



Miskatonic Mistletoe
By Angelia Sparrow

It is thirteen miles by Interstate from the insane asylum at Danvers to Route 113, which takes the traveler into the ancient city of Newburyport. The old coast road through Innsmouth, Rowley and Ispwich is longer, older and much narrower. The sprawling Boston metroplex sends out squamous suburbs, growths that threaten to swallow the whole of the state. Already, the twisting streets and oddly uniform houses creep down Highway One to Providence and up Route Three to Nashua. The world seems very small and urban and hardly the place for fear and the unnameable. The Space Age and Information Age have both come and gone.

So, of course, no one would have believed the two older men who stepped out of the little Ford wagon, on this gorgeous spring morning of the Lower Miskatonic Valley, were anything other than human.

“I don’t like it, elf,” Corin Faw growled at his half-Sidhe mate as he looked up and down the street of Arkham, Massachusetts. “It smells wrong. All kinds of wrong.” He sniffed again. Under the smells of spring melt and damp earth, under tulips and hyacinth and green leaves and pear blossoms, he scented decay and death and something that whispered of seas and stars and things best left undisturbed at the bottom of them.

Cian O’Brian came around the car to his mate. “Aruhn, my own sweet wolf, it is wrong. There is ancient evil here. Here is where we are needed.”

“Aye,” Corin growled, his nose still twitching. He unlocked the hatch. “We’re to fight evil from a tea shop. And not just a tea shop, but Miska-Tonics Tea and Herb Shoppe.” He pronounced the extra p and e with scorn.

Still, he had to admit that there was nothing wrong with the two-story frame building whose gambrel roof butted back against a hill, almost to the point where a person could climb the hill and right onto the roof. The colorful sign on the veranda, the daffodils and hyacinth dancing in the flowerbed and the lace curtains in the windows gave the place a cheerful air, even if it did look a bit like that place in Amityville which was on the market suspiciously cheaply. The spring woods, just showing the first yellow-green leaves, came right to the back door.

“Love, you know the Sight is not always clear. It took us to Memphis for Danior and now it brings us here. Take what comes.”

Corin growled again. The bites and wounds he had taken last fall in Memphis, in futile defense of Danior and his pack from the ravening power-thirst of Danior’s uncle Zoltan, still ached on damp days. He was not a young wolf any more. He got the bags from the car, making sure Cian saw the bite-scar on his arm from Zoltan’s teeth. “Not playin’ fairy godfather to pair of pups again, I’m not.” His brogue thickened, as it always did when he was irritable.

Cian laughed at him and lifted a portfolio of papers from the front seat. “Of course not. And you didn’t instigate the last game of Tail-Chase with them either.”

“Yer in trouble, elf,” he snorted.

Cian gave his most charming smile and Corin felt the faintest tingle of sidhe magic at the edges of it. “Have I told you I love you recently?”

“Ah, you’ll not get out of this with your flattering fae tongue, O’Brian.” Corin set the bags down at the foot of the stairs. “More stairs. You couldn’t find a place with the apartment in the back? Just how good do you think my knees are in my old age?”

Cian laughed and ruffled Corin’s grizzled hair. He set down the last box of fragile knick-knacks and picked up his suitcase. “I’ll make sure the next one has living quarters adjoining, Corin darling.” He caught the glance Corin shot the bed when they reached the loft apartment and laughed again as he put his suitcase in closet. “And shall we break the house in proper? Or at

least the bedroom?”

Corin growled low in his throat and set the last boxes down. “Insatiable fae,” he rumbled. He caught Cian and pressed him to the covers. It was the new moon, so he was at his most human, with no threat of the wolf. Despite this, he did love pouncing.

“Aye, always, love.” Cian drew him down for a kiss, his hands in Corin's thick, graying hair.

Corin growled softly again and nipped at Cian's throat. Cian just laughed more. Laughter would be in short supply this year, the Sight had shown him, so he planned to make the most of what he could steal. He kissed Corin again and rolled them so he was on top.

“Cranky old wolf,” he teased, opening Corin's shirt to lick at his nipples, half-buried in the abundant salt-and-pepper chest hair. “The shop stock doesn't arrive until tomorrow. Our things are all here. We needn't unpack at once.”

“Always time for a mating, you're saying, then?”

“Aye, a sweet loving in the Spring afternoon, as we did when we were young.” Cian kissed the corner of Corin's smile at that thought. He stripped off his own shirt and pants before starting in on Corin's jeans. Corin stood hard and ready, his cock jutting from the furry groin, which was as gray as the rest of his copious body hair. Cian sucked him all the way in. Then, he smiled up at his mate as he licked the bottom of Corin's shaft and then kissed the head. “Darling man. Still as eager as one of our pups.”

Corin, blunt fingers playing in Cian's hair, guided him back to suck as he had been. “Silver-tongued elf. You'll talk the day away and I'll get no joy of it.”

Cian chuckled and took him back in entirely, soft sounds of pleasure escaping him at the wild scent of his mate. He loved the taste of Corin, no matter what phase of the moon, but now, at his most human, was Cian's favorite. He swirled his tongue and listened to Corin growl. The short fingers stroked his blond hair and he sucked slow and hard. Corin came with a bit of a yelp when Cian surprised him into orgasm with some deftly applied fingers on his sac and perineum.

“Wicked magic you have,” Corin chuckled, stealing a kiss when Cian came back to his arms.

“The sidhe are a most pernicious and perfidious race, given to all manner of subtle trickery,” Cian quoted. “I have no clue where I read that, but it seemed to fit.”

“Somebody got ditched by a wild hunt,” Corin said, kissing his neck and then down his chest to return the favor.

Autumn had always been the New Year for Dan, regardless of what the calender said. He loved buying school supplies, and, later, textbooks and, still later, classroom supplies. The crisper

weather, an end to the stifling Memphis heat, and the smell of wood smoke and new crayons always made him cheerful. But this fall, he found himself at loose ends.

For the first time in twenty-seven years, he wasn't starting a new school year. The Frost book was in rewrites, and endless rounds of editing, and he couldn't seem to get started on the Thoreau one. The Wisconsin weather turned chilly and then cold, the wind howling off of Lake Michigan making everything damp and nasty. He wasn't sure he liked living at the northern tip of the four-state Chicago metro area.

