



**HERMETIC
THE**

BY: JOHN RAE

The Hermetic

Tuck was a man in love. Sure, he loved his wife, Jan, but she was only part of the reason why his world shone brighter these days. A tall man, strong and black—Tuck knew his imposing stature could easily scare people with just a look. This was a skill he had perfected over time, mind you. It used to frustrate him so how people would just assume he was something to fear. Nowadays, however, he leaned on it like a crutch when he didn't want to be bothered. The face he would show the world was something menacing, something that hid the fact that he was really just an overgrown teddy bear who only minded big bear hugs not because he hated them, but because he needed to avoid them. Or, rather, he needed to avoid siphoning a person's energy by avoiding those hugs. Handshakes, too. He could never figure out why the human race was so obsessed with touching one another. A simple touch when Tuck wasn't paying attention could transfer someone's foul mood, anxiety, depression as well as happiness and excitement. Often times, though, that transference simply led to Tuck feeling *off*, not quite himself. This usually led to a migraine that reminded him that he was, in fact, not careful at some point in his day. Lately, however, that hidden teddy bear had become the face he couldn't hide. This happiness caused him to be quite careless lately. The reason behind that happiness? He had just brought home his baby girl from the hospital, and he couldn't stop that dumb-as-shit grin from stretching across his face.

Rhiannon Stevie Devilliers melted his heart by simply being. He never knew he could love another person this much. He would just die for this little creature. Without hesitation. And, yes, he would die for Jan, too, if the need ever arose...but this felt different. If he had to choose between

his wife's life or his own, he'd want Jan to live. But with Rhiannon, he'd need for her to be the one to live. And if he were perfectly honest, there might be at least a little hesitation if the choice was between himself and Jan. But only a little as he would weigh whatever was best for Rhiannon.

Jan, of course, was as just as crazy in love with their baby. Tuck came home from work to find her feeding Rhiannon on the couch in the middle of the house they rented, singing their daughter's namesake Fleetwood Mac song. Jan's honey-gravel impression of Stevie Nicks was nearly spot on. Trade the mandala hippie dress for some black chiffon, maybe add a twirl or two, and a flowing tambourine, and Jan could pull off her favorite performer. She had the pale skin and Stevie's upturned sprite nose, but without makeup and effects, that was about as far as the comparisons to the singer could stretch. Tuck smiled at his two beauties and cuddled up next to them on the couch. "I don't reckon I ever heard that sung like a lullaby."

"It's pretty versatile," said Jan, her attention to Rhiannon never wavering. "You can sing it country. Make it a ballad. A folk song...I've even attempted a duet, but our Rhiannon keeps mum during her parts." Jan smiled at her own joke, right into the heart of her child, as if somewhere in the ethers she and Rhiannon were laughing together at their private joke. "She seems to like lullaby the best. Don't we?" Like Tuck, she couldn't believe she could love anyone this much. It could hurt to take her gaze from her.

Now Tuck, having grown up and run away from a life rich in Voodoo, had reservations about naming his daughter after a song about a witch, but Jan had insisted. And towards the really uncomfortable end of the pregnancy, Tuck was just so anxious to meet his baby girl and quite sympathetic to just how miserable Jan felt that he would have granted Jan the moon if she had asked for it. Besides, once his daughter was born and he met her, Tuck knew instantly that

Rhiannon was who she always had been. She wasn't a Shirley. Wasn't a Susan. Nor a Rosa. She was Rhiannon—dark and beautiful, whose heart rang like a bell. And, oh, did Tuck just love her.

Jan had been big on the turn on, tune in, drop out counter-culture that saw her at many sit-ins, sleep-ins, love-ins and marching protests. She believed in change; that it was necessary; that there were things worth getting angry about; that she could be part of a revolution towards a solution. Tuck believed the same, to a much lesser degree. He believed that change was necessary, but he had long stopped believing he had a part to play in that change. It wasn't pessimism, just acceptance. It was more important to him that he control his anger, even if he felt a fundamental right to be pissed about things. Racial things. Gender things. Sexuality things. Altered states of consciousness things. Things spiritual and economic. There truly existed so much injustice and ignorance in his world. But, Tuck didn't need that revolution that Jan sought, so long as he could see smaller changes of progress seep into the world around him. Sometimes, he'd assure himself, sometimes progress comes slow and difficult. Sometimes it comes fast and easy. So long as it comes is what mattered most to him.

Jan had also bought into the whole New Age of Aquarius—Mother Earth, healing crystals, pyramids, chakras, meditation, yoga, and a quest for an unyielding source of groovy energy. Tuck knew all about that world from his Mama. All that and hefty doses of curses, sacrifices, demons and the dead. He ran from that world as a kid. Literally ran. And although he experienced his every day world through the lens of the demon realm, the first time he felt any peace in his life was when he ran from Chicago's South Side to the relative calm of Elgin. He, of course, never told Jan about any of this for he knew she would find it interesting. No...fascinating! She would ask questions, and urge him to use his gifts for good—for his spiritual gifts were even more powerful than Tuck

could imagine! Why...she might even encourage him to use those gifts for financial gain, just as his Mama did when she opened The Hoodoo Room—a dive bar with an over-trope voodoo theme. Mama served up beer and curses, cocktails and potions, spirits and...spirits. But Tuck escaped that world for a reason, and even just him talking about that world could redirect his intentions and energies back into alleyways he had left behind. It needed to stay there. Behind him.

What was it like for Tuck to view his world through the demon realm? If you could get him to describe it—which he wouldn't, ever—it would be red. Everything he saw on this plane of existence had a reddish tint to it. He could see through walls and buildings...but not through those walls and into this plane, but rather into the realm. So, if you had hid a demon in your bedroom and Tuck came to visit...he couldn't see that your bed was unmade, but he could see the demon hiding underneath that messy bed. Some folks, like his Mama, would find this gift of his quite useful, but Tuck did not. Nor did he find it interesting. It was a curse. Like some handicap he couldn't escape, and rather try to find a way to take advantage of this handicap, Tuck merely just accepted this as his normal. And knowing that he could see the demons and spirits, he knew they could see him. Or, at least, they could see his aura. He wasn't ever sure if they could every truly see him in the flesh, but he knew that they sensed him much in the way a person who lacks spiritual gifting might sense a strong spirit, and so he worked his damndest to remain hidden. That effort involved keeping his energies neutral. To not feel too much of anything was key. He had to remain calm. Never express his anger. Nor grant himself overwhelming joy. And unfortunately for Tuck, Rhiannon's mere existence sent him over the moon; so much so that he completely overlooked all the necessary reasons he had for struggling to remain neutral all these years.

That night, Tuck awoke about 3am, a smile on his face in the irony that his daughter indeed rang like a bell through the night. It was her “feed me!” cry. He had just sat up when Jan absently groaned awake and instinctively threw the covers off her. “I can take tonight,” Tuck assured her.

Jan blinked at him a few times, trying to wake up. “But you’ve got work tomorrow.”

“Today,” he smiled, putting his thick palm on her relatively tiny leg. “I’m already awake. Just go back to sleep.”

