

The Interview

Lawrence King

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For Daniel Hutchison

Prologue

The four of them are arranged around one end of an enormous conference table in the chancellor's study at Miskatonic University. The study is quite large, designed for meetings of the full board of directors. This formal room, like so many at Miskatonic, creates an impression of long-standing wealth and influence. Its imposing fireplace is lighted today, but the room is hardly cheerful, scarcely warmed by its soft glow.

Dr. Marianne Christianson, head of the Science Department, slides a manila folder across the table to her boss, the chancellor of Miskatonic University.

Dr. Thomas Mason, the chancellor, receives the folder and asks, "Do you think he's a good choice, then? Will Dr. Mackenzie fit in here, Marianne?" Dr. Mason is the head of this small review committee and the head of the college as well.

"I think so," she replies. "He's smart, young, and eager to make his way in the world. He would make a good addition to our teaching staff. He's also a writer; his dissertation at UCLA was compelling. Not many people moving into academia add anything to physics research. His dissertation extends Steven Hawking's early work on black holes in two significant ways. First of all, he calculates the energies involved for creating small black holes in the laboratory.

Second, he shows how much Hawking radiation might be produced from them and how we might harness this energy.”

“I read the dissertation,” says Dr. Shyam Gupta, sitting to the right of Dr. Christianson. He’s clearly excited by what he’s saying. “If the hole is stable and sized appropriately, the energy production is immense due to black-body radiation being constantly released near the event horizon. It could be a surprisingly safe and efficient energy source.”

“Safe, unlimited energy—a nice theory,” says Dr. Christianson.

Dr. Gupta continues, “I also saw him present a research paper on creating miniature black holes. The team he was working with at UCLA has made a lot of progress in proving how that might be done.”

“So the boy can teach, research, and write,” says Dr. Mason. “That certainly could get him a graduate teaching fellowship here. But what about our other projects? How does Dr. Mackenzie fit into our long-range plans?”

“The details are in the folder, Thomas,” says Dr. Christianson. “I’ll give you the bird’s-eye view, though, and you can read the rest for yourself later. First off, he’s a lucid, imaginative, and coherent dreamer.”

“And we know this how?” asks Claire Barry. Ms. Barry, the fourth member of this review team, has been quietly taking notes.

“I have a friend who was involved with UCLA’s dream research program,” says Dr. Christianson. “As an undergraduate student, Dr. Mackenzie was one of their paid dreamers. My friend was helping to wind down the research after their grant money ran out. Dr. Mackenzie’s participation was distinctive—that was why my friend first called me.”

“Did he know the purpose of the research?” asks Ms. Barry.

“No. The students were told they were part of a study to compile a dream dictionary of common themes and symbols that dreamers encounter. They were given basic training on recalling, recording, and summarizing their dreams. They were given information on lucid dreaming and some simple exercises to try to enhance the lucidity of their dreams. They were paid for their efforts as part of a work-study program.”

“Is he stable?” asks Ms. Barry. She’s looking intently at Dr. Christianson.

She responds, “A good question given the lucidity and directive nature of his dreams. Yes, I think so. As part of the study, the students were required to have quarterly MMPI and other evaluations to test their mental states. Throughout the two-year project he was fine. His scores show that he’s a bit of a loner, a bit repressed emotionally and sexually, but quite sane. I would say from his profile that he could be taught to transverse. The copies of his dream diaries that I was given show powerful lucid-dreaming states.”

“Transverse potential,” says Dr. Mason, thoughtfully. “Anything else?”

“Perhaps just a curiosity,” says Dr. Christianson, shrugging her shoulders slightly. “I think he might be one of the Kingsport ‘Kings.’”

This gets the attention of the group. Ms. Barry breaks the silence. “And how would you know *that*?”

“That was an easy one. Our routine background check provides a birth certificate,” Dr. Christianson says. “Although his last name is Mackenzie, after his mother, his father is listed as James King of Kingsport, Massachusetts. Although it’s a common enough name—not in Kingsport. It appears that he’s had no contact with his father since he and his mother moved to California when ‘Mac’ was about three years old.”

“Should we consider this an asset or a liability?” asks Dr. Mason.

“Good question. Ultimately an asset, I think. It helps to explain some of the images in his dream journals and speaks to his potential in that area. He may have some of his father’s capabilities, although heredity doesn’t seem to play a major factor in that.”

Dr. Mason closes the folder that Dr. Christianson gave him. He pushes it back to her across the table. He says, “Let’s send the young man a letter of interest and set up an interview. Do you think we could have him here during Ostara? It would be lovely to have him here with a full moon! We can interview him for his teaching skills and to get an idea of how well he might fit into life at Miskatonic. If things work out, let’s have him teach for a year before we involve him in our greater plans. It would be good to have him think of Miskatonic as ‘home’ before we complicate things.”

Dr. Mason says, almost to himself, “I might have Brown Jenkin interview him as well, to check into the other matter.”

The mention of Brown Jenkin simultaneously elicits a smile from Dr. Christianson and a look of disgust from Ms. Barry.

Dr. Mason concludes the discussion, “If nothing else, wouldn’t it be better to have him here, working for *us*?”

Chapter One

Dressed for Success

The beach in Santa Monica is lovely on this spring morning. Although it's only 7:30 a.m., the temperature is already in the sixties, and the sky is blue and clear. It's supposed to be in the high seventies later in the day. I'm wearing cutoffs and a polo shirt. I'm barefoot, and Howie and I are enjoying a walk along the shoreline only a few blocks from our apartment. In one hand, I'm holding my flip-flops. In the other, I have Howie's leash.

Howie is an Italian greyhound. If you're not familiar with the breed, think regular greyhound, only smaller—much smaller. Weighing in at twelve pounds, he's oversized for the breed standard. Some are much smaller. With a short velvety coat and cockeyed ears, we get a lot of comments. I used to think it was all about Howie, but lately I've begun to realize it's the contrast. Where Howie is miniature, I'm tall. It's the combination that sticks out in people's minds: "Look at the tall, skinny man walking the skinny dog!"

I don't mind. Howie's family. Against my mom's wishes, I got him as a high school graduation present to myself. Rescued from an elderly breeder that passed away, Howie came

full-grown but with a lot of puppy energy. As an undergraduate, he rode around in my backpack and was very popular in study groups. Now he's ten years old, and I'm trying to start out in college again—this time as a professor.

I finished my doctoral dissertation this last winter and am scrambling to find a teaching job. My PhD in Physics turns out to only be useful in a few areas: the military, energy production, and academia. Not wanting to further the evolution of weapons of mass destruction or promote nuclear energy, I've been looking for teaching posts. My motivation is threefold:

1. I have to make my first student-loan payment in less than six months, and I'm almost broke.
2. I can't really afford to live in my little apartment now that my work-study job has ended.
3. Although she would love it, I do *not* want to move back in with my mother.

