

# The Gramarye Grimoire

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## **CORONACH OF THE BELL**

by  
Christopher Stasheff  
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There is a spruce, a skeleton, that stands above a forest in a mountain valley, and from its tip, a bell hangs high and lone, moaning in the Wind.

There is a pass into that valley, but the sides are sharp and jagged—torn and twisted, blackened granite. There, one slip means death.

Once a clan lived there, when the spruce was quick with resin and fields of maize filled half the valley. There was no pass between the mountains then, for a granite bridge once joined them. But that bridge was hollow, gutted out by adze and pick, honeycombed into a home for Manninglore.

Manninglore, bald and bearded, hunchbacked, stunted, musclebound, stooping from his years of toil.

Manninglore, born old.

The wrinkles of birth never left his face; hair never grew upon his scalp. "Changeling!" the children of the clan all called him. He did not dare protest, for his bandy legs could scarcely run, and his bulging arms were much too slow for fighting.

So, of course, his bald pate became the target for their mocking slaps—blows which, as Manninglore learned quickly, he could but endure. The lesson of his childhood was patience; the companion of his youth was solitude.

So, when he was old enough for numbering among the grown men of the clan, and his beard (already white) begun, he set the village at his back and

climbed up to the granite bridge between the mountains. Behind a grove of trees he hewed himself out a cave, hiding his door from village eyes. There, in the leaf-broken sunlight of the cave mouth, Manninglore sat tailor-fashion and opened his soul to the totem of his clan, the Wind.

They grew old, the men and women who had been young with Manninglore. Old and wrinkled, stooped and gnarled, they looked up to the mountainside with envy—envy, now, and longing; for those who rose before the dawn saw Manninglore up high upon the granite bridge, leaning on his staff in sunlight, though the village of the clan still lay in shadow. His beard was long, his shoulders stooped—but in all else, he had not changed.

"He is a sorcerer," said some. "He has dark knowledge."

"No," said most. "How could he age, who was ancient at his birth?"

Yet Manninglore too had aged, though not in body. The whole of the bridge was hollow now, filled with crucibles and books, with heaps of ore and precious earths. At the back, away from the valley, stood the bellows, anvil, and hearth of a smithy. At the front, two windows, too small to be seen by the clan, looked out towards the village.

When Manninglore's generation were long in their graves, their children's children, old in their turn, looked to the mountain with a curse, for Manninglore stood hale as ever, on the bridge of sunrise.

"Our grandfathers are dust," they muttered, "yet Manninglore lives."

"All that mountain is his home. We will die in huts of mud."

"What have we done with our lives?" they wondered. "We, and our grandfathers before us? Yet how much more has Manninglore gleaned!"

"He has knowledge, dark knowledge to lengthen his life. But will he give of it?"

Then, in their envy and their shame, they would have gone to the mountain and put Manninglore to the death, had they dared. But the span of his powers was hidden, their limits unknown. So they kept to their village in fear, and cursed at the mountain.

Then their anger fermented into bitterness and hatred. They cried to their totem for a sorcerer that they might safely burn. Thus, from their guilt and self-pity, Demouach was born.

The clan gathered round the central fire, muttering, quiet in the night.

Then Demouach was hopping round the flame-pit, grinning and chirping—Demouach, the height of a knee, brittle leather, with the form and the face of a man, but with parchment between his arms and sides and legs, and claws where a man should have feet. Wordless, with only chirpings, or wailings—Demouach, imbecile.

One long moment the clan crouched staring, silent. Then howling, and drumming of feet, and brands from the fire whirling at the monster.

Demouach flew, screaming in terror and pain. Still coals struck him; the clan, gleeful, followed.

But they turned away, cursing in fear, when Demouach fell onto the mountainside.

Manninglore, bent over alembics and crucibles, heard the wail at his threshold, stumped bandy-legged to the entryway, hauled back the door.

Burning leather, cries of torture, smoldering parchment writhed in the light from the doorway.

\* \* \*

The next generation knew Manninglore chiefly from Demouach, ever about his master's business, sailing over the valley with a leathern sack in his claws, fetching the raw stuffs of magic.

Legend had hidden Manninglore's birth from them. He was their sage, who always had dwelt on the mountain; only this could they know of him. "Our forefathers sinned against him," they said, "but in his mercy, Manninglore spared them." So they lived in awe of the hermit, awe and reverence. "Be diligent," they told their children. "Be steadfast," they told their youth. "Care well for your children," they told those new-come to parentage. "Be industrious, tenacious, generous, loving, and the child of your children's children may be like to Manninglore."

But the sage in his mountain knew nothing of their reverence. High in his granite hall, he thought of wood and stone and metal only, and hearkened to none but the totem of his clan, the Wind.

"Go," he said, putting a leathern pouch in Demouach's claws, "and fetch me clay from the bank of the river, and wax from old hives, for I would hear my totem speak in words."

He took the clay when Demouach returned, and squared it into a block, a cubit on each side.

Looking up at Demouach, he frowned. "Be still!"

For Demouach danced, hopping from foot to foot on the window ledge, keening like the birds of dusk.

"Be still!" said Manningleore again; but Demouach sprang from the ledge, catching Manningleore's sleeve in his horny lips, pulling the sage to the window.

Manningleore looked down, down to the village of the clan of Mannin under the noonday sun.

The people wandered thin and haggard, stumbling as they went.

"They starve," said Manningleore. "What is that to me?"

Demouach wailed, dancing on the ledge.

"Their cornfields lie in darkness," said the wizard. "The stalks are pale and flaccid, for they lie in the shadow of the forest pines even at noon. But that is not my care."

Demouach cried in short, lamenting calls, hopping from one foot to the other as though the window ledge burned beneath his claws.

"They revere the forest excessively," said Manningleore. "They will not fell a tree, even to let the sunlight in upon their crops. They are fools. But their folly is not mine."

Then Demouach chittered, scolding, his eye piercing brightly into Manninglore's.

The wizard's visage hardened; the ends of his moustache drew down to form a heel bone. "Only pain they gave me, Demouach. In the days of my youth they mocked me, striking me when my face was turned away, then running, for I could not follow. I have built my home and gathered knowledge, never asking aid of them. I owe them nothing."

Still Demouach lamented.

"You also, Demouach, have suffered at their hands. They have burned you, Demouach, and hunted you, and cursed you. And would you aid them, then?"

