

Exclusive Excerpt

Camp Arcanum

by
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Without waiting for Marc, Brenwyn strode down the path, looking like a dark ship under full sail as her cloak billowed out behind her.

“Why are you taking point?” he asked as he caught up with her.

“Do you not believe in ‘Ladies First’?” she chirped.

Marc didn’t appreciate her attempt at humor and he wasn’t going to let it distract him. Brenwyn’s next answer was less flippant.

“These . . . things, I can fight them.” She said. “You would never stand a chance against them.”

“What things?”

“Watch for them.”

That was all he was going to get out of her, he was sure. Marc scanned the woods to either side of the path. He could see shadows moving among the trees. Occasionally, Marc caught the flicker of red, glowing eyes. The shadows moved like oil on water or billows of smoke. The light of the bonfire shined through them as if they were not completely solid. Incomprehensible, grumbling voices drifted out of the darkness.

Marc felt his stomach lurch, the same way it did the first time he saw the local tree spirits or the monsters that loitered outside his trailer’s windows.

“There’s something moving in the trees,” Marc said, “and I’m damn sure those aren’t deer. Can you see them?”

“Of course not.” Her confident tone slipped a little there. “I feel them. I can hear them, too.”

The deep rumbling noise they made could have been either a dirge or a war chant, or both. The sound ran down Marc’s spine and settled in his gut.

“I don’t understand what they’re saying, but they’re *damned* unhappy about something.”

“That is a good summation. Primal pain, primal hatred, and they cannot wait to inflict it upon something else.”

Marc and Brenwyn continued down the path at a brisk pace in spite of what surrounded them.

“What are they?”

Brenwyn ignored his question, simply pointing towards the bonfire with a minute elevation of her chin. They had finally reached the end of the path and Marc had a clear line of sight to the stranger's bonfire. A wall of moving shadows gyred around the fire, outside a circle of chalk. Nine men in black and red robes stood around the fire and chanted.

The shadows around Marc and Brenwyn coalesced into surreal shapes: combinations of animals, fish, and insects with spines, claws, and glowing eyes.

One form rose to a height well above Marc's head and bellowed down at him. Marc clutched his shovel in both hands in front of him and hoped Brenwyn had a plan.

"Brenwyn?"

"Behind me," she ordered. "Now!"

Marc complied as Brenwyn pointed the dagger up at the heart of the shadow. She chanted something in a furious whisper. The shadow sprouted dozens of thorny appendages as it approached.

"You're not going to cut these with your knife," he muttered.

"Quiet!"

As Brenwyn continued her chant, the first form flowed away from the tip of her knife as if blown by a strong wind. The rumbling noise it made changed to an angry hiss.

A second form rose with a screech from the other side of the path. Marc found himself between it and Brenwyn as it puffed itself up to a height of eight or nine feet.

"Another spook," he shouted. "Seven o'clock!"

"I know!"

Brenwyn wheeled around to face it. Marc swiveled to stay behind her.

As the second form retreated, a claw/tentacle from yet another thing swept over Marc's head. He ducked and then swore as the tentacle tore a strip of bark off the tree behind him.

"Rat's ass! These guys do not play nice."

Brenwyn broke off her chant for a moment.

"We have to get clear of the trees," she said. "They breed in the shadows."

She pointed with her dagger to a clearing ahead of them. A single shadow, what looked like a seething pile of eyes and snakes and teeth, stood at the end of the path to block their escape.

"There's already something there!" Marc warned.

"Then it will just have to get out of my way," she snapped.

Marc recognized the sound of murder and mayhem in her voice, a tone that was usually his. He could see in the dim light that her eyes had turned silver. He moved in close behind her and hoped she was less dangerous than whatever he had pissed off.

Brenwyn pressed forward with her chants and dagger like a Marine with a rifle and a fixed bayonet. The mass of impossible forms flowed away as another tangle of tentacles and spines flowed into their path low to the ground.

Marc stepped up and hacked at the thing, using the shovel like an ax. The shovel blade sank into the heart of the mass with no apparent damage. Tendrils sprang out of the mass and wrapped around the handle in an effort to pull Marc in. He could feel the wood creaking through his palms. The sound the shadow made was almost a pleased chuckle.

