The Apocalypse Conundrum (BBT)

by donttouchmystuff

Summary

Penny, working part-time at the university library, meets a strange young man in the rare book archives. When he saves her from a demon attack, she discovers that he is stranger than she had ever imagined. And she knows a lot of unusual people.

Notes

1. I borrow liberally from incidents which have happened on BBT, but pay no attention to temporal accuracy.

2. I know nothing about libraries, rare books, or archives. Got any suggestions for research?

3. Crane does not fall in love with anyone in this story.

4. None of the people in this story is the new Witness.
Ichabod Crane heard the shrill, high-pitched human scream before he saw the Ubaldai. He knew the creature was there in the old graveyard: the oppressive atmosphere, the cloying humidity that made it difficult to breathe, the stench of putrid blood. He pivoted quickly, raising his blazing torch for better visibility, insides dropping with the agony of realizing he was not alone with his prey.

Another terrified scream split the air.

There. There she was, scrabbling across the grass on her back, trying to gain her feet and unable to take her eyes off the horror she had no name for.

What on God’s earth she is doing in the cemetery after dark…. Crane looked from her to the Ubaldai and back again. More than once.

Easily eight feet tall and covered with armor-like crimson-colored scales, the creature advanced, curling fingers with inch-long claws and snarling mouth. Neon green eyes glowed and luminescent liquid shone dripping from sharp fangs in the dark night.

“No!” Crane shouted and threw himself in front of the Ubaldai. An impression of bright brown eyes and a brilliant smile flashed through his mind. Not Miss Penny. He would not let the creature or its acidic saliva get any closer to the vivacious young lady.

“Fft’ai!” he shouted, dodging left to draw all attention to himself. “Run!” He screamed at Penny.

With the corner of his eye he saw that she did not run, then dismissed her from his thoughts. He waved the torch in the creature’s face and retreated farther into the graveyard. He rumbled the charm-word again, almost under his breath. “Fft’ai.”

Crane backed as slowly as he dared, trying to tempt the creature to follow, ignoring his pounding heart. His gaze catalogued the weak spots in the impenetrable crimson scales: back of the knee joint, armpit, groin, eyes. He wondered how many hits the Ubaldai could take before it succumbed. He longed for another hand, another weapon, an additional angle of attack besides his own. As it used to be. Crane shook his head. No time. For now he must simply chase it away if he could. Vanquishment was often a thing of the past, of partners, of….

He did his best. Sometimes it took more than one battle, but, so far, he’d always won, in the end. But, along the way, he often sacrificed too much. He needed….

He needed Abbie Mills. But she no longer stood at his side.

Crane swept her image from his mind’s eye, infuriated at himself for his lapse. The beast required all his concentration if he was going to survive.

He spiked the torch into the ground and pulled his crossbow from the holster at his back. Briefly studied his target. Aimed. The groin shot connected and the Ubaldai stumbled. Crane winced in subconscious, instinctual empathy, forcing himself to take a few more steps away. He needed a better angle at a better target and he would have only one chance.

The creature recovered slightly, taking a long, threatening lurch forward, forestalling the Witness’ maneuver. Crane quickly slammed the crossbow to reload, making himself ignore his restored
disadvantage. He had to shoot. Now.

The arrow sailed over the red scaly head. Crane reloaded, but before he could aim again, the Ubaldai swept a paw through the air, tossing him aside to one hand and his knees. He scrambled away, eyes always on the creature, praying his flight wouldn’t end against a tree or into a hole. The Ubaldai advanced, compelling him to aim from his knees. He panted, feeling a hitch in his side, as he struggled to make the shot. If it didn’t connect….

The air echoed with a different kind of scream this time. Guttural. Furious. Ready to attack. But then the Ubaldai stumbled again, one leg giving way. It collapsed on the ground with an arrow in an eye socket. Tried to get up and fell again. Stopped moving.

Crane supported himself on the nearest tree and gulped lungful’s of the slowly freshening air. Tendrils of smoke leaked out around the edges of the huge, crimson body at his feet. Crane found the strength to be grateful that there would be no traces of it left by morning. Then he straightened, holstered the crossbow, and moved to the torch, pulling it from the ground. He oriented himself and started to trudge back to the edge of the graveyard. The night was not over yet.

He’d gone only about a hundred feet when he saw her again. The blonde was near where he’d left her, now leaning against a large rock, face in hands, and loudly humming something that wasn’t a tune. Crane spiked the torch again and shrugged out of his weapons rig, setting it aside. He crouched in front of the distraught woman and spoke softly, gently. “Miss Penny?” He spoke her name again three times, each more loudly and more firmly. The last time, he gripped her forearm and pulled it from her face. “Miss Penny!”

She stirred and looked up, mucus running from her nose and mascara streaming in lines down her face. Her eyes were empty at first and fear stirred in the pit of his stomach. Then recognition surfaced and she grabbed him around the neck and pulled him against her shuddering body. “Oh my God!”

“Oh my God! Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.” She cried until her energy ran out and then she just sat there, clutching the back of his coat. He straightened and reached for her arms, disentangling himself. She looked at him. “Crane?” She clutched painfully at his elbows. “What … was that?”

“Miss Penny.” He stood and brought her with him. He pulled his coat off one-armed while he steadied her, then draped it around her shoulders. “Why don’t we go someplace where you can warm up and have something to drink and,” calm yourself down, he thought, “talk?”

She nodded. Crane kicked over the torch into the dirt and stomped out the flame; they were close enough to the street now for ambient light. Penny watched without blinking as he retrieved his crossbow.

Crane led her through the graveyard gate, past the pre-Revolutionary War church, while his mind raced to choose a destination. Choose? There were no choices…. One choice? Any choice. He couldn’t take her to a public venue; she might start remembering … and sobbing. He couldn’t take her to her apartment; that wouldn’t be … proper. He would have to take her to the Archives.

When he’d prevented the destruction of the building last year by having it declared an historical landmark, he’d become custodian. He could come and go as he pleased, let anyone in he wanted. And when Jenny Mills had, perforce, sold the house she had inherited from her sister, he’d found himself homeless. Without a job, without financial support, he’d set himself up in a corner, behind the bookshelves with a cot, a hotplate, and a coffee maker.

Crane really didn’t want to take Penny there. He’d always been rather protective of his personal
spaces and possessions. But at least he could offer her a warm cover and a cup of coffee. And it wasn’t too far away.

“What is this place?” she mumbled as he unlocked the door and showed her in. He put her on one of the chairs and went to get a blanket.

“You know I am an archivist.” He stopped to fill the coffee maker with water from a plastic jug, fiddling with coffee grounds. “It is an archive.” No answer. When he turned, he discovered she had risen from the chair and was staring at something on one of the desks.

Hell and damnation.

He’d left his sketch of the Ubaldai on the desktop and forgotten it was there.

Her eyes were large and transfixed and she was breathing too deeply, too quickly. She was going to hyperventilate. He looked desperately around the room. Paper bag. “Bag. Bag. Bag.” Crane grabbed the trashcan, pulled out an Arby’s takeaway bag and ran to her. One arm around her shoulders, he turned her away from the desk. He held the bag to her lips so she could exhale and inhale from it. “Slowly,” he admonished, “slowly.”

She didn’t take his advice right away, but eventually her breathing evened out and she pushed him from her, collapsing in the chair. Silent tears were flowing down her face. When she spoke, her voice was rough. “What is that?”

Wordlessly, he crouched by her chair and offered his handkerchief. He had to say something, explain, rescue her from her shock. He couldn’t leave her to be one of those in Sleepy Hollow who never got an answer, who were left to nightmares, psychiatrists, or self-medication. Not Miss Penny. No matter what the repercussions.

She looked directly at him as he struggled for words. He lowered his head, stared at the floor, squeezed his eyes shut, then looked back up at her. Opened his mouth and closed it again. Who could be more innocent, more refreshingly hoi polloi than Miss Penny? How could he possibly find the audacity to change that?

Suddenly, she jumped to her feet, nearly tossing him to the floor. Anger flared as she waved his own handkerchief in his face. “Don’t try to change the subject, mister. You’re not going to convince me I didn’t see that thing. I saw it. You fought it. You hit it in the eye with an arrow and it… it melted. And … and there’s a picture of it! I never cared that you dress like a refugee from the ride of Paul Revere or talk like the Upstairs side of Downstairs, but what … what… what….” She motioned violently at the sheet of paper on the desk. “Archivist, my ass!”

He straightened, clutching desperately at the remnants of his procrastination. “Coffee?”

She stiffened, but let him get away with it. “Whiskey.”

“Brandy?”

She nodded. Blew her nose heartily and noisily into his handkerchief. “And the truth.”

In spite of himself, he smiled slightly as he turned to get the bottle.

Crane had carefully chosen what to tell her. He couldn’t deny the evidence of her eyes, especially since she had seen the sketch. He called the Ubaldai by name, showed her a picture in the Bestiary of
Nineteenth Century America, paced, and warily tried to evade most of her questions.

He was still pacing, hands clutched at the small of his back, when he sensed she was about to challenge him again. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, making up his mind, straightened, and looked across at her. “Are you familiar with the Book of Revelation?”

She shook her head. “I don’t read many books.”

“You work in a library! How can you possibly—”

Penny dismissed his objection with a wave of her hand. “I can count and I know the alphabet. It’s not rocket science.”

Disgruntled, he stared at her for a moment. Her job probably wasn’t that difficult: reshelving books, running errands, making sure the undergraduates weren’t bussing in the basement stacks. He shook himself back to attention. He was tired and his mind was wandering. “Revelation is part of the Bible,” he explained.

“I haven’t read that since I started playing hooky from Vacation Bible School when I was eight.”

“You read Revelation when you were eight years old?!”

“No!” Penny wrinkled her nose and thought for a moment. “We had The ‘Jesus Calling’ Storybook.”

Was she being deliberately obtuse? He couldn’t tell. “Do you want to hear this?” Crane demanded, hands clutched into fists at his sides.

“Of course!”

“The Book of Revelation—”

“Wait, isn’t that the stuff that crazy people read and drink Kool-Aid and shoot up shopping malls?”

“I suppose.” He rubbed at his temple with a long finger, not understanding the reference, and started again. “The verses have been interpreted in many different ways. They detail the End of Days. The Apocalypse, if you will. One verse also describes the presence of two Witnesses who battle Evil, or the personification of Evil, in an attempt to prevent the Apocalypse.”

“You fight monsters.”

“In essence.”

“In the cemetery.”

“Amongst other places. Usually farther from the center of town.”

“Why you?”

“I do not really know,” Crane equivocated and smiled slightly. “For my sins, perhaps.”

She pursed her lips and watched him, as if she was waiting for more. When she didn’t get it, she drained her brandy glass and moved on. “Why Sleepy Hollow?”

He shrugged and paced away from her inquisitive look. “Historically, it is the nexus of many supernatural events that we can trace as far back as the Native Americans. The early settlers brought their own belief systems and agendas … fundamentalists, religious fanatics, witches’ covens,
He pivoted, watching to see if she was absorbing it all. She was mouthing some of the words after him as if she was trying to glean their meaning, but didn’t interrupt. So he continued. “The British who came here to fight in the Revolutionary War, for reasons I will not at this time explain, had to win. They were willing to go to any lengths and summon any sort of beings to that end. Unfortunately, the Founding Fathers found it necessary to answer the enemy with the same tactics. It did not end there. And so we have inherited thousands of years of warfare between Good and Evil.”

“Like Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

He blinked. “Pardon?”

“Leonard—He—Never mind.” She flopped a hand in his direction. “Who else?”

“Pardon?”

“You said two Witnesses. Who else?”

The pain spiked between his eyes and arrowed down to his heart. He felt light-headed for a moment. Abbie. The woman who still held his heart and soul in her hand, who had sacrificed herself so they could triumph against an evil deity.

“No one. At present.” He turned away. “No one. Just me.”

“Are you okay?” Her voice was soft, concerned.

“Yes,” he whispered, then cleared his throat. “I am fine. Is there anything else you wish to know?”

“Yes. But I don’t know what to ask.”

“You are safe, Miss Penny.” Crane tried to reassure her. “This town is safe. As safe as I can make it. Just do not go strolling through the graveyard after dark anymore.”

“I was not ‘strolling’. I was tired. It was a shortcut to the bus stop.”

He glared at her, pointedly.

“Okay, okay. No more shortcuts. No more ‘strolling’.” She pinned him with her own sharp brown gaze. “No more running with demons at my back.”

“The Ubaldai is not a demon. It…”

“Okay, okay.” Penny stood, pulling his coat from her shoulders and handing it back to him. She spat into his handkerchief and wiped the mascara from her cheeks. He winced, but she didn’t even try to return it.

“Are you all right now?” he asked. “Are you prepared to go home?”

“No. And yessss.”

Crane ran after her before she could get to the door and opened it for her. She stopped before she stepped outside. “Thank you.”

He nodded in acknowledgement, then froze, suspicious. “For what?”
“For being honest with me. I think.” Not enumerating what her doubts might be, she hurried outside. He paused to adjust the collar on his coat and followed her.

“If you please, Miss Penny, I do have a query for you.”

“Yeah?”

“What, precisely, is a ‘buffy’?”

Penny hadn’t had anything else to say during the drive to her apartment. Crane had left her to her ruminations, recognizing that she didn’t need any more of his inadequate reassurances. He had stood at her apartment door while she went inside and cleaned up, then watched as she crossed the hall to her fiancé’s door and disappeared inside. Unwilling to abandon Penny just yet, even if she had friends to support her, he had waited there in the hallway. For what, he had been hesitant to speculate.

He still stood there, unconsciously flexing and unflexing his fingers, now unable to keep the consequences of that evening from his thoughts. What was she going to tell Leonard? Was she going to tell him everything? Was she afraid Leonard wouldn’t believe her? Was it fair to put their relationship to a test like this? What would Leonard think? What would he do? What could he do? Would he want to call Crane out, or just punch him in the face?

He stared at the blue door through which Penny had disappeared, then drew in a deep breath and turned away. Four identical doors opened off the hallway, and Crane wondered briefly about the inhabitants behind the other two. What would they think if they found him here, for no demonstrable reason?

Perhaps they would condemn him as a stalker. He had learned the current sense of the word at some point in the three years and odd months since he had awakened in the twenty-first century. They would see him as a stranger who dressed in colonial garb, who spoke and acted like a man from the 1700’s. Who had, for that very reason, spent a night in a psychiatric hospital until he had learned to keep his counsel and not tell the authorities he was a spy for General Washington.

Because he was. Had been. In what felt like only moments before he fought his way, gasping, from under the dirt of his grave, he had been a captain in the Continental Army. He had come to America after enlisting in the British Army but turned his coat when he learned to appreciate the colonists’ grievances and their dreams for a new country. He had been felled in battle by a demon in the guise of an ax-wielding Hessian fighting for the British. Without his knowledge, Ichabod’s wife, a very talented witch who had been told of her husband’s destiny, cast a spell that he might be resurrected as needed in the future.

When he stumbled, terrified and bewildered, into present-day Sleepy Hollow, he had been rescued by Lt. Abbie Mills of the sheriff’s department. For reasons known only to the Lieutenant, she had eventually believed the story of his colonial origins. She had taken him under her wing to help him survive and attempt to understand, gradually and sometimes incredulously, modern times. Together, they had discovered they were the Biblical Witnesses destined to fight evil in seven tribulations until they faced and defeated the Apocalypse at the end of their trials.

He had no prospects of returning to his own time. Which was why he clung so desperately to his identity — his ideals, his diction, his etiquette. Abbie had been frustrated as she endeavored to turn him into a normal denizen of Sleepy Hollow. Although Crane suspected she really preferred him as he was — with the possible exception of his mode of dress. He’d resisted her efforts to outfit him in
skinny jeans or yoga pants, while he obtained new shirts and breeches from the seamstresses of the local Revolutionary War Reenactment Society. It was, he had concluded, a symbol of his identity.

But then Abbie had sacrificed herself. To save the world. To save him. Because that’s who she was, who she had to be. And Crane was left to battle on against evil as well as amidst his day-to-day existence, which at times seemed almost more impossible. With Abbie’s death, no one remaining in Sleepy Hollow was aware of his background, his experiences. His life.

Crane scrubbed at his face, pushing his shoulder-length hair from his eyes and dragging fingers through his trim beard. He sighed, then straightened into his habitual ramrod posture, marking him as a soldier even to those who knew nothing about him. He had no intention of telling Penny about his origins, regardless that she was now aware of the rest. She had already accepted him, strange as he was. She had needed no reasons or excuses for the man he presented to the world.

He looked over at the blue door again. Perhaps she could accept the Witness in him as well.

He approached the window at the end of the corridor intending to lose himself in the view of a once peaceful Sleepy Hollow. But all he could see was his own reflection, reminding him of the decisions of that night.

Crane retreated to the stairwell and settled down on the lower of the steps leading to the fifth floor. He looked down at his feet for a moment, then snapped his back to attention and stared into the air. “Lieutenant, what am I doing?”

Many of the people he and Abbie had encountered who survived contact with otherworldly creatures were law enforcement. Some they had let in on their secret and taken into what had inexplicably been labeled “Team Witness.” Others had denied the evidence of their eyes and removed themselves from any involvement.

And now Penny…. But in no way would he invite her to join the battle. She was the person he was meant to fight for, not with.

Crane sighed and stirred, leaning his elbows back on a step behind him. Penny had befriended him shortly after she had started a new job at the Tarrytown University Library. Crane had been working for six months as historian in the rare book archive when she came down to the basement. She had been headed to the employees’ breakroom, but poked her head into his department first. She wanted to know if he ever ate lunch.

“I assure you,” he had said, “I have many ordinary habits.” And immediately regretted his choice of words.

But she had laughed. “I’m Penny. I work upstairs in the stacks. And I haven’t seen you in the lunchroom.”

“Oh, I bring my lunch. I eat it here.” He motioned to his desk.

“That’s a little too ordinary, don’t you think? Why don’t you eat your lunch with me?”

And he had. A couple of times a week, now. In spite of the fact that Crane was now successfully supporting himself, little else in his life had been settled since he had lost Abbie. He was barely managing an existence at the archive, reading and studying to stay ahead of the few demons which had manifested themselves. And making a few new acquaintances, but no new friends. Six months without Abbie, without Miss Jenny, without any of those who had supported him in this new world, and he had not yet begun to reach beyond his closed existence.
Penny was a refreshing addition to his life, fussing over his wedge-like cheese sandwiches and warning him of his addiction to pastry. Her life’s ambition was to become an actress on Broadway or, barring that, Off-Off-Off-Broadway. She’d told him a few stories of her boyfriend – himself a theoretical physicist at Tarrytown University – and his roommate, but he suspected many of the tales were purposely devised to amuse him. One thing was patently clear—one thing that appealed to Crane and strangely reassured him about his current reality: she was very much in love with her fiancé.

Now, as Crane again shifted his position on the cold, hard stairs, he realized that she had to depend upon Leonard in this. He had to depend upon Leonard — a man he had never met. Leonard was the one who had to be there for Penny. Whatever happened, it was his place, not Crane’s. But Crane wasn’t going anywhere, not yet. He would hear the screams, the arguments, the activity on the other side of the door when Penny finally told her story. He would see Leonard come running out of the apartment to find the man who had done this. Or he would feel the vibrations of the police or the EMTs thundering up the stairs.

Or not. Perhaps the Penny who had asked questions and cracked feeble jokes would remain in control. Perhaps the vibrant, cheerful young woman who had grown to be important to him would triumph.

“God help us all,” he pled.

After a half hour of silence and the same thoughts tumbling around in his brain again and again, he pulled a slim book from a deep pocket in the lining of his frock coat. His journal. If his mind was to be troubled by the evening’s events, he might as well put them into words while he had the time. He retrieved the stub of a pencil as well, and opened the pages to the end of his last ruminations.

Just as he was delineating what he had revealed to Penny about the Witnesses, Crane heard a muffled scream. He froze. There was another, somewhat louder, longer scream. Voices raised, footsteps, more voices. A light suddenly showed under the door. More silence, then strident tones that were loud enough to hear, but not understand. Silence.

Crane stood, straining his ears for any sound, ready to hide further up the stairs if necessary. He stood like that for nearly forty-five minutes. Then the light went out. Against his better judgment, he put his ear to the door. Voices, fading. Nothing. He let out a heavy sigh. And began to pace again.

When the sun peeked over the horizon, Crane left.

Ichabod Crane should have been a happy man. He was in the rare books archive at Tarrytown, unpacking a new shipment the buyers had purchased from Drewettts and Bloomsbury. It was the sort of thing he usually reveled in. But his thoughts were scattered, and, if it had not been for his eidetic memory, he would have quite forgotten each of the titles he had read from the fragile spines.

He should also have been happy that he had vanquished another evil creature several nights before, without the aid and support of Miss Jenny or Master Corbin or Miss Sophie or Agent Reynolds or … or the Lieutenant … Abbie…. Everyone he had worked with was gone. Some out of town. Some out of this plane of existence.

Jenny Mills was traveling the world searching for artifacts and arcane knowledge that might help in his own endeavors. Because Jenny couldn’t bear to live in the town where she had finally been
happy with Joe and looking forward to … everything…. And, he forced himself to add, she couldn’t look Crane in the eyes and not remember how her sister had died.

The surviving Mills sister was also looking for any sign of the new Witness. Crane couldn’t leave Sleepy Hollow, the Ubaldai had proven that once again. He had thought, perhaps the Witness might come to him, but … not yet.

Perhaps not ever.

After he’d had some promising initial contact with Sophie and Reynolds, the FBI had officially washed their hands of him, preferring Not To Know. Sophie could not actively help any longer, but she had on occasion contacted him about anomalies and abnormalities which had come to the attention of the FBI and the local police. She wouldn’t tell him how she acquired the knowledge, although he did guess her methods weren’t exactly regulation. His own police scanner produced less satisfactory results, but he persevered.

Badly, he had to admit. For even though he had vanquished the Ubaldai, the experience had ultimately been a fiasco. Crane looked down at his hand where he had unconsciously crumpled the shipping inventory. He tossed the paper onto the table, without thinking to straighten it out, and paced away, hands in fists, pressing his fingernails into his palms.

His acquaintanceship with Penny was one of the things he treasured in his new life. She was bright, fresh, and normal. And now she had been introduced to his tainted world. *Just like Zoe.*

During that long night in the hallway, he had come to accept that the reasons for his confession were not altogether for Penny’s peace of mind. Actually, he had made the most feeble of excuses for selfishly wishing someone knew more about him than his predilection for doughnut holes. The opportunity had been presented to him by Fate and he had grasped it to his bosom, unthinking, with both hands.

But he had since had time to think.

What was he going to do? Keep her at arm’s length? Put her out of his life altogether? Try to explain again? “You probably won’t have a choice, you fool,” he admonished himself. Penny hadn’t been to work for the last three days—he had checked.

He paced again. He couldn’t settle. He couldn’t think about the newly-arrived books. He couldn’t *think.*

“Crane!”

He startled. *No…. He turned.*

The woman from his thoughts came running across the room and stopped in front of him. Although she was making the effort to smile, she looked him up and down as if she were upset with him for something. “You look … rough.”

“I—” He frowned. Penny had dark spots under her eyes and a little too much makeup. Her hair was limp and a certain spark was gone from her demeanor. “You do not— How are you? What — ?”

A voice from the hallway overrode his turmoil. “Penny!”

“In here!” she called over her shoulder. Then she froze her lips like a ventriloquist as she still managed to whisper, “Go along with anything you hear.”
“What—?” A man appeared at the door, dressed in a t-shirt with a jellyfish on it and one of those jackets with all the pockets. He had dark hair and black-rimmed glasses and was a few inches shorter than the blonde woman. She stepped over to the newcomer and took his arm. “Crane, this is my fiancé, Dr. Leonard Hofstadter. Leonard, this is Ichabod Crane.”

Crane began his customary short bow, but the man grinned widely and offered his hand. “Jeez, you really do dress like Thomas Jefferson.”

Crane might have been caught off guard by Hofstadter’s presence, but his fingers tightened considerably more than he had intended when he accepted the handshake.

“What?” Penny threw an annoyed look at her boyfriend, then made the effort to smile at Crane again. “Leonard just wanted to meet you and say ‘thanks’.”

“Crane,” Penny interrupted again, apparently determined not to let Crane explain himself or even finish a thought. “Oh, don’t be sorry for waking up Sheldon. He deserves it after all those disaster drills at two a.m.”

Leonard, massaging his fingers surreptitiously, seemed oblivious to the new undercurrent in the room. He put his arm around Penny’s waist. “She was so brave, I didn’t realize anything was wrong. Until she started screaming in the middle of the night and woke herself up. And me.” His voice trailed off. “And … and Sheldon.”

“Who’s this mugger?” Leonard and Penny finished together.

Mugger.

Penny continued, with a look at Crane that practically drilled through him. “I mean, neither of us really saw him that well, with that dark hoodie and the scarf covering the bottom of his face and how dark it was and how he ran away so fast after you punched him in the eye. And we couldn’t call the cops ’cause there was really nothing to tell.”
“Of course. I wounded him in the eye.” Crane drawled sarcastically, so relieved as to be almost giddy. “And we could not ‘call the cops’.”

Penny laid her hand on Leonard’s chest and squeezed his shoulder. “See, sweetie? I told you he’d be all modest.”

Leonard put out his hand again. “Well, I just wanted to see you … Ich … Ichabod. I’ve got to get to work.”

“Crane.” The shake was much more satisfactory this time. “My friends call me Crane.”

“Great.” Leonard turned to Penny, wiggled his eyebrows, and tilted his head toward the other man. “Don’t forget.” He kissed her briefly on the cheek and left, waving.

Crane was finally free to talk. “Are you really all right?”

“I’m getting there. Leonard’s being really supportive.” She shrugged. “I’m sorry about the story, but I had to say something.”

“It’s fine. It’s good. I am exceedingly penitent for your nightmares.”

Her eyes watered and she reached out to the table to support herself. He tried to take her elbow, but she waved him off. “I’m okay.”

“I would not have left you alone…” Did not leave you alone, he thought. “But—”

“I told you I was all right that night.” She straightened her shoulders. “And I’m really all right now.”

Penny wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. Crane pulled out his handkerchief and offered it to her.

“Leonard’s going to wonder why I have a collection of these.” She dabbed at her eyes so as not to smear her makeup. “But I’ll never tell.”

“What can I do?”

She finished with her nose and tucked the bit of cloth into her pocket. “Come to dinner.”

He was shocked into rudeness. “What?”

“Come to dinner.”

“That is not necessary.” Crane took a step back, to recover his personal space.

“Leonard wants to say ‘thank you’. We both do. And,” suddenly she couldn’t look at him again, “I need to be normal. I need you to be normal. I want to think of you as the nice guy I met at work, not… some….”

“I accept … the invitation.” He interrupted, afraid to hear what she thought of him now. If she could put aside her fears to save their friendship, he would embrace the opportunity.


“I do enjoy pizza, but let us refrain from becoming carried away.”
She snickered. “Maybe not. Keep your feet on the floor if you need to. Friday night. Seven?”

“It will be my pleasure.” He bowed.
Two

Chapter Summary

Penny presents her friends to Crane. Interrogations ensue.

Crane didn’t even glance at the elevator before he headed for the stairs; he knew it would not have been repaired in the five days since he had been here. Penny had told him the contraption had been nonfunctional since before she had moved into the building. He wasn’t quite sure he trusted elevators, anyway. It was, he justified his reticence, just another poor excuse to keep the people in this century from getting proper exercise.

Penny was closing the door to her own apartment, carrying an empty platter, as Crane arrived on the fourth floor. “Hey, Crane.” She waved the platter and shrugged. “The boys don’t have a hell of a lot of dishes.”

“Miss Penny.” He nodded, wondering what place the oversized plate would have in the serving of pizza.

She pointed to the bottle carrier in his hand. “Is that wine? Thank you. I was afraid we wouldn’t have enough.”

“I am unaware of the proper sort to imbibe with pizza. So I brought two bottles. I thought ale might be preferable, but not everyone likes Samuel Adams.” Hah, he couldn’t resist the thought. *Truer words were never spoken.* He pulled his mind back to the present and glanced up at the door they were standing beside. “Although, I must confess, the odor is not evocative of Italian cuisine.”

Her eyes clouded over for a telling split second, then she grinned. “Oh, no. Raj was offended at the idea of having takeout, so he said he’d cook.” She opened the door and stood aside, but he motioned for her to go first.

“Raj?” he inquired.

But Penny either didn’t hear or ignored him as she charged past. He sniffed. Salmon. And garlic. And onions. And tomatoes… and….

…And the room was full of people. Seven including Penny, most of them sitting on a couch and odd chairs in an arrangement facing the television. So much for casual – he knew he should have worn his good coat, his best shirt. He smiled stiffly and hurried after Penny to the kitchen counter.

Crane was not a stranger to social situations. He had attended many soirees with British aristocrats and army officers, as well as American gentry and businessmen. He had no problem with such men and ladies, or with fellow soldiers and freedom fighters. He had thought he could hold his own with Penny and her gentleman friend. But what in creation was he to discuss with a roomful of modern young people?

Relieved of the wine, he looked across the counter at a dark-skinned man wearing an oven mitt.

“Crane,” Penny piped up, “this is Rajesh Koothrappali. Raj, Ichabod Crane.”
Crane bowed his head in his usual greeting. Raj looked surprised, then smiled widely and bobbed his head as well. “Namaste.”

“Ehrrmm. ‘Mr. Koothrappali. I am at your service.’”

Penny said, “Raj works in the Physics Department at Tarrytown. He has a doctorate in astrophysics.”

“Dr. Koothrappali. My apologies.”

Raj shook his head, still smiling. “Not at all. Several of us here have acquired doctorates. It used to bother Penny—”

“You wish!” she protested.

“But you are the man of the hour this evening.” Raj finished.

“On the contrary,” Crane gestured to the food on the counter, “I believe that anyone who volunteers to prepare dinner is the man of the hour.”

“Do you cook…” Raj flipped a brief glance at Penny, “Crane?”

“I have been known to prepare an excellent baked marrow pudding.”

“Sounds old-fashioned.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Hey, Penny.” a voice came from the direction of the couch, “bring him over here before they start hugging each other and singing ‘Kum-ba-ya’.”

“Howard!” Penny scolded.

“Howie!” Another feminine, but high-pitched voice echoed.

Crane felt Penny touch his arm to urge him across the room. He smiled at Raj. “I look forward to your Salmon….”

“Sarciado.” Raj gave another little bow and waved his wooden spoon.

“C’mon.” Penny led him to the couch. “Crane, the loudmouth is Howard Wolowitz.”

He bowed. And guessed. Rajesh had said they all had doctorates but Penny, and Crane knew how closely most held their honoraries. “Dr. —”

The short, dark-haired young man with a rather large nose froze in his chair. “Mister. Thank you.”

“Oh, bazinga, Howard.” A tall, thin man seated on the couch snorted inelegantly. “Good shot, Crane.”

“Sheldon!” Leonard was sitting among the group, next to the man who had spoken. “What did we talk about?”

Crane floundered. “I sincerely beg your pardon. I had no intention—”

Penny stepped in to save him. “Howard is an engineer in the Physics Department. He invents gadgets for the government.”
Howard was apparently not mollified. His demeanor was unyielding as he stiffly explained. “I helped design the Mars Rover. I designed the telescope for the International Space Station. And I installed it. In person. In space.”

“You have been in space?” Crane’s interest was instant and obvious. “How remarkable! You mean like The Right Stuff?”

A loud chorus of groans came from the entire room.

“Exactly like that.” Howard ignored them, perking up, apparently forgetting any slights to his person as he answered Crane. “It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever done! Let me tell you—”

“Careful, Howard,” Raj mimicked from the kitchen. “Or you’ll start hugging yourself and singing ‘Rocket Man’.”

“Okay, people, listen up!” Penny shouted. “I invited Crane here to thank him for saving my life. So anybody who can’t behave themselves can leave right now.”

“Sorry, Penny.” Raj and Howard intoned immediately.

Her eyes went to Sheldon. “I live here!” he protested.

Leonard shrugged to his girlfriend. “I think that’s all you’re gonna get, honey. Sorry, Crane.”

Crane stood helplessly at attention, fingers flying, attempting to regain his equilibrium. He really was interested in the idea of space flight, but right now he was growing a headache. He struggled to smile at Howard. “I would love to speak of it later.”

“And this,” Penny overrode the moment, “is Dr. Bernadette Rostenkowski-Wolowitz.”

The woman sitting beside Howard was blonde, buxom, and petite—at least as short as the Lieutenant or perhaps a few inches shorter. “Yeah. I’m married to the putz.” Her voice came out surprisingly shrill and nasal. Then she offered her hand and a brilliant grin. “Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Crane,” she cooed.

He took her hand and bowed, almost touching his lips to it. “As am I, Dr. … W…w…?” He cast a glance out of the corner of his eye at Penny, who nodded encouragingly. “Wolowitz.”

“Bernadette,” the slight woman insisted.

“Are you a physician?”

“Oh, no, I have a doctorate in microbiology.”

“Indeed.”

Penny rescued him again. “Bernadette studies germs and develops medicines and does drug tests and stuff.”

Bernadette wrinkled her nose at Penny. “Good try,” she said drily.

Crane smiled, gallantly trying to rescue his hostess in turn. “I am sure we will have the opportunity to discuss your work at some point.”

“Oh?” Bernadette’s voice was sharp. “I thought you were a librarian.”
Just a librarian, Crane heard in his inner ear, and felt a sudden empathy for Howard. “I am an archivist, yes. But I have a voracious curiosity about almost any developments in this century.” He caught himself. “Or any other century.” He shrugged. “Because my main concentration is history.”

The woman sitting beside Bernadette spoke up. “Is that why you dress like that?”

“Partly.” Crane shifted his attention to field his least-favorite question, as everyone else’s eyes focused on the young woman. She wore glasses, long brown hair, a long skirt, and a sweater. “I also find it comfortable.”

She defended herself to the group who were all looking at her now. “What? Everybody else was thinking it.” She leaned forward as if to deliver a deep confidence to Crane. “I like it.”

“Thank you, Miss —”

“Dr. Amy Farrah Fowler.”

Another doctor. She offered her hand, not to be shaken, but with her palm to the floor, inviting the kiss he had nearly bestowed on Bernadette. She beamed at him expectantly. He obliged.

“See, Sheldon.” Amy addressed the tall man sitting next to her, showing her hand to him. “That’s the way you do it.”

Penny broke in again. “Amy’s a neurobiologist. And our resident romantic.”

“Hey!” For some reason, Raj took exception to that description.

“Hey!” Sheldon echoed, pulling away from Amy’s hand. “Do you know how many germs are on his mouth?”

“You could kiss my hand.”

“Do you know how many germs are on your hand?”

“And this,” Penny’s voice topped the argument, “is —”

Crane bowed, remembering some of the stories he had heard at lunches and determining to get the best of this exchange at least. “Dr. Sheldon Cooper. Your reputation precedes you.”

“Of course it does.” Sheldon agreed, but not gracefully. “But I’ve got a bone to pick with you about your reputation, mister.”

Crane drew back. “Pardon?”

“I mean, you hardly saved her life, no matter what she says. At the most, you saved her purse. She’s the Mistress of Hyperbole.”

“Did Sheldon just insult me?” Penny asked Leonard. Leonard ignored the question, keeping his eye on his roommate.

Sheldon continued. “You couldn’t even keep your hands on the mugger. You let him get away. What good is that? I’ll be looking over my shoulder every time I go outside!”

“Sheldon!” Leonard exclaimed. “You’re never outside. You make me drive you everywhere you go. You think exercise is a walk down the street in a video game and a breath of fresh air is poking your head into the hallway!”
“But I’ll know he’s there. I’ll have to run to get to the car.”

Howard leaned forward. “Hey, even muggers on the loose would be worth it to see you run.”

Sheldon threw Howard a withering look. “Howard—”

“Who wants wine?” Penny shouted.

Leonard cleared his throat. Bernadette shifted on the couch. Howard rolled his eyes. Amy studied her fingernails. Sheldon announced, “I’ll have a Diet Coke.”

“You don’t have to worry about the two dollar Thunderbird they’re selling at the corner gas station. Crane brought this.”

“I’ll have some.” Bernadette said immediately.

“Me, too.”

“I’ll help.” Leonard stood up.

“I’ll get it, sweetie. Just clear off the coffee table.”

Leonard grabbed a laptop computer and a box of DVD’s from the table and gestured at the chair he had just vacated. “Sit here, Crane. Best seat in the house.”

“I beg to differ,” Sheldon started in, but as Crane sat down his attention followed the two people in the kitchen.

Raj leaned over to Penny as she walked to the counter, his whisper louder than he realized. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“You were parading him around like the Queen Mother. Usually we just point and say ‘that’s him, that’s him, that’s her, no quiz later’.”

She posed with her hands on her hips. “Yeah, you do that at Comic Con. Not your living room.” She reached for the wine and a corkscrew from a drawer. “Anyway, I thought it might give them something to talk about besides Batman and Donkey Kong.”

Crane made a move to stand again, but Leonard stopped him. “Penny can handle the cork. She’s a pro.”

“Everyone can pour their own,” Raj interjected. “Dinner is served.”

Hands full with flotsam from the coffee table, Leonard stopped and motioned to Crane. “Go ahead.”

“The ladies should go first.”


The ladies dished out salmon, rice, and asparagus as Raj waited expectantly. They were examining the wine label when Sheldon peered into a pan of food. “What’s in it?”

“I know everyone’s food allergies, Sheldon,” Raj pointed out peevishly. “No one is going to die tonight.”
“Yes, but will I like it?”

“Let’s see ….” Raj pursed his lips. “I know. Why don’t you try it?”

“That seems an unreasonable way to determine an outcome without committing myself beforehand.”

“Sheldon,” Amy muttered, “consider it an experiment to determine your toleration levels.”

Penny had filled a plate and was shoving it at him. “Here. No one will make you eat it if you don’t want it.”

Sheldon took his dinner and went to the refrigerator, pulling out a can of Diet Coke. “Did you know that salmon are anadromous? That means they can live in both fresh water and salt water.”

Crane couldn’t help drilling the ungracious Sheldon with a look. Their eyes met at a level, being the same height. “That’s how they are able to swim upriver and spawn.”

“Some salmon travel up to 3,500 miles to spawn,” Sheldon countered.

Crane parried. “They do not eat while they are returning to the place of their birth but live off their body fat.”

“Boys!” Penny raised her voice. “We’re trying to eat here.”

“Pardon.” Crane felt his face warming. “My apologies.” He bowed slightly and took a glass of wine from Penny. Then he nodded at Raj encouragingly and spooned out his own food.

Sheldon huffed. “Well, excuse me for trying to educate the masses.”

They were all huddled in the kitchen; it was cozy but not conducive to dining. Crane looked around the apartment for a table. Penny said, “Just go sit in the easy chair.”

Everyone sat in the same arrangement as before. Leonard settled on the floor on one side, Raj on the other. Crane briefly tried to sort out the etiquette, but it didn’t seem to bother anyone else. Everyone was relaxed, concentrating on their food.

The Lieutenant and he used to sit on the floor sometimes, when they ate in the living room. Feet up and hair down. Of course. He smiled. “The Salmon Sarciado is excellent,” Crane said. “My compliments.”

“Thank you!” Raj beamed. “These hooligans wouldn’t know haute cuisine if it bit them on the—”

Amy glared “—nose.”

“But you’ve never made us lobster,” Howard quipped, imitating the claws with his fingers. He looked around the room to find no one laughing. “Which would … bite us….” He made the pincer gesture again. “On the nose.” He subsided.

The sound of silverware halted any talk for a couple of minutes. When Crane saw Sheldon fixing him with curious looks, he tried to direct the conversation away from himself. “So, Dr. Koothrappali, what is your native country?”

“India. I am from New Delhi. My parents still live there.”

“Do you not cook from the cuisine of India?”

Raj announced baldly. “I hate Indian food.”
Okay. Crane tried again. “How long have you been in America? You seem to have a much better grasp on the vernacular than I.”

That comment produced undue mirth from Howard’s direction. Raj made a valiant effort to ignore him.

“Oh, I’ve been here about ten years, but we spoke English at home.” His expression turned sour. “And Howard can at all times be counted on to correct my language and pronunciation.”

Howard smiled. “Always my pleasure, Raj.”

“How long have you been in this country, Crane?” Amy broke in.

“I have been here almost four years. Perhaps I, also, can rely on Howard.”

“That’s not—” Amy started, but was interrupted by a strange chortle from Sheldon.

“Another Howard bazinga. You’re good, Crane.”

“Pardon?”

Bernadette squeezed Howard’s knee and he closed the mouth that he was just opening. Bernadette smiled sweetly. “Do you live in Tarrytown around the university?”

“No, I live in Sleepy Hollow.”

“Ooooh, not those townhouses on Rockland.” Bernadette’s eyes went wide. “Those are gorgeous.”

“No. No, closer to the middle of town, across from the police department.”

Crane saw Penny’s eyes jerk up from her plate and narrow on him. She knew exactly where the Archives were. Now she knew he was living there. The very definition of creepy. Good, Crane.

Bernadette wrinkled her nose in thought. “I don’t remember any apartments there…”

Penny spoke up, brightly. “So, what do you do when you’re not at the university? In your spare time.”

“I read and collect books.”

“Something different than your job,” she commented drily.

Crane knew why she had redirected the discussion, but he felt a pang of disloyalty at her barb. “I also enjoy television, music, local history. Oh, yes, and Alien Invasion.”

“You play video games?” Leonard grinned and his eyebrows rose.

Crane backpedaled quickly. The ladies didn’t look happy. The Lieutenant, after seeing him introduced him to the phenomenon, had disapproved of the hours he would sometimes spend at the console. “Not all of them. I like Alien Invasion because I can practice my shooting on something besides other people or supernatural monsters or zombies.” He shrugged. “I am not sure why everyone is so fond of zombies.”

“Well, if you want to shoot things—” Sheldon jumped up and dodged all the feet to get to the hallway.
“Sheldon, sweetie,” Penny stopped him, “we’re not here right now to play video games.”

Sheldon froze. Penny continued watching him. He rocked his weight onto his front foot as if to keep going.

“No.”

He straightened and froze. Then rocked again.

“Sheldon.” Penny pointed to the empty spot on the couch. “Sit.”

Sheldon pouted like a chastised child and threw himself onto the couch. The room grew silent as they recovered from the tantrum.

“Oh.” Sheldon suddenly sat up as if nothing had happened. “If you watch television, you must know *Star Trek*. Which one is your favorite?”

“Pardon?” The abrupt change of subject took Crane aback.


Raj bounced in his spot on the floor. “Except for Nathan Fillion.”

Leonard smiled across at him. “Yeah, isn’t that great?”

“That’s just a rumor,” Howard pointed out.

“I’ll hold my judgments until the actual premiere.” Sheldon shook his head. “If we’ve learned anything, it’s not to anticipate.” He again fixed Crane with his stare. “Well?”

Crane had lost track of the question. “Pardon?”


Crane looked over at the door and back at Sheldon. “Pardon?”

Sheldon sighed impatiently. “*Star Trek: The Original Series, Star –*”

“No, I don’t need the list again. It’s all rather startling, space travel, is it not?” He looked to Howard, but Sheldon clucked his tongue. “I do rather like the balding gentleman. Captain Picard. He reminds me of–” Crane stopped himself and hoped Sheldon wouldn’t notice. He didn’t.

“Well, *that* took long enough. Like pulling teeth. Okay, you can stay.” But his quiz wasn’t over.

“What’s your favorite movie?”

“Sheldon,” Leonard admonished.

“No,” Amy said. “I want to know, too.”

“That can be a rather daunting task, can’t it? Picking one from them all?” Crane thought for a minute. “*The Lion in Winter,* I believe.”
“Oh. Okay.” Sheldon seemed to lose interest in the interrogation.

Crane defended his choice to Amy, who was still listening. “The usage of language is so refreshing compared to most modern speech.” He faltered, looking around the room to see the rest of them watching him with varying degrees of pique. “In movies,” he amended quickly, yet drew himself up to meet anyone who might challenge him. No one did. “I am also fascinated by the way they weave history into popular entertainment, poetic indulgence aside.”

Amy generously brushed past his faux pas. “Shakespeare did that all the time,” she suggested.

“Of course, but he often twisted history to appease the crown. I doubt that Hollywood has a stake in maligning the character of Henry II.”

“But they are interested in making it as dramatic and histrionic as possible.”

While Crane was considering that, Howard said, “Iron Man.”

“Four Weddings and a Funeral,” Raj volunteered.

“But your girl Sandy B. wasn’t in that one.” Howard pointed out.

“She should have been.”


Crane felt as if he were sinking in some sort of verbal mire. The conversation went back and forth until his neck got sore. It seemed like some sort of game whose rules he was not privy to. Sometimes he got the answers right, sometimes he got them wrong. Desperate for a distraction, he looked into his wine glass and saw only the dregs looking back. He really shouldn’t ask for more without being offered, but Penny had said casual. She was in the kitchen, rinsing and stacking dishes by the sink, so he went to stand beside her. “I can help with that if you like.”

“No. Thanks. I’m going to leave the rest.”

He waggled his glass at her. “Is there any more wine?”

“Oh.” She wrinkled her nose and nodded to the two empty bottles sitting by their carrier. “Sorry. It goes fast when four people turn into eight.” She crossed to the refrigerator and examined the insides. “I can offer you …. Eh. Just the stuff from the gas station.”

He raised an eyebrow, his glass still in the air. She shrugged, opened the green bottle and poured. Crane took a sip, and, before he could temper his reaction, his eyes widened in shock.

“Look, you don’t need that.” Penny took the glass and set it on the counter. He made a grab for it, but her reflexes were faster than his. She poked him twice on the chest. “You’re doing fine.”

Disgruntled, he looked down at the offending finger, then fixed her with a look. “So why does the phrase ‘baptism of fire’ come to mind?”

Her answering look was sheepish. “I didn’t mean all this. But I had to include Sheldon. And then he mentioned it last night and everybody just invited themselves. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I am being churlish. I am complimented that you wanted me to meet your friends.”
“They’re a tough audience. You are doing fine,” Penny assured him again. “Just one thing. Try not to say ‘pardon’ so much. It makes you sound weird.”

Crane drew himself up, embarrassed at the thought of seeming “weird”. “What am I supposed to say, ‘explain yourself, you idiot’?” He clipped off the last sound with the tip of his tongue.

“That would probably be okay with this bunch.” She smiled slightly and turned back to dry her hands. Crane watched her for a moment.

He lowered his voice to almost a whisper. “You are not as jovial as you would wish everyone to believe.”

“I’m not sure what that means.” She tried to put him off. “Something to do with Santa Claus?”

“You are still thinking about the other night. You are still afraid. Every time you look at me.” He sighed deeply. “I knew this would happen. It’s all right, you know. I can leave.”

“No!” Penny shouted, then lowered her voice as everyone looked over. “No, listen. Like you said, it’s only been a couple days. I’m still working on getting over it.” She reached for the dishrag and started picking at the edges as though she wanted to unravel it. “I talked it over with Leonard. Well, as much as I could. And I have to do this my way. It isn’t the monster, it’s the idea of monsters. Knowing there are more of them. All over town.” Penny threw the rag at the counter and turned to him. “Having you around makes me feel better.”

The explanation somehow disappointed him. “Keep your enemies closer,” he muttered.

Her expression was confused. Then upset. “Not an enemy. I like you. I want you to be a friend.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I … need … a friend. But—” perhaps not seven of them, he thought.

“Hey, I seem to attract weird people.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” He raised an eyebrow.

“If the shoe fits…” She poked his chest again and turned to join the others.

He lifted his wine from the counter and, without thinking, drank. He made a face because she wasn’t looking and followed her. “But next time I am bringing more than two bottles.”
“Crane?”

He was on the rolling ladder, pulling books off the top shelf for Professor Lorre’s research. He extended his head into the aisle to see Penny coming through the door, on a mission.

She looked up at him. “You’ve got a smudge of dust on your cheek.” She pantomimed on her own face.

He scurried down the ladder, pulling his handkerchief from his pocket. “And a lungful of the same, I fear.”

He scrubbed at his cheek and offered it for inspection. Penny smiled. “Lunch?” she wanted to know.

“Already?”

“Very funny,” she mumbled sourly.

“What’s wrong?”

Penny flung herself into a chair, elbows perched on the table beside it, holding up her chin. “Bored. Bored, bored, bored.”

“Today?” Crane was concerned. “Or in general?”

“I’m okay.” Penny waved him off. “Ignore me.”

“Perhaps you could acquire a few more skills.” Crane reached up for the books he had left on the ladder and deposited them on the table across from Penny. “Take a class.”

She straightened and regarded him with suspicion. “Have you been talking to Leonard behind my back?”

“How would I accomplish that?”

“Well, you can talk to him in front of my back.” She stood up. “I thought I’d walk over to the Science Building and eat there.”

“Oh.” Crane hesitated.

“You’re not interrupting an intimate lunch for two. The other guys’ll be there, too.”

“Oh,” he repeated. Crane hadn’t been sure he’d have other opportunities to see Penny’s compatriots after the dinner last week, but she seemed determined to encourage him. She put her hands on her hips and waited for his explanation. He inhaled, considering his words. “It’s not that I do not enjoy your friends. But sometimes I feel I need a bit of … preparation.”
“We have to walk across the quad,” she pointed out.

“Yes, that should be sufficient,” he responded drily.

“Sometimes I think you’re a little like Sheldon. But he doesn’t understand sarcasm.”

He fixed her with a burning stare, certain he didn’t want to be compared to the most … unusual of their group.

“Yes, that look. It’s like Sheldon doing Darth Vader trying to blow up your brain.”

“Should I want to know what that means?”

“Probably not.”

He gave up on that thread of conversation and went over to his desk to get the sandwich he’d prepared that morning. She misread his intention. “C’mon. I’ll buy your lunch,” she offered.

“No.” He bristled, then steadied himself. “That is not necessary.” He waved the bag at her. “I have my own.”

“Another donut?”

“No.”

She threw him a look of disbelief. He looked away. “I had one for breakfast,” he said.

“Just one?” She laughed.

“If you will refrain from abuse, I believe I will accompany you.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

When they got to the cafeteria in the Science Building, they quickly found the table where the boys were seated. Raj was loudly and impatiently holding forth.

“But you never answered my original question!” he objected.

Howard said, “What was your original question?”

Raj huffed out a heavy sigh and opened his mouth to reply.

“Hey, Penny!” Leonard jumped up. “Hey, Crane!” He kissed her on the cheek and seated her in the spot next to him. Crane took a place on the other end between Raj and Howard. Leonard had apparently already stood in line for Penny’s meal, and she smiled as she picked up her flatware.

“How was your morning?” Leonard asked brightly.

“Oh, please,” Sheldon groaned. “Must we endure the banality of everyday chitchat?”

Penny pointed the end of her fork at Sheldon. “For once, I’m with him.”

Leonard wrinkled his nose and spoke to Crane. “Was she like this all the way across the quad?”

“A little,” Crane allowed. “Mostly she was speculating on the subject of your conversation.” Four pairs of eyes fixed on him, full of curiosity and wariness. He shrugged. “It was an attempt to help us adjust our focus.”
Sheldon made a noise deep in his throat. Everyone else went back to their meals, except Raj.

“Then may I go back to the matter at hand?” he asked.

“Your question that no one can remember,” Howard said.

Raj answered, less than patient. “Since zombies eat the flesh of humans, what happens if they can’t find any? They can’t starve to death; they’re already dead.”

Penny rolled her eyes and looked over at Crane to show her sympathy, but he was already answering. “‘Zombies’ do not actually eat the flesh of humans.”

“Hey!”

“You don’t know—”

The reaction was immediate, but when Crane put up a finger, the noise subsided immediately. Penny seemed amazed, but Crane’s spell was complete. He looked deadly serious. “The correct term is zombi – z-o-m-b-i – from Haitian history. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Haiti was ruled by the French, who imported African slaves to labor on the sugar plantations. The conditions were wretched and many died within the year. The absolute misery and subjugation made most of the slaves wish to die rather than endure it. Dying released them to an afterlife of freedom. But some of them could not wait to die and so committed suicide. This condemned them to wander eternally in the plantations, never able to escape, as undead slaves trapped inside bodies with no souls. Zombis.