Spring had slipped into summer, and summer had faded into fall and he hadn't really noticed. Paul was starting to drop strong hints about signing up to substitute teach, but he couldn't get interested. He loved his mate, but Paul did drive him crazy sometimes.

The letter changed everything.

It arrived amid the bills, but the spidery handwriting on the envelope and the postmark of Arkham, Massachusetts made him open it. He didn't remember getting on the Miska-Tonics Tea and Herb Shoppe mailing list. Ordinarily, he would have pitched it as junk mail, but there was something familiar about the writing, and that script alone, in lieu of typing or a label, compelled him.

Dan skimmed the letter for the signature. Corin and Cian. He smiled and sat down to read it.

"Cead mille failte, pups."

Here's hoping you're all well, settled and legally wed. I'm hating to be the bearer of bad news, but there it is. We're living in Arkham these days and a right foul place it is. Memphis were bad enough, but this place shivers the soul. We're needing help, pups. If you could see clear to coming out for a visit, we could surely use some extra teeth in this battle. It's one of the big ones, lads.

"This isn't homophobes or anything so tidy as people. This is a battle for the very existence of planet Earth. I daren't say more in the letter. Give us a jingle and we'll explain everything. If you're willing. If not, ring anyway and howl at us. Cian's got the shop going with a steady trade and I'm keeping my tail busy enough. Won't be telling you the kinds of nasties I catch when I'm hunting. You'd not believe it.

"Call soon, pups. We're old, Cian and me. Too old to be saving the world.

Slainte mhor agus a h-uile beannachd duibh
Good Health and every good blessing on you,

Corin Faw"

Dan stared at the letter a while, reading the phone number on the bottom. Corin was not prone to exaggeration. Dan knew that much from the few months they'd been neighbors and werewolves

together. If he said it was urgent, it was.

Paul. He sighed. Paul would be impossible to convince. His lover was nothing if not stolid and middle-class. Paul didn't really believe in monsters or demons or the end of the world. He wouldn't even believe there were vampires in Memphis. A battle for the survival of the whole world would simply set his little world in a spin.

Dan read the letter again and went online. Googling Arkham and its Miskatonic University brought up a bunch of the queerest legends and histories he'd ever encountered. Tales of monsters, of fish gods in the nineteenth century, of cults and mad painters. Rumors of the reanimated dead before and after World War I. Miskatonic U. had one of the largest occult collections in the world, including a copy of the blasphemous *Necronomicon* by the mad Yemeni poet Abdul Al-Hazred. Dan shuddered just thinking of it.

He called the number. He'd call back when Paul came home, but he had to talk to Corin now and see what they would be up against.

"Miska-tonics, teas and herbs," Cian's voice lilted over the phone, making "tea" almost but not quite "tay."

"Hello, Cian, it's Danior." He figured they knew a lot of Dans, Dannys and Daniels. But Danior, Romany for "born with teeth," was not at all a common name in America.

"Ah, hullo, pup. It's Corin you're wanting? Let me see where the cranky old dog has taken himself."

"Cian," Dan wasn't sure how to start, "talk to me if you have a minute."

"Aye, plenty of 'em. We're closed and I almost didn't answer your jingle."

"Is Corin all right? His letter was...bizarre. He talked about evil and saving the world." Dan hesitated again. "He's not—"

"Gone daft?" Cian finished. "No, the old wolf is quite in his right mind, pup. We're in some deep trouble and needing any help we can get."

"Tell me," Dan said. "All of it."

"Have you a while, Dan? It's a long tale. Starts before the Earth cooled and came alive. Before my mother's people were sung awake by the Goddess Danu."

Cian told him all of it. Of the Old Ones and their shoggoths and their servants and their toys, including the ridiculous naked ape called mankind. He told of R'lyeh, the sunken city of the dead where the great Cthulhu lies dreaming, taking in prayers and sacrifices of mongrel swamp dwellers, diabolist Eskimos, the degenerate Firblog—the Old Ones' corruption of his own people—and aesthetes and dilettantes and morbid and decadent thrill seekers around the world. He spoke

of the Deep Ones, temporarily thwarted in the 1920s, but resuming their plans again.

Dan listened, a growing coldness sinking through him to gnaw at his vitals. Turning into a wolf three nights a month didn't even register on this scale of cosmic horrors. He had no idea what to tell Paul.

"So what can we do?" he finally asked.

"There's a ritual coming up, around the winter solstice. And we need to stop it before it gets going. Or R'lyeh will rise, and nothing will ever be right again. The lucky will die quickly. The rest will go mad and destroy themselves in an orgy of killing pleasure. Y'see why we're needing you pups. Corin and me, we're too old for this, truth be told."

Dan nodded although Cian could not see him over the phone. "Let me talk to Paul. Worst case, I come alone to help you. There aren't any prophecies about this thing, are there? Nothing like 'In the dark of the year, three wolves and an elf will save the universe?'"

Cian laughed. "No, nothing like that. We'll see you in December."

"I'll call later, and put Paul on. He's not going to believe any of this, you know."

"I know."

"But we can have that Christmas wedding after all."

"You pups still haven't done that?" Cian sounded shocked. "Aye, come on out and we'll stand up with ye."

"Thanks. Bye."

"Take care. You'll find the words for your Big Bad Wolf."

Dan hung up and went to look for something to say. He stuck the meatloaf in the oven and tried to edit a while to put it out of his mind. At least Paul had vacation he could take over the holidays. And the Solstice fell just before the full.

Dan groaned. Paul was going to grumble a lot about missing midnight services on Christmas Eve. But maybe saving the world would be considered adequate penance.

Paul came home and Dan left him to his evening routine of a shower, e-mail and list-dad duties. They'd figured out a system in the last ten months, and it seemed to work.

Over dinner, Dan told him everything Cian had said, and a good bit about his own searches. Paul shook his head with a disbelieving smile.

"Furball, that's crazy. You know that's crazy. There are no such things as monsters from beyond

the stars or forbidden rituals to end the world.”

“Ordinary architects don't turn into wolves three nights a month either,” Dan pointed out. “Look, I'm just asking you to talk to Corin and Cian. You don't have to believe it. I believe it. And I'm going out in December to help them stop this nightmare.”

Paul nodded. “I wouldn't expect anything else. I'm right behind you.” He leaned over the table and kissed his mate. “If nothing else, we can have some good seafood, see old friends for our birthdays and get married.”

