

## The Lost Eye of Odin

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It began some years ago, on October 13th. Or was it the 31st? Yeah, better make it the 31st, stories like this are always better on Halloween. I was at home, hunkered down to avoid the stormy weather outside. There was a considerable mess in my living room that I was reluctantly cleaning up. Most people said I was stupid for keeping an Alaskan Malamute in a small Brooklyn apartment. But I loved the thing and he seemed happy. I just wished I owned fewer valuables.

I was hunched over on all fours, gathering up the pieces of some electronic--when there came a crash from the other room. It was my bedroom, wherein dwelt my most prized equipment. I groaned, then yelled. A large, gray and white animal padded softly to me. His squeaking duck was proudly clasped in mouth.

"Where did you find it this time, Barabbas?" I asked him. "Behind my computer tower?"

Barabbas answered by squeezing the toy between his teeth. It squeaked happily.

"I built that computer myself, you know. Bought just the right case, hand-picked the processor. It has been my life's crowning achievement."

More squeaks. Barabbas looked at me with those wet, blue eyes. You know how the skin around a dog's eyes can crinkle like eyebrows? It makes them look very sad, apologetic. But I don't think Barabbas understood anything I was saying.

"Oh, come here you big lug." I stood up and cradled his enormous face in my hands. That beautiful beast dropped his toy, relishing in the affection of his master. "Let's go see what new disaster you've wrought upon me."

Barabbas followed as I trepidatiously went to my room. It was a completely uninspiring chamber, with barely enough room for my sad, twin-sized bed and desk. Every spare inch of space was judiciously used to hold books and clothes, the only two things I used frequently and could never seem to put away. A tiny lamp sat atop one of those poorly made plastic bins beside my bed--that was my nightstand. Plastered on the walls were my weak interpretations of art: a few bad movie posters and the diploma I received at that two-year college. It was a room no woman could love--a room no woman has seen.

I discovered Barabbas' latest catastrophe immediately. It was not the computer tower; I suspect it was quite safe, as it was covered in socks and underwear. No, the thing that my lovable dog had newly destroyed was my 27" computer monitor--my only monitor. It laid face down on the floor, looking every bit the murder victim. I cringed as I lifted it up. Yep, the glass was cracked, shattered in fact. But, in a serendipitous twist, it had stayed in place in the frame. At least I would not have to clean up shards of glass from my floor.

I sat beside my fallen monitor. Barabbas padded up beside me. He nuzzled his face in the crook of my neck, whimpering. He did know what he'd done.

"It's alright, boy," I said as I rubbed his head. "It's my fault, really. I had to buy the big one."

A few minutes of wrestling with the beast and he was back to his old, oblivious self. He suddenly realized he had dropped his chew toy and returned to the living room. I hoisted the monitor and placed it back on the desk.

"I guess I'll be working from my laptop for a while," I said to myself. A while, indeed. I hadn't seen a royalty check in months. Sales of my little book must have slowed down. I wouldn't have money for a new monitor; I wouldn't have money for cheeseburgers. I would have to milk the ad revenue from my website for as much as it was worth. Or worse still, go back to freelance work. I shuddered to think of it.

The bell rang. I pushed my worries aside and made my way to the door. I rummaged through the mostly empty bags of candy (it was Halloween!) in search of decent treats.

"Sorry kids," I said, as I unlocked the door, "I only have a few mallowmars left. I guess I ate all the snickers myself. I admire you for braving the rain though, just to trick or--"

The people standing in my doorway were not children. If they were wearing costumes, they were of characters I never heard of. They were two men, much older than myself. To say they were tall would be an understatement. The one in front was your run-of-the-mill tall, maybe 6' 2". He wore a black overcoat that hid most of what I figured was a lean frame. He had a sandy-brown mustache and wore round spectacles. I marveled at how perfectly circular they were. Atop his head was one of those classic bowler hats--the ones you always hear about, but never see in real life. It was amazing. The second man was so large I barely believed he was real. He stood behind the first man, taking up all available space the hallway could give him. He was wide, with a burly wool coat protecting his ham hock limbs. I could see--for he was actually crouching down--his ruddy, bare face, which was pulled into a gloomy frown. He wore a blue painter's cap which was, as everything else they wore, wet from the rain.

I stared at them a moment before swallowing and speaking. "Well boys you're a bit too old for trick-or-treating. But if you insist, have some mallowmars." I tossed the candy at them. It bounced off the man's coat and fell to the floor. He surreptitiously glanced at it, but did not move.

"Yeah," I said, "I hate mallowmars too. Goodnight." I tried to close the door on the gentlemen. A hand roughly the size of a frying pan gripped the doorknob and held it open. I then wished I had used the chain.