Marc screamed in rage and pulled with all his weight, cutting through the core of the shadow-thing. It ripped to pieces and the fragments evaporated into the darkness. The others screeched and raged and flailed their extremities, but retreated into the cover of the deep forest.

Marc had no idea how he did this, but guessed it was a combination pure anger and a Craftsman shovel. As he stood there trying to make sense of it, Brenwyn was already in the clearing and calling out to him.

“Stay with me, Marc!”

Marc sprinted to catch up.

“We need a circle, big enough for both of us to stand.” Brenwyn pointed at the ground at her feet.

Marc scratched a six-foot circle in the ground in seconds and jammed the shovel upright into the earth. Brenwyn dropped her cloak and did a condensed version of the circle rituals in hurried whispers. As she drew the last pentacle in the air, she finally relaxed.

“We should be safe here for a while,” she said.

“Good,” he rasped. Actually, he was jazzed on adrenaline and would have liked having something threaten them so he could beat it into a pulp.

Brenwyn threw herself at Marc and kissed him passionately, but it didn’t seem to be as much fun as it had been fifteen minutes ago. She settled back on her heels and wrapped her arms around him, her cheek pressed to his chest.

“I am so glad nothing hurt you,” she murmured.

“I’m pretty happy we aren’t dead either,” he replied. Still, he was too deep in his fight-or-flight response to enjoy a cuddle in the moonlight. “Could you do me a big favor?”

“Anything.”

“Could you drop the woman of mystery crap and explain the predicament I dashed into against your advice?”

Brenwyn kept her head on his chest, probably to avoid his eyes.

“The shadows—” she started haltingly. “A friend of mine in the metaphysics department—he called them Qliphotic elements—outcast remnants from the time before the Creation. They have no place in either the spirit or material realms.”

Marc sighed. This was all too familiar.

“That’s what Allen always used to talk about.”

Brenwyn chuckled into his chest.

“Just because he was insane did not mean he was wrong.”

Marc gently pulled her away so he could look into her eyes.

“Brenwyn—darling—you have an impressive gift for answering questions without answering questions. What is happening here?”

Brenwyn swallowed and looked guilty.

“In small words, slowly spoken: they are demons.”

He did a quick analysis in his head: demons from outside Time and Space were real and on Steve’s property. Supernatural entities that could do physical damage, and he just whacked one with a shovel.

“Demons.” He pointed at the men around the bonfire who seemed to be ignoring them still. “And those guys are summoning them?”

“Obviously.”

“Rat’s ass.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose, still a little crooked after twenty years and calculated the odds of nine against one, plus demons. “This isn’t going to happen. Steve would never get liability coverage if the insurance companies found out.”

Brenwyn looked at him as if she doubted Marc’s sanity. *He* doubted his sanity, but he couldn’t let his fears keep him trapped inside a circle scratched in the dirt.

“I have to be practical. Either that, or I have an even bigger breakdown.” He pulled his shovel out of the ground and leaned it across his shoulder. “I think I’ll have a word with those trouble-makers.”

“You cannot go out there!” Brenwyn clutched his arm in a death grip.

“I can and I will!” Marc pulled his arm free with a jerk. He was suddenly furious, though it would take him too long to figure out all the “whys” or “wherefores.” “If you trust my abilities as much as you say, you’d better never do that again.”

“Please do not be angry,” she said. Her eyes were their normal violet-grey and they were filling with tears. He wasn’t going to give her a chance to use that as leverage.

“No, I have to be angry,” he snapped. “Seething with rage.”

Marc took up his shovel in both hands like a poleax. With a growl, he stepped out of the circle and strode forcefully towards the other. With a look over his shoulder, Marc saw Brenwyn watching with one hand over her mouth. She still clutched that black-handled dagger. He turned and focused on the trouble in front of him.

The shadows gathered around Marc as he neared the edge of the circle. Several heads, spines, and claws formed above him as spidery legs drove into the ground behind him. Marc stepped right up to the biggest and ugliest of them all.

“Look, I’m giving you one chance,” he shouted up at the demon. “Get out of my way. I have business with these guys.”

The demons gathered closer, seeming to laugh at Marc in a sound that went right through his bones.

“Don’t screw with me!” he shouted. “There are a lot better things I could be doing right now and I’m in a piss-poor mood. So, unless you want me to rearrange your sorry, ectoplasmic asses, you will—get—the—*Hell*—out of my face!”