“Assuming we succeed and the world doesn't end,” Dan added. He sat for a minute as Paul cleared up. “Let's go call them, shall we?”

Once the dishwasher was running, they called, Dan on the kitchen phone, Paul on the bedroom extension. Again, Cian explained patiently the whole nightmarish saga from the shop phone while Corin added pithy remarks from their bedroom extension.

“Cian, you do understand that all of this is a bit much for me to take on just your word. It contradicts everything we know of pre-history or early hominids.”

Cian laughed. “Pup, my father was an iron age hunter in Ireland. His tribe hadn't even reached the literacy point. Please don't be preaching to me about early humans.”

“Sorry,” Paul mumbled. Dan could almost hear him blushing. “We'll be there. Is the twenty-second all right? I can't take the Friday off.”

“Aye, but hurry, since we change that night,” said Corin. “Make it an early flight.”

“We will,” Dan promised.

“Good night. We'll be in touch,” Paul promised and hung up. Dan watched him start hunting airfare deals on the net.

Dan turned on his own computer. Anything they knew, they could use in the battle. He learned of the Great Old Ones, the Star Spawn and the Old Ones. He read of how the Great Old Ones were almost beyond the scope of the human mind, but the Old Ones could be killed by beheading.

“Well fuck.” Dan looked up. It was rare for Paul to swear. “We're gonna shave it close, Furball. The only thing I can get us comes in at two-seventeen.”

Dan opened another window and hastily searched for Boston's sunset time on December twenty second. “Double fuck,” he corrected. “The sun sets at four- fifteen. If the plane is on time, and if our luggage doesn't get lost and if traffic isn't awful, we might make it back to Arkham in time to not maul Cian but scandalize the neighbors by changing on the lawn.”

“I'm guessing we aren't checking any luggage,” Paul said. “We'll be fine, pup.”

“That's what you say. You haven't been doing the homework I have. These things aren't just immortal, they're so far beyond what we can comprehend, we'll go crazy before we try to fight. And that's just the lesser servants.” He was shaking where he sat. “We're in so far over our heads. How can three werewolves and a half-sidhe save the world?”

Paul came to him and drew him to his feet, holding him tightly. “We can. We will. We have to, babe” He kissed Dan. “Your lips are cold.”

“I'm cold. And I'll never be warm until this is over.” Dan caught the glance Paul gave him. “Don't look at me like that. I'm perfectly sane. I'm not going to be the guy who, by the end of the legend, is yelling 'Ia! Ia! Cthulhu f'htagn' just before he blows his brains out.”

Paul kissed him again. “Let's see if I can warm you up some. We'll set the waterbed to a nice ninety and break out the comforter.”

“And of course, body heat.” Dan managed a smile. “Would I be right in suspecting friction might be involved too?”

Paul smiled back. “If you want it, you got it.” He turned off the computer room light and eased Dan out into the hall, never letting go of him.

Dan let himself be taken to bed. Despite his bold words, he had begun to wonder if he would be the crazed shouter with the revolver before the end of all this. He kissed Paul back, wanting his warmth, his nearness, the feel of his skin and hair. Paul broke for a moment to reset the waterbed and then turned his full attention to getting them undressed.

“I do love you,” Paul said, kissing his neck. “It worries me when you get all absorbed like that.”

“I know.” Dan nipped him. Their lovemaking had become less passionate with the constant presence of the other. It had settled into a comforting style of love, without the wildness. There was no longer the need to make the most of every second, or there hadn't been. Now, as December seemed ridiculously close, Dan felt his stomach clutch in the old urgency.

He kissed Paul hard, surprising them both with the fierceness, and shoved his half-dressed mate back onto the bed. Paul just laughed, and peeled out of his pants.

Dan fumbled with his own zipper, but relaxed when Paul reached up and worked it for him.

“Since you seem to be all alpha tonight, Danny,” he teased, and drew Dan's cock out to lick at it.

Dan said nothing, just drew Paul's head in closer and moaned a little when Paul's fingers reached up to tease the man-in-the-moon captive bead on his nipple ring. He shoved his cock into Paul's mouth, wanting more of the tongue, more suction. The heat was incredible, and he growled softly.

Paul shifted, just a little, a trick Dan had taught him. His nose and mouth grew a little longer and his rough canine tongue swabbed down along Dan's balls, making him moan again. Dan gave a soft cry and came when Paul managed to snake his tongue back to rim him.

“Oh, fuck,” Dan sighed.

Paul looked up. “Now that is the idea. Just don't claw the bed. I don't feel like drowning.”

Dan rumbled his alpha's thinning blond hair. “You say that every time. I have great control, BB, and you know it.”

“Is that why you shot the second I touched your ass?” Paul stood up and grinned, his slightly distended muzzle rendering the effect bizarre. Dan kissed him anyway.

“Told you, it just takes practice. Can you get back?”

“If I can't, I'm gonna have some 'splainin to do.” Paul concentrated, his face scrunching into lines of effort. Slowly, his face resumed its normal contours and Dan kissed him even more deeply, before shedding his jeans and climbing onto the bed.

Paul swatted him. “Adorable pup.” He reached for the lubricant, condoms having been abandoned in favor of monogamy months ago. Neither was certain their lycanthropic bodies would harbor any viruses anyway.

Dan lay waiting, fidgeting as Paul took his time. “In already,” he snarled over his shoulder as Paul rubbed slick fingers along his ass.

“Impatient.” Paul pressed the head of his cock against Dan's opening. Dan felt himself open at once, practically swallowing the intruder. He shoved back, taking it all. Full and warm and felling very well-loved, he squirmed under Paul, until his alpha had no choice but to thrust.

Finally satisfied with the pace, Dan relaxed and let Paul move. He flexed his back and tightened down for more stimulation, and felt himself getting hard again. He slid a hand under himself and stroked. Above him, Paul was almost barking with each thrust as he approached his climax.

Dan was still far enough from his own peak to be amused. His mate was picking up his bad habits. Paul slammed in, howling. Dan actually chuckled a little and Paul looked a bit embarrassed.

When he pulled out, Dan rolled onto his back and rubbed himself. Paul curled in beside him and drew the comforter up over both of them then replaced Dan's hand with his.

“Your friction, pup. Gotta get you warm.”

Dan curled up in his embrace, letting Paul rub him off while he kissed and licked his mate. He came quietly, only a deeper exhalation while his tongue was deep in Paul's mouth to mark it.

