast black and terrible seas."

“Oh, Joan!” exclaimed Norris. “She was distraught at your disappearance. No one could console her. We had to drag her from running into the woods to look for you at one point. How is she now?” he asked.

Gorran ignored him, “She was a gift from God Himself. She brought me to her apartment and fed and clothed me. That whole time I’d been living in Newcastle, I only found out that night.”

“I told her all that had happened to me, and she believed me! She said it was horrible but I had her now and that we could even get engaged again.” Gorran stared into the fireplace again. “She let me stay in her apartment, I felt bad mooching off of her so I started work as a street sweeper, though I also offered shoe polishing services in case I accidentally swept dirt onto their shoes.”

“It wasn't long though before I took a better job as a tailor's hand.”

“Well look at you Gorran,” interrupted Norris. “Not many make it out of the surface drain and especially as a tailor's hand.”

“Yes, it was good for a time, as good as before. But all the while I felt an itch. When I was alone I felt as if I was being watched, but no one was there. During work I had to be at attention but I felt a terrible gaze on me. I felt like a predator was lurking just beyond the canopy of my vision, like a mouse under the gaze of an owl at night.”

“One night, as Joan slept snugly in the crook of my arm, I lied awake, still but mentally tossing and turning. Eventually I couldn't take it anymore; I got up and went on a night walk.”

“I walked to and fro, volitating down alley and street, until I landed in a night market. The fancies, if just for a moment, took my mind off The Eye. One shop in particular caught me; a small stand of Far Eastern delights. What first caught my eye was a Japanese lucky cat, then it trailed to an ivory elephant statue from southern India, then a bronze jar from Nepal, then a tea set from the south eastern region of China, but what stopped this look over was an old tome tucked away behind the old Chinese shopkeeper.”

“It was different, it was the only Oriental thing in the shop. I asked him to see it but he shook his head and snatched it from the shelf, covering it with a red silk *fulu*. ‘No no, not for sale.’ I begged him to sell it to me. I offered him all my savings for it. The book had latched onto me. Something in me itched and could only be scratched by having that book.”

“Eventually he relented and sold me the grimoire. It was made of papyrus, though its aroma rather than a dry earthy smell, smelt strongly of stale blood. I asked the old man about it, he told me, ‘Transcribed by ill fated pen of apprentice Haitham al Hazen, now go!’ Once I got home I stitched it into the back of a seat to hide it from Joan.”

“I had no way of reading it, it wasn't in any language I could make sense of. The letters were Latin but I hadn't much else to go off of. So when Joan went on a trip to Bedford college I seized the chance and took the book to the college near Newcastle. There I found a professor of anthropology.”

“I hailed him down in the college yard, asking him if he could read this old tome to me. ‘Why of course, let me read a passage then narrate it for you. Beyond that you'll have to pay me.’ he said with a smile. I handed him the book and he opened it a short ways through. His head tilted and his brow furrowed. ‘I'm sorry but I can't understand this. It's in no language I know, it doesn't show similarities to anything I've studied.’”

“But I wasn't convinced, he had to know what it meant. I asked him if he were sure and to look at it again. He humored me and opened it, studying the text for several more minutes. Then he seemed to get nervous, he handed me the book a bit too rough and his eyes jumped around. ‘I can't make sense of any of it. Sorry, I have to get to class.’ The professor then hurried off, periodically he looked back to see if I was still there. I remained standing in the same spot looking at him until he turned around a building.”

“That night I again couldn't sleep. I pored over the book hopelessly, trying to glimmer a hint of its truth from the sketchings of horrid things or its schizophrenic maps directing to nowhere.”

“I then felt it. My back tried to climb up my neck as I threw my head around searching for that thing, but it was not there. When I looked back to the book however, that's when the horrid knowledge came to me. It was in cypher, not a foreign language. I stayed up until three in the morning deciphering the first few pages.”

“How'd you figure that out?” asked Norris.

“I took a book on ciphers from Dartmouth College. Joan loved secret letters even though we live in the same town. The cipher was a very sophisticated version of the Caesar Cipher, each letter was shifted with a corresponding letter down the alphabet, but instead of a uniform shift each letter was shifted an amount unique to it.”

“The book was an introductory, written by one Qays al Saahir, on the facets of wizardry, but furthermore, it was obsessed with an entity known as Muraqib Allah, obsessed with The Eye! It tracked down the location of every sighting, down to the very buildings. But something strange happened every morning. As the sun rose the book became incomprehensible once again, letters would change as I flipped the page! So I was resigned to reading and decoding it at night.”

“On her return I told Joan what I had learned, I shewed her the book, and told her that I was going to hunt down The Eye which had taken my life. I told her she didn't have to go and, I may be purposefully misremembering, hoped she wouldn't. She told me she'd come and that I needed to find that eye. Why did she? Why could she not be

reasonable and cast me aside?" The reflection of the fireplace flame danced in his shining eyes, like the reflection of stars dancing across the shallow and calm seas.

"We left barely a week later. Joan assured me it would be like a holiday for her; she made me promise that we'd get married when we came back." Gorran smiled though his eyes were doleful. "We first went to a small village in the south of France. The sighting there was at a house outside of town that the Arab described as 'artisanal, the carpentry the work of someone a third my equal' but I assure you when we got to it it was anything but."