"Is this Marcus English?" the first one asked me. It was an incredibly odd way of asking my name--as if I were a furnishing in a room and not a person. He spoke with an accent, it sounded Russian, and I just assumed it was a quirk.

"Uh, yes I am Marcus," I answered, knowing I'd regret admitting it. "If this is a census thing, I'd just as rather skip it." I would have once again shut the door, but the big one was still holding it.

"May we come in, Mr. English," said the mustachioed man.

"No, you may not," I answered in my most "concerned citizen" voice. I hoped it would communicate just how displeased I was at the suggestion.

"We are not asking," said the hulking figure behind him. He reached over his companion and--with a grotesquely oversized hand--swatted me aside like a fly.

As I staggered back, amazed by the force which was used to move me, the men entered my apartment. The first man smoothly stepped into my kitchen, but his cumbrous friend found it quite confining.

"May we move into living room?" they asked.

"Please," I said with a frown. They did not, apparently, get sarcasm.

I followed them into my living room. I motioned for the smaller one to sit on my couch. He did so, without removing his dripping topcoat. When his accomplice went to sit, I protested.

"No, you stand, Hoss."

He grunted and pushed me aside again. He walked over to my Easyboy (my one nice piece of furniture) and sat down. To my surprise it did not shatter into a thousand little pieces. His butt must have been smaller than the rest of him. I dragged my kitchen chair into the room and sat across from them.

"Excuse us, first of all, for barging in," began the thin one. "We do not mean to intrude." I found that quite ironic. He took off his hat and bowed his head slightly. "My name is Pyotr Gunder, this is my friend Victor Rasputin." Victor removed his hat as well and attempted to bow. It was obvious such things didn't come naturally to him.

"Hello," I said to them both. "What are you doing in my house?"

Pyotr smiled bashfully. I realized he was getting nervous. "We need your help."

My mind began to race. I tried to think of all the reasons two strange men would need me. Several months ago my novel, "The Trunkbottom Murder," had been published. It was a preposterous tale where I combined the traditional detective mystery with dark fantasy. I was very proud of it. To supplement the book I created a website where I regularly blogged about my writing process, occasionally divulging some of the research I used for my work. Going back to my college days (all two years of them) I was in high demand as a web designer. It never paid well--as most of my clients were broke friends--but at the time I liked thinking of myself as a "freelancer." It was terrible work. I couldn't believe these men were interested in my writing, so I took a stab and assumed they needed a designer.

"Listen gents, I don't know how you found out about it, but I don't design websites anymore."

The two men started to chuckle. I was confused. "You? Design our website?" Pyotr said. "No, I've seen your blog. I am not impressed by your 'designs.'"

Victor chimed in. "He uses flash rollovers? What is this? You never heard of J-query?" They were laughing pretty hard now. I was not amused.

"Flash is still a viable platform," I stammered. I could not believe I was defending my website to two strange Russian men. "Fine, you don't need a web designer--you're both experts, apparently. What do you want?"

"We come because of your book," Pyotr said. He just happened to have a dogged-eared copy.

"Wow you must have really liked it," I said, staring at the beaten up paperback.

"No, I find in garbage can."

"Oh."

"In book, you solved mysterious crime," he said. He leaned close and almost whispered. "Crime involving magic."

"Uh, right," I replied. "You do realize the book's not about me? It's made up. The main character's name is 'Meriweather Bingletree,' nobody has such a ridiculous name."

"Oh," Pyotr said, putting down the book. He looked so deflated. He quickly perked up. "But you know about these things: magical mysteries?"

"I don't think that's a thing," I answered, "but yeah, I studied magic and occult imagery while working on the novel. It sort of became a hobby of mine."

"Then you can still help me," he said earnestly.

"Really, how?"

Pyotr grew quiet and nervous once more. "Is a sensitive issue, one that is not easy to talk about. You see, my love have been taken."

I was confused all over again. "Uh, by me?"

"What?" he gasped. The two men started speaking frantically in Russian. It seemed Victor was explaining to Pyotr the misunderstanding. Victor was laughing.

"No!" Pyotr exclaimed. "No, heh, Mr. English. 'My love' is lady. A beautiful lady. Lysandra Comaneci."

"Oh," I said, breathing a sigh of relief. "The woman you love has been taken--that's good. Ah, I mean that's bad, that's terrible. Sorry." I motioned for him to take over speaking.

"She was singer," he continued, "at the Odessa night club. I would go there every night just to hear her. She had the voice of a song bird. I was always too afraid to talk to her; I assumed she had rich boyfriend or husband. But I asked around the club and found out she was single. I could not believe this. Tonight I finally mustered my courage. I would speak to her after she sang. But when I went to Odessa, she was not there! The manager did not know where she was. I found out where she lived and went to visit her. She was not there either and the house was a ruin. I fear for her life." He choked up and could not continue his story.