“Are you s-” She instantly relaxed back into her pillow, fast asleep. Tuck grinned, gently draped the covers back over her and kissed her on the cheek.

Jan, of course, would have gotten Rhiannon first before warming the bottle, to calm her and have hope that she would easily fall asleep while feeding. Tuck, however, intentional or not, would teach Rhiannon that things don’t necessarily come right away just because we scream for them at 3am. Learning patience would be important for his children. Already now, Rhiannon would have learned that the food will come, just not necessarily on her time. He listened to her cry while he warmed the bottle, hoping Jan could sleep through the noise that sounded as if her mother had forgotten to feed her for days. He shook his head, smiling and feeling all the love he could feel for such a tiny being.

Just then, a voice he hadn’t heard in ages spoke to him from the dark hallway. A young voice. A teenaged boy. “Say my name!” it demanded.

“Jesus H.!” Tuck gasped, spinning about, clutching the bottle. A ghost stepped into the kitchen; its face, bloated and ashen, just as it was when they found its body drifting down the Fox River so many years ago. Its thin t-shirt hung loose from its stocky frame, with sleeves and a hem

that flowed about him as if he still were floating in the river. Jeans, worn thin with holes, were smeared with mud from the riverbank. One red gym shoe remained. A ghostly toe protruded from the well-worn sock on its left foot. Tuck's lips trembled.

"You don't belong here," said the specter, looking about, quite anxious it seemed. Its eyes turned back on Tuck, speaking through Tuck—as if he merely sensed that Tuck was there in the room but didn't actually see him. "Rabbit!"

Tuck had seen many ghosts on quite a regular basis, but this ghost was personal. It was Tuck's bully in life, Randy—a tyrant on the schoolyard, who had tormented him on a nearly daily basis with his cronies. When Tuck had run from his Voodoo-rich life on the South Side, he escaped to Elgin to live with his aunt and uncle and was the first black kid in the school they had sent him to. *You don't belong here.* Yeah, Tuck heard that a lot, but only from Randy and his goons. Usually at the start of a beat down. *Say my name.* That would come at the end of the beating, when Tuck was sore and exhausted—emotionally and physically. And Tuck, never once, gave in to saying his name. Randy knew he wouldn't say it. That it would be Tuck's way of telling him to fuck off without actually saying anything provocative. *Say my name,* he would repeat, prolonging Tuck's torment until he got bored with his prey, got caught by a teacher, or got so frustrated that Tuck refused to give in that Randy saw no other option but to save the bullying for yet another day. In Tuck's mind, the refusal wasn't just defiance. It was winning, no matter how sore he felt.

And, yet, for all the bruises, cuts and bloody noses, Tuck preferred all that to his Mama's world of ghosts and demons and curses and patron saints of dubious character. Randy was as real a torment as the occult, but—at least in Tuck's schoolyard days—Randy was physical. Randy couldn't materialize in the middle of his kitchen, in the middle of the night, to torture him out of

whatever psychotic tendencies that drove him. But now, all these years later, as a baby bottle trembled in his hand, feet frozen in fear, it only made sense that whatever those psychotic tendencies were in Randy's life would drive him to torment Tuck in death.

Rabbit. That was the newest taunt, towards the end of Randy's life. The very end. It was a threat, and a deathly one at that. Frustrated with Tuck for refusing to submit to his whims, Randy had found an opportunity to teach by example. *Rabbit.* He had just snuffed the life from a young bunny by slowly crushing its neck under his foot to demonstrate to Tuck how perilously close Tuck's own death lingered, but if only Tuck would say his name. Tuck could still hear the poor animal's howls turn to silence. *Rabbit.* Randy would do the same to Tuck, unless Tuck "learned his place" in the confines of the school. The fear that welled up inside Tuck that day...the rage...the frustration...a valve had opened inside of Tuck. Something primal, instinctual. Something that called back to his Mama's world. Tuck didn't mean to tap into that world, siphoning energy from the demon realm. Once those floodgates were opened, they couldn't be shut...but merely managed. His world turned red as he collapsed before the dead rabbit, and he screamed through tears, for Randy had sacrificed this innocent creature to make Tuck do something he didn't want to do. *Say my name!* It was just as powerful a curse as something Mama might conjure with a blood sacrifice, a spell of words, and a clear intention. Randy, of course, didn't see it that way, but for Tuck it felt all too familiar. That gate had opened, and a demon stepped through, standing tall before him.

The demon shimmered purplish-green when its scales reflected in the sun. Its wide, angular mouth smiled at him with fangs. Short horns mirrored one another atop its head. Something about it looked fish-like, yet not a fish. Amphibian, maybe? A dorsal fin fanned out across its back, thin

and undulating with each breath. Its long body ended with a conical tail that bent through legs that crooked down to webbed claws. Its arms and hands matched the legs, giving the impression that it probably normally walked on all fours, and merely showed its height for effect. “Play with me,” it offered.

If Tuck were completely honest, he knew exactly what was being offered. But Tuck never claimed to be completely honest...as an adult clutching a baby bottle, nor as a thirteen-year-old who couldn't fathom ever being married and having a baby. *Play with me*. He was a child when he met this demon, desperate to get rid of his bully. The demon would do just that for him; but of course, demons don't do anything out of the goodness of their hearts. A price must be paid. A sacrifice made. Tuck didn't realize the true nature of this trickster demon, nor could he comprehend the enormity of the deal it offered. To make the bully go away, Tuck would have to give it his first-born child.

And that child had been born, the whole of Tuck's existence that screamed for her meal as he stared, awestruck, at the sheer energy that radiated out from this ghost standing in his kitchen. He desperately tried to take his gaze from it...to direct his own energies elsewhere. To not feed this thing standing before him. But he could not avert his gaze. He wasn't even sure if he was breathing. Randy locked his eyes on Tuck, as if he finally found what he had come here for. Its head cocked slightly as it frowned. “You don't belong here,” he repeated, finally fading away.

Tuck gasped and swallowed, trembling; the bottle reminding him of why he had stumbled out of bed in the first place. He looked up and saw it...the demon that took care of Tuck's schoolyard bully. It was crouched down inside the room up the stairs and just behind him.

Rhiannon's room! Tuck sprinted down the hall, grasping the handrail to the stairs as he spun a u-

turn, his feet slipping out from under him, and bolted upstairs to the nursery. He would take Randy tormenting him from the grave over what waited for him in the tiny room, arching over the crib on account of the demon being much too tall for the space. Tuck gasped when he saw the tail winding out into the hall, but didn't hesitate. He couldn't no longer tell if Rhiannon's wailing was simple hunger, or if the demon was torturing his baby girl. Momma bears get a lot of credit for protecting their young, but daddy bears can be a vicious thing, too. Tuck leapt over the tail and charged into the room, tackling into the side of the demon and bouncing back towards the crib. He snatched Rhiannon from the crib and stumbled on his own momentum, slamming backwards into the changing table, which broke apart and fell in pieces as Tuck fell through it and crashed into the wall. He stopped there, huddling over Rhiannon like some football player clutching the ball, leaning in the Tuck-sized divot he made in the wall.