"Of course to a treasure hunter, a lover of old things, it would carry an eminence and maybe if I went back, not now but a short time ago, I too would hold it in the same light. But at the time it seemed outdated and ill-kept. The foot-made path to the house was thin and shaded by long grasses. Vines grew up its walls rooted in dirt accumulated on the window sill, and moth worms and beetles crawled about in damp piles of pollen around the foot of the door."

"Inside was different though. When we knocked, a rather tall and slender man answered the door. His face was that of a ghost, his eye sockets and cheeks sank deep into his face. I must have been visibly surprised because he smiled at me and said 'Don't worry, I've just turned to jerky from the salt spray of the sea.'"

"He was a gracious host and his house interior was well kept. He wasn't French either, he came from an island just off of Scotland. Our warm reception turned just a bit colder once we mentioned the nature of our visit. 'So ye wish to know about The *Eye*.' He spoke with a titanic ire when he said 'eye'"

"I told him yes and he explained thusly—"

'T'was an October night. The moon's eyelid had just begun to close and I went out with Cyneburga to watch the night sky. We parted ways at the town tree. I can still feel her hand in mine. But we departed and on my way home is when I saw it, that damnable eye. Like a horrible ghost it sat on the way in the shadow of Aelfric's house, just-a-watchin me.'

'I was froze. I looked up to the moon but the clouds had blocked her from lookin upon me. When I looked back it was gone. I ran home and cowered in my blankets till the sun rose. I was fourteen at the time.'

'I felt safe under the watch of the sun. At the sun's rise I took to a cove where I had a small boat, small enough to be manned by one. My father had made it for me. I took my boat and the boat supplies wrapped in an oiled canvas from a nearby hollow tree and set sail. I was determined to get as far away from that thing as I could.'

‘I sailed for a week. I ate off the ocean and slept on it. T’was the eighth day I found an island. T’was a stormy day and the waves were mountains. I was no climber so I took to that island and dragged my ship ashore just within the tree line. The ship tent kept me cozy and once the storm stopped I was free to sail ‘round the island and find a cove to keep my ship.’

‘I grew to a man on that island. I ne’er forgot about The Eye. It was when my youth fire burned great and I killed the island bear did I set out to find the damnable thing.’

‘I took my ship and sailed. I sailed all o’er. I explored nearby islands. I explored far off ones. I came into small towns in Wales and large cities in France. It was then, in Paris, that I got a lead.’

I interjected and asked what it was but he raised his hand for me to shush.

‘T’was from an Arabic man. He worked as a keeper of history. This field was his “pet project” as he put it. I obtained a map of all the locations he knew The Eye had been seen at and set sail once again.’

‘Years of fruitless sailing. I sailed from Pacific to Atlantic, South America to Europe to Arabia to the straits of Sunda. Nothing but old abandoned buildings and places that existed no more.’

‘Three times I tried returning home, three times the sea laughed and threw me about. Once I wrecked on an island in northern Canada and had to rebuild my ship. The sea did not let me return home, return to the glens where I slept soundly, return to the glades set aside just to play and roll about with Cyneburga. I raged at The Eye. I felt it watching me, mockingly. I could feel it from afar and hated it for it.’

‘I finally came here, to my last destination and found again nothing. I could not return home. My compass was fouled and I no longer feel my homeland call to me, just an empty spot in my chest. My travels had done nothing but strip me of the land I loved. So I set down here, in this house no one wanted and haven't moved for thirty years.’

“That was the end of his story. I asked him if he was sure he obtained no information. All I got from him were the places he’d been and a warning, one I wish a curse upon myself now for not heeding.”

“‘Don’t look for The Eye. T’will be the end of ye,’ he said.”

“We left his house dejected. We decided to set up in a tent a bit outside of town on a road for the night. But I could not rest, The Eyes watch upon me chafed my own eyelids; they refused to stay shut.”

"I slipped out of Joan's embrace and took to the streets. You may know how noisy small towns are at night, the drunken mobs of flying bugs that dance in the starlight and the street singer crickets howling their carols. Under this air of busyness my pursuer hid."

"I hadn't a clue when he started following me; I first caught him as I stopped to look up at a bakery sign. He was a ways away and when I looked to him he ducked into an alley. I continued and caught him several more times following me, each time closer than the last."

"I could not make out many details. The entire time he was sort of hunched, I say sort of because his back didn't rise in a hump but his chest was still tucked in, angled towards his legs. It was like a beast who'd learned to imitate man too well."

"At some point when he was not a building behind, I looked back. He ducked into an alley; I quickly imitated him at the next alley. I crouched and waited to ambush him, but he never came around, I was froze there all night like a gargoyle. When Joan found me she said I was mumbling about something behind me glaring into my back; I have no recollection of this."

"Joan and I decided the next place we'd go would be to China."

Norris' eyebrows shot up, "China? That's a far way from France, were there no sightings between those points?"

"As I said the night before the old man had told us all the places he'd been, I took the liberty of marking them off the map, at least for now. It would be more fruitful to investigate the places he hadn't been. Then if those too were barren to check the searched places again just in case."