“The Haitian Revolution abolished slavery, while their Voodoo religion, or voudon, sustained the former slaves. As a result, voudon became associated with the legends of the zombi. Some shamans, known as bokor, were known to reanimate corpses to do manual labor or other more questionable activities.”

Penny looked around at the rapt faces on those seated around the table. She had never seen the boys this quiet for this long – without a movie or game in front of them – for the years she had known them.

“In 1932, a film was made by the name of White Zombie, which acknowledged Haitian slavery and the roots of the legends. George Romero in The Night of the Living Dead at least seemed to be familiar with the facts, but by the time he made Dawn of the Dead ten years later, he betrayed the history and completely reinvented the zombi.

“At first, zombies in Hollywood stood for America’s social ills and represented them as something to be extinguished for that very reason. Now pop culture has whitewashed the origins and manufactured escapist fantasy. A populist construct. Pride and Prejudice and Zombies indeed!”

Crane regarded his audience, catching his breath, nostrils flaring. Silence. Suddenly feeling awkward, he stared down at his lunch. The Lieutenant used to laugh at him when he pontificated. At least these guys weren’t laughing. Perhaps it was just a web of incredulity. With a sigh, he looked back up. “Sorry. I have been told I often carry around a soapbox. Sometimes, I climb up on it.”

Penny sat there, imitating a fish for a few moments, but making no comment.

Finally, Raj stirred. “So does this ‘populist construct’ ever starve to death?”

“Wow!” Howard interrupted. “We’ve gotta find a copy of White Zombie!”

“Here’s bokor,” Sheldon spoke slowly, considering, “could instruct the zombi to eat human flesh,
could he not?”

Leonard was furiously typing into his cell phone.

Crane had to keep himself from banging his forehead on the table. So much for the soapbox.

Penny stopped with a forkful of mac ‘n’ cheese at her mouth. “So, Crane, how was your morning?”

Leonard tucked his cell into a pocket. “Got it for tomorrow night! Who’s up for movie night?”

Penny stood and went over to the cafeteria line.

“T’ll make the popcorn!” Raj shouted.

“I’ve got Red Vines!” Sheldon volunteered.

“Beer?” Howard wanted to know.

Penny put a small plate on the table in front of Crane. Donut, she mouthed silently and whispered. “I think you need it.” Crane smiled.

“I’ll be across the hall tomorrow night,” Penny said to the others. “Even if you have beer. Tell Amy and Bernadette.”

“Hey, Crane,” Leonard said, “do ya wanna come see the movie?”

“I have seen it. But thank you.”

Penny sat to finish her lunch. “Do you want to come to girls’ night?”

“Par—“ Crane choked on his donut. Clearing his throat, he focused on Penny. “Wha—Explain—”

“Don’t worry,” Howard assured him. “Raj goes to girls’ night all the time. But that’s okay; he is one.”

Raj objected. “Hey!”

“One… ?” Crane was even more confused.

“Have you ever seen any of Sandra Bullock’s movies?” Howard asked.

“I … don’t … know?”

Howard seemed to think he’d been making sense. He slapped Crane on the back. “You’re okay, then. You can do anything you want tomorrow night.”

“Thank you so much.”

Penny objected. “I was being serious! And there’s nothing wrong with it. He hasn’t had as much chance to talk with Bernadette and Amy as he has with you guys.”

“Yeah, they’ll love his dissertation on zombies.” Leonard was enjoying himself entirely too much.

Sheldon protested. “But then they’ll all want to come over and watch the movie.”

“Sarcasm, sweetie.”
“Oh. Good.”

Crane bristled. He didn’t quite know what this nonsense was about, but he was sure he was the object of their ridicule. “I will have you know I am very accomplished at chatting with the ladies.”

“‘Chatting’?” Penny was indignant. “‘With the ladies?’”

Crane flinched. “No. I mean …” Then he reacted. Talking to these people was like navigating a labyrinth sometimes, and he was tired of it. “Yes, that is what I mean! Two very acceptable words, I believe!”

“Run,” Howard warned him and watched Penny like a deer at a noise.

“Run now;” Raj echoed.

Penny held up a hand. “No. No, no, no. It’s all right. But that just means he has to come and prove it.”

“Perhaps not tomorrow night.” Crane excused himself, considering Raj and Howard’s advice.

“Chicken,” she challenged.

Crane raised an eyebrow at her. “Are we now descending into name-calling?” Penny wiggled both her eyebrows. With a sigh, he pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. “I believe I will quit while I am behind. You remind me of the L— someone I once knew. I often had to surrender then, as well.”

“And with that victory,” Penny pushed her own chair back. “I have to get back to work. I’m not my own boss, you know.”

“I shall accompany you, if I am allowed. Gentlemen. Interesting, as always.”

Both of them were busy with private thoughts as they walked back to the Morris Library Center. Finally, Crane had to speak. “I am afraid I threw a tantrum back there. My apologies.”

“What, that? Pffffff.” Penny made a noise of dismissal and waved her hand. “But I was thinking – In your soapbox speech—”

“Please don’t.”

“No. You didn’t say the bokor tried to reanimate corpses, or they said they could reanimate corpses. You said they did reanimate….”

“You noticed that.” Crane sighed. “I am glad they did not.” He stopped walking, causing her to stop as well. “Miss Penny, do not worry. There are no bokor in Sleepy Hollow.” That I know of, he added to himself.

She smiled at him in reassurance and continued across the quad. “You might need to worry about Sheldon. If he thinks about it. He’s got an eidetic memory.”

“My God,” he breathed, thinking of his own naiveté as well as Sheldon’s obsessive behavior. “Next time. Stop me.”

“But you were bonding! They loved it!”

“Bonding,” he echoed sourly. “Quite a refined way to bond. With zomnis.”
“I told you I seem to attract the weird ones.”

“Do not keep reminding me.” They climbed the few steps in front of the library, and Crane held the door. “I would prefer to emerge from this with my dignity intact.”

“Not gonna happen today.” She grinned at him as she went by.

“Hmmm.”

Penny pressed the button for the elevator as Crane crossed to the basement stairs. He paused before he opened the door.

“If you continue to be bored this afternoon, come see me,” he said. “Apparently, I am very diverting.”

“I hear that’s what the ladies say.”

“Damnation.” He muttered to himself as he started down the steps. “I shall never outwear that. When will you learn, Crane, not to spar with a woman?”

“Miniature golf?” Crane stood just inside the door of Sheldon’s apartment, watching a smiling Penny make the invitation. Leonard, Howard, and Bernadette were behind her, cheerfully backing her up. Sheldon was at his desk, tapping on his keyboard, ignoring them all. “Why miniature golf?” Crane asked.

“Well, it was between that and roller skating,” Penny answered. “But every time I imagined that, I couldn’t stop laughing.”

Howard was rolling his tongue along the inside of his cheek while Bernadette pursed her lips to keep from snickering.

Suspiciously, Crane looked back to Penny. “And why would that be?”

“Oh, uh, Leonard spends most of the time on the seat of his pants. It’s hilarious.”

Leonard scowled.

“Umm hmm.” Crane nodded. “I am sure.”

Crane had ridden past the miniature golf course with the Lieutenant more than a few times. She had explained the sport, if that’s what it was, and had listened to his rant about the patriot-themed ornamentation. At least he wouldn’t have to ask too many stupid questions. He bowed. “As you wish.”

So now he stood, golf club in hand, watching his companions’ efforts at negotiating the bump, the thirty-degree angle, and the drop just before the hole. He had opted to take his turn last so he could profit from everyone else’s experience. Bernadette was posed above her ball tracking the path it would have to take. Again. And again.

Penny touched his arm. “See, you have to get the little ball in the hole with as few strokes as possible.”
“Clearly.”

Bernadette demanded shrilly. “Do you know what they do to people who talk on a golf course?”

“They ask them to leave?” Penny guessed.

Bernadette turned to burn them with a stare. “They kill them.”

Penny leaned in towards Crane to whisper. “Bernadette is very competitive. Her father taught her that.”

“I am gratified to be aware of that.”

Bernadette’s ball ended up about a foot and a half from the hole. Howard’s caromed around the corner, hopped over all obstacles, hit the far side, and bounced back and forth three times. But his ball landed closer to the hole, much to his wife’s dismay. Then Leonard stepped up and studiously examined the situation.

“You know,” he tossed over his shoulder at Crane, “it’s all angles and force and mass and acceleration.”

“I see,” Crane acknowledged, “like billiards.”

Leonard sent his ball into action, but not very aggressively. It got to the drop and was barely propelled past it, on the strength of gravity alone. He pulled a face. “Of course, you can know what to do and not be able to do it.”

Howard snickered. “Smooth move, Arnie.”

“It’s okay, sweetie.” Penny kissed him on the cheek. “It’s only the first hole.”

“Hey, I’m just lulling ’em into a false sense of security.”

“Uh huh.” Penny quickly adopted her stance and hit the ball. It went exactly where she intended, stopping just slightly closer than Howard’s, but on the other side of the hole. She grinned and twirled her club.

Crane watched, but didn’t move to take his turn. “It appears the ladies are the ones to defeat.”

“Penny’s very athletic,” Leonard said proudly. “She grew up in Nebraska, tipping cows.”

“Par—” Crane cleared his throat. “How does one tip a cow?”

“Dunno….” Leonard shrugged. “I guess you just sneak up and BAM!”

“Bam,” Crane repeated weakly and attempted to imitate everything Penny had done. With limited success. But at least he was closer than Leonard. He frowned.

“And the fun part,” Leonard slapped him on the back, “is you get to keep on doing that until you get over there.” He pointed across the lot at the flag marked “18”.

Crane squinted over at the spot Leonard pointed to. “Why did you not warn me before we left the apartment?”

“I thought maybe you’d be worse than me and you’d catch all the flak.”
“It is nice to be needed,” Crane drawled.

Leonard grinned.

“Hey, Arnie, it’s your turn!”

Penny and Bernadette each finished with one more stroke. Howard overshot three more times before he landed a putt. Crane matched Leonard with three strokes total. As he bent over to retrieve his ball, he announced heartily, “Not the worst, anyway.”

“You’ll be great,” Penny chirped. “You’ve got the advantage of beginner’s luck.”

Crane raised an eyebrow. Then he hurried to catch up with Howard, who was making his way to the second hole. “I have been wanting to speak with you about your expedition to the International Space Station.”

Howard brightened. “Hey, any time.”

“What is the event that stands out in your mind?”

“Landing.”

Crane smiled sympathetically. “I understand that you wanted to be reunited with your wife, but surely—”

“No,” Bernadette broke in, “he means what he’s saying, and it didn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Honey….”

“But what did it feel like to see the entirety of earth hanging in the void of space?” Crane’s eyes shone with excitement as he gestured with his long fingers spread wide in the air. “The megatons of force at your back as you are thrust into the sky towards something you have tried to imagine, but cannot really. Losing all sense of direction and weight as you float through the air, in contact with nothing, and so free. The spacewalk, where only a safety line keeps you from losing yourself in the ether for eternity.”

“Wow, Howard, if you’d told it like that, we might have actually listened to you,” Leonard commented drily.

“I am wholly serious,” Crane objected.

“We know you are,” Penny said. “Why don’t you walk ahead with the astronaut and ask your questions? But not too loudly while Bernadette’s putting.”

Crane drew himself up and stared down his nose, eyebrow up. “You are all troglodytes.” A slight smile gave him away.

“Hey! Crane! Buddy!” Howard huddled with the other man and escorted him through the next four holes. He was so eager to tell his stories that he paid no attention to the game and took at least four strokes to navigate each hole.

Crane, on the other hand, paid attention to both Howard and the game. He surprised everyone, including himself, by shooting the first hole-in-one. As they all applauded, Crane made his deepest bow. Howard grabbed the scorecard from Bernadette. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “I have got to catch up!”
She snatched it back. “Ain’t gonna happen.” She chortled. “You are so gonna loo-ooose!”

As they walked to the next hole, Crane asked. “So, do any of you play actual golf?”

“Actual golf.” Howard answered. “You mean like woods and irons and thrashing around in the undergrowth trying to find your ball?”

Leonard shook his head. “You have to be rich to do that. You need equipment and memberships and enough money to hold your own at the nineteenth hole.”

“I think Raj’s father plays. He’s rich,” Howard said. “And he’s a doctor. He has to play. They put it in the Hippocratic Oath.”

“Don’t listen to them,” Penny said. “Do you want to play golf?”

“No,” Crane set his ball on the concrete and stood behind it to determine the initial trajectory. “Certainly not based on a single hole-in-one at the Sleepy Hollow Play ’N’ Putt.” He watched the ball disappeared from the first level and reappear from a small tunnel to a lower level. It rolled out quickly and hit the opposite rail. “I never considered the game. There always seemed more reasonable things to do.” He watched Bernadette take her last stroke. “James II of Scotland banned golf because it was a distraction from archery practice for the military.”

“Well, it is a game of skill,” Penny said. “And you do get to walk around the hills and nature and breathe the fresh air.”

Crane objected. “But one doesn’t walk around, does one? These days everyone rides around in those little carts. That in itself would be acceptable, but they don’t go fast enough.”

“Aaaah. That’s it!” Penny laughed. “I’ve been looking for your weakness. Hey everybody, Crane’s a speed demon!”

“I have been accused of that before,” he admitted. “But if you are going somewhere, why not just … get there? And enjoy yourself doing it.”

Penny held her arms out, turning and requesting answers from the rest of the group. “What does that mean, people?”

“My Vespa!” Howard said.

“Howard, your Vespa doesn’t go any faster than a golf cart!” Leonard objected.

“I beg your—”

“Bumper cars!” Penny announced.

“Bumper cars don’t go that fast, either,” Bernadette said. “But you do get to smash into other people.”

“Crane,” Leonard asked, “do you enjoy maneuvering yourself into a space too small to hold you?”

“Only if I am in fear for my life.”

“That’s not fair. Sheldon went with us.” Penny pointed out.

“Yeah, but we had to help him unfold his legs and stand up,” Leonard said, and turned to Crane. “It wasn’t pretty.”
Bernadette giggled. “But it was kinda funny.”

Howard added. “And he just huddled there the whole time, screaming ‘he hit me, he hit me.’ ”

Crane putted his ball, once more earning himself a mere two points. He watched as Leonard and Howard tried to finish. Crane considered the conversation.

He knew better. He really knew better. But he hadn’t gotten to be a Captain in the Continental Army by being timid. “Bumper … cars?”
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

Penny has a great idea, but Crane is not so sure. Leonard helps, and then everyone else does, too.

The silence of the Archives was split by a banging on the door. Crane rested his head on the high-backed chair and closed his eyes. If he ignored the noise long enough, perhaps it would stop. Someone was either lost or, after seeing the preservation sign on the building, thought there must be a tour. He just wanted to go back to his reading. He had dispatched a Muchedu two nights ago, and he was enjoying the calm after the storm.

The door rattled again. “Crane?”

Miss Penny. He gave up. “Coming!”

He stretched his sore muscles as he stood, then put a paperclip in his book to hold his place. He hurried, as much as he could, to answer the door. “Must you—” He stopped. It wasn’t just Penny. Leonard stood at her side. Crane stared, trying to sort through his options quickly.

“Oh, my God!” Penny stared back. Crane had forgotten the bruises on his face and the cut above his eyebrow he’d incurred from being thrown against the walls by the Muchedu. He stepped back, away from her intensity, inadvertently giving her the opportunity to slip through the door.

“What happened to you?”

Crane looked over her shoulder at Leonard and silently pleaded for help. Leonard grinned and turned to examine the room. Crane hurried to distract them, speaking too quickly. “The Starbucks down the street has an outstanding chocolate croissant. We can get coffee. It’s like a tavern; you could sit there all day if you—”

“Stop,” Penny said, halting the rush of words. Crane straightened stiffly and stared down at her.

“I dislike having people here, Miss Penny,” Crane explained quietly after Leonard wandered away. “It makes them wonder about … things I would rather they not wonder about.”

“You don’t have any drawings lying on the tables, do you?”

“No.”

Her eyes swept the room. “Ooooh, I didn’t really look around much when I was here before.”

“Miss Penny!”

“I’m sorry. We just came to steal you away.” Her eyes came back to him. “What happened to you?”

He dodged the finger that was about to poke at his scab. “What is the stock phrase? I ran into a door? I fell in the bath? What do you think happened?”
Leonard called. “Have you read all these?” He stood at one of the shelves, an open book in his hands.

“I’m working on it!” Crane lowered his voice again. “The point is, the monster is—” gone back to where it came from—“dead,” he simplified.

Leonard was looking at the book spines. “But they’re not all in English. They’re not even in an alphabet. What is this?”

He didn’t bother to look where the man was gesturing. “Sumerian, I expect.”

“What’s that?”

“I read history at Oxford. It is preferable to study the materials in their original languages.”

“Wow.” Leonard looked at another volume. “Do you like old legends and spells and stuff?”

Crane tried to shrug nonchalantly. “It is part of history.”


“It is done. It no longer matters.” Crane shook his head. He’d made his point. He just hoped he wouldn’t have five more visitors after Leonard went home. His mind finally focused. “What did you mean ‘steal you away’?”

Penny grinned, rocking on her heels. “We want to take you somewhere.”

“I have just eaten.”

“But…” Penny objected, obviously thinking of chocolate croissants. She shook her head as if clearing it. “That’s not it. C’mon.” She took Crane’s arm and headed for the door, shouting over her shoulder. “C’mon, Leonard, you can’t read it, anyway.”

Crane extricated himself from Penny’s grip and grabbed his coat. “Why did you not invite me out when we were still at the door?”

“If you want to find reasons for what I do, you’ve got the wrong girl.” Penny watched as Crane locked the door to the Archives, then pointed across the street. “We’re parked over there.”

Crane had a sudden thought and stopped in the middle of the pavement. “It’s not bumper cars, is it?”

They stood by the broken elevator at Penny and Leonard’s apartment building. Penny grinned, wiggled her eyebrows, and led the way up the stairs. “If you wanted me to visit,” Crane asked, following, “why did you not just telephone?”

Penny answered over her shoulder. “After the last ambush, I wanted to make sure you’d come.”

“Ambush?” Crane uneasily looked back at Leonard.

Penny reached the next landing and paused. “Miniature golf. The arcade.”

“Ah.”

She trudged to the next set of stairs. “You know, you still haven’t taught us to play darts.”
“At least that’s not embarrassing myself in public.”

“No,” Leonard griped. “That’s me embarrassing myself in front of the toughest audience in the galaxy.”

“Who is that?”

“Are you kidding? Howard, Raj, and Sheldon.”

“I have a feeling they will be preoccupied with covering their own inadequacies.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?”

Crane smiled. “I could give you a lesson or two clandestinely.”

“Really?”

“I would not mention it were I not sincere.”

“When’s the next time Sheldon’s going to be out of the apartment?” Leonard shouted past the other man to Penny.

“I don’t know. We’ll figure it out later.” Penny stood between 4A and 4B waiting for Crane and Leonard to catch up. “C’mon.” She flourished a key and unlocked 4D, swinging open the door and stepping aside.

Crane shot a look at Leonard who nodded and gestured into the apartment. Crane preceded them both, taking in the empty rooms. “This is not a good idea.”

“It’s great. Look at all the space.” She ran across to the bedroom door and opened it wide. “Big closet. Holds forty-two pairs of shoes.” Penny looked down at Crane’s only pair of boots. “Or something else.”

“You live at the Archives, don’t you?” Leonard’s voice was quiet. “I saw the cot and the microwave and the little fridge and the orange crate. It looks like my dorm room at Princeton.”

“It is quite adequate for my needs,” Crane said stiffly.

“I’m sure you think so.” Penny came back and stood next to Leonard. “But ‘adequate’ is a pretty sad word, don’t you think?”

Crane regarded each of them. “Why are you doing this?” Without answering, Penny smiled brilliantly and bounced off to the kitchen space. She started opening and closing the cupboards.

Leonard answered instead. “You’ve been voted onto the island! Even Sheldon agreed.” He shrugged. “Of course, he can only manage so many friends at one time, so Raj is out.”

“Pardon?”

“Hey!” Penny’s head appeared above the counter where she was kneeling to check it out. She gave Crane a look of warning, scolding sharply. 

Ehrrm…. Crane raised an eyebrow at her and responded reluctantly. “Explain that, you idiot?”

Penny gave him a “thumbs up” and disappeared again.

Crane sighed. “It’s meant to be a joke. A bad one. I apologize.”

“Forget it.” Leonard shook his head. “And the answer to your question: Raj isn’t really out except in Sheldon’s head. And Sheldon’s head is sometimes whackadoodle.”

“Ah. Well.” He accepted that at face value. “But I do have one more question. If this apartment is exactly like hers,” Crane pointed, “why is she …” he twirled his hand in the air to encompass all the rooms, “… examining everything?”

“Because she’s Penny.” Leonard shrugged.

“I see.”

The subject of their discussion returned to their side. She pecked Leonard on the cheek and said, “I’m going to return the key to the landlord.” As she headed toward the door, she turned back to Crane. “You’re going to be here in Sleepy Hollow for the long run. Why don’t you put down some roots?”

“I tried that once.”

“Did you?”

Leonard watched her leave. “I think she wants me to talk to you.”

“If you are intending to persuade me into the apartment—”

“That might be what she means to happen. But….” Leonard took a deep breath. “Look, you two seem to have a thing … a connection somehow. An … undercurrent.”

“I assure you—”

“Let me talk, please.” Leonard waved him off. His expression was serious in a way Crane had never seen. “She’s been very affected by this attack in the cemetery. I can tell, even when she’s not talking about it. I don’t think it was a mugger. I think the guy … raped … her or … tried to … and she doesn’t want me to know.”

“I am sorry, Leonard, it is not” —god help me— “it is not my secret to tell. I will tell you that she was not taken advantage of. She does need a lot of understanding and support. Which I believe you can give her. But what she needs more than anything is to leave it behind her. And perhaps that is the best reason for me not to move here.”

Leonard considered the other man for a few more moments than Crane was comfortable with. “I’m not going to argue with you right now. I know she wants you to be here, and I hope you consider it.” He retreated to the door. “I’m going to my apartment. Stop by before you leave, will you? And, uh, lock the door.”

As Crane watched him disappear into the hallway, the image of Penny’s face appeared in his mind’s eye. In an effort to shake it off, he walked over to the window and stared out. He adopted a pose without thinking, ramrod straight, clasping hands at his back.

I need to be normal. I need you to be normal.

Crane closed his eyes against the moisture that had suddenly appeared. He had been trying
desperately to fit in whilst knowing he had no business doing so. And now he had a dilemma of his own making.

He heard the door open, but didn’t turn around. Penny came to stand beside him, looking out the window as well. “Why is this such a hard decision?” she asked. “You need an apartment, and this is the best deal in Sleepy Hollow. I know. I remind myself every time I have to walk up three flights of stairs. The boys didn’t blow up the elevator to get cheaper rents, but that’s what happened,”

“The boys blew up the elevator.” It was not a question.

“Long story. And don’t change the subject.”

“I—!”

“You can’t live your life alone no matter what you think you are!”

“I … I cannot have you in my life.”

“I’m already in your life.”

“I do not want you to be affected by what I do. Or any of the others. I have been enjoying myself so much, I’ve forgotten to be careful. I should not have gone this far. And yet I keep going.”

“What are you trying to punish yourself for?”

He felt as if she had literally slapped him; his cheeks stung. He waited several minutes before he answered, barely audible. “Nearly two years ago, a warlock conjured an entity specifically charged with destroying everyone I cared about. It killed a sweet young woman who had absolutely nothing to do with our mission.”

“I’m sorry.”

He should be shouting. He should be weeping. But his voice was clear and even and quiet and he didn’t move. “I personally have lost four women and two men to this fight. Precious, wonderful people. And that does not count the innocent bystanders.”

Penny waited, apparently thinking about his confession. Friends in his past. Then she stirred, just as calm as he was pretending to be. “Would they want you to be beating yourself up like this? Would they want you to give up happiness? Would they want you to give up living?”

“That is not a new thought. I have been struggling with it since you invited me to dinner. I want … I need ….” He shook his head. “But it does not matter what I need.”

“What would happen if you didn’t fight?”

“That is not a choice.”

“And if you don’t have friends and loved ones, what’s the point? How can you fight with any passion if it doesn’t mean anything to you personally? ‘I’m miserable, so I’m just going to stand here and wave my sword around until something kills me.’ ”

Crane closed his eyes again. “God, Miss Penny, you are so … untouched.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’m … I’m smarter than you!”
He smiled. “Yes. Yes, you are. And the other was a compliment.”

“Oh.” She watched him for a moment, then enveloped him in a hug.

Surprised, he reacted as he usually did, not moving, letting the embrace happen. Then he gathered her in his arms. They stood like that for several minutes. He had an unexpected vision of the Lieutenant in the underground vault with the Sword of Methuselah. Decide to live, she had advised him.

He smiled. At Abbie and at Penny. Finally, he said, “Is this meant as a bribe?”

She pulled away and smacked him on his bicep. Then she sobered. “If you’re that worried, you should know I can respect your boundaries.”

“Of course. That is why we are here today.” He gestured to the rooms.

Penny ignored the affront. She ignored his whole argument. “We can help you get furniture.”

“I’ve got furniture.” The words were out before he realized that he had apparently surrendered somewhere during the conversation. “Enough, anyway. And I can build bookshelves.”


Leonard. He wanted to tell her what Leonard was thinking about her experience. But it was close enough to her emotional reactions that he thought it might actually help her. He hoped he wasn’t making a mistake. In more ways than one.

He took her arm. “Let us go tell Leonard.”

If the Lieutenant had not acquired so many 21st century gadgets that she thought Crane could not do without, this move would take a fraction of the time and effort. Although, he had to admit, there were far more boxes of books and they were considerably heavier than gadgets.

He stopped briefly on the third floor. He needed to quit thinking about how much the boxes weighed and get back into forced-march mode. In the army, he had devised a series of mental exercises for racing across the countryside to any spot on the map Washington thought was vital to the cause – exercises which kept his mind alert to the surroundings and his senses dulled to how his back and his legs really felt. He remembered running through the woods at double-pace to deliver the General’s many missives.

Of course, the countryside was much more interesting than the stairwell of a five-story apartment building.

His door wasn’t locked and he pushed right in. Crane had considered the issue of privacy, and his possessions, but he had decided anyone who wanted to climb those stairs for a few replicated shirts and a can opener probably needed them more than he.

As he headed back into the hallway, the door to Penny’s apartment opened and she leaned against the jamb, arms crossed. She was wearing a bright pink, sleeveless, low-necked t-shirt and rather skimpy shorts, which he hoped weren’t her sleepwear. The short pink robe, left untied, did little to cover her up. He reminded himself that Miss Jenny had often worn much the same sort of outfit, only
in khaki, with combat boots.

No, he insisted, it wasn’t the same. He kept his gaze on her face.

“Hey, Crane, watcha doin’?”

“Am I making too much noise?”

“No! No, no, no, no. I barely heard you out here.” She grinned and untangled an arm to point at him. “Love the outfit.”

He was wearing the “sweats” that the Lieutenant had bought for him in her failed attempt to teach him yoga. Beside the fact that he loathed being upside down, she had an embarrassing tendency to refer to parts of his body he’d rather not have referred to.

He fingered the large handkerchief he had tied around his forehead to keep the perspiration out of his eyes. “It is for exercising. I thought it would be appropriate.”

“No. It’s great. Do you exercise?”

“Not as such.”

“But you are…” She gestured to the stairway and his apartment door.

“I am moving house today. I thought you knew.”

“I did, but why aren’t you waiting for us?”

“ ‘Us?’ ”


“ ‘Waiting for?’ ”

Penny straightened, agitated, and waved him into her living room. “Get in here.”

“But I did not ask for any help.” He stood at the door, as she turned to look at him, arms crossed.

“Yeah, we noticed. But that’s not the way it works. You move in. We help. We get pizza and beer. You pay for it.”

He drew himself up, considering the proposition. “That hardly seems equable.”

“Maybe.” She grinned. “But we also get to poke around in the boxes and find out everything that you’ve been keeping secret.”

He gave her his sternest expression in an attempt to quash that idea before it escalated. “Miss Penny.”

“Joke!” She protested, then shrugged. “Sort of. Keep an eye on Sheldon.” She paused, thinking. “And Howard.”

His eyebrow rose. “And you.”

Penny went pink and flounced off to the kitchen area. “You want coffee?” She put two mugs on the counter without waiting for the answer, and looked up at him still at the door. “Will you get in here?”
He took several steps, ending up by the sofa.

“Look—” She began, then apparently changed her mind about what she was going to say. “Pour your own. I’m gonna go get dressed.”

He ran his eyes across the kitchen and located the coffee maker, noticing the pot was full. He sighed as he poured himself a cup, casting back over their conversation. His level of discomfort was several notches higher than usual, between his own unfamiliar costume, entering a young lady’s rooms while she was *deshabille*, and the sheer pressure of moving house. Remembering what he had said to Penny only last week about boundaries, he decided he wasn’t at fault. Well, significantly.

He paced with the excess energy he should be using to carry more boxes up the stairs. He was just about to put his cup down on the counter and leave when Penny emerged from the back room. She was dressed in jeans and a faded t-shirt, and carried her shoes. She slipped one on and propped her foot up on the arm of the sofa to tie it. She looked down at his feet.

“So, where are your sneakers?”

“Sneakers?”

“Running shoes. You’ve got the clothes, you need the shoes. Words to live by.”

“I can run in my boots. And have, many times.”

She laughed, more than the comment deserved, he was sure. But he smiled, anyway. Peace offering.

“Have you had breakfast?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Of course, you got up at o’-dark-thirty. Better question: are you hungry?”

“Somewhat.”

“C’mon we’re gonna have eggs and toast and fruit across the hall. All I’ve got is a box of baking soda and half a bottle of tomato juice.”

“I can continue working while you are eating.”

“Relax. When we all get started it’ll take no time.”

He followed her into Sheldon’s apartment where he got a lungful of bacon aroma. Raj was already there, watching Leonard watching a hot frying pan. Leonard glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the door closing. “Hey, guys.”

“Lookin’ good.” Raj gave Crane an enthusiastic two thumbs up. His own outfit was an echo of the other man’s sweats, but Raj’s headband was a neon green which matched his running shoes.

Sheldon turned to whine at Penny, apparently not getting any sympathy from anyone else. “But Saturday is *pancake* day. I had eggs yesterday.”

“I told you, didn’t I? Not to eat eggs ’cause we were having them today?” Leonard glared at Sheldon, causing Raj to grab the tongs from his hand so he could attend to the bacon.

“You can have toast, sweetie,” Penny told him. “Or fruit. You don’t really want to trudge up and down the stairs with a stomach full of pancakes, do you?”
He pouted. “I don’t really want to trudge up and down the stairs at all.”

“Excuse me.” Crane cleared his throat. “No one has to trudge anywhere. No one has to eat anything he does not want to. I appreciate it, but I have considered this move at length and believe I have it all taken care of.”

“How?” Leonard asked.

“I shall bring in those items that I am able to handle myself,” Crane explained, trying to remain patient. “For whatever is left, I shall engage a removal concern.”

“No—” Leonard shook his head.

“Craa-ane!” Penny objected.

“I think we are all insulted,” Raj undercut everyone in a quiet voice.

“Ta da!” Howard burst through the door and struck a pose. He was wearing spandex, neck to mid-knee, in a sort of mauve color with maroon accents. He looked like a suspiciously-sexed bicycle racer.

Crane looked, with everyone else, to the vision at the door. “Well, now I don’t have to worry about what I’m wearing,” he muttered under his breath.

Bernadette followed her husband inside. “It’s not my fault. He was in the car before I saw him.”

Howard deflated. “Ber-nie!”

“I must apologize.” Crane raised his voice to stop whatever Howard was going to say. He dreaded the thought of another squabble in the room. “I believe I have been overwhelmed by the anxiety involved in moving house.” He glanced at Raj. “I meant to insult no one. I have been forced to rely solely upon myself in the past half-year and I have become accustomed to that necessity.” He looked at Penny and Leonard, standing next to each other. “I welcome the aid of anyone who wishes to participate. Go ahead and eat your breakfast, I am going to continue.” He bowed and exited past Bernadette and Howard, who were gaping at each other as if they’d seen a dybbuk. He winced and hurried down the stairs, hearing Howard’s words drift after him.

“What was that all about?”

Crane sat, half in and half out of the back seat of the Expedition, staring at the gutter. As he grew up in England, he had loved and respected his father and let much of his life be dictated, going as far as becoming a lecturer at Oxford. His decision to come to America in the British Army had been Abraham’s idea, and that desire to follow his best friend had become the strength to argue his father to his point of view.

Of course, when he had been inspired to defect to the Continental Army, he had quickly been disowned—shorn of everyone and everything that was familiar to him. Then Franklin had mentored him, Jefferson had become his friend, and Washington had trusted him. He became used to taking care of his own needs and, indeed, those of the whole regiment when required. In spite of the fact that he was fighting a war, he had never felt more liberated.

When he was resurrected to fight in the war against evil, he had again shouldered his duty willingly. And his partnership with Abbie had been one of the most fulfilling times in his life. But being cast
into the wholly alien environment of modern America, he was forced to depend upon the Lieutenant for the most trivial of necessities. Like a child.

With Abbie … gone … Crane had learned to take care of himself again, struggling sometimes, and he determined to remain that way. Was there no sort of compromise between friendship and independence as he survived in this century?

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Bernadette. He attempted a smile.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He sighed. “I believe I have been possessed.”

“You don’t know why you’re acting the way you are.” She sat on the curbstone, looking up at him. “We all feel like that sometimes.”

“Uhm.” Crane made a skeptical noise, then challenged her quietly. “Do you take everything personally, magnify the most petty of offenses, and tell your friends they are superfluous?

“Sometimes I wish they were. But I need them too much.”

“Yes.”

Bernadette scowled at him. “Each one of those people upstairs is unique. They’ve been rejected, noogied, beaten up, picked last, jeered, and panted their entire lives. And through it all, the only thing they can do is be themselves. That’s why they bicker so much. And it’s why they like you. Feel free to bicker back. Don’t do something just because they say so, but listen to them when they’re right.”

He felt his face going warm but he held her eyes. “I believe I have been humbled.”

She smiled shrewdly. “Truth hurts.”

“Only my pride.”

Bernadette patted his knee. She stood, nodding toward the back of the SUV. “Well, you don’t need your pride to help Howie with that box.”

Crane leapt up after she did, looking to see Howard at the tailgate, struggling with a rather large carton. He glanced back at Bernadette. “There are some sofa cushions I am sure you can manage.”

She stood, hands on hips, tapping her foot. “Strong things come in small packages, mister.” She rasped shrilly, her whole demeanor altered. “I’m sure there’s a lot of stuff in there I can carry.”

“Of course. Humbled again.” He started to make a bow but had to jump to grab the other end of Howard’s carton before it hit the ground.
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Crane discovers demons in their midst and Amy fixes an owie.

No fox had wreaked the bloody destruction in the chicken coop. The ground was red from one end to the other, but there were no feathers, no bones, nor dead or hysterically flapping fowl. In a frenzy, a fox might kill all the birds within the fence, but it would carry off only one of them. And foxes did not hunt in packs.

Crane had heard the call to the authorities over his scanner and followed the report to Ellis Farm. The two policemen and animal control officer who’d preceded him weren’t terribly interested in the scene or what Mr. Ellis had to say. Crane wished he could hear, but his view of the coop through his binoculars was excellent from where he perched in the yellow birch. Maybe tomorrow he could talk to the farmer, but tonight he daren’t be seen by the police. He was still persona non grata with most of them.

The Witness knew that many hexes and incantations required chicken bones or blood, or both, to complete. And most of them were performed with evil intent. So what was a mundane call to the others was vital to Crane and, perhaps, all of Sleepy Hollow.

Or, he thought as he jumped out of the tree, he was wasting his time and he should be home in bed, sleeping the sleep of the righteous. Perhaps, he grimaced, that was why he was here. Righteous?

The officials had apparently decided on the fox theory. Animal control would come back the next day, perhaps with a few farmers and their rifles, to try to track the animal to its lair. Crane hoped that none of them were very good, or else they might find the evidence of his own attempts to track the creature tonight. Perhaps his skills would be enough to mask them.

He waited until the area was quiet, then waited another ten minutes before he approached the chicken coop. Ellis had done his due diligence against an animal raid and had extended the fence another two feet under the ground. But where the apparent entrance hole was dug, parts of the wire were broken and pushed aside, enough for the alleged fox to get through.

“Except a fox would not have been able to get through the wire,” he muttered. He squatted and examined the disturbed earth more closely. Whatever Crane was working against seemed intelligent enough to create a decoy. He straightened, suddenly shivering, and examined the edge of the woods behind him, straining his ears for any sound. Scolding himself, he fingered the bent fastener on the gate and entered the run. Stopping to wonder if the fastener had always been bent, he stared at the blood beneath his boots. Some of it was still wet, and he brushed his fingertip into a droplet. He brought the finger to his mouth and tasted it with the very tip of his tongue, drawing back quickly. Definitely blood, but with something else … something bitter and … tingling. He retrieved his handkerchief and wiped his finger, then, for good measure, spat into his handkerchief several times.

“Serve you right if you have poisoned yourself.” He rubbed his tongue against the back of his front teeth and didn’t feel any sensation. An anodyne at the least. Probably why the chickens’ clucks hadn’t awakened Ellis. There hadn’t been any.
Crane closed the fence behind him and trained the narrow beam of his flashlight on the ground. There were the beginnings of a trail of blood. He followed, wondering how long it would last.

The droplets led deep into the woods before they were no longer visible. He widened the throw of the flashlight and the scope of his observation. The seasoned tracker in Crane had seen some little evidence of the creature’s passing besides the dwindling blood sign, and he was determined to continue. He noted the crushed grass and some broken twigs, but soon that dwindled, too. It was as though the creature were leading him so far and no farther.

“Do not start anthropomorphizing the thing,” he chided, though deep down he was afraid he was not overestimating his adversary.

He walked in ever-increasing circles around the end of the discernable trail and found nothing. He cursed. There couldn’t be nothing. But an hour later, that’s all there was. Nothing.

He turned on his heel and avoided the trail as he trudged back to his vehicle.

The next day, Crane was still troubled. Even as he worked on the shelves he had decided he could build for his books, he thought about the apparent intelligence the foraging creature had shown. Crane had looked through his sources as soon as he had returned to town, but there were too many incantations with the components he referenced for him to narrow the search in any significant manner.

Adding to his mental turmoil, the trip to the lumber yard and hardware store had been an education. Crane had worked with hammers and screwdrivers in this century – there was little improvement to be made on such simple tools. But when he had inquired about hand saws, chisels, and wooden mallets, the salesman had wanted to know all about the project he was embarking upon. Crane had reasons not to bring a companion to the store, and he had reasons not to discuss his requirements with the orange-shirted teenager, however foolhardy they might turn out to be. He had been shown implements of destruction more lethal than any weapons he had used on supernatural entities. Crane sometimes acceded to his own shortcomings, and there in the hardware store seemed an obvious example. He bowed to modern times, but bought non-electric hand tools.

The one recommendation to which Crane had acceded was sandpaper. It was better than a plane, the man had said, because it did not shave off as much waste. Wikipedia claimed the stuff had been invented by the Chinese (of course) but had not reached Europe until the century after his own. Again, he had avoided the electric version.

The man at the lumber yard had been more adamant, and, after engaging in a lively debate with anyone who offered an opinion, Crane had been forced to surrender and purchase what was available. He had altered his drawings accordingly, muttering all the while about standards in the 21st century. Who else would sell you a board measuring ¾”x 11 ½” under the misnomer of a “one by twelve”?

He examined the workspace he had set up in the apartment. The archive may have been preferable, but he really didn’t want to carry anything else up those stairs until absolutely necessary. It was easier to transport lumber than finished bookshelves, so here he was. After fashioning his own sawhorses, he arranged them on a tarpaulin on the floor and stacked the lumber closer, noting several boards that would have to be sanded. He concentrated while marking the boards to be cut, then let himself muse about chicken bones as he sanded the wood.
Crane began whistling, but stopped to smile for a moment. Vivaldi, chicken bones, and sandpaper—they called it “multitasking” in this day and age, but it was hardly earthshaking. The Lieutenant had thought he should be impressed when—

Ow!

His finger immediately went in his mouth as he stepped back, throwing the board to the floor and stumbling back into the stack piled across the other sawhorses. He tried to catch his fall and ended up on his back, staring at the ceiling. Everything came down with him. He sighed. So much for multitasking.

Crane sat up to look at his injured finger and winced. The splinter was large as splinters go, and had been driven quite deeply under the surface of the finger pad. He put it back in his mouth in an attempt to gain purchase on the flesh and pull it back from the piece of wood.

_Bam! Bam! Bam!_

“Crane? Are you okay? Crane?”

“I am fine, thank you. Go away!”

“Are you sure?”

He sighed, stood, and went to open the door. “Good afternoon, Miss Penny.”

“Hey, Crane.” She pretended to be nonchalant, but unfortunately looked past him to the jumble on the floor. “I thought I heard something.”

“You do not have to run over here every time you hear a noise. A monster is not likely to attack in my own apartment. And if it did, I would hardly want you here, anyway. I merely acquired a splinter,” he waved his finger at her, “while I was working.”

“So you threw the job on the floor in a fit of temper.”

“I stumbled.” He stared down at her, but she didn’t flinch. “What happened to our agreement about boundaries?”

“That is suspended in a state of emergency.”

“A state of emergency?” Crane couldn’t help smiling. Somehow, that gave her permission to proceed.

“Let me see.” Penny grabbed his hand and examined his finger. “Ewww. This is nasty. I don’t think I’ve seen one so deep since Daddy helped build the McCoy’s barn. You’re not going to be able to get at it.” She looked back up. “Have you been chewing at this?”

“Pray, let go of my hand.”

She ignored him. “You can’t leave it in there. It’ll fester.”

“It will work its way out. I have certainly had splinters before.” He was just trying to put her off; he could tell it was going to be difficult to get out, if he could at all, with his left hand. But he didn’t want her hovering while he made the attempt.

“What if it doesn’t?” She wrinkled her forehead in concentration, then brightened. “I know! Amy.”
He pulled his hand back. “What about Amy?”

“She cuts up brains all the time. In her job. For research.”

He glared, feeling suddenly uneasy. “The next time I need my brain severed, I shall contact her.”

“She’ll be able to cut your finger open and get the splinter out.”

“Oh, good.”

Penny grabbed his hand again. “C’mon.”

He didn’t move. “The events that transpired in this apartment today do not constitute an emergency.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Can’t I just worry about you?”

Ever the soft touch, Crane gave up and reached for his coat hanging on the rack by the door.

“You don’t need that,” Penny insisted. “Amy’s over at Sheldon’s.”

He didn’t even pause. He was leaving his domicile and that meant he wore his coat.

“You don’t need that!” Penny pulled him out into the hall, barely giving him time to close the door.

He pulled his hand free again. “We are going to have another talk.”

“Later. Amy!”

Amy was sitting on the couch with Sheldon, but when she saw Crane enter behind Penny, she bounced to her feet. “What was the crash?”

“Crane was just throwing lumber around. He has a horrible splinter.” Penny reached for his hand again, but Crane dodged and showed it to Amy himself.

“Ooooh, you did a really good job there. That certainly is repulsive.” Her enthusiasm discomfited Crane, but then she looked up at him crossly. “Were you chewing on this?”

“Why don’t you go shout it down the stairwell? I am sure everyone wants to know the answer to that question.”

“Is that sarcasm?” Sheldon wanted to know.

“Yes!” The two women shouted.

“Crane.” Sheldon shook his head. “I’m disappointed. I didn’t realize that you were capable of using sarcasm.”

Crane hung his head and chuckled. He had always been fond of adventure – and here he was, where every day was an adventure. He looked up at Amy. “Can we get on with this? Can you do anything?”

“It’s way too deep. And I think you drove it deeper with your teeth! You’re not going to get it out even with tweezers. But I,” she grabbed her purse from Sheldon’s desk and dug toward the bottom, “always carry my scalpel.” She opened a small case and displayed the blade.

“Oh, good.” Crane’s opinion hadn’t changed.
“What?” Amy went on the defensive, regarding each of them in turn. “It was a graduation present from my mother.”

Sheldon was way too interested. He jumped up from the couch and peered into the open purse. “What else have you got in there?”

Amy slammed it closed. “Nothing.”

Crane remembered the Lieutenant warning him about carrying weapons on his person as a defense against the unexpected. He hadn’t thought twice about putting a blade in the back of his waistband. “You know that could be considered a concealed weapon.” He said, trying to be helpful.

“You gonna squeal?” Amy challenged him uncharacteristically.

That startled him. He stepped back, hands raised in surrender. “If you mean am I going to report you, by no means. Law enforcement and I are hardly on speaking terms.”

Amy regarded him intensely. “And that is a story for another day. Soon.”

“Perhaps.”

“You want me to do this?” She made it sound like an unspoken tit for tat.

He was examining the small wound again, pushing at the sharp end of the splinter in an attempt to move it toward the surface. Pain flared and the wood shard didn’t move. He longed to gnaw at it again. “Not really.”

“Keep your teeth off of it, Crane, and get over here.”

Penny leaned over to watch Crane fret. “Don’t you need an anesthetic?” she asked Amy.

He straightened immediately. “I do not. I am a soldier, after all.” Three pairs of eyes fixed quickly on Crane. “Euphemistically speaking,” he added, vowing to keep his mouth shut until the pain subsided and he was in charge of his tongue again.

“Okay. I need at least one towel, some antiseptic, sterile gauze, and maybe a needle and suture.”

Amy was suddenly businesslike, professional. She was ready to stop wasting time and obviously confident in her skills. Crane let out a sigh of relief, marginally reassured. “You,” she pointed to him, “come on over to the kitchen island.”

Penny interrupted, bemused. “Suture? Really? We haven’t got suture!”

“I do!” Sheldon stopped fixating on Amy’s purse and announced. “It’s swaged polyglycolic acid, number zero.” He ran to his room.

“Why would you have suture?” Penny shouted after him, then muttered, shaking her head.. “Sheldon the hypochondriac.”

He walked back, package in hand, pulling his dignity around him. “I am prepared for any emergency as defined by Homeland Security, the Center for Disease Control, and Fear the Walking Dead.”

Amy asked, “Do you have antiseptic that’s not alcohol? Or we could just use soap and water.”

“Yes.” Sheldon nodded. “Antiseptic’s better. It smells like it’s working.”

“Get that, too. Penny, the other stuff? And my purse. I have some really good tweezers in there.”
Leonard, finally attracted by the noise, surfaced from his bedroom, passing his roommate scuttling in the other direction. “What’s going on?”

Sheldon disappeared into the bathroom. “Crane needs surgery!”

“What?” Leonard looked anxiously to the three gathered around the kitchen island.

Crane shook his head. “It is merely a deeply embedded splinter.”

“Oh. Need anything?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Leonard calmly settled on the couch, apparently willing to be a removed spectator rather than a participant. Crane was gratefully relieved at his disinterest.

While they were waiting for the rest of the supplies, Amy smiled over at Crane. “You like living across the hall?”

“I did, until fifteen minutes ago,” he admitted. “By the way, I have suture tape.”

“Ooooh.” Sheldon was returning with the antiseptic. “I want to see.”

“Suture tape might not be very good,” Amy told him. “You’ll probably be using your hand too much. Although the surface of your finger might not get too much stress.”

“What happens if we use it and it doesn’t work?” Crane asked.

“It’ll be harder to close the wound a second time. And you’ll probably get a scar. Actually, I can’t promise you won’t get a scar, anyway.”

“I am not worried,” he said drily.

“Why not go to the ER?” Leonard wanted to know.

Crane scoffed. “I would have done this myself, had I been left to it.”

Leonard caught his eye with an understanding glance. “Uh-huh.”

Crane shrugged.

Penny came from the back rooms and dumped the supplies she had gathered onto the counter. She hovered.

“Miss Penny, would you go into my apartment to the walk-in closet and get the suture tape out of the box labeled ‘first aid’? A rather large box, made of corrugated cardboard.”

“I’ll go!” Sheldon shouted and ran for the door.

“No!” Crane knew better than to let the man in his apartment unsupervised, especially around his first aid stores.

Leonard jumped in. “Sheldon, he doesn’t want you rifling through his stuff.”

“But—”

“You know you will,” Leonard scolded. “Just stay here.”
“Be right back.” Penny brushed by Sheldon.

Crane shouted after her. “And please bring the rum from the kitchen counter, also.”

Amy raised her eyebrows. “That’s not going to do you much good, you know.”

“Indulge me.”

“We can start without the suture,” she suggested.

“But we cannot start without the rum,” he insisted.

Amy examined the wound again. “Leonard, do you have a magnifying glass? And some more light?”

Crane perched on the barstool that was beside him and shifted uncomfortably. “I am pondering mountains and molehills.”

“No, it’ll be great,” she insisted, matter-of-fact, volunteering, “I’ve never operated on a live human before.”

He whipped the injured digit behind his back. Taken by surprise, Amy clutched at thin air, looking up at his face inquisitively. His blue eyes burned like a laser into hers, challenging, indignant. Their stares stayed locked while Leonard set a lamp on the counter and crawled around on the floor for the outlet.

Penny returned with a large box, which she deposited, on Sheldon’s desk, pulling out a bottle of rum. “I couldn’t tell what you wanted, so I brought it all.” Neither Crane nor Amy moved as she went to the cabinet, pulled out a glass, and poured a generous measure of rum. Setting the drink beside him, she took the hand from behind his back and placed it in front of Amy again, palm up.

“Behave.”

“But she said—”

“I don’t care. Drink your drink.”

He swallowed until he finished it.

“That’s no way to treat Barbadian Best Amber,” she protested indignantly.

“Unless you want to get drunk very, very quickly,” he informed her. “Pour me another, if you will, and have one for yourself.”

“Not yet, Bestie,” Amy said. “Hold the magnifying glass for me.”

Penny gave Crane his drink, then picked up the lens. Amy gripped his hand so he wouldn’t move.

“Why do you have atropine in your first aid kit?” Sheldon was elbow-deep in the corrugated box, examining a small bottle he had found within.

“Sheldon!” Penny reprimanded.

“Don’t—” Crane shouted, then closed his eyes against his temper. Some things were inevitable. “Do that,” he finished ineffectually.
Amy chose that moment to slice into the wounded finger. Crane flinched, drawing in a sharp breath, but didn’t move his hand.

Sheldon hadn’t moved. “Or antilirium?”

Penny spoke sharply to her fiancé. “Leonard, give your roommate a time out.”

Leonard joined Sheldon, who was taking another look into the box. “You don’t have a blood pressure cuff,” Sheldon announced.

Crane sighed, keeping an eye on the blood flowing onto the towel under his hand. “I have lived a full and rewarding life not knowing what my blood pressure is.”

“You have to know your blood pressure,” Sheldon insisted. “You have to avoid heart and kidney disease. If you don’t know your blood pressure is rising—”

“As a matter of fact, I know my blood pressure is rising at this moment without a cuff.”

“Of course it is. You’re in pain.”

“Sheldon,” Leonard tried to get his attention. “Let’s go look that stuff up on the internet. You know you want to.”

“I know what atropine is, Leonard, I just don’t know why he would need it. Maybe he knows something I don’t.”

“Really?”

“I mean….” Unfortunately, Sheldon took that moment to look over at what Amy was doing. He immediately dropped to the floor in a faint.

Leonard squatted. “C’mon, buddy, why don’t you go sit in your spot, out of the line of sight?” He helped Sheldon stand and hobble over to the couch.

Crane rested his head on his good hand. Amy watched him carefully. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. The dog and pony show was quite distracting. I assume Sheldon will be sound?”

“Yes. He does that. I didn’t think he was paying attention.” Amy reassured him. “Penny, would you look for the suture tape again? Crane, hold the magnifying glass.”