While that was happening, the demon bent where Tuck tackled him, whipping such that the middle of his back broke through the drywall and a wave of energy rolled up its spine, serpent-like, snapping its head into the ceiling. Drywall chunks littered the nursery as the demon growled, frowning its wide, angular eyes and jutting its fangs, glistening with saliva, at Tuck and Rhiannon. One of its horns snagged on the ceiling fan, yanking it down so that it dangled from its wires. "You owe me that child!" it demanded. Dust settled about the creature, covering the demon's purple- green scales in a sticky paste. Tuck's demon was not happy.

Tuck's eyes had grown fierce. A fiery red energy radiated from every cell of his being. One arm stretched towards the demon's face, forefinger and thumb stretched out like the letter L. Like the demon, his words seethed as he implored help from a deity he had denied since running from Mama, "Papa Legba, mwen sipliye w. Bani sa ki mal. Debarase li nan lavi mwen. Pwoteje timoun

sa a kont tout sa ki ta fè mal!” The demon leaned on the crib, straightening itself up as best it could in the small space, until its head thumped the ceiling and its weight broke the crib. The fan, still swinging, banged it in the face, infuriating him so that he ripped it from its wires and threw it to the ground. Tuck didn’t move, but kept repeating his Creole prayer. “Papa Legba...”

“A debt is owed,” snapped the demon. “A deal was made.”

“A deal you conscripted with a child!”

“Age matters not,” it snarled. “You must give me the child.”

“Papa Legba, mwen sipliye w. Bani sa-”

“Legba isn’t coming.” The beast spoke calmly now. It had been through this scenario countless times over the course of countless centuries. The specifics always changed, but the gist of this moment tasted so sweet to the demon. The *trickster* demon. Its breed was known for making deals. In the past, deals might include getting a wanna-be king his crown, or making a prince of a pauper. The demon always delivered on its promise, knowing that the debt would be too great. Broken deals...that’s where the real magic resided for these demons. A king begging for his princess to be spared. A father calling out to some deity to protect his child. Oh, that was the best appetizer heading into the most scrumptious of meals.

Tuck was unprepared. And the demon’s savoring of this moment threw him off. Of course the demon was right. Legba wasn’t coming. Legba was just a doorway to more powerful deities. But he hadn’t paid those deities any mind in so many years, certainly they wouldn’t come to his aid. Tuck collapsed to his knees, curled over Rhiannon, and sobbed. “Please,” he begged. “You can’t take her.” Of course, Tuck didn’t realize that he was right, too. The demon couldn’t just take

her, for the terms of the deal wouldn't allow it. Tuck had *to give* his first born to the demon. No half-decent parent could ever willingly *give* their child to a demon. The anguish this caused the parent...tasted like the most ridiculous gravy slathered over a plate of the finest steak and potatoes. It was nourishment and pleasure for the demon. The demon, of course, always chose its words well when making deals. "Please," Tuck repeated. "You can't."

The demon watched the father sob, heaving over the hungry child, enjoying the sensations the humans provided until Tuck's panic subsided. He continued crying as he reached over the demon's clawed-foot for the bottle he had dropped and brushed the nipple against the baby's lower lip. She eagerly started to suck, feeding like she was as famished as the demon. Though the demon could relate, the child couldn't possibly understand the intense energy Tuck was providing it in this moment. Tuck looked into the calming face of his child and began to heave again, crying. "I'm so sorry," he said to her. "I'm so, so sorry."

The demon arched one of its brows, curious, for it seemed that perhaps Tuck was so easily ready to accept the fact that the demon would get the debt he was owed. And it would. It always collected. But collecting was never this easy. It shouldn't be this easy. That was part of its game. Like a cat toying with its mouse. The demon was going to collect, but the game still needed to be played. It needed to enjoy and savor an entire smorgasbord of sensations before collecting. "I am not without compassion," it lied, manipulating a new deal. "Three guesses you have. Say my name and the child is yours. Three wrong guesses and I take the child."

Tuck knelt before the demon, now focusing on wrapping a fierce white-hot protective energy about Rhiannon. "Take me instead. Please."

The demon cocked its head askew. Normally, the deal-breaker always leaps at the chance. Tuck was most curious. And frustrating. “Three wrong guesses and I take the child,” it repeated. Words matter, of course. Not only would three guesses prolong Tuck’s suffering, adding more delicacies to the demon’s feast, but it would change the terms. “Give her now, or take three guesses.”

Tuck sniffled, searching his mind for a name as he poured all his energy into a shell about his baby, warm and loving, like back in the womb, comforting the child back to sleep as the bottle emptied. What could the demon’s name be? Just as he had run from the South Side all those years ago, Tuck was racing back there in his mind...down streets and alleys, desperately searching for a name. Any name from any demon that made any logical sense in this most illogical situation. No name could be found.

The demon didn’t understand that Tuck had already accepted the new deal. His silence merely looked like stubbornness. “I shall return tomorrow. Give her to me then, or offer your first guess.”

Staring at the ground, Tuck watched the claws before him fade away. A deep breath gasped inward as he collapsed backwards into the wall. He rolled off his knees, leaning sideways over Rhiannon, crying out uncontrollably. Almost as awful as when Randy had threatened him with death. He felt like he was that kid again. Helpless. Desperate. The tears spilled, dripping from his face along with snot as he struggled to get his breathing under control.

“Tuck?” Jan stood in the doorway, startling her husband. She was unsure she was really awake. She had never seen Tuck upset before. She noticed his anguish before she even saw the damage to the nursery. “What the fuck?” Her eyes widened, surveying the mess. “Rhia?!” Tuck

held her up to Jan, who took her and held her close as Tuck pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms about himself. Jan blinked hard at the mess before kneeling next to her husband, rubbing the back of his neck. “Hon?” The face that looked to her belonged to some stranger. Never had she seen panic in him. Fear. Anger. Hurt. She had only ever seen him calm, except perhaps lately after the baby had been born. Then he was just full of love. But even then, she felt, he had always seemed to hold back somewhat.

“Someone tried to take Rhia,” he whispered.

“What?!” With a baby in her arms, Jan sprang up from a kneeling position with very little effort. All her years of yoga left her surprisingly strong with her tiny frame. “I’m calling the police!” She turned to race for the phone, but Tuck dove and grabbed her by the ankle.

“No!” He shook his head, grabbing the first lie that came to him. “It’s about the weed. No cops.”

“The weed?” Rhiannon began to cry, distracting Jan from her confusion. Jan instinctively began to bounce. “The police aren’t going to care about you selling a little weed if there’s a kidnapping going on.” She looked about the room. “A breaking and entering. Assault!”

“Jan, no!” He climbed to his feet, much less easy than it was for Jan. “I have priors. A record. A year in prison.”

“Someone’s trying to take our baby!” she shouted. “They’re not going to care about the piddly amounts you sell!”

“I’m black. It won’t be a slap on the wrist. I’d be lucky to get *just* one more year.”

Her eyes darted back and forth to his, tears welling. “I’ll say it’s mine. And technically it is! It’s ours.”

