

The Magician knew his time was drawing close. For months he had regaled the small bayou town with sleight-of-hand tricks, parlor games, and the odd séance.

But wherever there was people, there was superstition. And like all things children can't understand, they began to conjure up haints and witches in their heads. They pointed their fingers at him for their nightmares; fair enough, he was an easy target.

The final straw was the Satanic accusations. After they had run through everything else, they accused him of cavorting with the Devil. For the record, he had not been trying to talk to the Old Fiend himself, just his helpers.

But that was all past. Now he was alone in his big, old estate on the water's edge. He'd let his help go the other night. Despite their protestations of loyalty, he knew they were relieved.

The mob was coming. He knew that because a girl that was sweet on him tipped him off. He thanked her before he killed her, to use her blood for tonight's concoction.

After each public witch trial, he'd had to give something away: trinkets, ingredients, spell books. Now all he had left were a couple of crystal balls he hardly ever used 'cept to see out of, and his black cat familiar Michel.

He ran a finger under the cat's chin while he ate a strip of catfish. One of the crystal balls glowed with the fire of torches, and the other shook with cries of outrage. The Magician rolled his eyes.

The mob was at his door already. He didn't think they would knock, but he was still ticked when they crashed the door.

"Wizard!" bellowed a bearded old man that looked more "wizard" than the Magician himself. "Show yourself, devil!"

From the top of the stairs, the Magician leaned over the railing, Michel in tow.

"How can I help you fine gentlemen this evening?"

"Don't play with us," someone else hissed. "We mean to run you outta here!"

The stone-faced priest at the center of the crowd began muttering the Magician's favorite church hymn, and when he began to sing along in his pleasing baritone, the crowd went off like a powder keg.

It's hard to see from the ground with jostling bodies in furious motion, pulling fixtures from walls and snatching curtains down. Even innocent table chairs are chopped and well-stuffed chairs ripped apart and their guts strewn on the floor. Upstairs, the Magician ducks back into his boudoir like a coward. Some men chased him in there. The mob saw this and began to cheer loudly, but their hoorahs died down in the eerie silence behind the cracked door. What had happened? Where was the Magician's head on a pike?

Then there was screaming, agonized screaming. At least two of the men staggered out clutching their heads and faces. They were splattered with too much blood and oil, and their flesh appeared to be melting. There was a loud whoosh that sounded like a bullwhip crack, and great long tentacles black like licorice whipped out from behind the doors, through the walls. Ten in all, with some flailing angrily and one snatched one of the men back and dragged him inside the boudoir kicking and screaming.

The Magician floated out like the blasphemous creature the town always knew he was, holding a fractured ball of quartz. The ball continued to crack with a childish twinkle like something out of a jewelry box. Upon reaching the center, the ball shattered and sent shards flying every which way in the room. The mob was broken up in a way mimicking the quartz shards, clutching their faces and heads and other soft tender parts that the haunted pieces were embedding themselves into. Faces and hands were cut to ribbons as the shards ricocheted off walls and went through the heavy drapery. The abomination in the bedroom was grabbing people up and shaking them like toys before a child throws them out the basket, dropping broken bodies with thousand-yard stares. The Magician watched the chaos for a while; people were so much like ants in the rain when they were hysterical-like, but not nearly as effective.

Michel pawed at his face.

“Oh! Time to go.”

The other ball he had reserved and now blew it away like sand in his palm. The particles clung to skin and fabric and ignited them in white smoke and blue flames. The Magician took his escape route through a tunnel in his bedroom that led to the undisturbed kitchen and out the back door into the swamps.

Poor Michel couldn't swim, so the Magician carried him through miles of stinking, sludgy water riddled with alligators and probably more than a few forgotten bodies. But the water and wildlife parted at the Magician's presence, so at least it was a dry trip. Once, he turned back to look at his former estate and seen the place gone up in a supernatural blaze. Love the place, not the people, he always said.

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