

I had also promised my father that I would take care of my brother. That promise I would keep. Oh, yes. I would take care of him.

We walked through the woods in the dark, for miles perhaps. My brother was in some kind of trance, I think. He was humming softly to himself. His eyes were wide, but I don't think he was seeing in the usual way. I had to reach out and push branches out of the way so he wouldn't get smacked in the face. Not that I'd mind him being smacked in the face, but that didn't fit with what I intended, not yet. He seemed to know where he was going.

Uncle was in the treetops. I heard him too now, chittering, scrambling from branch to branch, his wings and those of his companions flapping, buzzing, heavy upon the air.

Joram began to make chittering noises, not bird sounds, more like the sound of some enormous insect, and he was answered from above.

I looked up. There was only dark-

thing. I had lied to Elder Abraham. I had heard nothing, myself. Once again I was false, and to lie to the Elder like that is a blasphemy, but I did it, and I had no regrets.

And I was not. That was the next of course made my brother very special. It was very special when they did. Which communicate with us all that often, and centuries-lost-departed-uncles did not the gods, or Those of the Air, or even they, or my great-grandfather, because father had ever heard, or my grandfa- the walling, trailing cry. That was all my shouting from a distant hilltop and you couldn't make out what they said, only the wind rattling branches, or a voice you heard from far off, like somebody my hatred in secret almost since when intensely. I didn't show it but I'd nursed the first is that I hated my brother There are things I've left out.

The first is that I hated my brother intensely. I didn't show it but I'd nursed my hatred in secret almost since when he was born. I didn't even know why at first. He was smarter than me, cleverer. My parents liked him best. When we were very young, he broke my toys because he could. He did better in school. (Ours was perhaps the last one-room school in the country, so I saw when he won all the prizes. That meant I'd lost them.) But more than that, he was the one Uncle Alazar had showed a special interest in. It was Joram's dreams that Uncle had entered into, so that Joram would sit up in his bed sometimes and scream out words in strange languages, and then wake up in a sweat and (absurd as it



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passage into manhood perhaps.

So we followed the unpaved road for a little bit, then cut across the fields, into the woods, beneath the brilliant stars, and what, I ask you is wrong with this picture?

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UNCLE'S IN THE TREETOPS Darrell Schweitzer

Yes, I can tell you about it. It was in the Leaf Falling Time, when Uncle Alazar was in the treetops. He could come close to the Earth then, out of the midnight sky. You could hear him among the upper branches in the forest, sometimes skittering like a squirrel, sometimes hovering there, his wings buzzing and fluttering like those of some enormous insect. Whose uncle was he, precisely? There were stories about that, often contradictory. I'd been hearing them all my life. He was one of us, one of the Burton family, though whose brother and how many generations back, was not at all clear. He dwelt among Those of the Air. He spoke to the dark gods. He had gone to them, out into the night, and had never come back, not really, only able to return halfway like that, and was utterly transformed, beyond humanity altogether. Sometimes we Burtons heard him whispering to us. He reached into

by the hand, and joined our hands together, and he said, "Then you have to go. Go now."

I knew the rest, and we didn't have to rehearse it. The signs had manifested themselves. The stars had turned in their courses, as if tumblers had fallen into place in a lock, and gateways in the sky were open, and Uncle Alazar could come racing back out of the dark depths to speak to us on this night.

It was a very special time. To our people, though not to other Pennsylvanians, I am sure, a holy time.

My father spoke only briefly, to me, "Thomas, take care of your brother."

"I will, Dad."

So, hand-in-hand, my brother and I went. You could conjure up an almost bucolic scene, despite the spooky undertones, or so they wouldn't lose one another, two brothers making their way (noisily at first, kicking up leaves, then less noisily) into the wooded hills beyond the town, to fulfill some ancient rite,

He reached out, and took both of us

our dreams. My father had heard him, in his time, and my father's father, and his father; though not my mother, because she was only a Burton by marriage and there was something about the true blood that went back for years and years ... but I digress.

Now, mind you, the village of Chorzin may be isolated, and it may be different in its customs, but it's still in Pennsylvania, not on Mars, so we do have some things in common with the rest of the world. We have Halloween here, and Leaf Falling Time (old Indian name) is pretty much the same as Halloween, so we indeed have kids in costumes shuffling noisily through the leaves from house to house, collecting candy. They travel in groups only, and make all that noise to scare away Zenas, who was one of us once, so the story goes, but he too went into the darkness on such a night and became part of it – whether he was still alive or not was a matter of some debate – and he supposedly had long, sharp fingers like twigs, and you really

didn't want to meet him.