“No. They’ll just come down harder on me because you’re a white girl protecting the black man who corrupted you.”

“Well, what do they want? Money? More weed? What? What would they possibly gain by taking a baby?”

Tuck had no logical answer, but his deflection made perfect sense. He began snatching items from around the room—diapers, clothes, bath stuff—cramming whatever he could find into a diaper bag. “Get a motel room. Plan for about a week.”

“Where are we going?”

“Not we. You. And Rhia. Don’t tell me where you go. I can’t know where you’re at. Just go.”

“No.” She bounced and shook. “No. I’m afraid.”

“I’m scared, too!” He didn’t mean to shout. He was just feeling, wrapped up in intensity he simply never allowed himself. And Jan could see she was dealing with a side of Tuck that was desperate to gain control of the moment. “I need you to go. Don’t tell me where. Just call me when you get settled in.”

As soon as Jan had left, Tuck raced to the garage they had mostly used for storage of discarded finds—a perfectly good and beautiful couch that was too big for this house, boxes of

tools, a dining room set, knickknacks, and such. All of it, items they had collected from the side of the street on garbage day in the nicer areas of town. They had been planning to buy a house some day soon, and all this stuff was the perfect price for preparing for their dream starter. Tuck wouldn't allow any of this stuff inside until he "deloused" them, as he explained to Jan. The reality was, whenever they had a new find, Tuck would need to cleanse the energy from the previous owners, usually with a bit of sage and a small incantation. In those moments, he would recognize the hypocrisy of denying this bit of magic whenever it served his purpose. But, as far as magic goes, saging a couch with a few minor enchantments was pretty banal. Besides, sometimes the energy being cleansed would cause him the most horrific migraines, particularly when the previous owner was a bit hyperactive in nature.

Not all of this reclaimed stuff, however, was ever meant to be a part of that dream he shared with Jan, and not all of this stuff was found on the side of the road. He scraped a ladder across the cement slab, banging it against the one hanging lamp on accident. It swayed about him, casting eerie shadows that stretched and danced in the dusty space. He climbed up over the ceiling joists, careful to balance his frame across the beams and crouch low enough to avoid banging his head into the roofing nails as he inched towards a short stack of boxes. He tugged at a stack with the very tips of his fingers, scooching it along the beams far enough so that he could reach behind it for another box it hid. As his arm stretched, a glint of the dancing light caught in a dark set of eyes. A growl and a screech sounded as a set of teeth charged, surprising Tuck such that he fell back, one leg slipping off the ceiling joist and Tuck's hip catching him on the other beam he had been crouching on. Instinctively, he reached up to grab something and ripped the side of his hand open with a roofing nail.

“Sonofabitch!” he groaned...just a raccoon, which quickly navigated its way outside. Tuck inspected his hand and all the blood that dripped. He took his shirt off, fussing with it in the small space he found himself in, and wrapped the hand—not only to stop the bleeding, but to avoid getting any blood on what was in the box he came for. Blood was powerful energy, and that energy was dangerous with the contents of the box. He carefully moved it down the ladder, killed the light and shut the garage when another sound startled him.

“Mornin’ Tuck!” His neighbor was leaving for work with the dawn.

“Frank,” Huck nodded, humping the box onto his shoulder.

“Everything alright?” Tuck stopped mid-step, and flashed him a look...why wouldn’t everything be alright? “You’re not usually skittish. Or half-naked and bleeding. Pilfering stuff from your garage in the middle of the night.”

“Um...” Tuck imagined what he must look like in that moment. He could feel a bruise already on his hip. Probably bleeding, too. Something wet on the side of his leg started to feel cold. “Have a good day, Frank.” Tuck hurried back inside and plopped the box on the kitchen table. He’d leave his hip for later, but needed to get his hand taken care of before daring to open the box. He unwrapped it at the sink, wincing when the water hit it. It would need stitches. He wrapped it tight with paper towels and dug through the junk drawer for a needle and thread. Certainly Jan kept a needle and thread, and she did...just not in the junk drawer. Tuck didn’t think to look any further, however, when he stumbled across some super glue. He haphazardly squirted a bead in the wound, pinching the sides together...a trick he had learned from his very brief stint in the army. Once the glue sealed the wound, he cleaned it off a little more and returned to the box.

He blew the dust off its top, coughing away the cloud, and opened it to a collection of beautiful and ornate books from his Mama. Among the truck, there was a Bible, books on the occult, a grimoire of sorts that had been in his family since slavery—documenting and illustrating traditions, spells, incantations and creatures that were relevant to his family from many generations before his family was brought to the country in chains. Every one of these books was worth a small fortune. As much as Tuck wanted to pitch this box, this box held his heritage. It was one thing to reject his birthright, but to throw it in the landfill or sell for money seemed a level of disrespect he wouldn't dare. The karmic debt alone would probably destroy him in his next life, and if his Mama had ever found out, she would help him see that next life sooner than Tuck had planned.

The book he needed was like an encyclopedia of demons, legends, myths, and useful spells that had been collected across cultures and centuries. The Pentamon's Grimm, compiled and published in the 1700s, became an important reference in the family collection after a slave ancestor stole it from her master's library. This particular book wasn't worth a small fortune, but was considered priceless. Tuck held the thick volume up to the kitchen light. Energy that he would describe as a constant flow, pulsating and feathering out like black smoke. It wasn't an evil energy, just muddled. None of these books were inherently evil, per se...evil vs. good depended largely on the reader's intent, which left its mark on the pages. There were good fingerprints, neutral ones, and downright evil fingerprints. All that energy swirled together and just oozed, as if the book itself could welcome Tuck back into its pages and bid him to cast a new set of prints.

Tuck took the volume to the living room and collapsed into the couch, plopping the book on their coffee table. Of course, this book didn't have an index. Nor was it organized in any manner useful to Tuck. He wasn't even sure what he was looking for, aside from a named demon. Given

the creature's amphibious appearance, Tuck guessed it was a water demon. Aside from that, he really didn't know what he was dealing with. He quickly scanned through the pages, flipping them maniacally, occasionally folding a corner when a page held a description of a demon that maybe could fit the bill, or if he stumbled across a spell that might just be truly useful in his situation. The mounting dog-ears would surely diminish the pricelessness of this book, but it wasn't a book that would ever be sold, and it certainly wasn't worth more to him than Rhiannon. So wrapped up in his quest was he that he completely forgot to call in sick to work.

"Something's wrong with the baby," Tuck explained when his boss called, and it wasn't a lie. The apology for his no-call-no-show was sincere, yet vacant, and Tuck felt grateful his boss recognized that he was his best employee who couldn't give a damn in this moment. Tuck hung up the phone and paced the kitchen, realizing he needed the break the phone call afforded. He snatched an apple from the fridge and went to the back yard. There, he crunched up his toes between the grass and tried to ground himself again. He could do so, but only for a short moment. Then it was like he was trying to balance a set of scales where the slightest adjustment on one side would quickly cause the other side to dip and climb. He would struggle with that balance for the rest of the day, pouring through that book.