"You think she was abducted?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, nodding sadly. "At first I thought it was the Russian mob." His voice shrunk to a whisper. "They run everything, you do not mess with them. But after I explore her apartment, I knew it was not them."

“Why not?”

“The walls of her bedroom were covered in strange symbols,” he said. His eyes widen as he motioned with his hands. “They were evil things, I could feel it. Something was written in a strange language. It was not English, it was not Russian. It was some sort of spell.”

“A spell?” His story began to sound intriguing. “What kind of symbols were they? Runes? Hieroglyphics? Astrological signs?”

“Eh, I don’t know,” he said, shrugging anxiously. “You must come and see them.”

“Whoa, hold on Pete--can I call you Pete?”

“No.”

“Whatever. Listen, that apartment is a crime scene. Did you bother to call the police?”

“Yes,” he said defensively. “I call from payphone outside--I did not want them to see me.”

“Why not?”

“Lysandra does not know me,” he said. “How could I explain myself to police? Besides they inspected apartment for two minutes. They do not care. They help only rich people in Times Square.”

I took exception with that last part, but I let it go. “I’m not a detective, pal. There’s not much I can do.”

He grabbed my book and shook it. “In your story you write about this. You solve wizard’s murder, use secret symbols as clues. This is no different.”

“This is very different,” I said. “I knew the ending to that story, that’s how I was able to solve it. It sounds like your girl was nabbed by some sort of crazy cult. That’s dangerous stuff. We could be stepping into the middle of a dark ritual.”

“I pay you,” he said. He must have been getting desperate. “Five hundred dollars. You come, look at apartment, and tell me what you see. Then you go home. Is all I’m asking.”

The money did make that whole thing sound sweeter. Five hundred dollars would buy me one heck of a new monitor. Maybe one with shatter-proof glass. But I wasn’t stupid. I had read enough about the occult to know I wanted nothing to do with it.

“I don’t know, boys,” I said, leaning back in my chair. A soft squeaking came into the room. Barabbas emerged from whatever oblivion he had been in and padded over to me, squeaky duck in mouth. He eyed my guests suspiciously. When Victor saw my dog, he nearly fell out of his chair.

“You keep Malamute in tiny home?” His eyes were filled with amazement.

“Yeah, he keeps me warm in the winter,” I said as I scratched my pooch. “Saves on the heating bill.”

“Come here, little doggy,” he said. It was the first time anyone’s called

Barabbas “little.” Victor’s giant mitts nearly enveloped the beast’s head. Barabbas sniffed and moaned curiously at the behemoth playing with him.

“Please, Mr. English. I need an answer.” Pyotr was twitching with consternation. He sat on the edge of the couch. “Here, just look at this.” He retrieved a phone from his coat pocket. “Look at this face.” The image on the lock screen was of a woman standing behind a microphone. She had curly blonde hair, cut short around her ears. Her porcelain white skin was punctuated by vivid red lips. Dazzling blue eyes sparkled even in the tiny photo.

“She is very beautiful,” I said.

“I got more.” He began flipping through pictures on his phone.

“But I can’t help you,” I replied. “It’s too dangerous; for me and for you.”

“No,” Victor said, letting go of Barabbas and standing up. “Is dangerous only for you.” He proceeded to crack his knuckles in the usual, clichéd way you would expect at this moment. I would not have been intimidated, save for the fact it sounded like snapping tree branches.

“You would really beat me up if I don’t help?” I asked, mortified.

“Eh,” Victor said, “maybe break leg, break nose.”

“That’s a fine ‘how do ya do’.”

“Look at us, Mr. English,” Pyotr said, standing by his friend. “Do we look like gentle guys?”

I wasn’t surprised they weren’t above inflicting physical harm to get what they wanted. In fact, I had been expecting that from the beginning. I would have easily assumed they were in the Russian mob, had Pyotr not already decried it. So, in an effort to protect my fragile limbs, I changed my decision.

“Alright. I’ll help you out.”

“Very good,” Pyotr said. Despite his bravado, I could tell he was very relieved.

“But I want the five hundred in cash.”

“Here.” He tossed me a wad of twenties.

“Dang,” I replied.

“Let’s go already,” Victor grumbled, moving to the door.

“One last thing,” I added, “the dog comes too.”

###

After gathering up a few essential items and strapping Barabbas to his leash, I happily escorted my Russian visitors out of my apartment. We walked down to their car, which remarkably was parked right outside my Brownstone.