Luckily, I'm flying out for my first interview today. Honestly, I don't even remember sending a letter of inquiry to Miskatonic University in Massachusetts. I applied for a lot of graduate teaching fellowships online, though, so it's possible. I remember uploading my qualifications to an academic headhunting website, too. Maybe the referral came from there. In any case, I received a promising letter of introduction from Miskatonic University. They're paying for a two-day "greet, tour, and evaluate" trip to see if they want to hire me.

Howie's enjoying our walk along the beach. He's running off the leash now, along the edge of the water. "Would you like to live on the East Coast, Howie?" I ask. He looks up at me quizzically and pauses for a moment. Then, like a rocket, he launches himself after a seagull.

For a minute I worry about how he'll adjust to New England. Massachusetts has a beach, but it's not like this one. The winters in the Northeast can be brutal. I'll have to do a little research on dog clothing—sweaters and such.

For another minute I worry about my car. Can my 1999 Toyota RAV4 even make it to Massachusetts? I'll have to do a little more research on getting a newer car or see if I can get by at Miskatonic without a car. I've been thinking it would be environmentally responsible to have an electric car. Do they have charging stations in Massachusetts?

"Slow down, Mac," I say to myself. First there's the interview.

#

I'm checking my suitcase. Not being much of a traveler, I wonder what I've forgotten. I have the usual underwear, toiletries, and socks, of course, but do I have the right clothes? I assume that I need a button-down dress shirt and sport jacket for the interview, but is a tie necessary? Could I wear jeans? I nervously pack slacks and an emergency necktie in addition to more casual clothes. Better to be prepared.

The coordinator of this visit, a Ms. Claire Barry, indicated there would be some kind of "meet and greet" reception party when I get there tonight. "Do you think I need fancier clothes for the party, Howie?"

Howie is sitting on the end of my bed, his paws folded in front of him. He's been watching me intently. He knows I'm going somewhere and knows he's going to be spending some time at Mom's. She's going to come by and pick him up from my apartment on her way home from work.

I get out my tickets, maps, and information about Massachusetts and Miskatonic University. I don't really need the map; a driver is picking me up from Boston airport. Still, it's nice to visualize where I'm going.

Naturally, I've been doing some Internet research on Miskatonic. The campus is a few miles outside of Arkham, Massachusetts, on a 150-acre plot. Founded in 1775, it is one of the

few US universities established before the American Revolution. Although it is not one of the Ivy League schools like Brown or Columbia, it's certainly old enough and well pedigreed. It's a small university with about 4,000 students and 380 academic staff members.

The Internet claims that its specialties are literature and oceanography (it is only a half hour from the coast.) The online catalog of classes indicates plenty of physics classes that I could teach. Hopefully they will allow me to concentrate on some of my specialties.

The photos of the campus are impressive, if a bit austere. Many of the buildings are so old that they have that gothic look. If there's Internet access on the plane, I'll see if I can research the architecture a bit. The administrative building looks like a medieval cathedral or castle, and some of the other buildings are quite striking. I wonder if there's on-campus housing or if I have to find a place in Arkham.

The doorbell to my apartment interrupts my thinking. I see that my taxi to the airport has arrived. The driver picks up my small suitcase and backpack and puts them into the back of the cab. I say goodbye to Howie and lock the apartment behind me. The journey has begun.

#

Later, on the plane, I have a realization: *I'm going to get this job.* Since the letter of inquiry arrived, I've been feeling it getting closer. The job, I mean. I know that sounds a little crazy, or maybe desperate, but it's not that. Sometimes I know things before they happen. Sometimes I can feel when something is a sure thing—and generally it is. I have that feeling about Miskatonic. My life there is "getting closer."

I've also had one of my dreams.

I remember almost all of my dreams. I was trained to do that as part of a work-study research project at UCLA. As an undergraduate I was paid to do dream research. I still keep a

dream journal, and I can generally record several of my dreams every night.

My numinous dreams are different, though. They seem portentous. They stand out from the other dreams. They also generally come true. Not in a literal sense, not always, but almost always in a recognizable way. My backpack is under the seat in front of me, and I pull out my dream journal and find my notes on the dream I had about Miskatonic.

It was like this: I'm standing in a lecture hall in front of a green blackboard. A piece of chalk is in my hand. Rows of seats are arranged in tiers going back and up so that everyone has a good view. The hall has high ceilings and is well lit with arched palladium windows. The room is old, stately even. Although it has some modern touches and AV equipment, it looks like it's been in use for at least a century.

The hall is full of students, and they're all looking at me intently. In the dream it's not scary, though. I'm their professor, and they're just caught up in my lecture. It's a comfortable feeling and one that I've had as a graduate teaching fellow at UCLA. The difference is that it feels like home. It feels like it's *my* lecture hall. It feels like these are *my* students.

The classic *Star Trek* episodes had a weird lighting technique. It made a character or scene "stand out." In the midst of the otherwise well-lit Starship Enterprise, one actor (usually Captain Kirk) would have moody, shadowy lighting. His face would be strangely highlighted amid the shadows.

My dream journal says, "Star Trek lighting," because it was like that in the dream. I was the featured actor. I was the one getting the special lighting treatment in my own lecture hall, just like Captain Kirk got special lighting on the bridge of his starship.

That's how I know I'm going to get this job. The lecture hall is already mine. I'm the featured lecturer.

#

Flights going east across the country take all day. Even with a morning flight from LAX I spent most of the day on planes and then a ninety-minute trip in a hired car. We make it to Arkham near sunset, and as we approach the university gates there's just enough light to admire the campus.

Miskatonic University *is* impressive. It was built over two centuries and features some of America's most monumental architectural styles. Granite, sandstone, and brick are the featured materials, and some of the buildings are like medieval castles complete with turrets, colonnades, cloisters, and bell towers. The grounds are well maintained, and I feel like we've entered the estate of European nobility. Using a circuitous utility driveway, we pull up to the main administration building, University Hall.

Getting out of the hired car, I can't help but stare. The building is imposing. It stands tall at the head of an oblong grassy area and looks like it is carved out of solid granite. A sense of ponderous age assaults my senses. This building will be here long after my passing. It is both solid and graceful. It seems impossible that flying buttresses and filigreed window casings could be made of stone!

A cool wind blows across my face, making me shiver. I realize that I'm not alone, and I step forward to meet a woman standing in the entrance portico.

Extending her hand, she says, "I'm Claire Barry. You must be Dr. Mackenzie."

Ms. Barry looks extraordinary. Although in her fifties, she has a youthful bearing and an energetic handshake. What I notice first, though, is her shock of orange-red hair. This color, clearly out of a bottle, complements her almost-black skin perfectly. With striking looks and an easy-going manner, she seems larger than life. She's wearing a yellow blouse and a russet-

colored skirt and jacket that accentuate her slight figure.