It was on such a night, after the candy and costumes were put away, I'd gone as Darth Vader that year, my brother Joram as a vampire. We sat on our porch in the dark with our parents, my brother and I – he was ten, three years younger than me – and two very distinguished visitors, Elder Abraham, who is our leader, questioned Joram and me closely, and spoke to us both in a very old-fashioned way that I knew was part of the ritual.

My father sat wordlessly, while my mother let out a little sob.

This was a serious business. People who went out into the dark sometimes did not come back.

"Joram," said the elder. "Tell me in truth, hast thou heard thine uncle's voice clearly and comprehended his words? Will thou act as his messenger?"

"Yes, I will," my brother said.

"The Elder turned to me. "And thou?"

"Yeah. Me too."

dark, a lump of disfigured flesh. I don't think they knew I was awake, or could hear them when they whispered, "What is it?" and "That can't be him."

It was that year, too, on the evening after Halloween, which would be All Soul's Night (Halloween being the Eve of All Hallows – get it?) and that's what we called it too, that Elder Abraham led us all out into the woods, into the Bone Forest, where generations of bone offerings, our dead, animals, others, dangled from the trees and rattled in the wind. By torchlight he delivered a memorable sermon. I heard it all. The way was too rough for me to get there in a cart, so my father carried me in a satchel on his back, and I crawled up out of the satchel and clung to him, my arms around his neck, and looked over his shoulder and saw the Elder in his ceremonial robe and holding his staff with the glowing stone on the end of it.

He spoke about change, transformation and transfiguration, about how, in time, the Old Gods would return and

attic. There are, in Chorazin, lots of em-barrassments hidden away in attics. More than once, after I stopped screaming, Elder Abraham and Brother Azrael would come to see me, always late at night. They stood silently over my bed, regarding me, saying nothing. I could read nothing in their expressions. Once the Elder had a glowing stone with him, which he touched to my forehead. I didn't dare ask what that was about. I didn't dare say anything.

When my reason returned, more or less, and I had healed as much as I could, I was brought down from the attic, and began my new life as a cripple. My father had built a low, wooden cart for me. I could sit in it and reach over the sides to push myself along. No one mentioned Joram.

Almost a year had passed. That year, at Leaf-Falling Time, or Halloween as you'd call it, I sat with my parents on the porch as costumed children came up, fearfully, to receive a handful of candy, then scamper off. I just sat there in the

ness, and I could see the stars through the branches, and once, only once, did I see what looked like a black plastic bag detach itself from an upper branch and flutter off into the night; or that might have been a shadow.

I let Joram guide me, even though he couldn't see. I had to reach out and clear the way for him, but he was the one who led me on, even as we descended into a hollow, then climbed a ridge on the other side. The trees seemed larger than I had ever seen them, towering, the trunks as thick as houses; but that may have been a trick of the dark, or the night, or the dream which was pouring into my brother as he chattered and stared blindly ahead, and maybe I wasn't entirely lying after all, and maybe I really did feel a little bit of it.

We came to a particularly enormous tree, a beech it felt like from the smooth bark, with a lot of low branches all the way down the trunk to the ground. My brother began to climb. I climbed after him. By daylight, in the course of normal

impossible. I should have been dead by now. I should have bled to death, my guts gushing out like water from a balloon that's been slashed open. I went on on screaming and the pain just wouldn't end. It went on and on. I pounded my fists on the ground to try to make it stop, but it did not stop.

At one point he stared into my eyes, and I was terribly afraid that he would take them. But he just remained there, making clicking sounds as if he were speaking a language I did not know. He was there long afterwards in my dreams, with his bloody saliva dripping down onto my face, burning.

And when I awoke, in my own room, in my own bed, I was swathed in bandages. My face was covered by something thick and heavy, but I could see out, and I could see that both of my arms were in casts and my legs were gone. They tell me I screamed non-stop for another six months. I had to be put in an

kid activities, I actually was a pretty good tree climber, but this wasn't like that at all. We went up and up, and sometimes the angles of the branches and the trunk itself seemed to twist strangely. Several times my brother slipped and almost fell, but I caught hold of him, and he clung to me, whimpering slightly, as if he were half awake and scared in his dream.

Did he know what I intended? He had every right to be scared. Hah!

Still we climbed, and now there were things in the branches with us, only way out on the swaying ends, and the branches rose and fell and rose and fell as half-seen shapes alighted on them. The air was filled with buzzing and flapping sounds. Joram made sounds I hadn't know a human throat could ever make, and he was answered by multitudes.