"So we hopped onto a merchant ship that took us as far as Tinnevelly India. From there we hopped aboard another merchant ship to China. The first ship was a drab Portuguese ship. Their most notable oddity was that they were Catholic. The second ship however, that one was queer!"

"It was a spice freighter and, of course, primarily crewed by locals to the region. It stank of exotic spices. Only the captain spoke English; it was broken at best. The captain also had a monkey that Joan really loved, a little fellow with black fur except around his face that chattered a lot."

"The ship dropped us off in King-Shan, there we bought a *kakam* and sailed on our own the rest of the way."

"It was on the secluded island Chik Shui in the bay of Tin Pak, far away from any town. The shore was a narrow strip of beach sand about six paces wide before it abruptly became a jungle."

"When we arrived it was late. I insisted we not light a fire and eat first thing in the morning but Joan was hungry and insisted we go fish. I strongly opposed this, ever since

I saw that island, even as a speck on the horizon, the feeling that something was watching us grew. One side of the beach was utterly exposed. Titanic things could look upon us from miles away. On the other a heavy forest where lurking things could watch from only a few feet away.”

“While out fishing I looked back to the shore and saw a man in a purple cloak standing next to our prepared campfire. I felt our eyes lock! I tried to tell Joan, I tried pointing him out to her but she saw no one. He stood as proud as a pillar, yet she couldn’t find him, as if the air between the two were a maze.”

“I begged her to let us cast our anchor and sleep out on the water. She just looked at me as if I were crazy. My worries were lost on her. She said she was hungry and wanted to eat what we had caught and that we were going back to shore ‘end of story.’ And that was the end of it.”

“Joan had been whisked away to the realm of Morpheus and his siblings while I lay there struggling to hold my eyelids up, as if I were Atlas holding his grandfather. But I am a man, no titan, and soon grew weary. As my vision shuttered I saw figures standing just out of the light. Ten —no, twenty— had surrounded us. I tried to roll over, to get up, but it was no use. The last thing I saw was the man in the purple cloak towering over me.”

Gorran looked from the fire to Norris. His wild gaze shewed he recognized Norris in this very moment, not as a friend, but as a spited foe.

Norris noticed he was leaning forward; he cleared his throat then sat back. “What happened then?” asked Norris.

Gorran sipped his tea. “I woke with a scream. Joan was already awake and came to me. After I calmed down we discussed our plan going forward. We decided to capture more fish, then trek into the woods in search of wherever The Eye had been seen.”

Norris raised his eyebrows, “Boiling it in the seawater would preserve the meat wouldn't it?”

Gorran shook his head, “No, Joan smoked them, you know my Joan, always so smart. Seawater can’t dry out fish, have you never had to survive on an island Norris?” Asked Gorran.

Norris shook his head, “No, I didn’t go on a wondrous adventure in my youth, I was in school.”

“Bah, school!” exclaimed Gorran, waving his hand.

“Anyway,” continued Gorran, “We delved deeper into the forest. That day was uneventful, at first. While we hiked Joan teased me and we chased each other around, at one point I faked eating a bug to gross Joan out.” Gorran was smiling.

“Like two kids,” said Norris.

“Yes. It was sunset when we decided to settle down for the night. For a while we'd been smelling rain on the way, so we took our sail cloth and prepared to make a tent using the long low branches of a large tree. It was then that disaster struck.”

“A strong wind picked up suddenly and out of the trees burst a man in a yellow robe flapping with the now violent wind, his face hid under a hood. He seized Joan, I tried to stop him but he smacked me aside, and on the wind that brought him he flew into the forest again.”

“I chased after him. The storm picked up and shook the entire forest. I suffered beatings from branches that swung wildly and down to my bone I was soaked by the torrential downpour. All night I wandered those woods, calling out to Joan, cursing that stranger.”

“It was considerably into the night when I stumbled upon a stone tower. I saw only its horrendous frame loom in the abyss above me, like a dark monster bearing down on prey it lured into its lair”

“The archaic door was shut, fastened with iron hinges. Nearby I found a large rock and smashed it open. But don't think me some wet animal looking to get out of the rain. I knew Joan was in there. I knew this tower had swallowed her.”

“Once inside the cackling and howling of the wind stopped. In place of the cruel jabs of the wind, a more sinister, as encompassing noise took over. A Hellish chanting enveloped me, emanating from every brick. A wicked staircase wrapped around the wall and climbed up to the ceiling. On the walls, sordid shadows danced and twirled.”

“I climbed the stairs. The chanting became louder. I felt the power of the words. The words commanded the shadows bounding and leaping around me; they commanded the bricks to chant with them like a choir; they commanded the wind that then filled my chest. A wind that lifted me from the weariness I'd felt ever since that day I had run. The dark chanting lit a fire within me. Now I climbed to something greater.”

“At the top of the stairs was a great hall. Set aside for fiendish church goers to attend vile sermons. To each side of the altar was a burning brazier. They held great flames that twirled and spun with all the colors one could imagine. On the altar, layed across the communion table, was Joan, chained down and looking frightfully up at the man. His cloak was primarily yellow, in the fabric were images of tigers, two lovers under a tree, one sinking into the ground, and a chinese word, but his hood was purple and the cuffs were a light pink. His hands were raised high to the heavens with a dagger in one hand. Just above him a skylight was thrown open. The chanting came from him.”