Hastrman was the obvious answer, but that demon was too froglike. And too fishlike for that matter. He did have scales, though they were black. Dobhar-chú could look like his demon. Basically a water hound mashed with a fish and an otter. But he lacked horns and was probably too hairy. He really couldn't tell from the sketch in the book. He had once heard of Chessie, from Chesapeake Bay, sort of like a Loch Ness Monster—serpentine with flippers and scales. But the first sighting of that beast wasn't until long after Pentamon's had been published. But that got Tuck

thinking...what if his demon wasn't even in this book? What if it didn't even have a name to guess? Bäckhästen, from Scandinavia, a kelpie that usually appeared as a horse could have been his demon if for no other reason than it was a shape-shifter. Was Tuck dealing with a shape-shifter? If that was the case, then the demon could be any answer he might find in those old pages. This horse thing, though, didn't strike deals—it would lure its victims to ride on its back and then ride them into the water to drown them. Certainly too different from how his demon operated. Vodianoï was a type of demon that had scales. They, too, drowned their victims, to take them as slaves in their underwater dwellings. Not only would a baby be useless as a slave, but this type of demon usually appeared as an old man with long green beards and hair. But, again, it was also a type of shape-shifter. Why couldn't Tuck's demon be a Vodianoï? "Christ!" Tuck threw down the book.

At last, the phone rang again. Surely, it would be Jan. "You get settled in, yet?" he asked, not even greeting her properly.

"Well," an exhausted Jan began. "We can't check in until 4, so we're just hanging out at—"

"No! Don't tell me!"

"Seriously? You're really not going to join us?"

"I want to, hon." He breathed into the phone, doing his best to not just start sobbing again.

"I can't. Not yet. You remember where we first met?"

"At the—"

"Just meet me there in three days," he blurted, not wanting her to say it out loud. "Noon. If you don't hear from me. How's Rhia?"

“If I don’t hear from you for three days, you can be damn sure the police will be looking for you before then.”

“Jan, please trust me.” Tuck swallowed, unsure that she should. “I’ll get us to the other side of this and then we’ll be good again.”

“This doesn’t make any sense, hon. A drug dealer or whatever. Why would they want Rhiannon?”

Tuck felt flustered, for he hadn’t been thinking about anything other than finding that demon’s name. “You know that couch in the garage?” It was the first thought that came to him and he latched onto it. It wouldn’t be a lie, for ultimately, he believed, this is what he was supposed to say in this moment, even if what he was looking for was a deflection. A deflection needn’t be a lie, after all. “How ‘bout we give it a home?”

“It’s too big for the house.” He could tell she was bouncing the baby as she spoke. “We wouldn’t have room for the table.”

“Not a house,” Tuck said. “A home. Let’s get ourselves a home.” Silence. “Hon?”

“Can we afford it?”

“You know what we got saved up. Why don’t you go and find us a place?”

“What about packing where we’re renting?”

“I’ll tackle that. Just don’t put an offer down on anything unless you know we can afford it.” More silence. “Jan?” A sudden scream from the other end of the line terrified him. “Jan?!” And then behind him, a voice grumbled.

“You don’t belong here.”

Tuck twisted around and gasped. Randy stood in the middle of the living room. Its vacant expression looking about until it landed on Tuck, looking right at him and yet, through him.

“Say my name!”

Tuck swallowed. “Jan?!”

Jan’s laughter calmed him none. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just got excited! I woke the baby. I gotta-”

Tuck slammed the handset down on the receiver. “Don’t feed it. Don’t feed it. Don’t feed it.” Tuck continued to repeat himself, pacing in a small circle, eyes closed, frustrated palms smacking himself on the head. “Don’t feed it.”

“Rabbit!”

He finally opened his eyes, sensing Randy had gone. He stared at the space the ghost had occupied, catching his breath. Then he sensed another presence, and slowly looked up. His demon was upstairs in the nursery, slowly turning, lumbering down the stairs in heavy steps. Tuck trembled, mouth agape, as the demon stretched its way through the hallway and into the kitchen.

Oh, how Tuck’s terror tasted to the creature! It wanted more! And more! But, of course, it wouldn’t taste nearly as sweet as the flesh of Tuck’s child. It spied the book that had consumed Tuck’s day and chuckled slow and deep. “Pentamon’s. You find me there?” Tuck didn’t respond. That answered one of Tuck’s questions...the demon could see into the physical world. There were no words for Papa Legba. No pleas for baby Jesus. Only fear gripping his throat. “I should be quite disappointed if not,” said the demon. And that was only its ego speaking, for if the creature was

an entry among the various demons and ghosts and spells, then surely Tuck would find his answer. “Have you found my name?” Tuck stared into its wide and thick lips. The way they moved around the fangs and sharp teeth within. “Your first guess?”

Tuck’s mind flipped through the pages of the book. Every demon he could remember. What this a trickster? What this a shape-shifter? What would it want with a baby? His baby? At last, his brain landed on an entry that—if Tuck squinted just right—could maybe possibly be his demon. Maybe. The Makara—a type of creature that would be a mix of land and water creatures. Like Papa Legba, they were used to bring forth deities...but unlike Papa Legba, they literally carried the deities rather than acted like a gateway. Maybe this was how his demon knew of Papa Legba? Were the Makara evil or good? Tuck couldn’t remember. Did they make deals? His brain fully latched on the idea of the Makara that he couldn’t remember anything else. No other name came to mind. “M-“ His breathing raced.

“M?” The demon raised its eyes before frowning. “Is that your guess?”

Makara wasn’t a name. Rather, it was the name of a type of creature. Were they demonic? Thoughts jumbled in Tuck’s mind. He had no answer. No answer that made perfect sense. Nothing. “C-” He swallowed, conjuring the only name he had for a Makara. “C-c-c-c-ca-p”

“C-c-c-c-ca-p?” His demon mocked him.

“C-cap,” Tuck swallowed, scrunching his eyes shut, trying to force a name that had lodged in his throat until he finally blurted it out like a chunk of meat that had choked him nearly to death. “Capricorn!”

The demon's eyes grew wide as it gasped, clutching its hands to its chest, writhing in pain. "Capricorn!" it shouted in its deep, throaty voice.

For a moment, Tuck felt relief. Like he had slayed the dragon after a long, battle-worn quest. But his demon was merely mocking him.

Its laughter started slow and then filled the space of the house. "Capricorn!" it coughed through belly convulsions. Oh, Tuck's quick-returning pain felt like some savory butter, until at last, the demon's laughter faded. "I shall return tomorrow for your second guess." A menacing chuckle resumed as the creature faded from Tuck's kitchen. Tuck stared where it had stood, trembling... his lips quivering. The long, sturdy legs that carried this strong man suddenly gave out. Not seeming to even buckle beneath him, they simply slipped out from underneath him. Tuck collapsed onto the floor and sobbed, crying out for a savior, any savior, deity or otherwise. And at the end of the anguished breath lingered a name that surprised him. It was *Mama*. And though he had rejected her Voodoo world, Tuck truly felt like a wounded child, desperately crying out for his mom.