Then the branches cleared away, and we were beneath the open, star-filled, moonless sky, and Those of the Air circled around us now. Joram and I sat where the trunk forked, my arm around him, while with my other hand I held

a very human "Hah!" sound, and they *dropped* me.

Down I went, through the branches: screaming, crash, thump, thump, thump, crash, thud. There was so much pain. I couldn't move. I don't know if what followed was a dream, because the next thing I knew Zenas had found me, he of the silletto-sharp stick-like fingers, re-member? He was naked, and very thin, his body elongated, almost like a snake, with way too many ribs, and his face was partly a man's face, with a wild mass of hair, but his eyes were multi-faceted and like those of a praying mantis or a hornet, and he leaned down, out of my field of view, and came up again with a mouthful of bloody flesh. Zenas was *eating* me. I felt the bones of my legs crunching. I screamed and screamed and he went full, and gulped it down the way an animal would, and went back for more. I knew this couldn't be happening. It was

onto a branch. I could see them clearly, black creatures, a little like enormous bats, a little like wasps, but not really like either, and one of them came toward us, chittering, its face aglow like a paper lantern, its features human or almost human, and this I knew was our legendary relative, the fabled Uncle Alazar whose special affinity to our family brought him back to this planet on such occasions as this, when the signs were as they needed to be and the dark, holy rites were to be fulfilled.

Now that Uncle was here, and I had used my gibbering brother to guide me to him, I had no further use for Joram, whom I had always hated; so I flung him from me, out among the swaying branches, and down he fell: screaming, thump, thump, thump, crash, thump, and silence.

I was almost surprised that none of the winged ones tried to retrieve him, but they didn't.

Uncle Alazar hovered before me, his eyes dark, his face inscrutable.

"I am afraid my brother isn't available," I said. "You will have to take me instead."

And they did take me. Hard, sharp fingers or claws seized hold of me from every side. Some grabbed me by the hair and lifted me up.

I was hanging in the air, with wings whirring and flapping and buzzing all around me, and yes, I was terribly afraid, but also I was filled with a fierce, grasp-ing, greedy joy, because I had *done it* and now Uncle Alazar would have to reveal the secrets of the darkness and of the black worlds to me, and I would become very special indeed, a great one, perhaps able to live for centuries like Elder Abraham or Brother Azrael.

Uncle's face floated in front of mine, filled with pale light. He spoke. He made that chittering sound. It was just noise to me. He paused. He spoke again, as if expecting a reply. I tried to reply, imitating his squeaks and chirps and whatevers, and then, suddenly, he drew away, and made

in the earth. Despite the cold of the season he only wore a pair of filthy denim cut-offs. He was covered with mud, but his face was streaked with tears.

He stood at the top of the attic stairs, looked at me, and said softly, "I know what you did."

And before I could make any argument about leaves and tides and there being no morality, something clumped and scraped and grabbed Jerry by the hair from behind and threw him, yelping and banging, down the stairs.

Joram. I suppose while Jerry was swimming around among the graves, he'd met my late brother, and Joram demanded to be taken to visit dear older brother Tommy, and now that this was accomplished he'd tossed Jerry aside like an empty candy wrapper. I only had to contend with Joram. You don't grow older when you're dead, so he was still ten years old, but he'd changed. He wore only shreds of the sheet he'd been buried in, and he moved strangely because his bones were still broken, and his face

Nevertheless, he was my friend, even if he did betray me at the end, if that's what he did.

It was at the Leaf-Falling Time, yet again. Such things happen at particular times, because the cycles turn and the gates open.

I was in the attic. I wasn't confined there anymore, but I had grown to like it. It was only because my senses had begun to change, to become more acute, that I heard a very soft footsteps on the stairs. Jerry, when he's barefoot like that can be almost totally silent, but I knew it was him, and it was. He had been swimming

clear off the Earth of all human things, and only those of us who were changed in some way would have any place in the new world. And he emphasized something that I thought was aimed just at me, that this change comes as inevitably as leaves falling in the autumn, or a tide on the seashore, rushing in. There is *no morality* to it, for such things mean nothing to the darkness and to those who dwell there. What happens merely happens because it has happened, because the stars have turned and the gateways between the worlds have configured themselves *just so*.