“He looked down to me with wrath in his eyes. Mist twirled up his arm and around his fingers, mist full of faces. He lowered his arms to cast the ghosts at me, then stopped as surprise washed over his face. He threw his arms out and the ghosts were gone.”

“‘You have seen it too!’ He yelled out.”

“‘The Eye.’ I responded.”

“He spared Joan. After a long talk about The Eye and his quest to find it I became his assistant. Joan and I became permanent residents at his tower. He set aside the cellar for us, but we didn't live among the supplies.”

“My first task was to move the supplies to their appropriate cellars. He said the boxes would be labeled according to where they belonged to. The tea, coffee, herbs, and spices all belonged to the floor below. Beneath that were stored fruits, dried and undried, the leafy greens, and vegetables. Further down went the meats, the grains, and the starches. Still deeper were the wines, the oils, and the incense. But there were odd things that belonged in even deeper depths.”

“Dried parts of men and animals belonged to the sixth layer; the fifth layer was always to be left empty. There was a special set of armor and weapons paired with a harp that had silver strings that belonged to the seventh. The strangest and deepest stored item was a simple golden chalice inlaid with a winding obsidian cord.”

“My master prepared me to take this to the ninth, a layer only accessible by a cave tunnel hidden in the fifth layer, by making me practice copying a ward onto a scapular. He told me that the ward must be copied perfectly, then neglected to tell me why I had to wear it, I now can see after he turned from me he smirked.”

“I took the chalice to the level instructed, passing the eighth layer that was spattered with symbols and ward and sigils. The ninth layer was doused in a pitch darkness. Beyond my feet I could not see, except for a font at the center of the room. I had been instructed to walk in a straight line towards it then walk backwards toward the tunnel once the chalice had been placed in the water.”

“I did as instructed. When I placed the chalice in the water however, something appeared in the dark. Two dancing embers, always an inch or two apart, stared at me. I took a step back and the shadows shifted. For a moment I saw a wall behind the darkness. A simple cellar wall, degraded partially by time.”

“The shadows did not shift again but the embers followed. They never passed in front of the font and when I made it back to the tunnel I saw them staring at me around the mouth as I went. My master hadn't required it but I made my way through the entire tunnel backwards.”

“I started out as just a minion, I was to replace him on the supply runs to a village a few miles north. But I also assisted him in his rituals”

“Don't tell me you've become a pagan Gorran,” said Norris.

“I can assure you this is all in the past, my days of witchcraft are long behind me.”

“They had better be,” Norris set his empty teacup down and crossed his arms. “I won't have any accuse me of entertaining warlocks in the middle of the night.”

“As I was saying. I acted just as his assistant, doing menial chores and assisting in rituals. He also had me forage for herbs, spices, any ingredient he needed, really. This led to the adventure that promoted me from mere servant to apprentice.”

“My master, a hard faced Chinese man, though at the time I knew not specifically where he hailed from, ordered me to row to the island of Ngau-mu-shek alone on a rainy night. He needed pollen from a flower that grew only there for one of his rituals. He told me he had to watch over a concoction and the flower only produced pollen in weather like this. He told me that he cast a flame out to it, as a lighthouse. The flame would hover above the island until I reached it.”

“So I took a rowboat to the island. The seas were black that night. They tossed my boat. The wind raged, slighted by someone; possibly my master. I knew not whether I was making any progress until I looked back and saw a flame dancing in the sky. I followed it but it confused my course and sent me back to the shore. I rowed out from the shore twice more and was led back. The third time I ignored the dancing flame as I rowed out, soon it faded and on the horizon was a purple flame dancing above and dark island. I landed my boat on the beach and dragged it ashore.”

“The flower had a simple stem, the leaves were midnight blue spearheads fanning out from the stem arranged in an opposite pattern. At the top, the petals, on the outside white and the inside indigo speckled with sapphire flecks, twirled into a bulb protecting the pistil and ovary. The pollen was damp and black, it looked like miniature caviar.”

“I wandered the island, which was forested, though lighter than Chik Shui. I could see almost nothing, hear nothing but wind. I thought to give up, that was when I felt a thing nearby. An overwhelming fear gripped my chest. I hid under a large fallen branch that I'd stubbed my toe on and waited.”

“I saw it lumber towards me from afar. It was obscured by the rain but I could feel its size in the quaking of the earth under every footfall. Its head was that of an ox with a crown of horns denoting his princely status among those beasts of the earth. Its great lion paws dug into the earth leaving pillars of steam rising where they fell. The beast's tail was not one but twenty, rising high like cedars; the tails made a terrible sunburst behind the prince. Each tail was covered in wiry hairs and at their ends hooks of bone.”

“The creature sniffed around, its breath burning all it touched. My eyes dried in an instant and the ground was left warm. The beast raised its head, and not a roar, but an orchestra of the damned erupted forth. The screams of those in Hell filled the night and halted the rain. The beast then closed its mouth and with the return of the rain it moved on. I stayed in my spot for another minute or two before I crawled out and ran the way it

had come from. Luckily for me, there I found the flower. I took my chances with a mad ocean rather than spend another moment on that island. Later from my master I learned I'd encountered a child of Behemoth."