Crane couldn’t help but think that the blonde had aggravated the situation by bringing the whole first aid kit with her. He vented his frustration for the entire afternoon by pointing out. “It is in a box labeled ‘suture tape’.”

Penny glared daggers in reply.

Amy was staunching the blood flow from the newly extended wound and checking if she could get the whole splinter at once.

Crane was watching her every move. “I do not know how you can see anything. Can you see anything?”

Her forehead was wrinkled in concentration. “Cadavers don’t bleed when you slice into them.”

“Pardon my beating heart.” He tensed. His finger damn well hurt and Amy was still digging around.
He was thinking that he preferred dying from an ax wound when she announced she was finished.

“Keep an eye out for infection. Just in case I didn’t get it all.”

“Oh good.” Crane repeated once more.

Amy used the tape to close the inch-long wound. She finished off with a gauze bandage and smiled at her patient. “Do we have a lollipop?” She asked the air.

“No, but we do have more rum.” Penny raised her voice. “Any takers?”

Crane waved his once-again empty glass.

“You’re not driving, are you?” Amy teased.

“No, he’s going to sit right here until he can walk,” Penny announced.

“I am quite sober.” Crane drew himself up indignantly.

Amy was confused. “Then what was the point?”

“I was thirsty."

“Sit anyway.” Penny pointed to the easy chair. “You’ve been wounded.”

“Might you have any snacks?” Crane belied his sobriety by violating his own rules of etiquette.

“Says the man who doesn’t need to soak up his alcohol intake.” Penny looked down at him, daring him to dissent. “What do you want?”

“It matters not. Doughnuts?”

“Doughnuts and rum?”

“And why not? The shops make rum-flavored doughnuts,” he insisted, enunciating carefully.

“I’m not going to watch you eat them.” Penny slammed the box of sweets down on the arm of his chair.

“What do you do with physostygmine?” Sheldon demanded, looking up from his laptop.

Crane smiled, a little crookedly. “I take it intramuscularly.” Then he took a big bite of doughnut, obviously not intending to elaborate.

Sheldon pouted.


Crane sighed and leaned against the trunk of a different tree, waiting for the fuss to abate and the people to disappear. Another fox alert had been reported on his scanner in the middle of the night, but it hadn’t been until he secured himself in his spot that he heard the policeman reference yet another call that had been made earlier.
Less blood showed on the ground within the coop, a few feathers, and a single chicken that appeared to have been crushed flat, possibly by a very large foot. Crane shifted his position uneasily, yet making sure the crossbow across his back didn’t clatter against the tree. He was impatient to start tracking; there was a map in his pocket marked with the trail from the night before. By adding the two new trails and extrapolating he hoped to reveal the creature’s lair.

Finally, the officer shook Farmer Thomas’ hand and turned to leave. Holding his rifle across his chest, Thomas looked at the tree line as if to threaten whatever lurked there. Mentally, Crane tried to dissuade him from trailing the thief right away. The farmer shook his head and walked back to his house.

Crane dropped from the tree. “Pray your luck holds for the rest of the night, Captain,” he muttered and studied the ground by the opening in the fence. There was little blood to follow here, either, but if he was observant he could see the disturbance in the grass blades which occasionally showed in the beam of his flashlight. He was forced to travel slowly so he wouldn’t lose the sign. Ten minutes later, the experienced tracker pulled out his compass and went down on one knee to mark his position on the map.

He cursed himself and all the rum he had consumed that afternoon. Crane was tiring already and he had another trail to follow that night. And who knew what was waiting at the end? He felt a chill up his spine. Something that was large enough to crush a chicken with its foot and intelligent enough to leave false evidence. Tucking his uneasiness into the back of his brain, he set his attention once again to his task.

Much later, Crane stopped, having lost any trace of sign to follow. He had circled his last position but found no continuation of the trail. Sitting on a large rock, he studied all three pencil lines now meandering across his map. The creature was heading northeast, toward Pocantico Lake, where there was a warren of small caves. Crane stood, folded his map, and, checking his compass, set off in search of chicken bones. This time, he set himself in his personal forced-march mode to allay his fatigue.

On the ground, in the clearing at the front of the largest of the caves, he found the chicken bones arranged in a sigil—a cross with an upside down question mark extending the vertical stroke—the Satanic Cross. Denies the Deity of God. Associated with Belial and Leviathan as well as Satan. Symbolizes complete power under Lucifer. About twenty feet long. Surrounded by a twenty-five foot circle of chicken blood.

Crane sighed. He was up another tree, studying the details of the sigil. He really didn’t like climbing trees, but often it was the best vantage point. He scrambled down through the branches and pulled the crossbow out of its holster. Carefully, silently, he approached the demonic symbol, while casting his eyes all around himself for the creature. He stopped at the blood circle, but not because he wanted to. It wouldn’t let him pass. A tactile force resisted him, as if something were blocking his way with its body. As he stood, the toes of his boots practically touching the blood, he realized there were small unfired earthen bowls sitting in each of the right angles outside the cross. Two contained liquids and two contained grains of some kind.

He tested the barrier all around its circumference, but found no weakness. He wondered if the incantation had been fulfilled, then decided that the ward would probably not still be in effect if it were not needed. Crane turned to approach the entrance to the cave, instinctively certain that nothing hid there, but needing to confirm that feeling nevertheless. Across the ground there was another line of blood. He extended his hand toward the darkness of the cave and felt a familiar resistance.
“Damnation!” The frustrated expletive split the silence before he could bite it back. He sighed, tossed a look around his surroundings, then put some distance between himself and where he’d stood. Taking out the map, he confirmed the location of the other caves in the group and headed for the closest. They were connected, so if he could navigate underground with the aid of the compass, he should be able to come in behind the blood spell.

Almost an hour and a few false turns later, he arrived at the mouth of the cave and looked out at the sigil arranged on the ground. He had kept the crossbow in hand as much as possible, but had not encountered any beings, evil or otherwise, on his trek. His finger, under the gauze bandage and suture tape, ached from contact with the trigger. Typical, even when monsters weren’t throwing him around like a rag doll. The Lieutenant would have laughed at him.

Crane pushed the front end of his flashlight forward until it met the resistance of the ward. Of course it was omnidirectional. He’d have to backtrack through the cavern to get home. Before he did, he trained the light on the stone walls and floor. In the dirt were traces of the materials placed in the bowls next to the Satanic Cross. Crane felt his pockets, knowing he wouldn’t find any of those little plastic bags the Lieutenant had carried with her. He retrieved his handkerchief and scooped up some of the grains from the floor. Then he produced his pencil and poked at one of the two liquids dribbled in the dirt. Bringing it to his nose, he recognized it as some kind of oil. He put his finger in it and felt the viscosity. Definitely oil. Another finger went into the red liquid and up to his nose. Wine. Definitely wine. Oil and wine.

Something—yes, something niggled in his eidetic memory. Oil and wine and grain and…. The thought wouldn’t come. Written … it was on a written page. Handwritten… And also printed. He’d seen it several times, in several places. Book … manuscript ….  

“And do not damage the oil and the wine.”

Book of Revelation, Chapter 6. “Two pounds of wheat for a day’s wages and six pounds of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine.” He brought the handkerchief closer to his eyes. Among the dirt from the floor were two kinds of grain. Barley and wheat? Of course. Chicken and livestock feed.

He knew now he was exhausted. It shouldn’t have taken him that long to conjure up Revelation. He stood and cast a longing look outside, then turned into the black of the interior. Crane was returning to the Archives.

He slept. He hadn’t meant to. After he’d unlocked the door to the Archives, he’d pulled off his coat and headed straight for his best version of the Book of Revelation, in the original Greek. He could only confirm the words he’d already remembered, and the rest of the verses were as cryptic as always. There had been controversy, even before Revelation had been accepted as part of the Bible, whether the events recounted there were nonlinear. From his own experiences, Crane believed that since the End of Days was the epitome of chaos, there was no reason to believe that there was any order to the events therein.

So, enough for Revelation. The next task was to research the Satanic Cross to see if there were specifics that might signify as to what was going on in the woods. But before he turned back to the shelves, he looked over at the cot that was still sitting in the corner. The creature probably wouldn’t manifest again until nightfall. Surrendering to his weaker self without another thought, he removed his boots and collapsed on the sheets.

He awoke one hour later when the sun passed over the horizon. 6:15. He had plenty of time to get
home and get cleaned up before he had to get to work. On the shelves, he located a few books about
demonic markings and incantations, as well as George Washington’s diary. He had missed the
opportunity to do any more research last night, but those volumes could go to work with him. He
would discover some answers before he had to return to the caves tonight and surveille the Satanic
Cross.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Crane finds his demon because Rajesh knows his stuff.

Crane sat at his desk in the basement of the Morris Library Center, with a large black coffee at his elbow. The cruller was long gone with the mocha latte he had already drunk. He stared at the page in the text by Azazel Nichos, having found the sigil he was looking for. The strokes of the cross looked much less menacing without the chicken bones.

Satanists could draw the symbol on the floor or a wall for a celebration, worship, or a ritual. He doubted it was some cultish group composed of amateurs. Perhaps they would be able to kill poultry. Perhaps they would be able to trek through the woods with little sign of their passing. But amateurs could not create the blood ward—that would take someone with tangible talent as a witch, or some other occult entity.

Nevertheless, he had sent a text to Miss Sophie inquiring about covens of teenagers the police might be pursuing at the time. Receiving a negative reply, he had turned to less mundane quarry.

“Summoning spell … conjuration …. Depending on what they are conjuring, it could be done at a specific time during the day or night or according to the alignment of the planets. Incense, candles, and potions are commonly used, coupled with a specific spell to summon a spirit.”

Nothing new there. Mr. Nichos mentioned no particular entity which would likely be summoned. Crane pushed the book away. Washington’s diary was no help—it included a drawing of the symbol as a mere matter of fact. He drummed his fingers impatiently on the table. He had no direction in which to proceed, except to return to his Archives and continue the search through his sources.

He looked around the room. What was he obligated to do for the university before he left? He had pulled references for Professor Kendall and Instructor Marino first thing that morning. There were duties he could accomplish, but nothing that was required for today. Any teaching or research personnel had to submit their requests in writing—

“… according to the alignment of the planets.…”

Crane smiled. Think of something else, and inevitably the answer will struggle to the front of your brain. Well, not always. And not that easily. He sat among rows of books, staring up at them, wondering where the solution to his query would lay. Of all the resources of the university—

Doctor Rajesh Koothrappali was an astrophysicist.

He jumped up and ran, locking the door behind him. Several students stopped to watch him racing across the quadranple, but he dismissed them. He had been stared at before. He checked the building directory to find the correct office and sprinted for the stairs. When he reached the correct floor, he stopped on the landing and let his breathing even out somewhat. Composed, he pushed open the door to the corridor.

The scientist’s door was open, but he knocked nonetheless. “Dr. Koothrappali?”
“Crane!” Raj looked up from his desk. “Hello! What brings you here?”

“Curiosity. Do you have a moment?”

“Of course.” Raj smiled and stood, motioning to the chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you, but I am—”

“On university time. Crane, you must learn not to be so hyper. Tea?”

Hyper….

Raj shrugged. “So how can I satisfy your curiosity?”

“The stars. Celestial bodies. Is there anything happening presently that is noteworthy?”

“There is always something happening; the universe does not rest. But I think I know what you’re talking about.” Raj walked over to a large computer screen, and Crane followed closely. “About every ten years, several bright planets appear in the night sky simultaneously. Let me show you.”

Raj typed on a keyboard, then smiled as the image materialized. Crane’s own smile was eager as his eyes absorbed what he was seeing. “It is nice to have someone so interested,” Raj said.

“As I’ve mentioned before, I collect esoteric knowledge.” Crane motioned to the screen. “Can you …?”

They were looking at an image of the night sky. Raj continued. “A bright planet is one you can see with the naked eye. For the first time since 2005, you can see, from east to west, Jupiter,” he pointed to each vivid speck of light as he named them, “Mars, Saturn, Venus, and Mercury.”

“They are not there all night,” Crane commented. “What is the best time to view them?”

“Good question. Jupiter appears in the evening hours, about 7:30. Mars, just after midnight. Then Saturn and Venus.” He tossed a look at Crane. “I can get you times, if you like.”

Crane shook his head still absorbed by the image. “No need. And Mercury?”

“Yes. That’s the most difficult. About eighty minutes before sunrise, it appears very near the horizon. It is hard to see, but if you draw an imaginary line from Saturn through Venus, you can locate it.” Raj demonstrated with a ruler.

“How long does this phenomenon last?”

“Until the 20th of this month. It started on the 20th of last month. Of course, it’s easier to see in the middle of that time. Oh, and there’s a new moon on the 8th, so that’s the best.”

Crane tried to calm his excitement. “That’s tonight.”

“Ahh, yes it is. Are you going stargazing? Perhaps I could accompany you?”

That, finally, made Crane look at Raj. Raj was practically jumping out of his skin.

“I would enjoy that very much. Unfortunately, tonight is not a good night.”

“Friday? Saturday? I could bring my telescope. The roof of your building is an excellent spot from which to observe.”
“Ah. Would I be hosting a celestial soiree?”

Raj’s face fell. “You could invite everyone if you like. Although, they do not usually enjoy my themed events.”

“Then it shall be just you and I and a telescope.” Crane slapped Raj’s shoulder. “Sunday?” He fervently hoped the threat would have been dealt with by then.

“It sounds perfect.”

“Could you make a printout of the planetary chart so I can study it before then?”

“Of course.” Raj turned back to the keyboard.

Crane rolled up the large sheet of paper and tucked it under his arm. As he had told Raj, he would be very busy tonight.

Crane sat on the slope beside the cave and slightly up the hill so anything emerging from the cave would not see him. He should have a view of the glen with the Satanic Cross and the night sky showing through the clearing of trees. But with the new moon, it was difficult to discern the cross, or any other details in the landscape below him. The star map was unrolled across his lap. He could sneak only occasional glances at the chart with a penlight, so he wouldn’t lose whatever night vision he had cultivated. He wasn’t looking at it currently—his binoculars were trained on Jupiter. It was nearly eight o’clock and he could see it clearly.

Crane had doubts that the creature would appear before Mercury did, just before dawn. But there was always the possibility that the ritual would take the entire night, so he sat there and tried to stay awake, if not attentive. He had a thermos of coffee, but he had to conserve that. Eight o’clock. It’s only eight o’clock, he chided himself, but he’d had only seven hours of sleep in the last sixty-nine.

Irrelevant. He stood up and stretched. His crossbow was placed on his back and his military-grade flashlight was tucked in his waistband. Earlier, he had confirmed that the blood ward was still in place. Nothing had been disturbed in the glen since he had left it. Humans did not frequent this spot, and animals had the sense to stay away from Satanic sign. He paced a bit, but he didn’t want to trip over a rock or twist his ankle on a clump of grass in the dark. So he returned to his seat and settled again.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness…

Midnight. Mars. No, he didn’t expect the planet to appear on the stroke of the hour. But he trained his binoculars on the sky once more. He couldn’t help but be a little excited about the astronomical event of the night. The planets had not aligned in ten years and he had no idea when it would happen again. Raj would tell him on Sunday. He was actually looking forward to watching the sky with the astrophysicist. Raj would undoubtedly have much to say about the stars. And, Crane hoped, he wouldn’t be worrying about Revelation.

In another half hour, Mars appeared over the horizon. He wasn’t sure when he would see Saturn and Venus. He had to spend the night and await the dawn, and it hardly mattered what happened in the skies until then. He had researched each of the five planets that afternoon to see what demonic entities might be associated with them. It was uncomfortably close to astrology, but he didn’t care. He’d follow any thread in search of usable knowledge. But the exercise had been futile.
He stood up and stretched again, massaged his neck, and performed some squatting exercises. Looking down at the fallen log where he had been sitting, he felt no desire to sit again. Standing for a while, he stretched every muscle in his body several times in turn. Crane worked at the buckles of his crossbow holster and took it off, then pulled his coat off, too. He repositioned the holster, making sure of a quick draw, then folded his jacket and placed it on the log. He’d never thought of a cushion—soldiers don’t think of cushions—but now he wished he had one.

Perhaps now would be a good time to do another sweep around the area. He reached for his flashlight. Setting it on narrow beam, he aimed it just ahead of his feet and picked his way down the hill. The entrance to the cave was blacker than the black surrounding it. The night was still, nothing moving even in the undergrowth. He wasn’t sure that his quarry would emerge from the cave—there had been no sign of it in there. Crane could almost swear that the cross had appeared on its own if the chicken bones hadn’t come from local coops. After half an hour of patrolling, he went back to the hillside.

He looked up at the sky. Saturn.

Crane sighed as he sat again, arranging his coat before he settled, then opening his thermos and pouring himself a cup of caffeine. He missed the badinage he would engage in with the Lieutenant during what she would call a “stake out”. The time would pass quickly and she would never, ever let him feel sorry for himself the way he was now. He felt a stab of guilt. And laughed.

Abigail Mills was beautiful. She had a glint in her eye when she looked at him that never let him take himself too seriously. She understood his longing for his own time and yet would usually goad him to let go of it as pointless. The Lieutenant had the patience to teach him what he needed to know, even as he railed against what he regarded as the shortcomings of the 21st century. She was intelligent—she could take any problem and find a solution for it. Sometimes two solutions.

*There is always another way.*

She was practical in everything except affairs of the heart—she tried to dismiss that side of herself as a weakness, an indulgence. But she was so full of tenderness, he would ache for her vulnerability. She was always ready to shoulder her responsibilities as Witness. And she had offered herself up to save the world.

And he loved her.

As he hadn’t let himself in months, he thought of her. Every time they had been in danger. Every time they had laughed. Every time she had taught him something new. Pandora. Karaoke. Orion. Voting. Cell phones. Purgatory.

Crane looked up at the heavens through tear-filled eyes. And there was Venus. He shook his head in amusement. It felt as if the Lieutenant were taking him to task once more to lose the melancholy and get on with it. There were serious matters at hand and he needed to “deal”.

Picking up the binoculars, he followed the arc of the four planets. One more to go. The most important one. Just before dawn. He arose to take another sweep—he must be alert from now on. He kept an eye on the sky, but Raj had said that Mercury might be difficult to distinguish. And it was harder down in the glen where the trees obscured the horizon even more. Although, if his ideas were correct, he would not have to watch.

He froze. Had he heard a noise? *Schlurp.* He pivoted and pointed his flashlight, widening its beam. There, near the foot of the cross the earth was bubbling like a mud pool. Crane drew his crossbow and aimed, hurrying across to get closer to the disturbance. An arm came out of the mud, then a head and torso. Just as the figure stepped out, the wetness disappeared and the ground turned back into dirt. Crane’s arrow went straight through its torso, flying out the other side and falling into the grass. Mud filled the hole in the creature’s chest and hardened. Stunned, Crane reloaded, backing out of its range by fifteen feet but following every movement.

It was humanoid, about seven feet tall, with thin, elongated legs and arms, and looked as if it was made of the dirt it had emerged from. It seemed to be aware of Crane’s position, even though it had no eyes, ears, nose, or mouth. Or hair. It had long fingers that echoed its limbs, and feet that were huge and webbed. It didn’t even seem to notice the projectile that had passed right through its body. The creature had been summoned for a purpose and that was its sole objective.

Crane had no idea how to kill it. He aimed his crossbow at the head, with the same results as before. Knee, groin, foot. He might as well be waving at it.

He couldn’t let it finish the ritual. It had to be kept away from the cross. If it passed through the circle of blood, Crane would never be able to reach it—not with the ward in effect. The only strategy left was simply to keep it busy until he came up with a final solution.

He holstered the crossbow and grabbed a hefty branch from the ground, trying to tempt the creature to follow him away from the circle. He swung at the mud-man, but it was agile enough to dodge the blow. For all its lack of visible sensory features, it seemed to know exactly where Crane was and what he was doing.

The creature backed up a step and “stared” at Crane. It extended its right arm and its fingers melded together, growing into a sword-like extension about two and a half feet long. Crane raised the log above his head to parry the downward stroke of the mud-weapon. It impacted, and, almost halfway through the branch, it shattered. Before Crane could even react, however, the sword grew back. He fought desperately, only occasionally on the offensive. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted another tree limb on the ground, this one longer, with greater reach. Surprising the creature, Crane threw his badly scored branch straight at its head and in the same movement, swept his arm down to pick up the other one.

Unfortunately, the demon was faster than he and sliced into his back before Crane was ready. Pain swept through him and he staggered, but he parried the next blow and struck his enemy on its hip. A chunk of dirt fell, but was totally regenerated in thirty seconds. What Crane needed, he realized, was something that would destroy its body completely and quickly enough that it couldn’t regenerate. Something like a chainsaw.

Too bad he didn’t have one with him.

Trying to ignore his pain, Crane delivered a few more telling blows, only to watch the mud flow and dry to repair the damage. So, if he couldn’t chip away at it, what was left? Getting it wet? He didn’t have a fireman’s hose, either. And he didn’t think spitting at it would do much good.

He did have a small flask of holy water. A dozen strategies flashed through his mind at once, and he swept at the creature’s legs repeatedly, between efforts at defending himself. He took another blow, ripping white-hot across his chest.

His breath came faster now as he concentrated on tripping the beast to the ground. Finally, its legs became tangled in the branch and it fell. Its reaction was quick, but not quick enough as Crane pulled
out the flask, flipped off the top and poured the holy water on the dirt of its chest.

It writhed and rolled away. The hole in its chest gaped and bubbled, but did not regenerate. Wounded, but fit enough, the creature regained its feet and slashed at Crane again.

The fight slowed. Neither combatant had much strength to attack, but the struggle had to end somehow, and Crane was determined to be the one left standing.

Crane gathered his reserves and lunged, landing a telling strike at the beast’s midsection. Dirt crumbled and the healing mud did not respond as quickly as before. Then, unexpectedly, the beast stepped back, froze, and crumbled to dust into the grass. The entire entity gone. Absorbed into the earth. Sucking oxygen into his lungs, Crane watched the spot before him for a dozen seconds, then circled to examine his surroundings. Quiet. Undisturbed. Suddenly, he realized he could see the landscape bathed in soft light. Dawn. He laughed out loud and collapsed onto his knees. Dawn.

He sat there until his breathing evened out, willing the pain away through sheer strength of will. That didn’t work any better than it usually did, but he stood and looked around again. He walked over to the Satanic Cross and tried to touch it. The blood ward was still in place. So, not vanquished, just hibernating—probably until the five planets appeared tonight. He kicked at the ward in a fit of frustration. And stubbed his toe.

Crane gathered the arrows that had fallen ineffectually to the ground. No sense wasting them, even though the effort pulled at his injuries. He closed his eyes against his exhaustion, but he stirred quickly. Pulling his shirt out of his waistband, he stared at his chest. There was red smeared from the wound to his breeches and the slash was still bleeding sluggishly. His back likely looked pretty much the same. Crane pressed his arm against his torso and left it there as he trudged up the hillside to retrieve his coat, binoculars, map, and thermos. He didn’t really care—he knew he’d be back—but he didn’t like to leave possessions behind, just in case. His enemies were resourceful and you never knew what they were capable of.

He packed everything into the messenger bag he had also brought and walked back over to where the creature had disintegrated. Perhaps he could come later in the day and pour more holy water over the spot. It wouldn’t hurt. Crane ran a weary hand through his hair and discovered that he had a headache.

Of course.

He left the glen, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. He had a lot to do before night fell again.

“Are you just getting home? Aren’t those the clothes you had on yesterday?”

Crane struggled to get his key in the lock of his apartment door. There was no reason for him to be having trouble, except for the fact that Penny was standing by her door. He tried to ignore her.

“Okay, who is she?” she teased.

“I have seen too many movies to pretend not to know what you are talking about.” He turned, attempting to hide the blood on his shirt. He knew he should have gone to the Archives first, but home was much more comfortable. “Why have you arisen so early?”
“I fell asleep on the couch last night.” Penny looked tired, but fortunately she was dressed. “Jeez, you look worse than I feel. She ought to let you sleep a little.”

“Pray, do not continue that farce. I cannot—”

“Wait a minute.” She scurried across to look at him. “Have you been—” Penny mimed a couple of punches and a karate kick.

He smiled. “Yes.” He dangled his keys in front of her nose. “If I ask you to help me, would you take it as a precedent?”

“Absolutely,” she promised brightly, then sobered. “Th-that’s not the answer you wanted, is it?”

“No.”

Penny took the keys from his fingers and unlocked the door. Crane entered and hung his messenger bag on one of the hooks on the wall, then pulled off his coat and hung it as well. He was grateful he had on a dark-colored shirt and the blood was difficult to see. Going to the kitchen, he reached for a pitcher of water from the refrigerator and a glass from the counter. He drank a full measure before he looked at Penny, guiltily. “Can I get you anything?

“No! I’m here to help you!”

“I’m going to take a shower. Could you get Sheldon’s suture for me?”

That surprised her. “Are you hurt? Let me see!”

“No.” He pulled away from her too quickly and had to bite his lip to keep from crying out. “Later. I need stitches. I can do it,” he tried to reassure her. “I just need the suture. I should have gotten some more for myself, but—”

“Go! Go!” She turned him toward the bedroom door. “I’ll put away the water. Just take care of yourself.”

Crane soaped himself and his hair quickly and rinsed off. His injuries would have to be cleaned, anyway, and soapy water was the best thing for it. He dried and pulled on clean boxers, stockings, and new breeches, throwing a large towel around his shoulders and carrying a few more with him.

Penny had, of course, returned already. She was pacing and kneading her fingers. He threw a towel on the sofa before he sat down, leaning against it. Crane drew the terrycloth from across his chest and exposed his wound, which was still seeping somewhat.

“Oh, my god!”

“Miss Penny,” he said softly, “do you think you can calm down?”

“Yes.” She sat on the coffee table across from him. “Yes. Yes.”

“Please be careful.”

“Yes.” Penny was staring at his chest, and not at the new wound. She was looking at the scar from the Horseman’s ax. “What’s that?”

“Irrelevant.” His answer was short and edgy. She knew better than to goad him, but Crane knew she would not forget. He was grateful his knife scar was hidden beneath the high waistband of his breeches.
“I called Amy.”

He closed his eyes and tried to stay calm. “That’s probably good. There is a wound on my back as well.”

Penny immediately lost her worry in her anger at the man sitting there. “Oh. Yeah. ‘That’s probably good,’ ” she mimicked, “Mr. I-Can-Do-It-Myself!” He didn’t open his eyes and she fumed less than silently. Then she stopped. “Do you want some more water?”

“Yes, please.”

He barely heard her return with the glass and set it on the coffee table. Crane didn’t hear anything else until Amy came bustling through the door. She and Penny were whispering rather loudly.

“Where did you get all this stuff?” Penny asked.

“At work,” Amy answered. “That’s what took me so long. I figured better now than later.”

“Did you steal it?”

“No! I signed for all of it. What do you take me for?” She was unpacking items from a tote bag. “Crane is now a monkey who cut himself on his cage.”

He couldn’t help himself. He laughed out loud.

Penny didn’t think it was funny. “A monkey!” She pointed at him. “You! Be quiet.”

Crane clutched at his midsection and grimaced. “I am attempting to do so. But it is so perfect for how I am feeling tonight.”

“Today,” Amy corrected.

“Ahh,” he looked to the window, “yes.”

Penny moved the glass of water and sat on the coffee table again, laying her hand on his knee. “How’re ya doin’, sweetie?”

Crane looked down at her hand, then up at her eyes. He smiled weakly.

Amy snapped her fingers. “Hey. She calls everyone ‘sweetie’.”

He shook his head. “No. Not everyone.” Not until just now.

“Hey!” Penny protested. “I’m sitting right here!”

“Well, you shouldn’t be.” Amy scolded. “We need another towel, a bowl of water, and that lamp,” she gestured, “over here.”

Penny jumped up while Amy grabbed a straight-backed chair and pushed the coffee table aside. She removed the towel from Crane’s wound and studied it. “That’s pretty bad. I’m going to have to sew two layers.”

“Does Sheldon have enough suture?” He wanted to know.

“I brought my own.”
“I am in your debt.”

Amy looked up at his face. “Just tell me how you did this.”

“Can we save that for later?”

“I guess.” She shrugged. “One more thing I need to know—was the other day a sort of … audition?”

“Yes,” he said drily. “I drove a spike into my hand to ascertain whether you could manage an emergency medical procedure.”

Embarrassed, she pushed his shoulder roughly. “Lie down.”

Crane grimaced for her benefit and carefully shifted his position until he was supine on the cushions. Penny came back with towels and water, then helped Amy move her supplies to the table by the couch. She looked down at Crane. “Do you want a pillow?”

“That would be nice.”

She dropped it on his face.

Crane’s answer was muffled. “Thank you.”

“Spike?” She teased and helped him adjust the pillow. Then she sat on the floor beside him. Amy started with the topical anesthetic. Crane flinched and Penny grabbed his hand.

There was no more discussion until Amy finished with the chest wound. She dipped her hands in the water and wiped them off on a towel. “That’s it. You doing okay?”

“Yessss. ’Nk you.” He turned to his side and showed them his back. This wound was not nearly as long, nor as deep, and it had stopped bleeding.

“Oh.” Amy was surprised and threw a look over to the other woman. Penny shrugged.

“Well,” Amy continued. “It doesn’t look too bad. We’ll be finished in no time.” She began again with the anesthetic, then asked suspiciously, “Is this a sword cut?”

“More or less,” Crane admitted.

“Ummm.” Amy fell silent again. Mercifully, so did Penny.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Penny shows Crane how to vanquish the mud-man, with a little help from a child's toy. And some angst. Because there should be angst.

Chapter Notes

Kudos to anyone who sends kudos!! They are greatly appreciated and cherished. And thanks to everyone who continues reading through both my silliness and blood, sweat and tears.

Crane woke up on the couch under a cotton blanket. Penny was sitting, in fresh clothes, across the room in his rocking chair. Her nose was buried in a small book that he feared he recognized. Aleister Crowley.

He sat up cautiously. “You don’t want to read that.” He pushed himself off the couch and, very slowly, walked over to her, still wrapped in the blanket. Crane plucked the book from her fingers and held it behind his back.

She grasped for the missing book, then stuck out her lower lip in a pout. He raised an eyebrow.

“I had no idea how many people actually believe that stuff,” she said.

“And now you are one. Just don’t be seduced by Crowley.”

She wrinkled her nose. “He’s pretty yucky.”

“Succinct. But true.” Reassured, he threw the book on the coffee table. “What did you say to Miss Amy? Were you able to explain?”

“I was going to go the whole nine yards. I figured we might need her again sometime. But she laughed before I got very far, so I quit.” Penny grinned. “She said she’d rather go with the monkey story.”

Crane paced away. “I shall have to think of something tell her.”

“Well, you have a reprieve. She’s gone.”

“You should be gone, too,” he said. “You have to get to work, however late.”

“What about you? How are you feeling?”

“The Head Librarian and I have an understanding. I have to get to my own Archives downtown.”

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked.
“Better than earlier, thank you.”

“Amy left you some heavy duty pain killer. Well, as strong as it can be and still be OTC. She’s okay with a little light-fingered action, but dealing in illegal substances is a bit beyond her.”

Crane wasn’t sure what all of that meant, but he could see the medicine bottle on the kitchen counter. If it would help with the pain, he didn’t care what it was. “Excellent.”

Penny got a glass and water and shook two pills out of the little plastic bottle. “Take that now. You should’ve had some already, but I didn’t want to wake you.”

He did as he was told, then bowed slightly, smiling at her. “My sincerest thanks for your assistance. I will not see you again until tomorrow, so do not worry.”

“You are truly welcome.” Penny took his hand and squeezed it, then turned for the door, waving back over her shoulder. “Later.”

Crane was surprised, and relieved, that she left without an argument. He headed for the bedroom, a clean shirt, boots, and a different coat. The other one would need to be dry-cleaned. *Dry-cleaned.* Another paradox from this modern century. One of his favorites.

He brushed his teeth and hair, cursing his way through the latter for not having done that chore while his hair was still wet. It was unruly, so he gathered it in a tie and forgot about it. An unsliced loaf of pumpernickel and two pounds of Swiss cheese, along with the bottle of pills, went into his messenger bag. He grabbed his keys and locked the door behind him.

As he made his way down the stairs, he heard footsteps behind him. Penny, of course. He stopped and pivoted, glaring at her.

She was undaunted—he was really going to have to work on his intimidation methods. “You’re hurt,” she said. “You’re on major medication. I have to keep an eye on you.”

“According to whom?”

“Amy. You know, she’s basically your doctor right now. So, doctor’s orders.”

Crane stood and looked at her for a few moments, thinking of her sincerity and her determination since he had stumbled home this morning. It occurred to him to wonder at her being awake at that moment, even if she had been sleeping on the couch, but he decided just to be grateful that she had been there. He continued down the stairs and Penny hurried after him.

As they passed onto the sidewalk, Penny shouted. “I’m driving!” Acceding to her common sense, he unlocked the doors of the Expedition with a beep and a flash of lights, then gave her the key ring. He climbed into the passenger seat. She slid in behind the steering wheel, but before she fit the key into the ignition, she looked at the medallion linked to the ring. “Valley Forge?”

“It is a jest. A bad one,” he answered begrudgingly, buckling his seat belt. Obviously realizing the subject would bear no discussion, she adjusted the seat and the mirrors and started the car.

Between the desperate, and ultimately unsuccessful, fight in the glen and his unremitting pain, his better judgment seemed to be fading in and out. He knew he needed support … needed *someone.* Saving the world had not proved to be a one-person job. But Penny was *not* a Witness and he did not want her to be a Witness. She wanted to help, perhaps because she thought it was quixotic, or exhilarating, or enigmatic, or… whatever. The problem was, Crane genuinely liked having her around. He knew better, but perhaps he subconsciously felt the universe owed him something. *Don’t*
“Hey, sleepy head, we’re here.” Penny’s words seeped into his consciousness. “Are you sure you’re all right?

“Well enough,” he sighed and held his hand out for his keys. Penny followed him to the door of the erstwhile armory. The smell of the old books comforted him somewhat, as it always did, even at the worst of times.

“I have research that must be done. You may use the internet if you like.” Crane pointed to the laptop on the desk. “Surf, search, whatever. Look for shoes. Just don’t do anything that could get me arrested.”

She settled on the desk chair. “Eeyuck. You ought to be arrested for this home page.”

“You haven’t got to look at it.” He pulled the bread and cheese out of his bag. “Are you hungry?”

“Yum.”

“There is a coffee maker on the refrigerator and water in gallon bottles. Would you mind?”

Crane was absorbed in the Bestiary when Penny placed a plate with food and a cup of coffee at his elbow. He hadn’t been able to find a comfortable position in the big red chair, so he stood at the table with his book. Preoccupied, he barely gave a thought to the words he uttered. “Thank you.” She drifted back to the computer.

*Man composed of the dirt of the Earth. No eyes, nose, mouth. Regrows limbs.* He was disappointed by the *Bestiary*. This creature might not be considered by others as beastlike, but Crane had the evidence on his chest and back which belied that judgment. He looked over at the bookshelves, picked up a piece of bread and chewed on it pensively.

“You need something?”

Crane shook his head, moved over to one of the shelves, and reached up for a heavy volume.

“Aaaah!” He groaned and clutched at his midsection. The book slammed onto the floor. Penny ran over and steadied him on his feet. “I am quite fine,” he objected.

“Tell that to someone who’ll believe you. Sit down.”

“I have to do this. If that creature surfaces again tonight and finishes the incantation … I don’t even know what will happen because I haven’t got the research!”

“Sit down. I’ll get your book.”

He let her guide him to the chair. It didn’t help the pain but it was better than falling down. She put the book in his lap. *An Essay in Illustration of the Belief in the Existence of Devils.* A little light reading. Is that the one you want?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Let me help. Where can I look?”

“I don’t want you looking at these pictures. It is unavoidably fodder for nightmares.”

“You won’t have to worry about that creature because I’m going to kill you.”
Crane pointed to the shelf where he had just been standing. He would be having his own nightmares tonight about Penny’s state of mind. But he needed someone. “King James the First—”

“The Bible?”

“Pray do not interrupt,” he told her shortly. “It will only prolong our efforts. No. King James’ Demonology. He was very broad-minded.”

She opened the pages. “Wow.”

“Exchange books with me, please. That one is in the original Old English. And sit down.”

Penny dragged the other chair over, then brought their food. “Eat.”

In between bites of bread and cheese, Crane described the demon and what its capabilities were. Her eyes grew wider and wider as he spoke, but he felt no irrational fear or panic from her. He shouldn’t be surprised—she wouldn’t actually be meeting this creature. Perhaps he would be the only one with nightmares.

Almost an hour later, Penny decisively closed the latest book she had been examining and dug her palms into her eyes. “Ugh. How often do you do this?”

“Whenever I have to.”

“Monster hunting isn’t very glamorous, is it?”

Crane huffed. “Hardly.”

“Want some hot food? And real coffee?”

“I cannot—”

“I’ll get some.” Penny stood. “You should take those pills with food, anyway. What do you want?”

“Anything but pizza.”

“Oh?”

“No reason. Just….” He shrugged. “There is money—”

“Keep your money. I have to pay you back somehow for this good time you’re showing me.”

“I apol—”

“Joke!” she said and disappeared through the door.

Crane found the creature in The Banishment of Malevolent Entities and came to an unsettling conclusion. He had been convinced that the creatures he had been battling on his own these past months were from the lingering effects of Pandora’s summons. However difficult each of the demons had been to vanquish, they had appeared to be random, almost pointless. But this—this seemed the opening salvo of a new conflict. The next tribulation? He scrubbed his face with his hands and sighed deeply. Propping his head up, he looked down at the book in his lap and reread what it had to say about the illustration.

Penny came bustling through the door with several brown bags. “Chinese!” she enthused and put the food on the table. “And tea. Coffee doesn’t go—”
She stopped when he arose from his chair and laid the book in front of her. Looking down at the illustration, she volunteered her opinion. “Ew.”

“What you see is an Exluto. Which makes sense because it is the Latin for ‘from the dirt’.”

Penny pulled the book closer as Crane started opening up the bags containing his lunch. She choked back a giggle. “It’s a minion.” She looked up at his serious expression. “Sorry. I can’t help but think of cute little yellow guys with one eye and denim overalls.”

“It means that the Exluto will do anything—and I mean anything—for the entity who summons it.”

She was reading down the page. “Can anybody summon one? Could I summon one?”

Crane stopped to look at her, gauging her state of mind. “I believe so,” he admitted. “But you would probably lose your soul.”

“Too much consequence just to get my apartment cleaned. Besides, Sheldon would do it if I asked him to.”

Crane was still watching her, then decided she had been unnerved and was attempting to cover it. “That is worth remembering.”

Penny made a face. “Yeah. Like your apartment would ever get messed up.” She waved toward the food. “Take what you want.”

“Thank you.” He found the chopsticks and scraped some broccoli beef onto the fried rice. “There is a banishing spell, but you need an Eóganachta Rood from before 1585.”

She turned a page, absorbed in the text. “A-spee-or-ah-dee—”

“It’s Gaelic.”

“Can you get an egg-nak-ta-rude?”

“I have a friend who might, but I haven’t the time.”

“Well,” Penny reached for a shrimp roll, “how did you win last night?” She snickered. “If you can call that winning.”

Crane winced, anticipating her reaction. “Like many demons, it is nocturnal. The Exluto disintegrated when the sun came over the horizon.”

“You mean you had to fight it all night?”

She was so impressed, he hated to disappoint her. “Not quite. But I did throw holy water at it and injured it badly.”

“So what you need is a whole bunch of holy water.”

“I had come to that conclusion, but—”

“Do you have a whole bunch of holy water?” She wanted to know.

He motioned casually toward the entrance to the tunnels. “I have an unlimited supply in a spell-bound baptismal font from an abandoned church.”
“Of course you do.”

“The problem is the delivery system. Something that does not need electricity or a pump action every few minutes. Or a giant vat that I have to tip the demon into.”

“You want to get it all wet.”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Water pistol? Probably not enough water before you’d have to fill it—even a super-soaker with a reservoir. And you have to pump those.” Her tone of voice indicated she was thinking, so he didn’t comment. Even had he known what to say. Suddenly, she snapped her fingers. “How about water balloons?”

“What?”

Penny enunciated as if he were deaf. Or an idiot. “Balloons with water in them.”

“You mean the silver spheres that float above the checkout line in a grocery store.”

“Sort of. What planet did you grow up on?” She looked at him for a moment as if waiting for him to answer. Then she continued to explain. “Smaller balloons, made of latex. You fill them with water instead of air and throw them at each other and they break.”

“To what end?”

“To get everybody wet!”

“Obviously. But why would you want to?”

“It’s fun! Are you sure you’re not an alien?”

Crane started to pace, arms at his side, working his fingers in his usual way. “How hard do you have to throw this balloon? What if it doesn’t break?” He pivoted and stabbed her with a look. “This has to be foolproof, you know.”

Penny was chewing on the inside of her lip and Crane was not sure why. Then she said, “Why don’t I go get some balloons? You finish your lunch, take your medicine,” that part was an order, “and think about it. Then I’ll show you what I’m talking about.”

Crane mumbled his assent and watched Penny fly out the door again. He went to the shelves and pulled down a few more books. Now that he knew the name of the creature, the task of locating more references should be easier. He pushed everything aside, including the bottle of pills, to place his new research on the table. Merely glancing at the small plastic bottle, he debated whether to follow Penny’s advice. The pills helped with the pain, but they also clouded his thinking.

He turned to his research. The Exluto were mentioned briefly if at all. None of the books had any ideas on how to banish one without the Rood. Crane wondered at that. Surely, if the holy water were going to work, someone else would have discovered it by now. Perhaps no one really cared, since the Exluto were so far down in the demon hierarchy. But he needed to render the Satanic Cross powerless, and the only way to accomplish that was to vanquish its maker.

Crane thought about balloons. But not much. He didn’t really know what to think about them. So he picked up the last shrimp roll and began to nibble at it.
“Success!” Penny squealed as she slammed the door to the Archives back on its hinges. “I not only got balloons, I bought a funnel to help us fill them up without making a mess. And I got both the regular kid’s-party kind and the actual manufactured-for-the-purpose kind.”

“What is the difference?”

“The regular ones break more easily, but sometimes when you don’t want them to. The special ones sometimes don’t break when you do want them to.”

He scowled, still not quite convinced.

“Spoilsport! C’mon, this is going to work!”

Crane smiled at her enthusiasm. “Why aren’t you tired?”

“I will be tomorrow.” She dumped the contents of her bag onto the table. As she did, she saw the pills sitting there and picked them up, waving them at him. “Did you take these?”

“I am not a child.”

She rattled the bottle. “That’s not an answer.”

He plucked it from her fingers and hid it in his pocket. “Show me these balloons of yours.”

Penny muscled open one of the plastic bags and tipped about two dozen brightly colored pieces of latex on top of his books. He picked up a yellow one, examined the opening, put it in his mouth, and blew. “Like a pig’s bladder.”

“Ooooo-kay.” She picked up a blue one and pulled it from both ends. “It’s easier if you stretch them first.” She blew and showed Crane her much larger balloon. “Only with water instead of air.”

Crane turned to get one of the jugs that were next to the coffee maker. He held his midsection as he went, grateful he didn’t have to exhale into any more of those absurd objects. The effort made his chest hurt—not that he was going to say so to Penny. As he turned back, the blue balloon bounced off his forehead.

“See? Fun!”

He had to smile.

They filled a dozen balloons of each kind with the funnel, over the trashcan to catch any water they spilled. Crane found two canvas bags to carry them and slung one over his shoulder.

“What is the difference?”

“Are we going to test them outside?” Penny asked, taking the other bag.

He shook his head. “I do not require an audience.” He pointed across the room to the obscured entrance to the underground passageway. “There is a network of secret tunnels under the town through which supplies and weaponry were brought to the armory during the Revolutionary War. We have used them for storage, amongst other things.” Crane led Penny to the entrance of the tunnels, handing her a flashlight and grabbing one for himself.

Penny followed him, looking all around with wide eyes and curiosity. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

He thought about some of the things that had been “stored” down there—Andy Brooks and the Horseman, Jefferson’s treasury of resources, Joe Corbin’s Wendigo, witch’s bones. Now they were going to have target practice. With a child’s toy.
They found their way to the Masonic Cell, since it was equipped with lights. He flipped on the switches and she wandered around the room, nearly speechless. “Wow!”

Several hemp sacks full of grain had been left, forgotten in a corner, for over two hundred years. Crane figured they would finally be useful. He rolled a couple of empty kegs across the floor into a group against the wall and went to get the sacks. Penny was ahead of him. “I’ll get them.”

“They are heavy,” he objected.

“And that’s why I’m getting them.”

Frustrated, he acceded to her wishes, reducing his task to arranging the sacks on the barrels. Then he stepped back to stay out of reach of the “Exluto”. Keeping an eye on his adversary, as he would have to do later, he reached in the bag at his side and chose his ammunition. He gripped the latex, ready to throw.

It burst in his hand.

“Don’t—” Penny began.

“Obviously not.”

Crane tried two more times, with the same result. He could pick up the balloon and aim it, but as soon as he drew back to throw, his fingers would punch holes through the surface.

Penny sighed. “Okay, Superman. Don’t grip it so hard. Especially when you’re getting ready to throw. Do it like this.” She demonstrated, and the grain sack finally got wet.

He imitated her movements and the grain sack got wetter.

“Yes!” Penny fist the air.

He tried again, but the balloon fell short. Then again, and water splatted all over the hemp. Penny applauded, but Crane wasn’t happy. He emptied the canvas bag, with mixed success. He paced away angrily. “I cannot do this!”

“Yes, you can. You just need practice.”

“I have to think about this too much. When I am fighting a demon, I cannot be concentrating on my weapon. I have to constantly analyze the target. What it’s doing, how it’s moving, how it’s fighting back. What it’s going to do. It does not just sit there like a … like a grain sack!”

“Look.” Penny ran over to the other bag of balloons, sitting on the floor where Crane had left it. “Try these. The latex is a little thicker. And … throw them at me.” She dodged and ran.

He pulled the empty bag off his shoulder and replaced it with the full one. He stood and regarded her antics, scowling.

“So I’ll get wet,” she taunted. “Maybe.”

Crane rested his hand among the contents of the bag. Penny danced. “This is not the time to be a gentleman. Unless you think you can’t—”

*Thwack!* Right above the heart. Crane chuckled.

Penny stood, dripping. “All right, smart aleck. Do it again.”
He did. Water trickled down her knee.

The third balloon was thrown without invitation. But as it reached her, she caught it, slowing its speed by drawing her hand backwards until it lay in her palm without breaking. Grinning, she threw the missile back at him.

“Hey!” He dodged and it hit with a splat on the floor. He looked at the long wet spot on the stone, then looked back at her furiously.

“Chill out. The demon won’t do that.”

“It is a very intelligent demon.”

“Then it’ll be too busy laughing at you,” she said.

“The Exluto has no mouth,” he reminded her.

“Then maybe it’ll just roll around on the ground, clutching its stomach.”

Crane glowered at her again. He had been indulging her too much. He was lightheaded and fatigued and his wounds throbbed. The Exluto had to be destroyed and it had to happen tonight.

“Or maybe you could just look at it like that. You won’t need balloons.”

He threw the bag of toys from his shoulder to the ground, walking away from Penny. “This is ridiculous.”

“No. I’m serious now. Wait! This. Will. Work.” She grabbed his arm and tugged him around to face her. “I’m not sending you out there to fight that … thing … with no defenses. You’re going to bombard it with holy water until it melts into the dirt. It’s going to disappear forever and you won’t have to worry about it or whoever’s telling it what to do. This is just as good as your crossbows or your torches or baseball bats or nuclear bombs!”

“Sending me out there?”

“That’s what you got from that? Well, to hell with your fucking ego!”

“My what?”

“You have to protect everyone! You have to be perfect at everything! You don’t want anyone else to have an idea! Or take care of you!”

“I cannot become dependent—” He started, but he’d said all that before. His first thought was usually to reason with her, at whatever volume, but this time he couldn’t help himself. “Ego?”

“You heard me.”

Crane bristled. His lips pressed angrily together and his nostrils flared. He stared. She didn’t blink. He walked away from her, temper deflating, threading a hand through his hair. He pushed a grain bag onto the floor and sat on the empty keg. Elbows on knees, he watched his fingers flex almost unconsciously.

Penny was silent. For a long time.

She had been trying to help him, and not because she thought him ignorant or incapable or quaint. She knew he had to go back out there and fight whether he was ready or not. She was desperately
trying to make sure that he would come back. And he may as well have slapped her across the face.

“You’re not wholly wrong.” Crane admitted. “You’re not wholly right either. It’s complicated.” He looked up to see Penny twenty feet away, arms folded, watching him. His gaze went back to his fingers, which had clenched into fists. “There are supposed to be two Witnesses for a very good reason. I am exhausted. And I have not been so injured so often in my years of fighting. I am grateful for all your caring. But no matter how … original … or effective your suggestions might be, I cannot make this work. And I am running out of time.” He finally looked up at her again and found her eyes glued on his face. “I just need something familiar to fight this demon with.”

“What would your ex-partner say to that?”

His laugh was explosive and brief. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Crane. Damn women.* “Let me sit here for a few minutes. Then we can practice some more.”

“And take your pills.”

He closed his eyes, but not to rest. The entire fight from the night before played through his mind. And again. He envisioned each page in every book that had a reference to the Exluto. The exercise didn’t help.

So what was the problem? It wasn’t the holy water. Holy water was a time-honored and well-documented defense against demons. Was that it—the fact that it was a defense, a deterrent, and not an offensive weapon? No, he had the evidence of his own eyes. He knew he would not have survived last night if he hadn’t weakened the creature with the contents of his flask.

Or without the sunrise, he admitted grudgingly. But that was no good. He couldn’t keep battling the damn thing every night until the twentieth of the month when the planets were no longer visible.

Was it the balloons? Because they were childish and silly? The idea should appeal to his imagination, if not his sense of irony. Perhaps he was taking himself too seriously. Because they were unfamiliar? He had never, when he was in Washington’s army, resisted extensive drill with any unfamiliar weapon. Nor when fighting demons with the Lieutenant. They had welcomed new ideas.

*There is always another way.*

Crane stood up, resolute, and looked for Penny. She was across the room, her nose against the one-way glass that separated them from the small observation space. He walked over to the bag he had left on the floor and saw the rest of the colorful orbs that were left to experiment with. Unfamiliar. So why not marry the unfamiliar with the familiar? To be sure that a balloon would be delivered quickly, accurately, and intact. And then to burst open, holy water splashing all over the intended target.

“Stay here,” he addressed Penny’s back. “I shall return straightaway. Do not wander off.”

Penny turned, pointing to the glass. “Is that—?” But he didn’t hear the rest. He ran through the tunnels to the Archives and found where he had left his crossbow with its holster. Noticing the take-out cup half-filled with watered-down tea sitting on the table, he pulled the bottle of pills from his pocket, shook out two, and washed them down with the tea. That would keep Penny quiet. And perhaps subdue the pain across his chest and back.

Crane fit the holster, placed the crossbow securely, and raced to his newly-purposed practice room. He slung his “ammunition” bag across his shoulder.
“You said the arrows went right through—” Penny protested.

“Tsss.” Crane held a finger in the air and she subsided. He pierced the mouthpiece of a balloon with the arrowhead, aimed at the grain sack and fired. Before Penny could blink, just as the arrow impacted, he fired again, bursting the balloon and splashing water everywhere. He lowered the crossbow.

Penny gaped. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes!” She ran and threw her arms around him, weapons and all. He tolerated the embrace for a moment, then pushed her gently away.

“Pardon me if I do not use you as a target this time.”

“Thanks,” she drawled. “What made you think of that?”

He shrugged. “Your lecture on my ego.”

“I’m s—”

“Don’t.” His warning hand stopped her. “We still have a lot of work to do. I have to be sure I can do that repetitively and just as quickly. I need an automatic and easy way to fit the balloons on the arrows. I have to be sure I can reload the crossbow if necessary. And we will need more balloons.”