“Wow,” I said. “I’m amazed you could find a spot so close. Especially for that thing.”

It was a Hummer. A gigantic, earth-chewing, Hummer. Now, I lived in Park Slope. It was a clean, safe neighborhood, with many great restaurants and a comic book shop

nearby. The people were friendly and respectful, but they did not drive Hummers. Such a monster of a vehicle was an affront to these gentle yuppies. Plus, they would never find a parking space.

“We need big car for my friend here,” Pyotr said, slapping Victor on the back.

“Yeah, but how did you get this spot?”

“We had to persuade a few people to let us in,” Victor said with a wry smile.

“Oh no,” I groaned. I glanced around, honestly checking to see if a few cars had been thrown through windows. It was all clear.

“You get in back with pooch,” Pyotr said, kindly opening the door. “Victor drives. I ride in front.”

We all got in. I found that, despite its size, I could not get comfortable. Barabbas did not enjoy his seat; he preferred to sit on the floor, his head cradled in my lap. The Russian men closed their doors and the car went dark. A monstrous engine roared to life. Victor poked at a few blinking buttons on the dashboard as the two spoke to each other in low voices.

“You guys aren’t going to kill me, right?” I said, only half joking.

“Relax,” Pyotr said as he looked at me through his visor mirror. “We are just deciding on our route.” He spoke in a tone that, to him, must have sounded soothing. It only made him seem creepy, like a lame guy in a bar trying to woo the ladies.

“Maybe I can help,” I said. I leaned forward, trying to make out the GPS screen.

“Where is Lysandra’s apartment?”

“Brighton Beach,” Victor said, still fiddling with the onboard computer. “Is where we all live.”

“Ah crap.” I should have known they were from Brighton Beach. That area was mostly Russian immigrants. It was also on the other side of Brooklyn. It would be a mess getting there from my neighborhood.

Finally the computer dinged the coordinates. “Good,” Victor said, “is only twenty-minute ride.”

“Sure.”

An hour and a half later we arrived at Brighton Beach. To my surprise Victor had been an unusually calm driver. He took the crowded streets and frequent red lights with commendable aplomb. Pyotr, on the other hand, was less than graceful. At one point he even justified rolling down his window and cursing at a slow-moving trick-or-treater. “Red means, don’t go!” he shouted.

We pulled up to a four-story building. It was the only apartment complex on the block. Beside it on either side were smaller, two-family houses.

“Is nice place,” Pyotr said, “don’t you think?”

I agreed. The facade was clean, beige stone, flecked with glinting gold. A bit ostentatious to me, but in this neighborhood it was remarkably subdued. The eight apartments facing the street each had full balconies, save the ones on the bottom floor,

which had small lawns.

Victor parked in an open space several paces away and killed the engine. We climbed--literally--out of the Hummer. Pyotr pointed out one of the apartments.

"She lives on third floor," he said. We walked in silence. Barabbas was ecstatic. The rain had died down and new scents came from every direction. The smell of the sea air was more than enough to get him going, not to mention the whiffs of exotic food that came from the surrounding homes. I'm just glad we didn't pass another dog on the street, or I would have never seen him again.

The complex had a single entrance on the ground floor. Like most buildings its size, it had no elevator, so we took the stairs. As we climbed the three levels, Victor turned to me. He patted me in a way he meant as a friendly gesture, but when I saw that giant hand move toward me, I flinched wildly.

"Tell me something," he said, apparently ignoring my reaction, "why do you study all these spooky things? We Russian don't like it."

"Well, I enjoy it," I replied. "I've always had. My grandfather used to tell me about the druids and wizards of ancient folklore. That first piqued my interest. You see, he was a professor of history and literature and specialized in that stuff. He was brilliant," I said wistfully. "My father, on the other hands, never cared for that sort of thing. He wanted me to follow in his steps and study economics. He near disowned me when I refused to go to his alma mater, Harvard. I guess I feel more connected to my grandfather when I read those kinds of stories."

"So you never seen ghost?" Victor asked. I could see he was not interested in my personal history.

"No, Victor," I replied. "I've never seen ghost. None of that stuff is actually real. I enjoy it because of how out-of-the-ordinary it seems. If only life were that colorful."

Pyotr and Victor exchanged nervous glances. They were the dubious ones, now.

"We are here," Pyotr said. We stood before a dark, brown door with a copper number nine. Police tape covered the doorway, reading the typical "do not cross."

"Huh, this was not here before," Pyotr said.

"Maybe we shouldn't go in," I said.

"What? That's why we come."

"I'm sure the police have it well in hand. Besides, that tape says we shouldn't."

Pyotr pulled the tape down with one hand. "There, tape is gone."

"You can't just do that," I said.