“Nice to meet you,” I lamely say, noticing that her long fingernails are painted the exact color of her hair.

“You look a little tired,” says Ms. Barry, motioning me to follow her into University Hall. “That’s not surprising, considering your all-day trip.” I take my suitcase and backpack and follow her into the foyer of this grand building, back toward a hallway to the left of the entrance. As I follow, she continues speaking. “Let me show you our visitor’s suite and you can freshen up before our meet-and-greet party tonight. This building was built in 1750, and although it’s drafty and cold in the winter, it has some beautiful rooms.”

At the end of the hall, she opens a tall door, and I see what she means. If this is the visitor’s suite, they must have been expecting royalty. We’ve entered a sitting room with a travertine floor, white paneled walls, a travertine and alabaster fireplace, and lovely modern (and comfortable-looking) furniture. An oriental rug is centered in front of a fireplace and subdued lighting warms up the entire space. To the left, I see an opening into a bedroom with more of the modern furniture to contrast with the three-hundred-year-old dark wood paneling and vaulted stone ceiling. The effect of both rooms is one of amazing luxury.

“I’m sure you’ll be comfortable here, Dr. Mackenzie. The bedroom is through there and a bathroom beyond. You have an hour or so to get ready for our cocktail party. I’m not sure if that’s enough time for a nap, but you can at least take a shower if you like.” She’s smiling and getting ready to make her exit. “The meet-and-greet is at seven, and I’ll come by to take you there.”

I’m putting my suitcase down, still taking in the room. It has arched gothic windows looking into a walled garden. The dwindling twilight barely illuminates a cherry tree in early

spring bloom.

As Ms. Barry heads to the door, I stop her with a question. “How should I be dressed tonight?”

She turns to look at me, and her smile widens a bit. “Nervous?” she asks. “You needn’t be. Although the university faculty may tend to dress up for holiday parties, it’s more a matter of form than it is of judgment. You brought a suit, didn’t you?”

I pull my sport jacket and slacks out of my suitcase and hold them up. Ms. Barry looks less than impressed.

“A tie?” she asks.

Reluctantly, I pull my tie out of the suitcase.

Ms. Barry looks from the clothes to me and back again. “Yes, that will do,” she says, turning to leave.

“You mentioned a holiday,” I say with a question in my voice.

Without turning back, Ms. Barry says, “Tonight’s the beginning of Ostara.”

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An hour later, a chime sounds in the sitting room. I’m almost dressed—just struggling into my necktie. I feel much better after a shower and am looking forward to meeting my colleagues at the party. I fuss some more with my tie, then realize the chime was probably some kind of doorbell.

Ms. Barry is at the door, and she’s holding a necktie of her own.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she says. “This belongs to my son, and it will go much better with your shirt and sport jacket.” She’s smiling again, and I realize this is probably the way she smiles at her son. Maybe I remind her of him. Maybe he also has trouble dressing properly.

“I don’t mind, if you help me put it on,” I say. “I’m having a heck of a time getting the two ends to be even.”

“Of course,” says Ms. Barry. She deftly puts her son’s tie around my neck, and ties it in a few seconds. She was right, too, it looks like it was made for my sport jacket.

“I thought you said they wouldn’t mind how I looked,” I say, inviting comment.

“That’s not exactly what I said,” clarifies Ms. Barry. “I said that dressing well for tonight was more a matter of form than a means of judgment. I also think that first impressions are important, and I want you to make a good impression.”

I’m not sure how to respond to her kindness, so I say, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she says.

“You mentioned Ostara. I don’t think I’ve heard of that holiday. Is tonight a special occasion?”

Ms. Barry looks puzzled for a minute, then asks, “Did I say Ostara? I meant Easter, of course. It’s this Sunday, and we like to celebrate it at Miskatonic. Ostara is just an old word for the beginning of spring. Easter’s an old holiday, you know, based on the lunar cycle. It’s celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox. The early Anglo-Saxons used it as a time for planting spring gardens and to herald new life and new ideas.”

I’m wondering how the resurrection of Christ fits into all this, but not being a churchgoer I make no comment.

“Shall we go ‘meet-and-greet?’” asks Ms. Barry, pointing to the door of the visitor’s suite.

I follow her down the corridor nearly all the way to the grand entrance hall, but we make a turn down a short hall and through a doorway at its end. It opens into a small, lovely ballroom.

The room is square, with twin fireplaces on opposite sides. Both are lit, and they add to the warm glow of the room. An inlaid wood floor is in shades of honey-oak with ebony accents. A rich tapestry covers much of the stone wall opposite the doorway. A bar has been set up near the fireplace on the left, and a few small tables and club chairs furnish the rest of the room. The ceiling is quite high, with amber-shaded lights hanging from imposing wooden beams. Flanking the tapestries, arched windows look out into the same garden I see from the visitor suite. It's dark now, but the garden is bathed in moonlight.

The room has about a dozen people in it, and Ms. Barry guides me toward a group seated at one of the tables.

"Dr. Mason, I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Mackenzie," she says, brightly. "Dr. Mason is chancellor of Miskatonic University."

Dr. Mason is pale and lean and rises to shake my hand. In his late sixties or early seventies, his hair, eyebrows, and small mustache are surprisingly dark. He is wearing a black evening suit and tie. His clothes look like they were tailor-made just for him. I'm clearly underdressed for this evening.

"Glad you could come out east for a visit," says Dr. Mason, smiling warmly. "It's almost impossible to find good teaching staff these days, and you are highly regarded at UCLA. It's hard to get to know people in just one day, but I hope we can at least start the process."

I'm thinking, *Not well regarded enough for UCLA to hire me*, but I say, "That's nice to hear! I'm looking forward to meeting some of the people I might be working with."

"Then, let me introduce two of your colleagues," says Dr. Mason. "This is Dr. Marianne Christianson, the head of the Science Department. She would be your boss and advisor. Marianne has had the pleasure to mentor quite a few new faculty members here at Miskatonic."

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Mackenzie,” says Dr. Christianson. Marianne Christianson is dressed even more extravagantly than Dr. Mason. Although I’m not much on ladies’ fashion, it’s easy to spot some of the more expensive accessories. Her Hermés scarf must have cost more than my monthly salary at UCLA.

“My pleasure,” I say, shaking her hand. She is about five-and-a-half feet tall and a little plump. With an expensive short haircut and manicured nails, she is every inch a powerful businesswoman. Her smile is genuine, though, and I can tell that she’s more interested in me than in how I’m dressed.

“Your dissertation on black-body energy was most promising. Do you think it might be put to practical use?” Dr. Christianson’s eyes gleam in the soft light of the room.

“Science always has real-world potential,” I say. “The trouble is how much time and resources must be spent to make it useful. In the case of harnessing black-body energy, containment of a mini black hole will be the first issue to be addressed. It won’t be contained using any current techniques, that I know of.”