Then Demouach howled, flapping from the ledge to beat his wings about the wizard's head till he raised his arms for shielding and stumbled from the window. "Peace!" he bellowed over Demouach's cries. "Peace, Demouach! I shall heal them, I shall pull down the pines and give them light! Only give me peace, good Demouach, that I may work!"

Then he filled a pouch with seeds and gave it to Demouach. "Scatter these over the forest," he said, "and oak and ash shall spring up 'mongst the giant pines, to bring them down."

Caroling, Demouach gripped the pouch in his claws and tumbled through the window.

"Demouach, hold!" cried Manninglore, and the messenger hovered.

"Spare one spruce," the wizard called, "for I would not have the dark beauty of that tree lost, forever and irrevocably, to the clan of Mannin."



Demouach bobbed his head, then turned to soar away in swirling song. He sped out over the village, over the fields, to the forest.

There he tilted the pouch, spilling out the seeds, spiraling in to the center of the forest until the pouch was empty.

When the sun rose again, the pines had fallen. In their place, but half their height, stood oak and ash, full-grown.

The clan of Mannin stood and stared, and marveled; and their corn was green by sunset.

"The wizard has saved us," they murmured, and blessed the name of Manninglore.

But deep in the forest stood one sapling spruce.

\* \* \*

Manninglore in his granite hall carved a deep bowl in a cube of clay. He widened the lip, flaring, and carved the name of his clan and its totem, "Mannin," "Wind," in the side. He kindled coke in his forge and fanned it hot; he swung a crucible over the flames and dropped in iron ingots.

When the iron flowed, he poured it into the block of clay, then poured it out again. A film of iron remained on the clay.

Seven times Manninglore filled and drained the mold. Then he let it cool, broke away the clay, and set the iron beaker on a tripod. He filled its form with frozen air and crystallized water; looking in, he saw the stars roll past in majesty.

"Now the Wind will speak to me in words," said Manninglore. He wet his finger on his tongue and stroked the lip of the bell in circles.

A deep tone rose from out of the bell, then formed itself to words: "What would you know?"

"Wind!" cried Manninglore. "Only spirit that I venerate!"

He turned, arm swinging in a circle. "I have hollowed out a mountain for a home. I have filled one wall with books of lore. Tell me, spirit, for I must know—are these things worthy?"

And, "No," the spirit answered.

Manninglore turned in a temper and took up his pick. Children in the valley grew old and died while Manninglore tore into the bowels of the mountain.

Then he called again to the spirit of the Wind and cried, "A mountain of gold have I amassed! Wealth beyond a world of kings! Tell me, spirit—is it worthy?"

"No," the spirit answered.

Manninglore swore, and stamped away. Two generations howled in birth and coughed in death while the wizard labored and his messenger passed in weary flight again and again about the world.

Manninglore called up his totem then and cried, "Ten thousand books have flowed from my pen! There is no secret of wood or stone or metal that I do not know! Tell me, spirit—is this worthy?"

But, "No," the spirit answered.

"Then is nothing worthy!" cried Manninglore. "Mountains, houses, wealth, and tomes—are none of these things worthy?"

"None," the spirit answered.

"Why!" the wizard stormed.

"Wizard," intoned the spirit, "look to the valley." Slowly, Manninglore turned to the window. He saw the fields barren, his clan staggering, emaciated.

"They die," said Manninglore. "What is that to me?"

"Sage," droned the spirit, "who shall read your books?"

Manninglore stood frozen.

"Miser," mourned the spirit, "whom shall you pay?"

Manninglore's eyes showed white around the rim.

"Builder," the spirit tolled, "who shall dwell in your halls?"

\* \* \*

In the hour before dawn, when all the world was still, the clan of Mannin shot trembling from their beds as the earth beneath them shook with thunder.

Rushing from their doors, they saw a great notch torn between the mountains.

"The ridge is gone," they whispered; and, "The wizard of Mannin is no more! Who shall aid us now?"

Then Manninglore stepped into the village, a pack of magics on his back, an iron beaker in the crook of his elbow, Demouach upon his twisted shoulder.

\* \* \*

He paced through the village that day, gaze probing the folk of the clan, tagging each person and allotting it category, for Manninglore had studied Humanity once, long ago, had wrought through the gear-meshing strivings, the escapements of mores, to the tightly-coiled spring of the cravings. Then, when he knew why Man and Woman did what they did and when they would do it, he had given over the study as ephemeral, and therefore unworthy.

But now, as he measured the paths with his stride, his eyes sought through flesh and marrow to the souls within, and found them all shrunken, dwindled to gibbering, skeletal monkeys, atrophied. And Manninglore marveled that this dwindling had come to pass within his gaze, but without his notice.

They were dying, all about him, the folk of his clan, those in the prime of their lives. The elders still mumbled and moved with some sign of life, with jerkings and tics, and youths still walked, limbs laboring slowly, as though they forced their way through some dark and viscous fluid.

But the men and women in the fullness of their days sprawled in the doorways, muscles sodden, bones sagging. Here an old one gave his woman-grown daughter to drink; there a girl crooned her parents to their final slumber. Children there were none.

Yet kindness was here, and love, in the pitiful efforts of the old and young to ease the slow, sinking deaths of maturity.

Manninglore saw, and shame grew within him.

"O Spirit!" he cried to the Wind, "totem of Mannin! Hear the tale of a life come to naught. My cry has been only, 'For me!' for I labored only to say, 'I have built, I have crafted, I shall always endure in my works!' while here in the valley they have cried only, 'For thee! All for thee!' "

"It is true," chimed the spirit, "yet but half of the truth. They have cried, 'All for thee, my child, that you may someday be like to Manninglore!' Wizard, you have served them in your selfishness; you have given them a mark for their striving, and so have brought them out of greed, to giving."

"Yet how little to give!" cried the sage; but Demouach crooned on his shoulder.

So they came to the fields, the beaker, the hermit, and the batwing. There they looked upon the maize standing tall, in buff serried ranks, tasseled heads nodding to make the Wind whisper.

Manninglore scowled; words growled low in his throat. "There is corn in the field, there is grain in the bin, there is gruel in the pot. Yet the strength has gone from their bodies. How is this?"