Paul wiped his hand on a tissue and cuddled him in close.

“My own mate,” he whispered.

Dan kissed his neck, and let the drowsy warmth settle over him. They would be warm and safe and whole. And on Christmas night, after it was all over, they would curl up just like this, secure and loved.

Dan hated flying. Having a month to pack and fret over the reactions of Transportation Safety and Homeland Security to each item only compounded the hate into a distilled ball of pure panic. His research on legend-haunted, witch-cursed Arkham had given him no peace of mind, and the Elder Gods had begun invading his dreams.

He'd taken to creative insomnia to avoid the nightmares, sitting up until all hours working on various books and papers. He managed to bang out fifty pages on Thoreau, and get an outline for Whitman done as well. Paul complained, missing cuddling him at night.

So, he'd gone to bed, cuddled until Paul slept the sleep of the uninformed and unbelieving, and then slipped out to type until dawn. He found if he slept by day, the nightmares were fewer.

They talked to Corin and Cian every night. The older couple had finally caved in and bought a computer and Corin had taken to instant messaging like a shot. He appeared to be a bit insomniac, too. Dan would be up and typing in the small hours and Corin would log in to chat with him a while. It made the nights pass faster.

“Cian don't understand,” Corin typed. “He's seen so much, it all just washes over him. He don't get how scared we are, being mortal.”

“Can Cian die?” Dan typed back.

*“Be killed, yes, die natural, no. Not like us, the Fae. He's not sure if he has a soul either. Some says the Sidhe haven't, so they all go to Hell on Judgment Day. Some says they do, being they're like men. Some says they can earn a soul. Some says they're only clever animals. *bg*”*

Dan smiled at Corin's big grin tag. “And that makes werewolves what? Cleverer animals?” He added a winking smiley.

“You're a naughty pup. We'll have a fine time up here during Change. No basements or fences. We're to run and rip and tear and hunt and kill this time.”

Dan shivered a little. “Yeah, about that. Maybe you better let Cian come get us alone. No guarantee we'll be back to Arkham in time for the Change. We can scent your territory if he has to let us out.”

“Couldn't you get an earlier flight, lad?”

“Nope, sorry.”

“Ah, it's done, and the hour is late. My Cian will be waking and wanting his tea in a couple hours. Take care of our poor dim Paul. Don't be too hard on him. He'll believe when he sees.”

“Love you, old wolf.”

“We love you pups, too. Best to Paul.” Corin signed off the instant messenger and Dan set his away message. He curled up beside Paul in the big warm waterbed. He was never really warm here in Wisconsin. He couldn't wait for the change and its fur coat. Not just the warmth, but also the simplicity when his thoughts were of nothing but food and mate and play and song. His belly would be full that night, so he would not have the blood-thirst Corin spoke of so eagerly.

That, too, would be good in its time. That intrusive thought, seemingly out of nowhere frightened Dan. He'd always been a pacifist, even family quarrels upset him. The brawl with Uncle Zoltan over his birth-pack's succession had taken more out of him than even Paul knew. His rage and grief last winter, and his ongoing lethargy hadn't been simply losing his beloved grandfather and mentor. It had been part and parcel of the shattering of his family by Zoltan's decree that he was an outcast for his gayness.

He rolled over in the big warm waterbed and Paul wrapped warmer furry arms around him, never waking as he did. Dan snuggled down into his mate's embrace. Safe, solid, comfortable Paul made everything better, when he could. Dan wasn't so sure he could make this better. He dozed as the dawn started filling the room.

Thanksgiving snuck up on them in the chaos of the Arkham nightmare. Paul barely remembered to stop and pick up a turkey breast and a pumpkin pie on his way home from work. Dan found a box of stuffing and a can of green beans and they muddled through. The meal was quiet, interrupted only by calls from Dan's mother in Memphis, Tennessee, and Paul's mother in Hammond, Indiana. Both ladies sounded a bit strained.

Dan had to reassure his mother that all was well and he wasn't freezing in Wisconsin. He had to mollify her hurt feelings that he wouldn't be home for Yule, because of the full moon, with the promise of a gift box of local cheese. His mother was not the easily mollified sort, and Dan had a feeling he'd be hearing about this for ages.

Paul had to explain at length to his mother why they wouldn't be coming to Christmas Eve services at First United Methodist. First, he mentioned Dan was pagan. Then, he reminded his mother they would be in Change. Then, he added, they were going to Massachusetts to spend the holiday with a couple of other werewolves.

Dan listened as the woman's voice went shrill and hostile. Unlike his own parents, Paul's were

perfectly fine with the idea that Paul was gay. However, werewolves didn't fit their nice WASP, middle class world-view. He knew Paul's folks hated any mention of his "hebephrenia," as they called the lycanthropy. Paul wasn't smiling when he hung up.

The pie was under-spiced and neither man wanted to finish his slice.

The holiday weekend melted away and Dan occupied himself with research and logistics. But he even found the packing problematic. The Cthulhu-in-a-Santa-hat sweatshirt that had been so fun and silly two years ago now seemed grotesque and terrifying, as well as deeply inappropriate.

Finally, he settled on two pairs of jeans, and three plain sweatshirts, underwear and pajamas for them both. Nothing that the TSA could object to. Nothing that would offend anyone, except by sheer blandness. He packed two backpacks, and then found himself at loose ends.

Inspired -- or perhaps fighting the stress -- he finished half of the Thoreau before it was time to leave, and sent the first three chapters and a query letter to his publisher. This time, he wanted an advance. If it came through before the world ended, even better. But he doubted either of those would happen.

Dan had always hated flying, the preparation, the hassle and the act itself. He hated the smell of airports. The trip to Wisconsin two years had been a very special occasion. This trip just left him shaky.

Once they were in the passenger area, Paul leaned over and whispered, "You look bad, Furball. You want booze or Dramamine?"

"The really good drugs, please. Enough to send me unconscious until we get to Boston."

Paul handed over two of the little white pills. Dan dry-swallowed them and sat, twiddling his thumbs until Paul covered his hands, stopping the motion.

"We'll be okay."

Dan looked at him. "Easy for you to say. You don't even believe what we're going up against. You think the Archivist was just making up weird legends." He kept his voice low, although it wanted to spiral up into a shout. Picking a fight would be a bad idea, not just for his nerves, but because security would undoubtedly make them miss their plane. The idea of Changing away from home territory terrified him. It had been bad enough during the last months in Memphis, after being cast out, when he couldn't Change on home ground, but shared territory with Cian. This was infinitely worse.