Dr. Christianson smiles broadly as though I’ve passed some test. “Oh yes, time and resources! Time and resources! I guess everything boils down to those!”

“Luckily, we’re teaching the theories that will eventually allow such things,” I say, with an encouraging smile of my own.

“Quite right,” Dr. Christianson says.

Dr. Mason continues his introductions. “And this is Dr. Horace Alvarez. Dr. Alvarez, this is Dr. Mackenzie.”

“We’d be partners,” says Dr. Alvarez. “We’d share lab spaces, conference rooms, and lecture halls.” With coffee-colored skin and dark hair that has turned mostly gray, Dr. Alvarez

must be in his early sixties. He's tall, like I am, and has a strong, confident handshake. He's dressed a little more casually, in a dark brown suit, a cream-colored shirt, and a patterned necktie. I immediately get a good feeling from Dr. Alvarez. His clear brown eyes are friendly and welcoming.

"What is the lab space like?" I ask.

Dr. Alvarez shakes his head. "We have two. They're a bit stuck in classical physics, I'm afraid. One of the reasons I'm looking forward to having you here is to modernize things. The labs are a good size, but the equipment needs updating."

"And I've promised to help with that," says Dr. Christianson. "We have a significant budget for lab equipment upgrades over the next twenty-four months. We're just waiting for a proposal on how to use it."

Dr. Alvarez is looking at me directly, and I say, "I think Dr. Alvarez and I could have fun spending your money, Dr. Christianson."

"Call me Horace," says Dr. Horace Alvarez, with a happy smile.

"I'm Mac," I say, smiling right back.

As we get drinks from the bar, I can't help but notice the tapestry on the stone wall. It's huge, and it's so old that the once-bright colors have faded considerably. It appears to be a coastal scene. The blue, green, and gray colors depict a shoreline with cliffs, a prominent reef, and a small town. It also appears to be a battlefield. The people from town are attacking people from the offshore reef. It's a confusing design, and it's difficult to see whether the townspeople are fighting other townspeople or creatures from the sea. Some of the "people" on the reef look human. Others look more like fish or mythological creatures.

"That's one of our famous tapestries," says Ms. Barry. "It's over two hundred years old

and depicts Devil's Reef and the uprising of the townspeople of Innsmouth against the Dagon merpeople." Ms. Barry is trying her best to keep from smiling.

"Um, OK." I say. "I didn't realize that tapestry makers would spend all that effort on myths."

"Oh yes," says Ms. Barry. "They do, actually. There are wonderful tapestries depicting St. George and the dragon and others featuring unicorns and mythical creatures. What makes our tapestry unique is that it is a new-world myth. Stories of the merpeople, or Dagon as they were called, go back before the founding of America by white settlers. Innsmouth was one of the first settlements in Massachusetts, and this depicts how that initial settlement was destroyed."

"By merpeople?"

"That's the myth," says Ms. Barry, peering closely at the tapestry.

We're interrupted by the approach of a shy man of middle age. Ms. Barry introduces him. "This is Dr. Shyam Gupta. He's one of our dissertation advisors and one of the true scientists on staff."

I extend my hand and say, "Pleased to meet you, Dr. Gupta. I'm Dr. Mac Mackenzie."

Dr. Gupta is olive-skinned and has dark hair and shining black eyes. Ms. Barry leaves the two of us to talk as she heads over to a table of finger food.

"Yes, I know," says Dr. Gupta, shaking my hand as he speaks. He's clearly interested in my research, and excitement shows in his voice. "We've actually met once before. We were at a conference together. You were part of the team that presented a wonderful paper on miniature black holes."

Remembering the conference in New York, but not Dr. Gupta, I say, "Thank you. It was a great conference. Were you presenting that day, also?"

“No, just an observer,” says Dr. Gupta. Brightening, he continues, “Do you think we’ll be able to create mini black holes in the laboratory?”

“Maybe we already have,” I say, slyly.

“Not for real!” exclaims Dr. Gupta, clapping his hands together.

“Well, it’s possible,” I say. “A mini one would be microscopic. They would be devilishly hard to detect. With such a small event horizon, they could remain unnoticed for a long period of time. We may have already created one as a result of one of the particle collision experiments at CERN or at Beijing’s IHEP.”

“Wouldn’t it siphon off matter, though?” asks Dr. Gupta.

“Oh yes. Little by little. Because it would work its way through matter, it would fall into the nearest gravity well. Then its event horizon would slowly eat away at the matter drawn into that well.”

“My stars! But you’re talking about the Earth!” says Dr. Gupta. “If the black hole was created here, it would sink down into the Earth’s core. It would be digesting the planet from the inside out!”

“Little by little,” I say again.

A pause, then we both laugh at my little physics joke. We both know that in theoretical physics most anything is possible. Not likely but possible. As we laugh, I think Dr. Gupta is warming up to having me on campus.

“And what about transversing the realms?” asks Dr. Gupta. “Do you think we can manage it through physics, or will we have to continue using trance states and lucid dreaming?”

I’m completely baffled by his question. Unsure what to say or ask, the conversation halts. Ms. Barry rejoins us with a plate of crackers and Brie and sees my inquiring face.

Dr. Gupta explains, “I was asking Dr. Mackenzie about his thoughts on transversing and...”

Ms. Barry gives Dr. Gupta a Medusa stare that cuts him off in mid-thought.

“Dr. Gupta,” she says with a surprisingly cold voice, “Perhaps you would consider refilling our glasses?”

Ms. Barry continues to look at Dr. Gupta as he heads to the bar. Without a word of explanation, she holds out her plate of finger food. “You really should try one of the rice paper rolls,” she says. “They’re quite good.”

After more chatting and with fresh drinks in hand, Ms. Barry introduces me to a table of gentlemen from the Oceanography Department. I must be starting to get tired (or a little drunk), because I almost immediately forget their names. They’re all complaining about funding and the expense of submersible equipment. After a bit, I realize that they’re talking about Innsmouth. Miskatonic University’s Marine Science Center is located in modern-day Innsmouth.

I point to the tapestry and ask the group, “Do you gentlemen know more about merpeople and the Dagon myth? Ms. Barry told me that the tapestry depicts Innsmouth from two hundred years ago.”

The gentlemen look at each other in silence. Finally, one of them, a blond professor of oceanic currents, says, “Do you mean the creature or the worship?”

The others at the table look down, but the speaker continues. “The word ‘Dagon’ pertains to both the mythical creature thought to live off the coast of Massachusetts and also to a cult that worships those creatures.”

He says this with such seriousness that I’m not sure how to respond.

“The Dagons still exist,” he says, shrugging. “They have a church in Innsmouth.”

Chapter Two

Ostara

After the party, after falling asleep in the visitor's suite, and long after midnight, I have this dream. It's an unusual one, and at first I don't think I'm dreaming. I gradually "wake up" in the dream and find myself in bed in the visitor's suite of University Hall. I've never had a dream about waking up in bed before. But it's definitely a dream.