"Sure I can," he replied. I noticed he had pulled a crowbar from under his coat.

"What the heck is that?" I asked.

"How do you think we get in? I don't have key!"

"My God, I'm going to jail."

"Calm down," Pyotr said. "I'm very good at this. Victor has brawn, I have brain. We are good team." He tried the handle and found it unlocked. "See? We don't need crowbar

after all.”

That didn’t calm me down. “You’re criminals, I should have known. Why else would you need me? I’m a patsy. You’re setting me up to take the fall and steal my dog!”

“Quiet.” Victor smacked me on the back. The wind, the entire atmosphere, was knocked out of me. Stars danced before my eyes. When I came to, the door was open and they were already inside.

“Well,” I said to Barabbas, “we’ve come this far.” I let him go in first.

It was a modest sized, one bedroom apartment. Quite larger than mine, I noticed. A short hallway led from the front door to a spacious living room. To the left of that was a narrow kitchen with space for a dining table. Through that room you could access the balcony. On the opposite side of the living room was another passage leading to the bedroom and bath.

I moved slowly through the place, partly because I was trying to examine every detail and partly because of how uncomfortable I felt intruding into this woman’s apartment. The entryway was quaintly furnished with an antique mirror, framed pieces of art and a few photos. There was a coat rack and a small seat used for when you put on your shoes. It was very neatly arranged, by some who obviously cherished the little nuisances of her home.

The living room was decorated with much the same care, at least I assumed at one point it had been. It was a complete wreck. An old, wood-framed couch (that reminded me of one my mother used to own) was cracked in half and knocked on its back. Pillows were torn open, their fluffy internals strewn all over the place. Books and magazines lay opened on the floor, crushed undoubtedly during the melee. A large, oak bookshelf, which once had glass doors, had been repeatedly violated. Its contents of knick-knacks, figures and what I’m sure were valuable antiques were cracked, thrown to the floor, and ruined. What was left of the room--a coffee table, an old TV and stand, a tall lamp and a few chairs--were left reasonably unmolested, though they were buried under the carnage.

“Bedroom is this way,” Pyotr said as I stepped into the living room.

“Hold on,” I answered, raising a hand. “I think I should examine all this.”

“What?”

“You wanted me to be a detective,” I said, lifting my chin in an indignant way. “Let me be.”

I walked a few circles around the destroyed room. I had no idea what I was looking for.

“They certainly were thorough,” I said. I let Barabbas off his leash so he could sniff around. “Find me something good, boy.” The dog trepidatiously began to root his nose around the rubble. I could sense his uneasiness about the place.

Victor pointed to Barabbas. “Little doggy look for clues?”

“He’s pretty good at finding things,” I replied. My mind went back to his daily routine of losing and rediscovering the squeaky duck.

I knelt down with him to take a closer look. Carefully I picked through the broken pieces of the woman's life. I found one of the many photos. It was old and faded around the edges. A young couple smiled at the camera, a small girl standing between them. It slipped out of the cracked frame and I noticed some writing on the back.

"What does this say?" I handed the picture to Pyotr.

"I do not know," he replied. "Is not Russian."

"It's not?" I asked, taking it back. "What language is it?"

"Is Norwegian," Victor said.

"How do you know that?" I asked, aghast.

"Grandma was from Norway," he replied. "She show me old love letters when I was child."

"So... can you read it?"

"Eh, no," he sighed. "I never learn."

I put the picture back in its frame. From the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of a paperback, half-covered in the mess. A large, black bird was on the cover. It had a frightening, red gaze. "The Eye of Odin," read the title. I flipped through the book. Much of it was too damaged to read, but there were a few salvageable pages. There were charts marked with symbols: esoteric calendars I presumed. I found a few illustrations depicting epic scenes from Norse mythology. On one page there was a vulknut--a set of three interlocking triangles, a Germanic symbol of heroism--encircled by a ring. The description beneath read: "The Mark of Odin's Eye." I put the book away and continued to scan the room. I began to notice a pattern.

"There are a lot of ravens around here," I said, looking around the room. A painting above the television contained the birds, as did a tattered, knit throw.

"What does that mean?" Pyotr asked.

"The raven is Odin's bird. He had two of them, named Hugin and Munin. The fact that she has some much stuff with those birds is very interesting."

Barabbas whined. He was digging through a pile of broken pottery.

"Be careful, boy." I immediately pulled him away, checking to see if he had been cut. "One of you see what he was digging at."

Pyotr bent down and pulled up a black statuette of polished glass. It was in the shape of the now familiar image of two ravens atop a tree. One of the birds had been broken off and the other's eyes seem to have been cut out. I assumed they had been gems.