"What was the pollen for? Even in tales of slavic witches I've never heard of them using pollen," inquired Norris.

"Ah well, my master was no third rate witch. It was used for a soul binding ritual."

"Not a week after the encounter with that island monster my master took me on as an apprentice proper. My learning of the black arts had begun. The first ritual I was involved in had us lay chains in the corners of the room. In the center of the room in a censer the dried pollen was burned. We used that place where Joan would have been sacrificed for all rituals."

"The ritual took place, not at midnight, but in the light of day. The skylight sat open as we waited. Finally, a ghost appeared in the smoke over the censer. The ghost was adorned in ritual armor, tiny golden plates were interlinked and draped over his iron chest plate and on his helmet between two silver horns that formed a sunburst was a great golden disc."

"My master leaped up and shouted the ritual words. He spoke with such force that the words felt like a punch to my chest when I heard them. The ghost cried in anger and tried to flee but the smoke had stopped rising out of the room. It now coalesced in a cloud."

"'Speak!' My master shouted, 'I command you speak and tell me of Kyerulyenii Ötnii Agui!'"

"Now crying in pain the ghost looked down on my master. Pure hatred burned in his eyes. 'I will tell you nothing, witch!' he bellowed with a proud chest."

"My master turned toward the door, beckoning for me to follow. 'Tell me nothing!' he said. 'You shall remain in that spot forever!' That day the tower filled with the wails of the dead."

"Joan became terrified and had to be comforted. I was glad to comfort her; I too was chilled to the bone by the souls' screams. Joan's embrace warmed me."

"My master, of course, was indomitable in his resolve. When I petitioned him to make a deal with the ghost to stop the shrieks he looked down upon me coldly. 'My life I have spent chasing The Eye. I will not let a noise stop me for a moment.' I can see his scowl in that moment even now. He was unyielding."

"That night my master took me up to speak with the ghost again. We found him in a miserable state. The pride had drained out of him and his helmet sagged to one side."

"'Speak now, shade!' Commanded my master."

“The ghost's head shot up at my master's voice. He fell forward, tumbling through the smoke down toward my master and I. He was, however, just smoke, and the magic returned him to the space he was confined. ‘It is south-east of Kerulen! In the hill of Blood Forged Sword!’”

“‘The blood of that old troublesome khan!’ My master shot his hand out.”

“‘Erlík Khan, do not judge my actions here!’ cried the ghost.”

“‘The blood! Or you’ll never return to await a new life!’”

“Then the ghost reached out his hand over my master's and a drop of blood rolled down his finger. My master caught the blood on his own finger and dropped it into a small vial.”

“‘Now depart!’ bellowed my master. The smoke blew away and he ordered me to get him some tea, as his throat was raw from yelling.”

Norris’ brow furrowed. “Who is your master exactly?” he asked. “How can someone with such a knowledge of the occult just be lurking in the woods of an island in southern China?”

“Do great wolves not lurk far from man in the depths of Arctic forests? Does not Leviathan reside below where light cannot reach?” answered Gorran.

The warlock Norris once knew as a friend went silent for a time. He seemed to be thinking. Norris, too afraid to disrupt his thoughts lest he never learn them, simply watched.”

Then he started again. “For the remaining years under my master’s tutelage I learned a great deal from him. The mystic arts were like a malleable clay betwixt my fingers then. My master and I swept through hidden ruins and forgotten cities the world over! Archeologists of our age couldn't lay claim to our Tuesday afternoons. And after my exploits as we sailed the pacific sea fleeing from a child of the aforementioned Leviathan, my master judged me ready to accompany him to The Hill of The Blood Forged Sword in the Mongolian steppe.”

“On all our expeditions Joan remained at the tower, on all of them my return was expected and when it eventually happened she demanded affection. However, as we prepared to depart, my master told me to warn her that I may not return, and to set a waiting period aside before she assumed my death and returned to England. Then my master gave me a crystal flask and a cloth sigil to give to her as well. It contained a crew of spirits to operate a ship and an enthralled demon to watch over her.”

Now Gorran spoke very solemnly, “I did as he said, and I can still remember the look on her face as I warned her. I can remember the muscles in her cheek slacken, the ones in her forehead tighten, I can remember her pupils contract. I remember seeing desperation in the bags of her eyes. Of all my woes until that point, the look on her face

pierced me most deeply. My heart cried out to disobey my master and run back to England with Joan, to arrange our marriage just as she always wanted; some dark thing growing on my soul whispered to me ‘you cannot stop now, The Eye is so close, you know it!’” Gorran raised his hand behind his head, curling his fingers like a claw as he said “dark thing”.

“Once we had done all we could to prepare Joan for the worst, I hugged her and left for the steppe with my master.”

“The journey was uneventful, but as we drew near to our destination my master did a strange thing. The grasses bowed at the command of the wind to worship the sun. Amidst this ceremony my master turned to me and looked me in my eyes. His eyes were sad, this I know now, not at the time. He said to me, ‘I have one more lesson for you. The Eye. It is what links you and I. We are one now. Without that thing we would not have met, we would not share an art, and we would not be here marching to it. Without The Eye we would not be here.’”

