

The Shaker of Worlds

By

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## Prologue

1542 AD: Speckled Owl of the Susquehannock tribe that lived along the Susquehanna River, in the place that's now called Kirkwood, NY, sat in his small hut and inhaled the smoke from the leaves and brush that burnt in a shallow pit that he had dug. He was his tribe's medicine man and there were some bad things happening in the small village. It had all started a few days ago when a white man had shown up looking to trade. He'd been coughing and looked sickly, but they had figured there would be no harm in trading with him if he would then be on his way.

A day after the stranger left, people had begun to get ill. Three days later they began to die. Speckled Owl was a skilled medicine man. He had an extensive knowledge of plants and insects that could be used for medicinal purposes. He was forty-two, an old man in those times, and he had seen a lot but this sickness that the trader had brought with him was nothing like he had ever dealt with before. The fevers, sores, and the almost 100 percent death rate were devastating the tribe.

He was purifying himself now before going to the Place of the Lights. It was a special place of power deep in the forest. The medicine man before him had revealed it to him and taken him there when he was a young apprentice. It was a place where the chosen ones sometimes got the glow in the hands, and they were able to heal the sick. It was an awesome and dangerous place, because the medicine man before him had said if the supplicant was found to be unworthy, they would see the beast that lived there and it would devour them, but if they were found to be good, they would be given the power for a time. Speckled Owl prayed to his ancestors and searched his soul. He hoped that the

spirits that lived at the Place of Lights would find him worthy and grant him the power he sought.

Taking nothing with him, he walked naked out into the cool November night. The walk to this place was over rough terrain, and as he scrambled up over overgrown trails and pressed his way through thick brush, he began to chant in his language. It was filled with rich tones and fervor, and while he walked he noticed that the moon had disappeared from the sky and the heavens were filled with different stars and constellations. He also realized that the trees around him were now peculiar and not native to his country. When he finally got to the spot, he fell onto his knees, then prostrated himself face-down on the ground. Little balls of light flitted around him, some seeming to caress his body. The little globes seemed to wink into existence, then wink out again. After saying the prayer taught to him by the previous medicine man, he closed his eyes and turned around carefully.

Chanting the same song he chanted when he walked to the sacred spot, he now began the walk home. He noticed now how deathly dark it was, and he noticed that, although the trail was supposed to be mostly flat, he seemed to be walking down through thick strange trees.

Fear entered his heart. He stopped chanting the purity and wisdom song out loud. He kept quiet and moved carefully. There were sounds in the forest that he didn't recognize, terrible sounds, and he knew if the things that made those sounds found him he would be lost forever. The trail then went up and the stars shifted and became the stars of his sky.

This way the medicine man walked back to his village, and when he went into the lodge of the Chief who was sick, he laid his hands on him and that early morning the man was cured. So was every villager he touched that day. People remarked upon the miracle and upon his hair, which had now turned completely white.

Years later, as progress came to the area, that same spot where he had prostrated himself became the site of an army barracks, then a prison, next a slaughter house, a graveyard, followed by a mental hospital, and finally, in 1935, it became the Kirkwood Gray Department Base, a place of secrets and screams and sin. Today that base sits upon the place of power.

It was a large forbidding structure built in the shape of an octagon. The two-story building was the size of a city block, and each arm of the octagon was engaged with its own secret work carried out on behalf of the government. It was surrounded by an electrified fence, and when it was first constructed, it had excited the imagination of the local townspeople. As time passed, the base became known simply as the government building just out of town, although strange stories would float around Kirkwood now and then about some odd goings on. The older people died off, and the base was almost forgotten.

No one used the road that led up to the base anymore, because everyone knew that 'It was just the base that was there', and it was a dead end. No one hunted or hiked in the woods surrounding the base. Time and again some brave or unknowing soul would venture in, and there was always something, a prickling at the back of the neck that would make them relieved once they got out of the woods and into their cars, driving for home. A few people had gone in and never came out. There were several times in the past when the base had become the focal point of some important events. That time was here again.

## Chapter 1

*“Come, follow me, and leave the world to its babblings.”* Dante Alighieri

Matthew Stewart stumbled forward. Only his iron willpower kept him going. He was badly shot. As a matter of fact, he was shot in three places; right calf, stomach, and upper torso under the collar bone. He was bleeding profusely as well, and he knew that it was just a matter of time before he would blackout. He doubted if he would ever wake up. As he reached his apartment building in the Soho corner of New York City, he fumbled for his keys. With another effort of will, because his fingers seemed so far away and hard to move, he slotted the key into the massive main door, twisted, and shoved. The door whooshed inward, and he made for the elevator.