Yet he didn't really want to see Mama any more than he wanted to see this demon. As he raced into the city, he marveled at the irony of his own self. He didn't fear Mama any more than he should. He feared what she represented. All the things that could go wrong when you mess with these powers. She had nothing to do with this demon. And yet, she did. Whether she had inadvertently taught Tuck the skills that he needed to accidentally summon this creature when he was a child or it was a gift she had given him as his birthright...in his own DNA...this demon had everything to do with her. He wove through traffic just as Voodoo had woven itself through him. With intent. He was just another vehicle for this magic. He may have chosen to get out of its way,

to run from it, but by then Voodoo had already hopped in the car and not only rode alongside with Tuck, but drove the damn car. It was a cruel trick.

That the demon was a water demon, Tuck was sure of that. Was it a shape-shifter? The joke it played when Tuck had guessed its name made him wonder. Why hadn't it just taken Rhiannon when it first showed up, towering over her crib? Why play this little game? *Play with me*. The details of their original deal played clear in his mind. The demon was toying with him even back when they had first met. It offered a deal. A deal that would most certainly be broken. Tuck nearly hit the brakes on I-90 when he realized...the demon could not simply *take* Rhiannon. Tuck had to give her. It wasn't compassion, obviously, that caused the demon to change the terms. It wanted to play this sick game to torment Tuck a little longer. But the terms at the end of three guesses now allowed for it to take Tuck's child from him. It was most definitely a trickster.

Tuck drove past The Hoodoo Room—Mama's bar—to find a place to park. Although he left the city well before he was legally allowed to drive, Mama had him driving when it wasn't so legal whenever the convenience of having a personal valet was necessary. She would hop out of the running car in front of the bar and tell him to park it. And almost always, she'd call back "and don't forget to lock it!" as he slid over from the passenger side to the driver side. He used to be able to parallel park easy enough, but hadn't had much need to in Elgin. When he killed the ignition, he rest his head on the steering wheel, hands at ten and two. Mama's abilities would surely have alerted her by now that he was near, just as he could sense her. Unlike being able to see into and through the demon realm, sensing Mama's energies was more of a feeling. Chaotic. A swirling vortex that spun in the right side of his head, where the brain met the spine. When he was a child, Tuck thought that feeling was normal. That everybody felt it just as you would feel

an itch that needed scratching. The way a person's energy hit him was unique for everyone, and the cacophony of it all was something Tuck had to work through—how to tune it out, to focus on certain energies the way you might tune a radio to a specific frequency. All those radio stations broadcast through the air, a jumbled mess on top of one another, but a radio—much like Tuck's brain had to learn—hones in on a single frequency. Before Tuck figured out how to manage that, he was cursed with those constant migraines. “Just because the energy is there,” Mama would say, “doesn't mean you have to accept it. Nor do you need to reject in order to not accept it. Just focus.” Perhaps he had learned more from her than he cared to admit.

He stepped out of the car to the familiar sounds and smells and sights. It felt heavy on him, like an old winter coat. He loved it. Missed it. But it was all too close to Mama, whom he also loved and missed. It wasn't her that he rejected after all, but the Voodoo that might as well have been her. Around the corner, he walked in front of the building painted dark as night. “Ambiance,” Mama would say, never explaining to the patrons the color acted as a buffer of sorts—keeping the energies in or out of her space. Since he had left, Mama had put up a beautiful sign. Dancing red letters with red neon. Purplish-blue skulls on either side of The Hoodoo Room. The sensation of his hand on the door felt smaller than he remembered, but literally nothing had changed inside. It was still an over-trope Voodoo theme one might expect to call in the tourists down in New Orleans. He looked about at all the skulls, the headdresses, the decorated gourds, feathers, candles. All the same as when he left. The bartender...she was new, and much, much too young to be serving alcohol.

The big afro added a foot and half to the lanky girl's boney frame. She stopped wiping down the bar top and paused on Tuck, who frowned back at her. “Maybelline?”

“Maybell.” She resumed her cleaning. “And you are?”

Mama answered, coming in from the hall that led to the restrooms. “Tucker. John. Devilliers.”

Maybell’s eyes grew as wide as her toothy grin. “Cousin?”

Tuck turned to Mama. She was shorter and rounder than he remembered. Oh, but those eyes were just as fierce. She was scolding her child with fake contempt. “As I live and breathe.”

“Mama.” His eyes instinctively cast down as shame washed over him for abandoning her, the bar, and the city. Guilt for all the unreturned phone calls and holidays made meaningless without his presence. She gave him life. He was her joy, just as Rhiannon was his. How it would break his heart should Rhiannon ever do something like that to him. It all felt so different now that he was a parent, yet now more than ever, so very necessary. He hadn’t needed, wanted, or counted on comfort from anyone in all these years and it felt so easy and selfish to just let the tears well up and flow before her.

Those tears washed away all the fake anger and very real hurt from Mama. “Oh, baby,” she breathed, stepping up to the man who would always be just that to her...her baby. Her arms wrapped about him and held him as tight as all those years apart warranted.

“I need help,” he finally said.

“Maybell, lock the doors.” Mama pointed, leading Tuck to the Hoodoo Room in the back, where she helped those who came to her for spells, hexes and whatnot.

Maybell’s chin dropped to her chest. “I can go home?”

“Do whatever you want, child,” Mama responded, as they disappeared down the hallway.

“I don’t see no chains on your feet.”

The Hoodoo Room was the name of the bar, but the room where Tuck now sat was the actual Hoodoo Room. Even more over-trope than the proper bar. Shelves with shrunken heads and crystals, bottles of mystical and not-so-mystical liquids, tiny drawers filled with various spices and herbs and twigs and rocks and other seemingly random stuff that gave the space a gritty funk. Dark velvet and family heirlooms hung from the wall for effect and utility, most notably a curio cabinet full of twelve slave rag dolls. Tuck’s book collection was both priceless and yet a small fortune compared to the various knickknacks that cluttered this room. He felt an immediate connection to it all, his heritage. But the orb in the center of the table felt a bit kitschy.

“A crystal ball?” he asked as Mama sat across from him.

“Crystal gazing is a thing, child.”

“But a crystal ball? That’s kind of...”

“Shtick? Blame Hollyweird. The magic is all real, but part of what I do is theater, which helps get people to let their guard down. You, however...are shut tighter than a nun’s-”

“Mama.”

“Is this about my grandbaby?”

“How you know about Rhiannon?”

“I hear things.”

He stared a moment. “Auntie?”

“Well, sure, she tells me a thing or two on the rare notion she gets for having a sister, but I probably knew about my grandbaby before even that white girl you married. She’s powerful.”

“Jan?”

“Rhiannon.”

Tuck shook his head. He definitely didn’t want any of this for his daughter. “I need a Hermetic.”

Mama’s eyes grew wide. “A Hermetic?”

“A powerful one at that.”

“What’s chasing you?” she frowned.

“Chasing Rhiannon. I don’t-” Tuck swallowed. “I don’t want to talk about it. Don’t want to feed it.”