“In that time those words affected me, they roused me. They were noble words in that time, and I know not whether the words or my old ears have changed over time, but now they are sad words, words that are tired.” Gorran paused, then his voice quavered, “He always knew how to command words well.”

“It was only a short time before we arrived. The destination was an abandoned crypt in a hill, similar to the burial mounds of the ancient Britons. It had been left untouched for millennia. However, as we entered it became evident that the last touch it felt was a strike from an outraged sword.”

“The halls of this crypt were littered with swords and clubs and daggers older than all of western civilization, so too were these halls littered with skeletons, many of which had been on the receiving end of those weapons. Others obliterated with magic as evident by the occasional blackened skeleton, or skeleton that still had magenta skin clinging to it, preserving the agonized final expression of the person.”

“My master swept his right hand over the corpses. He said, ‘This is our legacy, and our inheritance.’ The remains were those of the founders of the order we belonged to, ancient practitioners of the black arts, and those, who on a fateful night long ago, had come to kill them. Warriors of the steppe were our enemy.”

“The order to which we traced our roots opposed Tengri and all the gods. They opposed living in harmony with the world; they believed that it was the right of man not only to rule over the world, but the heavens and all of creation itself. They saw the ancestors as tools, not as figures to worship. It was these assertions that led them to defy Tengri, but also led his followers to wipe them out. This burial place was a record of the final battle.”

“There were no coffins in this burial mound, only jars containing the vital essences of dead men, stored so that they may be summoned for knowledge. The walls were covered in scribblings in a language I could scarcely trace to any known today. My master said they were notes, recordings of rituals, words of dead men, whatever knowledge that the warlocks saw fit to record.”

“We entered a great ritual room in the center of the crypt. By all means it was simply a more sophisticated version of the ritual room in my master's tower. The exception being the communion table was in the center of the room in a stepped recess. The walls held hundreds of niches, each holding small amounts of salts, herbs, pollens, powders, phosphorus’, essences’, and ritual tools. Protuberances decorated their pentagonal openings, on which were chiseled the name of the substance or tool it held and its use.”

“As soon as we entered my master yelled, ‘Hurry! We came to do one thing. Let us do it and be done!’ I did as we had practiced with all diligence and soon the ritual was ready.”

“I stood aside. My master began the ritual. I studied very carefully as, though we had practiced the setup, my master had never practiced the ritual itself. He always said that spells were only to be said when they were to be said, not before. So I watched and remembered every step. And as he neared the end, and as the earth shook and I heard far off the faint breeze of pandemonium, disaster struck.”

“From the walls a legion of ghosts rushed forth, down the halls over the shattered ancient traps the corpses of dead wizard and warrior alike ran to us. I got by my master who had halted the ritual. The dead screamed as they came forward ‘We shall not be seen! We shall not be watched!’ My master and I hurled lightning at them. The electricity leapt from my master's fingertips, jumping from spirit to spirit, banishing them in screams of torment.”

“But they were too many. My master commanded me, ‘Go you fool! You shall not die, go!’ He opened a path to the door with lightning, paving it with the essence and dust of ghost and corpse. I ran, with seven bars tied together, that I’d stolen on our expeditions from the crypts of dead kings, I beat and bashed my way through the dead. The last I saw of my master, the dead had him. They overwhelmed him. But he did not look like a man who was at his end, but rather a man whose chest was still filled with wind.”

“After this I fled on foot through the steppe. Behind me I could feel the spirits chasing, they were not satisfied just that the ritual had been stopped, they had to make sure that the long line of wizards that knew of it were finally put to rest.”

“I could not afford sleep. Sleep would allow them to catch up to me. So for three days I ran. On the fourth day my relief had come, an onager. I chanted the words and

plunged my fingers into its neck. The spell made its flesh like clay. With the blood that could not stop flowing I drew a sign of warding on my palm, then signs of binding amidst the grass, of course, without chains they were more signs of slowing. It was midday. ”

“At dusk the spirits caught up to me. I heard their wails the moment they touched the horizon, there was no concept of caution in their mind. Every moment they drew closer and the sun drew further into the underworld. They glowed as white hot chariots of light racing toward me. The signs of binding caught them like a bramble. It took not a moment for me to raise my hand, the sign of warding on my palm tore at their very being, unstringing the tendons of their souls. Lightning leapt from my fingers, eager to avenge the one who taught me how to give it life. All this within an instant. Their essence scattered in the wind across the mongolian steppe, then I collapsed from exhaustion. All my muscles shivered terribly, my very flesh felt drained of life, as if it knew my soul was standing at the edge of the abyss, teetering.”

“For an entire day I slept next to the corpse of the ass I’d slain. When I awoke I drank its blood, then dragged myself south across all of China to the tower, to Joan. All the way I was filled with dread, The Eye’s woeful gaze bore down between my shoulders. I was a wounded deer, watched very closely by a wolf from just beyond the brush.”

“I knew not what day it was when my head knocked against the tower door, only that the dusk sky had been beautiful. Joan found me and lugged me inside, her worried babbling gave way to coos of relief. It is a sorry ordeal that I do not remember her words from that day.”

“At the tower I regained my strength. I told Joan of what had happened. On the twentieth day after my return I climbed the tower to pour over my master’s notes, for our work would resume.”