When he got to the eighth floor, he hobbled to the apartment at the end of the hall and tried to fit the key. He couldn't do it. A searing pain ripped through his right side and he coughed and spit blood, a bad sign. He pressed the door buzzer and, hearing movement on the other side, braced himself to the peep hole. The door opened. A slim brunette with a worried, strained face gasped at his appearance, then quickly helped him inside.

“The bastards shot me. They'll be here soon.”

The woman grunted as she helped him to the floor. “Oh Matt! Matt! You're hurt.” They looked at each other and something silent, fleeting but final, passed between them.

He grabbed her hand and held it to his lips. He knew this would be the final time they would be together. He was going to die. “Here's what we'll do,” he said. “We'll let them come, then we'll fight them. I don't have to worry about running anymore, and they don't really know the extent of our combined ability. We'll wait until they're close, then we'll try to take them out. As soon as you have the chance, take the children and run.”

Rachael and John came out of their rooms and looked in horror and disbelief at their parents. Rachael was first to react, running and grabbing her father's hand.

John, a dark-haired version of his mother, stood back and took in the scene with his green eyes. This was his nightmare come true. He had suspected for months now that something was wrong with his parents. He could tell that they had been worried about something, but he couldn't tell what specifically. He knew that they loved each other, so the thought of divorce didn't cross his mind, but he knew something wasn't right. He could feel the tension between them.

Matthew looked hard at his wife. He never knew that he could feel so much pain, but he knew he had to hold on a bit longer. He had to see his family out of the apartment and safely down below. "Okay, we knew this might happen and there's no use crying over spilled milk." He reached out a bloody hand and touched his wife's cheek. "They tried to arrest me in the park. The gloves are off, you know what I mean. They tried to convince me to go with them, and to get you guys to turn yourselves in so they could continue to run their project. I said no. It was the answer they didn't want. Those agents, Clandestine and Smalls, took me to this Besque. You'll know him when you see him, Mr. Big, Bald, and Scary. He didn't like my answer to his request."

Matthew coughed up more blood and the world wobbled a bit. He coughed again, and a little rill of blood ran from his lips. He laid on his back, fighting for air. He was finding it increasingly difficult to breathe.

His fear was confirmed by the sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside and a loud imperious banging on the door, which made them all jump.

"This is Besque. You and your family need to come out with your hands up. I have a warrant for your arrest."



Maggie nodded to her husband, and she reached down behind the sofa and grabbed two backpacks, which she gave to the children. She felt like she was in a dream. Surely this couldn't be happening to her. How could her husband, a good gentle man, be lying on the floor, shot and bleeding to death? A sound of anguish escaped her, and she groaned. She knew that she was most likely speaking with her partner for the last time. She could feel the effort he was making trying to stay conscious.

“I will break some heads, while you do your thing. How many people outside the door?”

His wife reached out with her mind. “Five, I think.”

“Okay, are the kids ready?”

“Yeah.” John found himself speaking up. He was scared, and he didn't quite understand what was going on, but the inborn instinct to protect his family was strong. He was ready to do whatever his parents asked.

“We will have to do it together, and hard,” Maggie said. Matthew nodded, his face pale and matted with sweat. “On three, kids, get ready to run for the door.” She instinctively reached down and gripped her husband's hand. A jolt of anger and dismay welled up inside her as she realized that this would be the last time she would see him alive.

*They flexed and shoved hard with their minds.*

There were five men outside the door with Besque, and they all collapsed in a writhing pile on the carpeted floor. Three of the men began to vomit violently, and one of them suddenly clutched his head and screamed. His skull moved under the skin, and there was a sickening, bone-crunching sound as his head imploded. Blood ran from his eyes and ears, staining the vanilla carpet red.

A couple of the neighbors' doors popped open, then closed quickly as they caught sight of the writhing bodies, dropped weapons, and blood at the end of the hall.

The door to the Stewarts' apartment, 8E, flew open. Three fugitives bolted for the stairs. Maggie couldn't help turning around one last time, but what she looked for wasn't visible, as the door had swung closed on its hinges. There was something else that she saw which made her blood chill to ice, and she almost gave up at the sight of it. Besque's face, a mask of pain and hate, glared at her. His pale bald head gleamed in the fluorescents. His sunken, red eyes held hers for a moment. She knew that if he could have caught her there and then, there would have been no mercy. He would have killed her, and slowly, regardless of what his orders were.