"Go into the village," answered the spirit, "and ask." There in the village, a man lay flaccid by the door of a cottage. A palsied hand, blue-veined and wrinkled, lifted his head; its mate held a cup to his lips. The man gulped at the porridge, then lolled his head back. The old hand lowered him gently to earth. "I fed him once from my breast," its owner said, vein pulsing slowly in the stalk of her throat. "He throve, then... But my breasts are long dry now, and fallen."

And she turned away to her mortar. "You have fed him," said Manninglore.  
"Why then does he fail?"

"Watch," she said then, "and see," and touched the kernels of maize with the pestle. They fell away into powder.

"Dust," she said, lifting her hand. Flour strewed on the Wind, and was gone.  
"There is no substance in it. The kernels have form, but no weight. They are empty."

She turned; the eyes of the man had glazed over. Sighing, she closed the lids gently.

"He was your son," the wizard murmured. "I had twenty sons," she replied.  
"Six remain. I had sixteen daughters. Only two still walk."

Her face was thin, and shrunken to the skull. But the eyes still were large, the hair a cascade of foam down her back. Manninglore's throat tightened; he put his hand out to her. She did not feel his touch.

Manninglore ordered the corn mown, the stalks plowed under. Then he kindled fire and brewed magic powder. He broadcast it over the fields and planted the maize.

And the old woman moved through the village, tending her children, for the young now were dying.

The corn grew green and tall—but the kernels were small, and crumbled to powder as the husks were stripped off.

It was plowed under, and the wizard brewed waters of power from the saps of trees, and planted the maize.

And the old woman knelt by her last dying daughter. Breath stilled; the old woman stayed by her in silence awhile. Then, stretching out her quivering hand, she closed the eyes of her child. She sighed, and fell limp in the dust.

Manninglore cradled her head in the crook of his arm, holding a steaming cup to her lips. The old eyes opened slowly. "I loved you, wizard," she whispered. "I saw you at dawn on the mountaintop, and I loved you. I could not be content with any man, because my love was you. I bore a child to every man of my generation, thirty-six children, one for each year I could bear, because of my love for you. Yet still, I love you."

Then her head fell back as her eyes rolled up, and the slow rise and fall of the flattened breasts ceased.

He closed her eyes, pressed her hair to his cheek. "She loved me—I, hunchback and cripple, who swore no woman could look upon me without revulsion. I ruined her life, and she loved me. I gave her nothing, yet for all of her days, she loved me."

He looked up to the old folk crowding about him, bodies of wire and paper under fiery sun. "Are all the youth dead?" he asked, and they nodded.

He tallied the walking mummies about him and muttered, "These at least shall not die."

The sun behind the mountains spread glory up into the sky; cool winds stole out of the forest; and Manninglore held a knife to the cleft in back of his ear, pushed, and drew. Blood welled in thick gouts from the great vein of his throat, pulsing in heavy glutinous masses down to his breastbone.

Then he measured the fields with his tread, stooping forward to water the earth with his blood.

But when he leaned, drained, on the trunk of an oak, the blood still stood, thick and heavy, over the furrows. It failed to sink into the earth through all that long night, and the sun, in the morning, baked it to glaze.

"Now spirit, how is this?" sighed the wizard. "I have given the blood of my life, but the earth will not take it."

"You have waited too long," mourned the spirit. "Sage, your blood has grown thick with the centuries. It will not yield to the earth."

Then Manninglore slumped to his knees and leaned to strike, rolling full length on the earth. The old folk of the clan saw the fall of their sage and, moaning, slipped one by one to measure their lengths on the earth under the glare of the sun.

The afternoon light burned red through his eyelids; the last labored breathing ceased near him. Only the rustle of Demouach's wings by his shoulder, and the calling Wind over the lip of the beaker, were left him.

Then, slowly, the red of the light slipped from his sight. A cool breeze touched his cheek. Forcing his eyelids open, Manninglore saw the tip of a spruce standing between his face and the sun.

And there in the shadow, by Manninglore's elbow, a shoot of green corn speared through the glaze.

"Too late," the sage murmured. "Too late."



Then he rose up on his elbow screaming, his free, shaking arm pointing up at the spruce. "Go, Demouach! And hang this sounding bell to the top of that tree, that men may know there was once a clan here!"

And Demouach leaped into the air with the beaker, bound it to the top spike of the spruce with a ribbon of cornhusk. Crying, then, he swooped to the side of his master and friend.

But the wizard's eyelids were closed, sunken in, the skin of his face become ashen, the last fate-spiting breath expired.

Then Demouach swirled into the air with one last screaming wail, and ceased.

\* \* \*

The forest has reclaimed the valley, filling it from hill to hill. But high above the restless green of hickory and oak towers the skeleton of a spruce, bleak against the annealed sky. From its scaling, brittle tip there hangs a bell, an iron bell without a clapper, alien in the Wind's demesne. And the cataracting gale exacts a tribute from it, a tribute paid in moans, a growling coronach caught from the mouth of the bell and flung out over the forest, to break against the mountains and be funneled down into the mountain pass.

There, in the notch between the peaks, the coronach collects again, feeding in upon itself, slapping into the baffled granite and rebounding, rolling

in its torment until it echoes up into a banshee wail, an eternal keening  
coronach, despair.

And far below, a patch of forest floor is bare, fused into obsidian. At its  
center stands a mummied cornstalk, paper wrapped around a hollow core,  
sole testimony to the clan of Mannin.

## **HOLE IN THE HEART**

by  
Edward Stasheff  
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It was Thursday, February 23, 2006 when I got the call. I was at work recording IP addresses from the office computers. At 4:01 my cell phone rang. I looked at the display. It was Owen, a friend of mine. Not a close friend, just a friend I saw at every month or two. It was odd that he should call me, especially when he knew I would be at work, but I answered it anyway.

"Hello?"

"Ed?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Look... I know I haven't called in a while, but..."

"What's wrong?" I said, sensing something serious in his tone. "Are you okay?"

"I... got some bad news for you."

"What happened?" He had probably just had another fight with his semi-ex-girlfriend Sami...

"It's... Canis. He... he passed away."

Ever wish you could get that really serious, super-important call so you could justify talking on your cell phone at work? Well, trust me... you don't.

I was silent, trying to comprehend what he had just said. It didn't make sense.

"You're joking... right?"

"I'm not. Polaris just called me. I just... thought you should know. No one else had your number."