The story fascinated Norris. Now over his initial puritanical shock, the ups and downs of this tale exhilarated him, to know that while he stayed in New England and worked as an academic his old friend had been living a pulp novel! But something of dread gnawed at him. What would be so horrible to cause the dead to claw their way through the firmament back to earth?

“Among my master's notes I found a great deal. Invaluable knowledge on the beasts of this world, how to concoct the essence of the dead, but most importantly a magic kept from me by my master. Among the papyrus scrolls I learned that the old man practiced divination.”

“Divination?” asked Norris.

“Yes, the reading of the heavens, the heavens do not exist in time, therefore if you learn to read them you can see what they see of the future and past. My master had divined his own death the night before we left for the steppe tomb.”

“If I knew I would die in a place I would avoid it at all costs frankly.” said Norris.

“My master and I, and all the masters before us, believed we could shape the heavens, control them; at least, that is what we strove for. I cannot say whether he thought he could defy the heavens that night as he had done always or whether he had accepted his death.”

“I took the time to learn divination from the disparate notes and manuals in my masters library, and oh what good it did. Joan wanted us to return home; I told her she could but I still had work to do here, but she would not leave me. I was happy for it, then. With Joan nearby I felt safe.”

“It was once I could gaze upon the heavens and see what they saw that I took the first steps to fulfill a plan that had been brewing for many years. You see, the seven bars I had in my possession were not to be used as simple clubs on animals and ghosts. They were meant to be used on The Eye. My master never made clear what his plans with The Eye were, but mine were clear from the beginning. Per the ancient law, ‘an eye for an eye’, that thing took my life so I would take its.”

“In my master's notes I learned that the bars would not be enough on their own, they must be forged into a javelin and tempered with the blood of a monster. If you have read Beowulf you will know that the children of Cain are monsters, and many roam the earth even now, but I could not settle for their blood. I needed a stock greater than theirs, I needed a child of Behemoth, or Leviathan. Not just any of their blood would suffice either, I needed blood from their living heart. Luckily I had a child of the great land beast nearby.”

“After she had fallen asleep, I rose and went to the place where I had left my rowboat. In a cove hidden by the jungle. Next to my boat, which waited calmly on a slack rope in the water, I burnt the essence of a soul in an iron brazier. Once I smelt the soul's intellect burning I thrust the seven rods into the flame. I twisted them together and beat one end into a point. In my boat I kept a stone bowl that held the fire and javelin. it had to stay hot.”

“The night was silent and clear. Above, the beauty of the sky moved its route, unbothered by the evils of this world. That was the last night sky I saw, for my plans were come to pass quickly now, the appreciation that hid in my soul that night, dwarfed by my strained eyes that looked to a fire on the horizon, swore there were twice as many stars as usual.”

“I rowed out over that calm sea to an island, not busy, but lackadaisically chirping and buzzing. Into this nighttime village I stole with my red hot javelin held by tongs, and kept warm with magic. I found the son of Behemoth laying down, asleep. He reminded me of a soft cow that I'd pet as a child. I took the lance in my right hand and aimed it

toward his heart. The flesh in my palm squealed and popped and twisted as it touched the javelin, still I held tight. He awoke, but not to look at me, rather he looked up to the sky, one last time. I saw the sky reflected in his large black eyes. I wonder if he counted twice as many stars.”

Gorran paused.

“I purchased a ship, a junk, and two years rations, with money from selling a small jewelled necklace I believe? It was from a Babylonian tomb so it went for a decent price. I needed no crew for just as my master had done to keep up the tower, I enslaved spirits to crew my ship. With our junk Joan and I sailed for the Atlantic, where once and for all the ritual would be done and perhaps we could return to England.”

“My master was prideful, I believed that was his folly. He did magic under the open sun and moon, tested the gods in their line of sight, spoke of his mastery over the world, and provoked spirits in their own tombs. I would not make his mistake. Or so I thought. Our destination was an island in the atlantic, over the atlantis fracture zone.”

“This island was special, it only rose from the sea once every fifty years and only until dawn; despite this, the island was fully furnished with flora, and a subterranean structure that predated history. Of the flora I cannot attest to their origins. There were trees whose apples when picked burst into ash and smoke and trees with leaves of amber that oozed poisons that upon contact would alter the flesh of men into the flesh of snakes. Some trees had no magical properties but were odd, like one with an entirely smooth dark green bark and orange leaves that were not solid sheets but pear shaped webs. The shrubs were no less normal, there were shrubs that appeared normal until their yellow flowers bloomed, wherein the pistils were the faces of babies, or the shrub that would flap its branches and fly to spots with more favorable soil. Then among all of these plants were some potatoes, tomatoes, and watermelons.”

“Why do so many of these stories take place on islands? They’re all so terribly isolated,” interrupted Norris.

“That is the point! They are removed from the world. The expanse of human mundanity does not leak into these places. If they were not isolated then people would see the monsters there, and you know what happens to monsters seen.”

“I could not tell whether it was night when we arrived. The clouds above drew over that place so thick the sun could not have shone even if it were midday. We docked in a little cove on the north face of the island then made our way to the structure.”

“There was no grand entrance. On the surface was a stone doorway to stairs that led downward. I remember that night Joan was so frightened she clung to me. I told her it would-” Gorran’s voice cracked. “I told her it would be alright.”