The moment was broken when John grabbed her hand. She turned and ran down the eight flights of steps and through the small lobby. On her way out of the building, she felt a frantic tugging at her mind, her heart caught in her throat. She knew that mental brush as well as she knew his actual physical touch. Matthew had reached out one last time and in his way had said goodbye.

Her eyes swam with tears as they ran around the corner to the other car Matthew had bought a month ago, all in cash, when he thought there would be bad trouble. It was an old 2004 Honda Civic. It had more than a hundred thousand miles on it, but it was reliable. She opened the driver's door, and the kids piled into the backseat. She then eased out of the tight parking space, brushing the bumper of the car in front.

When she got into traffic and pulled onto the West Side Highway, she checked her rear view mirror and noted there was no sign of pursuit. She felt a spasm in her chest and began to cry. The kids sat in the back, looking at her with their eyes wide and searching. She could not yet begin to help them; no, not yet, for as her acute fear calmed she now began to grieve for her husband.

She understood, and it was quite a shock how deeply she had loved him and how much she was going to miss him.



Besque got slowly to his knees, head pounding. He looked around at his men. One was dead and another was on his way. He knew which of the Stewarts was responsible for each incident. The dead man, and the one who would soon be, were attacked by the man inside. The others and he were attacked by the woman. Even while his head swam and his stomach felt that it would lurch, his sharp, analytical mind sifted through this confirming data. So the man was a *bender*, and the wife a *feeler*.

He also felt his skin crawl. He hated *senders*, or as they were sometimes called *talents*, with the same unrelenting revulsion that one had for reptiles or crawly insects. That's what they were in Besque's mind; they were a different species, an inhuman abomination which needed to be hunted down and either captured or liquidated.

The senior agent got to his feet and leaned a long, thick, heavy hand on the wall. He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. That bitch had made him almost puke again. Her husband caused him to throw up earlier when they had tried arresting him in the park. He had curled up into a ball in the hallway and dry retched. He counted himself as lucky. He could have been like Sanchez there, with his head looking like a squashed melon, or Rollings, who had just stopped twitching. He was lucky, too, that the Stewarts hadn't coordinated their attack better. If the man had gone after him directly, instead of just lashing out, this could have ended very badly for him. He grunted, looked around the corridor, and saw only one other agent had made it to his feet. He would have to call in a cleanup crew.

They would have to clean the corridor, the men, and the neighbors, too. He stepped around the puke and blood, and opened the Stewarts' door. Lying just inside was Matthew Stewart, and Besque could tell that the man was dead. A great deal of blood had pooled on the wooden floor under the body. The man shook his head, remembering how he had shot the *sender*, and how he still managed to get away. Now his team would have to go over the whole apartment bit by bit to see what potentially useful morsels of knowledge they could pick up, although they knew a great deal about these people already. They had bugged their apartment years ago, so they knew them intimately. They knew every happy and sad time the couple and their children had experienced over the past three years, but it still seemed that there were certain things they had managed to keep to themselves, and it annoyed him. He would have the team go over every inch of the flat. He needed to know if there were any other secrets, because now he would have to catch them.

The woman would be invaluable as a test subject, breeder, or agent. The children would be deep-vaulted, meaning imprisoned forever for study. There was even a chance they could be trained as agents. He already figured that the boy probably wouldn't be a strong subject, but the girl would. The ability seemed to travel stronger in females than males.

He got on his cell and called in his location, and in fifteen minutes men and women wearing green overalls and white masks appeared. They set off a couple of powerful cyanide gas charges in the corridor, killing the Stewarts' neighbors. Then they quickly disposed of the bodies in opaque bags. The cleanup crew sprayed everything with a neutralizing element. When they finally packed up their black vans, all traces of the bodies and evidence were gone.

Another group would come later and move all the furniture and personal effects out. It seemed incredible that in America today, six people could have just disappeared from the same apartment building without a trace, with no one raising an alarm about it, but that was the case. In

a month, the mystified building superintendent would be showing the empty apartments to new prospecting tenants. The Gray Department would make sure that stories and letters were planted and sent to relatives. Bills would be paid and credit cards used in different states. For a while the dead would be living, until they faded out of contact forever.

Besque spent four hours in the Stewarts' apartment, but came up with nothing substantial. He found the names of relatives who would be checked out, but he realized it was unlikely they would go to any family members. Such a plan would be too obvious. The woman would want to hide and burrow herself and her children away. The deal with the car told him that she and her husband had made some plans for escape. She probably wouldn't be easy to find, but he had no doubts that he would track her down, and they, too, would be made to vanish.