“Oh?” Her head pulled back, eyes wide. “This ain’t of the mortal realm.” Mama leaned back and sized up the man that was her boy. “Sometimes you gotta feed a beast in order to starve it.” Mama was always good for saying shit like that...complete nonsense on the surface, but with a meaning that a deeper level offered clarity. Tuck didn’t think treating his demon like some goldfish he won at a carnival was a great analogy, though he knew what she meant. Mama saw him ponder on her words and frowned, turning her head aside, trying to get a read on Tuck. “Whatever it is is ancient. A wet energy.”

“Auntie couldn’t have told you that.”

“I hear things,” she repeated with a smirk.

“Mama, I’m sorry. For coming back to this. For leaving it all behind.”

“If you’d stayed, hon, a Hermetic would be no challenge for you. You got more power behind you than I ever had.”

“Exactly why I had to go,” he sighed. “Will you help?”

She gazed into the crystal ball with no hint of mysticism. Just staring to gather her thoughts. Finally, her chair scooted back and she rose to the curio cabinet. She pointed at the dolls it contained with two fingers that twitched as she passed over each doll, moving back and forth. “Ole Miss Sipsey, it is,” she finally exclaimed. She opened the tiny door to the compartment that held the doll and carefully pulled it out. The rag doll had a dress made from old sheets, black yarn hair that was braided and tied with ribbons that matched the dress. Its face was both sewn and painted on in an unblinking, uncaring blankness. “She’s been in our family since slavin’.”

“You don’t worry anyone might come and steal your shit?”

“My shit?” she chuckled. “Name one body with half a sense to not be afraid to take any of my shit.” She moved behind Tuck, nudging his head with her palm—in part because it had been years since she had touched her child’s head and she simply wanted to, in part to mark him as “protected” with her energy in a way he might not notice. She dropped the doll in his lap and moved on to the cabinet with the tiny spice drawers. She mumbled as she moved from drawer to drawer, the noise of her swirling at the base of Tuck’s head, as she added dashes of various oddities into a gris-gris—a pouch she tied up as she handed it to him. “You know how to sew, yes? You learned that much from me?”

Tuck swallowed, not knowing if the jab was playful or hurtful. “Sure.”

“Cut open the back of Ole Miss Sipsey here, pack that inside along with a drop of my grandbaby’s blood to activate it.” She sighed, closing her eyes as if saying a prayer or casting a spell in her mind. “Probably best to add a healthy dose of your own as well. Sew it back up. Keep it near my grandbaby. All times.”

“Does it need Rhia’s blood, too?” Tuck shrugged. “Her blood is my blood, right?”

“Her blood is also some white girl’s blood,” Mama nodded. Tuck latched on to *some white girl*. Mama wasn’t being racist...that pretty much summed up all Tuck was ever told of his father. *Some white guy*. Now that Tuck was a parent, more than ever, he wished he knew his father. Tuck never really knew what being-a-dad was, and felt like he was just winging it. Mama pinched the air in front of her. “My grandbaby’s blood goes in, too. Just a smidge...all that’s needed.”

She walked him back to the door and forced a long hug on him for her sake. She stepped back with her hands still attached to his arms as if unable to let go. “I appreciate you coming here. Whatever situation you’re in, I mean...that would bring you back home. It must be dire, knowing what all this means to you.” She looked about her bar.

“Thank you,” he replied, shaking her gifts in front of him.

The door rattled, quite violently, jarring the two from their moment. A muffled voice sounded from the outside, “That bitch closed tonight?”

Mama frowned. “That bitch will be open in a few minutes, Jared. Unbunch those panties ‘a yours.”

A brief silence passed before the voice replied. “Sorry, ma’am.”

Mama stared into her son's eyes with a smile. "Damn right you're sorry when I get through with you."

Tuck returned the smile. "You don't ever change, do you?"

"And mess with this perfection?" she smirked. "I know that my energies throw you off, son, but I'd like to think with that Hermetic on you, you might be able to at least risk a phone call once in a while. Don't be a stranger."

"I promise," he nodded stepping out into the busy night as Jared, presumably, stepped inside.

"Who you calling a bitch?" Mama greeted her customer as Tuck walked to his car. She, of course, knew his promise was a lie, every bit as much as Tuck knew she had marked him.

On his way back to the suburbs, Tuck stopped off at a K-Mart for a hunting knife and a travel sewing kit. He hadn't seen Randy, who so far had only appeared just before whenever his demon showed. He didn't sense the ghost, nor the demon. But to be sure he could shake the both of them, Tuck needed to do what he was going to do while driving on the highway. Back in the car, he cut a delicate slit down the doll's back. It truly was a priceless treasure that his mother had gifted him, yet still stuffed with just ancient beans and pebbles and scraps of cloth. And now, it was about to become a powerful talisman. A Hermetic. He tucked the gris-gris among the stuffing and splayed out the gap so that he could easily access it while speeding along the highway. He hopped back on 90 and drove along with the traffic, carefully managing the wheel with his left forearm that held the knife and wincing as he slid his right palm across the blade. He couldn't believe he was doing this. That he needed to do all this. But, here he was, offering a blood sacrifice

over a sack of whatever it was Mama had gathered. He dropped the knife and squeezed his palm over the doll's gaping backside and uttered a few words to Legba, imploring help from the deities. He might have turned his back on those deities, but they would help him. Of course they would help. Not necessarily for Tuck's sake, but for Rhiannon's. She was powerful in a way Tuck wasn't able to sense. Important. And otherwise defenseless until she grew into those powers once they started to manifest.

"Oh!" Tuck gasped, feeling a sudden burst of energy. A kind of energy he hadn't ever felt before. It washed over him. Enveloped him. He drove through a void, inside a pocket that felt sealed from the world, as if external energies warped around him rather than through him...light bending around the event horizon of a black hole, unaware of the bend in its path. Tuck felt an expansion within himself, a tingling sensation that almost felt lifting him from his car seat. Nearly afloat.

He didn't go home that night. Nor the next, when his demon would return for Tuck's second guess. He instead crashed at a Motel 6 a few towns over, waiting to see if his demon would find him. Jan had no way of reaching him. Nor he reaching her. When the beast didn't come knocking on his motel room door, he returned home; both to wait on Jan's call and for the ultimate test of Mama's magic. He wondered what he must look like to Frank, if his neighbor was watching him per usual, as he walked from the car to the house, his hand bound up in a bloodied scrap of cloth, clutching a hunting knife while delicately holding an ancient slave rag doll in the other. Tuck felt like he was headed to battle despite the fact that he had no intention of facing his demon—today, nor ever again. You see, Tuck figured a loophole in the rules of the demon's game, just as he had figured out why the demon couldn't merely take his daughter on the first night of its return. With

the new terms, Tuck had to give three wrong guesses to the demon's name and only *then* could the demon take Rhiannon. But, what if Tuck never made those guesses? What if Tuck and Rhiannon could stay safely hidden inside the power of the Hermetic? Indefinitely?