Something in his voice and choice of words told me it was true. But Nick Haley, also known by the battle-name Canis, was only 27 years old. It didn't make sense.

"What happened?"

"They're not sure. They think he had a heart attack. He was having chest pains."

Something clicked in my mind. Nick had a hole in his heart. He was born that way. I didn't know what that meant... and it never seemed to slow him down, but... a

heart attack... Nick drank, he smoked, he was overweight... it began to make sense. But I wished it didn't.

"When's... when's the funeral?" I asked.

"We don't know yet. We're trying to find someone who knows how to contact his parents so we can find out when it is. Do you know how to get a hold of them?"

I didn't. I didn't know jack about Nick's family. He didn't talk about it much. I had known him for years before I found out he had five brothers and sisters.

"Do you know anyone who does?" Own asked. "What about Howie? Should I call Howie?"

"Yeah... call Howie." It was a stupid idea, really... Howie knew even less about Nick's family than I did. But on the off chance he did know something, he had to be called. He had to know what had happened. And we had to know when the funeral was. We couldn't miss it... we just *couldn't*.

"Alright, I'll call Howie."

"And if you find out when the funeral is, let me know, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course."

"Okay, thanks."

We said goodbye and hung up. I folded my cell phone closed and took a deep breath. I stared at the phone. I felt dizzy. Nick was dead.

I had to do something. People had to know. Heather had to know.

I didn't have Heather's number. I didn't have her email. I didn't have any way to contact her, and I liked it that way. But she had to know. Nick had been her best man at our wedding. Her parents... for some reason, I still had her parent's number saved in my cell phone. I dialed it and didn't think twice.

"Hullo?"

"Hi, Jim. This is Ed. Stasheff. I know it's been a long time, but...uh... I need to get a hold of Heather. A very good friend of Heather and I has just..." I took a deep breath, then continued. "...has passed away. I... want to make sure she knows. She wouldn't want to miss the funeral. Is there any chance you could give me her number? If you don't, I totally understand, maybe you could just pass the message on instead? Whatever works for you."

There was a pause. “Wellll...” he said in his Southern Illinois drawl, “you... better just give me the message.”

“That’s fine. Tell her Nicholas Haley has just passed away. He was also known as Canis. He died of a heart attack last night. I don’t know any more than that. It was kind of sudden.”

“Nick who?”

I had to spell the name for him, but by now I could tell he believed me. That was good. That meant he would pass it on. I gave him my number and email, thanked him, and hung up.

I looked up at the black and white text on the command line of the computer screen in front of me. None of it made any sense.

What if I was wrong? What if this was all a big joke, or a mistake, or a false alarm? What if I panicked Heather for nothing? She would hate me... well, she already hated me, but now she would hate me even more. I had to know for sure. I wasn’t even sure I believed all this myself.

I flipped open my cell phone and looked through the address book. Bill. Bill would know. And he wouldn’t joke about it. Not Bill.

His phone rang and rang and rang. Just when I thought it would kick over to voice mail, Bill answered. Later that day, I learned he had to compose himself before answering.

“Hi, Bill. This is Ed. Nolen.”

“Oh... hi, Ed... ummm...”

“Is it true?”

“Uh... well...”

It was true. Dear God in heaven, it was true. Nick was really dead.

“I... was hoping it was a joke...”

“I think we all were, Ed,” Bill said. “I’m glad you called, though. None of us knew how to get a hold of you. How did you—”

“Owen called me,” I answered. “I just called Heather’s parents and asked them to relay a message—”

“They’ve already called her, Ed,” Bill cut me off. “How... how are you holding up?”

“Doesn’t seem real yet. You?”

“Same.”

“Alright... if you hear anything about a funeral, you let me know, okay? My number is—“

“Already got your number, Ed,” Bill assured me, “it came up in my cell phone when you called. And we’ll let you know if we hear anything.”

I guess we said goodbye after that. I don’t really remember. I closed my cell phone and looked at the computer screen. I couldn’t for the life of me remember what the hell I was supposed to be doing. Then I remembered... I had to write down the IP address. I couldn’t find it. I’d done this literally hundreds of times, but I couldn’t find the fucking IP address. I tried to keep working for maybe a minute, then gave up. I couldn’t work. Not now.

I looked out of the cubicle. The woman across the aisle jerked her eyes away. Suddenly I realized it was silent. The constant background hum of office chatter was gone. Everyone had been listening. I hadn’t even tried to lower my voice. *Well, at least I won’t get in trouble for taking personal calls at work*, I thought.

I found my boss, let him know what had happened, and told him I had to leave, now. He didn’t object. It was 15 minutes to quitting time anyway. I walked out into the parking lot and sat in my truck. I had to do something. People had to know.

I called Howie. It was a dumb thing to do, really. Owen had already called him and I knew that. But I didn’t know who else to call. I also knew Howie was a self-employed carpenter in the winter, and that meant he was short on cash. I told him I’d give him whatever he needed to be there for the funeral. Gas money, a ride, anything. Howie had to be there. Nick and Howie had been groomsmen at my wedding.

I guess my body was on autopilot. I drove down the street and headed for the interstate. It was Thursday, you see, and on Thursdays I drive an hour away to Bloomington for graduate history classes at ISU. Bloomington was where Nick lived... *had* lived. It’s where all of them lived...

I merged onto I-74 and headed west. Normally I listened to NPR during the drive to catch up on world news. If it's a boring story, like the effect of sponge mold on tomato plants, I listen to my ethno-fusion new age hippie music instead. But this time I made the drive in silence. The radio would distract me, and I didn't want to be distracted. I wanted to remember.

I wondered if I had a photo of Nick. I didn't know if I did...not a good one, at least. It suddenly seemed very important that I had a good photo of him. Because if I didn't have a photo, I might not remember what he looked like. And if I forgot what he looked like, I might someday forget him. And Nick deserved to be remembered.

That's when it happened. Quietly. Calmly. I looked in the rearview mirror at a tailgater and saw my face. It was expressionless, but from under my sunglasses two tears ran down my cheeks. It didn't last long. It would just have embarrassed Nick anyway.

At this point, I should really explain who Nick was, and what he did for me, because whoever is reading this probably doesn't know. But where the hell do I start?