“Down that stairway spiraled. As we drew deeper into the earth it grew hotter, and in the earth around us were queer sounds. Even with my arcane knowledge I could not tell you what they were. Of those unspeakable sounds the only I can relate is a great foreboding they drew from my soul.”

“We arrived at a chamber and the air grew chill. In three fourths of a circle were arranged stone thrones, in the center of the circle was a circular terrace leading up a few steps. In the empty spot, across from the door, a blank wall.”

“I had brought all the requirements for the ritual and in an hour it was ready. I told Joan she would do well to leave but she was too afraid to ascend to the surface without me. I told her that the stairs were safe, but she stopped me and said she was afraid for me, not her. I gave her a talisman and told her not to let go of it, and that it would keep her safe.”

“I began the ritual, mimicking my master's movements from that morning on the steppe. This time, unfortunately, no spirits lept forth from the walls to stop me. And as I raised my hands and chanted the final incantation all went still. I cannot describe the stillness to you, the quiet that invaded that chamber. The entire world had stopped. My ears dare not ring, so quiet it was.”

“Then, from beyond the firmament of our world, a long sigh broke the silence. Then screams! Horrible screams belonging to neither beast nor man ruptured my ears. Wind blew through the tear in the veil thrashing and beating against me. I struggled with all my might to stay on my feet though my eyes were forced shut. I regret opening them, for when I did the dread I felt so long ago gripped my soul.”

“Before me where the blank wall had been stretched the realm of Pandemonium! It was a terrible, encompassing black void, oh but it rolled, and writhed, and squirmed, and danced with demonic delight. The realm was alive, and within it, watching me, was The Eye, but no longer was it from afar. No longer did the cosmos and the veil lie between it and me; I'd flung open its front door and it was staring.”

“I screamed. My voice hammered the incantation of sealing against the daemonic howls of the wind as I fell and shielded myself. I lay on the floor, a whimpering mess, a terrified child who'd witnessed the death of his mother, until the winds faded and I was left alone.”

“I slithered off the terrace to look for Joan, I needed her comfort, I needed her to be safe, but what I found only served to tear out my heart. Lying on the ground, her face veiled by fiery amber hair, was her lifeless body. The talisman I'd given her was ripped to shreds a foot away.”

“I picked her up and rushed her to the surface, running all the way up the stairs. As I exited the tomb I collapsed and simply cradled her until a storm gathered above. Until

the waves lapped against more and more of the island's surface. Until I felt The Eye watching again.”

Norris glared at Gorran, the news of his friend's death had been delivered to him as a play. “You’re a murderer.” He said bluntly.

“I am.”

“Your chasing after some imaginary monster got her killed! Why did you return if all you planned to do was spin some fairy tale as an excuse for dragging an innocent woman to her doom?”

“I came back because The Eye still follows me.”

“Oh what a load of crap-”

“Silence!” Snapped Gorran. Norris’ mouth shut, almost against his will. “Ever since I have entered your house I have felt The Eye watching.”

Norris spoke again, “Don’t you dare accuse me of harboring any witchcraft, I am an esteemed member of the presbyterian congregation and don’t you imply I have any vermin in my house either.”

Gorran looked distractedly away from Norris, “I buried Joan when I returned. I gave her a gravestone of opal. She’s just in the cemetery outside of town. I’ll be there after all of this.” Gorran stood up. “Look to the corners of the room.”

In each corner of the room, in semicircles, lay small chains. While Norris had been making tea Gorran was setting up a pagan ritual, in his own home, the audacity!

“It is here!” cried Gorran. With his long disfigured finger on his right hand he pointed under Norris’ chair while reaching into his sleeve.

Norris leapt out of his chair. He gripped his chest and stumbled back as his eyes fell upon a singular human eye sitting under his chair looking at him. It’d all been true, the wizardry, battling ghosts, opening a tear to another realm, Gorran had done all of it! And the proof had been sitting just between his legs.

Gorran’s face contorted with twisted hatred, no longer was there fear in him, after he lost his life on that atlantic island he’d felt only hatred. His left hand withdrew from his sleeve holding the vile lance. He raised it and in a single throw shot it into The Eye.

For a moment Norris’ house melted away, so too did the city surrounding it and the ground it stood on. The sky was awash with winged men circling a throne of light. The throne was held up by spinning rings of flame. Then his house was back and the eye closed, sending Gorran's javelin tumbling to the floor; its tip was missing.

Next to him Gorran sighed, as he did he seemed to get smaller. He sat back down in his chair and looked up to Norris. “There is a grave prepared next to Joan, it has no headstone. Lay me in it.” With that Gorran breathed his last.

Can't You See It?

Norris immediately took his friend's body to the cemetery to bury it. The moment he reached the grave the sun rose over the horizon, its beams danced across Gorran's body and a golden mist seeped out of him. The mist rose and bunched into a cloud, as the cloud dispersed Norris saw the shape of Joan take the shape of Gorran by the hand and lead him into the wind, Gorran's shape looked upon Joan with complete awe.

Norris lowered his friend into the grave gently, then, after placing a golden cross that'd been in the warlock's pocket over him, he filled the grave and went home. Since that night Norris was no longer a light sleeper.

-end-