"The bottom is missing from this," Pyotr said, turning it over. The trunk of the tree was hollow, the space inside big enough to hold a small item.

"Something could have been in there," I said.

"What?"

"I have no idea. Let's take a look at the bedroom."

It was surprisingly small, with only enough room for a double bed, dresser and

vanity. There were two windows across from the door. A closet was tucked into an alcove at the far corner. A few pictures were on the walls and I spied the usual accoutrement of a woman's bedroom. Signs of violence were rampant, as in the living room. The dresser was caved-in with a sledge hammer. The mattress had been knocked off its frame, the sheets were strewn about. Much of what should have been stowed away in drawers was on the floor; evidence that Lysandra's captors had been searching for something.

Most remarkable about the room were the walls. Scrawled in the corners were runic charms. There was 'Hraethigalder,' a symbol that resembled two asterisks with the second attached to a 'e.' It was used to intimidate an enemy. I recognized 'Aegishjalmur,' something similar to eight tridents joined in the middle; a protective charm for battles. There was the a rune that looked like a box, a binding used to hold a prisoner. And the last one was "Vegvisir," a compass to prevent one from getting lost. On the wall behind the bed was written, in a cryptic code, an invocation. I had seen it before: "From the Gods, to the Earth, to us. From us, to the Earth, to the Gods. A gift for a gift." Above that was the ringed valknut, the symbol I had seen in the book referred to as the "Mark of Odin's Eye."

"This is some deep stuff," I said, turning to Pyotr. Victor was standing in the hallway. He had refused to enter the room. Barabbas sat beside him.

"Da," Pyotr replied. I noticed he was trying to avert his eyes away from the walls. "Do you understand it?"

"Yes," I replied, a little bit of pride rising in my chest. "This is Astaru magic; it's used by cults who worship the ancient Norse gods. For whatever reason this particular cult came after Lysandra and used these charms to subdue and capture her."

"But why?"

"She obviously had some connection to all this stuff," I answered, "judging by the ravens. But I don't know why they would kidnap her. These runes don't really give any hints. They're used in a variety of rituals--most notably, though, for war. They must have considered Lysandra a serious threat. The invocation could also be referring to whatever they were looking for, something they considered to be a gift from the gods."

"What are they going to do to her?" Pyotr was exasperated.

"There's no way we could know unless we found them and asked," I said sarcastically.

"But they could be anywhere," Pyotr said.

"Uh, not necessarily," I said slowly, worried what my next revelation might bring about. "The ending to the spell is missing. It should say: 'The ritual is complete.' They left it out because they haven't finished the ceremony. They have to be outside to do it. These groups love nature, most of them meet outdoors in forests or parks. Also, the most important ceremonies occur late, around midnight." I looked at my watch. It was eleven thirty five.

"There is park nearby," Victor said, poking his head into the room.

"Of course there is," I said.

"We must go there," Pyotr exclaimed. "Rescue Lysandra."

"Oh no fellas," I said. "This is where I get off. I did what you asked me to do. You can go get killed on your own."

"Come on!" Victor reached into the room and grabbed my arm. He didn't even need to step inside. He pulled me with him as we returned to the hummer.

"You see, this is why the police never come to Brighton Beach!"

###

Not to my surprise, Grovesfield Park was only a few blocks away. It was surrounded by a stone wall, with a gate that was locked.

"Obviously the city doesn't want the place egged," I said, rapping the iron bars with my knuckles. "It is Halloween. Let's go. There's no way they could be in there."

"Let's be sure," Victor said. With a single blow of his fist the lock gave way. I knew what that felt like. The gate swung back.

"It's like a damn forest," I said as we entered. The place was huge. I was not expecting such a scene in Brooklyn. The Forestry Service must have been working overtime. Soon enough, however, we reached the center of the park. There was a small clearing, hedged about by trees. We caught the flicker of candles and the sound of movement. Instinctively, we crouched out of view. A row of figures entered the clearing from the other side. They were all dressed in dark, green robes with the hoods pulled up. I could hear them chanting, a haunting sound that reminded me of a gong. At the front of the procession was a woman in plain clothes. Her hands were bound behind her. Pyotr recognized her immediately.

"Lysandra!" he growled. He almost leapt at them. I pulled him back behind the large boulder that concealed us.

"Are you insane?" I asked in my loudest whisper. "We need to call the police, now."

"No time," he answered. I was afraid he was right. "We have to stop them."

"You're going to attack them? All of them?"

"We come prepared," he said, revealing a revolver holstered beneath his coat.

"How many things you got under there?" I asked.

The chanting ended and the cult formed a circle around the clearing. One of the figures stood in the center. He removed his hood, exposing an old and creased face. His long hair and beard were startlingly white. I noted how much he looked like Odin. He began to address the others and I assumed he was their godi, the priest.