Nick was a huge man. Six foot six, almost three hundred pounds and strong as an ox. His tendency to accidentally break things earned him the nickname "Smashie". But he never hurt anyone, not on purpose. The man was a damn teddy bear. He never got angry at anybody except himself. He never spoke bad of anyone. He never gossiped, never criticized, never judged... or at least if he did, he kept it to himself. He got along with absolutely everyone. Everybody liked him. And he was loyal. God was he loyal. If you needed him, he was there, without question or hesitation. And if his loyalties were divided... well, Nick still found a way to please everyone. It was a gift.

Nick was a man of few words. When he spoke, it was short and to the point. We used to tease him about his silence, and he always took it with a nod and a smile. But his silence made him a great listener. And that's what he did for me that night... listen.

The night I discovered my wife was having an affair, I called Nick. I asked him if it was true. I told him to tell me the truth.

There was a long silence. He was my friend. He was Heather's friend. And he was good friends with the man who slept with her... they even lived in the same

apartment building. I can only imagine what went through his head... loyalties... choices... but he chose to tell me the truth.

"I don't know," he said, "But I've wondered that, too."

A few days later, I went to confront the man who fucked my wife. I had to. I simply had to. This couldn't go unanswered. I don't care if you don't understand why. I had to.

Somehow... I still don't know how... Nick knew. He was waiting for me, standing in the doorway of the apartment building, arms folded across his chest, barring the way.

"What are you doing, Ed?"

"I'm not gonna hurt him," I shook my head, "I just wanna talk to him."

Nick stared at me in silence. He cocked an eyebrow. And then he stepped aside. Nick understood. He stood by and he let it happen.

Maybe it was because he knew me. Because he knew I wouldn't hurt the guy, no matter how much I wanted to. I'd like to think that. But I guess I'll never know now.

When I was done, I left the guy's apartment. There was Nick, standing on the landing, listening and waiting.

"It's okay," I said. "No violence. Just talk."

"I know," Nick said, "I heard."

"If there *was* violence... would have stopped me?"

Silence. "Yeah..." Nick shrugged, "but I'd let you get in a few good shots first."

A few days later, I needed to talk to someone about everything that had gone down. Family was good... but they didn't understand the situation, not completely... I needed to talk to someone in the group, in the clan, in my other family... but I didn't want anyone to know what had happened. I was trying to save the marriage. Keeping all this secret would help.

But Nick already knew. He was the only one who did, and he kept the secret for months. And I could talk to him. He met me for drinks. We went to Lunker's. We drank many pitchers of beer. We did many shots of Tequila. That night I crashed on his couch. But before that, we talked. And not just about me.



Dawn was his first girlfriend. She was the first woman he loved, the first woman he made love to, the woman who broke his heart when she left him for another man. A year earlier, I had stood by his side and watched as he smashed an empty beer bottle into powder on the sidewalk because he would never hurt Dawn or her new boyfriend, but he had to release the pain, the rage, *somehow*. And I held him when he cried silently.

He had barely talked about it during the last year, to me or anyone else. But in the bar with me that night, between the lime and the salt, he opened up and told me everything he had thought and felt in the last year, and we bonded even more over our mutual pain.

Nick told me how he stayed friends with Dawn because he didn't want to hurt her, even though each conversation was like a cold knife in his heart. He told me how he didn't decorate for Christmas this year, because Dawn had left him at Christmas last year and decorating would only remind him. And he told me how, even after all that had happened, part of him still loved Dawn and would take her back if he got the chance. He even told me how he privately and silently dealt with the pain and managed to get on with life. Nick gave me good advice that night, in Silent Nick's typical, super-concise way:

"One day at a time. Choose to move on. Worked for me."

And now Nick is dead.

Nick is dead because his incredibly big heart had a hole in it.

It's not fair. It's not fucking fair. Why him? Of all the worthless assholes in Dagorhir, why take Nick? Fuck you, God! Fuck you, Jesus and your long hippie hair! If you got a plan here, I can't see it! And don't give me that bullshit about 'mysterious ways', because that's a cop out and you know it! You tell me why! Tell me why him?! *Why him, and not...*

Because the good die young. And the rest of us are left holding the pieces and wondering why.

My phone rang. It was Killian, the only other person from the old group besides Owen who had my number. He was calling to make sure I knew. The human network had been activated, and everyone was calling everyone, spreading the news. *Why*

*can't good news ever travel this fast?* I thought, but I joined in just the same. I didn't really have anything else to do on this long drive. I went through my cell phone address book, looking for anyone who knew Nick, and called them. All the numbers were years old, and most of them didn't work anymore. But finally I got an answer – Robbie, also known as Theros.

"Hello?"

"Robbie?"

"Yeah?"

"This is Ed."

"Ed? Nolen? Whoa... how are ya?"

"Have you heard?"

"Have I...?" Robbie said, flabbergasted, "Ed... I was the guy who *found* him!"

"Oh." Suddenly, I was King Asshole of the World.

"Yeah," Robbie said. "It's been a bad day."

"Well... I just happen to be heading to Bloomington right now," I said. "I just wanted to know if there's anything going on tonight, y'know, like a gathering or something? Cause, y'know... I could swig by..." I didn't want to intrude. And I wasn't sure if any of them wanted to see me ever again.

"Uh... well... yeah..." Robbie said, and I could almost hear him thinking and looking around at people. "People are just sorta hanging out at Fox's place... you could come by if you want to... know where to find it?"

"Is he still in the same apartment?"

"Well, same building, yeah," Robbie said, "but he's in apartment 11 now."

"Okay, I can find it then. I'll see you in an hour."

"Yeah... thanks for calling, Nolen."

I hung up and thought about what I had just agreed to. I hadn't spoken to anyone in Bloomington since my Divorce Party almost two years ago, the night I had told the world what really happened and threw Heather's wedding dress into the bonfire in front of everyone. How could I possibly face them again?

You have to understand... once upon a time, we had been so close, the whole group, and I had been at the center. We're nonconformists by nature. We don't care

about looking normal. We wear our medieval costumes and foam weapons in public with pride. Even out of costume, we stand out. Maybe it's the dyed, spiked hair styled in mohawks and topknots. Or the tattoos and facial piercings. Or the black leather and chain wallets and combat boots. Either way, we stand out. But we're used to shocked stares and shouted insults from the windows of passing SUVs. It comes with the lifestyle. And it didn't really matter—because we had each other. Sure, we had our cliques and our dramas like every circle of friends, but in the end, if you were in the group, you were one of us and we supported you against the outside world, no matter what. We stood somewhere between players on a sports field and soldiers on a battlefield. For years we fought together side by side and built something unique and wonderful. It was all just pretend, but at the same time it was real. The emotions were real. The bonds were real. And then I turned my back on all of them, suddenly and completely.