The moon pulled at him, although she wasn't up yet. She called to him, begging him to sing her up, even though it was only noon and she was on the far side of the world. The smells of all the humans around him, rich blood pulsing in their veins, well-marbled meat under the thin covering of skin, left him ravenous.

He drew a couple of ragged breaths, trying to shed the foreign thoughts, and locked his fingers -- much hairier now than they had been when he gave the guard his shoes -- in his lap. He had been reading too much and was very on edge. Paul was having no such reaction.

Paul casually dropped his leather jacket over the chair arm between them and slid his hand under it. Dan understood the invitation and slipped his hand under and held Paul's. The calm security of his alpha wolf let him breathe easier and relax.

"Shame that we don't have a laptop. I could harness it to you and run it off sheer nervous energy," Paul teased. "Bet I could beat you at Alpha Centauri, too."

"We aren't going to be stuck here long enough for Alpha Centauri. Just maybe a round of spider solitaire."

Paul smiled. "Yeah." He gestured out the window. "They've already got our plane up to the tunnel." The PA announced that pre-boarding would begin. Parents with children traveling for the holidays and those needing extra assistance, including a wheelchair-bound woman and a man with an oxygen tank, lined up. Paul checked their seat assignment.

They stashed their overhead bags and settled in to the seats. Dan clutched the arms of his, and Paul covered their hands with a coat again.

"You're really nervous. I feel talons, pup."

"Sorry. I'm really keyed up this month." He took a couple of deep breaths as the tunnel retracted and the plane started taxiing. "I wish we could have brought something to read. Do you really think they would have confiscated *Leaves of Grass*?"

"Of course. You're reading literature; that makes you an intellectual and very dangerous," Paul teased softly. "We'll be okay. Did we get Corin and Cian anything for our birthdays?"

"I ordered it by the net. It'll be drop-shipped. I didn't want to risk breakage or confiscation."

"Such a clever pup I have."

The plane taxied a little more and then the captain came on. "We're experiencing slight delays. We should be off the ground in about twenty minutes."

Paul looked worried at that and Dan clutched his hand. "We're already shaving this so fine... Oh God. What if we change in Cian's car?"

Dan said nothing, just held tight. He didn't think they would eat Cian. He hoped they wouldn't eat Cian.

It was closer to thirty minutes when the plane finally got off the ground. The flight attendant went into the usual safety spiel. Neither paid much attention. A water landing was the least of

their worries, and they'd already figured out the seatbelts.

Dan took both the pretzels and the cookie when the stewardess came around, but skipped the soda pop. He nibbled slowly, trying to make the snacks last. Finally, he started feeling drowsy. Paul gave his shoulder a small squeeze.

“Go to sleep. I'll wake you in Boston.”

Dan leaned his head against the window and let the engines' roar lull him. He woke up on his own as they started the descent. Paul smiled at him, and he wanted to kiss his mate.

They grabbed their bags and disembarked, only to see Cian waiting for them. He shifted from one foot to the other, eagerly scanning the faces of all the passengers, and checking his watch every ten seconds.

Dan hurried over, Paul hard on his heels. The half-sidhe seized them into a fast hug. He looked at them a moment.

“A rough flight, pups? Have you luggage?” When they indicated their backpacks, he jerked his head to the parking lot. “I'm parked nearby, all haste please. Boston traffic is fearful.”

The werewolves climbed into the backseat of the little Ford wagon and tossed their backs under the hatch. Cian steered out into the traffic.

Even Dan, used to Memphis insanity, clutched the door handles as Cian drove them out of town and north to Arkham. They crept at a near-walking pace along 90 to US 1 where it melded with I-95. All three men kept an eye on the slow sinking of the December sun, on this, one of the shortest days of the year.

“Listen, lads, should the moon overtake us, I will let you out to run. It's not that far to Arkham now. You can find it by smell. Corin's pissed on every tree in a twelve mile radius, the old alpha.”

Paul laughed. “We'll be fine, I think. Thank you for coming to get us.”

“Thank you for coming. This...oh pups, it's bad. This is end of the world bad. If we can't stop it, we'll at least die fighting.”

“Don't talk like that,” Paul said. “We're going to fight and win.”

Dan wished he could believe his mate. Instead, he snuggled deeper into Paul's arms and listened to Mother Moon who drew nearer with each minute until he could contain himself no longer. He burst out into a low, long howl, singing to her, singing her up into the sky.

“Not already!” Cian looked west and saw the sun was barely touching the horizon. The moon had not yet risen. He glanced in the rearview mirror.

Dan sat quietly, his hands over his mouth. "I'm sorry." He stared at the fur covering his arms.

The traffic ground to a complete halt. Both wolves looked over their shoulders before Cian did. An ambulance and two police cars screamed up the shoulder, sirens and lights running.

Cian swore in his own language. "No help for it, boys. You're going to have to strip down here in traffic, and I'll let you out. Head north and east."

Dan growled, his fingers already too clumsy to manage his shirt. He pushed at his jeans. Paul eased him out of both, ignoring the horrified woman in the next car. Dan let him have a kiss and then dropped to the floorboard, already uncomfortable on two legs.

Paul stripped and dropped down too. "Furball, it's okay. We're all right," he soothed, stroking Dan's head.

The moon was barely peering over the horizon when Dan let out a long howl of pain and felt the Change take him. He heard Paul say, "We'll find Corin," and then he scrabbled at the door, whining to be let out. He knew the elf in the front seat was not food.

Cian shoved the car into park and let the wolves bound out of the back seat. Both of them streaked off the Interstate toward the woods on the eastern side. "Be safe, lads," he said softly. He climbed back in and waited out the jam. The shop would be empty when he got in, but in the morning there would be three ravenous wolves for breakfast.

He stopped at the twenty-four hour supermarket and bought a great deal of bread and sausage and eggs and cheese. Breakfast casserole with oatmeal and tea would suit his men fine.

The Moon sang in Furball's blood, and once out of sight of men and their road, he sat back on his haunches and sang. He sang of power and hunting and running on four feet. He sang of her growing round and wasting to nothing before she grew again. Paul sat beside him, singing too.