Now a strange thing happened two hours after Besque left the Stewarts'. Their Manhattan apartment fronted the street. It was a substantial building that took up a quarter of a city block. The back part of the building faced a two story medical building, and there was a walled fence around this part of the building which gave way to an ivy-covered wire fence at the sides. Inside at the back was a small garden maintained by the building's superintendent.

Few of the building's residents took advantage of the small garden during the hot summers that assaulted the city every year. It was here that something peculiar began to happen. Just above a bed of chrysanthemums, the air wavered and began to ripple, then it seemed like a hole had opened up in the fabric of reality as the air began to whistle through the aperture. Small bits of grass and leaves tumbled and spun up and into the deepening rift.

Then a man stepped through the ripple and it closed behind him with a soft coughing sound. He was of medium height and dressed in blue jeans-like pants and a brown and green checkered shirt. His shirt was covered by a heavy tan oilskin duster that almost swept the ground whenever he moved. He wore knee-high engineer boots which crunched the ground as he walked. On his head sat a dark wide-brimmed hat of indistinguishable color. The hair under the hat was almost completely gray.

The man, whose name was Oliver, stood at the back of the Stewarts' apartment and looked up at it quizzically. He had traveled far and with some urgency, but he knew that he was already too late. He went into the building through the basement door and walked up the stairs to the eighth floor. He checked out the corridor, and although everything looked clean and orderly, he could feel the wrongness of the place.

He then went into the Stewarts' apartment and knew a struggle had gone on there. He laid a hand on the walls, and they spoke faintly to him. He was familiar with violence and understood there had been a lot here. He knew that the man was killed, but the woman and her children had gotten away. Those children were the key to everything he had fought for all his life. He had to get to them before those other men found them. Moving silently, he took one last look around the apartment. He would go back to where he had come from because it was easier to track them from there. He would have to make a dangerous trip to consult the best seer on his world. The next time the children and their mother were located, he would be ready to move.



Besque checked in at the New York City Gray Department headquarters, located in an impressive 50-story building which said 2005 WEST 20<sup>th</sup> STREET in bold letters on the front. He

went past security and rode the elevator to the 49<sup>th</sup> floor, where an office, one of many he used all over the country, was located. When he opened the door, there was a man sitting in one of the lush leather chairs that tastefully complimented the office.

He was singular in appearance, and when he stood, Besque realized that he was a little over 5'11", with light red hair, and a young face that looked old. It was a face that had nothing remarkable about it, but was remarkable all the same. One could not guess at his ancestral heritage. He had pale gray eyes and was of average build. He wore a dark suit with a white shirt and gray tie. He looked every inch a government clerk.

"Hi," he said, his face expressionless. "I'm Grievely. I was assigned to work with you on this Stewart business." There was no need to check out the guy's story. He was legit alright. Sent down from the top to keep an eye on things, Besque thought.

"I'll not be in the way," Grievely said. "I'll be there when you need to clean things up, so to speak." He said this in a flat toneless voice which made Besque aware that the man opposite him was dangerous. There was something about Grievely which just didn't seem completely right. In his line of work, Besque had dealt with all kinds of men who did this sort of government business for a living. There were some true blue psychos among the cadre, that was for sure, but this one was stranger somehow.

Besque took one close hard look at his new partner and realized what set those inner alarm bells off; the man seemed to be a copy of a man, rather than a true human being, if that was possible. The face and body was just a costume that hid the truth beneath. He realized that Grievely was also taking a close look at him as well. He felt the skin on his back tighten. He knew the Gray Department, whose mission was to push the boundaries of science and research, dealt with, for lack of a better word, 'gray' areas of the government's business. He always considered the

Department as operating on the fringes, a cold gray place where sometimes the truth was better left alone.

He knew that there were many Gray labs and prisons, and as a high-level operative he also realized there were also many things of which even he was unaware. This man Grievely was one of those things which popped out from the dusky corridors of the Department's shadowy web of a network. Besque didn't need to ask if Grievely outranked him.

The man wasn't here to work with him; he was here to watch and clear up matters. This also signaled that someone, somewhere in the organization was worried about the Stewart family, and he began to wonder if there was more to all of this than he originally thought. His curiosity had now piqued. Besque had already gotten over Mr. 'Flat' Grievely. He now wanted to know why the Department was so interested in his case. "We have our profiling techs at work on locating them. I am expecting an update in ten minutes. We also have the chopper standing by on the pad, and we have all our statewide neutralizing teams on alert."