I had to do it. They were my friends. But they were friends with Heather and her lover too. I didn't want them to have to choose sides... I couldn't let a personal conflict rip the group apart. So I left. I cut off all contact and hadn't talked to anyone in almost two years. But when I deserted them, I deserted Nick, too. After all he had done for me, I abandoned him. Please, Nick... wherever you are... forgive me.

In the back of my mind, I had always planned on getting back in touch with the group. As soon as Heather left the state, as soon as I lost a few pounds, as soon as I got back in shape, I'd drive to Bloomington for some Sunday practice and test the waters, see if I was still welcome. And Nick was the key. He was my gate back into the world I missed so much. I didn't know what they thought of me. They might all hate me. But Nick wouldn't. Nick was my friend. Nick understood why I had to leave, and he didn't blame me.

And now Nick was dead. And I had to face the rest of them alone, at a time when they were all angry and hurting.

I figured it was safe to expect the worst. They were still friends with Heather. They were still friends with her lover. And they hadn't seen me in two years. *Assume they all hate you*, I told myself. *Assume they think you're a cruel and petty asshole. Assume they all think you're a loser who got what he deserved. And don't mention*

*Heather*, I told myself, *just don't bring it up. If they're happy to see me, stay. But if they seem surprised, puzzled, or uncomfortable, leave.* The last thing a grieving family needs is a traitor trying to muscle his way back into the group.

I had just pulled into the parking lot of Fox's apartment when my cell phone rang. I looked at the display. It was a number I didn't recognize, from a strange area code. Somehow, I just knew who it was. I answered it anyway.

"Hello?"

"Hi... it's Heather."

I hadn't spoken to her in two years. Not since I had done something unbelievably cruel for the sole purpose of hurting her as much as I could. All I could think of to say was "Hi."

"Have you... uh... had a call from anyone in Bloomington?"

"I've heard."

"I just wanted to make sure someone let you know."

Okay, that was bullshit. Heather didn't have my number. No one in the old group had my number *and* hers. She must have acquired my number in the last hour, and from only two possible sources: from her father, passing on the message like I asked, or from Bill, after I called him. Either way, she *knew* I heard about Nick. So why was she calling me?

"I've heard," I repeated. "I... uh..." I groped for words. I wanted to tell her that what happened between us didn't matter right now, that I'd help any way I could to make sure she'd be here for the funeral. Nick had been a good friend to both of us, even when it happened, even afterward. What I said instead was, "Where are you living? What state?"

A long silence. Could you blame her? "Virginia," she said.

"Are you going to be able to make it out here for the funeral?"

"When is it?"

"I don't know. No one does, not yet."

"Well, I can't get my plane ticket until I know when it is!"

"I know. We'll tell you as soon as we find out. Do... do you want me to call you, or someone else?"

"Polaris will let me know."

"Okay," I said. "I'll see you at the funeral."

We hung up. *Well, that was as about as graceful as a train wreck*, I thought. Not a good omen. I got out of my truck and walked toward the brick apartment building where God Knew What awaited me.

"Nolen!"

My old battle name from a past life. I looked up. Old friends waved to me from a balcony... *but were they still friends?*

"Hold on, we'll come let you in!" they called, and then disappeared inside.

I approached the door of the apartment building. Janice, Danny's short, chubby, and big-hearted girlfriend stepped out onto the steps. I tried to shake her hand, but she insisted on a hug. "You gonna come inside?" she asked.

"Am I welcome here?" I asked.

"No one cares about that right now," Janice said in her squawky Chicago accent, shaking her head, "and if they do, I'll kick their ass."

*That's not a good sign*, I thought... but I followed her inside. I'd come this far, after all.

I followed her up the stairs and through the doorway into a living room full of young people. Some I recognized. Some I didn't. No one smiled. No one waved. No one spoke to me.

Well, at least I was here, goddammit. That had to mean something.

"Nolen."

I looked at the voice. Pale face, long blond hair, wire-rimmed glasses... it was Danny. Oh thank God.

Danny was Sir Morpheus. Before he was a Knight, he had been my Squire. It's hard to explain the depth of that relationship to outsiders... it's a mutual respect and loyalty that comes from working hard together to bring out the best in each other. It's a bond that lasts a lifetime. It meant at least one person in this room was still on my side. Thank God Danny was here.

I held out my hand. He bypassed my hand and gripped my forearm, and I fell seamlessly back into the old ritual of the warrior's handshake. Squeeze the arm.

Shake once. Step forward with your left foot. Bump shoulders. Slap each other's back. Twice. Step back. I can't describe how incredibly good it felt.

"How you doing?" I asked.

"I...uh... uh... been better."

"Yeah. I know."

"It's, uh... y'know... been a while."

"Almost two years, yeah."

"I, umm... uh... good you came."

"Thanks."

We didn't say anything after that. There was really no need to. I looked back at the living room full of people. The television was on, but no one was watching it. The girls were sitting on the floor, holding each other and giggling and crying. The boys were slouching on the sofa or pacing and staring at nothing. I suddenly realized their silence had nothing to do with me.

I looked to my other side into the kitchen of the tiny apartment. Short little Allison was sitting on a kitchen chair, clutching a glass of water to her chest and staring the floor. She had dated Nick for almost a year. Next to her, all four hundred pounds of Robbie was squeezed into a chair, a cell phone pressed to his bald face. "No, I don't know... no one can get a hold of his family... yes, we called Gabriel, he knows... no, he doesn't have the number for them either...."

"Nolen! How are ya?"

A huge muscular pair of shoulders attached to a man held a hand out to me. He had a square jaw and a crew cut that screamed 'I'm in the US Army!' It could only be Fox.

"Fox!" I said, "Good to see you again! How you been?"

"Drinking since three!"

"When did you find out?"

Fox shrugged. "Three."

"Yeah, I figured."

"Well, let me give you the dime tour of the place," he said, gesturing around with a near empty glass of beer. "This is the kitchen. We clean it, sometimes - not today, though. This is the living room, that's the balcony. My room's down here. I got sweet

new armor.” He headed down the hallway and I followed. He tapped a door as he passed it. “That’s Bret’s room.”