The room has a funny feel to it, a sort of dreamlike, slo-mo quality. I imagine this must be what it's like being anesthetized for an operation. Moonlight streams in from the window, washing the room in pale, silvery tones. I'm awake but not.

Of course, it has to be a dream for the little brown man to fit in. He's quite amusing. At no more than six inches tall, he's sitting at the foot of my bed on top of the covers. Just looking at him makes me smile. He's like an animated character out of a children's movie. Half human, half animated mouse, he's holding his tiny hands in front of him and is wearing a green vest. Although covered in sleek brown fur, his head is human and cocked to one side, peering at me from underneath expansive eyebrows. He's smiling, too, like we're good friends.

“Hello,” I say. “I’m Mac.”

The little man/mouse smiles more broadly, and he stretches forward a bit sniffing the air. It is a mouse-like movement, and his pointy nose is lifted high.

“I’m Brown Jenkin,” he says.

It’s hard to place his accent, but I swear he must have flown in from Bristol, England. Brown Jenkin continues to stare at me with both familiarity and intensity.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“Oh, that’s a good one,” says Brown Jenkin. “Why am I here? Well, I will not lie to you. It’s not my style. I’m here to interview you.”

That gets me laughing a bit. I’m being interviewed by an animated mouse! I don’t remember having such an odd, funny dream before.

Brown Jenkin joins me in the laughter, then asks, “Will you remember this dream, do you think, Mac?”

“I’m sure I will. I remember all my dreams.”

“Do you?” asks Brown Jenkin. “Remarkable. Do you mind if I come a bit closer?”

“Of course not,” I say. “Come up, and I’ll get a better look at you.”

Brown Jenkin edges forward a bit on the bedspread, and it’s an odd movement. His edges appear indistinct, and the motion is a hybrid of how a mouse might scramble and how a small man might walk. My mind has trouble understanding Brown Jenkin’s mode of movement, but suddenly he’s much closer, and I notice that his small round face is really quite handsome. For some reason, I’m feeling almost inebriated, and I say the first thing that comes into my head.

“You’re a handsome little fellow, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am quite ‘glamorous’ tonight, you might say,” he replies. “I thought I would look

my best for the interview, you see. I owes you that.” As he speaks, he’s primping a bit, showing off his vest and puffing up his furry chest.

“That’s right. The interview,” I say.

“Second question,” says Brown Jenkin. “Do you make changes in your dreams?”

“Oh yes. All the time. If things get scary, I just change it. Sometimes I change things in a dream just to make it more fun.”

“Are your dreams often scary, Mac?”

“Is that one of your questions, Mr. Jenkin?”

“We’re friends now, Mac. You can call me Brownie, if you want. Scary dreams, yes?”

“Some are scary, Brownie,” I say, almost laughing again. Something about calling him Brownie seems hilarious. “What kind of name is ‘Brown Jenkin?’” I ask.

“Oh, it’s an old, old name, but then, I’m an old fella. I came to America on a brigantine full of Puritans. Those were the days, eh? A little fellow could take his pick of friends then. People were simple, more trusting, like. But I’m the one asking questions, remember?”

“I remember.”

“Do you have dreams about places you’ve never been to? Places in other worlds or places where people aren’t even people?” asks Brown Jenkin.

“Of course,” I reply. “Doesn’t everybody? Don’t you?”

Brown Jenkin smiles broadly, and his teeth come into better focus. They seem sharper than I would have thought for this happy little guy. He doesn’t answer my question.

“Do your dreams ever show you what’s going to happen?”

The frivolity of this dream seems to be having its impact on me. I think of the Disney version of this question. “Are you asking me if my dreams ‘really do come true?’”

“Yes,” says Brown Jenkin, pointedly. “Do they?”

“Not always,” I say truthfully, hoping not to disappoint my new little friend.

“Can you tell the difference?” asks Brown Jenkin. “Do you know which dreams will come true?”

“Sometimes.”

“Is this dream going to come true, do you think?” asks Brown Jenkin, with a twinkle in his small brown eyes.

At first the question seems silly. We’re still having this dream, after all! But then I realize he’s also asking if this is a lucid dream. He’s asking if I have any control over how it comes out. By way of answering, I make his vest disappear.

“Oi!” says Brown Jenkin. “That’s my vest! You ought not interfere with a fella’s vest, you rascal!” The vest reappears but not under my direction.

“Do you believe in Magic?” asks Brown Jenkin. “Do you believe in summoning spirits, talking to the dead, and scrying the future?”

“That’s more than one question,” I say, a bit peevishly.

“Answer,” says Brown Jenkin, a note of sternness in his voice.

“I do believe that ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,’” I say, remembering the quote from *Hamlet*. I try to match Brown Jenkin’s stern tone but end up with a giggle.

“Shakespeare, is it?” remarks Brown Jenkin. “He was a true arse, in my opinion. Thought he was so la-ti-da!” He pauses for a moment, reflecting. “So you *do* believe in the hidden world, eh?”

“Yes. Most of what’s hidden isn’t magic, though. It’s just hidden.”

“Always the scientist,” says Brown Jenkin, tilting his head and smiling wickedly. “I suppose you’ll think more on it after Miskatonic gets under your skin. Have you ever wished someone harm and had it happen?”

“No. Other people create their own bad fortune.”

Brown Jenkin thinks and then asks for clarification. “And you, eh? Do you create your own bad fortune?”

The conversation has turned philosophical for a moment. “I believe that we each create our life, bad or good, as a consequence of what we think and believe and expect. If you expect life to be hard, it will be. If you expect and think the best, you’ll have a more positive life.”

“Oi,” says Brown Jenkin, after a moment’s pause. Suddenly he’s all smiles again. “Sounds like New Age American pap! Good luck with that around here!” He waves broadly, indicating the university or perhaps the world in general.

“Last question,” says Brown Jenkin. “Do you have sex with animals?”

We both laugh. This seems like a great joke, but at the same time I see that he requires an answer. Throughout the dream I feel like I’ve been given a truth serum. It’s a fun dream, and answering the questions feels fun, too.

“No,” I say, smiling. “That’s disgusting.”

Brown Jenkin shrugs, then he says, “I think that’s enough questions for now, eh?”

“Did I pass?” I ask.

He looks at me, uncomprehending.

“The interview,” I prompt. “Did I answer all the questions correctly? Did I pass?”

“Oh yes. The interview.” Brown Jenkin reflects a moment. “Yes, you answered all the questions. You did good, and I’m going to tell you a story.”

Clearly the story is a reward of some kind. “Is it a bedtime story?” I ask, indicating the bed around us with a sweep of my hand.

We both laugh.

“Yes,” says Brown Jenkin. “It will help you go back to your sleep.”

Sleeping already, as we are, we both have another quiet laugh.