As they finished, Dan bumped his head against Paul, wanting his alpha. A low rumble from nearby drew their attention. Something smelled old and dead, yet still moving. They stalked toward it stiff-legged, hackles raised, growling.

They were never sure later exactly what they had seen and smelled. But it had flown away before they could pounce.

Both wolves snorted the odor out of their noses. They cast about in ever-widening circles, looking for Corin's scent marks. Dan howled when he found it. Paul trotted up and sniffed, then obeying a male instinct older than time, put his own mark atop it. Dan marked a nearby tree, and they headed north and east, following the scent toward Corin and safety.

They found the old wolf in the woods south of the town of Arkham. Corin touched noses with them and licked them. They fanned out to hunt, hunger impelling them to search the woods for

game.

Dan chased down a slimy, squealing thing and devoured it, its rank fishy flavor revolting him, and the oily flesh roiling in his stomach. He hated it from the first bite, but some primal instinct said it had to be eaten, that if he killed it, it would come back, or if he shredded it, the bits would all regenerate into new creatures.

He nibbled some dried grass, letting it take the foulness of the beast away. So much for local cuisine. He was lucky enough to find a couple of rabbits to settle his stomach.

As dawn approached, he followed Corin's scent marks to the back door of the Miska-tonics Herb and Tea Shoppe. Cian stood there, and he sniffed the elf. He smelled food in the background, meat and bread, and other stuff.

“You're late, pup,” Cian smiled. Dan slunk in, navigated the stairs and curled up next to Paul, in front of a fire that took off the December chill. As the sun rose, Cian tossed blankets over the three wolves before they could change into naked men.

Once they were human again, Cian announced, “There is breakfast when you've washed and dressed. Danior, have a shower. I'm not knowing what you ate, but it's covered in ichor you are.”

Corin practically snarled as he sniffed Dan, and Paul moved between them,

“BB, it's okay. I'm showering, I'm showering.” He ducked into the bathroom and scoured under hot water, using a half the bar of Cian's meadow-scented soap. The black goo on his face and throat wasn't wanting to come off.

At last it did, and he heard Paul out in the bathroom, washing himself in the sink. “Better hurry, Furball. Corin's getting crankier and hungrier by the minute.”

“I'm out.” Dan stepped out of the shower and dried himself off.

Over breakfast, Cian explained that the main ceremony would be on Christmas Eve, climaxing at midnight. They had to stop it before enough power was released to raise sunken Ry'leh and awaken the Great Old Ones.

“Not all of the cultists will be human, you understand,” Corin added in.

“Ugh,” Dan said, still not sure what he'd eaten. His stomach was not right even yet, and he wanted to lie down and rest. He concentrated on the oatmeal.

“Aye, we'll talk more this evening. Our pups are dead on their feet, all that travel,” Corin said.

Cian nodded. “And you too, arûhn.” He showed Paul and Dan to the spare room and kissed Corin. “All will be well.”

“Come to bed with me elf, just long enough to let me sleep?”

Cian nodded. It could be one of their last chances. If anything went wrong tomorrow night, they would die quickly. The rest of the world would not be nearly so fortunate. He curled around Corin, his lean, smooth body cool against the stocky, hairy heat of his mate.

“Cian, love, what happens if we fail?”

“Then you'll have to use the were-nose and hunt me down in the Summerlands. The Lady takes care of her own, you know that.”

“Aye. And find you I will, elf, and hold you through female and fish, snake and fire again if I must.”

Cian smiled, remembering the way Corin had captured him after the faerie ride so long ago. “And in Her realm, we need never change again.”

Corin was already snoring and Cian squeezed him a moment more before heading downstairs to open the shop. He did a brisk business, as people stopped in for last-minute Christmas gifts. Paul wandered downstairs about noon and snooped around.

A customer stood at the counter complaining of nightmares.

“Aye, there's been a rash of them,” Cian said. “I'm nearly tapped.” He scooped the last of the catnip and comfrey tea into a bag for the young man. “What are you dreaming, lad?”

“Cities where all the angles are wrong. And giant monsters, way bigger than humans.”

Cian nodded. “Indeed. Try the tea. One tablespoon steeped ten minutes in boiling water at bedtime, with honey.”

Paul ambled back upstairs. After a while, Cian smelled lunch cooking, and hung the “out to lunch” sign before going up.

Dan and Paul were putting out a large lunch of hash and eggs. Dan still looked a bit pale. Cian wondered what he'd eaten. He went to their room and kissed Corin awake.

“The pups made lunch for us, wolf. Come out and eat.”

Corin growled. He never liked being awakened, and Cian knew only the promise of food kept him from ducking back down under the featherbed. He sat up and kissed Cian, hard, holding the half-sidhe there until he squirmed.

“Love you, elf. What's for nosh?”

“I don't know yet. We'll see.”

As the short winter's day faded into evening, Cian explained their plan for the next night. He would put a mild control spell on the wolves, enough to allow them to keep their human minds and not eat him or any normal human. They all assented, only Paul expressing any reservations and those quickly quelled, and Cian cast the spell.

The room filled with a soft golden glow and the smell of spring flowers, a distinct contrast to the wet wool and mud of a New England winter. The werewolves felt no real difference in themselves.

“Now, who is for a very, very large dinner, so you lazy beasts can sleep and be fresh for the morrow?”

Arkham had no chain restaurants in the historic part of the city where the shop was, but many had sprung up near the highway. Cian drove them to a common steak buffet place and urged them all to eat, despite lunch only three hours before.

Dan was still not quite hungry. He felt pale and queasy, a little clammy. He ate anyway, because he would be hungry in the night and he didn't want another of those slimy fell things he had eaten. Paul ate with good appetite, pausing now and then to stroke his leg under the table or brush his hand.

At four sharp, Cian hustled them back home, arriving with five minutes to spare. “Strip children, quickly.” He pulled the shop blinds and locked the door as the men flung off their coats and clothing.

Dan went first, groaning in pain that he thought he'd outgrown in his teens. The world grew taller and lost its color. He smelled Corin and Paul, still changing, and Cian, who smelled of flowers and light and hope.

When Paul had changed, Dan went and touched noses, sniffing and licking him. He dropped his shoulders to the floor and raised his haunches, almost whimpering to be mounted.

Cian opened the door. “Outside, pups.” Corin bounded out and the younger wolves followed. Their bellies full, they romped through the frost-rimed woods, under cold uncaring stars. Dan submitted himself for a mounting, and he and Paul sang their joy of it afterward.