If I'd been better read, better educated, I might have called it fate. That year I became better read and educated. I got out more, wheeling my way here and there around the village, sometimes scaring the younger children and making other people turn away. For months I had been desperately afraid of mirrors. I could feel that my face was thick and stiff and my cheeks didn't move properly. I was afraid of how disfigured I might

friend was the muddly kid, Jerry, or more formally Jeroboam. He was odd like me, not that he was misshapen or missing any limbs, but that his special talent as that he could swim through the earth as if through water, so that any time day or night when he felt the call, but especially on certain festivals, he would sink down into the ground without smothering and converse with our dead ancestors, or with others that lay there. Sometimes he would raise up the dead, or bone-creatures, like skeletal beasts, for us to ride on as we went to places of worship and sacrifice. The result of this was that he was always dirty; even when he tried to wash himself, he never got it all; and he could feel the dead beneath the ground whenever he could touch it with his skin, so he went barefoot much of the year, except when it was very cold. It was hell on his clothes too, so he would turn up at school that way sometimes, barefoot and smeared with mud and nearly naked, but that was just Jerry.

He was the one who told me what

be. But in time was I angry. I had become a monster. I should damn well look like a monster. Finally I dared, and snatched up one of my mother's mirrors and saw that I was indeed hideous, as if my face had been half dissolved and partially reshaped, until I looked a little bit like an insect, a little bit like Zenas, though I did not have multi-faceted eyes and my jaws and teeth worked normally.

Fate, education, yes. There I went, scurrying and scooting around town, the object of horror and fascination. I went to the general store, where Brother Azrael kept his collection of ancient books and scrolls locked away in a back room. Those weren't for just anybody to read, but he unlocked the door to that room, and let me read them. He patiently tutored me in the languages required. He spoke to me of things we had known since the most ancient days, since before even Elder Abraham was alive, and Elder Abraham was over a thousand. ("He remembers when Charlemagne was king," the Brother told me, and later, from a

and an aerosol can in the turret.

This did not work out well. When I trundled up to the first house and shouted, "Seig Heil! Fuck you! Trick or treat!" the aerosol can exploded and the tank went up in a fireball and I set somebody's porch on fire, and then everybody was trying to beat the flames out with rugs and such before I burned down the whole village. I was screaming once more, and I was hurt, but my screams gave way to screeching and chattering the likes of which no human throat should be able to utter, and I was *answered*, right there in town, from some point above the rooftops, and I began to understand what was said.

Like I said, I had a gift for languages. Once again I was in the attic for a while, gibbering. The Elder came and touched me with his glowing stone one more time.

I should mention that I had only one friend during this period. My parents were my parents, and Brother Azrael was my teacher, but the closest thing I had to a

more conventional set of encyclopedias, I learned who Charlemagne was.) That was the essence of our faith, what other people would call a religion, or the beliefs of a cult, that we had no faith, that we knew with certain knowledge that Elder Abraham was indeed that old, and that there are things in the sky and the earth that you can talk to, and that the elder powers will one day rule again where mankind rules now. These things are merely true, we know, from what we have seen and what we have done.

Yes, I even read part of the *Necronomicon*. It should not be surprising that someone as eminent as Elder Abraham or Brother Azrael should have a copy. I read it in Latin, which wasn't hard. For all my brother Joram had excelled me in school, I proved to have gift for languages, once I applied myself.

What comforted me most was that nowhere in all of this was there any discussion of *right and wrong* or of *morality*. It was just as the Elder had said. Things happen because they happen. In the large

er scheme of things, by the standards of the Abyss and of the Black Worlds beyond the sky, such human concerns are irrelevant. Therefore I felt no guilt over what I had done. I had suffered much, but I was not sorry. It was like the leaves falling, or like a tide rushing in at the seashore.

I was also still a kid. I was, by my count, more than fifteen, and I should have been getting a bit old for Halloween, but I told my parents that I wanted to go out one last time, and either they felt sorry for me, or maybe they were even afraid, so they didn't stop me as I worked for hours on my "costume." If I was going to have to move around on wheels, I decided, I would go as a tank. I built a shell out of plywood and cardboard, complete with a swiveling turret, and I fit it over my car, so I could indeed go out disguised as a goddam Panzer tank from World War II, complete with an iron cross and swastikas painted on it. As a finishing touch, it was a flame-throwing tank. I rigged up a cigarette lighter

All these changes, he said, all these sufferings and sacrifices, are stages in your transformation, for only those who are transformed, one way or another, have any place in the world that is to come. You have climbed, step by step, up a ladder, never falling in

to. words at all any longer. He didn't need of Those of the Air, not using human mind, in the chattering, clicking language Elder Abraham spoke to me, in my or my destiny, if you want to call it that. climb was for me alone. It was my fate Besides, he wasn't supposed to. This was never a very good climber anyway. the Elder bade me climb, Jerry didn't try to follow me. He was of the earth. He

stairs, trying to keep up. where he'd banged his knees on the bare chest against the cold, limping from for a while, his arms crossed across his was even aware that Jerry was with us it was wolves, but we were followed. I ed off eyes in the forest. I don't think by the burning staves. The light reflect-

of the village were gathered, costumed, not for Halloween festivities, though it was Halloween, but for something a lot more serious. They all wore masks, some like skulls, some like beasts, some like nothing that had ever walked the earth.