Brown Jenkin moves a little closer and begins to tell the story. “There once was an old lady what wanted to own the world.”

“You can’t own the world.” I say, but Brown Jenkin silences me with one finger of his right paw.

“She wanted to control the world, then, if you like. To this purpose, she learned the forgotten magic ways. She studied old books. She apprenticed with a cut-wife and learned herbs. Later, she conjured demons and learned the means to control them.”

“Did she have sex with animals?” I ask, repressing a giggle.

“Shush,” says Brown Jenkin. “Listen to my story.” He moves a little closer. He’s sitting on my solar plexus now, his perfect little hands clasped together in front of him.

“She learned about the secret side of life. She learned how to bewitch people and have them see what she wanted them to see. She healed people of all sorts of diseases and also could make them sick, when it suited her right. She learned ancient ways of stopping death or at least how to go beyond it.

“As part of learning poisons, many of the neighbors’ dogs did disappear. One of her spells made all the milk in the village turn sour. Although she had nothing to do with it, a village babe was born with twelve fingers. These things and more were said to be her fault, and the people of the town grew fearful, like. They called her names and stopped doing business with

her. They were afraid of her, but she learned that fear was not enough to keep her safe. One cold spring morn' she heard the old wives talking to each other while hanging the wash. She heard the wicked people of town planning to kill her. A dozen men would come to her home on Sunday, three days hence. After church they'd hang her."

"Hang her," I say, almost to myself.

"Oh yes," says Brown Jenkin. "They planned to haul her right up Church Street to Hangman's Hill. That's the way they did things then."

"In the story," I say, quietly.

"In the story," repeats Brown Jenkin. "So she planned her escape. By Sunday morning she'd be long gone. She put together the things she needed for travel. She'd go on horseback Saturday night and needed to get provisions from the village. The villagers all knew about the hanging, of course, and they were happy to sell her what she needed. They must've figured it was easy money and soon she'd be done."

Brown Jenkin pauses in thought as though remembering the rest of the story.

"She bought herself traveling clothes, jerky, pemmican, hardtack, and other things so she wouldn't have to stop for a league or more. She was a smart one and a good planner, like. She also decided to buy a new saddle, one better for long-distance and damp travel. At the smithy, she came across a fine saddle brought all the way from England. She bought it with the last of her money. Hidden away, in the pommel of the saddle, after four thousand miles aboard a ship, she found her first true friend."

"It was you," I say, somewhat sleepily. The bedtime story is having its effect, and I'm having trouble focusing on the story and on Brown Jenkin. When I blink my eyes, it's hard to see him clearly. One blink, he's all animated mouse character. The next blink, he seems more like an

old sewer rat.

“I was her only true friend,” says Brown Jenkin, “and someone who could help her.” He moves forward again. Now he’s on my chest, and I see that his vest is gone and what I thought was sleek brown fur is actually patchy and worn. His front paws still look like hands, though, and they’re outstretched to my neck and face as he continues his story.

“Her new friend also knew a thing or two about magic. Even a mouse has its place in the hidden world,” says Brown Jenkin, puffing out his chest. “Old World mice have lived through plague and war. While much of London was on fire, mice were underground learning what can only be learnt in the dark places of tomb and grave.”

Brown Jenkin’s voice is getting quieter now, and I’m half asleep. I’ve got one eye open, and Brown Jenkin has paused his story for a moment. His mouth is bright red now, as though he’s wearing lipstick. Lipstick on a rat! I think, amused at the idea.

As I slip into a half-sleep, back into the dream within a dream, Brown Jenkin finishes his story. “But either the old woman overheard wrong or the villagers changed the plan. When she went out Saturday afternoon to saddle up the horse, her property was surrounded by villains, her horse nowhere to be seen. That lady was desperate, I can tell you, with no means for escape. She ran back into the house. That’s when those men decided that instead of hanging, they would burn her up.

“They set her thatched roof on fire and proceeded to barricade the doors. The house went up quick, I can tell you! Whoosh! With the flames coming out the windows, they expected to hear screams. But there was only silence and the sound of burning wood. They guarded the house all the afternoon until it was burnt clean to the ground. In evening they looked for signs of her body in the ashes and smoky remains. They were disappointed! No trace was ever found of

Mother Mason!”

I can still hear Brown Jenkin, but my thinking is muddled with sleep, and I find myself overcome by it as I hear the last words of his story.

“I taught the witch to fly!”

#

Breakfast is uneventful. Ms. Barry has sent over someone from the dorm cafeteria with a tray. She must have forgotten to tell them I’m a vegetarian, because in addition to eggs, toast, and oatmeal, there’s a pile of bacon. I pick over the food and wonder how I was at the party last night.

I remember the conversation was a little weird. Something about mythic undersea creatures. I got a bit drunk and indistinctly remember Ms. Barry walking me back to the visitor’s suite. Oh, and the weird dream. I wonder if I should explain my behavior or if it was really OK? Distractedly, I look out the window in the sitting room into the walled garden. Today it’s cloudy and looks colder than yesterday.

This time I recognize the chime from the door to the visitor’s suite. I open the door, and there’s Ms. Barry and a young man with blond hair and watery blue eyes.

“Good morning, Dr. Mackenzie,” says Ms. Barry. “I hope you slept well.”

I do not detect disapproval in her voice or face, so maybe I behaved well enough at the meet-and-greet. Ms. Barry looks fresh and happy. I return the borrowed tie to her, and she introduces the young fellow.

“This is George Marsh,” she says. “He’s a graduate teaching fellow in the Oceanography Department. I thought you might enjoy having someone your own age give you a short campus tour.”

“Call me George,” he says.

I smile and return the favor. “I’m Mac.”

“George, would you do me a favor?” asks Ms. Barry. “I don’t want Dr. Mackenzie to get lost or be late for his interview. Can I ask you to give him a tour, but end the tour at Massachusetts Hall no later than ten forty-five? His interview is at eleven, and I’ll walk him there from Massachusetts Hall.”

“Sounds fine, Ms. Barry,” says George.

Ms. Barry takes her leave, and George helps me finish my breakfast. He eats the bacon, I take the rest.

George is about my height with a narrow face and a slender but muscled torso and lean arms. He’s probably just a few years younger than I am. His blond hair is receding a bit, but he’s handsome and easygoing.

“I like Claire,” says George. “She practically runs the Science Department. I know she’s Dr. Christianson’s personal assistant, but somehow she’s more than just that. She doesn’t like me calling her ‘Claire,’ though. She’s all business where Miskatonic is concerned.”

While I’m getting ready to go out on the tour, I ask George some questions about the college.

“Are the younger faculty happy here?” I ask, pulling on a sweater for insulation against the outdoors.

“I suppose,” says George, thoughtfully. “To be honest, though, there aren’t many young professors on staff. I would guess that’s one of the reasons they’ve invited you to interview. Miskatonic could use younger people with new ideas. There are a few other graduate teaching fellows that are in their twenties and thirties, but not many full professors under fifty.”