They chased through the woods, hunting by smell. They came upon a cyclopean ruin of an odor so foul they shied from it, whining. Dan hacked, remembering the slimy thing he shouldn't have eaten. A few humans stood within the ruin, around a table or altar, their low, droning chant rising ominously into the night.

They scuttled away, disturbing something foul, from which rose a bacchanal of bats that flew squeaking and flapping into the night, black against the full moon. They skirted the noisome

dead thing and made their way to the shop.

They saw Corin duck back inside the doggie door about midnight and both of them followed again, to curl up on the rug by the hearth. They awoke human, covered by blankets in front of a lovely fire. From the front of the shop, Cian was singing in Gaelic.

“I close at noon. Go find breakfast and we'll all have an afternoon nap. Twill be a long and bloody night's work.”

“Aye,” Corin growled and stole a kiss before Cian could duck away.

The naps under the featherbeds struck Dan as luxurious beyond belief. He decided they were going to have one back in Wisconsin when he got home. He nestled under the soft down, smelling the high wild scent of Paul, his own Big Bad Wolf. They would win. He would have his featherbed and his mate and the world would be safe. He repeated this to make himself believe it with no great luck.

Cian woke them all about three. Dan was beginning to wonder if the half-sidhe ever slept. They drank large mugs of hot tea, Dan wishing for some really strong coffee, and waited.

“Tonight, my dear ones. Tonight it is for good or ill.” Cian washed up the tea things and vanished upstairs as they stripped down. He returned in clothing straight out of Tolkien, and Dan stifled a laugh.

If there was any doubt in his mind about Cian's origins, it was firmly at rest now. The doeskin trousers, and vest over a soft linen shirt were covered by a light gray cloak. A silver band held Cian's longish hair off his face and showed his pointed ears. His eyes seemed longer and more tilted than usual.

He opened the door as the Change began. The weres, once comfortable in their wolf-shapes, padded after him into the night, following his now-glowing shape. He led the way back to the ruin Dan and Paul had found the night before.

Dan whimpered a little as they reached it, his stomach still upset. He should have passed the crud by now. They stalked around the circle, one lean gray timber wolf, one small black wolf, a brindled wolf with white around its muzzle, and the elf leading them all, his cloak dimming the light he cast.

The cultists surrounded an idol of odd green and black stone, carved into the figure of winged demon with a squid's head. The thing's talons dug into the base and the firelight made it seem to leer maleficently at the worshipers who surrounded it.

“Ia! Ia! Cthulhu f'htagn!” they chanted, moving counter-clockwise in a sort of hopping dance. A priest, crowned with a deep diadem of odd gold led them in the chanting, breaking now and then into a longer chant in the same nearly unspeakable language.

The night air grew still and stagnant. It had been chill, but was now completely frigid. The wolves circled noiselessly, trying to keep warm. Large dark things blotted out the moon once and twice, and a third time. The unwholesome leprous lichens that grew on the ruins seemed to expand and feed on the energy, glowing a sickly green.

The dancers grew more frenzied and the shouts grew louder. The moon went dark and something rumbled ominously under the earth.

Cian gave the signal and the wolves broke into the circle. Dan remembered very little of the fight later. It was a blur of shouting humans, hot blood in his mouth and bodies that kept moving long after they should have stopped.

He saw Paul rip the throat out of something that walked upright and dressed like a man, but looked like a fish turning into a frog, or a frog becoming a fish. Paul howled and whined and licked at the grass and rocks and finally tore the throat from a human cultist, singing to the renascent moon as the hot copper and iron of it filled his mouth and washed over the fur of his chest.

Cian threw balls of light, which exploded on contact into the people and the fish-frogs. The ruin blazed with faerie light but still the earth rumbled, even more insistently.

The last of the cultists had fled, the majority lying dead on the frozen, blood- and ichor-soaked ground. Corin sat near one of the vast stones, licking a wound. Paul lay quietly, whimpering in exhaustion. Cian checked them both over.

Dan watched Cian lay his faintly glowing hands on Corin's torn leg. He whimpered and moved closer to Paul as Corin healed under Cian's touch. Paul nuzzled him. He buried his head under his mate's chin, feeling very unwell. He whined a little and Cian came to them.

He stroked their heads and Paul stopped whimpering. But Dan couldn't stop whining. His stomach felt worse and worse, and the elf's touch only increased the excruciating pain. Everything went black.

Cian stared as Dan collapsed. The timber wolf nudged his mate, but Dan didn't move. Paul growled at Cian, who understood it perfectly as "fix my mate or I eat you next." Corin stalked over, looming over Paul and snarled his own warning for Paul to leave his mate alone. The younger alpha raised his hackles and Cian stroked them down.

"Enough, my darlings. Young Danior needs me."

The little black wolf's body went rigid and then convulsed as if jolted by electricity. Something like a tentacle poked out of the corner of his mouth for an instant and then whipped out of sight.

"Get away," he told the wolves. "I must do this myself."

Paul bared his teeth, unwilling to be away from his mate. He sniffed Dan and whined in distress.

Cian stroked Dan's head. "Paul, I will take care of him, acushla. I say move away so you are not infested too. He has eaten a star-spawn which will devour him and explode on the world, wreaking as much havoc as any of the Old Ones."

Paul whimpered and backed off.

Cian continued stroking Dan, the glow from his hands getting brighter and spreading over the limp, furry body. Paul rose as if to start toward Cian and his mate, but Corin flopped heavily on top of him, holding him pinned to the moldering leaves and cold, moist earth.

At Dan's mid-section, the glow intensified. Cian beckoned, almost tugging at the light that joined him and the wolf. Paul growled at Corin to get off of him, but the old wolf nipped his ear and shifted to hold him down more firmly.

A globule of light, not a sphere exactly, the exact geometry incongruent with anything earthly, began to emanate from Dan's belly. His paws twitched and Cian tugged at the light again, as if drawing the thing out, forcing him to give birth by yanking on an extremely reluctant umbilical.

The blob finally extracted itself from the prone wolf, and thrashed about, flopping in mid-air as if beached. It twisted and bucked, but Cian restrained it and carried it to the center of the circle. The wolves snarled at the unwholesome thing within the sphere.