Marc snarled and pressed towards the demon. It backed away, from either fear or surprise.

The third option, Marc realized a moment too late, was a feint. As the first demon withdrew, other shadows attacked Marc from the rear and sides. Remembering what had worked before, Marc turned and charged like a madman. An overhead stroke split a shadow skull with six mismatched eyes. A backhand slash cut through several limbs and claws. Over and over again, Marc screamed slashed and spun, using strokes and flourishes worthy of a samurai. Each blow that connected ripped chunks of shadow out of the demons. The maimed creatures retreated.

Marc straightened his clothing and dusted himself off as the shadows withdrew. He felt fine, not even breathing hard.

Marc loved adrenaline.

“Damned straight,” he grunted.

Marc looked over his shoulder to see Brenwyn staring at him in absolute shock. From the slack-armed, heads-forward postures of the men in black robes, Marc would say they were shocked too. Only the man in the red robes seemed to take the spectacle in stride, gently applauding his performance like a well-played tee shot.

Marc stepped up to the edge of the circle to address the men in robes. Their circle was far less tidy than the coven’s. The bonfire was low and lopsided and the ground around it was littered with candles, tarot cards and assorted crap. Something like reddish-brown sausages hung from strings tied to overhead branches, dozens of them. As Marc stepped up to outside of the circle, he could see they were dead animals like squirrels and rabbits. They had been skinned and hung there as either sacrifices or the most disgusting version of a piñata he could imagine.

“Okay guys, the party’s over,” he shouted in a loud, clear voice. “I gave only *one* group permission for a bonfire and pagan rituals. So, pack up your Ozzy Osbourne records, put out your black candles, and get your asses off my property before I call the cops.”

One of the men in black robes produced a knife from his robes and prepared to throw it at Marc

“You’re going to die, old man!” The voice coming out of the concealing hood had the adenoidal tones of a teenaged boy.

Great, Marc thought, children.

The man in red robes threw up a gloved hand in warning, but the Problem Child wasn’t paying attention.

“No, you idiot!” Red Robes’ voice was soft, effeminate, and strangely familiar. Marc decided to worry about identifying them later, once they were all unconscious.

The black-robed boy lobbed the knife at Marc. Marc swiftly turned sideways and swung up the shovel to protect his head and throat. The knife struck the shovel blade and fell at Marc’s feet. Marc leaned over and picked up a rock to return fire. The rock connected with his assailant’s black-clad head and the boy dropped like a bag of wet cement.

“To quote a bad movie,” Marc grunted “Why does evil get all the retards?”

Red Robes, definitely the group’s leader, inclined his head to Marc.

“Excellent technique,” he said in that annoyingly familiar voice. Then, he swept his hand across the circle, encompassing his flock. “But there are still eight of us, Marc, and you’re a long way from the police.”

Can I take these guys in a fair fight? Marc thought. Marc did a quick threat assessment: eight opponents still standing; assorted knives, sickles, even a sword in their hands; a large bonfire, which could either be a threat or play to his advantage. It didn’t look easy.

Then, how unfair can I make it?

Of course, there were still dozens of protean demons circling the whole mess. His hole card was the fact that, unlike Marc, the boys in robes were more afraid of the demons than the demons were of them.

“If that’s the way it’s going to play out,” he said diffidently, “I have just one thing to say before we dance—”

Marc swept his shovel through a foot-wide piece of the chalk line in the dirt, thus breaking the protective circle. Marc stepped back and let the shadows flow freely into the circle from all points.

“Start bailing, boys,” he shouted, “‘cause there’s a hole in the dike!”

Marc had often used the phrase “all Hell broke loose.” This was the first time he saw it actually happen. Demons harried the men in black robes, who ran around as if their dresses had caught fire. Red Robes stepped backwards into a circle within the circle and chanting something Marc assumed to be another spell. It was hard to hear over the others screaming like little girls.

As if the carnage and confusion weren't enough, several shadows flew into the dead animals hanging from the trees around the fire pit. The huge volumes of twisted organic forms pumping their way into the tiny corpses was the most disgusting thing Marc had seen in a very long time. The skinless rodents pulsed and twitched erratically and then twisted around to chew themselves free of their bonds. As they flopped to the ground, the undead, skinless bunnies and squirrels joined the fray in attacks on unprotected ankles.