She sprinted for the tunnel opening. “I’ll get them!”

“Flashlight!” He picked it up from where she had discarded it.

She stopped to take it from him. “Don’t get lost,” he quipped.

Penny’s nose wrinkled. “Why don’t you go first?”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “Are you sure?”

“Don’t push your luck, sweetie.”
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Crane puts Penny's ideas to good use and shares a propensity for Doctor Who.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in posting. I was visiting with my sister, and she doesn't have internet service. No comment. But I promise to post again soon. Hope you enjoy.

Crane had driven his SUV through the woods, as close to the cave as he could manage, a bit less than a mile away. Hiking back and forth to the clearing a few times, he had poured several plastic jugs of holy water on the spot where the Exluto had first manifested as well as the spot where it had disintegrated at dawn. Afterward, the blood ward had still been in place, so he doubted that the effort had had any effect. Two more open containers of water were placed under a tree near the Satanic Cross, in case he was reduced to dousing the creature desperately before he ran.

Finished with his setup for the impending battle, he returned to the Expedition, climbed into the front seat, pressed the button to recline, and set the alarm on his cell phone. Nothing would be gained by returning to town to wait. Jupiter would be visible in about two hours. He doubted that the Exluto would appear before Mercury did, as it had the night before, but he wasn’t prepared to risk his whole strategy on a supposition. He would be in the clearing when the first planet rose.

His goal was not to fall asleep, but when he did, the alarm woke him easily. Crane ate a sandwich and took some pain pills. He crawled out of the SUV, strapped the crossbow holster and quiver on his back, and fitted the weapon securely inside. Placing the canvas bag at his left hip, he checked the arm movement necessary to grab a balloon and finger the small loose-leaf binder ring that had been attached to it. He strode into the woods, aiming his flashlight and trying to dismiss the feelings of foolishness that suddenly flooded his head.

Franklin would be proud, he reassured himself. And then was reminded of all the times he had thought his mentor insane.

This night felt longer and yet shorter than the last. Crane knew what to expect tonight, both in the sky and on the ground, at least until the demon surfaced. He was anxious to meet the Exluto and execute the new strategy. But, after the constant flurry of activity that day, all that was left was the waiting.

He wasn’t as concerned about using his flashlight, so he repeatedly patrolled the area, memorizing every rock, tree, and bump in the earth. He rehearsed and replayed the coming battle a dozen times in his head. But he didn’t try to envision the outcome. It was not superstition—Crane simply did not know what the outcome would be.

He regarded the sky. Mars. He sighed, fervently hoping that Raj had enough conversation to keep him interested in another night of planet-gazing.
Crane stretched his muscles methodically. He had been practicing all afternoon, and he didn’t want his body to get the message that it could rest now. His wounds objected to the activity, so he tried to reach a compromise between being limber and being in agony. Next time, Crane decided, Amy’s monkey will need some very effective pain medication.

He walked. And he started to sing.

“There were three kings into the east,

Three kings both great and high.

And they hae sworn a solemn oath

John Barleycorn should die.”

The fifteen verses kept him busy for a while. He began another ballad. And another round of patrols. And, eventually, there was Saturn.

Then, after a detailed rendition of the music from *The Beggar’s Opera* and more pacing, Venus appeared above the trees. Mercury would be visible in about two hours. Crane was ready.

He walked and watched the whole area. Trying to calm himself. It wouldn’t do to stay on high alert for that long. He didn’t want his adrenaline to peak before he needed it.

Eventually, he heard a familiar, tell-tale sound and whirled in that direction, alert and eager, crossbow now in his hand. The Exluto had apparently learned from Crane as well, for it drew itself from the earth much more quickly than last night. And from an entirely different spot. It charged aggressively, growing its “sword” from its arm as it came.

Crane dodged. An arrow was already staged in his crossbow, so he stepped back twice, fitting his brightly colored ammunition into place. He had to evade another assault from the creature, suddenly afraid he would not get a chance with his weapon.

He began the banishment spell. “*A spioradi an tsaoil éistigi liom!*”

He would swear that the Exluto looked at him as it paused for a split second in its advance. Crane didn’t hesitate. He fired. The arrow touched at the creature’s left side. The second arrow followed immediately. Mud dripped as the holy water melted its way into its target.

Crane backpedaled, but he couldn’t go far, in case the demon tried to retreat behind the barrier of the ward. A fleeting thought made him wonder why the Exluto couldn’t simply materialize next to the Cross inside the ward. He refocused his concentration quickly and reloaded with a new balloon, trying to find another opening for his arrows.

The creature attacked suddenly and Crane fired. He had to duck away from the razor sharp mud-sword and couldn’t follow-up with the second shot. The balloon fluttered absurdly to the ground.

“*Dóighigí an fear seo! Dóighigí go luithreaché!*”

When Crane sent the next arrow, the creature tried to swat it away but the missile came too fast. The sixth arrow flew, and a wound grew in its chest.

The Exluto faltered and Crane quickly reloaded. Crane wondered if it felt pain or if it had merely been taken aback at being on the defensive. He pressed his advantage. “*A spioradi an tsaoil éistigi liom!*”
It stood, just for a moment, trying to recover and making a leg shot possible. The arrows flew, melting the shin and foot into mud. It fell to the ground with three grievous wounds. Crane took a head shot, then three more, just because he could. Then he retrieved one of the containers of holy water and emptied it until the Exluto was gone into the ground.

He leaned against a nearby tree and chuckled in relief. Giddy with leftover adrenaline, he tried to calm himself down and slow his accelerated heartbeat. He gulped in air. Then he forced his breathing to even out so he wouldn’t hyperventilate.

Crane studied the clearing again. There were no new Exlutos struggling to the surface. He might have to wait it out until dawn to be sure. Or—Crane walked over to the Satanic Cross and passed his hand over the circle of blood. Continuing to the sigil, he reached down to pick up one of the bones. And dropped it. And looked at the blister on his hand. Served him right for letting his guard down.

He straightened, went over to the second container of water, and submerged his hand. He brightened. Apparently, the blessed water had curative properties for burns caused by hexed chicken skeletons. Inspired, he picked up the container and transferred it over to the bones, pouring the water over as many as he could. When the container was empty, he reached for the remaining balloons and, one by one, spilled their contents onto the rest of the Satanic Cross. When he tested the bones, he found they could be handled, and deposited them all into his now-empty canvas bag. He put the small dishes into the bag as well.

Crane took his cell phone from his pocket, checked the time, and texted Penny.

“Project finally finished. Return to apartment later. Much later. Still have other work.”

He stacked the containers, one into the other, and, picking them up, left the glen.

Crane went back to the Archives to offload his equipment and weapons. While there, he washed off in the basin and changed his shirt. He filled one of the empty containers with holy water and submerged the bones and bowls, leaving it in the tunnel to be taken care of later. Feeling slightly better, he pulled about a dozen books from the shelves and loaded them on the main table so he could follow up on the Satanic Cross again. He was afraid he was about to embark on the same fruitless quest he had engaged in two days before. But his intuition told him he had not finished with whatever entity had enlisted the aid of the Exluto, and Crane had long ago learned to follow his intuition. So he buried himself in his research, munching on leftover bread and cheese.

By one o’clock in the afternoon, Crane’s stomach was telling him it was past lunchtime and the leftovers simply were not enough. He chose three of the books he had not yet examined and slid them into his messenger bag, along with his soiled shirt. At his home he could make a fresh pot of coffee and defrost some of the homemade stew from the freezer. After he ate, he would go visit Penny and prove to her, in person, that he was indeed alive and well. He was surprised his cell had not buzzed with texts all morning, but he didn’t know how many times she might have knocked on his door.

An hour later, Crane stood at his kitchen counter, enjoying a bowl of stew and reading from a book propped up against the splashboard. The research had not yet produced any results, as he had feared, and he was ready to admit that he would have to wait for his adversary to make the next move.

He washed his bowl and fork, leaving a half-empty coffee cup by the sink. Closing the book, he set it on the island beside his bag with the other volumes and crossed to the hallway. His knock on Sheldon’s door brought the now-unusual response.
“‘S open!” Penny’s voice.

“Ssssshhh!” The four men were watching television.

Sheldon added. “You know the rule!”

But just then, a tune split the air—the Dr. Who theme—and Crane knew he was safe until the commercials were done.

“Hey, Crane.” Howard waved a salute.

“Yo.” Raj raised his Diet Coke into the air.


“Because it’s not Christmas,” Leonard explained.

Crane playfully raised an eyebrow. “Of course.”

Penny shook her head in surrender, then concentrated on him. “Thanks for the text. You look horrible.”

“You’re welcome and thank you.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I was surprised not to get an answer,” Crane said.

“Leonard told me it sounded like you wanted to be left alone.”

“And you followed his advice.”

Leonard spoke up. “Naaah. She’d already decided for herself.”

Crane chuckled when Penny made a face at her fiancé and said, “Watch your step, mister.”

When she moved, Crane noticed an instrument case leaning against the wall behind her. “Ah,” he addressed the room, “who is the cello virtuoso?”

“That would be me,” Leonard volunteered. “And I’m hardly a virtuoso.”

“I also play the cello.” Crane was suddenly eager for conversation. “I would enjoy hearing you play.”

“Hah!” Sheldon interjected. “No, you wouldn’t.”

Leonard ignored him. “I don’t remember anybody carrying a case upstairs when you moved in.”

“I did not have the opportunity to bring it with me from Oxford.” Crane commented wistfully, thinking of the afternoons he’d spent playing, his mother entreating him always for “one more piece”.

“You should borrow it, then. I don’t play that often. I can borrow it back when I want to.”

“I have not played for years.”

“Then you need the practice.”
Unfortunately, the commercials quit at that moment, causing Sheldon to immediately intone, “Rule!”

Crane knew better than to continue the discussion. He was a guest, after all, and he bowed to the etiquette of the domicile. Even if that very etiquette seemed rude.

Penny was signaling to him, mouthing words. “Come in. Sit. Watch. Relax.”

He looked over at the television. He had finished all the work he had planned. Although he was tired, he didn’t really want to sleep again until that night—it would ruin something that the Lieutenant had called his circadian rhythm. He’d already been disrupted enough this week and he was eager to reorient himself. Besides, he could settle the issue of the cello during the commercials.

And he liked Dr. Who.

That’s all it took for him to settle in the hardback chair, leaving the easy chair for Penny. She didn’t look overjoyed, but she sat anyway.

The episode was Russell Davies’ take on the Titanic tragedy. Crane had researched the historical event after seeing Avatar and looking up other works from James Cameron. He had resisted the dubious temptation of viewing the movie itself, but it had sparked his curiosity and there was no dearth of material on the disaster. Voyage of the Damned seemed to have only a passing resemblance to the facts, but Crane had already reasoned it wasn’t going to be a light-hearted comedy.

One of the details piqued Crane’s interest immediately.

*The Doctor had recently decided to travel alone and had taken his latest companion back to her own time. But he, at the whim of the writer and definitely in character, had soon taken on a young lady who worked on the spaceship. “Just for fun. Well, that’s the plan. Never quite works.”*

No, it never did. There was always something that complicated … everything. Nothing in Crane’s life was ever simple. Except for the people he was sitting with right now. Just for fun. Like miniature golf.

*Before long, the Doctor had explained himself to the girl named Astrid. He needed her to trust him so he could save the ship—as well as Astrid herself.*

*After much running, and losing two of their party, they decided they were safe. “We made it.”*

*The Doctor’s answer was quiet. “Not all of us.”*

But they couldn’t be safe. No one was ever safe until the final curtain. And even then, he knew, Fate could strike a further blow.

The commercial came on and Penny jumped up again, looking at Crane, then heading for the kitchen. “Drink? You can’t have wine or a beer because you’re still on medication.” She looked over at him from where she was standing by the open door of the refrigerator. “Right?”

Crane didn’t answer because he didn’t want to lie. The moment of silence, however, told him she was not fooled.

“Right,” she intoned.

“I am saving it for a rainy day,” was his excuse.

“You’ve got a weatherman who can get you more,” she reminded him. Then, apparently deciding
the argument wasn’t worth pursuing, she examined the contents of the fridge. “Water. Soda. Oh, and Yoo-hoo.”

Howard objected. “Hey! That Yoo-hoo is m—”

Penny spoke over the protest. “For anyone who wants some.”

Crane’s face wrinkled in bemusement. “Yoo … hoo?”

“It’s like chocolate milk,” Penny explained.

Crane perked up. “Chocolate?”

“Aaah,” Howard surrendered. “Give Crane one. He probably hasn’t had his fix yet today.”

“Anybody else?” she asked but received no replies, so she grabbed a water for herself and shut the refrigerator door.

Penny handed him the bottle as she sat down. Crane nodded his thanks to Howard and took a sip. It was … sort of … chocolate milk. But it was exactly what he didn’t know he wanted.

“Rule!”

Crane turned his attention back to the screen, suddenly and unusually feeling a sense of comfort.

*Of course, Astrid, the waitress yearning for new experiences, wanted to go with the Doctor. “It’s not always safe,” he told her.*

“So you need someone to look after you.”

Crane felt eyes on him, but he didn’t have to glance around. He knew who it was.

*Astrid drove Capricorn into the abyss and saved everyone, including the entire population of Earth, from the evil Host. Unfortunately, Astrid fell into the Abyss herself and became particles spread across the firmament with merely a ghost of consciousness. “Now you can travel forever.”*

Crane wasn’t sure why they thought that was better than death.

He thought of Abbie.

Crane jumped up and hurried to the sink to rinse out the bottle that was now empty. Penny followed.

“Pray, do not watch me like that.” He whispered because the show was still running. “It makes me want to fidget. And I do *not,*” he emphasized, “fidget.”

He felt rather than saw her eyes rolling at his denial. He watched as she splayed her fingers and then pulled them into a fist. His face grew warm, feeling even edgier than moments before.

After a beat of silence, Penny shrugged. “Sorry. You just seemed….”

Crane didn’t answer. He didn’t move from the sink and he didn’t return to his chair.

*The Doctor and the old man had beamed down to Earth. Mr. Copper wanted to escape his life, but the Doctor explained. “I travel alone. It’s better that way.”*

*But when Copper discovered he could live in London, he was content. “I can have a kitchen,”* was
his discovery. Then, “I won’t forget her,” he promised the Doctor, and himself.

As if obeying Crane’s request not to stare at him, Penny was watching the end of the show. “Dr. Who is lonely,” she observed.

“A man out of time. The last of his kind.” He drew a deep breath. “Miss Penny—”

“Take the cello. And if you ever want any more Yoo-hoo, you know where to come.”

Crane looked down at her earnest brown eyes and smiled. “I’m sorry I’m feeling so changeable today. I’m just … weary.” Rubbing a hand across his eyes, he finished, “And always making excuses for myself.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out his key chain, removing one of the keys. “For my apartment. Tell Leonard to come get his cello whenever he wants it, even if I am not there.”

He set the key on the counter and walked to the door, picking up the case on the way. “Thank you,” he said to the room, and left.

Across the hall, he studied the almost-familiar instrument. The smooth, polished wood was beautiful, and the strings needed only a bit of tuning.

Then he sat down and played.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Raj comes to dinner at Crane's and brings his girlfriend Emily, who is a bit too interested in all things supernatural.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who continues to follow my little ditty--I hope you are enjoying yourselves. I have made a mini-resolution to finish writing this story before the end of the year. Yes, I violated my cardinal rule and began posting this before it was done. Good thing, though, because that has actually forced me to write my way through the most difficult scenes.
Kudos to the archive for being here.

“Rajesh.” Crane opened his door to the astrophysicist and a young lady with flaming red hair, carrying a beverage cooler and a white KFC bag. He started to greet her as Emily, Raj’s girlfriend, then thought better of it, just in case. He bowed his head to her and stepped aside to let them into his apartment. Raj had a leather case that he set down by the door—probably the telescope he had promised to bring.

“Emily, this is my very good friend Ichabod Crane. Crane, my very good girlfriend Emily Sweeney.”

“Don’t blame Raj.” She grabbed Crane’s hand and shook decisively. “When he told me he was going to spend the evening with you, I insisted on coming. He’s told me so much about you.”

“It is quite all right. It is my great pleasure to finally meet you as well.”

“I brought enough food for her, too.” Raj displayed his carryout bags and set them down on the kitchen island. Emily handed over her bag and immediately wandered away.

Crane turned to see her examining everything within the four walls, as if she were considering moving in. He tried to gain her attention. “Are you also interested in the stars, Miss—”

“Just Emily,” she interrupted. She dragged her gaze away from the sawhorses sitting in the corner along with the lumber and tools he had been using. “Do you mind if I call you Ichabod? It’s a wonderful name.”

“Not at all. And thank you.”

“I’m a dermatologist. That makes me a doctor, too. Poor Howard.”

“Crane doesn’t have a doctorate, either, Emily,” Raj muttered from between clenched teeth into her ear.
Crane smiled uncertainly. “I read History at Oxford. I needed no more credentials in order to lecture there. Then I opted for adventure in the colonies.”

“Did you find it?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Adventure.” Raj supplied for her.

“More than enough. I find I am occasionally defeated by the prevailing culture.”

“I love the prevailing culture.” Raj gushed. “I hope never to return to India for longer than a visit. I get nervous sometimes just thinking about it.”

“I became an American citizen a few months ago.”

“Really?” Raj looked shocked. “My parents would kill me!”

“It was not a problem.” Crane noticed that Emily was wandering again. “Forgive my atrocious manners. Would you like to sit down? May I get you something to drink?”

“I love your apartment,” she enthused, nearly whirling in place. “It’s so….”

“Empty?” Raj supplied.

“Spartan!” she finished.

Crane didn’t know what to say to that.

“I mean, you obviously don’t have anything that isn’t important.” She pointed to a frame on the wall. “That map, for example, is the only piece of art you have displayed.”

“I moved here little more than a month ago,” Crane tried to explain, although he couldn’t say that Emily wasn’t right. It was the only art here, besides a photo hanging in the bedroom of Abbie, Jenny, and himself.

Unfortunately, she zeroed in on the map. “Hudson Valley and Environs. Is it old?”

“1779.”

“Wow.” She reached up to trace a finger on the glass. “Are those— ” She stretched to tiptoe. “Are those ley lines?”

Crane frowned. She was entirely too excited at that prospect.

“What?” Raj joined her to look at the diagram of the valley.

Emily took his arm with one hand and pointed with the other. “In 1921, a man named Alfred Watkins discovered that ancient sites like standing stones, stone circles, barrows, earthworks, prominent hilltops, and fragments of tracks and ancient roads are aligned along straight lines. Now called ley lines.”

“Really?” Raj squinted at the map. “Do we have any standing stones around here?”

“No.” Crane tried to discourage their interest. “Experts have said that there are so many such points of interest in the English countryside that by selectively choosing which to include or omit, you could
arrive at any pattern you wish to find.” He finished drily, “You could draw a duck.”

“You’re the one that’s got it hanging on your wall,” Emily insisted.

“I am fond of the map. The Revolutionary War is one of my main interests.”

“I’d love to walk the lines.”

Crane had to keep her away from those lines. The demons which Pandora had summoned were still occasionally following them to reach Sleepy Hollow. Desperately, he sought to put her off. “The early British also believed if you hiked those paths, you would meet fairies who wouldn’t enjoy sharing them with you. Fairies which could be quite vicious when aroused.”

“Fairies?” Raj asked.

“It’s an outdated superstition,” Emily dismissed Crane’s warning. “These days, ley lines are considered spiritual and mystical energies that can be felt by certain adepts. I’d love to find out I was an adept!” She drew out her smart phone. “Do you mind?” Without waiting for his answer, she snapped a photo.

“Are you good at following maps?” Crane wanted to know.

“It’s worth a try.”

Crane turned to Raj as her potential companion. “Do you enjoy hiking?”

Raj shook his head. “Only from the comic book store to the movies.”

Emily pouted at her boyfriend. “You wouldn’t come along with me?”

“We-ell,” Raj hedged, apparently very susceptible to her persuasive wiles.

“You are likely to get lost.” Crane pointed out.

Her attention immediately locked on him. She looked as if she was about to make an appeal for his company.

“I do not hike, either.” Crane backed up, hands raised in surrender. Emily’s expression changed, obviously searching for a strategy to get her way. He avoided the issue. “Would anyone care for a beer?”

Raj eagerly agreed. “Yes, please.”

“Two!”

Crane popped the tops and placed the bottles, with coasters, on the coffee table, in an attempt to get Emily to sit down and stop poking around. Penny had told him she was overly curious and a little “creepy”. He realized, to his dismay, that that extended to an interest in the occult. He didn’t need her looking into his boxes of books on demonology, witchcraft, and the End of Days. Perhaps he should rethink the shelves altogether.

Emily, with another look around, settled on the couch. Raj sat beside her, stretching an arm to drape around her shoulders. Crane took the easy chair opposite, and asked, however mundane, the question he sincerely wanted answered as he watched them together. “How did you become acquainted?”

“We met online,” Raj said.
Emily leaned forward, as if in confidence. “Actually, Raj was too intimidated to answer the post.”

“I—” Raj started to object, but apparently couldn’t.

Emily threw him a withering look and continued with her story. “He got Amy to answer, and she and I hit it off.”

Raj shrugged. “They both like medieval poetry.”

“Chaucer?” Crane suggested.

“Not necessarily.” Emily grinned, shook her head, and recited.

“When the turuf is thy tour,
And thy pit is thy bour,
Thy wel and thy white throte
Shulen wormes to note
What helpet thee thenne
All the worilde wenne?”

Crane was incredulous. “Miss Amy likes that?”

“I doubt it. But I do.”

“Why wouldn’t Amy like it?” Raj asked.

Crane answered. “The verse is about a body rotting in a grave.”

“Kudos, Crane.” Emily laughed. “Impressive.”

“I told you.” Raj spoke to Emily and nodded at Crane. “History at Oxford.”

“I would imagine Miss Amy is fond of love ballads,” he commented.


“Yes, well, Chaucer can be rather….”

She recited.

“And prively he caught hire by the queynte,
And seyde, ‘Y’wis, but if ich have my wille,
For deerme love of thee, lemman, I spille.’
And heeld hire harde by the haunchbones.”

“Hoo!” Raj laughed. “Even I get that one!”

Crane admitted to himself that he had always enjoyed The Miller’s Tale. Especially in his early teens, when he had first discovered that well-regarded historical literature could be ribald. But now, the
young lady wiggling her eyebrows at him made him uncomfortable. He smiled faintly.

“Why don’t you discuss it between yourselves? I will set out our dinner.” Crane stood and headed into the kitchen while Emily and Raj exchanged curious looks. He had already placed dishes on the small dining table, but he needed another place setting.

He wasn’t sure what to think about Emily. The facets of her personality were probably normal for a modern woman—witness reality television. But, fortunately, he had not had to embrace such as a friend before. The Lieutenant had been fond of pushing his boundaries past where he wanted to let her go, but eventually she would quit. Part of her reasoning had always been to try to drag him into the twenty-first century. And, he reflected, she loved to tease him.

When he turned back to the main room, he found Emily at his elbow. She said, “I think I need to apologize.”

Crane grimaced. “No. You don’t.”

“Raj told me you were a bit old-fashioned. I should have figured, but how much more old-fashioned can you get than The Canterbury Tales?”

Crane looked at her disconcerted expression and softened. Abbie had been right. She had always been right. He smiled, sincerely this time. “I don’t know. Beowulf?”

Emily rolled her eyes. She reached out to take the dishes from him. “I’ve got that. You can bring the food.”

Crane didn’t let go. “I must beg your pardon. I concede to Rajesh’s characterization.”

“Okay. Evenses?”

Crane blinked. “If you mean we shall forget about the incident, that is acceptable.”

She wrinkled her nose and grinned. “You’re so cute!”

That embarrassed him nearly as much as the questionable verse.

Seemingly mollified, Emily headed to the table with the dishes.

As Crane reached the table by the window with the bags of takeout, Raj apparently was determined to ignore the byplay. “Leonard bought a dining room table once, but Sheldon didn’t like it and made him get rid of it.”

Crane was impelled to ask, “Why didn’t he like it?”

“It was new. It was different. He is very uncomfortable with change.”

He stared at Raj for a moment. It was as if the man had been reading his thoughts. Then he shook the idea out of his head. “I am afraid I would be unable to accommodate Dr. Cooper’s fixations.”

Emily challenged him. “Have you ever actually been put to the test?”

He reflected for a moment. “I suppose not.”

“He’s impossible.”

Raj agreed. “One of you would probably end up walking out of the room. And I don’t think it would
be Sheldon.”

Crane bristled inwardly. He adamantly rejected the notion he was anything like Sheldon. But Penny had mentioned it as well. Perhaps he should examine that observation. Later. He focused on the food that Emily had been unloading onto serving plates.

“Kentucky Fried Chicken,” she said. “It’s a guilty secret of mine. I don’t let myself eat it very often. You’re my excuse tonight.”

“I am unsure if that is good or bad,” Crane admitted.

“We have extra-crispy, hot wings, corn on the cob, and Cole slaw.”

“It all looks very American.”

“And dreadful for you,” Raj lamented. “My hips will never be the same.”

“Then you can jog around the roof later tonight,” Emily told him, unsympathetic. “I bet Ichabod can eat anything he wants.”

“I get quite a bit of exercise,” he assured her.


“I run a lot.”

“Have you tried any of Sheldon and Leonard’s Wii games?” Raj asked.

“They call it ‘getting some fresh air’,” Emily commented sardonically.

“They have tennis, boxing, baseball, golf, bowling, archery, horse racing…. ” Raj paused, trying to think of more.

“I do enjoy archery,” Crane said.

“I like to boogie.” Raj illustrated by raising his arms above his head and jerking them in unison. Emily smacked his shoulder.

Crane chewed a hot wing, deciding it was better than a chicken tender. “Do I understand that these sports are simulations?”

“Pretty much like everything else they do,” Emily shrugged, then fixed her eyes on Crane. “Which makes me wonder, what do you do that makes you a nerd?”

“Pardon?”

“You have to be at least a little nerd-like to fit into his bunch.” She waved in Raj’s direction.

“Do you consider yourself to be a … nerd?” Crane asked her.

“Not really. But I am weird.”

“I will admit to weird.” Crane thought about that for a moment. “At least by modern standards.”

Raj, perhaps feeling sensitive, enumerated Crane’s qualifications. “He likes science fiction—Star Trek and Doctor Who especially. He is always in costume. And Howard says he talks funny.”
Crane stiffened. “Howard is pointing fingers now?”

Raj shook his head ruefully. “Howard has always pointed fingers.”

Emily perked up. “Do you like horror flicks?” she wanted to know.

Crane was unfamiliar with the term. He decided to show his ignorance rather than make a potentially humiliating mistake. “Flicks?”

“See?” Raj obviously took that as proof of ‘talking funny’.

Emily ignored him. “Movies. Do you like horror movies?”

“No. Not a lot.”

“Not even classics like Frankenstein and Dracula?” she insisted.

“Mary Shelley’s novel is an excellent commentary on human nature. The movies do not always satisfy in the same manner. Bride of Frankenstein, indeed.”

Emily let go of one end of her corncob to point an accusatory finger. “That’s like using Invasion of the Neptune Men to criticize science fiction.”

He’d never heard of that film, but he could imagine. “You are right. But you must admit most of the movies featuring werewolves, vampires, mummies, and … zombies are hilarious.”

“Ooh,” Raj interjected enthusiastically. “Crane does a great riff on zombies.”

“Really?”

Raj nodded with a grin, but didn’t elaborate. Instead, he opted to support Crane’s comment. “Francis Ford Coppola’s A-grade, forty-million-dollar-budget, successful-with-the-public-and-critics Dracula was hilarious.”

“But it had such ambience. And Gary Oldman.” Emily turned back to Crane. “And you can’t lump together werewolves and zombies and the rest and make generalizations. Werewolves are about the evil that’s inside all of us, what we’re capable of doing, and the fear of not being able to control it. Mummies and zombies are about the nobility of fighting evil that’s outside ourselves, our ability to face down the powerful and seemingly invincible.”

“You make an interesting argument. But fighting evil is not romantic, it is essentially tragic.”

“Tragedy is noble. Or not, if you deny your destiny. Besides, movies are supposed to be entertaining. If they make you think, too, that’s just icing.”

Crane frowned. “I have never been convinced that killing human beings in the most gruesome ways possible is entertaining.”

“That’s the point! You know it’s not true! It’s a game between the audience and the movie-makers. They’re trying to scare you by making the horror look as real as possible, and you’re determined not to be scared. And when you do scream, that’s art!”

“You’re very passionate.”

“It’s her favorite subject,” Raj told him. “Like your soapboxes.”
Raj was apparently deeper than he let on sometimes. Crane had no idea anyone had been listening to his rants.

Emily fixed him with another look. “What you need is a sense of humor.”

“I find many things to be funny,” Crane defended himself.

“Name some.”

“Gilbert and Sullivan.” Crane had to think. A lot of modern comedy had needed to be explained to him. “Mark Twain. ‘As long as’ Geico commercials. Monty Python.”

The latter appealed to her. “O-kay!”

Crane smiled self-consciously and put his palm up to be slapped.

Raj interrupted the moment. “Emily’s favorite movie is Nightmare Before Christmas.”

“I … do not know that one.” Crane confessed.

“It’s great!” She clapped her hands in delight. “Skellington, the man in charge of Halloween, decides he wants to manage Christmas, but he gets Santa kidnapped and ruins everything for everybody. But then he meets the girl of his dreams and they fix it all. My favorite character—my role model, actually—is Sally. When she falls apart, she can sew herself back together again.”

“An enviable talent.” Crane smiled at her. Her avowed ambition was very telling.

“Yes, it is. Oh, did I say it was animated?”

“That makes me feel slightly better.”

“You don’t hate me because I like horror, do you?”

“Not at all.” He leaned in to flirt a little. “You are just weird enough to fit in with the rest of us.”

She turned to her boyfriend. “You’ll have to invite me along more often. I can put up with Howard and Sheldon if I can talk to Ichabod.” Emily looked as though she’d just realized what she said, so she patted Raj’s arm. “And cuddle with you.”

“We don’t cuddle a lot when the group gets together. But we can talk.” Raj made a gesture to indicate the two of them. “I didn’t know all that. Whenever I asked why you like horror movies, you would say ‘because they are very red and red is my favorite color’.”

“I didn’t know you wanted serious discussion.”

“I like serious discussion,” Raj told her. “And a cuddle.”

Crane gathered the leftover food—there wasn’t much—and took it over to the kitchen to be stored in the refrigerator. If Raj and Emily were going to start talking about cuddling, he didn’t need to hear their conversation. He had rather been monopolizing Emily that evening and he felt guilty. But now they could go up to the roof and the astrophysicist could do all the talking.

And if she wanted to talk with him in the future, at least she would be doing so in Sheldon’s apartment, away from Crane’s library.

The two of them approached with the empty dishes. Emily was explaining, “I did tell you that
graveyards make me feel alive.”

“I remember.”

Crane regarded both of them—they looked happy enough. At least neither of them seemed to think he’d been talking too much. He rinsed off the dishes and left them in the sink. As he reached for the lever to turn off the tap, Emily grabbed his hand and stared at his ring finger.

“You’re a Mason!”

He braced himself for another awkward conversation and reconsidered his recent judgment that she was, after all, harmless. He didn’t answer, simply waited for her next question.

“Do you know secrets?”

“Secrets about what?”

“You know, mysticism and the occult!”

“You are entirely too preoccupied with rumor, innuendo, and urban legend.” Crane took back his hand and dismissed the subject. “We need another chair on the roof. I will carry one.”

Emily’s eyes didn’t leave him as he walked across the room to the dining area. “I’ve got the cooler.” She announced, although the tone of her voice betrayed that she was thinking about his answer.

Raj smiled, obviously unconcerned. “And I will take the telescope.”

Crane grabbed one of the chairs, pulled his coat off the hook by the door, and locked the apartment behind them. “So, Rajesh, tell us everything you know about Jupiter.”
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Penny, Bernadette, and Amy take Ichabod to dinner, where he proves that he can chat up ... er ... chat with the ladies.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who continues to read. I hope you are enjoying yourselves as much as I am.

Penny didn’t use her signal as she turned off the main highway onto the back road to take them to wherever they were going for luncheon. Bernadette and Amy were to meet them at a restaurant in Dobbs Ferry. Crane was carefully following their route through northern New York.

“Finally, our girls’ night out.” She grinned. “Or, to be accurate, afternoon.”

“I knew you were never going to relinquish your preoccupation with that notion,” Crane grumbled.

“Oh, come on, tell me you’re upset about being surrounded by three young ladies and chatting them up.”

“With,” Crane insisted. “I said with, not up. I do know the difference.”

“Chill, Crane,” Penny laughed. “This is supposed to be fun.”

“I am quite prepared to have fun. If you would cease mocking me.”

“Sorry. I’ll stop,” she promised. “I will. But I can’t vouch for the other two.”

“I am unworried.” Pretending to survey the scenery, he watched her out of the corner of his eye.

“Miss Amy is often more pleasant than you.”

“Hey!”

Crane smirked.

Penny struck him on the shoulder. “You didn’t need an apology, you ... putz!”

“Putz?”

“Ask Howard. I have no idea what it means. I know it’s not a compliment.”

“I am sure it is not.”

Crane settled back and looked out the side window. He knew they were not headed toward the downtown area. This section of Dobbs Ferry was not dense with buildings, and he wondered what
kind of eatery could be around here. Then they drove around a hill that was blocking the view and he saw the tavern.

Prady’s Tavern.

The rough-hewn wood siding, high windows, tile roof, and stone chimney were exactly the same as they had been in 1781. Undoubtedly repaired and replaced, but everything looked the same, even to the color of the paint. Penny couldn’t know that he’d been here before, to strategize, to discuss politics, to drink. He realized she was waiting for him to say something, but he couldn’t get any words past his throat.

Amy and Bernadette were standing by the Wolowitzes’ SUV, waiting in the parking lot for their friends to arrive. Penny parked beside them “and Crane jumped eagerly from the car. He couldn’t take his eyes off the building.

“Well?” Bernadette wanted to know.

“He’s speechless,” Penny drawled. “Not a word. But he’s looking at it like it’s his long lost twin.”

Crane realized he was being rude. He finally cleared his throat. He bowed. “Ladies.” He swallowed. “How did you find it?”

Bernadette smiled. “We were looking for a new place for ladies’ night. Amy found it on the internet. We thought it was better than poetry night at Mabie’s.”

“Decidedly.” He looked at each of them in turn. “Thank you for inviting me.”

Penny nodded toward the entrance. “Let’s go.”

Crane opened the door for the three women to file inside ahead of him. As he entered, he looked everywhere to take it all in. The owners of the tavern were obviously invested in historical accuracy. He stumbled behind Amy, gazing full circle and trying to follow to their table at the same time.

The walls of the main room were covered with five foot of maple paneling; tan-colored plaster swirled in a pattern for the remaining three feet to the ceiling. High windows let in the daylight, which was augmented by lanterns on the walls and candles on the tables, unfortunately supplied with flame-shaped bulbs. The ceiling was half-timbered with visible beams. The room itself was divided occasionally by panels extending into the main space, topped with turned finials to the ceiling. To Crane’s surprise, he recognized several of the paintings, including the one of General William Alexander hung over the stone fireplace. On that temperate day, the fire was not lit, and Crane missed the warmth and cheeriness it usually provided.

He pulled a chair away from the table for Amy to sit, but the other two were already settled before he could attend to them. His eyebrow went up, then he sat in his own chair.

As soon as they’d been assured that a server would shortly be with them, Penny grinned and said, “Well?”

“It is amazing.” He smiled back.

“No. I mean, where’s the lecture on Revolutionary War era taverns?”

“American War of Independence.” He corrected her, just because he could, feeling a little stung at the idea of an apparently expected lecture. “And I believe if you look on the back of your menu,” he pointed at the ribbon-bound folder he’d seen lying face down in front of Bernadette, “You will learn
everything you need to know.”

“No!” Amy whined. “I want a speech.”

Bernadette was reading. “It says this place was owned by a woman.”

Willa Prady, a friendly middle-aged woman who personally greeted everyone who walked through the door, often calling them by name. “That was not unusual then. Women were frequently given licenses to run local taverns. Magistrates awarded permits to widows who would otherwise be a burden to county finances.”

“I’m glad they were so liberated,” Amy noted, drily.

“They were not liberated, not in modern terms. You would scarcely find anything familiar in their lifestyle. Which was not even a word in 1780, by the way.” Crane answered quietly. “But they were very forward-thinking on what was most important: they did not want a king or Parliament to tell them what to do.”

He watched them exchanging looks. “That was not a lecture!”

“No.” They all agreed in unison, shaking their heads. He sighed.

“Ah!” Bernadette was reading again. “They used taverns as post offices. You left your mail on the side table and a traveler would pick it up.”

Crane nodded. “True.”

“And?” Penny prompted.

“And what?” he inquired innocently.

“Whatever it is you’re dying to tell us!”

“I do not believe my longevity is in danger. But there is an amusing footnote.”

“Crane!”

He smiled. “If travelers take your letters for delivery, they are allowed to read them.”

“Ew!”

Amy laughed. “No wonder Benjamin Franklin invented the real post office.”

“I do not believe Mr. Franklin ever left a missive in a public house.” Crane knew—he had hand-delivered more than a few of them himself. “Why don’t we look at the inside of the menu so the server can get on with the rest of his day?”

Bernadette looked at the choices. “Not a lot of dainty dishes.”

Crane winced, knowing he was going to suffer the repercussions from this historical detail as well. “Women were not allowed to eat in taverns. There were often separate rooms for them to gather. I believe the room on the right as we came in was initially intended for that purpose.”

“The bar?” Penny turned to look.

“It is the only room, apparently, which has been redecorated from the original building. Excepting, I
imagine, the kitchen.”

Penny pulled a face, but none of them argued. Crane gratefully gave them credit for accepting that Colonial mores were not his responsibility, after all.

“Well,” Bernadette was studying the menu again, “I was going to ask you what to order, but this is pretty self-explanatory.”

Amy smiled. “Not everyone brings along their own Oxford professor.”

Among the four of them, they started with a Ploughman’s Platter, then individually ordered Brunswick stew, shepherd’s pie, a beef trencher, and roasted corn chowder, with plenty of pasties and johnnycakes. Drinks of choice were hard cider and spiced punch. Crane opted for a pint of Old Stitch.

“Unless I shall have to drive home.” He regarded Penny. “I have been told of some of these ‘ladies’ nights’.”

Penny scowled. “Go ahead and drink, Crane. I can take care of myself.”

Amy apparently wanted to smooth over the impending disagreement and steered the conversation away. “Who ratted?”

Crane, only half-serious in his slight to Penny and having made his point, seized on the diversion. “Sheldon. He pitied me for my impending participation in this ritual.”

“Yeah, well,” Bernadette grinned evilly, wiggling her eyebrows, “we did get drunk and make him take us dancing.”

“Sheldon does not drink,” Crane noted.

“He was disgustingly holier-than-thou the next morning,” Amy groaned.

Crane chuckled, then wanted to know. “Do you not invite Miss Emily when you plan something?”

“Yes. But she doesn’t often want to come,” Bernadette said.

Amy sniffed. “She was really upset about not being able to come today, though.”

Penny seemed to be concentrating on the Ploughman’s platter which had just arrived, and chose a slice of Virginia ham. “We heard she really enjoyed your night on the roof.”

“Rajesh was there, as well,” Crane defended himself from her implication.

“We know!” Amy said, apparently not understanding the byplay.

“Funny that you should jump right in with that.” Penny put a slice of cheddar on her salad plate. “You almost sound defensive, Crane.”

“No,” he denied. “But I had no idea that astronomy could be so amatory.”

“You never gazed at the stars with your girlfriend?” Bernadette jumped on the prevarication.

“Yes, well, I mean … astronomy as opposed to the stars. Rajesh was…” his face grew warm, wishing he could control the blood flow. He cleared his throat. “I only wish I’d had a few stories such as those when I was courting.”
“What do you mean, *when* you were courting?” Penny challenged.

“I am not now, obviously.”

“Why not?”

“Not under discussion,” he warned and tried to change the subject. “Why did Miss Emily not accompany us today?”

“No, no, no, no, no.” Penny waggled her finger. “Not getting away with that. I happen to know that Billie in Circulation likes you.”

“You sound like an adolescent, Miss Penny.”

She threw him a disparaging glare.

“Besides,” he said, falling into the adolescent himself, and a modern one at that, “she is not my type.”

“What *is* your type?”

“I do not have a ‘type’.”

“You have a not-type. So you must have a type.”

Bernadette leaned forward and growled. “Spill it.”

Crane wasn’t about to surrender any unnecessary personal detail, so he opted for a compliment. “Miss Amy.”

He had, at last, surprised Penny. “What?” she blurted.

“Explain yourself.” Bernadette scowled.

“She is intelligent, independent, has a sense of humor and a lovely smile, embraces music and poetry, appreciates history, and….” He paused and leaned forward, as if he were going to give away a great secret. “When we first met, she said she liked my clothes.”

Amy grinned.

Penny crossed her arms and regarded Crane with slitted eyes. “*And* she happens to be unavailable.”

Crane fixed her with his own look. “Just so.”

Happily, Amy laughed.

He threw her a grateful glance. “Which still leaves the question: why is Miss Emily not here?”

“You know the boys went to a science fiction convention this weekend.” Amy started the explanation.

They all paused the conversation when the food arrived. Crane brandished his fork at the shepherd’s pie but waited for the ladies to begin. “I am vaguely aware of the distribution of our group for the next few days.”

“Emily went with them.” Penny inadvertently slurped her corn chowder as she eyed the pasties it came with. “Well, with Raj. She had this amazing costume she wanted to wear.”
“Allow me to guess: all black and definitively malevolent.”

“You did get to know her pretty well.”

“She dressed up as Mazikeen and made Raj dress up as Lucifer,” Bernadette said.

Crane’s forehead wrinkled in confusion. “But Mazikeen are not evil, and they can take any shape they want to. How would you costume yourself as one?”

Penny rescued him from his all-too reality-based knowledge of gods and demons. “From the TV show. Lucifer’s bartender and protector. Here.” She dove into her purse for her smart phone. Fingering the buttons, she showed him a picture.

Emily was stunning in a long, black wig upswept in a French twist and a low-cut black leather dress that reached only a couple of inches over her thigh. She wore black boots that just covered her knee, with six-inch spike heels. A choker of two-inch-long silver daggers, arranged vertically and attached at the cross-guards, graced her neck and matched a bracelet and earrings. Her eye makeup was black and eerily fanciful.

Crane tried not to be disturbed.

Penny pulled up the next picture on her phone. Raj was standing in a tuxedo with all the trimmings, looking like an extremely smooth James Bond—or Lucifer. She also had an image of the two of them together. Unfortunately, with Raj being of a height with Emily, her heels did him no favors.

Imagining the sort of trouble he could get into, Crane decided not to comment. Instead, he asked, “Why didn’t any of you accompany them?”

“Hell, no.” Penny swore.

“To a science fiction convention?” Bernadette squeaked. “In New Jersey?”

“What is wrong with New Jersey?”

Bernadette shook her head in dismay. “What’s not wrong with New Jersey?”

Penny smiled and added, “Beside the fact that Leonard was born there.”

“We barely avoided it.” Amy nodded knowingly. “But they also want to go camping in a couple of weeks, so we traded one for the other.”

Crane winced. “My mind reels with the number of questions that statement prompts.”

Penny sighed. “Go for it.”

“They do realize that camping is outside? Why in the world would they choose to go camping?”

“We don’t know.” Bernadette shrugged. “We think maybe it’s the 50th anniversary of Snakeman getting his super powers after being bitten by a radioactive rattler in his sleeping bag.”

Crane closed his eyes briefly, considering that scenario was, regrettably, as viable as any. “And why would you choose to go camping? I believe even a New Jersey hotel must be preferable to ‘roughing it’ in the woods.”

Penny pointed her spoon at him. “Yes, but putting off a trip for several weeks is much better than a weekend right now.” She looked at the other two women. “We’ll think of something before then.”
“I have extreme confidence in your abilities.”

Amy said, “You should be grateful that we also helped you dodge a bullet.”

“A convention with a masquerade?” Crane scoffed. “I believe I could have avoided that without excess effort. And I enjoy camping.” He told them. “It is very … basic.”

Bernadette shook her head sadly “Let me give you a clue: Howard practically needs a whole car to himself to pack his electronics.”

“Unnh,” Crane groaned.

“Anyway, I wasn’t referring to that,” Amy clarified. “I meant what we saved you from by inviting you here.”

Penny’s look was full of feigned sympathy. “A theme party, created by Raj. He’s been casting around for ideas. He wants to feed you British food.”

“Now that we’ve been here,” Amy said, “he won’t have to.”

Crane’s only knowledge of the young man’s parties was a story of something called a “Tom-Hanksgiving”. Having already argued with the Lieutenant about the modern concept of the holiday, he hadn’t known what was wrong with Raj’s idea. Until he’d been informed that “Tom” was not because it was another word for turkey. Nonetheless, he defended his friend. “Perhaps you should indulge Rajesh a bit more than you do.”

“Just wait,” Penny said. “You’ve never seen him get carried away.”

Bernadette explained, “He wanted to do a Revolutionary War theme party.”

“Raj had overheard part of what we were saying about this place,” Amy noted.

“He was looking for a source to buy tricorn hats.” Penny made a face like she’d found a worm in her pasty. “Everybody would have to wear one. The whole apartment would be covered in red, white, and blue. He was struggling to decide between Union Jacks and Stars and Stripes.”

“If it was to be an event for my benefit, he should know,” Crane said. “I am an American citizen.”

“He claimed the British flag was more decorative,” Bernadette offered.

He shook his head. “And British cuisine is hardly deserving of the name. The food is, on the whole, hearty and satisfying, but hardly inspiring. There are popular jokes about the subject,” he said, hoping they would not ask for one.

Instead, Amy protested, looking at her plate. “I like it!”

“As do I. I am enjoying myself very much. But you know how much Rajesh likes to show off his cooking skills. This kind of food would hardly avail him of that opportunity.”

“Neither do Frankenweenies,” Penny observed, “but if they fit into a theme, it doesn’t matter.”

Crane let that go by, wondering if he should know what she was talking about.

“You may still get to enjoy his efforts,” Amy said. “As they were leaving for the weekend, Raj was trying to persuade Leonard and Howard to learn the fife and drum.”
“I can play the fife,” he innocently volunteered.

They all reacted instantly. Bernadette’s eyes went wide. “Don’t tell Raj that!”

Crane looked from one to the other to the other. He said, “I have been told that Sheldon plays the recorder. It is much the same.”

“Yeah,” Penny acknowledged, “but he didn’t want to have anything to do with ‘Raj’s inanity,’ as he called it.”

“How would you choose to learn the fife?” Amy asked.

“I play the flute. The skill is transferrable.”

“Wow. Flute and cello.” Amy marveled. “You could perform a duet with yourself.”

Crane tossed Amy a curious look. That sounded vaguely risqué, but she was oblivious. And, luckily, no one else even blinked. Perhaps they were used to such observations from her.

The server appeared at that moment and offered refills on their drinks. Penny enthusiastically ordered another spiced punch. Amy and Bernadette were obviously still enjoying the cider and ordered more. Crane waved in agreement at his stein. *Girls’ night*, he surrendered.

“Are you still playing Leonard’s cello?” Penny wanted to know.

“Indeed. It can be very restful at the end of the day,” he said. “I am saving for one of my own. Or … or a motorcycle.”

“What?” Penny blurted. A small smile grew slowly on her lips.

Bernadette laughed. “Both useful items, but not exactly interchangeable.”

“Hardly,” Crane commented mysteriously.

“Speed demon,” Penny said.

“So I have heard.” Crane alluded both to her allegation at the miniature golf course and Abbie’s many cautions whenever he managed to get behind the wheel of a car.

But Amy wasn’t interested in that. “How much does a cello cost?”

Crane was more than willing to change the subject. “Over a thousand dollars for one that is only just playable. Leonard is quite lucky that he still has his instrument from his adolescence.”

“I guess,” Penny mumbled.

“Does he play for you?” Crane asked.

“No really.”

“A shame. It can be quite … romantic.”

Bernadette jumped in and guided the subject wide again. “Amy plays the harp,” she bragged for her friend’s benefit.

“Sheldon doesn’t appreciate it at all,” Amy moaned. “He refuses to participate in Boyfriend-
Girlfriend Sing-Along Night even though it’s in included our Relationship Agreement.”

Crane had heard of that contract before, and he didn’t really want to think about it. The idea was somehow … disquieting. Marriages had often been prearranged in the eighteenth century, but Amy’s pact seemed—well, it was with Sheldon, after all.

He brightened at his mental picture of the young lady with the harp on one shoulder. “Do you know Jean-Baptiste Krumholtz? Four Sonatas non difficiles with cello? Bernadette and Penny might enjoy listening.”

“Oh, no, I’m only self-taught.”

“That is quite an accomplishment. What kind of music do you play?”

“The Girl from Ipanema. The theme song from What’s Happening.”

“What … is …happening?”

Penny volunteered. “It’s a TV show from the seventies.”

“Ahh.” Crane didn’t want to admit he was confused again. He turned to Amy. “Perhaps you can play for me sometime.”

“Do you know the lyrics to Wanted: Dead or Alive?” she asked.

“No. But it cannot be too difficult.”

“Yeeeeeaaah,” Penny drawled, too amused and a little drunk. “I’d pay to hear that.”

Bernadette had her smart phone quickly in hand, regarding the screen. “Should I pencil you in for girl’s night on the seventeenth?”

He protested. “I believed this was to be a unique event to test an hypothesis.”

Bernadette’s finger poised above her calendar app. “We could create another activity. ‘An Evening with Crane’.”

Crane put up a good front. Or thought he did. “You ladies could not keep up with me.”

“Do I hear another challenge?” Penny asked, too sweetly.

“No. No, no. No. Not a gauntlet thrown down. Just a casual comment. Amongst friends.” He looked desperately to Amy, but she was grinning cheekily at him. He trailed a glance around the table, grabbed a small menu from those in the center where the server had left them, opened it, and asked loudly. “Shall we indulge in dessert?”

Penny pressed her lips together to control her laughter and reached for her own menu.

The server brought more drinks to accompany the dessert of spice cake and fruit tarts, with custard for Crane. He had declined a refill on his ale. The custard, he hoped, would slide down easily with the amounts of food he had consumed that afternoon. He couldn’t even think about loosening any of the buttons on his breeches—he was in public and in the presence of ladies. The last time he was here with Ben Franklin, however….

“Are you falling asleep on us?” Bernadette’s gruff voice stirred him from his reverie.
“No!” Crane sat up to eat his dessert. “I was simply reminisc—uh, thinking about what it must have been like to dine here in the 1770’s.”

“Or surrendering to a drunken stupor,” Penny mumbled to her cake. She threw a quick grin at him to tempt him into replying.

He did not rise to her bait. Much. “I was thinking that it is fortunate the fire has not been laid. I imagine it can get rather warm in here if you’ve imbibed carelessly.”

“Ooooh.” Amy’s eyes brightened at the idea. “That would be so wonderful! We should come back sometime, when it’s snowing.”

Bernadette agreed. “You can bring Sheldon.”

Amy pouted. “He probably has some pathological problem with large open flames.”

“So maybe you won’t be going camping after all,” Crane said.

“Depends on how much he likes Snakeman,” she said sourly.

“I thought—”

“It is a euphemism,” she told him. “I just mean why they’re really going. Whatever stupid idea they’ve got in their heads.”

Crane looked desperately to Bernadette and Penny for help. Bernadette rallied. “We can all come back here for dinner. We can sit at that big table over there and stay until they close.”

“And have more of these incredible blueberry tarts.” Penny enunciated carefully. She grinned. “And punch.”

Bernadette put her fingers over Amy’s wrist. “You know Sheldon won’t be able to help himself. No matter how much he protests, he’ll be here with the rest of us.”

“Even if he’s the last one in the car.” Crane added. “Crying ‘shotgun’.”

Amy smiled, gazing at the fireplace and the table next to it. “It’ll be romantic.”