Mottled and greenish gray, it resembled the thing on the altar in miniature. Cian carried it before the altar, his own glow lighting the ruins to near-daylight levels. With each step, he grew brighter and brighter, the power charging him.

He flung the light-ball at the idol with a cry in a language that was neither Gaelic, nor English nor any other tongue the wolves knew. It grew in flight, the monstrosity in the sphere expanding and writhing as it tried to avoid the collision with its stone counterpart.

When it struck, the world exploded.

The light went brighter than the sun, and the earth rocked. Corin and Paul covered their heads with their paws as tree limbs and dirt and small stones rained down in torrents. Paul tried to shake off Corin to crawl over to cover Dan, but the older wolf was immovable. They couldn't see Cian in the heart of the light and explosion.

When the light died away, the wolves blinked against the gray of the Christmas morning dawn. Somewhere, up in the hills, a chickadee called out "phoebe, phoebe, chickadee-dee-dee." The clouds tinted first red and then rosy-gold as they shook out stiff limbs and tails and walked to their mates.

Paul nudged Dan with his nose, smelling that Dan was finally well, just sleeping. Corin settled

over Cian protectively and whined. As the sun touched them, they groaned and Changed.

December in the Miskatonic Valley does not often bring snow, but it is far too cold for a naked man -- let alone three and one of those unconscious -- to be out of doors at dawn.

Corin took charge and stripped away Cian's cloak. He gave a short, sharp laugh. Cian's cloak was a heavy, lined thing, with many pockets inside it. The pockets held minimal clothing for all of them, and the lining detached to make a separate cloak.

"Darling elf," Corin murmured and covered him with the unlined cloak before putting on the sweat suit Cian had for him and then taking the other sweats to Paul and Dan.

Paul pulled his own on before maneuvering Dan's unconscious body enough to dress him. He brushed away leaf-mold, foul clots of dirt and some blood where a sharp pebble had struck Dan's flank.

"We'll have to carry them, lad. They're both breathing, so both'll likely live." He scooped his mate into his arms and draped the cloak around both of them, using his own body heat to warm Cian. Paul did the same, finding Dan heavier than he'd expected.

"I'm all soft. Heaviest thing I ever lift is the phonebook." He shifted Dan into a fireman's carry across his shoulders and draped the cloak lining around them.

It was a long half mile to the house. They took it slowly, stopping often to rest and check their mates. As they sat on a large boulder on the hill above the shop, Dan's eyes fluttered. He raised one hand and blinked.

"BB?" he whispered.

"Shhh. Happy birthday. I think we saved the world. We're going indoors."

"Good. Your shoulders are bony. I'm cold."

"Gripe, gripe gripe," Paul smiled. He looked at Corin. "I think he's feeling better."

Corin was cradling Cian in his arms, stroking the longish hair out of Cian's face. "That he is. Oh, elf," he sighed in Cian's slightly pointed ear. "Wake up and nag me, darlin' man."

They staggered into the back door of Miska-Tonics and into the rear parlor where Cian did tea-leaf readings on alternate Wednesdays. Paul sat Dan in a chair near the fireplace and started stirring up the coals. Corin lay Cian down on the sofa and covered him, sitting on the floor, holding his hand.

"I'll get the kettle on, shall I?" Paul went for the copper kettle that Cian used for making tea back here, filled it and set it on the hearth near the newly-stoked blaze.

“Plain for me, with sugar,” Dan said, finally sticking his nose out from where he was buried in the cloak. Paul smiled and filled his tea ball with the good oolong tea.

“Alertness blend for me,” Corin said.

“Catnip with lavender for me, pup.”

They all turned to look. Cian had propped up on elbow, looking very pale and fragile. Paul didn't like it. It was too much like how Dan's grandfather had looked the morning he had died over breakfast.

Paul fetched all three mugs and some Alertness blend for himself as well, and waited for the water to heat. He sat beside Dan, stroking his black curls. Corin and Cian murmured together in soft Gaelic. When the kettle whistled, there was tea and sweet silence as they sipped and rested. Cian regained most of his color.

“Well, then.” Corin stood up. “It's saved the world, we have. I'm thinking that calls for a bit of a celebration. Not to mention there are three birthdays today, mine being one.”

Cian smiled wanly. “I'd rather have a nap, acushla.”

Paul nodded. “It's Christmas Day. Go have a nap. Furball and I can make breakfast and wake you later. Right?” He glanced at Dan.

Dan gave a weak nod. Corin glowered.

“Put some porridge in that pup before you press-gang him into kitchen work.” He helped Cian up the stairs. “Moon knows he hasn't eaten right in days.”

Dan nodded. “I'm starved.”

Paul used the end of the hot water to make some instant oatmeal packs he found in one of the cupboards. “Eat. Then we'll get some real breakfast in you. Pancakes and ham and eggs and more oatmeal, and plenty of tea.”

“Kippers!” Cian's soft call drifted down from the balcony.

“Just for you.” Paul called up. He kissed Dan's nose. “And I bought presents. Had 'em delivered by net ordering, just like you. Corin's been sitting on them for us.”

“Clever, devious old wolf,” Dan smiled. “We really did, huh?”

“Yep. We sure did. And six billion people out there will never know.” Paul wrapped his arms around Dan and buried his face in his mate's chest. “Furball, I thought we were going to lose you. I was scared to death.”

Dan rolled his eyes. "I eat star-spawn and he's the one who's scared?"

"Come on. The kitchen's upstairs." Paul helped him out of the chair, and they went up the old wooden staircase, Paul's arm supporting Dan around his waist. "Merry Christmas, Furball. Quite a change from Wisconsin, isn't it?"

Dan nodded. "Happy birthday, BB. I love you. Have I said that?"

"Frequently. But never quite so often that I get tired of hearing it."

They paused on the landing and Paul stole a kiss. Dan's mouth, wet silk under his own, tasted only of Dan and the tea. There was no trace of the nightmare they had just lived.

"Come on, babe. Let's get breakfast for our grumpy old men. Then we'll tell them about our planned trip to the courthouse tomorrow for a marriage license."

Dan smiled. "Maybe we can make it a double wedding." He shrugged. "It's only a formality. Mother joined us, you know, the first time we mated in wolf-form."

Paul kissed him again. "I suspected as much. My Furball." He led the way up the stairs, Dan tucked up warm against his side, firmly convinced of Cian's promise that all would be well. Now it would be, at any rate.

Miskatonic Mistletoe

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