"My brothers," he began. His voice rung with a slow, Norwegian accent. "Tonight is a hallowed night. While the foolish among us revile in a holiday bereft of significance, we the Night Watchers, honor the old ways of our fathers. I, Jerungda, your humble leader, have served you faithfully for many years, first in the homeland and now in America. As your priest I have guided you on the righteous path, the path of sacred knowledge. And

tonight I am happy to say our journey is almost complete.”

He held up a long, gold chain. At the end of it hung a black gem. It was a perfect circle. The candle light glinted off it, revealing an inner core that glowed like fire. When they saw it, the cultists cheered triumphantly.

“The Eye of Odin is ours!” the godi exclaimed. “This is the very gem given to my ancestors by the valkyrie Brynhildr--the gem taken eons ago from the Well of Wisdom. It may look like simple piece of stone, but it is in fact the very eye Odin plucked from his face, so he could see into the future.” He followers nodded in agreement. “This is proof that we are favored by the All-Father. We have received his blessing. With the Eye we will peel back the veil of mortality and walk among the gods. All that Odin asks, is we punish the one who had kept it from us!”

Jerungda pointed at Lysandra. Two of his followers dragged her into the center of the ring. The godi placed the chain around his neck and unsheathed a dagger that hung from his belt.

“They’re going to kill her,” Pyotr said, horrified.

“Enough of this,” Victor said. He burst into the clearing. Chaos erupting among the cultists as the intruder began to pummel them. Pyotr followed close behind, forcing his way through the throng to get to his lady. I ran out after them, carried away in the excitement.

“What am I doing?” I said to myself as I ran for cover behind the closest tree. I may be a lot of things, but a brawler is not one of them. A body crashed against the tree as I hastily tied Barabbas to a branch. He was not happy to be restrained.

I apprehensively peered around the trunk. In the midst of the ruckus, Jerungda grabbed Lysandra and began to drag her away into the trees.

“Pete!” I hollered to gain his attention. I pointed to where they had disappeared.

“Come with me,” he shouted, beckoning with the end of his crowbar. He ran after them before I could respond. I cursed and left the safety of the tree.

What was left of the cult had focused their attention on the gargantuan Victor. He was weighed down by half a dozen men. “Go, go!” he said to me as he knocked two heads together. A few more jumped onto him. He did not seem to mind.

I followed after Pyotr. Through the break in the trees I could see he had reached the godi and his victim. Lysandra had been thrown to the ground. The two men grappled. Pyotr had dropped his crowbar and was trying to wrestle the dagger from the madman. He did not prevail. The priest was possessed with a desperate energy. He could not be deterred. The dagger found a home in Pyotr’s stomach. He collapsed and did not move.

“Not what I had planned,” Jerungda said, “but the blót has been made.” He was smiling wickedly as he rubbed Pyotr’s blood on the gem around his neck. “By the Great Eye of Odin, I open the Well of Wisdom!”

The godi took a deep breath. His eyes grew wide. He turned and look directly at me.

“Come close, Marcus,” he said, “the danger has passed.” His voice had changed. It

was musical and haunting. Against my better judgment I approached.

“Ah, little Marcus. The sad, strange boy. Unloved by his father, forgotten by his mother. The only man who cared for him, his grandfather, so far away. Bury yourself in your books, you will never find acceptance.”

I would have asked how he was saying all those things, but I couldn't speak. His voice rang in my head, in my mind.

“Oh poor Marcus,” he sang, his head bobbing from side to side. “You're caught up in something that's too big for you. You didn't want to come here, get wrapped up in these people's problems. This is not your fight. Besides you cannot win. You cannot defeat me now.”

I felt his eyes penetrating into me. I don't know where the soul is, but I could feel him poking into my gut, prodding and pulling out whatever he wished. My legs grew weak; a heaviness fell over me. I was pushed to my knees.

“Go to sleep, Marcus. Let me go free. Try as you might, you will always fail. Best if you just hid yourself in your little apartment and disappeared.”

I started to feel something else, anger. I was on my hands and knees, beside the bleeding Pyotr who was soon to die. I reached into his coat and pulled out the hand gun. Without thinking I cocked it back and fired at the godi.

I never fired a gun before. It was painful. I unloaded the gun at Jerungda. He snarled as he tried to avoid the bullets. None of them hit him, except one. It struck the smooth black stone that hung around his neck. The Eye of Odin cracked. The godi howled as if he was in agony. He fell to the ground like a dead man.