Grievely nodded. "I don't doubt that we'll locate the Stewart woman soon. She's not an expert at such things, and we are."

"Would you like some coffee?" Besque offered as he filled a carafe with water. Grievely declined and took his seat again in the chair. Besque made his coffee and motioned Grievely to follow him to the briefing room.



Maggie's eyes burned hot as she drove. The front of her shirt was already soaked with tears and sweat. She also had a mother of a headache which was ramming itself against the base of her eyes. Rachael sat next to her brother in the back seat, her crying clearly audible to Maggie up front.



The sound brought Maggie out of her own grief for a moment. They were fifty miles out of New York City, heading upstate towards Broome County. She had spoken of this to Matthew, but he never approved. She was going to see her brother Andrew before disappearing.

She looked in the rear view mirror at the kids. John was looking at her intensely. There was a rest stop coming up on the right, and she decided to pull in and have a bathroom break, as well as grab a few things from the store. She pulled into the lot and hopped out gingerly. She suddenly realized just how frantic she was to get moving again, and she almost decided to get back in and drive, but looked at the kids and understood that she had to stop, if even for only a few minutes.

She walked with them into the rest stop, Maggie and her daughter to the ladies' bathroom, and John to the men's room across the hall. As she sat on the toilet, she could hear Rachael peeing and crying, and she began to cry herself. She felt agonizingly ill, got up from the seat, and vomited into the toilet. It was painful and watery. While leaning over the toilet she became aware of the splashes of old urine on the badly swabbed floor and felt a wave of despair at her predicament. Yet more tears came, and she reached and tore off some tissue. She still had to go, so she sat back on the seat. Her bladder then released its hot liquid and she began to feel better.

"Hey, mom, what's that?" Rachael asked from outside her stall. She saw dim lights around the bathroom and dismissed it as stress. She closed her eyes tightly and cupped her head in her hands, then began to breathe deeply. She felt that she would soon be able to get up and get back on the road again.

What was that smell? She smelled something old, rotting, and pungent. Her eyes were still closed, and it was as if the vents had wafted the smell of something putrefying her way. She wrinkled her nose and opened her eyes. What she saw made her breath catch in her throat. Swirling

under the bathroom stall's door was a churning dark vapor. At first she felt her insides tighten as the thought that it might be smoke flashed through her mind. Damn it to hell if that was smoke and the place was on fire. What were the odds? Her mind was just beginning to work again, thinking that she must find John and get out when something peculiar occurred.

The mist reared up. The dark vapor extended itself into two columns and swirled into rippling arms, reaching for her. She tried to scream and found that it didn't come. Her eyes became watery, and her vision faded for a second. She heard Rachael calling her name from far away.

She struck out at the mist trying to encircle her. As it did so, it also seemed to take on more of a solid shape. She instinctively held her breath. She didn't want to inhale any part of it. What she did next probably saved her life. She forced herself to be calm and fought back the only way she knew how. She imagined a rusty knife being rammed into her arm. The feeling of pain flared through her mind, then she *pushed* the thought at the mist.

The thing stopped dead in its swirling tracks and cringed back against the bathroom door. Maggie *pushed* hard again and the mist recoiled. It then quickly retreated back under the stall, and an eerie distant cry seemed to echo through the now rancid-smelling bathroom. She quickly opened the stall door and found Rachael staring at her, eyes wide and red.

“Shit, Mom? What was that smoke?”

“Don't say shit, Rach. I don't know what that was, but I think you should wash your hands and face, and we should just get out of here.” She felt her skin prickling as she remembered the smoke thing trying to grab her. She hurried her daughter over to the sink and Rachael quickly washed her face.

John was waiting on the sidewalk when they came outside. Maggie's previously healthy boy looked shocking, face drawn and white. It was obvious he'd been crying. She didn't have time

to comfort him now. That would have to come later. She just wanted them to get back in their car and get on the road. She was almost to the vehicle when John suddenly said, “You smell funny.”

She quickly sniffed at her sleeve and realized that the smell of her smoke attacker was on her skin and clothes. Hell, it had been real. Her mind began to swirl. What in God’s name was that? What the hell was it? What was going on? It was all too much to think about now. The smoke had left that faintly putrescent smell on her, and she groaned inwardly, knowing that she wouldn’t be able to shower for the next few hours. The kids got into the car and she pulled out onto the highway again. She had enough gas to get to her brother in Whitney Point. She wouldn’t be stopping again.