I stopped. “Wait... Bret?”

“Yeah.”

“*That* Bret?”

“Yeah, that Bret,” Fox nodded.

I stared at the dirty carpet silently. Then I spun around. “I should go.”

“No! Nolen, stay...it’s okay, he’s at class. He won’t be back for a while.”

I looked at Fox. “When will he be back?”

Fox shrugged. “Dunno, man. Hard to say, today.”

I stayed. I had to stay long enough to talk to Bret and Cyric, to make sure things went smoothly for the funeral. But to be in Bret’s *home*... I followed Fox back to his room. He talked about his deployment to the Gulf for Hurricane Katrina. He talked about his new girlfriend. He talked about his carpentry job. He talked about his new armor. He even talked about his water cooler. He talked about everything except Nick. Slowly, I realized he was playing the role of gracious host. The poor guy had been hit with a double punch. He barely had time to react to Nick’s death before dozens of stunned people began gathering at his apartment for no apparent reason. No wonder he was drinking.

I heard a high-pitched squeaky voice that I recognized, and I wandered back to the living room. A short rotund man with thick glasses had just entered... Bill. Good old Bill.

“Hey, Bill,” I said.

“Oh... hi, Ed!” Bill’s voice always sounded cheerful, even now. “How are you? You look good.”

“Nah,” I said, “I’ve gained weight. You look good, too. You haven’t changed.”

“Gained some weight,” Bill nodded, “Lost it. Gained a bit back.”

“How you doing?”

“Better now. Already had my breakdown. You called in the middle of it, actually.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I was glad to hear from you. It’s been...”

“Two years.”

“Good to have you back.”

Bill excused himself. I watched a social maestro at work as Bill worked the room, shaking hands, patting shoulders, speaking in his soft consoling voice. Bill didn't stay long, maybe twenty minutes, just long enough to make the announcement.

“I, uh, could I have everyone's attention, please?” The room fell almost silent. “I just want to let everyone know that there will be a remembrance party for Nick at my place tomorrow night. Open invitation, everyone's welcome. Bring Jamison's Irish Whisky. That was his favorite. We'll all do a shot for Nick.” There was a little talk about the address, arranging rides, what time it started. Bill left soon after.

Still, I think we were all grateful that he stopped by. He knew just what to do. Every circle of friends has someone who is the heart of the group. It used to be Nick. Now, I guess, it was Bill. I had just watched the torch passed, silently and smoothly. I smiled.

I wandered back to the kitchen. Robbie was off the phone. He had called so many people his battery had died. At least it released him from the responsibility of having to repeat the news over and over again and listen to one shocked silence after another.

“Yeah,” Robbie said, “It's been a bad day. On a scale of one to ten, I'd say this is a negative eight.” He kept chatting, making jokes, throwing out tidbits of information to the people listening. At some point, a smoke break was declared, and we headed out to the balcony for cigarettes. Taurus and a few others joined us. Back in the day, we used to call Taurus Nick Junior, because he was also big and silent. He had joined to group when he was still in high school. Now he was out of college. My God... the Wolfpack, the group that I started... was that really *ten years ago*?

“I haven't actually heard the full story, Robbie,” I said as we lit our cigarettes. “What happened? You said you found him...?”

“Well... okay,” Robbie sighed. He took a deep drag off his cigarette and launched into a tale he had probably already told a dozen times that day. “Okay... we'll, I guess it started last weekend, y'know, when he was having chest pains? And he's like, ‘Fuck this, call 911!’ So he went to the hospital in an ambulance. And the doctor



told him it was fuckin' acid reflux. Gave him goddamn Pepcid or some shit." Robbie paused to puff his cigarette. "Man... if I ever get my hands on that doc..."

"I know," Taurus said. "I thought that, too..."

"Do you... you think the medicine had something to do with it?" I asked. "I mean... if it *wasn't* acid reflux..."

A lengthy debate followed about the medicine. Nick had said he 'wasn't taking it right', although none of us knew what that meant. We figured he was probably taking too much, thinking he was a big guy who needed more for the same effect. But eventually we concluded that the medicine probably had nothing to do with it. The doctor just misdiagnosed him, that's all, although we all agreed he should have his license revoked. Finally, Robbie continued.

"Okay, so it's Wednesday. And I hear his car pull up. I hear him go into his apartment. I didn't think anything of it. Then he doesn't show up for Dungeons & Dragons that night. We're thinking, shit, this ain't like him, but, hell, he said he wasn't feeling well, no big deal. So the next morning I'm going to work, and his car is still in the parking lot. Again, I don't think anything of it. I drive a fuckin' school bus, man, I'm back by 10:30. His car is still there. And I'm thinkin', did he walk to work? I mean, it's close enough, but it's real cold out..." Robbie took another long drag. "So I call his job. They say he didn't show up for work that day. Okay, so now I'm kinda worried. I go across the hall to his apartment. Knock on the door. I can hear the TV, but he ain't answering. I go round the place, but his apartment is locked up like a fuckin' tomb. I mean, both doors are locked, the windows are locked, and blinds are down, I can't see shit. Now I'm getting kinda pissed. I'm like, 'Godammit Nick, if you're dead in there, I'm gonna kick you!' So I start calling people. I'm like, Nick there? You seen Nick? No one's seen him. Okay, so now I call the landlord. I tell him, this is Rob in apartment 23, the guy across the hall isn't answering his door, but I think he's in there, and I think he might be sick, he went to the hospital a few days ago. So my landlord Paul comes over. He unlocks Nick's door... but it's chained from the inside."

Robbie glanced up at us suddenly with a half-wild look in his eyes. "I'll say this about Nick, he was a paranoid fuck. Always locked his doors. I'd be bored and knock on his door, and I'd hear him yell, 'Come on in!', and I'd be like, 'Fuck you, the door's

locked, like always!' I swear, I'm gonna die and go to heaven and knock on the Pearly Gates and Nick'll say, 'Come on in!' and I'll say 'Fuck you, the Gates are locked!'"

We all laughed as Robbie smoked. Before the laughter even died down, he continued.

"So we go round the back and unlock that door, but it's chained, too. I look at my landlord, and I'm like, 'Sorry, Paul,' and then I kick the fuckin' door open! I walk in. I check his bedroom. He ain't there. I check the kitchen. He ain't there. I check the living room... and there he is... on the floor... the color of my jeans."