“Port?” The server appeared from nowhere, as was his habit, and offered to extend their afternoon still more.

Amy pushed away her dessert plate. “I’ll have some.”

“Me, too,” Bernadette agreed.

“And do I like port?” Penny wanted to know.

Crane raised an eyebrow at her in pointed comment and said, “I believe I shall have coffee.”

Penny knew exactly what that eyebrow meant. “The day I can’t drink you under the table, Ichabod Crane, is the day I’ll hand in my ‘Best Boozer at Bridgeman High’ Badge.”

“Heaven forbid.”

“Port?” She looked up at the server. “No port. I’ll have another spiced punch.”
“You do know there is gin in the spiced punch,” he commented.

Penny smiled widely, serenely. “Yeah.”

In the event, Crane drove them home. All of them. And made a pot of coffee.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

The crew goes on a camping trip to watch a meteor shower. No brownies, but plenty of other entertainment. (I hope.)

Chapter Notes

I spaced out December. Blame it on the holiday. I had a lot of new and unusual stuff going on. My apologies. In the new year, I wish to finish this up and start a new one. Best case scenario, anyway.

“It’s a marvelous night for a moondance!” Emily leapt out of the SUV and stretched her arms to the darkening sky.

Raj climbed out after her. “Go ahead,” he said and turned to help the rest of them to unload. “Just keep your clothes on.” He leered at Howard. “For now!”

Crane punched the button to open the hatch on the Expedition so they could unload. The former soldier, who had packed everything he was going to need in his bedroll, marveled at the volume of possessions the other eight people felt they had to bring along. He walked around to the back to help Howard unload some electronic equipment—as Bernadette had correctly predicted.

But she hadn’t been right about being able to dodge the camping trip or about the reason for it. They were there, in the woods and away from the city’s lights, to witness the Orionid meteor shower. Crane had enthusiastically signed on for the expedition.

“Are you going to record the meteor shower?” he asked.

“Oh, no, that would be Raj’s thing. Anyway, he decided to come here with us instead of sticking with the stargazers at the university. They’ll be taking readings of every little speck of dust that’s worthy of the name. And analyze it ad nauseum until they run out of grant money.” Howard pulled a suitcase-looking thing out by the handle. “This is to see if we can get the west coast feed of HBO. Westworld is on tonight and we missed it.”

“Television.” Crane sighed. He enjoyed the invention himself, but there was a time and a place. “Will they not be showing it again? All week?”

“Yeah, but you gotta keep up with the forums on Previously.TV and they’ve already started picking it apart.”

“I imagined there might be conversation amongst ourselves.”

“Conversation?” Howard looked as if he’d never heard the word before. “About what? What could you possibly talk about all night?”
“Surely we will think of something. There are nine people here.”

“People I talk to all the time.” Howard scoffed.

“Or,” Crane offered weakly. “There could be silence.”

“Silence.” Howard gave that high-pitched chuckle he favored when Raj said something untenable. “Yeah, you go with that.”

“Told you so.” Bernadette approached from behind, carrying a duffel bag.

“Yes, you did. You just did not elaborate.” He turned back to the car to grab another box of who-knew-what.

“No lecture?” Bernadette asked.

“No. No lecture.” Crane had reconciled himself to their expectations of his habitual diatribes and had sworn to refrain as much as possible. “I admit I am a bit disappointed, but if that is what they want to do, I am not going to persuade them otherwise.”

“What do you want to do? Have a sing-along around the campfire?”

“Not a ‘sing-along’, thank you. But a single voice echoing in the darkness can be quite beautiful.” He looked out over the grass to the trees and remembered. Then he looked back at her and smiled. “And, strangely enough, reassuring.”

“What do you want to be reassured about?” she wanted to know.

“Nothing. Everything. Life.” He smiled so he wouldn’t alarm her. “Getting the west coast feed of HBO.”

“Hey, where’s the campfire?” Amy exclaimed from where the others were setting up. “Let’s have a sing-along!”

He raised an eyebrow at Bernadette as she laughed. He called over. “I shall build the campfire, Miss Amy. You are in charge of anything else.”

“Crane!” Leonard shouted. “I brought some fire sticks!”

“Fire … sticks.”

“You know. For tinder. I researched it on the internet.”

“Thank you, Leonard.” He refrained, with difficulty, from expressing his views on the 21st century once again. No wonder they’d brought so many boxes. “Good idea.”

Crane returned to the SUV for his bedroll and pulled out someone’s laptop case as well. He added it to the growing pile of electronic flotsam and retreated to the spot where the tents had been left. Stooping to unroll his blankets, he located his hatchet and folding shovel; military grade flashlight; empty canvas carryall; and a few apples, bread, and cheese wrapped in a towel.

“Is that all you brought?” Penny stood watching.

“There is a gallon of water in the SUV and a couple of torches. And a bucket.”

“Torches?”
He nodded. “I believe you will be grateful for the additional illumination.”

“Where’s your tent?”

“I do not need one.”

“What if it rains?” she insisted.

“I shall get wet.”

She laughed. “Someone will give you a spot.”

“I expect they will be too busy covering that lot.” He gestured to the growing pile of equipment, wires, and corresponding tools.

Penny turned up her nose. Crane shrugged. “Chacun à son goût.”

“What?”

“I believe the phrase is ‘whatever floats your boat’.” He stood, holding the carryall and hatchet, surveying the scene. “Do they need help with the tents?”

“I can do that.”

“Then I am going to gather wood and confirm a water source, in case we need it.” Crane waved into the distance. “There is supposed to be a stream to our north. Not too far.”

“Leonard’s not the only one who checked the internet.”

He drew himself up with a sniff. “Of course you did.”

“Sheldon! What is this?” Leonard held in the air, of all things, a sword. He gained the attention of everyone, except Sheldon, who merely glanced over his shoulder.

“You know what that is. That’s my Game of Thrones Longclaw Valyrian Steel Collector’s Edition sword.”

“Ours,” Leonard corrected. “I mean, what’s it doing here?”

“Protection,” Sheldon insisted. “This is the forest! There are wild animals all over the place. I’ve been sharpening it every night and I am ready!”

“That’s what I’ve been hearing while I’m trying to sleep!” Leonard shouted as Sheldon ran over to retrieve the replica weapon. “I suppose when all these crazed raccoons and rabbits attack, you’re going to kill them with a sword.”

(Of course not!” Sheldon chided his roommate. “I’m going to set it out where they can see it and they’ll stay away.”

Crane dropped his eyes to the ground and bit his lips so he wouldn’t smile too obviously. Taking only a moment to gain control, he cleared his throat. “A deterrent. Like a nuclear bomb.”

“Precisely.” Sheldon nodded.
“Meanwhile,” Crane crossed to the woods with his hatchet, “I will build and light a fire that will actually ward off most of the wildlife.”

Howard’s voice echoed after him. “‘Most of’?”

Crane did smile that time.

After loading the bag with dry leaves and tinder, Crane chopped the wood he’d found into shorter lengths—pine to get the fire started and oak to make it last. The task wasn’t difficult; none of the logs were greater than four inches in diameter. Still, he shed his coat before he worked. The cost to clean it was prohibitive. He did appreciate the modern penchant for bathing, but sometimes the preoccupation for fresh scents seemed obsessive.

As he labored, he heard heavy feet crashing through the undergrowth. He straightened. “I am over here!”

Raj appeared through the brush. “Oh, good. I thought I was lost.”

Crane grimaced but decided he didn’t need to add to Raj’s obvious anxiety with an admonition. “I am glad you are here. You can help carry.”

He stacked the small logs onto the other man’s arms until Raj signaled his limit. Hiking the strap of the canvas bag to his shoulder, Crane hoisted the rest of the firewood. He started back to the campsite, moderating his pace. “Shout out if I walk too quickly.”

As they were approaching the others, he heard Emily say, “No, not Michael, Row the Boat Ashore. Ghost stories!” He watched her confronting Amy and found himself wondering who could take whom in a fair fight.

He chose a spot far enough from the tents and set about clearing the space while the girls continued their argument. “Thank you, Rajesh,” he said. “Why don’t you go rescue your girlfriend?”

Raj sniffed. “She doesn’t need my help. What do you want me to do?”

Crane heard more loud voices. “Are you also attempting to avoid the dispute over tent construction? Or Howard’s supervision of the video preparation?”

“Yes,” he agreed whole-heartedly, not specifying either one.

Crane smiled. “Do you see where I left my shovel?”

They found it on the ground nearby and began clearing away the sod from the area for the fire. Raj asked Leonard for the fire sticks and ran to the car to fetch them. Crane used the leaves he’d gathered and included the man-made sticks to appease his friend. He discovered he liked them, finding that they didn’t burn away as fast as the tinder and held the heat longer than the kindling. Raj kept an eye on the video setup and, as soon as Howard declared victory, abandoned Crane in favor of Westworld.

By the time he was finished and had set the logs alight, the atmosphere had quieted considerably. When the television show was over and the set was muted, its flickering light was easy to ignore. The tents were set up, the sleeping bags distributed, the fire burned, and Crane’s torches demarked each end of their domain. He was lying supine on his blankets, hands behind his head, staring up at the stars. He breathed in the pine-scented air and felt the warmth of the fire along his left side. “When
“In about half an hour,” Raj answered. “There will be on average twenty meteors an hour.”

“A meteor approximately every three minutes,” Crane commented absently.

Sheldon squealed from where he was sitting with Amy and Leonard. “The man is a mathematician!”

“No. He is right.” Crane sighed. “It was redundant. I am merely in wonder at it all.”

Raj grinned in empathy. “The Orionid shower is the dust and particles from the trail of Halley’s Comet. The Earth is passing through its debris field. The fragments slam into the atmosphere at tens of thousands of miles per hour, generating streaks of light as they burn away.”

“And that is what you see from the ground?”

“Ab-so-lutely!”

“Aren’t they cute together?” Emily smiled. “Crane just drinks up everything Raj says.”

“I am merely fascinated by the stars. And Raj is the expert.”

“Oh, please,” Sheldon groaned, “everyone knows that stuff.”

Crane objected, “I do not.”

“Just so.”


Howard stretched out on his sleeping bag, making his own tacit comment on the squabble. “Somebody wake me up when it starts.”

“Ichabod?”

He didn’t look over, kept his eyes on the sky. “Miss Emily?”

“Other than your parents, who has been the most influential person in your life, and why?”

He answered without thinking. “George Washington.”

“Why?”

Suddenly wary, he tempered his answer. “Because he is … one of the good guys. What are you doing?” He sat up to see all four women with eyes on their smart phones.

“Sounds like a canned question to me,” Raj said. “From an online dating site.”

Crane challenged immediately. “Explain.”

“We’re going to find you a woman,” Emily grinned.

“You are not.”

She shrugged. “Then we’ll find you a man.”
“I do not want one of those, either. Cease and desist immediately.”

“It worked for Sheldon and Amy,” Penny pointed out.

“What worked for Sheldon and Amy?” Crane asked.

“Howard and Raj signed Sheldon up on match.com without him knowing it.”

“Howard and Rajesh should mind their own business,” Crane replied irritably.

“Hey! I have nothing to do with this!” Howard looked as if he was still trying to sleep.

“But you’ll listen to his answers to the questions,” Bernadette noted, leaning over her husband’s prone body.

“Of course.”

“Besides, if they hadn’t minded Sheldon’s business, you wouldn’t know Amy,” Penny pointed out to Crane. “Is that what you want?”

“Do not obfuscate the issue. I, too, will have a nap, like Howard.”

Bernadette said, “Howard’s not asleep. Howard’s waiting for you to give in and answer the questions.”

Sheldon jumped up from his seat on the ground. “If you are going to engage in this nonsense, I am going to watch television.”

“What program are they showing?” Crane stood to follow him, agreeing about the “nonsense”. This was beginning to sound like some of the magazine quizzes the Lieutenant was fond of getting him involved in, to “loosen up”.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Penny made a grab for his ankle.

“Here’s the deal: if you answer, we won’t put it on the internet.” Emily bargained.

He drew himself up indignantly. “I am not a fool.”

She muttered. “Maybe not, but you are a party-pooper.”

“What happened to the ghost stories?” He attempted to divert her focus.

“That’s for after the meteors. At the witching hour.”

“And the sing-along?” He looked to Amy to save him.

“After the ghost stories,” she insisted, while everyone else groaned.

“And when are we going to sleep?”

“You don’t sleep when you camp out,” Amy said. “It’s like a pajama party outside with your clothes on.”

“I should hope so.”

Dismissing his protests, Emily continued. “What are five things you can’t live without?”
That was an easy one. Perhaps the rest of the questions would be as innocuous. Everyone was
having a good time and he didn’t want to be a … a … he couldn’t even bring himself to think the
Three questions. And at least one of you will have to answer as well.”

The girls looked at each other. Bernadette nodded. Penny said, “Deal.”

They waited expectantly, but not for long. He surrendered, sat down, and thought. “Food, air, water,
sleep—”

“The site says you can’t use those.” Emily was reading from her smart phone.

“And companionship. Why not?”

“Because it doesn’t really tell anything about you.”

“It does. It’s exactly him.”

“Your turn.” Crane dared the women.

They looked at each other again. It seemed as if they were actually communicating. A frisson echoed
down Crane’s spine and made him fear for his continued ability to dissemble. He’d already erred
with the “George Washington” answer, but fortunately, no one had seriously called him on it.

Amy was the one who spoke up. “Science. Literature. Music. Art. And Sheldon.”

“Good answer.” He smiled. “Anyone else? Howard?”

“Hey! I’m just an innocent bystander.”

“Hardly innocent.” Bernadette growled. “You started it.”

“I was miles away at the time. Metaphysically speaking.”

Crane doubted Howard knew what the term actually meant, but he resisted pointing that out.

Emily chose another question. “The four things your friends say about you are….”

He thought before he spoke, careful of any traps he might be setting for himself. “I dress strangely,”
he answered. “I speak strangely … I am extremely polite, and … I enjoy being right.”

Raj chimed in. “Whoa.”

“Self-knowledge,” Penny chortled, “thy name is Crane.”

“I so want to put this online just to see if anyone bites,” Emily murmured.

“Of course they would,” Bernadette said. “He’s a cutie. Some women wouldn’t even bother to read
the profile.”

“Then they’d deserve what they got,” Penny added drily.

“Pardon me, but am I being complimented? Or maligned?”

“Yes.” Penny and Bernadette answered.
Crane rolled his eyes and tried to move things along. “Someone else answer. Rajesh?”

“I dress impeccably,” he echoed Crane’s answer. “I speak strangely, I am extremely polite, and I am right.”

“Pray, someone strike him. I cannot reach. Someone else respond.”

“You got your ‘at least’,” Emily reminded him. “Twice.”

“Wait,” Penny said and looked over at Crane. “I’m nosy, I care about my friends, I’m not very smart, and I can’t cook.”

“Miss Penny—“

“It’s only a game, Crane.” She interrupted. “And you don’t know if I can cook.”

“Meteors, ahoy!” Leonard shouted.

“Was that the first one?” Crane asked, immediately looking to the sky.

“Sorry, there were a couple more,” Leonard answered, “but I wanted to be sure before I interrupted your … whatever that was.”

They watched for a while in silence. Sheldon rejoined the group, settling on his sleeping bag that Amy had arranged beside hers. She scooted over to sit by him, but he seemed oblivious. Until he said, “You’re breathing in my ear.”

“What does that make you think of?”

“Making you sit over there.”

She backed off.

They enjoyed watching for about forty-five minutes, even though the streaking lights were, as advertised, sporadic. Each of the group tried to be the first to sight the next one, shouting “Meteor!” often in unison.

Emily apparently tired of the game first. “Last question.”

Crane sighed. He could have sat the rest of the night in silence. “Get it over with.”

“What is the one thing that people don’t notice about you right away that you wish they would?”

“My sense of humor.”

They all—except Sheldon—collapsed in laughter. Some of them louder and longer than others. Rather than becoming indignant—which they clearly expected him to do—he calmly said. “Point proven.”

Sheldon asked, “Was that sarcasm?”

Penny had to stop laughing to answer. “It wasn’t supposed to be.”

Crane ignored her and looked back at the sky.

“You know,” Leonard said, “Howard and Raj and I went camping several years ago to watch the
Leonid shower.”

“I remember,” Raj agreed. “It was a quite different spot, though.”

“Howard wandered away from camp and met a couple of older women who’d come in their VW bus,” Leonard resumed. “They gave him brownies.”

Penny and Emily snickered. Everyone else apparently knew what was coming, but Crane waited for the rest of the story.

“Very good brownies. We ate them all,” Howard added.

“We got sooooo stoned.” Leonard laughed. “We didn’t realize it right away.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Penny admonished, “I had to tell you when you got home.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “we got silly and told secrets on ourselves and then we got hungry and ate everything in sight.”

Raj said, “We even planned a raid on a cub scout troop to steal their food.”

“Fortunately, Howard’s mother had put a brisket in his backpack and he found it before the commando raid could gain any steam.”

“We had already rubbed dirt on our faces and covered our hair with handkerchiefs.” Raj remembered.

“Don’t tell them that!” Howard shouted.

“I was not aware that you had done all this before,” Crane said.

“That’s it. We haven’t. Not really,” Leonard admitted. “We were so out of it, we forgot to watch the meteors!”

It was obviously a well-worn story—no one else reacted. Crane smiled on cue, but he wasn’t really surprised. He had learned to recognize and anticipate such behavior from them as typical. But it still warmed him, somehow.

The conversation lapsed comfortably. Leonard poked Penny in the ribs and muttered in her ear. “Meteor.”

Raj stood, went over to where the cars were parked, and unloaded a cooler full of food. He brought it back to their midst and opened the lid. “That story always makes me hungry.”

“The power of suggestion,” Amy pointed out. “I could show you the part of the brain that does that, but I’d have to scalp you first.”

“Speaking of which,” Emily said, “we’re coming up to midnight. I’m sure you know a few good stories, Ichabod.”

“About what? Microbiology?”

Emily clarified impatiently. “Ghosts. Demons. The occult.”

“None that would be proper for a campfire.” He prevaricated. “All of my knowledge is academic.”
Raj had begun distributing submarine sandwiches filled with deli meats and cheese. He offered one to Crane.

“Thank you, but I did bring some food for myself. I thought—”

“We brought one for you, Crane. Did you think we wouldn’t?”

“I—didn’t think about it.” He said awkwardly. He took the sandwich. “Thank you.” He cleared his throat and raised his voice. “Would anyone like an apple?”

“Me!” Amy cried.

Sheldon agreed. “I’ll have one.”

He was going to toss them over, but decided that Amy might miss, and Sheldon would probably dodge out of the way. So he stood and delivered them.

“Thanks,” Amy smiled. “You are going to help with the sing-along, aren’t you? No one else seems very eager.”

“I am sure once you get them started it will be fine.” He had about as much enthusiasm for the idea as the time he’d sung karaoke.

“Do you know You Can’t Get to Heaven on Roller Skates?”

“Uhmmm.” Crane tried to wedge that into his imagination. “Sorry,” he shrugged and, to his shame, hurried back to his sandwich.

Raj handed around bottles of lemonade and orange juice. The next minutes were spent with munching, drinking, and desultory conversation. Sheldon complained that his sandwich had been built with the lettuce next to the bread, but everybody ignored him.

Too soon, Emily stood, reduced her trash to a ball, and threw it in the cooler. “Gather ’round the campfire, comrades, it’s time to shock and disturb.”

“What have we been doing?” Howard quipped.

Emily stooped to speak in his ear. “And scare your pants off.” She straightened, looking at him, then over at Crane, still speaking to Howard. “Or maybe not yours.” She laughed and danced her way to the fire.

“What do we have to move?” Sheldon whined.

Amy was already following her. She pulled at Sheldon’s arm. “That’s the way it’s done. It’s scarier that way.”

“You can’t scare me,” he insisted.

“Oh, come one,” Howard said. “Somebody tell a story about birds. Or germs. Or—”

Sheldon scrambled to his feet and brushed non-existent grass from the seat of his pants. “I thought this ill-advised expedition was all about meteors.” He turned to look at Raj accusingly and raised his voice. “Which are of dubious interest to begin with.”

“Maybe,” Raj reacted pointedly, “there will be stories about chickens chasing people up trees.”
“Come on,” Amy pulled Sheldon away from the impending argument. “We’ve got a hypothesis on
the table.”

“What?”

“No one can scare you.”

“Okay.” That seemed to cheer him up. “Let me get my notebook.”

“Why?”

“And you call yourself a scientist.” He sorted through the possessions scattered across his sleeping
bag. “To record the results, of course.”

She waited for him, obviously reluctant to risk what she considered a “win”.

Crane divested himself of his coat before he approached the warmth of the flames. He sank to the
ground, folding his legs into each other, and sorted through his memory for a story he might tell.
Penny was looking in his direction, so he threw her a wan smile, trying and failing to reassure. He
regarded the rest of the circle. They all seemed game, while Amy, of all of them, seemed the keenest.
She was embracing the whole camping experience like a novice.

Emily was manic—in her milieu. Her eyes shone yellow in the firelight and her smile was almost
wicked. “I’ll start. This is a short one. I’ve got a few longer tales, too.” She leaned forward and
lowered her voice, forcing them to lean forward, too. “If you survive this one.” It was hyperbole and
her manner showed she knew it, but she launched into the narrative with relish.

I hate it when my brother Charlie has to go away.

My parents constantly try to explain to me how sick he is. That I am lucky to have a brain where all
the chemicals flow properly to their destinations like undammed rivers. When I complain how bored
I am not to have a little brother to play with, they try to make me feel bad by pointing out that his
boredom far surpasses mine, considering he is confined to a dark room in an institution.

I always beg for them to give him one last chance. Of course, they did at first. Charlie has been back
home several times, each shorter in duration than the last. Every time, without fail, it all starts again.
The neighborhood cats with gouged out eyes showing up in his toy chest, my dad’s razor blades
found dropped on the baby slide in the park across the street, mom’s vitamins replaced by bits of
dishwasher tablets. My parents are hesitant now, using “last chances” sparingly. They say his
disorder makes him charming, makes it easy for him to fake normalcy, and to trick the doctors who
care for him into thinking he is ready for rehabilitation. That I will just have to put up with my
boredom if it means staying safe from him.

I hate it when Charlie has to go away. It means I have to be good until he gets back.

There was a long, silent pause. Then a few of them stirred and Amy let out a noisy breath.

Raj laughed. “Good one! And go sit over there, please.”

“Is that it?” Sheldon wanted to know. “Is it over?”

“Yes.” An exasperated Amy pushed at his shoulder. “I should have known you wouldn’t be scared.
You don’t have enough empathy to be scared.”

“What would I do with empathy? I’m a scientist!”
“I’m a scientist, too, Sheldon, and I’d like to think—”

“You’re a biologist—”

A shrill whistle sounded across the clearing. Penny took her two fingers out of her mouth. “That’s enough, you two. We’re trying to enjoy ourselves.”

“Sorry,” Amy mumbled. Sheldon started writing in his notebook.

“Who else?” Emily asked.

“Me!” Leonard raised his hand.

“You know a ghost story?” Penny was surprised.

“I told you I did research on the internet for the trip.”

Crane rubbed a hand across his mouth to hide his expression. So he had not been the only benefactor of Leonard’s “research”.

Leonard cleared his throat.

_I don’t know why I looked up, but when I did, I saw him there. He stood against my window. His forehead rested against the glass, and his eyes were still and light and he smiled a lipstick-red, cartoonish grin. And he just stood there in the window. My wife was upstairs sleeping, my son was in his crib and I couldn’t move. I froze and watched him looking past me through the glass.

Oh, please, no._

_His smile never moved, but he put a hand up and slid it down the glass, watching me. With matted hair and yellow skin and face through the window._

_I couldn’t do anything. I just stood there, frozen, feet still in the bushes I was pruning, looking into my home. He stood against my window._

Penny studied her fiancé as if she didn’t know who he was. Howard raised his palm for Leonard to slap. Emily chortled. “Way to go! That’s the spirit!”

“So to speak,” Crane muttered.

Emily stuck her tongue out at him, but no one else reacted. “Your turn, Ichabod.”

He cursed for having drawn attention to himself. He had hoped to sit out the ghost stories as a spectator. He should have known better. He looked to Penny for rescue, but she wasn’t looking at him. Beside her, Leonard was waiting expectantly. Crane was reminded that Leonard had seen his collection of the occult, and the book in Sumerian, at the Archives.

Crane wavered, then hardened his resolve. What would he tell them? Some tale of an actual, bloodthirsty, terrifying demon, guilty of the deaths of innocent people? They were not to be gawked at.

He shook his head. “I told you. I have no stories.”

Emily looked exasperated. Crane had the uncomfortable feeling that she had come camping just to goad him into talking about the supernatural. Immediately, he rejected the idea. Why would she have become preoccupied with him? For his _library_?
“No, Amy,” Sheldon suddenly raised his voice, “Leonard isn’t married and we live on the fourth floor. How do you expect me to be scared if that didn’t even happen to him?”

Amy gestured to the notebook spread on his lap. “Strike two.”

Howard raised his eyebrows and leaned into the fire so he could see everybody at once, looking as if he were hiding a guilty secret. “I have one.”

“One what?” Bernadette asked.

“A story.”

“What kind of story?” She looked suspicious.

“A ghost story!”

“What did you learn a ghost story?”

“I went to the Temple Beth-el Summer Camp for four years. Several young boys were terrified by this story, and I have made it better.”

Raj, never happy with Howard’s exaggerations, pulled a face and groaned, “I’m sure.”

“You want to hear it, or not?”

Emily threw a dirty look at her boyfriend. “Yes, Howard, we would like to hear it. Unless Raj wants to entertain us first.”

“I don’t think that tales from the Yajurveda would play in this room.”

“Howard?”

He waited a moment for dramatic effect, then launched into his tale.

"They didn’t believe me when I told them there was an open wireless network in range, aptly named “Free Wifi”. It was rather slow, but that was not the problem. You see, we were camping out in the middle of nowhere. We parked the SUV about a mile down the trail, and from there it was a fifteen minute drive to the road. We were far removed from civilization, to say the least.

After we were all done with checking in on Facebook and replying to snapchats, my friends and I made a game of finding the source of the signal. Bernadette and I went one direction, Raj and Emily went the other. Three minutes later, we were back at the site.

They agreed with my proposal to go a third direction so we could approximate by triangulation the location of the source. Bernadette counted the steps, Raj kept an eye on the signal indicator, Emily and I looked for anything that remotely resembled a router.

About a hundred feet in, Raj told Bernadette to stop counting, the signal was at full strength. Emily looked around for flashing LEDs or running cables or anything that lit up. I suggested it could be a pocket wifi hotspot that another camper had left behind. But we found nothing.

We gave up the search and made our way back towards the campsite. That’s when the wifi signal disappeared.

The sun was setting and it was starting to fog up. A little spooked, we agreed we would pack our stuff and hike back to the truck. When we got back, we realized that we had been robbed. Our bags
were torn open, our food supplies were missing, and our tents were toppled.

What immediately seemed odd to me was that the thieves hadn’t taken our laptops or cameras. Upon closer inspection, all they had taken were the food and beverages. And in my opinion, that was the scary part. Needless to say, we crammed whatever we could into our torn-up bags and made a dash for the truck. It wasn’t until we got into the truck that Raj told us to check our phones. The wifi signal was at full strength again. A chill ran down my spine when I saw the name of the connection.

RUN, HUMANS, RUN

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Then Penny applauded. Raj looked over his shoulder.

“Why did you have to use my name?”

“No,” Sheldon was talking to Amy again. “The only scary thing about that story was they had to depend on someone else’s slow wifi!”

“Strike three,” Amy lamented. “Why don’t we do something else?”

If she was hinting for someone to call for a sing-along, she was disappointed. There was barely a pause before Leonard shouted, “Marshmallows!”

Emily echoed, “Marshmallows!”

“I brought skewers,” Raj said and jumped to his feet.

Amy stood as well, disagreeing. “I’m going to get a twig.”

“Ew.” Sheldon turned up his nose. “You can’t do that! They’re full of germs. And bugs.”

“It’s what you do when you go camping, Sheldon, and I’m going to do it. Besides, the flames will kill everything.”

“Then you’re not allowed to touch me later.”

Crane tuned out the exchange and pushed back from the fire, stretching out and offering his boot soles to the warmth. He was waiting for another meteor, feeling relaxed and content.

“Hey, Crane,” Penny hovered in his field of vision. “You want marshmallows?”

He moved his head so he could see the star field again. “Is someone making hot cocoa?”

“No, silly, we’re toasting them over the fire.”

“Oh.” He sat up, drawing his knees to his chest. “I have never done that.”

Hands on hips, she looked down at him. “You’ve never thrown a water balloon, you’ve never toasted a marshmallow. Just what did you do with your childhood?”

“I learned the cello, became a master at fencing, and hid in closets reading banned books.”


He took a breath to defend himself, but Leonard interrupted. “You know how to fence?”
“Yes?” Crane had still not developed the propensity for being teased one second and enthused over the next.

“We,” Leonard indicated the four men, “started taking lessons, but we didn’t get past the first one because it was Kripke. You could teach us!”

Crane looked at Penny. “What is ‘cripkey’?”

“I’ll tell you later. Just say no.”

He looked back at the four pairs of eyes fixed on him. “I do not have my épée nor any protective clothing.”

“I can take care of that,” Raj offered. “We want to be Jedi.”

Crane dropped his forehead to his knees. “No! The answer is no.”

“Why not?”

“Fencing is a serious sport. One can be injured. I am not going to teach you so you can turn it into some sort of fantasy mischiefs.”

“We’ll talk later,” Raj promised.

Crane shrugged. He was not going to accede to their wishes under such circumstances, but the carefree mood had dissipated and he was not going to be responsible. “Someone mentioned marshmallows? Amy,” he unfolded himself and climbed to his feet, “let us find some twigs.”

When they came back with their sturdy green sticks shorn of leaves, they found Emily feeding Raj a gooey confection with charcoal outsides. At Crane’s wince, Amy said, “You don’t have to burn it.” She smiled. “And you can serve yourself.”

“Good.” He settled in again between Penny and Howard, watching how everyone else held their sticks over the flame until white turned golden brown. Nothing had changed since the eighteenth century but the choice of food. And those long, thin metal skewers that you could probably kill with, given enough thrust and the proper target. He chased the thought and requested a marshmallow.

Crane waited patiently until it toasted and carefully pulled it off the end of the sharpened twig.

“Perfect!” Penny interrupted his narrow focus on his dessert. “Watch your moustache!”

Obediently, he opened his mouth wider. The sweetness exploded on his tongue and he would have moaned aloud if his lips had not been sealed. He closed his eyes and heard the sound of Penny’s laughter. Reluctantly, he looked over at her and tried to speak, but all he produced was a mmpfh. She laughed harder.

“Steady on, there, Crane. It’s not sex.”

“No,” he managed to loosen his tongue, “it decidedly is not.”

“Sorry,” She dipped her hand in the bag and held out a marshmallow. “I keep forgetting you don’t want to hear the s-word.”

He threw her a skeptical glare, but accepted her offering nonetheless. “You prey on my sweet tooth.”

“It makes you pliable. You ought to watch that.”
Crane knew that she had discerned his weakness, but not that she realized she could take advantage. He filed the fact in the back of his eidetic memory and happily ate six more marshmallows.

They were finishing off the bag when Amy declared, “I hear a song coming on!”

There was grumbling and shuffling while everyone avoided eye contact with her. Seemingly oblivious, she continued enthusiastically. “When I was little, I dreamed about what camping might be like. My mother wouldn’t let me join the Girl Scouts or the Campfire Girls or the 4-H, and our church didn’t have a camp. So I would pretend to build a fire in the middle of my bedroom floor—well, I tried it once, but we don’t talk about that. And now I’m actually here with you guys and the only thing that’s left is the songs.”

“Aw, sweetie….” Penny wasn’t sure what to say.

“Listen up!” Bernadette rasped, rather loudly. “You guys are gonna sing!” She looked at Amy and said sweetly. “We’re all going to sing.”

“Yes!” Howard agreed after getting an elbow in his ribs. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

Amy clapped her hands in delight. “Does anyone know Nobody Likes Me?”

Crane doubted that such a song would lighten the mood, and was surprised when everyone nodded sportingly. Amy drew a breath and sang with gusto and a clear alto that lacked finesse.

Nobody likes me,
Everybody hates me!

Guess I’ll eat some worms.

Long, slim, slimy ones,

Short, fat, juicy ones,

Itsy-bitsy, fuzzy-wuzzy worms.

The last three lines, apparently, were the chorus and he was bidden to sing along.

First you get a bucket,
Then you get a shovel.

Oh, how they wiggle and squirm.

“Chorus!” Penny shouted and poked him.

Everyone was getting into it now, shedding their reluctance for true enjoyment. He smiled and made a stab at joining them.

Long, slim, slimy ones,

Short, fat, juicy ones,

Itsy-bitsy, fuzzy-wuzzy worms.

There were five more verses, about sucking guts and vomiting, and therefore five more choruses. At
the end, Crane said, “I see you all know that … song.”

“Oh, yeah,” Leonard nodded. “Inevitably. Learned it when we were kids.”

He fixed Penny with a glare. “And you make mock of my childhood.”

Raj, obviously having learned the chorus along with Crane, was catching his breath after an exuberant finish. “It must be an American thing.”

Crane had to smile. This was why he had fought and died in the Revolution, after all. He wondered what Washington would have thought.

Emily didn’t give him any time for more reflection. “If that’s what you’re after,” she said, “I have one.”

*Great green gobs of greasy, grimy, gopher guts,*

*Mutilated monkey meat,*

*Little, dirty, birdie feet.*

*A great big bowl of all-purpose porpoise pus,*

*And me without my spoon.*

She began to direct grandly like Zubin Mehta, inviting them all to join in, refusing to stop the dubious line until they were all singing.

*Me without my spoon.*

*Me without my spoon.*

*A great big bowl of all-purpose porpoise pus,*

*And me without my spoon.*

*But there’s a straw!*

Applause. There was actual applause.

Penny, looking a bit unhappy, asked, “Does anyone know *You Are My Sunshine*?”

“I do!” Amy cried.

They sang a duet, running through the song twice. Everyone had the decency to applaud again.

“Howard,” Amy asked. “You said you went to camp. Did you learn *You Can’t Get to Heaven on Roller Skates*?”

“Jews don’t believe in heaven.”

“Oh. Too bad. I can’t seem to find the melody anywhere. It’s got a million verses.”

Crane spoke up, “I could have a turn.”

“Really?” Amy beamed.
“You won’t know it.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she assured him.

“It is a drinking song.”

Penny, of course, teased him. “Don’t you have to get sloshed first?”

“Not necessarily,” he admitted. “But it does help.”

He sang in a rich baritone.

_Let’s be jovial, fill our glasses,_

_Madness ’tis for us to think,_

_How the world is ruled by asses,_

_And the wise are swayed by chink._

_Never let vain cares oppress us,_

_Riches are to them a snare;_  

_We are all as rich as Croesus,_

_While our bottle drowns our care._

Clapping. And hooting. Penny used two fingers to whistle. Amy cried, “He can sing, too!”

“Teach it to us,” Emily demanded.

“You don’t really—” He looked around the group. They were all too amenable. Except Sheldon, who was glaring at him. For some reason.

“All right,” Crane agreed. “I will sing one line and then you repeat it.”

_Let’s be jovial, fill our glasses._

That lasted entirely too long, as far as Crane was concerned, but finally they were satisfied. He sat back, glad to no longer be the center of attention when Sheldon grabbed Amy’s arm and said, “I can sing.”

She was surprised. “You want to sing a song?”

“I know songs.”

“Go, Sheldon!” Leonard clapped.

“This is called _Sophisticated Row, Row, Row Your Boat._”

_Propel, propel, propel your craft_

_Placidly over the liquid solution._

_Ecstatically, ecstatically, ecstatically, ecstatically,_
Existence is merely an illusion.

No one expected anything different from Sheldon, but they all laughed and made a fuss over him. He insisted on a round, organizing it, and pushing until they’d sung the tune several times.

“We used to sing that in school,” Emily said. “Only the last two lines were ‘throw your teacher overboard, listen to her scream.’ ”

Raj smiled at her affectionately. “Of course they were. But now it’s time for some hip hop.” He bellowed the last two words. “Shake it off!” He got up, helping Emily to her feet.

‘Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play,

And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.

Emily and Raj were moving to their music. Penny scrambled to her feet, looked over to Leonard who was pointedly not looking at her, then gestured to Crane. He put up a palm in refusal and shook his head. She danced over to Howard, but Bernadette followed her husband as he jumped up. Amy eagerly joined Penny.

Baby, I’m just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake.

I shake it off, I shake it off.

Leonard enjoyed watching Penny while Sheldon sat with his hands over his ears. Crane might have heard two verses in there somewhere, as well as some speaking parts. After three choruses and endless repetitions of “I-I shake it off, I-I shake it off”, the dancers collapsed and crawled back to their sleeping bags. Crane banked the fire and picked up the marshmallow bags and skewers. The remnants went into the cooler with other odd bits of trash and a few juice drinks.

Crane sat on his blankets and gazed again at the stars. The intermittent spectacle was not over yet, and he was content just to watch.

A little later, he looked around the campsite at his friends. Rajesh and Emily had gone off by themselves, but had come back, giggling and falling into each other. Some of the rest were on the internet, some were watching television, but he didn’t care anymore. Penny and Leonard were lying on her sleeping bag, murmuring sporadically to each other. It was a marvelous night, as Emily had said, moondances notwithstanding.

He settled back to the stars and his thoughts.
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

The gang finds out more than Crane ever wanted them to. A lot more. They all work to deal with it in their own way.

Crane was kneeling by the fire, about to encourage it back to life when the first scream echoed from the trees across the clearing. The sound was muffled, as though it was not nearby. Instinctively, he checked the group to reassure himself they were all there. He jumped to his feet while his friends were still looking at each other, wide-eyed and uneasy.

“It is probably nothing. Someone celebrating too loudly.” Crane pried one of the torches out of the ground. “I shall check. You stay here.” His gaze fell on Penny. “All of you. Miss Penny.” He tried to communicate, with a look, how deadly serious he was without frightening the rest too much. “Keep them here by the tents. I mean it.” He looked at each of them. “Do not move. Do not follow for any reason. I will be back. Don’t … worry. Watch … television.”

Before the others could do anything but stand, before they could process what he was saying, he plucked Sheldon’s replica weapon from the ground by the man’s sleeping bag. Crane hoped it was sharp enough to defend against whatever was out there. If there was anything out there.

Sheldon shouted. “My Game of Thrones Longclaw Valyrian Steel Collector’s Edition sword!”

Two more screams. One voice. Crane ran for the woods before the thought to run could even materialize. “Thank you!”

His fault. His fault. He’d had a gut feeling that the threat had not disappeared with the Exluto and the five-planet phenomenon. But here he was, treating the very next astronomical event like a holiday in the country. He cursed himself for being caught up in the romance of gathering with actual friends to watch the meteor shower, drinking, eating, and telling tall tales. Foolish beyond words. Especially when this was so similar to his last experiences in the darkened woods. If not earlier, he should have at least made the connection when he settled in the grass and looked up to the sky.

He found himself wishing for another scream, not only for reassurance that the person was still alive, but for a direction to pursue his prey. Then Crane heard something moving through the underbrush, apparently not caring if it was detected. Not nearby, but sizeable. Not an Exluto. Bigger, not as clever.

Crane ran.

Eventually, he came across the flattened grass of a path. The underbrush had not been disturbed by the screamer, but by a large entity with oversized feet. He took off in the direction that the creature had taken, resisting the temptation to beat back the remaining branches with the sword. He had no idea if the blade was sharp enough to fight off a demon, and he wasn’t going to dull it any more.

He was grateful for every stride that took him away from the campsite, hoping that whatever it was would not encounter any more stargazers. Especially, selfishly, his companions.
Stumbling suddenly onto a clearing, he caught a whiff like burning sulfur. Sword extended and torch in the air, Crane walked clear of the woods, turning in a circle, consciously slowing his breathing.

Only about eight feet tall—not counting the horns curved close to its head—but powerfully muscular. Limber, but not excessively quick. The head similar to a boar, with a shorter snout. Body covered with inch-long fur, black with a blue sheen. Except for a brand burned into its chest, Crane noted with dread—of the Satanic Cross.

The creature was a Banach, he knew from his books. Its only vulnerable spot was on the bottom of its feet. He wondered, fleetingly, if the young lady from Nebraska who was alleged to tip cows could tip a Banach.

Crane ran at the demon, waving the sword at its ankles, ducking under the swipe from its claw, and forcing it to pivot to face him. He planted one end of his torch into the soil for illumination, as well as potential use as a weapon later, and turned all his attention on his opponent. It stood ready to attack, arms slightly away from its body, but legs straight instead of bent at the knee. That posture might be a small advantage, especially if he tried to topple the creature to get at its feet. He wondered if he could cut it elsewhere and moved in to find out.

He slashed at its torso, but it turned and the sword landed across its side. The blade broke the skin, but the demon seemed not to notice, other than a slight pause in its attack. It swiped at Crane with the back of its hand and he found himself on the ground. He failed to get a good angle on the foot that came after him and rolled away at the last instant, gaining his feet. His biggest advantage, it seemed, was his speed. He winced, knowing from experience that his stamina would not last as long as the demon’s. He maneuvered closer, trying to avoid its arms.

His sword lashed at its legs again in an attempt to make the Banach raise a foot to drive him off. Crane scored in several places before he was swatted away, this time to his hands and knees. He wondered why the creature didn’t use its claws, but he was grateful.

A scream echoed across the clearing.

“Crane!”

“No!”

“Ohmigod!”

_Damnation!_

He looked up. Five of them, with the rest crashing through the brush from behind. “Stay back! Stay among the trees!”

Wielding the sword, he tried to drive the Banach across the empty space, away from Penny and her friends. The demon refused to cooperate, standing its ground and striking back at Crane. He weaved and avoided the blows, sometimes parrying the strong paws, gripping the sword with both hands. But he was knocked to the ground again and rolled away, at the same time making a desperate bid to cut the demon’s feet. He stood, staggered, sucking in lungful’s of air.

The night filled with shouts from the edge of the woods.

“It’s a demon! It’s really a demon!” Emily.

“Do something, Howie.” Bernadette.

“It’s an alien. Don’t hurt it!” Sheldon.

“Sheldon! Get back!” Penny.

“Sheldon!” Leonard.

Out of the corner of his eye, Crane saw the lanky scientist, enthralled with the Banach, reaching out. “Get the hell out of here, Sheldon! You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“Don’t hurt it. It’s only trying to defend itself.”

Crane shoved Sheldon out of the reach of the demon, and threw himself between them, trying to keep an eye on both. “Go! Now!”

“This is our first alien contact. You can’t—”

Crane whirled and punched at him, hitting his face, and finished the movement by confronting the advancing Banach. He noted Leonard running up and grabbing at Sheldon, pulling him away. Raj followed, and together, with the shock of the bleeding nose, managed to get them all back to the protection of the trees.

“He hit me!”

Dismissing everything but his opponent, Crane concentrated on his tactics. If the thing wouldn’t go down with low strikes, perhaps blows to the head would do the trick. He cut at the demon’s snout, startling it, but leaving his own midsection vulnerable. It struck out with its claws this time, but was too late; Crane had already slid away.

He studied the Banach. The wounds were no more than a nuisance to it. Perhaps he should target its eyes. That might confuse it enough so it would stagger and trip. He didn’t make the move right away, agitating it for a few minutes rather than attacking. Finally, he saw his opening and, rather than the broad side of the blade, he used the point and aimed for the eye.

He missed. The creature didn’t. He felt claws sink into his side. He moved with the strike and knew he had avoided the worst of it. The wound still hurt like perdition, but he had to ignore it.

“No! No! You can’t—!” Penny screamed.

Crane retreated for a moment. He watched the demon waiting for him. He stared at the satanic brand on its chest and wondered what it was there for. The Banach wasn’t known for being a servant, but perhaps the cross put it in thrall to whoever had used the Exluto. Was it a taunt to the Witness, or a necessity to bring it into the spellcaster’s power?

He looked around the clearing, locating the torch he had thrust into the ground. Keeping an eye on the demon, he crossed over, tugged it from its place, and went back to the fight. He circled, waiting. One of the strong arms clouted Crane’s shoulder, but he stood his ground. When the demon pulled back its arm again, Crane was close enough to aim the torch at the exposed chest and its sigil. He held it there as the Banach staggered back, one foot, another foot, and again. Both arms reached out and picked up Crane and threw him across the clearing.

He lost his grip on the torch and rolled across the grass. In a moment his head cleared, and he pushed himself up to see that Leonard had grabbed the torch. A few small flames licked up from where it had lain, but were not a danger. He tossed his sword from his left to his right hand and sought the
Banach. It was prostrate, struggling to recover, but Crane’s only focus was the soles of its feet. Crane ran and made giant x's on the calloused flesh.

The Banach stopped moving. Crane continued slashing until there was nothing but dark ichor seeping from the flesh, unrecognizable as feet. From the lower appendages, then upward, the demon’s body melted into liquid until nothing but a long, wide streak remained.

Crane kept himself upright using the sword as a cane. He breathed heavily and closed his eyes, trying to recover, but suddenly feeling all the injuries he had incurred. He opened his eyes to find he was surrounded. Nodding his head to acknowledge them, he took the torch from Leonard. “Pray, make sure the flames are out.” And walked over to the stain in the grass. “Emily!”

Startled, she looked up from where she knelt by the stain, ready to poke at it with the end of a ballpoint pen. He had to keep her away, had to keep them all away. His eyebrow rose as he stared her down in a bluff. “I hope you are prepared to die a horrible, wasting death, for that is what will happen if you even touch the ichor from that demon!”

She jumped to her feet. “It is a demon!”

“Move away.” Crane touched the flame to the stain, making it glow low and blue like a gas burner on a stove. He watched it, almost mesmerized, his anger simmering until he could no longer manage the feeling.

“I have never asked anything from any of you. So when I gave serious instructions, I thought, if only for the novelty, that you might actually listen.” His hands gripped into fists while he tried not to tremble with pent-up horror at their actions. Crane turned, shouted, feeling helpless. “Look at each other! Go on, look! Now choose one to see lying on the ground, without a breath, without a heartbeat, covered in blood! Any of you could have died! All of you could have died!”

Penny’s quiet voice undercut his emotion. “So could you.”

He ignored her sentiment in favor of the one he couldn’t let go. “You were supposed to keep them at the campsite.”

“Don’t blame her,” Leonard said. “She tried.”

“Seven to one,” Amy defended, then apparently reconsidered and looked confused. “More or less.”

“Less, I imagine.” Crane deliberately misconstrued her meaning. “Because you wanted to help.”

“That’s not fair.” Penny was nearly crying. “Screw you.”

“And you hit me,” Sheldon challenged, leaping into the open animosity to note his grievance.

Crane turned his laser look on Sheldon, daring him to continue, completely disregarding the redness growing around the man’s eyes. Sheldon stepped behind Amy.

“Go back to the campsite,” Crane started, then heard movement from the trees and at least two women’s voices. He handed off the sword to Raj. “Conceal this. Don’t touch the blade or the liquid on it.”

Crane turned to face three young ladies as they stepped into the clearing. “Ah! Are you the ones who saw the bear?”

One, with short blonde hair and running shorts with a sweatshirt, looked at him suspiciously.
“Wasn’t a bear.”

Crane smiled. “I have never seen a bear walk around on its hind legs for so long. They usually lumber around on all fours. The bear went off that way,” he pointed, “away from the campsites. I expect the bear was attracted by the smell of food, but it was put off by the fires. Black bear, handsome fur coat. Rather tall, but the bear was probably more afraid of us. I know there are bear around Sleepy Hollow, but I didn’t think one would show itself tonight. You should go on back to your belongings to keep away from the bear. Wouldn’t want to sight it again, would you?”

“No. I wouldn’t. No.” She shrugged at her friends. “The bear scared me to death. We don’t usually go camping, but we couldn’t resist tonight.”

“Seen everything, anyway.” The long-haired brunette laughed, shakily. “And I mean everything.”

Crane asked, “Did you see the bear, too?”

“No, only Paula did.”

“Well, now you have a tale for the tavern Saturday night. A meteor shower and a bear.” He unobtrusively aimed the three in the direction he wanted them to go. “Have a good night. Whatever is left of it.”

“You, too.”

“Bye.”

The third girl waved, still not speaking.

After they disappeared and their passage could no longer be heard, Amy said, “Boy, you’re good.”

“Pardon?”

“You must have said the word ‘bear’ at least ten times.” She grinned and wagged her eyebrows. “Neuro-linguistic programming.”

“Again?”

“Neuro-linguistic programming,” Amy enunciated.

“Yeah,” Penny put in, caustically. “Now you’ll be even more full of yourself.”

“As I was saying,” he continued, pretending he hadn’t heard the snub, “go back to the campsite—follow the trampled brush—and pack up. Go home. Take both vehicles, I will find my way back. I need to search for anything else that might be in the woods.”

Penny stirred, but didn’t speak.

Raj shook his head. “We will pack both cars, but we’ll leave yours where it is.” He attempted a small smile. “Howard can sit on my lap.”

“Fine,” Crane acknowledged.

“Not.” Howard’s delayed protest was feeble, as if he didn’t really care. He still held Bernadette’s hand and she hovered at his shoulder.

“Wait a minute,” Emily insisted. “What the hell is going on?”
Crane turned to her. “You just saw me frighten away a bear. Tell anyone else you see that it will be safer if they return home.”

“But—”

“We will all speak later. I have duties.” Crane realized that there would probably not be another demon in the woods that night, or he would not leave his friends to stumble back to the campsite on their own. But he was too overwrought to speak and they were in no shape to listen. Penny would have to answer their multitude of questions and he was infuriated enough to let her.

He took the sword from Raj and the torch from where it had been planted once again. He stepped away from the clearing and deeper into the woods.

Ichabod Crane was becoming angrier and angrier as he walked. He was angry at Penny for following him and letting everyone else follow him. He was angry at Emily for being fascinated by the demon. At Sheldon for getting punched. At Leonard and Amy and Raj and Bernadette and Howard for succumbing to their curiosity. At all of them, for caring about him.

He cursed the demon, and the being who had sent it, for ruining his idyllic evening at the campfire and reminding him of who and what he was.

Crane was slashing at the underbrush before him as he stormed through the wooded area—something he had been careful not to do earlier. He was also recklessly warning whatever might be near of his own presence. He stopped, bending over to clutch at a stitch in his side from running, gulping air. He couldn’t see for the tears in his eyes.

He hated Jenny for being halfway around the world. He hated Irving for choosing his own family, and Corbin for dying.

He hated Abbie for abandoning him.

And he hated himself for every mistake he had made since clawing his way out of his grave.

Crane tilted his head back, addressing the firmament, but oblivious to the occasional meteor that streaked across. After a few minutes, he lowered himself to the ground and leaned against a tree. He left the torch, which was running out of fuel to burn, and the sword in the dirt beside him. Exhausted physically and emotionally, he willed himself to relax, but his body and mind still vibrated.

He didn’t want to be angry. He didn’t want to hate … anybody else.

He concentrated on himself.

Leaving Abbie in Purgatory. Not knowing his own wife as he should have. Desperately embracing the easiest answers. Allowing Macey to be possessed. Disappearing to England for months without a word. Not letting himself realize that Abbie was about to make another sacrifice for them all.

Honor our bond.

Be brave.

Be strong.

Abbie’s last words.
Bash some monsters for me.

Crane inhaled sharply, noisily. Guiltily. He forced himself to gather his thoughts. And exhaled. What kind of being could gain control of an Exluto and a Banach? What kind of being would gain control of an Exluto and a Banach? Why? Not enough information.

The being had referenced Revelation in the efforts of the mud-man. So. Crane needed Revelation. He started to run the verses through in his mind. But he was exhausted, and he couldn’t hold them there. Couldn’t concentrate. Couldn’t think. Couldn’t even stay awake.

He slept.