“Is it easy to make friends here, do you think?” I ask, putting my shoes on.

“Oh yeah,” says George, smiling. “Every fall there’s a new batch of friends—if you know what I mean.”

I do know what George means, but I respond, “Yes, but friends that will be more permanent. Not just dating.”

“I see what you mean,” says George, more thoughtfully. “I guess Miskatonic isn’t any different than any other place with groups of transient people. You have to look toward the people who really live there if you want to make lasting friends. I don’t think you’ll have any trouble with that, Mac. I’d be glad to introduce you to some of the permanent faculty and GTFs. We’re all a pretty friendly bunch.”

I sense that George is being truthful, and I like the idea that he might be a friend on campus. We make our way to the front of University Hall. For all his fitness, George has a strange kind of shambling walk. From the windowed entry I can see that last night’s clear sky has been replaced by heavy overcast. A light rain is beginning to fall. Although it’s itching a bit, I’m glad I brought the wool sweater! We borrow umbrellas from the entryway of University Hall and step out onto the portico.

George starts by explaining the overall layout of the university.

“Think of three concentric rings,” he says. “The first ring was built surrounding the Green. That’s the common green area that existed when the campus was founded.” We’re standing just outside University Hall, at the head of the Green, with the first of George’s rings spread out around us.

“In the early days, there was just this circle of buildings. In the 1800s, a second circle was built around the first circle. The third circle is mostly private residences built in the 1700s and

1800s. They were converted into university buildings and acquired by the school after the original owners died.”

“Across the Green is Massachusetts Hall. That’s the Science Department where Claire and Dr. Christianson work. That’s also where you’d be teaching. I have a few of my science classes there too. Also in the first ring are the buildings for music, natural sciences, mathematics, and an alumni building. The big one to the right is the Solomon Center, which houses the main library as well as a large event auditorium.”

George points between two of the buildings in the first ring to a more modern building in the background. “The second ring has a few newer buildings in it, including that modern dormitory complex and the Student Union. The Union is a great place to hang out, get a snack, and meet friends. It also has a graduate-student lounge, which is a nice place to meet some of the GTFs and younger instructors.

“I live in the third ring. If you get the job, ask them to find housing for you. They only take a small portion of my teaching salary and give me a small apartment. It’s really quite affordable. Make sure you ask for on-campus housing—driving into Arkham in the winter is not fun!”

We step out into the rain, and George shows me more of the architectural sights. The Solomon Center, in particular, is spectacular. It’s shaped like an eight-sided multistory beehive built of brick and sandstone. The sides are stacked gothic arches with leaded-glass windows. Each arch has fretwork and a lightning rod at the apex. The front “door” is three stories high, and George shows me the first floor of the library complex. It’s a showpiece of old paneling and antique fixtures but also has modern library facilities and computers.

We end the tour, as we promised Ms. Barry, at Massachusetts Hall. It’s a bit of a marvel,

too. All granite and brick, it has an unusual five-sided tower integrated into one side of the building and projecting from the top of it. “I think they built the building around that old tower,” says George. “You can see that it doesn’t really match the rest of the building.”

As we walk up the steps to Massachusetts Hall, I get a strange feeling. There’s something not quite right about the place, or maybe it reminds me of something from a forgotten dream. I feel a little disoriented standing in the entryway. For a moment I wonder if this whole “moving to Massachusetts thing” is a good idea. Maybe I should change my mind, change my course of action, just get the hell out of here! Then, whatever weird feeling I’m getting passes. I’m just standing at the top of the steps at Massachusetts Hall with George holding the door open for me.

The inside of Massachusetts Hall is quite lovely. It’s designed around a central rotunda, ringed with a multistory colonnade. We find Ms. Barry in the rotunda on the first floor. She’s behind a reception desk, clicking away at a computer terminal.

“You’re just in time,” says Ms. Barry, speaking to George. “Let’s quickly take him up to the third floor so he can see the physics labs and the lecture halls. Then I’ve got to get him back to University Hall in time to have him change for his interview.” She’s eyeing my clothing again. Clearly my jeans will not be adequate for the interview.

The three of us pile into the most interesting elevator I’ve ever seen. It’s a brass cage hanging on the edge of the multistory colonnade and held in place with cables and struts. The controls look like some kind of steam-punk fantasy, but George is familiar with them. He pulls the gate to the cage closed, turns a huge lever, and we begin to rise majestically upward to the top of the rotunda.

We start with the physics labs. There are two of them on the third floor, and I’m a bit disappointed. When Dr. Alvarez said they were designed for “classical physics,” I think he was

being generous. Sir Isaac Newton would have been pleased with the labs and their equipment. Not me. Major upgrades will be necessary to perform quantum physics experiments in these labs.

Then we walk down the hall a bit farther, and Ms. Barry opens the door to one of the lecture halls.

It's my classroom from the dream. The tiered seating. The palladium windows. The green blackboard. All of it. I feel a chill going down my spine, and it's as though the lights have dimmed, while a brighter light is shining on me. It's that *Star Trek* lighting thing again. Of course, it's only in my head, but isn't that where reality starts?

"This is my lecture hall," I say, quietly, in perfect confidence.

Neither George nor Ms. Barry contradict me.

#

I'm back at University Hall in the visitor's suite and, once again, Ms. Barry is helping me with my wardrobe. She's borrowed another necktie and a pocket square from her son to go with my sport jacket and sweater. I have to say, Ms. Barry knows what she's doing. Although my look is still casual, it now looks expensive-casual and everything "goes together."

I'm still not sure of her motives. Why does she care how I look? Why does she care if I get this job? Somehow, I just don't have the gumption to ask these questions, and, smiling, she leads me down yet another hallway into a formal conference room.

The room is quite impressive. Ms. Barry calls it the chancellor's study, but it looks more like a medieval boardroom with a long oak table lined with armchairs with high backs. There's a fireplace along one paneled wall, but it doesn't dissipate the chill from this austere room. A wall of leaded-glass windows provides filtered light. High overhead, arched beams hold up a whitewashed ceiling. The main wall is bare granite stonework. The fireplace mantel contains the

only decoration, and its bas-relief is a row of winged creatures with spears. Angels? Demons?

The room's chilly atmosphere is broken with a welcoming invitation.

"Come in, come in, Dr. Mackenzie. We've been looking forward to talking more with you." Chancellor Mason is all smiles today. He's dressed in another tailored suit, this time in shiny midnight blue. He motions to the others sitting at one end of the enormous table, and they stand. "I think you've already met everyone here." He motions to each one in turn, reminding me of their names. "Dr. Christianson, Dr. Alvarez, Dr. Gupta, and Ms. Barry, of course."

They all smile and nod as they're reintroduced. Dr. Alvarez (Horace) gives me a small wink.