Robbie puffed his smoke while the rest of us stood in silence.

"So..." I said, "Did you kick him?"

Everyone laughed again, even Robbie. "No," he said, rolling his eyes, "I didn't kick him."

"What *did* you do?" I asked.

Robbie shrugged and grimaced. "I... I checked his pulse, man, but he was fuckin' cold. I tried to open his mouth, 'cuz I know CPR, y'know?...but he was stiff." Again, silence descended on us. "So I didn't know it, but while I was doin' that, my landlord called 911, and the cops and paramedics show up right about then. I'll give the cops this, man, they're *fast!* So the paramedics walk in, and they look at Nick, and they look at each other with this look of like, 'Oh shit', and I knew at that point, man... I *knew!*" Robbie took another drag. "So I'm standing outside smoking a cigarette and a cop comes up to question me. And what's the first thing he says? He says, 'Those things'll kill you, man, you should really quit.' And I look at him and I yell, 'NOT! TODAY!'"

We all laughed at that, even Robbie. He lit a fresh cigarette and looked out from the balcony. "It was a fuckin' circus, man. Two cops, four paramedics, and three coroners."

"Three?" Taurus asked, "Why did they need three?"

"To move his big ass," Robbie said. "I've had to carry that guy before... ain't easy."

"Just three?" I asked, confused. "It took eight of us to carry him to his room after he passed out at my Dagorhir Inn Party. You remember that, right? Nick's Drunken

Feat 2001, when he chugged the bottle of Hakima, puked in my basement, and passed out in my bushes?”

“Yeah,” Robbie grinned. “I had to carry him that night, too. No man, I don’t know why it only took three guys this time.”

“Because he was stiff,” Taurus said. That darkened the mood. Everyone fell silent.

“I was twenty feet away, man,” Robbie said. “I was sitting on my fat ass watching TV when Nick died. I coulda done something. I coulda kicked the door down. I know CPR...”

“Robbie,” I said, “think about it, man—whatever happened, it musta happened *really* fast. Nick didn’t even have time to get his cell phone to call 911 or something. I mean, even if you *did* know what was going on, you probably couldn’t have gotten there in time... y’know?”

“Maybe not, Ed,” Robbie said, staring at the dark blue Bloomington sky, “But I still shoulda tried. I shoulda done *something*.” He flung his lit cigarette off the balcony and went back inside.

We followed. Back in the living room, someone had put on *The Transformers Movie* and people were half-watching it. It seemed appropriate. It was the movie that traumatized every kid in America when Optimus Prime died.

And right then... Cyric entered. I was standing right across from the door, and the moment he entered, he saw me... no, he *glared* at me. He looked away. He looked angry. I didn’t know for sure what most of these people thought of me, but at least with Cyric I knew where I stood: he didn’t want me here. He hated me, and the feeling was mutual. Well... there’s a simplicity in that, I guess.

Cyric had been good friends with Heather and her lover, and when it all happened, he had come down firmly on their side. I couldn’t blame him, really. I had friends who did the same for me.

Still... I had to talk to him. I had to make sure there was no drama at Nick’s funeral. Nick would have wanted that. I followed Cyric into the kitchen, waiting for a chance to get him alone and talk to him privately. I was leaning against the kitchen wall, waiting for an opening, when I heard it.

Behind me, the front door opened. Whoever it was didn't knock first. The only people who enter without knocking are the people who live there. I looked over. I saw Bret. Bret saw me. We both looked away.

This was the man who had seduced my wife. The man who had ended my marriage. I hated him totally and completely. I had sworn to myself that if I ever saw him again, I would break his nose. But this wasn't about him, or me, or Heather... this was about Nick.

I turned back and walked up to him. He looked up but didn't meet my eyes.

"Everything that happened," I said in a low voice, "we can just... forget about it for the next few days, right?"

He nodded and sniffed. He looked like he was on the verge of tears. He and Nick had been good friends. I felt a twinge of pity for a man I utterly despised. I turned back to the kitchen as Bret headed for his room.

Everyone was staring at me in silence.

"Are you and he...?" Robbie said timidly.

"It's okay, we're cool," I cut him off.

"Well, I dunno, I mean I know you guys—"

"Oh, come on, at a time like this?" I said, a bit louder than I meant to.

"Yeah... whole lotta that going around tonight..." Robbie said.

"Yeah," I looked over and caught Cyric's eye. "Same here, right?"

Cyric nodded and grunted. That was good enough.

I leaned back against the kitchen wall and let the conversation flow around me. I had done all I needed to. It was time to go. But I had to make sure I knew when the funeral was. I walked down the hall to Fox's room for a pen so I could write down my phone number. As I passed Bret's room, I think I heard a sob. Suddenly, hatred and vengeance seemed trivial and pointless.

I gave my number to Danny, my old squire. I could trust him to make sure I knew when and where the funeral was. I waved goodbye to the room in general, and tried to slip out quietly.

I took a deep breath of cold February air as I crossed the parking lot. "Well," I said to myself, "that could have gone worse."

I drove back to Champaign. I suddenly remembered that I was supposed to be in class... but I didn't really care right then. On the way home, I picked up a box of cigarettes and a six pack of beer. I turned on my computer and began to write.

Tomorrow I will go to Pierce Place in Bloomington, the unofficial social headquarters of the Wolfpack, for the wake. I'm still not sure what those people think of me... but I know it doesn't matter, not now. They will drink with me anyway. There is an unspoken truce born of our shared grief and loss.

We will light a bonfire and drink to the memory of Nick Haley, a gentle giant who lived too hard and died too young. We will listen to Johnny Cash and share photos and stories and beer. We'll laugh and we'll cry and we might even scream. Maybe somewhere among the tears and whisky we'll make some sense out of all this...but I doubt it.

And when the wake is over, I will drive alone to the park that was our battlefield, where Nick and I fought side by side for almost ten years. I will pour a 40-ounce of Miller Genuine Draft onto the field and tell him goodbye. And I will thank him. Because when he died, I think he took my pain and hatred with him. Even in death, he's helping me.

But that is tomorrow. Right now, I have to write this all down. I have to get it out. Because I have to do something. Because people have to know.

*Nick Haley*  
*a.k.a.*  
*Canis Nocturnis*  
*1978 - 2006*