In a town just outside Syracuse, NY, called Lakeside, a man named Jurgis Phin sat in a padded cell, staring at the walls. Water oozed out of his red and bloodshot eyes. Jurgis was an inmate of the Sunny Rest Psychiatric Home. He was thirty-nine years old and had been diagnosed with schizophrenia when he was twenty-six. Thirteen years ago, Jurgis started hearing voices that told him the truth about certain things and people.

Once he had been a normal messed up human being, with a regular life. Physically, he was a tall, broad man with a way and look about him so that at first glance he would be taken for someone just a bit on the slow side. He was told that he resembled Karl in that movie *Sling Blade*.

He had lived in an apartment in Syracuse, and he worked as a carpenter at a fairly successful furniture store. He was actually good at his craft, and the items that he worked on were masterpieces. He was so good that clients would come in or call requesting his creations, but his

life was changed when the sickness crept up on him, taking away his sanity. He also began seeing things as well.

Before he committed the act that got him locked up permanently, Jurgis realized that his neighbor's cat had a lot to say about people, and he was usually right. Hell, he was certainly right about the man who lived in Apartment 2F below him. The cat, which had begun visiting him every day, told him that the man was a drug addict and seller, and that he would soon be caught, and it was so. His neighbor was dragged off to jail a week later for making meth in his apartment. This explained the horrible smells that came up from the floors.

His feline friend, a pure white Norwegian Forest Cat, licked his balls and sneezed before telling him of the woman who lived with all those other cats on the first floor. Cat Lady, the cat said, was a witch, and he could tell this by just looking into her eyes. The cat said that he could tell a witch because her eyes glowed yellow when she was standing in the shade. These witches, the cat said, were dangerous, and if they looked at you and their eyes glowed, it meant that you were marked.

They would come for you at some fated time to tear your soul from its body and drag it off to Hell. These witches were the consorts of demons and did their bidding. The only way to protect yourself, the cat had said, was to mark the witch yourself and kill her before she had the chance to kill you. The only way to kill a witch was with a long wooden stake or blade, but it had to be wood or it wouldn't work. This weapon would have to be dipped in holy water before it was used.

Jurgis had followed his feline friend's instructions to the letter. He made a wooden glaive with a sharp blade. He sneaked the weapon into a church and dipped its wooden edge into the blessed water in the holy fount. He then began to follow Cat Lady discreetly, noting her daily patterns.

He found out that her name was Gloria Picklu, and that she was sixty-nine years old. Her husband had died of cancer a year before, and she lived by herself now. The cat told him that Cat Lady had actually finished off her old man by slipping a witch's poison into his soup. He told Jurgis how old man Picklu's soul was dragged off kicking and screaming by demons that ripped at it, as practice for an eternity of brutal sport.

He informed Jurgis how to protect his home from these demons that roamed around, looking to torment the earthbound, which is what the cat said all humans were. It was after this discourse that Jurgis began to see the visions of dead people and demons trying to claw their way out of his apartment floor and walls. He did as the cat told him to do. He painted bright red crosses all over his walls and floor, then ripped the pages out of a Bible and pasted them all over his apartment. It worked. They tried getting through, but they would come up against a cross or the leaves, and they would writhe and sink back under the surface.

The cat, by showing him how to keep himself safe from the demons, only served to confirm what Jurgis thought he already knew; the cat was good. The feline Cheshire was often a guest in Jurgis' home, where it would lick *Fancy Feast* from its lips. It would sit and purr in Jurgis' lap as he watched the crap that was passed off as television programming in those days. Sometimes the cat would break in with a thing or two about the people featured on the programs. *That one was having an affair with his intern, she was stealing money from the welfare fund, he would soon be dead from an aneurism building in his brain, that one pushed his best friend off a balcony because he thought he was sleeping with his wife, and he's gotten away with it, for a time anyway, because it all gets reckoned up, and the sheets are balanced eventually.* On and on the cat would ramble, and more often than not, there would be another story a day or month from the feline's deliberation in which his words were proved true.

That was the kicker in all of this, because at first Jurgis thought that maybe he was going a bit crazy, but then the cat was always proved right. *How can I be crazy if the fur ball is always right?* Jurgis had thought, and still did. That was the thing which made him exasperated. He had read up about schizophrenia and realized that his symptoms fit the definition, but he couldn't explain away the one incontrovertible argument against him being ill, and that was the cat was always right.

They became good pals then, with Jurgis accepting his talking feline companion. When he began to see other things which the cat called *drifters*, he accepted this as real because, as the cat said, his perception was now a bit heightened. This was a consequence of becoming a *chosen one*. The cat revealed to him that he was chosen to do two deeds for the good of mankind.