He had left Pentamon's Grimm on the kitchen counter, but it now rested on the back of the couch, just below a dent in the wall. His demon must have thrown it in anger. He sure hoped Mama's magic would hold. He took the book with him upstairs towards the bedroom to grab a change of clothes, pausing at the doorway to the disaster that was Rhiannon's room. He definitely wouldn't be getting his security deposit back. Tuck started to throw clothes and necessities into garbage bags and tossing them into the back yard. His stash of weed, hidden within the hide-a-bed of their couch, would stay with him in a backpack. He'd have a moving crew pick up everything and pack up the house to wherever they were headed. Hopefully Jan found a place, for as much as he loved and appreciated his aunt and uncle, Tuck definitely did not want to ask them if not only could he move back in with them, but also his family. They would say yes, of course, were he to ask. He just didn't want to ask. He was a grown man and was used to the privacy and autonomy of being on his own.

He crouched on the kitchen floor, tossing pots and pans from the cabinet into a box when the phone rang. "Please tell me you found a place!" he answered, again, just assuming the person on the other side of the line was his wife.

A happy scream came back at him. "They *just* accepted my offer!"

Tuck grinned and laughed. "Damn, you're fast!"

“They hadn’t even put it up for sale, yet!” The excitement in her voice radiated from the speaker. “We were driving around, looking for for sale signs, when I just felt compelled to turn down this street. There was a moving truck outside. I knocked on the door. Found out they just inherited it from some hoarders in their family. Can I tell you where?”

“Yes! Please!” He really wasn’t sure if that was the right answer, but her excitement was contagious. He had faith in Mama’s spells, but if the test failed, he was mentally preparing to never see his family again. Trying to, anyway. He would probably have to rely on Mama more than ever if the Hermetic didn’t hold.

“Near Six Corners, on Hamilton.”

“West side?”

Jan heard his frown through the phone. “Relax! We can afford this. It’s kind of a dump. Needs a lot of work. But you’re handy and I’m crafty. It’ll be our dump to fix. They even said if I wanted any of the mess they had to haul away, it was ours! The stuff ain’t the best, but it isn’t bad either. There’s a dining room, Tuck! A real dining room. With a table and chairs and even a hutch that’s ours. If we want it.”

“Dump sweet home,” Tuck chuckled, anticipating all the “delousing” he would need to do. “Love it.” Tuck’s eyes then grew wide. He was recognizing Randy’s energy hit him in the chest. The ghost was certainly trying to materialize. “Meet me where we met!” He slammed down the phone and looked about for the ghost. It hadn’t fully arrived. The demon would certainly be right behind it.

He slid the box of pots and pans across the floor, grabbed the doll, and wedged himself into the cabinet. It was, quite thankfully, a corner blind, so it had lots of room...but it was still a tight place for a man as large as Tuck. So compressed into the space was he that his knees pressed into his chest, forcing him to take shallow breaths.

“You don’t belong here!” Randy shouted at last. Tuck could see it, dreamlike, in the same space in the hall where he had seen him first. Its vacant stare surveyed the kitchen, never seeming fully cognizant of whatever the gaze latched onto. “Say my name!” It stepped into the kitchen and then seemed attracted to the dent the demon made into the wall with Pentamon’s. It moved, fluid- like, its shirt undulating ripples as it moved into the living room and cocked its head aside in the direction of the wall divot. “Rabbit!” It then quickly faded as the demon materialized upstairs in Rhia’s room.

The demon growled, annoyed that Tuck seemingly wasn’t there to greet him with the baby, and then lumbered down the stairs, one leg thudding on each step, as if it were trying to break the boards beneath its webbed feet. “You owe me two guesses!” it hissed, turning at the end of the stairs and thundering into the kitchen. It turned its angular head to the place where Randy had stood and saw the book was gone. “You’ve been home since I was here last.” Two heavy steps sounded into the kitchen, followed by the slithering of its tail. “Two guesses and a child.” It looked to the left, and then the right, sniffing the air. “We made a deal.”

Tuck could hear his heartbeat thundering in his ears, drowning out his breathing. His eyes latched onto the demon’s plodding as it moved about the table and along the cabinets. It pounded on the counter, rattling the box in which Tuck hid. Tuck tensed up even tighter, looking up at his demon through the fake wood of the cabinets, the formica laminate countertop and into the demon

realm. Looked as giant as when they first met. The demon roared and slammed his fist on the kitchen table...its thin wooden legs slipped out and splintered. The table fell, landing against one of the chairs before the demon kicked up at it and it flew backwards, tumbling through the air and cracking against the coffee table in the living room.

“Two guesses!” it howled. Tuck closed his eyes, forcing them tighter and tighter as if doing so would also shut his ears to the noise. “Two guesses and a child!” And when Tuck failed to show himself, the demon tried a personal attack. “Are you not man enough to pay your debts?”

But Tuck would not take the bait. He remained as still as he could, balled up in the cabinet.

“I will find you!” the demon shouted before roaring out his rage. It hurled a chair across the room and into the upper cabinets. Splintered wood rained down, denting the oven as it fell. It then kicked at the box of pots and pans, which rattled against the wall and clanged onto the floor.

Just then, a crow cracked itself against the kitchen sink window, startling the demon and grabbing its attention. “I’m only here for what I’m owed!” it shouted up to the heavens. “Two guesses and a child!” Another crow slammed, followed by another, cracking the pane. Surely this must be Legba and the deities responding, protecting what Mama had marked. Another crow burst through, shattering glass, followed by a steady stream of birds that flew in and swirled about the demon, all cawing and whistling, wings fluttering, pecking at it and causing him to twist and turn, duck and howl the loudest rage that shook the very foundation of the house. “I will find you!” it shouted as it quickly dissipated, leaving behind a clear, watery vision of itself...as if the demon were cast in liquid that remained slightly before crashing into a puddle of water that splashed across the floor and up the sides of the cabinets and walls. The birds all squawked, pulling from

their swirling attack and retreated backwards from the wet spray, finally resuming another spin about the room before darting out the window from whence they came.

Tuck remained hidden for a time, gradually permitting himself deeper breaths, until he finally gathered enough courage to push against the magnet that held the cabinet door shut. The kitchen air felt cool and clean, rushing into his face as he crawled out. A single crow remained, thick and sturdy, perched on the countertop, and with its dark eyes it watched Tuck rise up to his full height, clutching the ancient slave rag doll. It stretched out its wings and flapped, tucking them away as Tuck bent over to look into its eyes. “Legba?” he asked.

Tuck didn’t get any clear acknowledgement. The bird flapped its wings, hovering slightly and then darting to the top of the fridge. Tuck smiled in appreciation, knowing he was protected. The bird darted away, through the broken window. Mama’s magic had come through for him. All but guaranteeing he’d lose the security deposit on the house he was renting was a small price to pay to test that magic. He was hidden, safe inside the Hermetic. With a help from Mama’s Voodoo and the deities summoned, Tuck had managed to out-trick a trickster demon.

He would go and meet Jan at the Denny’s where they had met. He would prick Rhiannon’s big toe with the sewing needle while Jan was off in the bathroom. He would sew shut the back side of the doll and present it as a family heirloom. They would go off to their dream home—some dump that would become their dump to fix on the West side of Elgin—and, like some fairy tale, they would live happily ever after.

For a time, anyway.