Zenas caught hold of me and lifted me up, and began to strip away the flesh from my back and shoulders, but Elder Abraham struck him with his staff, and he exploded into a cloud of blood and bones and flesh. Then Brother Azrael struck Joram, and he was gone too.

The Elder explained that some who go into the darkness and are changed and come back are failures, or of limited use.

But it would not be so for me. Though I was hurt and bleeding, someone bore me up, and I was carried at the head of a procession, alongside the Elder and the Brother, with all the people behind us, singing. We passed through the Bone Forest. We went past the standing stones beyond it, into the woods again, on for miles, our way lit

swooped low through an endless valley ers without names, beyond the Rim. We goth, and more distant Shaggai, and other black planets loomed before me, Yng- of time in that cold, dark voyage. The by the stars of space, and I lost all sense the distance, but then I was surrounded fields, and the few lights of Chorazin in stant I could see the dark hills, and the bore me up, out of the tree. For an in- But this time he and his companions allowed myself to fall.

him, and I let go of the last branch, and Alazar was there. He bade me come to with buzzing, flapping wings. Uncle The air began to fill with presences, monkey.

So I climbed, easily seizing one branch after another, swinging like a and hope and love like old clothes. manly behind. All of it. She'd hate and fear messenger. For this you must leave your hu- come back to us when it is the season, as their realm of the gods, and learn their secrets, and one who will climb on our behalf into the your course, and that is good. You are the

tops while Joram hissed and shrieked and crashed into furniture and shelves and storage boxes. I made it past him and down the stairs. I skittered right over Jerry, who was still lying there, stunned. Joram came after me.

That was when I heard real screaming, human screaming, from downstairs in the parlor. Two voices, a grown man and a woman, in utmost agony. My parents. But by the time I got to them it was too late. Zenas was there, all awash in blood, looming over them, gobbling. He had killed and partially eaten both of them. There was blood all over the walls and ceiling.

Joram was there. He shouted something to Zenas, who looked up, then began to follow me.

I scrambled out the front door and across the lawn, with Joram and Zenas both in close pursuit.

And came face to face with Elder Abraham and Brother Azrael in their ceremonial robes, both of them holding burning staves. Behind them the people

than even they ever did. I am like a god me now, because I went so much farther tops. So am I. He and his fellows worship That's the story. Uncle's in the tree- * * * * *

discarded with my humanity. Other such notions I had left behind, things were. They are and shall be. no good or evil, right or wrong. These a great whirlpool of the void, for a thou-

And I learned their ways. and I learned their ways. Again space opened up, and we were falling, swirling around and around into sand years, I think, or a million, or for all of time, while in the far distance and faintly I heard the throbbing, pulsating drumming that is the voice of ultimate chaos, which is called Azathoth.

lined with frozen gods, those that slept and waited and dreamed while the cycles turned. Their immense shapes were like nothing that ever walked the earth, or ever will until the end. They spoke to me, inside my head, in muted thunder,

was terribly pale, his eyes very strange, his fingers long and thin like sharpened sticks.

He screamed at me, not in words, but chattering, and I understood how much he hated me, how much he resented that I had stolen his role in the future among the stars.

There's no morality. No right and wrong. We do what we do.

He lunged for me, shrieking. His mouth was distorted, almost like an insect's. I could see that his teeth were sharp points. His fingernails were like knives.

But I skittered aside. Since I had very strong arms, and there was only half of me left, my body was light, and I'd learned to move like the half-man, Johnny Eck, in that movie *Freaks*. (Brother Azrael had a secret TV and VCR hidden in the back room of his store. He'd showed it to me.) There were hoops of rope strung all over the attic rafters, and I grabbed hold of them, and swung out of reach, then moved like a monkey in tree-

If you want to know more. Climb.

I can't actually touch the earth. I can't changed at all. They do not.

The Elder and the Brother had not think he was afraid. he was exactly glad to see me, but I don't ways covered with mud. I don't know if long-limbed and smooth-skinned and although he looked pretty much the same, Jerry, who was a grown man now, I manifested myself to my old friend I'd departed.

precisely back at the point from which stars decreed. I fell backwards through and the seasons and the motions of the Pennsylvania hills, because the time I returned to Earth, to Chorazin in ence, and we converse.

Neither are Elder Abraham or Brother Joram is not here. Zenas is not here. to them.

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