Eight bodies were lying on the ground, left carelessly strewn about the clearing where he had fought the Banach. Each one had suffered a different cause of death. Slashed, eviscerated, burned, beheaded, blackened with bruises, mottled with disease, green with pus, eaten with acid. Penny. Leonard. Sheldon. Emily. Howard. Amy. Bernadette. Rajesh. Each one frozen in time by their mortality.

He screamed. And awoke. He struggled to his knees and vomited until he was gagging up bile. He rolled to his back, away from the stench, and stared up at the lightening sky.

There he was.

Numb.

Crane added another transgression to his list: trying to be a normal man in 21st century America.

He lay there, taking comfort from the fact that he could not hurt anyone for as long as he lay there.

Crane fitted the key into the lock and then realized that the door to his apartment had already been opened. He shouldn’t have been surprised. As he considered retreating to the Archives, the door swung wide and Penny stood there.

How do they say that? If looks could kill....

“Miss Penny.”

“Crane.”

“Penny, let him in,” Leonard called. “It is his apartment.”

As she stood aside, Crane nodded to Leonard. “Thank you.”

He stopped short. They were all there, eyes on him, having dragged over even the dining chairs to have a place to sit. He’d expected Penny to be watching for him from her own doorway, possibly Leonard, maybe Emily. But not all eight of them. And not in his apartment. Like adjudicators. Or an extended family. Or cannon fodder.

Crane crossed to the kitchen island and set down the sword. Sheldon ran across the room and studied the blade that the Witness had forcibly borrowed.

“I will return it in the same shape as when I appropriated it,” Crane told him. “If you will allow me.”
“You bet you will, buster!” Sheldon turned to face him. His eyes had become a deep purplish black and a piece of tape graced his nose.

Crane winced. “I—” He battled with his personal protocols, but couldn’t bring himself to apologize. Sheldon had deserved it, after all. “Are you sufficiently recovered?”

“No.” Sheldon glared. “You hit me!”

“You could have gotten us both killed,” Crane countered.

Leonard warned, “Sheldon, remember what we talked about? I told you not to bring it up.”

“I didn’t. He did.”

Crane pivoted to address the rest of them. “If any of you wish to further remonstrate with me, my answer is the same to you.”

“You killed a demon.” Emily stared at him, holding one of his leather-bound volumes about the occult, a finger stuck among the pages betraying that she had been reading it. “Penny told us why. You’re … you’re….”

He cursed vehemently in Sumerian and practically leapt across the room to seize the book from her fingers. “I see you have discovered one of the reasons I value my privacy. And why I always keep my door locked.”

“We figured you wouldn’t come to see us,” Amy said.

“No. Not until I was ready.”

Penny growled. “Do you know how long it’s been since you left us in the woods to go ‘do your duty’?”

“I regret to say that I do not. But I did at least wish to freshen myself, attend to my injuries, and change my shirt. If none of you object.” He regarded each of them, wishing they were not making this so difficult. He had foolishly thought that he would be able to pick the time and place for their … discussion. Hardening his resolve, he raised his voice, “That was your cue to leave my home!”

Amy’s calm voice interrupted his vehemence. “Do you need help with your wounds?”

His eyes pressed closed in exhaustion. “Go away.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “We can be just as stubborn as you, and we don’t have to holler.”

“Are you trying to make us mad at you?” Penny asked. “Because we’re extremely through that and out the other side. You shouldn’t have taken so long to get home.”

Perhaps not unexpectedly, Amy was the one who challenged him now. “What would you have done if your wounds were as bad as last time?”

He had no answer for that. He’d never had to worry about the hurts he’d incurred. Before. The Lieutenant’s influence had gotten them into the Emergency Room with impunity, and Corbin was an EMT. Amy had been delivered to him, inadvertently, by Penny, and he had taken her for granted.

Crane looked down at Amy, realizing he should have talked with her weeks ago. He had waited for her to ask because he had known she would not. “You weren’t surprised, were you?” he asked,
trying to be matter-of-fact.

Amy shook her head. “Penny tried to tell me before and I wouldn’t let her. But I thought a lot about what she almost said. I have seen that horrible scar on your chest, you know. If it had been from an auto accident or something, you would have explained. You put me off instead.” She explained frankly and calmly. “I was stunned last night, but I reasoned through it pretty quickly.”

“Hey!” Raj protested. “How come she got to know and we didn’t?”

“So Amy knew.” Emily half-accused him of …what?

“No….”

Raj saw through the prevarication. “But you’re not mad at her. And Penny knew. And you are mad at her,” he objected.

Crane resented being challenged. “I would prefer that no one knew. It puts you all in danger.”

“Do you think that us not knowing keeps us any safer than we are now?” Leonard asked quietly.

Crane froze. “No,” he admitted. “Merely being acquainted with me puts you in danger.”

No one else in the room moved, either, as they watched him. No one said anything. They waited.

He stood until his mind cleared a bit, then he drew in a deep breath. “I am sorry. I am angry. I am … overcome. I can find no words in the English language to describe how I feel at this moment. None of you can possibly have any idea—” He looked around the room at all of them—upset, angry, argumentative, confused. Suddenly cast adrift from their anchor of reality. He dropped his eyes to the floor, trying to block their faces from his awareness. And sighed. He wanted time. Needed time. But time had run out and he owed them a new mooring.

“Will you each make a vow not to follow me into battle ever again?”

“If you hadn’t kept secrets,” Leonard said, “we might not have followed this time.”

His eyebrow went up. “Might not?”

“Some of us.” Leonard equivocated, then mumbled down his shirt. “Probably.”

“We’re not heroes,” Raj said.

“Nor am I.”

Emily protested. “You’re in the fricking Bible!”

“Pray, do not blaspheme.”

“I wasn’t—”

Penny cut into the argument. “I won’t remind you how dangerous it is just to walk down the street in Sleepy Hollow. Or through the town cemetery.”

Leonard agreed. “And I won’t mention that you thought camping out was a great idea.”

“My decision was foolish. I should have been more circumspect.” Crane tried to defend himself.
Raj asked quietly, “What would have happened if you hadn’t been there?”

“None of us can know the answer to that.”

After a few moments, Leonard spoke again. “Look at me. And tell me. If I had heard a terrifying scream and chased off into the woods with a torch and a sword, what would you have done?”

Sighing, Crane had to concede. Leonard was right. They were all right. He could not expect to coexist as intimately as he was attempting without revealing his secret. And now they were paying for it. He had been terrifyingly selfish.

Penny, too perceptive by far, seemed to read his thought processes as if they were a book. “Are you going to move out of the apartment?” she demanded.

“I have a lease.” Crane pretended that that meant something.

“You’re going to hide, then.” She smiled, humorlessly. “I know where the Archives are.”

He saw that she was deadly serious. He studied her silently for a moment, then turned back into the room and regarded the rest of his companions. He pictured them all trailing after Penny to the Archives.

His hands worked in agitation and his head tilted back to study the ceiling. His hair was in his eyes because the tie that was meant to hold it back was hanging over his shoulder by only a few strands. He wondered why he was thinking about his hair.

Crane focused on them again. “You have obviously been speaking amongst yourselves while I have been … absent. Why don’t you tell me what you have decided and then I will tell you what you have decided.”

“Very funny,” Penny said.

“I mean it.”

They all looked at each other and shuffled a bit. Leonard shrugged, and Howard drew Bernadette closer with both arms. Raj reached for Emily’s hand, but she was too distracted to notice when he took it. Sheldon looked like he didn’t care. Penny waited. Amy was watching Crane carefully.

Leonard looked around at the others and then stepped forward. “I think you’d admit we are all intelligent people. Now, none of us are very physical—” Penny and Bernadette reacted at that. “Okay!” The interruption seemed to put him off his stride and he started to ramble. “I can say … none of us wants to fight demons … physically. In person. With fists or swords or crossbows or even balloons—”


He lowered his head and took a breath. And looked at Crane again. “We all have something to contribute. You know Penny has a terrific imagination. Sheldon can help you do research—he can speed read and remember everything. Emily wants to help you study the occult. Amy can analyze the behavior of animals—maybe demons, too.”

Crane opened his mouth to protest and Penny stopped him. “Shut up. He’s not finished.”

“Bernadette can design chemical weapons based on a demon’s physiology. Howard can build mechanical weapons and Raj can assist him and egg him on. And I can design protocols to test
everything before you use it.” Leonard grinned, apparently more confident in his argument now. “And apparently you’ve already been getting help with your injuries.”

“I am a doctor.” Emily was obviously upset at having to remind him.

Crane rubbed at the tension building in his temples. He was impressed by the depth of their thinking, but he still had to discourage them. “You are quite optimistic. And obviously keen. I am overwhelmed. However—”

“We said we don’t want to fight. At all. For any reason.” Leonard promised.

His head throbbed, his bruises ached, and his wounds stung. He could barely stay upright. His throat insisted on closing up and he cleared it again. “I would appreciate some time to … consider … your offer.”

“You mean you want to think of reasons to turn us down,” Penny drawled.

“Perhaps.” He wasn’t sure himself if he was lying at that moment.

Leonard raised a hand to stop the rumble of discontent. “Hold on. We’ve at least got a chance.”

“In the interim, I would like to address each of you.”

Amy spoke before he had the chance. Her look had softened. Somewhat. “I’m fine. But I will be looking at those cuts.”

“Later.” Crane assured her, surrendering only to her promised ministrations. He looked to the newest of the group. “Miss Emily—”

“Can we talk about supernatural stuff?”

He studied her expression. She was eager, but not stupid. He knew she would go ahead with reading and searching on her own if he did not rein her in. “With much circumspection. And I will tell you what you can learn and what you cannot.”

Emily regarded him before she answered. He hoped she saw how resolute he was. She shrugged. “Then I’m cool.”

Crane’s eyes lingered on her for a second, then he turned to her companion. “Rajesh—”

“She knew.” Raj grinned, his eyes bright with satisfaction. “She told me and I thought she was crazy.”

Looking briefly to Emily, Crane figured he had the answer, but asked anyway. “Knew what?”

“That you were more familiar with the occult than you were letting on. Like really a lot.”

“All your boxes of books,” Emily explained. “It wasn’t hard to see some of the titles.”

“I was not expecting you in my home.”

“I tried to ask without asking,” she said. “I guess I was too subtle.”

“Actually no,” Crane grimaced. “But I was not going to let you open the subject.”

Raj admitted, “I did not notice at all. Until she said. She didn’t figure everything.” He looked across
at Emily and smiled tentatively. “But I’m okay now. I think.”

Impatient, Sheldon spoke up. “Where’s my apology?”

Leonard touched his arm. “Give it a rest, Sheldon.”

“No.” Crane walked over to the pouting man. “I am sorry your assumption was incorrect. And I am sorry it was necessary to strike you.”

“Now, there’s a Sheldonesque apology, if I ever heard one,” Raj observed in a loud whisper. “Serves him right.”

“Not so fast!” Sheldon’s protest was indignant.

Crane was not in the mood to indulge him. “Do I have to point out—again—that you aggravated the situation? Everyone else remained in relative safety, while you put yourself in the sphere of battle. You would not listen. My action was necessary.”

Unexpectedly, Sheldon subsided, most likely organizing his next argument.

Crane approached Bernadette who was standing very close to Howard. Neither of them had said a word since Crane had returned. He tried to smile gently. “How are you?”

“You scared me.” She answered honestly. “You still do.”

“I do not want to.” He whispered because he could not manage anything else. He wanted to touch her arm, but he could not move.

“I know.”

“Howard?” Crane shifted his attention.

“You scared my wife.” Howard accused him angrily.

“I am sorry.”

Bernadette squeezed her husband’s arm and smiled up at him. Howard kissed her forehead.

“I guess we’re okay with you.”


Never one to be kept down for long, Howard dredged up a bit of his usual spirit. “And I can build you weapons delivery systems like you wouldn’t believe,” he asserted wearily, a shade of a smile on his lips.

“Leave it for now. Please.”

Crane walked back to Penny, who was waiting for him. He said, “We have had this conversation before.”

“More than once,” she reminded him.

“I regret that you were unable to share my secret with your friends until now.”

“Every time I wanted to help you, I had to fight you. And now you’re going to let this happen?”
He protested. “I have not yet decided.”

“Sounds to me like you have.”

Crane didn’t really want to hold this conversation in front of the others, but he owed it to Penny not to procrastinate. “I know we argue. And you know my motivations. I have lost people. That is why I have not yet decided about this. But you are the reason I can even contemplate accepting their help. The fact that you have aided me in so much. And done it with such generosity of spirit.” He cleared the closeness out of his throat again. “I do not blame you for allowing them to chase after me. I blame myself. To my shame, I was too overwrought to acknowledge that any of it was my fault. And I regret that I left you last night to explain my circumstances to your friends. My omission was unconscionable.”

He didn’t wait to ask her if she was all right with him. He was afraid to.

He looked at Leonard. “I should have told you when you asked about the cemetery.”

“Strangely enough, I’m relieved. I’m glad to know now.”

Crane raised his voice to speak to all of them again. “You are remarkable people. I am proud to know you all.” He smiled, faintly. “Even Sheldon. You did only what you thought was right. But I would strike you again if I had to.”

He walked over to the bedroom door and stood with his back to it, ramrod straight and hands folded behind him. “I beg you to continue to speak amongst yourselves in other venues. The people next to you are the best security against the uncertainty I have introduced into your lives. You are the ablest I can imagine at supporting one another. I will speak to you all later. But right now, I must beg your pardon, for I find I cannot.”

He went in the bedroom and closed the door, praying desperately that they would now leave. Surrendering to his fatigue, he sat on the bed and looked down at his boots. He promised himself that he would remove them. Soon.

There was a knock on the door. Amy’s voice. “I’m waiting out here to have a look at those cuts!” Determined. Sarcastic. “Because I’m so sure that that demon pumped on the claw disinfectant before it scratched open your chest!”
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

The friends deal with the ramifications of their new knowledge. Crane deals with the ramifications of having friends.

“Miss Penny.”

“Crane.”

He had slept, showered, dressed in fresh clothes, medicated himself, eaten, and ruminated over his choices. Having made up his mind, he now stood at Penny’s apartment door, not surprised that she was here rather than across the hall with Leonard and Sheldon. She had needed to be alone as much as Crane. He drew himself to attention as he often did when he felt at a disadvantage, glad to be attired properly for visiting—in his coat.

“I believe I have already given you a heartfelt apology. If you require another, I shall willingly deliver it.” He paused and she didn’t react, so he plowed ahead, determined. “I do not—”

“Oh, stop looking like a puppy somebody kicked and get in here.” She stepped back and opened the door all the way.

He could hardly become any more rigid, but he tried. He pulled his head back and looked down his nose. “I take exception to that characterization.”

“Really? You’re arguing with me already?”

“No,” he blustered, eyes wide with indignation. “I am merely expressing an opinion.”

“You … oh—” She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. This time he enfolded her without hesitation. And smiled.


“Beer. Thank you.” He settled on her couch and picked up a throw pillow. Recognizing it as a defensive maneuver, he set it aside.

“You need a glass?” she asked from the kitchen counter, waving a bottle.

“No. Miss Penny, I know we did not part on the best of terms—”

“First, I got away from you this morning so you couldn’t annoy me anymore. Second, you’ve already apologized at least three times. Clue: apologizing more than once is annoying. Third, I talked it over with Leonard.” She popped the tops off of two beers and handed him one. “That third one was the most important, by the way. You might want to thank him.”

She dropped onto the other side of the couch from Crane, curled up with her feet on the cushions. They both drank before he continued. He studied the wall ahead, but was aware of her out of the corner of his eye. “You have told me I need to learn to embrace life. Ultimately, I accepted that
assessment, partly by moving here. I have enjoyed it. You are all so enthusiastic. So animated. And it is worth my life to preserve your artlessness if I can.” Penny was watching him intently and he didn’t want to look at her. But he had to. He caught her eyes with his. “I am not going to accept their very generous offer.”

She seemed surprised, but didn’t protest. “You’re going to disappoint some people.”

“They will learn to live with it. That is the important point. They will live.”

For whatever reason, she argued. “I survived the Exluto.”

“You didn’t go anywhere near the Exluto!”

“See?” Penny seemed to think that proved something.

“And Caroline was killed in her own home by the Weeping Lady. I am resolute.”

“We’ve had this discussion before.”

“Before. Yes. Before I really got to know you all. When I was still deluding myself that I could hold back, not get involved. Simply live here and have neighbors, not close friends. But you’re inescapable. I fear my soul has been commandeered.”

“Maybe that was the idea.”

Suddenly, Crane wondered if she had plotted it from the beginning. From what he knew about her history since she had moved across from Leonard and Sheldon, her own inevitable journey to friendship had been much the same as his own, if not as swift. She understood his need for completion. But now she must understand his need to focus. “I am but halfway through my mission. Seven years, according to prophecy. And I fear the third tribulation has begun.”

“What does that mean?”

“I will not be seeing you for the foreseeable future.”

“You’ll need to rest.” She tried to reason. “Take a break once in a while.”

He shook his head. “That is not how this works.”

Penny took a long pull on her beer bottle, thinking, then asked, “What about Emily and Supernatural 101?”

He drew in a deep breath and huffed. “I believe it will keep her from mischief.” He was afraid Penny would try to extrapolate something from that, to argue in her own favor. “I will merely loan her the odd book now and again.”

She regarded him suspiciously. “Maybe.”

Before she had a chance to regroup, he said. “I have a favor to ask.”

“I’m not going to tell them for you.”

“No.” He was certain a ploy like that would just have eight people back in his apartment, facing him down, as fast as they could race across the hall. “I would just have you call a gathering. If you choose to have a meal, I will of course pay for it.”
“So you can run away afterward,” she accused.

“No.” He defended himself indignantly. “Simply because there are not enough places to sit in my apartment.”

“And yet we all fit in there this morning.”

“I seem to have enough chairs for a lynching, but not a dinner party.”

“And you’re going to run away afterward,” she insisted.

“Only if necessary,” he admitted. “They may not want to socialize with me.”

“Get over yourself, Crane. We all have lives of our own, you know. We don’t really need yours.”

He knew they did not want to live his life. It was worse than that: they wanted to take care of him. To make their contribution to keep him alive. The entire confrontation in his apartment proved that assumption, and he needed to quash their notions as quickly as possible. “So you will?” he verified. “Call the others?”

“How about tonight? They’re all waiting for your answer. I’ll get pizza.”

“Acceptable.” He nodded and stood, setting his beer bottle on the kitchen island. Taking out his wallet, he retrieved some bills and handed them to her. “Seven o’clock?”

“You’ll be lucky if they’re not all here as soon as I hang up the phone.”

“You’ll be lucky,” he deflected. “I shall not be there until seven.”

“Need time to write your speech?” She stood as well, anticipating his move to the door.

“Something like that.”

“Don’t wear yourself out. You know they all care about you.”

He smiled. “Except for Sheldon.”

“Don’t sell him short.”

“I should have asked. How is he?”

“Miserable,” she said. “But he’ll live.”

“You know I had no choice.”

“He’s just mad at you because it wasn’t an alien.” Penny excused Crane as she hadn’t earlier. She was probably tired of Sheldon’s whining. “Amy told me she’d fixed you up.”

“She is very solicitous,” Crane allowed. “Although I could have done without her staying behind when the rest of you had gone.”

“Was it awkward?” Penny smirked. “What did you two talk about?”

“Infections mostly,” he answered. He moved over to the door, not wanting to start a new discussion. There would be plenty of time this evening for that. “She knows, even as I refuse the rest of you, I will have to continue to receive her help.”
And mine.”

He didn’t agree nor disagree, and they both realized it. He was obviously kidding himself when he thought he could end their interest, especially where Penny was concerned. He hoped, without much confidence, that the rest of them would see reason.

Crane opened the door for himself. “Until later.” He bowed. “And thank you.”

Penny was right about the arrival of her friends after being summoned for that evening. Crane could hear footsteps echoing up the stairwell as early as five-thirty. He realized Bernadette and Howard had arrived when Leonard opened the door. Emily came next, without Raj, revealed by a loud inquiry from Penny. Sheldon acknowledged Amy’s presence by wailing, in shrill tones, about his swollen face as soon as her knock was answered. Raj moaned at being the last as he stepped into the apartment and found he would have to sit on the floor again.

Crane was sitting at his dining table with the police scanner hissing in the background. Occasionally, it crackled to life with news of a domestic complaint or a store alarm sounding, but nothing about teenagers being frightened by a bear. Or worse. He was studying his personal copies of Demonology and Devil-lore, the Grimorium Verum, and Johann Weyes’ Pseudomonarchia Daemonum, trying to find any connection between Exlutos and Banachs, and what occult being might summon those two types of demon.

He hesitated to exaggerate his own importance, but he felt as if the Banach had been wandering the woods around Sleepy Hollow merely to bait or distract him. The Exluto had been conjured to construct a summoning spell, but the Banach did not have the intelligence or the motor skills to accomplish a task at that level. So if the spell had been dismantled before it had been fulfilled, did the entity have an alternate way to arrive on this plane? Could it have had anything to do with the meteor shower? Were the Five Planets and Orionid linked in any way besides being astronomical events?

He could find nothing. Pushing the volumes across the table—telling himself he should reshelve them and ignoring his own advice—he stood and located the bookcase that held his various versions and translations of the Bible and the Book of Revelation. Crane chose the Geneva Bible New Testament reflecting Puritan theological outlook, the Jewish New Testament including relevant Semitic cultural references, King James, the Eastern Peshitta Manuscripts utilizing a language closely related to Aramaic, an extremely old copy of the 69 AD Book of Revelation in Koine Greek, and his own translation of those verses.

Looking at the new stack of books and manuscripts waiting for him, he sighed and crossed to the coffeemaker for another cup of caffeine. He stood at the sink and drank half before he topped off the refill and took it back to his chair.

Revelation Chapter 19 eventually caught his attention and he sought it out in all his translations. Verse 1 told of a star falling from heaven to earth and opening a fathomless pit. The pit spewed smoke that obliterated the sun and the sky.

Perhaps he had not searched the woods long and hard enough the night before. Another demon may not have manifested, but he should have found a great hole in the ground. Although the pit may not have opened yet—chronological order and time lapses meant little in Revelation.

Crane believed that finding the new opening in the earth must be his next task. The prophecy told not only of prolific smoke, but of the emergence of creatures called “locusts,” described as having scorpions’ tails. These locusts did not kill, but tortured any man without a particular seal on his
He needed to do more research on these locust/scorpions. He needed to know the nature of the seal that might make him immune—and if he dared wear it. He needed to find the pit.

And he needed to go next door and talk to his friends.

At ten minutes before seven, Crane rose to wash his face, put on a fresh shirt, and gather his hair in a tie. As he walked past the hooks on the wall, he grabbed his coat, shrugged it on, and straightened his collars. He was locking his apartment when Leonard appeared through the door across the hall.

“Pizza’s here!” Leonard announced.

“Shall I help?”

“Sure,” the other man headed down the stairs.

Crane followed. “ Apparently I should thank you for talking matters through with Miss Penny earlier today.”

He threw a look over his shoulder, smiling. “I did that for me, not you.”

“Nevertheless.” He caught up and walked in step, hands at his back. Preoccupied, he fell mute, unable to think past the polite exchange.

Leonard filled the silence. “You get any rest this afternoon?”

“No.” Elaborating, Crane thought, might beg discussion about details he was still sorting out, so he said nothing.

“I was watching some *Dr. Who*. Tennant. Penny seemed to think it would be a good idea. Of course, she called him ‘the skinny, goofy-looking guy who runs around with the blonde’. I wasn’t sure until she mentioned the *Titanic*."

Crane remembered watching that particular episode with Sheldon and Leonard and Penny several weeks ago, where the tenth Doctor was attempting to travel without a companion—and making himself miserable. So which one of them was being clever, Penny or Leonard? Crane eyed the man beside him, but he seemed ingenuous. “I was … doing research.”

“On bears?”

Crane’s smile was tight at the intended humor. “Something akin to that.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs and the delivery boy hurried over. Obviously, he was a regular, and the occupants of 4A knew he wouldn’t climb up to them. Crane accepted a small and three large pizzas while Leonard counted out the money.

“Do you have sufficient funds?” Crane asked.

“Plenty. I owe you some.”

The boy zipped up his thermal bag and hurried out the glass door. Leonard took the top two boxes and turned back to the stairs. He seemed to be waiting for Crane to speak, but Crane had nothing he wanted to say.

Finally, Leonard sighed. “Penny thought you might revert.”
“Revert to—?”

“The way you were. Reserved. Aloof. I prefer the guy you were yesterday.”

Crane tried to equivocate. “I do not understand.”

“Sure you do. You answered that stupid quiz for the girls. You sang a drinking song at the campfire. And you ate more marshmallows than any self-respecting adult should consume at one time.”

Crane felt his face grow warm. “And witness what happened.”

“Not cause and effect,” Leonard maintained. “Look, Penny already told us what you decided. You may turn down our help, but you can’t turn away from us. We won’t let you.”

“I would prefer to say this only once,” Crane replied impatiently.

“Practice on me. You may have to change your paradigms.”

They were shoulder to shoulder, but Crane did not look sideways to speak. “My reasoning has not changed. I will risk no one but myself.”

“Yeah, we got that already,” Leonard allowed, then he shook his head. “I don’t think anyone’s going to argue this time.”

Crane was surprised. “Good.” They arrived on the fourth floor together. Perhaps this gathering would go more smoothly than he had anticipated, and he could bow out gracefully.

“You’re still stuck with us, though. And you might as well save your breath over that.” He faced Crane, grinning, reaching behind himself to turn the doorknob, then swung into the room with the door. “Pizza’s here!” he announced. “And so is Crane!”

The jumble of shouted greetings made any one of them difficult to understand. Bernadette smiled sweetly at him as she swept past and took their pizza boxes. Leonard laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Go on, Crane,” he murmured earnestly. “Sing us another song. Please.”

Penny stood at his shoulder. “Can I take your coat?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“I know why you wear that coat. You use it to set up a barrier between you and everyone else.”

“Indeed?” Crane was startled at her observation. She wasn’t entirely wrong, he realized.

“It took me too long to get you out of it. Don’t start that again.”

“Humor me.” He studied the disappointment in her face and felt a twinge of remorse. He quashed the emotion quickly.

Penny pouted and answered with a trace of rancor. “I hope you get tomato sauce all over it.”

“Hey, Crane.” Raj waved from the kitchen. “Do you want a beer?”
He shook his head. “Is there any coffee?”

“I can make some.”

“Do not bother. I will have water.”

Raj pulled a bottle from the refrigerator and left it on the island counter by the pizza. “There’s pepperoni, sausage, black olives, no cheese—”

Howard interrupted, loading a plate for himself. “For the more flatulent among us.”

Raj ignored him, not missing a beat. “Meat lovers; Philly cheese steak; and ultimate pepperoni with mushrooms.”

Crane wondered if he should eat, but decided going hungry wouldn’t be worth whatever point he might be trying to make that no one would admit to understanding, anyway. He walked over among them, picked up a paper plate and filled it with three slices of meat lovers. Retreating to the seating area, he refrained from teasing Leonard about sitting in “my spot” on the armchair. He settled on the wooden chair instead.

Howard and Bernadette sat on the couch beside Sheldon. If possible, the injured man looked even more despondent than he had last night. A refreezable ice pack wrapped carelessly in a towel lay near him on the end table. He was ignoring everyone. Amy slid his plate under his eyes and said, “Ultimate pepperoni, just like you ordered.”

“I don’t know why we have to have him here,” Sheldon complained.

“He paid for the pizza.”

Crane stood and offered his chair, pulling the one away from Leonard’s desk for himself. Amy sat, with her own plate, and leaned into Crane, muttering. “Do not engage him in conversation if you know what’s good for you. Particularly do not ask how he is.”

“I appreciate the advice, but I may well have discerned that on my own.”

“How about you? Any angry red marks around your cuts?”

“No,” he said, then reminded himself to add, “Thank you.”

Amy watched him for a few moments longer than he was comfortable with, then Bernadette’s nasal tones overrode the quiet conversation. “Howard! Keep your hands to yourself!”

Fourteen eyes zeroed in on the two people sitting on the couch.

Raj clicked his tongue, shaking his head. “Howard. I’m ashamed of you. In public, too.”

“Hands off my pizza,” Bernadette clarified, glaring at Raj. “Jerk face.”

“Good recovery,” Emily said.

Howard objected. “I just wanted a taste—”

“Howard, Howard, Howard.” Raj continued his taunt.

“Of the Philly cheese steak—”
“And I said,” Bernadette shrilled, “there’s more over there!”

Crane couldn’t help but feel isolated from his friends at that moment. He supposed the pizza had been his first mistake. The gathering had been turned into a social event and no one seemed to care about why they were there. Last night, they were enthusiastic, intelligent, and interested in his mission. Now they were … he didn’t know what they were. He felt as if they had … reverted.

No, they hadn’t. He had.

“Penny thought you might revert.”

Crane had expected them to be different somehow. But they were the same people who watched HBO in the woods and sang about gopher guts. He had enjoyed it yesterday, and now he was … what had Leonard said? Reserved. Aloof.

Leonard, Penny, Amy, Rajesh, Emily, Bernadette, Howard, and possibly even Sheldon were waiting for him.

He deposited his plate on the coffee table and stood. “I believe it is my turn to contribute to the conversation. But I am unsure what you wish me to say.”

Howard scoffed. “You asked us to come here.”

“I had been given to understand that everyone already knew my decision.”

Penny threw her fiancé the look of death. “That doesn’t get you out of telling us yourself.”

“Of course.” Crane cleared his throat, clasped his hands at his back, and swept the room with his gaze. “Each one of you has volunteered a talent to aid me in my research and strategy. I am hesitant to involve any of you at any level, in spite of how safe it may seem at the present time. So, while I cherish your generous offers, I cannot, in all good conscience, accept.”

“That’s it?” Raj seemed surprised.

“There is no point in discussion. I beg you to refrain.”

“What about me? You already promised,” Emily said.

“As I can spare the time, I will give you some books to read.”

“Hey!” Howard objected loudly. “That’s not fair!”

Annoyed, Crane scolded, “First, you sound like a child. Second, let me point out that there is nothing more dangerous than an unschooled mind.”

“I’m unschooled.” Howard said.

Sheldon stirred. “Finally, a glimmer of truth amidst the rest of this nonsense.”

Raj volunteered. “I’m with Howard.”

“Me, too!” Leonard agreed.

A rash of general support sounded from everyone but Amy. Crane looked to her and raised an eyebrow, “Et tu, Brute?”
Amy smiled. “I’ve already got my in, but I’m always ready for some new knowledge.” She rolled the desk chair a few inches in his direction. “Why don’t you sit down again? You look tired.”

Feeling overwhelmed, Crane sank into the offered seat. This was not what he had in mind, but he had opened the door himself. He had no way to curb their wishes, short of reneging on his word to Emily.

“So can we all read them?” Penny asked.

Unwittingly, Crane sounded dubious as he asked, “You want to read a book?”

“Hey!” she seemed sincerely offended.

“My apologies, Miss Penny.” He hurried to assure her. “I did not intend to insult you.”

She was not mollified. She silently demanded her answer by glaring at him.

Crane felt irrevocably trapped. He sighed again. “If you must.”

“Is there some time restraint?” Leonard asked. “Are you expecting something else to happen soon?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You implied you were going to be busy.”

“I believe that more was set in motion last night than the appearance of the Banach.”

Emily asked, “Is that what it’s called?”

“Yes.”

“Can you and I read Revelation together?” she asked.

Crane was confused. He had thought she wanted an education in demons and incantations for the shock value. “Is that what you desire?”

“Unless you’re going to give me a volume of Aleister Crowley.” Emily smirked. “But I’ve already read that.”

“Some books are too readily available,” he complained. “And, as an historian and bibliophile, I do not say that lightly. I trust that you did not embrace his dogma?”

“I found it interesting,” she said drily. “I didn’t adopt it as my gospel.”

He studied her face, daring her to dissemble. “Can I trust you?”

Emily didn’t blink or look away. “Yes.”

Crane nodded, then tried to explain his reservations about studying the Bible verses. “Revelation is problematic. Prophecy frequently does not seem to make sense. Until you unravel it. And even then, you may have misunderstood.”

She answered. “I thought it was your handbook.”

“I have studied the verses in many versions and translations,” he agreed, but cautioned. “Much of it still escapes me.”
“I could read all about it on the internet.”

He resisted her bait. “You could.”

She put him on the spot. “Yes or no.”

Crane did not want her coming to unguided conclusions, especially if she was to share them with everyone else. He took a deep breath and capitulated. “Agreed. It is possible a fresh view might be useful.”

“We all have a fresh view,” Howard said.

Crane pivoted to confront Howard directly. “I am not going to conduct classes on Biblical divination!”

“Okay, folks.” Penny interrupted, touching her palm with the straightened fingers of her other hand. “Time out! Leave the man alone. He’s given you his answers.” She reached across to pick up Crane’s plate. “I’ll nuke this for you.”

“Thank you.” Crane meant more than the microwaving of his dinner. “I am quite hungry.”

“You eat anything since—?”

“Marshmallows?” A slightly embarrassed smile graced his lips. “No.”

Penny turned away, muttering under her breath, “Still think you need a nanny.” Raising her voice, she said. “Anybody else, come get it yourself.”

When Raj got up to fetch more pizza, Crane followed him. “Thank you, Miss Penny, I have this.” He planted himself beside the appliance, retrieving his meal at the beep, and waited for Raj to do the same.

Crane chewed the warmed pepperoni and sausage before he spoke to the other man. “Rajesh, the last two demons have been associated with astronomical events. There is a possibility this will continue.”

“You mean the five planets?” Raj leaned a hip against the kitchen counter.

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“I believe Miss Penny must have already told you.”

“The mud-man?”

“Yes.”

“The mud-man came with the five planets?” Raj’s eyes gleamed and he pumped his fist. “I’m on it!”

“You are to warn me of anything you discover. That is all,” Crane admonished.

“That’s just it. There is something.”

Crane’s stomach suddenly objected to the pizza. “Soon?”

“November fourteenth—8:25 AM is the best view. A supermoon.”
“Twenty-three days.” Crane set his plate on the counter. “Explain.”

“The phenomenon was named in 1979 by Richard Nolle, unfortunately an astrologer. It’s also called a mega beaver moon. I have no idea why.”

Crane nodded, matter-of-fact, and explained. “It’s from the Algonquin tribes and early American colonists. November is the month to set beaver traps before the rivers freeze, to guarantee a supply of winter furs. Hence, any moon in November is a beaver moon.”

Raj just looked at him for a moment, then continued. “Real live scientists call it perigee syzygy.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“Let me finish. Syzygy refers to the configuration of three celestial bodies, specifically the Earth, Sun, and Moon. On the fourteenth, the Moon will be the closest in its orbit to Earth since 1948 and until 2034.”

Crane smiled. “I begin to believe you also have a remarkable memory.”

“Oh, no,” Raj grinned at the compliment even as he dismissed it. “We at the university have been speaking of the event lately. It’s more interesting than the Orionids which, frankly, happen every year.”

“Ah. Yes.” Crane remembered what he had also wanted to ask the astrophysicist. “Pardon the digression, but will you have records of the meteor shower at the university as early as Monday?”

“Of course.”

“Might I see them?”

“I can arrange that,” Raj assured him.

“Excellent. Pray continue with the syzygy … thing.”

“Right. The moon will be less than 360,000 kilometers from Earth and appear fourteen per cent bigger and thirty per cent brighter than other full moons.”

“Might that cause any natural disasters?” Crane asked.

Raj shook his head. “None within recorded history. But there is usually a small increase in tectonic activity.”

_Twenty-three days._ “My gratitude, Rajesh.” Crane grasped the other man’s shoulder enthusiastically.

Raj preened, obviously glad to contribute as the others were not able to. “My pleasure.”

“I will … text … you on Monday.” Crane stepped to the couch to address the rest of his companions. “I regret that I must leave. I find I suddenly have a new deadline.”

“Wait!” Penny squealed and ran to the kitchen. She put about half of the pizza slices into one box and brought it back to Crane. “Take this. You have to eat.”

“I appreciate it, but—”

Objections were loud and jumbled, but one stood out. “Take it, Crane, and don’t argue.”
“Thank you.” He faced the others. “All of you.”

He bowed briefly and left with new purpose. And, thankfully, something to eat.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

Penny comes to know much more about the current demon, in spite of Crane's best intentions. She's just so easy to talk to, and it helps him clear his mind.

Chapter Notes

I just want to thank all of you at the BBT site who continue to read my story. I post it simultaneously on the Sleepy Hollow site in a (very slightly) different form (you have a bit more Ichabod background which doesn't need to be explained to SH fans). And you guys outnumber them. (Yes, I know why, but it's irrelevant.) I almost didn't post here, but I am glad I did. Thanks for all the fish!

As he locked his apartment door behind him, Crane decided he didn’t really want to eat any more, in spite of the fact he’d barely managed a single slice that evening. He had to move a few things in the refrigerator to accommodate the pizza box, then went back to leave his coat on the hook and his boots on the floor. Looking from across the room at the dining table with its stacks of books, Crane resigned himself to an evening of study. He retrieved his pen and ink, notebook, sketchbook, and pencils, and settled at the table once again.

Referring back to the original Greek Revelation, he took careful notes on the appearance of the beasts which should be crawling from the pit. Long golden hair, faces of women, lions’ teeth, breastplates, locust wings, scorpions’ tails and stingers. He checked his other sources, but they did not disagree and had nothing else to add.

He sat back, closed his eyes, and tried to picture the creatures. There were a lot of details left off of that list, and he struggled to fill in with his imagination. If they stood upright, they could hardly have the legs of a locust, but then there was no allusion that they stood upright. His head was whirling with questions, so he decided just to make a few assumptions. Crane picked up a pencil and his sketchbook in the attempt to put the image on paper. He drew what he was certain about, then added the wings folded close to the bodies, long and spindly extremities connected at knobby junctures, with thigh and shank jointed toward the rear.

When he was finished, he propped up the paper against some of the books and studied the creature. He let his mind wander among the notions that popped into his head, considering whether the characteristics of the locust or the scorpion would be dominant. Remembering the sting of the scorpion he had suffered while working a spell a couple of years ago, he was determined not to let that happen again. Most scorpion bites would not kill a human, but there was no guarantee that the venom of these creatures was not fatal.

Crane dipped his quill into the ink well and scratched out a few queries he would have to investigate, probably on the Internet. What were the traits of the locust, its biological makeup? What were its vulnerabilities? What could you use to kill it? How might it kill you? Of course, the same questions
applied to the scorpion.

And he would still have to do research among his books. Just because this creature had aspects in common with earthly life forms did not mean they shared any of their attributes.

Had anyone in recorded history ever encountered one of these locust/scorpions?

Nothing. That’s what Crane knew. Absolutely nothing. Perhaps that’s all he would know until he met one face to face. It had usually been the Witnesses’ *modus operandi*, after all.

Crane stared at the sketch. “Well, Lieutenant, do you have anything to add?”

He waited a few minutes for an answer, then got up to reheat the pizza.

Crane had retired the night before and arose that morning at the usual time. He wanted to be alert for whatever was to happen that day. It was important to conserve his energy until he knew what he was up against—it wouldn’t do to be exhausted when the shit finally hit the fan.

“...he scolded himself.

He was reshelving the books and manuscripts he had abandoned on the table after his last session. He’d left them out far too long, in the hope that he would need them again. Unfortunately, the answers to the questions topmost in his mind would not be found there.

He poured a glass of orange juice and made some toast, then stood in front of the map of the area that hung on the wall. If the Banach had been a decoy, then whoever was making these moves would have manifested the creature far away from the pit that the falling star would create. Making that his guideline, he mentally excised a block of Rockefeller State Park he didn’t need to search for the pit.

On the other hand, the Banach might have been guarding the pit.

On the next hand, he had to decide something just so he could make some progress. He studied the map again. He included the area around Pocantico Lake and the caves—that was where the Exluto had been executing the conjuring spell. Perhaps it had been an attempt to anticipate the meteor shower and bring the locust/scorpions to Earth before it had been prophesied. He winced. Perhaps he hadn’t been as clever as he had thought.

Crane hated prophecy.

He reached for the aerial map sitting on top of the bookshelf and unfolded it across the now-empty table. He found a white-board marker for a white-board that was nowhere in the apartment and drew a perimeter around his proposed search area. Dividing that into smaller pieces he thought he could cover in an evening, he folded the map back to show most of those pieces.

Sliding it into his messenger bag, he added a wrapper-full of cold pizza, his notes, and his sketch. All of his weapons and flashlights were at the Archive where he was headed to do some more combing through the books. By noon, he should be in the woods, tracking through the first of the designated areas on his map.
On Monday, Crane tacked his sketch on the side of a bookshelf so he could see it from his desk in Tarrytown University’s rare book department. As he spent most of the morning actually doing his salaried job, he kept looking over at the likeness of the creature. Shelving books, locating resources requested by professors, and doing preservation work on a couple of donated texts failed to distract the Witness from thinking about his duties. For all his efforts the past weekend, he had not located a picture in any of his manuscripts, nor anyone who had seen the locust/scorpion. The creatures were still only an idea, a theory. And he had not found the pit.

Raj had sent Crane visual recordings of the Orionids, and he was already weary of studying the images of the night sky for any anomalies he might see with the naked eye. He was grateful that Raj was doing a computer analysis of information that had been recorded, as well as studying the notes of the scientists who had been in the lab during the shower.

He realized there would be no recording of a meteor striking the area around Sleepy Hollow and creating the pit he was searching for, or local scientists would be there studying it. But prophecies work in mysterious ways, and he was reasonably certain that the new creatures would arrive with a “star falling from heaven unto the earth”.

There must be some sign. Revelation loved signs.

Finally, Crane stood, bending over his desk to continue watching the monitor and not fall asleep while doing so. He knew he wouldn’t be able to scrutinize all the footage at one time, but he was determined to get as much done as was humanly possible.

“Hey! Crane! Lunch!”

He pushed the pause button and looked up to see Penny close the door to his domain in the basement of the library.

“Are you trying to wreck your back?” she continued. “Or ruin your eyes? You’re doing a pretty good job.”

Knowing that “pause” wouldn’t be enough for her, he checked his computer and stopped all activity before he straightened to address her. “Miss Penny.” He clamped his lips against a groan at the pain in his spine. Proving her right would harm their relationship irretrievably. “I was not sure—”

“I’d come for lunch? Why not? You probably wouldn’t eat if I didn’t stop by.”

“Why do you persist in thinking I have no common sense?”

“You’re a guy. You think like a guy.”

Crane sighed. “I am glad it is nothing personal.”

“What ’cha doin’?” She set her insulated lunch bag on his desk, and pulled one of the wooden chairs opposite him.

“Watching the meteor shower.” He grimaced and pushed his laptop to one side. “Without benefit of fresh air or a campfire.”

“Or sing-along’s or Internet match-ups,” she reminded him.

“It wasn’t that bad.” Crane admitted. “In … hindsight.”

“Really?” Penny baited him. “We can finish that quiz at lunch today.” She sat, elaborately avoiding
his caustic look, when she caught a glimpse of his sketch. “Oh!” She jumped up to examine it. “Is that the new monster?”

His eyes followed hers to the image he had produced. “I have no idea.” He shrugged in a pretense of indifference. He hadn’t thought anyone would see it hanging there, even Penny, after the meeting in Leonard’s apartment. He should have known better.

He stepped over and slipped his fingers under the cellophane tape so as not to tear the paper as he retrieved it.

“You’re disturbingly good at drawing them.”

Crane shook his head, feeling the ambivalence he had the night before. “The creature may not look like that at all. The drawing is merely an interpretation of the written word. It can be easier to find them in the research if I have a picture in my mind.” He closed the page in the top desk drawer, hoping it would disappear from their discussion as well.

It didn’t.

“The Old Baldy sketch you did looked pretty accurate.”

Crane pressed his lips together momentarily so he wouldn’t react. “Ubaldai,” he reminded her. “I had seen one already. I have no evidence that anyone has seen one of these entities. Nor even knows what it is called.”

“So that came out of your imagination. Locusts and scorpions and sharp teeth. And of course it’s a woman.” She shivered. “I thought it was your books that were creepy.”

Stung, Crane looked away from her. “Pardon me. I shall get my lunch.”

“What did you bring?”

“Pizza.”

“Not the leftovers?”

“You gave me a goodly amount. And I cannot let it get old. I do not mind. I am used to eating the same meal several days in sequence.” He walked back to the cubbyhole where the library staff had installed a tiny refrigerator and microwave. Penny followed with a large plastic container from her bag. He pulled his lunch from the fridge. “Actually, a cheeseless slice can be rather startling when you put it in your mouth thinking you know how it is going to taste.” He shrugged. “At least it has pepperoni.”

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Why?” He wanted to know.

“Because you said ‘why’ instead of ‘no’,” she said. “And you’re babbling. You don’t usually babble.”

His eyes went wide, thinking of Abbie’s frequent challenges to his loquaciousness. “Usually?”

“Unless you’re on your soapbox.” Penny started to laugh, then made an effort to stop herself. “Sorry —”

“No.” He waved away her concern. “I fully acknowledge I enjoy pontificating. I am merely
disturbed that you think my mind is full of … well … ‘creepy’.”

“It kinda has to be, doesn’t it?” She raised both her eyebrows at him. “You want to share my lunch? I have chili and cornbread.”

He calmed at her candor. “It sounds marvelous. Thank you.” He pushed the catch to open the door of the microwave.

Penny popped the lid off her Tupperware, then set it back on the top without sealing it. “Of course, Sheldon would tell you it’s not chili because chili doesn’t have beans. That’s according to people from Texas. Unfortunately, the International Chili Society agrees with him.”

Crane punched in the cooking time. “You are babbling now.”

“I’m allowed.” She smiled back, sassy. “That’s what I do.”

“Of course.” He relaxed, suddenly glad that she had come to see him today

“Do you have a bowl?” Penny asked.

“I bring whatever I require for lunch from home each day. Then I take it home and wash it.”

“Do you have a spoon?”

“I believe,” he said, “I have already answered that question.”

Penny returned to the desk and her lunch bag. Rummaging through it, she found a couple of spoons hidden among the napkins and Baggies of cornbread. “Here!” She presented him with one. “You up for eating from the plastic container?”

“I often do.”

“With me?”

“Perhaps I should—” He reached for his plastic-wrapped pizza.

“No, you shouldn’t.” She smacked his fingers. “Do you have any contagious diseases?”

He scowled. The microwave beeped.

“Let’s eat.” Penny handled the container carefully as she walked back to his desk and deposited their lunch halfway between the two chairs. She stepped back to the microwave with her Baggies. “I’ll just warm the cornbread.”

He stood until she returned, and sat a moment after she did. Penny handed him a fistful of napkins, then scooped up a spoonful of chili.

He fidgeted with his spoon, watching her take another mouthful.

“Have at it,” she mumbled around her food, then swallowed. “Don’t get all starchy on me.”

Crane wasn’t going to tell Penny, but he had eaten from a common pot warming over the fire with men considerably dirtier than she would ever be. “I simply do not wish to eat more than my share.”

“Just eat.”
He complied with his own mouthful, and swallowed. “That’s very good.”

“Leonard made it. I think he only does it to irritate Sheldon about the beans.”

“Our good fortune.”

They continued eating, spreading the cornbread on an unfolded napkin. After a few minutes, Penny gestured to the drawer without looking up. “So you got the idea for that thing from reading books? Like we did with the Exluto?”

Crane fixed her with a glare, but she ignored it. “Miss Penny. We should speak of other subject matter as we enjoy our lunch. Not demons.”

“Really?” She did look at him then. “Crane. This is me.”

“And that has been my error.”

“No. You don’t get to do that.”

“You are not—” Crane stopped, searching for the word he wanted – partner, Witness … involved … allowed – but she halted his thoughts.

“You think you turned away everyone’s help.”

“I have done so.”

Penny shook her head. “Amy loves it when you need her first aid, and—”

“Amy loves when I am injured?” he interrupted, confused.

“She loves being needed,” Penny enunciated, shaking her head in exasperation. “And Emily can’t wait for her supernatural library card. And Raj is all puffed up because you asked him for data.”

Crane suddenly felt like a rope in a tug-of-war and he didn’t like it. “I do not require bandages and analgesics every time I confront a demon, nor do I require knowledge of the heavens every time I wish to locate one.”

“Are you going to follow up with Emily?”

“I have said that I would, but I fear I shall not have much time for her in the foreseeable future.”

Penny hid her smile. “Unless she comes by for lunch.”

Crane refused to take the bait. “I must continue searching the woods. Finish watching the recordings. Research locusts and scorpions. Develop a means of attack.” He threw his spoon on the desktop and pushed his chair back with his long legs, jumped to his feet and started pacing. “Alternately, I might be fabricating the whole thing. I have yet to find any real evidence I am on the right track. Or, indeed, if anything is happening at all.”

His frustration peaked as he gripped his hands into fists and then released them. Penny sat in silence until he nearly forgot she was there. After a minute, he threw himself back into his chair, visibly forcing his breathing to slow. He stared at the desk for another few seconds, then sighed. “I will handle Miss Emily.”

“If you say so. But you know,” she leaned forward across the desk to make her point, “Raj can’t handle Emily.”
“You know,” mirroring her, he leaned in to answer, “I am not Rajesh.”

“No,” she admitted. “But you really have no idea what to expect from Emily.”

Concerned that Penny seemed excessively interested in the necro-enthusiast, Crane asked, “Are you worried for her?”

She wouldn’t look at him. “I … don’t.”

Alarms sounded in his head, as he wondered if Penny were somehow identifying with Emily’s potential problems. He began with an obvious question. “Do you believe that the reading will be too disturbing for Miss Emily?”

“I don’t know her well enough. But she always seems pretty sure of herself. I do know she spooks Raj sometimes. She watches the most horrible videos. And she likes to do it in the graveyard.”

Crane’s eyebrows went up. He recognized that Emily’s interest in the supernatural was a bit excessive, but she didn’t seem fanatical. She functioned well in the real world – she was a dermatologist at a hospital, after all. “I believe she may perform merely to draw reactions from other people. And Rajesh can be unduly excitable. But I will be cautious.”

Crane watched Penny for a minute. “What about you? Are you experiencing fears of which I am unaware? Are you still vulnerable to nightmares?”

“Nightmares?” She smiled faintly and pointed to the drawer. “That picture of the locust-lady is yuck-worthy, but it’s not going to scare me more than actually being attacked.”

Unless you dwell on it too long. He studied her carefully. “You are the only one who truly knows if you are still suffering repercussions from your experiences.”

“I’m fine. Really.”

“What if I inquired of Leonard? What would he say?”

“He hasn’t forbidden me to come to the library basement to eat my lunch. Don’t you think he would if he was concerned about my state of mind?”

“I think he would know better than to forbid you to do anything.”

“One of your big uglies is not going to bust in here and attack me.”

“Don’t be glib.”

“At least you wouldn’t have to go hunting for it in the woods.”

“Miss Penny—!”

“He was totally more freaked out than I was.”

Crane doubted that—Penny could not realize the chilling quality of her own screams that night. But he wasn’t going to argue with her. “He was worried that you were reacting so severely to a mugger. He thought you might not have told him everything. Now at least he is convinced you are not hiding any more truths.”

“I wish I didn’t have to lie to him.”
“Have you told him that?”

“Yes.”

Nodding his approval, Crane asked, “Should I speak with him again?”

“Don’t scare him,” she warned, deadly serious. “I will hurt you if you do.”

“I would not do so knowingly.”

“I get that.”

“But I will ask you both to look after each other,” he said.

“You don’t really have to ask.”

“It will help put my mind to rest. Will I discover anything you will not admit?”

Penny shrugged, and the ghost of a smile crossed her lips. Then she picked up a piece of cornbread and nibbled at it, as if to hide.

While the silence lay between them, Crane ate some more chili and tried not to let his head explode with his new responsibilities. Penny dodged around his spoon to eat as well, concentrating on the container and not looking at him.

“There’s something about locusts….“ Her voice held a pensive note that caught Crane’s attention.

He refocused on Penny’s face. “What?”

She wrinkled her nose in concentration. “We had an infestation in Nebraska when I was a teenager.”