"Please sit," says Dr. Mason, "and we'll get started. Claire, do you mind taking notes for us?"

Ms. Barry already has a small pad of paper in front of her, and she picks up a pen for note-taking.

Remembering my dream and Brown Jenkin, I wonder if Dr. Mason is going to ask me if I have sex with animals. He does not. Instead, I get a series of questions about my academic record, my research into quantum physics, black holes, dark matter, inter-dimensional mathematics, quantum computers, some of Einstein's paradoxes, and particle accelerators. Most of it pertains to the subjects I'll be teaching, but some of the questions sound more like fringe-science. At one point Dr. Christiansen asks if I think inter-dimensional travel is possible. Is she trying to see if I'm crazy or if I like science fiction? I give her my "anything is possible" speech, but I see that she's not entirely satisfied by it. Does she want me to speculate without any sort of scientific evidence?

Ms. Barry must feel that I'm starting to get flustered, so she asks me a question that's

more down-to-earth. It's a hard question, but I appreciate her sincerity. She asks, "Why do you want to leave your home, your family, and your life on the West Coast, Dr. Mackenzie?" She's looking at me with compassion, and I know that this is the only question that matters to her.

"It's time for me to move forward in life," I say, simply. "So far I've just moved along. In school I did well in science, so Mom suggested UCLA. It was close to home, so I could save on expenses. One of my professors said that I had a real talent for quantum physics and started involving me in a team working on black holes and dark matter. Another professor loved my master's thesis and wanted me to help her work on a paper to be presented at a symposium. Someone at the symposium thought we could collaborate on a more fundamental study of so-called 'Hawking radiation.'"

I notice that I'm scratching my neck. That darn wool sweater! Self-consciously, I relax my hand and put it in my lap. "It seems my whole life has been successful—but always doing what other people thought I should be doing." I pause for a moment. I'm not really sure what I'm going to say next, but I plunge ahead, looking at Ms. Barry. "Working here represents doing something just for me. I love teaching, and this would be an opportunity to concentrate on what I love. There's something wonderful about showing new people the wonders of quantum physics. There's a power in helping someone set up proper conditions for a controlled laboratory experiment and utilizing the rigors of scientific methodology."

I look over to Dr. Alvarez and say, "I would so enjoy working with you in upgrading the science labs, Dr. Alvarez. Collaboration is something that I'm good at, and I have friends at UCLA who would help me, help *us*, with lab design. Updated equipment would bring Miskatonic into the modern age. Maybe physics could one day be listed as a Miskatonic 'specialty.'"

Now, looking at Dr. Mason, I finish answering Ms. Barry's question. "Although I don't know much about Miskatonic University, I do feel called to be here. When I went into the lecture hall on the third floor of Massachusetts Hall, I knew it was *my* lecture hall. I don't mean this in an arrogant way. I know you may not hire me for a teaching position. What I mean is that I had a complete sense of owning a classroom. I'm a good teacher. I would be a good professor *here*. I know that I can thrive at Miskatonic University, and I know the university will be better for my participation."

After a bit of silence, Dr. Christianson smiles and says, "So we've grilled you for about an hour, and you'll need to leave for your red-eye back to California in about another hour. Before you go, what questions do you have for us? If you were to accept a teaching position here what would you ask of us?"

So I tell them.

#

The plane ride home isn't any shorter, but at least the lights are low, and there's no pressure for talking. Most everyone is asleep. I'm pleased with my job interview. I can't imagine answering the questions any differently, and I think people responded well to me. Dr. Alvarez seems relieved that he would have someone to help him upgrade the labs and teach some of the more modern physics classes. Ms. Barry clearly wants me to have the job, and Dr. Mason, the chancellor, seemed friendly toward me.

Dr. Christianson didn't say much during the interview, but she didn't seem negative in any way, either.

My mind is racing a bit, and I realize that "worrying" about my job interview is silly. I either get the job or not. Worry will have no effect on the outcome and is just preventing me from

going to sleep.

I also realize that I've been scratching my neck, off and on, for most of the day. It feels like I'm getting a rash on my neck and upper chest. I stop scratching and get out my gratitude journal to calm my nerves. It would be good to focus on all the positive things happening in my life and put my worries aside. A wise teacher once told me that recording five gratitude items every night would increase my awareness of the good things around me. Actually, she said, "That which we are grateful for will increase."

I write my list for tonight:

1. *Claire Barry: Ms. Barry may be too formal to be called "Claire," but I know she's going to be a friend.*
2. *Horace Alvarez: Horace will make a good colleague and collaborator.*
3. *My new lecture hall: It's mine. I can feel it!*
4. *Howie: I'm always grateful for Howie, and I know we'll make a home together at Miskatonic.*
5. *Neckties: I wore two different neckties in two days. That's got to count for something.*

I stow my journal and turn out the reading light. I'm calmer, but my neck still itches. I wonder if one of the flight attendants might have some cream. If it's an allergic reaction to the wool sweater, maybe a Benadryl would help. The seatbelt sign is off, so I unbuckle and move to the forward galley and bathroom area.

"Any chance you might have a Benadryl?" I ask one of the flight attendants. "I think I'm having an allergic reaction to something I was wearing earlier in the day. My neck and chest are really itchy."

She looks back at me, not unkindly. "I'm afraid we're not allowed to give passengers any

kind of medication. Not even over-the-counter stuff.”

“Might you have some hand cream or lotion? That might take some of the itchiness away.”

The flight attendant reaches into an overhead and brings down her purse. “I guess I won’t get in trouble for giving you hand lotion.” She offers me a tube.

I get into one of the plane’s tiny bathrooms. It’s so small that I have trouble taking my polo off to check the rash—and it’s quite a rash. It’s at least ten inches in diameter, centered just above my collarbone. Of course, my scratching hasn’t helped things. It’s bleeding in the center.

I run some water on a paper towel and blot the small bloody patch where I’ve been scratching. The cool water feels good, and the bit of blood easily washes away.

Revealing the most curious thing.

There, at the center of this spreading rash, is a mark that’s not made from my scratching or from a reaction to wool. It’s two small punctures, like injection marks. They stand out white and unnatural against the surrounding rash. I’m dumbfounded. At first I think of spider bites. I’ve had them before, and they cause this kind of rash if you scratch them. Then I think of bed bugs, but they make bumps as well as itching. Maybe they’re not bug bites at all.

In the dim lighting of this tiny bathroom, I peer closely at my neck. Suddenly, I realize exactly what the marks are.

I picture him sitting on my chest chatting amiably, creeping closer, so charming. Now he’s leering with red-stained lips, his two incisors suddenly sharper than I remembered.

But Brown Jenkin was just a dream!

* * *

The story continues in the full-length novel *Witch Tower*, available in paperback and Kindle versions at Amazon.com. You can also follow the author on his website at <http://www.miskatonic.us>. Book two in the Miskatonic University series is due out in May of 2018.