The first would be to kill Cat Lady, because she was a witch and a killer, and the second deed would happen at a later time, but he would be called to perform a heroic service. The cat had told him this one Saturday evening when Jurgis had brought home a large salmon from the fish market. He had unwrapped the large fish and placed it on his square kitchen table. Anyone watching this would have thought it the actions of an acolyte making a gift to his god.

The cat jumped upon the table and seemed to smile at Jurgis. Its eyes glowed orange as it began to snack on the fish's flesh. At first thought one would have surmised that there was no way the cat could have consumed such a large meal, but it purred and growled and smacked its jaws as it tore into the flesh and cracked bones. Its body seemed to grow bigger as its fur stood up on end. There was a chilling savagery in its mastication, and soon there was nothing left of the fish on the table. It had eaten the entire thing; not a bone or fin was left.

It jumped down and flicked its tail before collapsing into a contented heap on a small mat in front of the television. It purred and growled and its body shook before it fell asleep. While

watching this savage display, Jurgis felt a shiver. Reality crept up and placed its bony hand on his shoulder. He wondered again about his sanity, *but the cat was right*.

Two days later he passed Mrs. Picklu in the downstairs lobby. She was standing in her doorway talking to the mailman. He had gotten to the door and was about to push on through to the outside when he turned his head and caught Cat Lady looking at him. Her eyes flashed a dazzling yellow glow. Jurgis felt his blood turn to ice, and he almost tripped as he went outside into the bright June sunlight. He planned her murder for the next four weeks, with the fervor and dedication of a man on a holy mission.

He waited until she was coming in from the supermarket. He hid at the end of the hall in the shadows, gripping the wooden weapon. As soon as she came inside, he ran toward her and stabbed her in her left side. The sharp wooden blade ripped through her skin and rammed upward under her ribcage. Mrs. Picklu dropped her bags and fell toward the glass door, which shattered outwards with the force of her weight.

With the bleeding woman lying half in, half out of the doorway, Jurgis yanked the weapon from her side and stabbed her again in the throat. Picklu's eyes widened and flashed yellow as blood gushed from the jagged wound in her neck. Jurgis stopped at this point to look at the damage he had done. Everything had narrowed to the woman on the ground. Time slowed down for him. He had seen his hand thrust forward and the glaive rip into the woman's side, had seen her fall, slowly it seemed, through the glass. He had heard the scream of a passing pedestrian.

He saw himself thrusting again and felt as the wooden blade ripped through the flesh and bone of the neck, then things began to speed up. The blood did it. It ran in an unbelievable quantity from the neck down onto the sidewalk. He saw the old woman spasm and choke, then she stopped moving as her life force seeped away with every heartbeat. Jurgis looked up from the destroyed

woman and saw the cat standing just inside the hallway, being careful not to step in the blood. It looked at Jurgis, and he could have sworn that it winked and smiled.

Reflecting upon this years later in his cell, he came to the conclusion that it had winked and that its mouth did turn upwards in a grin. Yes, a great big, aw-shucks grin, then it grew grave, stretching its neck to look at him in an imperial way, it said, "This is the first. There will be three others. When the time comes I'll tell you." It turned as primly as you please, and went up the steps. That was the last time Jurgis had seen the cat.

He had stood there on the sidewalk until the cops came and arrested him. They searched his place and found proof of his insanity painted and pasted all over his apartment walls and floor. When his case finally got to trial, it was really a done deal. There were a couple of witnesses who saw him do it, and he admitted killing the old witch. He told the court exactly what the cat had told him. He related the sequence of events so matter-of-factly that the jury and the judge nodded, almost, it seemed to him, at every word, and he found himself locked up in a maximum security facility for the criminally insane. He was in a padded cell with a mattress on the floor. It was amazing to Jurgis that even after the passage of thirteen years, they still didn't trust him enough to put him in a cell with a proper bed. After all this time, he would shake his head at that.

He had never indicated that he would harm himself. The unsophisticated, mild-mannered man who had worked as a carpenter at J&W Furniture Company realized that his story seemed too implausible to the doctors who examined and treated him, and years after when he looked back upon the matter he had to admit that he should have kept his mouth shut. He often asked himself whether or not he was imagining things. The doctors said that he was sick and delusional, but he just couldn't bring himself to admit that he had imagined it all. The visions of things coming through the walls went away, and he even thought he had an explanation for that as well. While



the cat was around, he figured he was amped up on something which caused him to be more sensitive to certain things.