“And?” He prompted, awaiting a pronouncement.

“Something…. I thought it was hilarious at the time. I thought I’d remember it forever.” Penny hunched over, staring at the surface of the desk. “It’s in there. I’ll get it.”

“Do not try too hard and the thought will appear.”

Penny put her spoon down and Crane concentrated on scraping the last of the tomato sauce from the bottom of the container, until he asked. “What year was it? Your infestation?”

“Oh, hell, I don’t know. I was sixteen…."

“So … 2004.”

“Thank you.” Penny smiled. “It was 2001.”

“You think it might be worth researching?”

“It could be something really silly.”

“So,” Crane reminded her, “are water balloons.” He pulled open another desk drawer, retrieving quill and ink. He wanted to include the Nebraska infestation on his list of research topics, just to be thorough.

“You use a quill pen?” She sounded surprised. “Isn’t that a little OCD?”
He was preoccupied with his task, and the term didn’t register in his memory. “I am not familiar … with…that…. When he was finished writing, he finally focused on her question. “Why does this century constantly use letters to represent everything?”

“This century?”

“Country. I meant this country,” he bluffed anxiously, then pushed the conversation past his error. “Well?”

“Because it’s a lot easier than saying ‘obsessive-compulsive disorder’.”

“Obsess—no! I am not.” He straightened and looked indignantly down his nose at her. “This is a perfectly normal habit.”

“If you’re Shakespeare,” she deadpanned. He drew a breath to object, but she continued. “You know what? You’re not OCD; you’re just bat crap crazy.”

He couldn’t stop the small smile quirking at his mouth. “If you fought demons for a living, you would be a bit insane yourself.”

Penny burst into a fit of laughter, not able to stop until there were tears. She used the back of her hand to dab at her eyes without smearing her makeup. Fighting a larger grin, Crane handed over his handkerchief. She gulped. “I’ve never heard that excuse before.”

Crane shrugged. “I am uncommon.”

“Understatement.” Penny declared. The Tupperware was empty and she snapped the lid on again. “I’ll leave the cornbread; you might need a break this afternoon.” She stood and packed the container and spoons into her thermal bag.

He stood when she did and followed her to the door. “Pray, consider your actions before you cultivate my vices, Miss Penny.”

“Your biggest vice, Mr. Crane, is: you work too hard.”

He watched her leave, then turned to glare at the back of his oblivious computer. “Not a vice.” Crane walked around his desk and settled into his chair, then reactivated the screen and surrendered to four more hours of nighttime skies and trailing lights.
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

The BBT gang are attempting, in their own inimitable way, to help Crane with his mission. So what do they know how to do? Talk. Hack. Sit on the sofa in Sheldon's apartment. And follow their own version of what Crane may or may not have told them to do.

Chapter Notes

My apologies for taking so long. I have been preoccupied with finishing this thing. Also, my beta reader has a life and, unfortunately, my posts caught up with what she had read. But she did a marathon this week (thank you) and here is the next bit.

After another week of trekking in the Rockefeller State Park Preserve outside Sleepy Hollow, searching for a smoking pit or any sort of creature that wanted to crawl out of one, Crane looked up at the stairwell of his apartment building and sighed. He admitted to himself he was more than ready to try an elevator. Cheap rent was not an attraction when all he wanted was to pull off his boots and soak his feet in a tub of Epsom salts.

As he reached the top of the stairs to the fourth floor, however, his eye drifted across the door to Leonard’s apartment. Abruptly, he was reminded of the talk he’d intended to have with the man regarding Penny’s state of mind.

Crane stopped and stared at the doorknob; he still didn’t walk right in, although everyone else seemed to. He heard voices leaking through and considered that today might not be the best to have a discussion. Leonard would certainly have addressed any problem – he was particularly solicitous of his fiancée’s happiness and well-being.

Knowing he was just making excuses, Crane raised a hand and knocked on the blue metal. The voices became whispers, urgent, then nearly inaudible.

“It’s open!” Penny shouted.

Although he disliked admitting himself into anyone’s domicile, he knew better than to argue. He stood just inside the entrance and regarded Penny, Emily, and Raj sitting around the coffee table. Leonard was standing at his desk, grabbing pages as they came out of a printer.

“You ought not to do that,” Crane nodded his head toward the open door.

Penny looked up from what she was doing. “Your boots on the stairs sound different than anyone else’s feet.” She shrugged. “Besides, the four of us could beat up a burglar.”

Crane raised an eyebrow. “Or perhaps not.”
Leonard grinned at him. “Come on in. Want something to drink?”

“Thank you, no.” Crane dipped his head graciously, then scanned the room, a little anxious about his reception since the last time he had spoken to them all. If they’d known it was he knocking, the low murmurs had to have been for his benefit. But the friends looked over at him with open expressions, each of them holding some of Leonard’s pages. Raj, for some reason, tucked a magnifying glass on the chair cushion beside his thigh where no one could see it. Crane cleared his uncertainty by reminding himself of what Penny had said about them living their own lives. He looked back at Leonard. “I wonder if I might talk—”

But Leonard had turned away to toss his handful of printed papers onto a sea of others that covered the coffee table. At a glance, the pages seemed much the same, depicting what might be the tops of trees from above. Far above.

“What are those?” Crane asked, unable to hide his interest.

“How do you find a pit?” Leonard stood at his elbow, arms crossed and rocking back on his heels. Grinning again.

Crane’s lips pressed together as he bit back his initial reaction. Their own lives, indeed. But Penny didn’t even blink at his challenging glare. “I would make a grid pattern of the area and search,” he answered.

“That’s what we are doing.” Raj volunteered enthusiastically. “Sort of. With commercial satellite images.”

“Satellites bounce cell phone signals.” Crane knew the concept from Abbie’s lectures on technology. “And voices in automobiles.”

“Yes, but these take pictures.” Raj enunciated as if his audience were three years old. Carefully unfolding his reflexively fisting hands, Crane regarded the others who seemed to be gauging his reaction.

He sighed quietly. Whatever this was, they were afraid he wasn’t going to like it. “And anyone can obtain these pictures?”

“Well,” Leonard wrinkled his face, “there are satellite images on sites like Google Maps, but those don’t change very often. And there are some live feeds if you know where to find them.”

“This is not illegal, is it?”

“It would be if we hacked national defense, or something like that. But Amy told us the Department of the Interior contracts with commercial satellite companies to monitor national and state parks for stuff like forest fires and animal migration. So Howard hacked their feed and we’re looking for your pit.”

“My pit.” Crane echoed, trying to hold in his frustration, trying to recall whom he had told about his thus-far fruitless search. He’d only asked Rajesh about astronomical phenomena. But Penny—

“Sheldon wanted to use drones, but he figured we’d need at least a dozen of them. So—” Raj reached for his magnifying glass and waved it at Crane. “We are searching for anomalies. This time on the ground, not in the stars.”

“Have you found something?”
Not yet.” Raj shrugged, obviously missing the hopeful note in Crane’s tone. “At first we were scanning on one of my huge computer screens.”

Leonard interjected, “Then we narrowed down to a few areas, looking at before and after images.”

“This is better, because Emily kept breathing in my ear, and I kept losing focus.” Raj leered at Crane. “You know what I mean.”

Crane hadn’t really absorbed any comment past the negative, his mind racing beyond the immediate implications. “Of course,” he answered absently, barely aware that Raj had stopped speaking. “Who started all this? Miss Penny—”

Penny rolled her eyes. “You’re not really listening to him are you?”

“Pardon?”

She huffed, dismissing her attempt at a jest. “Crane, I didn’t know anything about this until this evening.”

Emily shuffled her boots, staring down at her feet, then quickly back to him, drawing his attention. “I’ve been studying Revelation.” she announced, forcibly taking credit. “I found the part about the shooting stars. And the pit. The smoking pit and the creatures.”

Crane closed his eyes momentarily, realizing his culpability for this entire incident. He had told them they could talk amongst themselves, while he had thought he would have some control over what they would be learning. But he had to be sure Emily hadn’t seen all of chapter nine; he was afraid of the response that might provoke. “Miss Emily, perhaps you should not proceed alone in your studies.”

“If I waited for you, the Apocalypse would be here before I had a chance to read about it.”

“Were I you, I would not alienate the person from whom I wished a boon.”

Emily watched him for a moment, apparently waiting for him to continue. She did not seem overly concerned with his safety, just dangerously curious. Penny piped up from across the room, mistaking the pause for confusion. “Even I got that one. Keep up, doc.”

“Him,” Emily pointed at Crane. “I get. The one I don’t get is the John that wrote about the End of Times. Seriously, if I hadn’t come across the ‘star falling from heaven unto the earth’, I wouldn’t have figured out as much as I did.”

“Indeed.” Crane relaxed somewhat, realizing that Emily had not truly analyzed all she had read, and resolved to keep her thoughts unfocused. “The writer had a genuine ecstatic experience and wrote down what he saw in his visions. His need to use human words to describe what is beyond human expression accounts for the incoherence, the strange formation of sentences, the repetition, and the odd juxtaposition of words.”

Leonard spoke from the side of his mouth, in Penny’s direction. “Did you get that one?”

“He’s just showing off now,” she muttered.

Silence settled over the room. Crane studied them all. Emily. Rajesh. Leonard. Penny. Then back to Emily.

When he had first met Dr. Sweeney, she had very quickly become aware that he was a point of
occult interest. She had noticed his books, his ring, and also zeroed in on Washington’s map. Either she was simply habitually aware of her surroundings or she was a sensitive. He’d had two options: keep her away from knowledge that may be dangerous or monitor her to be sure she was led in the right direction. It was a responsibility Crane had chosen and then proceeded to ignore.

Crane paced, then pivoted, certain he was the center of everyone’s attention. “It is difficult to translate language which is both symbolic and poetic, which can easily lose both beauty and significance when reduced to a mundane, workaday vocabulary.” He looked at Penny. “Or a simple drawing, which also necessarily uses the images which are familiar rather than those which otherwise might be thought delirium.”

Emily caught his eye again, crossing her arms across her chest and drawling. “I hope you’re going to explain it better than that.”

“Better?” Crane wasn’t sure if he should be offended.

Penny barked a laugh. “I think she just called you on your bullshit.”

Crane raised an eyebrow, pointedly not looking at the blonde.

Emily pressed what she must have seen as an advantage. “I always thought Revelation was written by the good guys. Why would anyone want these nasty things to go on?”

Crane’s lips twitched. “It is not a consummation devoutly to be wished.” He relented and attempted to explain better than that. “It is a warning. Be good, accept Christ, or these bad things will happen to you and not to the person standing beside you who is not a Christian. If you read carefully, you see that events affect only a certain percentage of the population. The holy ones are saved. John of Patmos is proselytizing at a time when whole populations are drifting away from the Church. That is what the opening verses are about.”

“Has all that other stuff already happened? The stuff before the falling stars? Why doesn’t anybody notice?”

“For the reasons I have already pointed out, Revelation has never been regarded as occurring in chronological order. And people do notice. Mostly law enforcement. They are simply not disposed toward connecting events in any kind of coherent pattern. Nor are they given to looking for apocalyptic explanations.”

“Are you telling us that the Apocalypse has started?”

“No. Not at all. You must not think that.” It was bad enough that his friends had been exposed to demons. He did not want them spending their lives worrying about the end of days. He answered, not quite sure if he was lying. “Whatever the forces of evil have endeavored thus far has been defeated.”

“So what are you doing? What is this ‘seven tribulations’ crap?”

Crane closed his eyes and forced down his temper. He reminded himself of the casual ways of speaking utilized by modern people. That’s all it was. Emily was not trivializing his mission or his existence. She was trying to understand. He took a deep breath. “Evil entities attempt to take over events – often ordinary events – to distort prophecy for their own benefit, so that they might consolidate and extend their power. They use prophecy.”

“With a plague of locusts?” Emily challenged.
“What?” Raj was horrified and accused Crane. “You did not tell me about locusts. You only wanted a stellar anomaly.”

“Insects are not your specialty,” Crane sighed, knowing Rajesh would need a reason to keep him from panicking. “Moreover, it will likely not be a literal infestation. A plague of locusts was akin to apocalypse in Biblical times, bringing about starvation and disease. You have only to reference the happenings in Genesis. So this might well have been how Patmos was trying to persuade his audience to stand by the teachings of Christ. I have no idea what might be manifest. But a viable avenue of investigation, which I have also taken, is discovering the weaknesses of both locusts and scorpions.”

Raj’s eyes grew wider. “Oh, lord, not scorpions, too.”

Emily motioned for her boyfriend to settle down. “You don’t really want me helping you figure out what John the Man really means,” she challenged Crane.

He undercut her indignance with quiet control. “That method has eluded mankind for centuries. It makes no sense that I should follow it. The best we could do would be merely academic. In practicable experience the problem appears first and then I do research to decide how to deal with it.”

“So you wait around until some goony starts running around killing people.”

“Sometimes that is all you can do. There have been no demonstrable ramifications as of yet. The Banach killed no one in the forest. Nor did the Exluto.”

Of course, the Witness in him believed the so-called mud-man had been trying to bring something much more threatening and powerful across from another level of existence. But he wasn’t going to address that concern to these people. Nor was he going to point out that the locust/scorpions were not meant to kill. Not literally.

“I am trying to anticipate,” he continued. “Hence, the search for the pit, which is the next manifestation in Revelation. My deadlines may be merely self-imposed.”

“But you’re in a hurry.”

“The last two creatures manifested during astronomic events. Since another such event is upon us, I see no reason to think another creature will not appear. And I confess I am a bit desperate to confirm there is something significant in the appearance of the Banach. I am unsure as to why.”

“Maybe you feel guilty because we all saw it,” Raj observed. “And you need it to mean something.”

“I—” Crane swallowed, pulled himself straighter, as if that were possible. “This is precisely why I didn’t want to speak with you all at once.” It was a stupid thing to say, but he hated being on the defensive. Not talking to them wouldn’t change anything now that they knew. There was no going back to a state of ignorant bliss for any of them.

He’d reached the end of his argument, not knowing what else to say, how else to explain himself. They seemed to wait for a moment while none of them said anything. Then Leonard handed more of the pages of satellite images around; they studied them carefully, murmuring to each other.

Crane stood and watched his friends. He wouldn’t encourage them. He wouldn’t give them permission. But he wouldn’t argue with them anymore, either. Not as long as they stayed in the apartment, searching the internet.

“So very,” Emily broke into the silence, “we look for your pit for you, which frees you up to tutor
us in the supernatural.”

“Ah. That is what this is supposed to be. Do you believe that is a good idea?”

“We need to know.”

He looked over at Penny. She shrugged. “Don’t blame me, I just got here.”

“But I am sure you think it is a valid notion.”

“Only wish I’d thought of it.”

He shook his head, wondering when they were going to understand what he was trying to tell them. If they would understand. “There is only doubt and guesswork and uncertainty. There is very little truth to unearth.”

“Then we won’t take up too much of your time.”

Crane recognized a stone wall when he saw one. He told himself that searching for the pit on paper would keep his friends occupied for the foreseeable future, so he gave up on his currently unwinnable argument. He looked at the images on the coffee table, then went down on one knee and picked up some of the pages. “Have you discovered any incongruities?”

Leonard wrinkled his nose. “No. But we’re still looking.”

Crane flipped through some of the pages before he put them back where he’d gotten them. He really didn’t understand what he was looking at, anyway. He straightened and fixed Leonard with a suspicious eye. “I can only hope you were going to come to me if you found anything.”

“That was the plan. We’ve seen you use a sword, remember?”

He headed toward the door, raising his arm in farewell … or dismissal. Or both.

“Oh, oh.” Penny stopped him. “It’s not all bad news! I remembered that thing about locusts from high school.”

He turned. “And what is that?”

“Well, the bunch of us on County Road couldn’t always scrape together enough money to—”

“Pardon me. Money?”

“For gas. To cruise Main Street. Don’t interrupt. Anyway, we’d sit around whatever barn we hadn’t been chased out of lately. On hay bales, passing around the Thunderbird. We’d get buzzed—”

“Pardon me. Buzzed?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Slightly drunk. Don’t you get buzzed in England?”

“Fox’d. Or staggerish. Franklin once wrote a treatise listing 228 words for drunk. I do not believe your ‘buzzed’ was included.”

She snickered. He pressed his lips together. Did they even still say fox’d?

“Wasn’t Ben Franklin an American?”
He could tell her that the insufferable boor was British until the year 1776, but the fact was unavoidable that he had always been an American. So, as Crane did whenever he was discomfited, he went on the offensive. “How did you afford wine if you couldn’t afford gasoline?”

“I did say ‘buzzed’. And it was really cheap wine and we were in the middle of a locust infestation. Not a lot of cash coming out of the crops that year. Do you want to hear this or not?”

“My apologies. Pray, continue.”

“Well, the jumping uglies were all over the barn, too, so whenever one got within reach, we’d pour a little wine on it.”

In spite of himself, Crane asked, “Why?”

“We were teenagers. Bored teenagers. Bored, drunk teenagers. Charlie used to let his dog smoke weed.”

“Locusts?” Crane prompted.

“Get this: it would lose control and stagger around just like it was drunk, too, and we could poke at it or put it in a jar and shake it up. It was hilarious!” She looked around at the others who were staring at her like she’d just said the Avengers were stupid. “I guess you had to be there.”

“Did it work with other sorts of wine, or just Thunderbird?” Crane asked.

“I don’t know! We weren’t writing it up for Scientific American!”

Leonard tried to hide his smile. “Too bad. You could have been in print years before I was.”

“Remind me not to tell you guys anything ever again!” Penny crossed her arms over her chest. “Locusts were serious. I guess we wanted revenge.”

Understanding the sentiment, Crane held up a palm to mollify her. “I once tied a hand bell to a hound’s tail,” he said. “It was my father’s favorite.”

“How many hounds did you have?” she asked suspiciously.

Penny had missed the point, making him caustic once more. “I shan’t tell you anything, either.” He sighed. “Never mind.” He bowed slightly. “Thank you. I am unsure how I might utilize that fact, but one never knows.”

He retreated to the door again, fortunately not too close when it swung open. Sheldon entered, followed by Amy.

“I don’t care if he won the MacArthur Fellowship. Bert is a geologist and he’s been wasting his time ever since he started collecting rocks as a child.” He pulled off his nylon jacket, looking around the room at the papers strewn everywhere. “I told them to use drones, Crane, but they didn’t have enough.”

“I appreciate that, Sheldon. Good evening, Miss Amy.”

“Hey.” She smiled, then turned to Sheldon, their conversation apparently not over. “Bert is going spelunking, Sheldon. There are areas of the Skyline Caverns that haven’t been excavated, yet, and they think they might find some more anthodites. It’s very exciting.”

“I don’t care what you call it, he’s still crawling around in a hole in the ground. Any self-respecting
adult stands on two feet and looks at the sky.” Sheldon crossed to his desk chair and draped his jacket on the back, then turned into the room. “This needs to go so we can order dinner. You’re not staying, are you, Crane?”

“Thursday? Thai? No. Thank you for the gracious invitation. I must get back to my research.”

“Can I help?” Emily was eager.

“Do you read Koine Greek?”

“Way to stack the deck, Crane. You know I don’t.”

“Sorry. Good evening, everyone.” He bowed and pivoted for the door, which was still open.

“Are you going to eat tonight?” Penny shouted after him.

Crane paused for just a second before he shut the door behind him.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Crane finally finds the locust demons. Or do they find him?

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the absence of the Big Bang Gang in this chapter. They are very much in the rest of the story ... for better or worse.

He closed the door of his own apartment and locked it automatically. He hung his coat on one of the hooks on the wall and bent to pull off his boots, leaving them upright on the floor underneath. Stretching lengthwise across the couch, Crane propped his feet up on its padded arm. He closed his eyes, but not to sleep. He didn’t think he would be able to, anyway. So he would choose between food and research. In a minute. A few minutes.

Giving the lie to what he’d said, his planned research for tonight was not in an ancient language. The creature had a name now – the Acridida. He had found a reference that afternoon in *Demons of Ancient and Medieval Christianity*. But no pictures. None but his own.

Feeling that he’d exhausted his sources in that direction, he determined it was time to drag out the laptop and perform his due diligence on *arthroputa chelicera, locustana pardalina*, and their weaknesses. Right after a leftover burrito and a beer.

Later that night, he found he was able to sleep, although not very restfully. Sheldon ran through the room, tossing tree-filled pages into the air and complaining about geologists. Over and over again. On his fifth trip, Crane gasped and sat up, grasping the bedclothes to his chest with one hand. What in hell?

He scrubbed at his face and laughed at himself. Of all the things in his experiences to have nightmares about, he had chosen Dr. Sheldon Cooper and his insane rumblings. His eye drifted around the room and rested on the photo of Abbie and her sister Jenny on the wall beside his bed. She would have told him not to eat burritos before retiring. He would have told her there was nothing wrong with his stomach.

Crane sighed. He wasn’t going to get back to sleep if he couldn’t relax. He threw the covers aside and grabbed his robe from the back of the bathroom door. Hot chocolate. Not out of an envelope, but warm milk with syrup. And a spoonful of sugar to assuage his sweet tooth.

He stared into the pot, stirring slowly, letting his thoughts drift, encouraging a mindset that would let him get back to sleep. Suddenly, Sheldon intruded again. “I don’t care what you call it, he’s still crawling around in a hole in the ground.”

His hand stilled immediately, losing its grip and dropping the spoon into the hot milk. After a few steadying breaths, he resisted the urge to slap his forehead, realizing the import of the physicist’s
words. Instead, he picked up the now-bubbling pot and poured the brown liquid into a mug, careful
to not let the spoon slide out and make a mess. He put the pot in the sink, filling it with water, to be
washed when he was finished with his drink.

Settling on a stool at the kitchen island, he rested his elbows on the counter and brought the mug to
his lips. “…Crawling around in a hole in the ground.” He burnt his tongue before he thought better
of it, pushed the mug away from himself, and rested his head in his hands.

A hole in the ground. Sheldon thought a cave was a hole in the ground. A pit was a hole in the
ground. A pit.

_Cavositas. Shimo. Jama. Otth._

Damn Sheldon Cooper. And damn himself for an idiot. Of course he had inspected the cave where
the sigil had been drawn. That area had been the very first place he had gone, even as he could argue
the choice at once flawed, sound, and foolhardy. But he had too much ground to cover and he’d
never been back.

He sat up, pulled his mug towards his mouth, and forced himself not to gulp. He wouldn’t go out
tomorrow: he couldn’t get there until after dark and he wanted to explore the area under optimal
conditions. As he had foolishly pointed out to Emily, no one had died yet and he had to gamble that
no one would. Crisis point, if he was correct, was in a fortnight – a lot more time than he usually had.

He’d go to work tomorrow, do some more research, take the time to plan this operation, and get in
one more day at the library in case he needed to take off later.

Cursing under his breath, Crane turned to the sink to wash his dishes. He had never appreciated the
luxury of not having a job until he had one. He had fabricated a cover story for Dr. Collins, his
superior, who was always more forgiving than he had a right to expect. But right now, he wasn’t
ready for action. Saturday would be soon enough.

He dried his hands, leaving the dishes in the drainer, and crawled back into bed. Mentally, he began
to cycle through the inventory of his available weaponry, trying to determine which would be most
effective against an Acridida.

As he trekked his way through the undergrowth of the state park, Crane fervently hoped that he
would encounter evidence of the creatures rather than the creatures themselves. He may have spent
an extra day in research and preparation, but he did not feel primed for confronting one of the hybrid
entities.

Locust infestations could be handled efficiently if an area had enough resources to deal with it. One
of the problems for him was that agriculture officials often dealt with the insects’ breeding grounds or
larval states. That would not help him confront any of the mature creatures that had arrived with the
shooting stars.

Using insecticides held considerable risk. He had studied them all from the safety of his desk in the
library. Fenitrothion had been banned by most countries. Fipronil caused nausea, vomiting, seizures
and attacks on the human nervous system. A company named Boehringer Ingelheim produced a
product that was supposedly effective, but had to be bought in bulk and needed an applicator’s
license. Bifen was not available in New York. Bifenthrin was a carcinogenic, bad for insects and
He doubted he could obtain any of these without a decent backstory. After all, there was no demonstrable infestation in New York.

Jenny could undoubtedly locate and steal any of these items. Abbie had disapproved of her sister’s penchant for thievery, but Crane had done worse in the past to accomplish his duties as Washington’s spy. And Abbie was, after everything, a practical woman. Unfortunately, at present, Jenny was in Qatar.

There was no proper trail to the caves from where he had parked his car, but in some spots there were worn-down places through the grass where many feet had traveled. As he crossed one of these, he encountered a couple of hikers and tried to scare them away with the story of the bear-sighting during the Orionids. The young lady had not made an official report, however, and the hikers were not intimidated. As he waved them off, he offered a silent prayer for their well-being.

Crane readjusted the harness where he had stashed several torches in lieu of a flamethrower—which would be more effective but unobtainable. Jenny would undoubtedly have been able to acquire one of those as well.

He brushed an overhanging branch away from his forehead, forcibly reminding him of the other reason such a weapon was not a good idea. Habitually unable to rationalize many of his everyday faux pas, he could not possibly defend setting Rockefeller State Park ablaze. Not having too many alternatives, he had settled for his sword and the pistol Abbie had taught him to use.

Stopping short of the clearing where the nearest cave was situated, he obscured himself as well as he could with leafless bushes and brambles. He watched awhile for any activity, then moved to pace the grass. He knew the caves were interconnected, but he opted to examine them from the outside, not willing to risk himself to the closeness and darkness.

Crane moved on to each cavern marked on his map, as he had the night of the camping trip. Disappointed, he eventually scrutinized the area around the last one. Perhaps he should have asked for the satellite images of this area, but he had been afraid some of his friends would follow him out here. Or worse, gotten here first. He didn’t think Leonard would be that adventurous, but there was not much the man did not tell his fiancée. And what might Penny have revealed to Emily now that Crane himself had openly entertained their questions and speculations?

He was tempted to scramble up a tree but set that aside as a last resort. Climbing would not be easy, given the harness and sword sling he wore, even if it would give him a relatively unobstructed view of the countryside.

Frustrated, he studied the ground once more, desperate for a sign. He detected a small patch where the grass had been disturbed, but not by anything as substantial as feet. A disarray in the underbrush became slightly more apparent as he proceeded, caused by entities at least as large as humans, perhaps a little larger. But there were no visible tracks in the dirt.

Following the meager trail which seemed to lead away from the direction he had just been, Crane had to suppress a growing excitement in his chest. The disturbances grew more marked, until he stumbled into another small clearing, barely large enough for a hollow opening in the ground. The vegetation around the opening was scorched brown, as though someone had to remove the greenery to find their way inside. Or perhaps it had been burned away when the cavity was formed. Recently.

This cave, this pit, was what he had been looking for and he had almost missed it because it hadn’t been there on that first night. The demon was apparently in less of a hurry than the Witness.
Crane paced around the opening, then in wider arcs as he discovered nothing that actually verified the presence of the Acrididae. Could he justify continuing? Perhaps he should retreat now that he had found the place to begin. To strategize and find an effective weapon.

But hadn’t he already done all that? Spent hours in the Archives and on the internet to fall back on his current strategy and the weapons he already wore?

Bowing to a sudden impulsiveness and against his better judgment, he abandoned his earlier reluctance. Drawn to the black hole, he found himself moving into the darkness. Pulling one of his handmade torches from its harness, he ignited it with the lighter that was so much faster than flint. His pulse quickened as he ventured forward, willing all prophecy erased from his eidetic memory.

As he trod farther into the dank and chilly air, he pricked his ears for any sounds at all, rustling, scraping, skittering noises. He had the overwhelming urge to cough and swallowed repeatedly to discourage it. Suddenly, he heard a low whirring and knew it was from the wings of the creatures. Still fighting the irritation in his throat, he knew that if he could hear them, they would be able to hear him.

And then it was right in front of him … standing erect … tail … wings … brown … hell … shoving his torch forward … flash fire consuming the thing… singeing hairs on his hand … stumbling backward … turning away … damning his recklessness … sensing a presence behind him … whirling … torch … too far away … pulling his pistol … bullet ricocheting … feeling a sting … burning … pain in his side … tail coiling toward him again … unbearable … dropping his torch … too much … too much … pain….

Crane rolled to his side and vomited onto the floor of the cave. He stared at his half-digested breakfast and wondered where he was and how he had gotten there. He was lying on a flat rock formation raised from the ground like a shelf. All he wanted was to stay there and sleep, but somewhere in the back of his brain he realized that was not a good idea.

Laboring to sit up, he swallowed down his nausea and closed his eyes against vertigo. He slid his feet to the floor, but when he let go of the cave wall he stumbled and fell. Acrididae. His legs itched unbearably in at least three places, and his left side was on fire. Ignoring the pain, he fought against his lightheadedness and tried to stand again. He ended on his hands and knees, determined not to be there when his captors returned.

The chamber where he crouched was large enough for a company standing in formation. A light source was coming from somewhere, flickering a dim yellow. Some kind of fire, possibly torches. He crawled in the other direction, gasping cold air into his lungs and tasting a peculiar sort of dust.

“Witness-s-s.” The rasping voice came from behind him. He didn’t stop; instead he tried to stagger to his feet once more.

“Ahhh, you would like another s-s-sting, Witness-s-s.”

He turned, facing the creature, and had to lean against the damp cave wall with one shoulder. He tried not to let any of his pain show in his face.

The being confronting him barely resembled his sketch. It had more human characteristics, which somehow made it more grotesque. His own height, standing erect, wings folded against its back. Its
body was green – more mature than the one he had destroyed – its tail a pearlescent white. The chitin across its chest gave the impression of a breastplate, but semitransparent, pliant, and, chillingly, engraved with the Satanic cross.

Subconsciously, his hand scrubbed across his own chest. The imprinted sigil horrified him more than even his own vulnerability. “Why am I held captive?” he demanded. “Why do you not kill me?”

“Our des-s-stiny is to torture you. Your des-s-stiny is to be tortured.”

*They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the Seal on their foreheads. They were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes. During those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.*

Revelation. Chapter nine. The verses he did not wish Emily to read.

*Fuck.*

“I deny destiny.”

“Would you have us-s-s end your exis-s-stence, Witness-s-s?”

“I would have you abandon this plane of reality entirely.”

The Acridida made an ugly, guttural noise. “You amus-s-se, Witness-s-s.”

The creature picked him up and deposited him back onto the stone shelf. It was too strong to be bothered by his struggles. The ersatz locust ignored him as it continued around the bend in the cave wall, toward the source of light. Resolved to crawl again if necessary, he glanced over at his flight path and saw a second Acridida standing, watching.

He sighed and lay back determined, albeit under duress, to heal somewhat and develop a course of action before he tried again.

Sitting on the ground, leaning sideways against the cave wall, legs curled up into his body, Crane watched one of his guards standing twenty feet away. He had pulled off his coat and rolled up his sleeves and adjusted his position every few minutes to find a new spot of cold, wet rock. He was so hot, sweating profusely, his stomach queasy and threatening to rebel every time he moved.

If this wasn’t quite torture yet, he wasn’t going to tell them.

He watched his captor through slitted eyes. He had gradually inched closer to one of the passageways, testing to see how close he could get before being forcibly invited back to his bed/shelf. Attempting to ignore the pain on his arm where he last been bitten, he said, “Is the hive queen the only one of you who can talk?”

The Acridida moved only its mouth. “We do not s-s-subs-s-sis-s-st in a hive.”

Deliriously, he mused that he wouldn’t use the word “subsist” if he had that much trouble forming the sibilant. “Figure of speech,” he slurred.

“We do not have thos-s-s-se.”

“I imagine not.” Crane leaned his head back and closed his eyes to keep the room from spinning.
“The moon is coming closest to Earth in its orbit” – he doubted the creature would have heard of a supermoon – “in twelve days.” Or less depending on how long I’ve been here. “How do you plan to torture me for five months?” Of course he knew that lengths of times, like most numbers, were symbolic in Revelation, but usually they were at least relative to reality. And he really needed to know.

“It has been promised.”

“Oh. Good.” He wondered if this minion knew what was going to happen – if any of them did. Perhaps the end-all of their existence was his suffering.

“You are early. We were to seek you out at the proper time.”

“Sorry to ruin your plans.” Information. That was important. If only he could tuck it somewhere in his brain where it meant something. “Is your leader angry?”

“We follow prophecy.” The Acridida suddenly stood three feet away, forcing Crane to look up. “You can speak. You are not in pain.”

It stung his chest. His leg.

He screamed.


When he awoke, his whole body was on fire. Now this is torture.

He didn’t move. He didn’t think he would ever move again. Tears leaked out of his eyes. He found the strength to turn his head so they wouldn’t drip into his ears. The compulsive laugh at himself was only one syllable, but it made his chest burn. And the sideways position of his head turned his excess saliva into drool. Not embarrassed, he told himself. Symptoms of venom poisoning.

There was another Acridida watching him. He didn’t care. He refused to let them humiliate him. They understood pain. Did they understand emotion?

They’re bloody insects, Crane.

He didn’t care. He drifted back into darkness.

Dinner looked like oatmeal, or some inedible version of it made by someone who had no idea what oatmeal was. They brought it in some sort of metal bowl, and water in its own metal cup. Crane stirred at it with his fingers, debating whether he should eat to keep up his strength. There were so many myths built around the inadvisability of consuming food in undesirable places.

As he moved his fingers, he felt a roughness on the bottom of the bowl. Pushing the food aside, he could see the pattern of the Satanic cross. He looked in the cup and saw the same. Crane wondered where the dishes had come from. They looked as if they had been hammered over a die of the sigil. The edges were sharp; he might well cut his lip if he tried to drink.

He put the food on the rock beside him. “I would not eat that even if I wanted to.”
“S-s-sus-s-stenanc-c-ce,” the creature insisted.

“Do you eat this?”

“Grain. Yes-s-s.”

“Then you may have it.”

“We do not kill. You mus-s-st eat.”

He could last thirty to forty days without food but only three to five without water. That wouldn’t even get him to the supermoon.

He did not know if eating from the hexed utensils was the same as wearing the seal on his forehead. Would they have to stop torturing him? Would it make him a servant of whoever was trying to come through?

Were they attempting to trick him? Their use of the dishes seemed to indicate that. But could they trick him? In all the fables he knew, the supplicant had to knowingly accept his subjugation.

It did not make sense that they would want to put the seal on his forehead. They enjoyed torturing him too much. “Do you want to stop the pain?”

“The pain has been promis-s-sed.”

“You follow prophecy.”

“Yes-s-s.”

“So if I eat this….?”

“We wait. All there is-s-s, is-s-s what is-s-s.”

Not precisely a definitive answer.

He tried to make his own meaning clearer. “What if I was your ally?”

“He thinks-s-s he us-s-ses-s-s evil, but evil us-s-ses-s-s him. He thinks-s-s he fights-s-s evil, but he is-s-s evil.”

The Acridida seemed to be finished with the conversation. It moved back across the chamber to its usual position. With a suspicious eye, Crane looked at the food he had set beside him. He couldn’t afford to tempt fate. He left it there and dropped to the floor to lie down. A new spot, cooler. He pressed his face against the chill of the stone and lapped at the moisture there. If he wasn’t going to drink from the tainted cup, he had to replenish at least some of the water in his body.

Crane closed his eyes and thought about what he had just been told. “All there is, is what is.”

What did it mean? What did any of it mean?

The Acridida stood over him, its stinger slashing whip-like into and out of the flesh on Crane’s thigh. The milky white appendage arched, suspended in the air as if waiting for the next strike.

“Is that all you have?” he grit his teeth until the spike of agony passed and settled into a dull roar.
“You are able to hit high C, yet cannot sing the patter song.”

“What is-s-s that, Witness-s-s?”

“Humor. I am very funny.”

Crane wasn’t sure what he was doing. If he was trying to make friends, he was destined to be disappointed. What did they call it? Stockholm syndrome. No, that was backwards. Lima syndrome. The Japanese Embassy in Peru. Where the captors began to empathize and identify with their captives and released them. Or perhaps he was merely delirious.

“Are you not in pain?”

“I have been told my humor is sometimes very painful.”

Crane looked up into yellow eyes, empty, used as ocular orbits only. No window to the soul. First, you had to have a soul.


Crane gasped a short laugh. He was trying to empathize with a demonic creature. Did he really have something in common with it? Could they truly communicate at any level?

“Lima syndrome? Really, Crane?”

He peered over the edge of his shelf and found Abbie sitting on the floor, dressed in tight black jeans, heavy boots, and her leather jacket. She chuckled. “You can do better than that.”

“I am attempting to do so. I simply cannot seem to keep my mind from wandering.”

“Well, you’d better. Or you’re not getting out of here.”

“They are not supposed to kill me,” he protested.

“You’re relying on demons now to know how much is too much? They enjoy it, Crane.”

“I do not hear any suggestions coming from you. If you have nothing constructive to offer, you should leave.” He regretted his impatience as soon as he said it. He did not want her to leave.

“I’m working on it, too,” she drawled, accustomed to his temper.

“I know you will think of something,” he said, then whispered, “I rely on you.”

...living being walking in the Valley of Death...

Crane was tied down by his ankles and wrists. A scorpion wandered on his bare chest, stinging him at random, bringing up welts until the whole area was red and inflamed and swollen and left him in agony. “Is that necessary?” he slurred, absurdly.

He looked up and saw Abbie beside him, in the same position, wearing her black sports bra and her own creeping scorpion.
“No.”

Then he was in the forest, calling for her. He couldn’t find her. He had to find her.

“I saw a demon in the woods, and I lied … I lied….”

The Exluto in the clearing. The Banach crashing through the undergrowth. The foliage burned away from the Acrididae’s cave.

…and she’d rather go with the monkey story … are you the ones who saw the bear? … there is only doubt and guesswork and uncertainty….

 “…to protect myself.”

No more scorpions, ever, he’d vowed.

Yet here he was.

His eyes opened. He was still in the cavern chamber. His chest itched. He gripped both sides of the opening in his shirt and used all his strength to tear it the rest of the way. There were three new bites, red, swollen, angry. Wet. Sweat. Pooling on his skin.

*What do you want?*

Whatever it was, he was ready. He would tell them anything. George Washington’s secret headquarters? Just ask. Interrogate a prisoner? He had the whip ready.

But they didn’t want anything. They only wanted to torture.

There was no bargaining with them. No pleading. No bribes.

No way to get out.

So he pretended he didn’t care. Pretended he didn’t hurt. But he did.

His chest hurt. No, his heart hurt. His head throbbed. He started to sob, but it broke into a coughing fit. He rolled over to vomit, but he only heaved from an empty stomach.

Prophecy.

*We follow prophecy.*

How did you fight prophecy? How did you fight someone that believed prophecy?

He willed himself into unconsciousness.

Abbie stood, looking down on him, from where the Acridida often stood. “You’re not very bright.”

*If you are casting aspersions on my intelligence*—but it didn’t come out of his mouth, his uncooperative tongue couldn’t form the words. “I am …” he insisted “…so.”

“Eloquent,” she shook her head. “Why are you baiting them?”
“Th’ talk. Give ’nforma-a-a-tion.”

“And then they sting you. What does that get you?”

“Going t’ sting me, ’nyway.

“Maybe.” She leaned her face into his. “Think about it. You’re telling them it doesn’t hurt. Crane, they don’t understand macho. They just want you to hurt.”

“They ’r doin’ a fiiiine job.”

“What if you played it up? Scream and groan and cry.” She turned away, waving her arms. “Grab your stomach and your head. Make them think you’re gonna die if you take one more sting.”

“And?” he didn’t understand.

“And they won’t sting you as much. You wanna get out of here or not? You have to be able to stand up to do that.”

“Right. ’ll try. Let y’know.”

Abbie smiled. “I’ll know.”

“And ’m not stupid. Jus’ delirious.”

“Happy to see you, too.”

It wasn’t difficult – he was constantly miserable from something. Crane massaged his abdomen and groaned, softly at first and then more loudly. Clutched his head. Pressed his fingers into the spot where his heart was grumbling. Sobbed, even.

He held the Acrididae’s attention. They seemed fascinated by his tossing and turning. Absorbed by his cries and moans.

Sometimes they stung him but many times they did not. It seemed as if he was getting just a little stronger. But there was always a guard and he could hardly test his strength while it watched.

Sometimes he felt ridiculous. But he persevered.

Oatcakes. Well, it looked like oatcakes. Much more appealing than the usual gruel. And they had given him wine this time, not water. Hardly the best choice for a man who was becoming increasingly dehydrated. But what did they know? Perhaps it was an effort to tempt his palate.

He rotated the plate to see the sigil right side up. As he did, he slid it against the palm of his hand and pain flared. Blood. His hand went to his mouth and his tongue slid along the deep cut.

The metal plate was sharp along the side. He glanced up at his current guard which was apparently unconcerned that he had hurt his hand, maybe even pleased that there was another way to make him miserable. Blood. Their stings drew no blood, but this Acridida seemed transfixed by the sight of it.

Wine … wine…. He looked into the depths of the cup and swirled it around.
Wine…. *God’s wounds!* Miss Penny was going to be his salvation.

He flexed each of his muscles surreptitiously. Not too responsive, but better than before. Abbie’s subterfuge seemed to be working. The women in his life … it was always the women in his life…. He jerked his mind back to the present. Would they ever give him this plate or offer him wine again? It was now or never.

His captor was still staring at the blood. He gripped the cup with his left hand and threw the contents in the face of the demon. It blinked and wavered. Crane leapt up with the force of adrenaline and will power, shoved the sharp edge of the plate into the gap between breastplate and head, and got a face full of brownish liquid for his trouble. His grip on the wet plate slipped as he tried to pull it out, but he managed. He didn’t know if he’d get close enough to any of the others to use it, but he wasn’t about to give up his only weapon.

As he turned to the passage where the flickering light showed, he was overcome with a coughing fit. *No!* That was *not* going to happen. He swallowed excess saliva and ignored his distress.

And stumbling, he ran.

And ran. And prayed that he was going in the right direction. Any direction that would take him to daylight and not deeper into the cave. He staggered, grasped at the walls to keep himself upright. He rejected a passageway to the right that appeared to descend slightly. The path should go up, towards the surface. His lungs labored to breathe as his legs burned, which he took as a sign he was climbing.

Or he was just really, really in bad shape.

Scorpion stings will do that to a man.

He should have brought Abbie with him. She’d keep him straight.

Crane struggled around a bend in the path and discovered a recession where several torches had been stowed. He stuffed the plate he had been carrying inside the waistband of his breeches and grabbed two torches, one in each hand. He held one of them high, so he could see better, and forged ahead, wondering why he hadn’t encountered any more Acrididae.

He didn’t wonder for long.

Apparently, the swarm had no idea he was loose, for which he was grateful. Some demons had a collective awareness and could share such intelligence. But the next two he met were unaware and, taken by surprise, easily dispatched with the flame of his torches.

Crane leaned on the cave wall, drenched in sweat, gasping for breath, and trying to sustain his vigilance. He wanted to clutch his chest to keep his heart from beating out of his chest, but he daren’t release either of the weapons. He’d just killed three of the creatures, one before he’d been captured. But he had no idea how many of them there were, how fast they bred, or even if they *could* breed on this plane of reality.

He spun a torch at a tail stinger that lunged toward his torso, setting it afire as he swept it away, and followed up with a strike to the creature’s face. It vanished into a pile of ashes on the stone floor. Lurching away, Crane turned another corner and picked a new path with a prayer. He almost wept when he discerned a spot of daylight ahead and sped his erratic steps as determinedly as he could.

Two more paths crossed his course. One revealed another Acridida which managed to wound him in the side. Crane dropped a torch as he reflexively grasped the puncture site with a flattened palm, gasping, nearly screaming, dodging away, this time taking a glancing blow from the stinger, the
venom trickling down his heated skin. With a desperate cry, Crane parried with his fiery weapon and his opponent *whooshed* into the air.

He was on his knees, panting against the arm now clutching at his stomach, casting around the floor for his lost torch. This last battle had been too noisy. He had to get out of the cave before he was stopped again or he would lose even his meager reserves of energy.

Crane struggled to his feet, lost his balance, and staggered a few steps toward a curve in the passageway. There, reflected on the wall, was light of a cooler temperature than his torch. Daylight. His adrenaline spiked again and colors danced across his eyes. He drew in a steady breath, examining his surroundings continually as he moved to the light.

Hugging the limestone, he approached the mouth of the cave. Shadows flitted through the brush outside where he could discern at least three Acrididae in a small clearing that had not been there before. He worried for a moment about what they might be doing, but he pushed that from his mind in favor of escaping without being seen.

Both problems were solved at the same time when he discovered a collection of porcelain bowls and urns just inside the opening. All the lids were impressed with the Satanic symbol. Fighting an uneasy feeling of familiarity, he studied the contents. Barley. Wheat. Oil. Wine.

The Acrididae were here to finish what the Exluto could not. On the night of the supermoon.

Crane picked up each of the bowls in turn and threw the grain across the floor, then poured the oil in a wide swathe and set it ablaze. He grabbed the other urn and dodged to the side out of the cave and into the bushes. The three creatures he had seen rushed to the fire, stingers waving. Just as they turned, silhouetted by the flames, Crane threw the wine across their faces. One tripped into the burning oil, the other two were reduced to ashes by his swinging torch.

He wanted to collapse. Instead, he swept his second torch from the ground and, gripping both his weapons, he staggered away.
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

Penny, Raj, and Emily become anxious about Crane’s continued absence, so they do something about it. But Crane is not amused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Crane!”

Miss Penny. God’s wounds! No. No, no, no, no, no.

“Ichabod!”

And Miss Emily. Damnation, are they all here?

He leaned back against a birch tree and looked around. The two ladies and Raj came crashing through the brush, eyes wide, panting with exertion and anxiety. Crane cast his eyes around to be sure their noise hadn’t attracted attention from the Acrididae. Clenching his teeth, he felt a wave of nausea and indignation overwhelm him.

“Whoa! Smokey would not approve!” Raj ran over to him and grabbed the torches from his suddenly lifeless hands. He had no idea what the man was talking about, forgetting it immediately in his panic as Raj stamped one of the flames into the dirt.

“Do not extinguish that torch!”

Raj stopped and looked up, stunned at the dominance in the command. Penny and Emily flanked Crane, each taking an arm to steady him. He pulled away from Penny, causing Emily to grip him with both hands. “C’mon, you should sit down,” she urged.

“I cannot,” he murmured, withdrawing from Emily as well. He glared at Raj valiantly attempting to do as he was told and back his girlfriend at the same time. The incongruity of it spiked Crane’s anger. “And you should not be here!”

“You’ve been gone for a week!” Raj protested.

“And you’re hurt!” Penny reached for him again, but he dodged and had to grope for a branch to keep from stumbling.

“This is what happens,” he hissed. “You know that. And you know you are not to be here!”

“You can’t even stand up by yourself!” she pointed out.

Crane drew himself stiffly erect. “And yet I escaped. And am still escaping.” He swept a hand out in the direction he had been heading, the direction they had come from. He pulled at Emily’s sleeve and propelled her in front of him, pushing at her back and indicating for Penny to follow. “You will run. Now. As quickly as you can.”
“Not without you.”

“You have no defenses,” he insisted. “Are you insane?”

“I have your torches,” Raj waved one in the air. “I assume your monsters burn well.”

He couldn’t argue. He couldn’t concentrate long enough to make sense to these three who insisted on disregarding his every directive. His rage magnified the weakness he already felt, so he bowed his head and closed his eyes against it, bringing it under control, whispering. “Not monsters…. Not mine. And … yes.”

“We have –” Penny bristled with indignation as she tugged a large tote bag off her shoulder and displayed its contents to Crane.

He scoffed, hardly believing what he saw. “Balloons. Holy water will not—”

“Not water. Wine.” The corners of Penny’s mouth curled, but not in a smile. “The same crap we drank in Nebraska.”

“We’re not totally clueless.” Emily seemed almost triumphant. “We figured where you’d gone. We found your car parked on the side of the road. We could see it on the latest satellite—”

We … we … we … There should be no “we”. There was only the Witness…. “Be silent!”

Emily abruptly stopped talking, but her focus was not on Ichabod. She looked over his shoulder, past Penny, and froze in terror. “What—?” she gasped.

Raj screamed. Two Acrididae had landed among the trees, folding their wings back against their bodies. Human-sized locusts. Scorpions’ tails. Women’s faces with puckered greenish brown skin. The stuff of nightmares. Coming for them.

“Run!”

Crane dug in Penny’s bag for some balloons and shoved her away. He threw the brightly colored bombs at the demons’ vulnerable heads, missing twice but not stopping until both were reeling from the wine dripping down their features. He seized one of Raj’s torches and sprinted toward the Acrididae. One at a time, they whooshed into nothingness. Crane, sucking in oxygen, turned back to his friends. They stood, gaping.

“Damn you! Go!”

Emily walked over to Crane, looped her bag of balloons over his shoulder, and moved to run after Raj. Suddenly, two more Acrididae materialized in their path. Penny made a low moaning sound deep in her throat and dug her fingers into his arm.

“Kuongoza kutoka uzima.” Raj was muttering frantically under his breath, backing away, ignoring the roots and clumps of grass he stumbled over, just managing to stay on his feet.

Then Penny threw a balloon as Crane rushed forward with his torch. The demon knocked the burning weapon from his hand even as it disappeared into the flames. Fortunately, the torch fell onto barren ground.

“No!” Emily’s shout was a warning of the second creature threatening them.

Crane pivoted, pulling the almost-forgotten plate from his belt and slashed the thing across the throat.
Ichor spurted from the wound and over Crane’s filthy, bruised chest. He staggered and fell to his knees. The three friends ran up and circled him; while Emily helped him up and Raj waved his torch in the air, Penny held two balloons, searching their surroundings desperately.

Crane was sweating profusely, trying hard not to vomit. Raj stammered. “C-c-can we not do that again?”

“Do we have to bury it?” Emily looked down at the dead Acridida, obviously sickened at the thought.

Crane put his hand out for the last torch and ignited the body. “No.”

“Omigod.”

“Breathe,” Crane admonished. Raj was white-faced. Tears were leaking from Emily’s eyes. Penny was gasping into her cupped hands. “Now. We will move as quickly as possible. For all our lives.”

By the time they made it to the road, Penny and Rajesh were practically carrying Crane. Emily was leading, slashing their way through the underbrush using a doused torch as a club. They stumbled into Crane’s SUV, pulled into a small clearing, while Emily’s Jeep was parked to the rear in plain sight. She pulled her key fob from her pocket and aimed it at the red car.

“You’re not driving,” she announced without looking at him.

Crane huffed in disbelief at the thought that he would be able to or even want to. He was not that pig-headed. He obediently perched sideways on the passenger seat of the Jeep and hung his head down to escape his nausea. The rest of them scrambled to get organized.

“Do you have your keys?” Emily asked.

He wanted to throw her a scathing look, but his stomach objected. His coat was lost, his shirt was torn in several places by his own hand, and his breeches were pockmarked with holes. Where in hell and damnation did she think he was keeping his keys?

He spoke as steadily as he could manage. “I shall return for the automobile. Let us go home.”

“I have a key for his car.” Penny volunteered.

“How—?”

“Valley Forge,” she grimaced. “I went out for food, remember?”

He had been trying to hold onto his temper. Meeting and fighting the Acrididae had made his anger irrelevant. He’d had to be grateful that he was not stumbling and blacking out when the creatures appeared. But for some reason, this was veritable flash paper to his already volatile humour. He swallowed the bile that threatened to rise in his throat again and controlled his breathing. Then he looked at his three companions, each in turn, waiting as they watched him warily. “Did you think we would not speak of boundaries ever again?” Crane asked.

The silence stretched as they seemed to gauge his mood. He scoffed, wondering that he was not immediately transparent. Penny finally spoke. “You look terrible.” Concerned, but a blatant attempt to change the subject.
“I am growing weary of cautioning you.” He bit out the words. “You could all have been killed today.”

Raj took a breath, but Crane silenced him with a warning finger while keeping his eye on Penny. “I do not believe Leonard let you come.”

“He’s not the boss of me.”