Victor, having successfully defeated the cultist, found us. He shouted in horror and scooped up his comrade. He began to sob. He held Pyotr in his mighty arms, unable to staunch the wound. I turned my attention to Lysandra. I removed her binds and helped her to her feet. She clasped onto me, exhausted by weariness and fear. I heard a whimper from behind. Barabbas had freed himself--unsurprisingly--and was padding towards me. In his jaws was the golden chain, the broken gem swinging like a toy. I scanned the ground beyond him. Jerungda was gone.

Pyotr groaned. His eyes were searching. “My beautiful Lysandra,” he said, his voice fading. He reached towards her. Then he was gone.

“Who is that?” Lysandra asked.

“His name was Pyotr,” I said. “He loved you very much.”

A glimmer of recognition came into her eyes, quickly followed by tears.

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“Well you really did it this time!” I was crouching under my kitchen table. “I can't find it anywhere.” Slowly I climbed out from under it, careful not to hit my head. I did anyway. Rubbing my wound, I went into the living room. The great gray beast was waiting for me,

his eyes full of sorrow.

"It's your duck," I said. "I don't know where you left it." Barabbas whimpered as I cupped his shaggy head. What a baby.

"Relax, boy," I said. "We can get a new one. They're like four dollars, right?" I knew a fresh toy wouldn't be as good as the old one, but he'd soon forget.

My doorbell rang. I made my way to it, making sure to check the peephole. I was stunned at who I saw. I quickly opened the door.

"Lysandra!" The young woman stood in my doorway. She wore a black trench coat, belted tight. I could see beneath she wore a long, dark dress. She was clutching a travel bag between her hands.

"Hello, Mr. English," she said in a soft voice. "May I come in?"

"Of course." I led her into the living room. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Tea would be nice," she said.

"Coming right up." I went to my cupboard. "Tea, tea." I had no tea. "How does coffee sound?"

"Alright."

I returned with two cups and sat down on the couch beside her. I could tell she was nervous. She looked around my apartment absentmindedly. I remembered the care she took to decorate hers. Mine must have looked like a dump.

"You have a very nice home," she said politely.

"Thanks," I replied, "it's sort of a home-office meets dog pen--I don't get many visitors."

"I see."

"So what can I do for you?" I asked.

"I have not seen you since the night," she began. "It has been a few weeks, though, and I thought I should thank you properly."

"Oh, that's not necessary," I said. "I only did what little I could to help."

"No. Victor told me everything. He said you study cult ways. It was you who knew how to find me. I owe you my life."

I smiled and nodded my head in an attempt to look humble. "The real hero was Pyotr," I said. "He died fighting for you."

"Yes," she replied solemnly.

"But there was something, I don't know," I added. "Why did you have the Eye of Odin?"

She took a deep breath. "When I was a child, I lived in Norway. My mother and father were members of the Night Watchers--a dark Astaru cult. When I was five, their god said I would be sacrificed to Odin in a ceremony that would use the Eye to open a portal to the gods. My parents were horrified; they refused to allow it. My father was from Russia, so we fled there, taking with us the Eye to punish them. When I grew up, I came to America to start a new life. I stayed in the Russian community, because it made me feel safe. I did

not know the Watchers were still looking for the Eye. Somehow they found me here.”

She opened her bag and pulled out a long wooden box. It was polished smooth, inlaid with intricate symbols.

“I want to give you this,” she said, handing it to me.

“It’s a beautiful box,” I said.

“No, open it.”

“Oh.” It was the Eye of Odin.

“This gem has haunted my family for years; I can no longer look at it. I want you to protect it for me.”

I looked down at the black gem nestled against the velvet lining. Even cracked, it shone with an inner fire.

“Does it still have power?” I asked, remembering what Jerungda knew while wearing it.

“It is broken,” she said. “I do not believe it still holds any allure for the Watchers. But I will rest easy knowing its in your hands.”

“Then I will keep it safe,” I said, closing the case. “And only wear it at wild parties.”

She smiled. For a moment, the sadness in her eyes lifted and I saw how ravishingly beautiful she was.

“I must go.” She stood up and I walked her to the door. “I am leaving New York, starting over again. Victor has helped me make the arrangements.”

“That guy is pretty useful,” I said.

“Yes.” She bowed her head as she stood in my doorway. “Goodbye, Marcus.” She placed her hand on my cheek and pressed her lips against mine. I swear, I’ve never been kissed so sweetly. Without another word she turned and walked away. I quietly closed my door, relishing that last moment.

A crash came from the living room. I heard the familiar sound of squeaking.

“Please Barabbas,” I cried, “tell me you didn’t.”

I walked into the room. He did. The television was on the ground.

“I gotta get me a chihuahua.” I sat on the floor in defeat. The big pooch tackled me happily, squeaking all the way.