He laid on his mattress and stared up at the small window on the other side of his room. It was bolted from the inside and was small enough and high enough to make sure that an inmate could not escape through it. It did, however, provide him with his only moments of peace as he gazed into a dark clear sky where the stars were just ready to pop out. Looking up at the shimmering points of light he remembered a movie he'd seen when he was young. It was *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

There was a song which he had loved, and as he started to hum, the tune the words came filtering back. He began to sing the words to the song *Pure Imagination*. Jurgis was a big man with a strong baritone voice, and the haunting song resounded in the cell despite the padded walls. Suddenly he stopped. There was a small sound from the window. The lock on the latch popped and fell to the floor. He jumped to his feet, his neck hairs prickling. Something was pushing in the window from the outside. His breath caught in his throat as his little visitor stepped through and jumped nimbly down into his cell. A smile broke over Jurgis' face as the cat sat down facing him and licking its paws.

"Hello, hero," the cat said and smiled, its eyes flashing. "You're looking well." Jurgis smiled and rubbed his eyes.

"Is it really you? Or am I just hallucinating?"

"It's me."

Jurgis looked at the animal. It looked the same, and its pure white coat still had that rakish cut.

“I told you it would be hard, but you knew that I was right about the old woman and everything else.”

“You must be fifteen years old now,” Jurgis rasped.

“Close, I’m pretty old, Jurgis, in both human and cat years. I heard you singing and thought it was time to get my instrument out of prison. He has important work to do.”

“What are you talking about?” Jurgis asked. “I can’t leave here.”

The cat looked at him and smirked. “Sure you can, Jurgis. It’s just like that song you were singing before I came in. Sometimes there are things that defy explanation.” The animal sat on its haunches, and with its eyes taking on a malevolent orange glow, it looked hard at the wall on the far side of the cell and began clapping its two paws together. Each clap sent out a visually shimmering, pulsing, translucent light that made a frightening din.

The cat’s paws clapped together faster and faster, and the booming noise it made caused the walls to crack. Jurgis looked at the animal as it wreaked its destruction upon the walls of the cell, and he realized that its paws were no longer paws, but small, shimmering, slender white arms with sharp curved claws. The walls of the cell sagged outwards, and with a creaking tearing sound, it collapsed in a dusty crashing heap.

Jurgis was outside before the dust cleared. He followed the cat to the perimeter wall. He could hear the horns blaring and the confusion behind him. “Press here,” the cat said, indicating a portion of the wall. Jurgis reached out and pushed his entire weight against the barrier. A few of the bricks close to where his hands were came loose, then the entire portion of the wall sagged and fell around him in a crash. One of the cinder blocks clipped him on the shoulder, and a strangled gasp of pain escaped his lips. That didn’t slow him down. In a flash he was on the other side of the

wall, crossing over to the sycamore woods and walking toward Route 12. The cat jumped nimbly in front, leading him with tail twitching.

“Why did you come for me now?” Jurgis asked.

“You have an important task to do,” his feline rescuer answered. You’ll have to kill another witch and her sucklings. Her name is Maggie Stewart, and she must be eliminated.”

Jurgis the carpenter walked through the woods toward the main road. In the distance he heard the sirens going by. He had no knowledge of the damage the catlike animal had caused. It would be all over the major New York television networks and papers the next day. It wasn’t just his wall that had collapsed, but a whole wing had been demolished. It killed fourteen people, injuring ten more. So while the rescue crews were busy digging through the rubble looking for bodies, the carpenter would be moving toward his goal.

He would break into a store and take a yellow long sleeve shirt, jeans, and a pair of blue canvas sneakers with white laces. He didn’t take a coat because he found that he was warm inside. He was actually generating a sweat. He looked around and found a few dollars, enough for a bus ticket and a meal, and moved on.

He went into the town of Lakeside and caught the next bus to Binghamton. From there he could walk or hitch a ride to Kirkwood, NY. While settling into his seat, he reviewed what his feline liberator had told him and made plans. He would have to find a place in Kirkwood to stay for a few days while he made the weapon that would kill the witch and her little ones.

Jurgis remembered a story he’d read in a class when he was getting his associates degree at Burbank Community College in Syracuse. It was about this knight called Redcrosse. He remembered that Redcrosse had to kill the beast Error who waited in her den to devour souls. That’s how he now saw himself, a vengeful knight doing God’s work. He would find a place to

hide and draw strength. He would seek out the witch, that beast Error, and remove her and her kind from the world. With that thought he slipped into sleep in his seat.