“Would you rather die to prove a point?” Crane challenged. Penny raised her head defiantly, but her face was still drained of color, belying her façade. “He loves you very much. And you should care what he would say.” He looked at Raj. “I suspect Miss Emily talked you into this. You should know better. And you. If the Book of Revelation does not terrify you enough, then I shall.”

Crane straightened himself in the passenger’s seat and buckled his seat belt, staring studiously ahead. He fervently wished for a blanket from the boot of his SUV, but he refused to ask his rebellious companions for anything, lest they take it as more tacit permission to do as they pleased. He knew they were still scared and were desperately trying to return to a level of normal, and he yearned to help them. But if they did not learn their lesson from this, they never would. “None of you are ignorant. But this today is criminally ignorant. Fatally ignorant. And I will tolerate it no longer.”

Penny sneered. “You’re welcome, Mr. Crane.” She turned on her heel and climbed into the black SUV, its engine coming alive.

Emily and Raj joined Crane in the Jeep. Their ride home was silent.

Crane didn’t want to open his eyes. He hurt everywhere. That was not unusual for the past … several days? But his worst symptoms had subsided somewhat. Although if he tried to move, perhaps the nausea and headache would come back. He knew he had to try, but when he planted his elbow and felt the surface he was lying on shift under his weight, he remembered where he was.

He was lying in his own bed.

When they’d reached the parking lot of his apartment building, Miss Emily had run around to his side of the Jeep and opened his door. Essentially dumping him out of his seat as he’d aimed himself at the ground but forgot to move his legs. She and Raj had caught and held him until Leonard had appeared to help Raj support him up the stairs—all three flights, he winced—and into his bed.

Penny had disappeared.

Crane clutched his stomach just in case and turned over onto one shoulder. He took a breath, His insides stayed where they were. So he opened his eyes.

Amy was next to his bed, sitting in the rocking chair from the living room. She was watching him. Without knowing why, he pulled the quilt over his chest and shifted his eyes to avoid her appraising gaze.

“What is that?” he demanded, changing a subject that had yet to be broached.

She didn’t even look over her shoulder. “It’s an IV stand.”

“I know that.” Crane sighed. “Why is it here?”
She plucked his wrist from where it rested on the covers and he pulled it away. She reached for it again, looking at her watch. “You categorically refused to go to the hospital.” When he tried to answer, Amy challenged him with a glare that silenced him until she had finished checking his pulse. “They were mad enough at you that they didn’t take you.”

He stirred impatiently. “I have done the research,” he snapped. “The doctors in Sleepy Hollow would be ill-equipped to deal with a scorpion sting. And they would ask too many questions.”

Amy disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a cup of water. She set it on the nightstand. “You should drink. Not too fast.”

Crane pushed himself up to lean against the headboard, closing his eyes to wait out a slight vertigo. Amy plumped his pillow in position behind his shoulders. Irritably, he dodged her proximity, picking up the cup and sipping at it gratefully. “Why are you here?”

“Because, for some reason,” exasperated, she retreated a step, “I like skinny, sour-faced men who think they know everything and don’t appreciate what people do for them.”

Crane matched her irritation, stubborn, tired of repeating his argument yet again. He knew she was not speaking solely of herself. “Not when it puts them in mortal danger.” He closed his eyes. His chest had begun to hurt and his face had grown exceptionally warm.

“Calm down,” Amy urged, laying her hand on his arm. “You’re preaching to the choir.”

“Preaching to… Yes.” He smiled faintly. “Thank you.”

“You might try that on a few other people.” She squeezed his arm, then withdrew. “Including Bernadette, who managed to get you some Anascorp.” She waved toward the IV stand.

The pain in his chest spiked. He looked down at his arm where an intravenous needle had been taped to keep it from moving. “What did she do?” he rasped.

“What do you mean?”

“That drug is prohibitively expensive and difficult to obtain, or I would have located some myself before I went … hunting.”

“Her company is doing research on anti-venoms,” she explained.

He huffed scornfully and shifted in the bed in an attempt to escape his frustration. His words were short and clipped. “They did not give it to her.” Not a question.

She made a face but could not avoid the answer. “No.”

Crane’s hands curled into fists. Why did his friends insist on thievery in order to help him? Granted, he had always depended on Miss Jenny, who was impossible to control anyway. But Ms. Bernadette…. She was not emotionally equipped to be discovered and incarcerated. She put forward a tough exterior, but this would ruin her life.

Amy’s voice broke into his turmoil, quiet and reasonable. “If you don’t calm down, you’re going to hurt yourself. You’re distraught because you’re ill, and you’re ill because you’re distraught.”

“I am fine,” he protested feebly.

“You’re not,” she insisted, shaking her head. “You want us to think so. You want to pretend you
could have gotten away on your own.”

“I could have.” He sniffed. “I was doing so.”

She ignored that, turning to the dresser where her purse was sitting and began to unload it. “The
Anascorp will take care of most of your symptoms, but I have to monitor your heart rate and blood
pressure. And I’ve got some corticosteroid cream – you must itch like the devil – benzodiazepine,
antibiotic—"

“I do not need any pills,” Crane insisted.

She grabbed two of the bottles she’d pulled from her bag and laid them on the bedside table, picking
up a blood pressure monitor she’d left there. “When is the last time you had a tetanus shot?”
Proficiently, she slid the cuff over his hand and tried to continue to above his elbow.

He intercepted her efforts with his other hand. He had to return his focus to annihilating the
Acrididae and he couldn’t do that if Amy kept him bedridden. “My inoculations are current, thank
you.”

She fought with him briefly until she soundly smacked him with a vehement slap. “Lie still, you
jackass. I’m trying to make sure you don’t die!”

“I—” He froze, startled, not that he might die, but that she had used even a mild expletive. They
regarded each other in silence for a moment, then Amy finished applying the blood pressure cuff and
pumped it up.

“Emily told me you passed out in the car.”

“I walked up the stairs!”

“Sort of.” Amy raised a finger to silence him again while she finished. “You know, we have no idea
how many times you were stung.”

“The Acrididae had no intention to kill me. They are not allowed to do so.”

“I suppose they’ve read all the medical manuals.”

“Revelation tends to supersede any medical manual,” he pointed out, drily.

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you.”

Crane frowned, nearly a pout. “I thought you agreed with me.”

A shadow of a smile ghosted her lips, but she hid it quickly. “Only with your basic premise. Not
with your right to abuse your body.”

“If you wish to offer succor, I would appreciate some food.”

“You’re hungry?”

She seemed surprised. He had to accede to that, however. With his present symptoms, he was not
sure he would trust his stomach under normal circumstances. But he had fasted for a week.

He raised an eyebrow. “It is not usually a good idea to consume anything a demon gives you, even if
it is on a plate.”
“Again with the sarcasm.” She attempted a joke, but her face wrinkled in concern.

“My apologies,” he relented. “I do not wish to insult you or belittle your efforts. But I cannot be unwell.”

“Ignoring your vitals isn’t going to make you healthy.” Amy picked up the medicine bottles from the nightstand and shook a pill from each. She offered them to Crane and took his now-empty water glass into the bathroom for a refill. “But this will.” She pushed the glass into his hand. “It’ll help to take them with food. I’ll get you something.”

Examining one of the bottles, he stopped her at the door. “More pilfered anodynes?”

“Prescriptions. Emily wrote them.”

“Hmmm.” He didn’t say anything, but he wondered about a doctor with Emily’s specialty writing a prescription for benzo … whatever Amy had mentioned. He finished the water she had given him and lay his head back on his pillow. He was staring at the ceiling thinking about the Acrididae when Amy returned.

“Recommended by all the internet gurus for post-fasting.” She offered a tumbler of orange juice. “Don’t start complaining, but I had to water it down. The acid isn’t good for your insides.”

He scowled. “I had no intention to complain.”

She placed her hands on her hips, aggressively. “That would be the first time today. So I’m told.” Turning back to the doorway, she raised her voice. “I’m going to find you some fresh fruit.”

He called after her. “I’m sorry.”

Crane took a deep drink of the juice before he remembered he should sip it. Impatiently, he deposited the tumbler on the nightstand and pushed the covers back. He stood and carefully made his way to the dresser, digging out boxers and breeches which he struggled to pull over his legs and button at his waist. Braced against a wave of lightheadedness, he cast a longing look at his bed and regretted his decision to … he wasn’t even sure why he had gotten up.

“Not sorry enough, apparently.” Amy suddenly appeared next to him, holding a bowl. She sighed. “Get into bed, Crane.”

“I was about to do just that.” He wanted to move his feet, but he didn’t want to let go of the rocking chair. Which he discovered was a bad choice to clutch when he stumbled. Amy shook her head violently, putting the food aside and taking his arm. He settled on the mattress and she pulled up the quilt.

“If you start behaving yourself, I might not have to put you back on the drip.”

He looked down at the bowl of sliced apples and grapes she’d set on his lap. “Where did you get this? I know there is no fresh fruit in the apartment.”

Amy grabbed his wrist to check his pulse again. “Sheldon and Leonard.” Satisfied, she let go so he could eat, and settled in the chair. “By the way, Leonard wants you to know he’s mad at you.

“That is why he sent me fruit.”

“How do you know it wasn’t Sheldon?”
“Sheldon would not have paid the least bit of attention,” Crane pointed out as he plucked at one of the apples.


“I thought you rejected sarcasm.”

“That wasn’t sarcasm.”

He frowned. “Perhaps that is best.”

“What do you mean?”

Crane set the bowl aside and picked up the juice. He emptied the tumbler and set it beside the bowl. Finally, he explained, “I cannot apologize. I would not be sincere.”

“You could at least apologize for being offensive.” She glared at him. “For being insensitive.”

Crane watched Amy for a minute, then he reached up and pulled the photo of Abbie and Jenny from the wall. He handed it over, tapping his finger on the glass. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. “My fellow Witness. Abigail Mills. The Lieutenant. Or not. She was an FBI agent when she … sacrificed herself. She was brilliant. She was intelligent, independent, generous.” He chuckled softly. “Opinionated. She could fight, use a knife, wield a sword, shoot a gun, strategize, analyze, deduce, and kill a monster with her bare hands. And I loved her deeply.”

The soreness in his throat threatened to overwhelm him and he fought to speak past it. “She was absorbed into another plane of existence when she destroyed a vindictive god who meant to wipe all humans from existence. She is lost to a world that desperately needs her. As I do.”

He sucked in a breath and let it go slowly. “A librarian, a scientist, and a dermatologist followed after me into the woods today. They fought demons with balloons. That will never, ever happen again.”

He had not been able to stop Abbie. She had made her decision and committed herself before he knew what she was doing. Because he hadn’t been paying enough attention.

But he could control this. And it didn’t matter what they thought of him. If they hated him.

“I … forbid … it.”

Chapter End Notes

kuongoza kutoka uzima = Lead me from death to life
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

The gang does not accept Crane’s latest decisions and challenge him passionately, to great effect. (Because he needs a boot in the backside on occasion.)

Chapter Notes

I love you guys! I hope all of the hits I get are actually reading my humble story. I am continually amazed that you are interested in a story which is only peripherally involved in Big Bang. Thanks a bunch!!!

Yes.
No.
Of course.
He should know better.
Amy was right. There were a few things he could apologize for.

He paced among the tables and shelves filled with rare books. Rapped his knuckles on his desk. He looked at the clock. It was lunchtime.

Penny was not there.
Not surprised.
Disappointed.
In whom?
Past lunchtime.
Penny was not there.
He was not hungry.
That surprised him. After this past week….

He should be ravenous.
He didn’t care.
He sat down and ate his sandwich.
Penny had her friends. She would live without him. They all would.

Crane had begun keeping a journal in the days he’d been sent away to school and had continued the habit as he’d risen in the ranks of the Continental Army. Even though, with his all-encompassing memory, he could recall his experiences with perfect clarity, he’d discovered writing helped him organize and analyze his thoughts and emotions as well.

But as he sat at the small table in his apartment and dipped his pen in the inkwell to recount his recent adventures with the Acrididae, he found he was uncomfortable with some of those thoughts. Amy had been right. In spite of his overwhelming anger and his protestations otherwise, he was not confident that he could have escaped from the swarm of creatures on his own.

He remembered his rage. He also remembered the split second of relief and gratitude when he realized his friends were prepared to help him out of the forest. And the sheer terror that engulfed him immediately after.

Crane forced himself to refocus on his narrative of the last week. He hoped that ordering his experiences would lead him to a few conclusions on what to do next. He found, disturbingly, that he struggled to recollect what had happened in the cave. And that some things he summoned up didn’t bear scrutiny.

As he poured his feelings out onto the page, he felt vindicated. And guilty. And he renewed his vow to preserve his friends’ lives at whatever cost to himself.

He finished his journal and set it aside. Without missing a beat, he pulled out stationery and wrote eight letters. He apologized for his attitude, his ire, and his abuse. He made no excuses or explanations. He felt those had been increasingly clear since the afternoon Penny had first shown him the apartment. He bore the guilt for ignoring his own arguments, and now they were all bearing the consequences.

His companions would mend. They had each other. Perhaps he’d had no right to intrude upon that to begin with.

Crane pushed his reflections aside as self-pity. He folded, addressed, and stamped each of the letters, putting them in his messenger bag with his journal, his translation of Revelation, and several other books. Then he retreated to his bedroom and packed few clothes and his toiletries into a duffel bag. Pulling on the old frock coat that he had resurrected from the back of his closet, Crane locked the door to his apartment and turned for the stairs.

The only sound in the Archives that morning was from the quiet susurrations of Crane’s toothbrush. He had rejected the electric version for the same reason he avoided bottled water: this one was free – from the dentist Abbie had finally persuaded him to visit. He liked it better than the shredded twig he had employed whilst marching with the Continental Army. A Frenchman had invented a mass-produced toothbrush in 1780, but he had not lived long enough to obtain one.

He pushed those irrelevant ruminations from his mind as he examined his image in the mirror above the sink. He had substantially recovered from the symptoms of the scorpion’s venom, thanks to
Bernadette’s antiserum and Amy’s ministrations, but he still showed the effects of his forced fast. The dark smudges under his eyes, however, had more to do with his late-night searches for the solution to his Acriddidae problem.

He had not risen early that morning. He’d tried to rest, to prepare himself for that evening and the imminent rising of the supermoon. Between his mission and the condition of the cot in the Archives, he had not slept well the last few nights, even when he tried to. He told himself he had only to tolerate his situation until he found a new affordable abode, but he knew from experience that would not be easy. He shoved away the vision of the bed at his erstwhile apartment with more vehemence than that of an eighteenth-century toothbrush.

None of that was important. He needed to focus on the impending battle. His physical and mental well-being were as important as his strategy and preparations.

Crane dragged a soapy facecloth across his chest and under his arms, and sighed noisily. He would go down to the public pool later today for a shower, but for now his abbreviated ablutions would have to do. After all, four years ago, he would not have washed every day, let alone stood under a stream of hot water to do it.

And why in the world was he thinking so much of his old life today?

He rinsed the facecloth and draped it over the side of the sink. Picking up a towel, he exited the small bathroom and stopped short.

Oh, ballocks.

Eight people stood, scattered around the room, apparently waiting for him. Sheldon was examining the books on the shelves. Amy was absorbed with the mural of Washington. Emily couldn’t decide between looking at him and inspecting an intricately carved trunk that sat by the door. Howard was attempting to hold his hand over his wife’s eyes while Bernadette slapped away his fingers. Leonard and Rajesh were staring at the Horseman’s scar on Crane’s chest.

Unfortunately, Penny stood, hands on her hips and fire in her eyes. “You are a coward, Mr. Crane.”

He twitched the towel between his fingers, but held his ground. “I did not wish you to have to cope with me when you clearly had no desire to.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said in your – what was that word, Sheldon?”

He looked up – “Epistle.” – and returned to studying a book he had pulled from the shelf.

“Epistle!”

“Perhaps you would allow me to continue getting dressed before we have this conversation.” Crane was grateful that he’d at least been wearing his boxers when his sanctum was invaded, but he still felt a disadvantage. He concentrated on the forlorn hope that his face wasn’t turning pink.

“I wouldn’t care if you were naked, Crane.” She pulled the offending sheet of vellum out of her pocket and threw it on the library table. “This is bullshit!”

Leonard interrupted softly. “Penny, we agreed we weren’t going to—”

“You agreed.” She snapped at her fiancé.

Crane took the opportunity to pull his shirt over his head and find his breeches. Penny barely waited
for him to finish his buttons. “That’s not the reason you’re not in your apartment right now. You’re not thinking of me. Or any of us. You just ran away.”

He watched Penny carefully as she had apparently finished her tirade. The rest of them looked on with varying degrees of interest and discomfort. He understood why none of them seemed as upset as the young blonde. He had bonded with her in ways he had not with the others.

He thought about the difficult lessons he had eventually learned after he had run away from his wife’s death. Away from Abbie. And come back, disregarding how deeply in the wrong he had been. He had finally, completely, only, learned when Abbie had left him. For better reasons than he had ever had.

He suddenly realized he hadn’t actually learned a damn thing.

Crane straightened and cleared his throat. “You are right. I am a coward. I am terrified of seeing my friends die. And I am terrified that I have been unable to find any reasoning that will convince them to save their own lives.

“When you decided I should move in across the corridor,” he continued. “I tried to establish boundaries. We both violated them again and again. It was too easy to do so. But I can no longer allow it. Consequently, I removed myself from the purlieu of your building.”

Penny wrinkled her face and grumbled words he could not discern. Howard took up the gauntlet, but more affable than she had been. “And ran to the Archives. Like you said you would the night we all found out about your hobby. Not a smooth move, Crane.”

Crane pulled himself straighter and protested. “I was not hiding.”

“You thought we couldn’t get in.” Penny argued.

“You have a key,” Crane guessed. “Valley Forge?”

“Yeah.”

He held out his hand, palm up. She ignored it.

“Penny.” Leonard whined.

“Do not undercut me, Leonard.”

Crane shook his head. “You do not want to fight with Leonard.”

“No, I don’t. But I haven’t made my point yet.”

He understood. He spoke quietly. “I should have spoken with you instead of penning a missive.”

Her voice was just as quiet. “Yeah.”

Crane reached out again, but curled his fingers closed before he could touch her. “I am truly sorry. I did not mean to hurt you. I have always had an unfortunate degree of focus when doing what I see as my duty. I apologize.” He looked up, raising his voice slightly. “I apologize to you all.”

Raj moved restlessly, drawing attention to himself. “We don’t want to throw wine at monsters. That was a mistake. A big mistake.”

Emily nodded. “We didn’t want to do it then, either. We never imagined that we would. But you’d
been gone a week!"

“You have to accept that,” Crane said. “And leave it be.”

“We don’t want you to die, either.” Emily objected vehemently.

“Nor do I. But if it happens, it happens. You will not prevent it.”

“Maybe.”

“Miss Emily—"

“No. No, no, no. God, no, I don’t even want to see anything like that for the rest of my life. It’s one thing to watch a movie, imagine it, read about it; it’s something else to actually experience it.” She smiled a little, trying to placate Ichabod. Then flashed her resolve, in contradiction. “But if you and I are walking down the street and a demon jumps your bones, I will fight it.”

Raj grabbed her arm. “Emily.”

“Sorry.” She shrugged. “That’s not what we came here for.”

“Indeed,” Crane acknowledged. He looked around the room again. “Why did you come here?”

Leonard volunteered. “You remember the last time you were at our place and I said we could help you and stay in our apartment at the same time?”

“More or less.”

“That’s all we want to do,” Leonard said.

“All we’re ever going to do,” Raj agreed. “From now on. I swear.”

“You have said that before,” Crane reminded him.

“No,” Emily disagreed, “you’ve said that before.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “And said it and said it.”

“Now we’re saying it,” Bernadette spoke up. “None of us will ever let it happen again.”

Crane was tempted, but this was precisely the arrangement he had turned down a month ago. And he had even more reason to refuse this time. He knew he was right.

“Wait.” Amy walked closer to him, regarding him, but addressing her boyfriend. “Sheldon, what was that thing Helen Keller said?”

Sheldon put down the book he had been paging through and fixed Crane with a stare. “ ‘Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoidance of danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.’ ”

Crane didn’t need an explanation, but Amy gave him one, anyway. “You didn’t just introduce us to monsters. You introduced us to the Apocalypse. Not the silly movies these guys watch or the even sillier video games they play, but the literal end of the world.”

“No one really thinks about it,” Leonard said quietly. “No one really reads Revelation. And if they do, it’s just Judgment Day. What does that mean? Some people go to heaven. Some people go to
hell. Sometime around the year one million A.D. But now we’re thinking about it.”

Crane realized he had been focusing too narrowly on his mission. What was that phrase? Tunnel vision. He had been thinking only of what their awareness of the demons meant to him – that he had to protect them from harm, that they could distract him from doing what he had to do.

He’d thought he had talked them down from the idea of an apocalypse, that his part in Revelation was merely to battle demons who had ambitions toward power and corruption. Of course, they would be frightened by monsters, but by allowing Emily her curiosity he could keep her attention on the details and away from the big picture.

He had underestimated them all. Even as he held them at arm’s length, he had brought them a fear of much, much more: the absolute end of existence. Perhaps they had to help him, to do their part, to keep the terrors away at night.

Did he have any right to forbid them their efforts? What if someone told him he could not fight any longer? Could he leave it to someone else to fight in his stead?

Years ago, he had embraced his mission as soon as he had encountered the Horseman in this new world. Not just because his mentor Washington had wanted Crane to pursue him. The Lieutenant had intended to destroy the monster as well. And once he’d known the whole story, nothing on earth or hell would have denied him his calling.

He realized Amy was speaking again. “We need to do something,” she said, “to battle the insecurity. The awareness that we’re not safe. We can’t un-know what we know now. So we have to move on from here.”

Howard added, “And you’re the only game in town.”

Giving her husband a dirty look, Bernadette finally spoke up. “Hiding from it,” she used the word deliberately, “doesn’t help. Anybody.”

Crane shook his head. “You don’t understand. I, too, made a grave mistake. And I can rectify it.”

“What mistake?” Penny deliberately misunderstood. “Saving my life in the cemetery?”

The ghost of a smile played across his lips. “Never.”

“You can’t jump back in time and unfriend us,” Leonard acknowledged what Crane had been referring to. “Any more than we can forget what you’re fighting.

“Maybe we’re inevitable,” Penny said.


“No. But we are doctors and researchers and inventors.” Howard stepped forward and set a long, narrow case on the library table. He looked around the room at his friends. “Are you guys done flapping your gums? Can I show him this now?”

Howard unzipped the leather case and pulled out an unusual-looking rifle, with a short barrel and a metal stock. Crane approached and slid his fingers across the shiny finish. In spite of himself, he was immediately mesmerized and felt an undefinable frisson along his spine.

“Did you steal this?”
“No.” Howard scoffed. “We invented it.”

He marveled. He felt as if he’d been searching his texts forever, but it had not really been that long. “When did you have the time?”

Leonard said, “We started talking about it the night when you found us looking for the pit.”

“Penny told us about the picture you drew,” Emily added.

“Locusts and scorpions,” Bernadette said brightly. “I researched pesticides and poisons.”

“We just needed a delivery system,” Howard finished.

Crane considered the weapon speculatively, unsure as to why they deemed it necessary to invent a gun. “I appreciate your effort. Sincerely. But I have already tried shooting one of the Acridida. The bullet ricocheted off its chitin.”

“The tip is silver.”

Crane closed his eyes against Howard’s enthusiasm. “For vampires and werewolves…!” He wanted to get caught up, to believe that his remarkably intelligent friends had the answer to his dilemma. But these people were entirely too fond of myths from pop culture to discern between fact and fiction.

“And demon crickets.” Howard agreed, not noticing the other man’s rebuff.

Penny did notice. “What’ve you got?” she almost snarled.

“Perhaps I shall stretch a piece of string between two trees and trip them up.”

“Jokes, Crane?”

“I believe Howard just perpetrated one,” he replied brusquely. Then he drew himself up. “I will fight the Acrididae, however it is necessary, whether I drown them in wine, behead them with a sharp object, or immolate them with a torch. Even if I use a damn piece of string. I have discovered no other weapon. There is very little written besides the existence of the creatures.”

“Then how do you know silver won’t work?” she insisted.

Crane sighed. He had searched the source books and the experts until his eyes were red and aching for sleep. Perhaps what he needed was a little faith. Would it hurt to hear them out? Many of his strategies in the past had seemed equally as absurd – until they succeeded.

“I do not. I am sorry. I do not know silver will not work. Tell me about this.”

“The rest of the bullet is a thermosensitive material that’ll melt once it gets inside the body. It dissolves in heat and moisture. I borrowed some from NASA. Inside is a lethal amount of pesticide that gets released into the target.”

“Borrowed….” Crane knew better than to ask. He was beginning to worry about their propensity for theft.

Bernadette sorted through her purse and withdrew a large box which turned out to hold ammunition. “I distilled the pesticide from some commercial stuff that we bought.”

“Where did you get the silver?”
“From some truly ugly jewelry my mother gave me,” Amy volunteered from over Bernadette’s shoulder.

“At least it’ll be good for something,” Penny drawled, raising her eyebrows at Crane. “Believe me, no one would actually wear that stuff.”

Crane picked up one of the bullets and examined it. “Have you confirmed its purity?”

“Leonard did the tests.”

“But,” Howard picked up the box and encouraged Crane to replace the small projectile, “you can’t fire it from an ordinary gun, because the flash of the powder and the friction of the barrel gets it too hot. So you’ve got a modified harpoon gun that operates on air pressure.

“Penny told us how a hunting rifle works. Leonard and I extrapolated from there. And I built this gun.”

Crane was fascinated and apprehensive at the same time. If he was going to use this thing, he needed to know everything there was to know about it and then some. He had to anticipate the problems that its makers hadn’t. And marry that to his own unique knowledge of the supernatural.

He raised an eyebrow at Howard. “To shoot fabricated bullets.”

“Yeah!”

Crane doubted that any esoteric knowledge he had gleaned since his arrival in the twenty-first century would be a match for these scientists, but he dredged his memory, anyway. It took him a minute. “I have read,” he finally said, “that the internal temperature of an insect is the same as the ambient temperature.”

Amy jumped right in. “Locusts can fly. Well, more like jump with augmentation. But they thermoregulate.”

“Which means?”

“Flying requires a great deal of energy,” she explained. “Their body temperature goes up when they’re about to take off.”

Crane flexed his fingers in chagrin. “Therefore, I have to provoke them before I can shoot. I cannot snipe at them from a hidden location.”

Howard exploded, finally. “You want me to go get you a giant ball of string?”

“I am the one who has to take your pop gun into the forest to do battle with a band of demonic creatures. It is incumbent upon me to know everything about this weapon before I make the attempt.” He waved irritably at the rifle lying on the table. “This all seems terribly theoretical.”

“Everything you do is theoretical!” Penny cried.

His eyebrows went up. “Granted.”

“I have a doctorate in practical experimentation,” Leonard said matter-of-factly. “As far as I am able to determine, this gun and its bullets will do what they were designed to do.”

Sheldon’s quiet voice came from the other side of the room. “Based on my hypotheses, I believe it will work.”
Crane looked over at the scientist in surprise. He had been uncharacteristically quiet – that announcement had been his only contribution besides the Helen Keller quote. Was he attempting to reassure the Witness or merely to assert his ownership on what he thought was a viable idea? The two men might not get along well, but Crane had learned he could trust the genius’ intellectual instincts.

Enough to risk his life?

Crane hefted the rifle and aimed it across the room at a reading lamp. It was heavier than he expected it to be; the stock felt strange against his shoulder.

Howard reached out, but thought better of it. “There’s no safety,” he explained.

“Is it loaded?”

“No, but—”

“And yet.” Crane removed his finger from the trigger and tucked the gun under his arm. “I appreciate that you were working on this while I was forsaking your help. I admire your persistence and I regret my own intractability. I—” he stopped himself, aware by the smiles they were exchanging that he had fallen into his characteristic formality. He could not help himself, but he rewarded them with a sheepish wince. “I will test your invention myself. It is, of course, necessary that I become familiar with it and can employ it with the same facility as those I am used to.”

Amy ran her hand across the back of one of the antique chairs, as if she was concerned for the fine fixtures. “You’re not going to test it in here?”

“No, I have a place.”

“Do you need help?” Penny asked.

“No. Thank you. I believe you have made your point and I shall continue to make mine. For now,” he made the single concession, “I must proceed alone.”

Leonard offered a box he had taken from the pocket of his windbreaker. “Ammunition for testing,” he explained. “You don’t want to waste all the Lone Ranger’s bullets.”

Crane pulled a face, but he was used to their unfamiliar references. Before he could move to show them to the door, Amy also came forward. She handed him a flashlight.

He shook his head. “I have a—”

“No,” she interrupted. “this one’s ultraviolet.”

He gave her a blank look.

“Shine it around the forest,” she said. “Scorpions glow blue-green.”

He took the light from her hand and nodded. “Thank you.”

“Crane?”

He turned, wondering if they would all have a last word. “Rajesh?”

“The moon rises at 6:22 and sets at 8:35.”
“I …” Crane had already researched that, but he acknowledged the man's concern. "... my gratitude, Rajesh."

Penny stayed back as the others started to leave. She put a hand on Crane’s arm. “Come back when you’re done. *Whenever* you’re done.” Crane knew what she meant. It was an apology of sorts. And a promise.

He also knew she didn’t mean to the Archives. “And if I can’t?”

“You will.”

Bernadette stood by the door, lingering for him as well. “Wait. Something else.”

“Ms. Bernadette?”

She grinned, her eyes twinkling. “Nice legs,” she said, and followed the others.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

Crane confronts the latest demons, backed with the talents of his friends. And everyone looks to the future.

Chapter Notes

I wanted to get this story to twenty chapters. Just because I like round numbers. It didn't happen. As you can see from the above, it is finished.

So, does anybody want to see any more? My favorite parts of this story are when Crane and various parts of the Big Bang gang are out and about. I have one-shots in my head about Fun with Flags, paintball, and playing "Never Have I Ever". Any takers?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As much as he enjoyed the outdoors, Crane was growing to despise desperately this particular section of the Rockefeller State Park Preserve. He had come in a different direction from the highway, but as he trekked closer to the cavern itself, taking familiar paths was unavoidable. He was silent, using all the skills he had learned stalking behind enemy lines during the war. Unsure if Acrididae had sharper senses than humans, he knew only that they had been able to locate him amongst the trees after his escape.

Of course, the four of them had been making as much noise as humanly possible.

The plan, if it could be called that, was to establish himself in a vantage point outside the cave and snipe at the creatures as they emerged. If they had managed to replace the wine, oil, and grains for what he felt sure was a summoning, they would also have to construct some sort of Satanic Cross. The demon they served had apparently discovered a way to cross into Earth’s realm and was determined to succeed.

He remembered what he’d told Miss Emily about his role being reactionary, defensive instead of offensive. He ached to go on the attack against his ultimate enemy, but he didn’t even know who that might be. He needed knowledge, knowledge he did not have. So he found himself working to rid the forest of Acrididae before the supermoon. Tonight.

As he neared the Acrididae’s cave, Crane constantly examined his surroundings even more carefully than he had been. He tried to calm his nerves, but he really didn’t want to repeat his experience at the hand of the creatures – he doubted they would fall for the same subterfuge that had worked last time.

He gave the mouth of the cave a wide berth and climbed to the hillock overlooking the area in front of the gaping black hole. He chose not to climb a tree – the creatures would be able to fly to his position much more quickly than he could scramble to the ground. Since he had no idea if his hand-fashioned rifle would work against them, he had to be able to change his tactics at a moment’s notice. He also carried a dirk and a torch as backup, one at his hip and one at his back – weapons that would
require an up-close confrontation within the range of those damnable stingers.

Crane stretched across the grass with the rifle, feeling calmer camouflaged by the weeds around him. But what he saw then froze the breath in his chest.

A Satanic Cross etched into the clearing below was nearly complete. Two Acrididae were chewing the grass into the sigil that was necessary to complete their spell. They were concentrating on their task, but unfortunately Crane would have to call attention to himself before his magic bullets would take effect. He decided to take dead aim and hope that the shells melted quickly enough to keep the creatures at bay. Or to keep them from communicating with the others. He had killed a dozen of the things already, but had no idea how many more there might be.

He knew the aim of the rifle was a little high and to the right, so he compensated and gently squeezed the trigger, ignoring the thud of his heart in his chest. The bullet hit true in the dirty green torso and spurted brown ichor. In a split second, Crane blessed everyone who imagined the silver would work, and aimed again. The Acridida recoiled and extended its wings, but Crane steadied himself and followed with another shot. On the edge of his vision, he saw its companion look around in surprise. He shifted and targeted the second one as the wounded Acridida took to the sky.

It spotted Crane on the hillock but could not change direction midflight. Its trajectory was more of a hop than a flight, but it came for him as soon as it hit the ground. An expletive burst in Crane’s mind, but he didn’t waste breath on it as he scrambled for his life. Coming to his feet, he squared and drew his dirk just as the tail stinger reached out to strike. But before he could charge, the creature faltered, its tail drooped, and it crashed into the weeds at Crane’s feet. Immediately, he scrabbled for the rifle, pivoted, and shot frantically at the other creature.

And missed. And shot again. And felt a glancing blow from its stinger. But the venom did not expel into his skin before this Acridida collided into Crane and brought him down. It didn’t move again and Crane had to crawl out from under the body.

He sat for a minute, dragging air into his lungs and squeezing his hands into fists to steady their shaking. Looking down at the weapon Howard had given him, he thought to reload while he had the time. He rolled two of the bullets in his fingers, reflecting on the contributions his other friends had made.

There would be no living with any of them now.

He smiled, briefly. Then he was up, burning the two lifeless husks with his lighter, and scrambling down to the clearing in front of the cave. Even though the sigil was not quite finished, he would come back later and destroy it completely. For now, he would search for any surviving Acrididae who might be ready to complete the spell or begin another.

Crane crept back through the woods, keeping the cave in sight. His efforts were rewarded when he encountered two more of the locust creatures, which may have been sentries or may just have been bored with their lot and looking for a way out. They seemed to have no direction until they saw him and they both came for him at once.

He ran. Somehow, he had to get them to launch into the air. But first, he planted his feet, turned, and fired his poison pellets. Crane hurled himself into a chestnut tree with low hanging branches and clambered up until he was out of reach. And fired again. They both leapt, but just before they reached him, the two Acrididae faltered and fell, hurling through the branches to the dirt.

Crane leaned his forehead against a thick branch and breathed deeply for a moment before he shinned partway down and dropped the rest of the way. He was grateful the bullets worked, but he
couldn’t help but wish they worked more quickly.

Four gone. How many more to dispatch? He wouldn’t feel safe until the supermoon had risen and set. The afternoon was waning, so he traced his search back to the nearly finished Satanic Cross. The locust creatures had eaten the sigil right to the bare soil, demarking a mostly contained area which Crane felt safe burning off in sections with his torch. He scuffed some of it with his boots, wishing he had a shovel.

As he cast his eye over at the hole in the earth – his pit – he balked. He’d had more than enough caverns during this tribulation. And, he admitted, he’d grown a bit claustrophobic since he’d had to dig his way out from underneath the dirt of two graves. He decided even if there were a lair or nest of some sort, he could wait until they came out to play with their incantation.

Crane was also tired of waiting, but it was the best move. Or not-move. So he settled into the growing dusk and pulled out the flashlight Amy had given him.

Twenty-two minutes after six o’clock. The moon was rising, but he couldn’t see it over the trees.

The Acrididae were filing, in a single queue, out of the cave. The first ones were carrying earthenware vessels. Urns, bowls, pots. The oil and the wine and the wheat and the barley. He couldn’t see how many creatures there were, for they were still coming, but he couldn’t delay.

Crane drew a bead on a pot and pulled the trigger. The piece of crockery shattered, spilling grain over the ground, and the Acridida dropped the rest of the shards. Its wings unfolded as Crane took another shot into its chitin. Twice. Then he was forced to move past that target when the rest of the group reacted. Quickly, he pumped bullets into as many of the creatures as he could see, dodging to cover behind a far tree where he took the chance to reload.

And kept firing. Acrididae were flying through the air, some falling while others kept coming. The delay for the bullets to melt was going to get him killed, but he kept shooting. Careful aim became irrelevant in the melee, so Crane held the rifle against his body and shot one-handed, pulling out his dirk with the other. One of the creatures landed next to him, and he slashed at its neck.

A stinger hovered in his side vision and he whirled, slicing across the tail. Twice, finally severing it before he turned away to fire at two Acrididae still in the air.

Four left. At least of those that had come out of the cave. He had shot one, but it had stayed on the ground and the bullet had not been fatal. He fired into the group, but none of them seemed inclined to jump. Could these creatures have reasoned through what was happening to them?

Crane aimed at the last urn and it exploded, dousing the closest Acridida with wine. It stumbled, as though confused, but did not fall. A puddle of oil had also spread across the sigil, in the dirt where Crane had spoiled the integrity of the Satanic Cross. He pulled out his lighter, struck the flint, and tossed it over into the liquid. Flames leapt, encompassing two of the creatures, while the other two extended their wings to get away. He shot them quickly, several times, then waited until they fell.

Finally, Crane retrieved his torch and lit it from the oil that was burning. He walked around the clearing, incinerating all the husks, and keeping an eye on the small conflagration in the clearing until it burned itself out.

Crane wiped down his face with a hand, then stretched to relieve the tension from his body. He could see the supermoon now over the trees and it was beautiful – bright and full and ever-so-slightly
larger than usual. He took a moment to appreciate the sight for its magnificence, divorced from the occult overtones. Then he moved to dispose of the rest of the dead Acrididae. He’d keep vigil at the cave’s entrance until moonset, with an eye on the surrounding area in case any of them made a bid to start the summoning in another spot.

At 8:35 that morning, Crane finally ventured into the cave to vanquish any remaining Acrididae, resolute never to meet another of the creatures after this foray. Ever.

“I hear his boots. C’mon, that’s his boots.”

The door to Sheldon’s apartment flew open and Penny barreled out, barely stopping short of mowing him down, and blowing one of those New-Year’s-Eve noisemakers into his face.

“Pour his drink, Leonard,” she shouted over her shoulder. “Crane’s here.”

He drew himself erect and looked down at the effusive blonde, clearing his throat. “It is not yet ten o’clock in the morning,” he pointed out.

She grinned, a little lopsided. “Doesn’t count if you’re coming at it from the other side.”

“You stayed up all night?”

Her hands flew to her hips and she hit him with a challenging glare. Her best get real look. “Didn’t you?”

A smile played around his lips, but he quashed it quickly. “You can tell us not to interfere, but you can’t tell us not to worry.”

“Us?”

“Yeah. We’re all here.”

“Oh. Good.”

She apparently didn’t like that answer, either, and blew the noisemaker at him again.

“So half an hour later, successfully intimidated in a way he had not been by the locust creatures, he was seated on Sheldon’s couch with a glass of rum in his hand. As soon as he had appeared, his friends had mobbed him and pounded his back and embraced him. And each other. He strongly suspected that they had not waited for his arrival to start drinking.

Crane was offered a plethora of snacks which covered the coffee table, evoking a party atmosphere and appealing to his hunger which hadn’t been addressed at all that night. Everyone hovered, determined to remedy that situation. Everyone but Sheldon, who settled in his spot and picked up his
laptop, blithely disregarding the action in the rest of the room.

Howard dipped his hand into a bowlful of chips, sat in one of the desk chairs and leaned forward as if he were watching a particularly exciting movie. “So spill it, Crane.”

“Pardon?”

Bernadette, who had by this time added Coke to her rum, waved it about. “How many did you fight?”

“Where’s the gun?” Raj wanted to know, wiggling his fingers like he wanted to get his hands on it. Hadn’t gotten to play with it enough before they’d given it over, Crane figured.

“How’d it work?” Leonard asked.

Amy rapped a fist on her chest and smiled widely. “The silver punched right through, all werewolf-y?”

“Did they, like—” Howard grabbed at his throat, gagging and writhing.

“Tell us everything.” Emily invited.

“The weapon is at the Archives,” Crane straightened, setting his glass on the table, “safely under lock and key. Your invention functioned as promised. And – no.”

Amy’s face fell. “No what?”

“You do not need to hear everything,” he insisted.

Everyone froze. Emily let out a noisy, impatient breath. Raj looked around surreptitiously to see how the others were reacting. Leonard folded his arms, his expression sullen.

“But –” Penny regarded her silent friends, gave it a moment, then extended her arms to them and up to the sky. “We won!” she shouted.

Crane smiled and agreed. “We won.”

The high fives started again. Crane put his fist up for bumps, acknowledging their contributions and enthusiasm. But he was tired.

And he was still worried. He didn’t want these people to be taking this too lightly. But hadn’t he and Abbie celebrated their victories? Was theirs not that same release of emotion, of fear, the steam from the pressure cooker? Just because they hadn’t been there, shooting, stabbing, burning, did it mean they felt it any less?

He didn’t know. He’d have to figure it out, but not today. Today, he wanted to fist-bump, too.

As the cheers died down, Crane looked over at Sheldon absorbed in his computer and, tempting fate, decided to poke the dragon. “No festivities for you today, Doctor?”

He looked over at the Witness, obviously annoyed, not bothering to close the laptop. “You located the insects, you destroyed them. It was a foregone conclusion; my theory was faultless.”

Crane’s eyebrow went up good-humoredly. “I should have confirmed with you before I made the attempt. It would have saved a lot of angst.”
“And you claim to have an eidetic memory. I did tell you.”

Leonard scolded. “Sheldon!”

“Well, I did tell him. And I can’t deal with this nonsense anymore. I have an episode of *Fun with Flags* to write.”

“C’mon, Sheldon,” Bernadette wheedled, “it’s a party.”

But Crane asked, “What is *Fun with Flags*?”

Bernadette’s chin fell to her chest. Penny covered her ears and whimpered. A single sound escaped from Raj – “Nooo.” They all groaned.

“My internet show,” Sheldon’s eyes remained on his screen, fingers tapping the keyboard. “I offer information to an unenlightened public regarding one of the most fascinating subjects about which they are woefully ignorant: flags.”

“I work on it, too,” Amy settled on the couch between the two, eager to tell Crane of her contribution. “Sometimes I record Sheldon, but lately I’ve been on camera, too. We have several regular viewers,” she assured him.

Sheldon finally stopped typing, caught up in the idea that someone might actually be interested. “And guests. Celebrity guests. Wil Wheaton has spoken about the flags of *Star Trek*. Although I did have to do the research for him. I’ve also done call-in shows.”

“Why have I never heard of this?” Crane wanted to know.

“Because you have better things to do with your time,” Emily drawled.

“You know anything fun about flags, Crane?” Leonard asked.

“As a matter of fact—”

Raj and Penny shouted at once. “No!”

Sheldon raised his hand. “Let the man speak.”

Crane would not be stopped at any rate. He had a captive audience, after all. And if Sheldon loved talking about flags, he loved talking about the Revolutionary War. “Have you heard of John Paul Jones?”

“Yeah, sure,” Penny acknowledged.

“Everybody knows John Paul Jones,” Bernadette agreed.

Amy quoted, “‘I have not yet begun to fight.’”

“Actually, he fabricated that aphorism after the fact. The man was a rogue. He killed a man during a mutiny on one of his ships and was rebuked for it by many. He came to America because it was necessary. Jones was not even his real name. But for some reason, Franklin was quite fond of him.”

His friends exchanged glances, but he disregarded them. Sheldon and Amy were rapt.

“In 1779 Jones had been sailing the Irish Sea and occasionally into the North Sea for about a year. As a result of the Battle of Flamborough Head, he had lost the flagship of his squadron, even as the
battle was won. Jones and his crew transferred to one of the British frigates, but as his flag had been shot away, they had no colors to fly from the foremasthead. When they sailed on to the neutral Dutch United Provinces, the British maintained that Jones was a pirate and petitioned the Dutch to arrest him.

“There were several descriptions circulating of the American flag as having ‘thirteen stripes, alternately red, white, and blue’. Based on this, a recognizable ensign was quickly made, and Dutch records were edited to make it official. They therefore avoided the legal controversy they did not wish to explore. But the flag did not meet the Congressional Flag Resolution of 1777 and was never flown again.”

Sheldon had closed his laptop and was leaning over Amy toward Crane. “What did it look like?”

“I can draw you a sketch. It is distinctive because of the four irregularly placed blue stripes and 8 pointed stars arranged in rows in the top half of the usual field.”

“You can be our next guest.” Sheldon clapped his hands.

“As an expert historian?” Leonard teased. He exchanged playful looks with Howard, who baited Sheldon as well.

“Sheldon, isn’t history one of the humanities?”

“Yes, I know. That’s usually a problem.” He threw Crane a disdainful look. “But I’ve gotten used to it.”

Crane smiled, enjoying Sheldon’s discomfiture as much as he had pontificating. “I’m gratified you are able to keep an open mind.”

Sheldon jumped to his feet, ignoring the comment, followed by Amy joining him at his desk for a whispered discussion. “Are you busy next Thursday night?” he called over his shoulder.

“It seems I must be,” Crane agreed. “I look forward to it.”

“Could you elaborate on your story a little more?” Amy asked. “Make it longer?”

“Oh,” Penny’s eyes twinkled, “I think he can do that. If you twist his arm.”

Crane was unperturbed. “There is the invasion at Whitehaven. Half his sailors got too fox’d to accomplish their mission.”

“Great!”

Disparaging John Paul Jones on the worldwide internet wasn’t going to bother Crane one bit. Satisfied, he picked up his glass and took a sip, letting it burn down his throat. Emily flopped onto the cushion Amy had just abandoned and patted his knee. He moved it. She grinned. “So when should I come by your place?”

“For what?”

“For my lesson in the supernatural. To read Revelation.”

“You still wish to do that?”

“Absolut-ti-ment.”
Crane winced at the faux French, but addressed a different concern. “Do you not remember what I said about the difficulty of the prophecies in Revelation?”

“Yeah.” She nodded enthusiastically. “Like Agnes Nutter.”

“Who?”

“A witch. She predicted the future. People who read her divinations only understood what she was talking about once things happened.”

Crane stared at her blankly.

“Great book. Good Omens. About two angels trying to prevent the apocalypse. You should read it.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, repeating himself inadvertently. “Why have I never heard of this?”


Crane realized he was going to have to drink more than a little to catch up with her. With any of them. “So, of course, you admire them.”

“Of course.” Emily smiled and patted his knee again. “I’ll lend you my copy. But you’ll want to get your own.”

“Perhaps we should discuss that,” he offered. “Your book.”

“You may regret it.” She smiled enigmatically, but seemed content.

Perhaps unwittingly, Penny saved him from a further answer with the bacon and egg sandwich she deposited at his elbow. “You’re going to need more than just a few potato chips if you’re going to pace the rest of us with the rum.”

“Thank you.”

“Or I could just let you drink and get you to tell us everything.”

Crane cast a glance at Emily, then focused on Penny. “Why do I feel as though I’m being conspired against?”

“You’ve gotta talk,” Penny asserted. “Eventually. You may have the world’s most constipated personality, but you can’t spend the next three years not talking to anybody.”

“I beg your pardon!”

“See? There it is.” She laughed affectionately. “And I love you for it. But you’re gonna have to cough up all your secrets.”

Crane swallowed his alarm. “I have no—”

“Of course you do.” Penny settled into the chair opposite. “Everybody has secrets.”

Leonard set a bowl of Bugles on the coffee table and perched on the arm next to her. “Don’t tell her anything, Crane,” he warned. “She is the world’s worst at keeping stuff to herself.”

“Hey!” She punched his arm. “Just when did you find out about the demons?”
Leonard rubbed his bicep and grinned, unbothered. “Possibly the first time you ever kept a secret in your life.”

She pushed out her lower lip. “Maybe.”

Howard walked over from the kitchen island where he’d made his own sandwich. “She tells everybody one at a time, swears them to silence, then gets mad when everybody knows.”

Crane fixed Penny with his gaze. If their allegations were true, he wondered why she had kept his confidences. Because she had, more than once, even after her friends would have been inclined to believe her. “I do not feel I have had that difficulty.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bernadette’s already-strident voice came across a little loud and a little drunk. “Crane has to talk to all of us now.”

“I have already said,” he disagreed. “I will not conduct seminars on Revelation.”

“No,” Raj said. “Not books and legends and religion.”

The astrophysicist obviously knew where the rest of them were heading with this. Crane was overwhelmed with a growing dread that he was beginning to.

“We’re consultants,” Amy announced proudly.

“And you know what you do with consultants.” Raj prompted.

Penny finished. “You consult them.”

Crane had realized, when the first Acridida fell to a poisonous silver bullet, that this moment was coming. As Penny had said, they were “inevitable”. He closed his eyes and, with no small amount of guilt, surrendered.

He gulped the rest of his rum.

“Hey! We need a name!” Leonard shouted.

“What?” Crane examined the bottom of his glass and wished it wasn’t empty.

“A group name.” Howard explained.

“Why?”

“That’s how it’s done.” Raj grinned. “Like the Scooby Gang.”

“I am unaware of what that means, but no.”

Emily, still on the couch beside him, gripped at his arm. “The Librarians!”

“The what?” He pointedly moved her hand, fixing her with a glare. “Are you mocking my livelihood?”

“No! It’s a TV show,” she protested. “They protect magic and track down bad guys who use it for evil.”

“Librarians.” Crane muttered under his breath.
“I don’t love it,” Howard said.

“Good.”

“What do you think, Crane?” Leonard asked.

“I think you’re insane.”

“Yeah,” Leonard acknowledged. “But what would you call us? If you had to.”

Crane didn’t like the idea, but he acquiesced in the face of their keenness. “The Militia,” he shrugged.

“Nah.” Raj wrinkled his nose.

Howard agreed. “Too military.”

Sheldon finally turned from his desk and joined in with the rest. This, apparently, was a topic that appealed to him. “The Avengers.”

“How is that less bellicose—?” Crane began, but Raj interrupted.

“Would that make him Tony Stark?” He pointed at Crane.

Leonard shook his head. “No. More like Fury.”

Howard pointed at his chest. “I’d be Tony Stark.”

“Who died and made you Iron Man?” Sheldon squealed.

“I am an engineer.”

“I’m more like Tony Stark,” Raj argued. “I have more money than any of you.”

“You’re Hawkeye,” Howard said.

“I don’t want to be Hawkeye. No one ever says, ‘Help me, Hawkeye’. He’s the Aquaman of the Avengers.”

Crane looked around the room at his squabbling friends. The men were passionately engaged, and the ladies were bemusedly watching them. He investigated his glass again and set it back down. Then he stood, walked to the door, opened it and – once more checking his friends – closed it behind him. And sought sanctuary in his own apartment.

EPILOGUE

Closing his journal on the latest entry, chronicling his final adventures with the Acrididae, Crane leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs as far as they would go. For what it was worth, he had written about his friends’ contribution to his success and their intention to continue to do so. The future would bear the ramifications of that decision and the eventual heirs of his mission would judge him, harshly or not. He only hoped that both would understand his all-too human frailty.
He felt a little of the weight of carrying on with his mission lift from his shoulders. He knew circumstances were not ideal, but he could not help but be grateful for the expertise of his … Avengers. His brain rebelled even as it supplied the word.

This tribulation was not over. Crane had vanquished the Exluto and the Banach and the Acrididae, but the power behind their presence had yet to be revealed. And a power great enough to bring such sycophants to this plane of existence was as great as that of Moloch or the Hidden One.

He had people standing behind him now. And Abbie's life force was still his companion.

Chapter End Notes

I may have been a bit hard on John Paul Jones, but Wikipedia didn’t seem to like him much, either. He was not a team player and was self-aggrandizing – the very sort to alienate Crane. And it was true that Ben Franklin liked him. Jones’ adventures in England were mostly ineffective and achieved very few results, but they did increase morale in the colonies. So that was something, I suppose. The flag does exist. I found out about it from Mysteries at the Museum, but when I researched it on the internet, I discovered it is pretty well-known among flag aficionados. I hadn’t known anything about it, so I used it anyway.

Thanks again so much to everyone reading. And especially to those who run the Archive. If Fandom has a heaven, your salvation is assured!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!