

A large, scaly dragon with a red and green tail breathing fire in a city at night. The dragon is the central focus, breathing a stream of fire that illuminates the scene. The background shows a city skyline with lit-up buildings under a dark sky. The overall mood is dramatic and intense.

The Paradox Room

Monte Cook
Bruce Cordell

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The Stranger

by Monte Cook

Merid lied. That much remained obvious.

I crawled across the fake stone floor. Crawled! I had never crawled in all my existence before I came to this place of nightmares.

And I am ancient.

Merid had described this place as one of wonders. The Maker's own realm. She lied. It was a world of horror and pain. And worst of all, indignities. Crawl! Like a worm I pulled myself along the dirty floor where once I would have soared high in the azure skies, all creatures—*all*—cowering or running in terror before me. Back then, I feared nothing. I wanted for nothing.

Now? Now everything was different.

I heard a noise in the darkness. My eyes were still keen and I lifted my head to look around, although the effort was great. I was so heavy here. The sound was not another rat. Much to my eternal embarrassment, I had taken to feeding upon them and the other vermin I found down

here to sate my hunger.

No, I knew these sounds. They were human sounds. I salivated at the thought of human meat and bone. It had been long since I feasted upon them, and never here in this nightmarish place.

The sounds grew louder. Footsteps. Breathing. The quiet shuffle of the cloth they drape themselves in.

That's right. Come closer. I grew eager.

The footsteps I heard came with another sound. I almost couldn't identify it, but then it occurred to me. The man—yes, it was a male human—was mumbling to himself as he shuffled through the darkness. He must be a madman, I thought. All the easier to grab him and feast upon his warm entrails.

But no. Wait. A better idea came to me. A much better idea.

“Greetings, man,” I whispered. Only then did it occur to me—what language did they speak here? Surely it was the Maker's Tongue, right? That only made sense. It was his world, after all.

“Huhn?” came the man's garbled reply. The alcohol

odor was strong. Perhaps not mad then. But close enough.

“Who’s there?” Yes, he spoke the Maker’s Tongue.

“Do not be afraid. I am not here to harm you.”

“Who’s that? Who’s over there? I can’t see you.”

His words slurred around his tongue, and—I saw as he drew closer—through swollen lips and a thick, unkempt beard.

“It is me, little man. It is your god.”

~

Cold rain spattered on the windows of the apartment. Richard and Sarah kept the place in Chicago as an office and a crash spot for when they were in town. When they weren’t *somewhere else*.

Sarah walked over to the couch with her tablet computer in hand. “Remember what Jamison said about someone coming through that doorway before they could get it closed?”

Richard nodded.

Sarah sighed and said, “I think we may have found

him. Her. It...whatever.” She held her tablet in his face so that the screen glared at him. An email was displayed on it and he snatched it to hold it steady while he read.

It was from Laura Bennings, with whom they had worked before on behalf of the Estate. She wasn't a recursor, but she was quickened and knew about the Strange and the recursions within. Which is probably why, when she heard on the police scanner about this particular disturbance in North Lawndale, she thought to contact Sarah. Richard finished reading and handed the tablet back to his partner.

She raised her eyebrows when he finished reading. “Shadow God? That certainly sounds like Ardeyn stuff to me.”

Richard leaned back on the couch. “I've never heard of anything called the Shadow God.”

Sarah sat next to him. “We should contact a native. Someone who knows more about religious lore there. Maybe it's an obscure cult or something.”

“Let me look at that again.” He took back the tablet. Two officers had apprehended a suspect on foot last night

with a handgun and a backpack full of wallets. When questioned, he claimed he was the servant of the Shadow God.

Whatever that meant.

“The perp they arrested was clearly from here, though, right?”

“Yeah.”

Sarah unwrapped a piece of gum like she always did when she faced a problem that required a little pondering. Her round face and petite nose and mouth were in motion while she thought. “Could be a priest or someone like that, converting people on this side to an Ardeyn cult.”

“That we’ve never heard of.” He got up and started walking where his laptop bag sat by the door. “I’ll check the Estate database,” he said.

“Already did. They’ve got nothing on a Shadow God. I even tried, you know, ‘god of shadows,’ ‘shade god,’ and a few other synonyms I could think of. Nothing. If it’s a secret cult, it’s really secret.”

“Maybe it’s something new.”

~

The pain was worse. Each day, more of my scales sloughed away, like dried leaves falling from an autumn tree. At first, I had thought it was my imagination, just aches and the wearying weight of this place. But no. My beautiful serpentine neck grew shorter with time. My flesh warped and withered. The laws of this world weren't just tearing me apart; they were altering me into something else.

“Oh lord,” a stammering voice came, interrupting my misery. “We have these offerings for you.”

I looked. A rotund woman with a pocked face stood in the shadows—a darkness that blinded them, but not me—inhabiting a long coat that had seen far too few washings. Her head was bowed. She smelled of waste and disease. Such were my subjects.

My faithful worshippers.

She held a few paper sacks filled with meat wrapped in that dreadful clear material they seem to love here. I held my temper in check. I had a role to play. Dangerous, but

magnanimous.

Terrifying, but... what's the word? Loving.

“Unwrap the meat,” I whispered with a low growl. “You know your master hates the taste of that rubbish.”

The meat would be far from fresh. Beef, from the smell of it, again, and tainted with the poisons of this foul world. I longed for some fresh mutton or even beef from my own glorious realm. But it was better than rat. Probably even better than the human meat that bowed before me now. She would be fresh, but old, tough, and likely dirty and diseased.

The supplicant complied with my command without hesitation, although she fumbled at the task in the darkness.

“Your reward will be great,” I cooed to her. “You serve your god well.”

She sobbed as she pulled at the packaging of raw meat, tossing each piece into a pile before her.

“When you are done here, you can return to your family. You’ll find them safe and sound, thanks to the grace of your just and protecting Shadow God.”

The woman muttered something I could not

understand.

“Speak up, child.”

“Some of the faithful have been arrested. They were caught stealing for you.”

Of course they were. “How many?”

“There was Jacob. And that one with the beard, I don’t know his name. Maybe one other.”

Acceptable losses.

“If they are faithful, I will see to it that they are freed,” I lied. “Exonerated.” I gestured with a claw, although it was doubtful her eyes had adjusted to the dark enough to see. “The people of this city simply do not yet understand me as you do. They do not understand my needs, or my power. But we shall change that, won’t we, daughter?”

She swallowed and nodded.

The people of this world were easily manipulated. At least, those who hid in its shadows were. These were people without homes. Without any sense of loyalty to their fellows. Some of them appeared to be at least somewhat mad. Damaged.

In other words, perfect for my needs.

“Go now. See to your children.” Let me eat.

She bowed and said her thanks and stumbled past the metal pipes and the rotting boxes of paper filled with trash no one had looked at in years. I watched her move toward the steps that would take her up out of the darkness.

And then I ate the offerings she had placed before her god.

~

Richard and Sarah flanked the man as they walked away from the police station.

“Mr. Harrison. You’re probably wondering why we paid your bail,” Sarah said.

The man in the long gray coat said nothing. He stroked his thick black beard with a dirty hand.

“We just want to ask you a few questions.”

A block from the station, the man tried to bolt, but Richard grabbed his arm. “Just a couple questions, Mr. Harrison. Why don’t we buy you some breakfast?”

The man's large eyes widened at the mention of food, and he let Richard lead him down the street to a fast food restaurant. They let him order whatever he wanted, while Richard and Sarah just got coffee. The three of them sat at the smooth, brightly colored table, Sarah on one side, Richard and the man on the other. Richard remained ready if the man tried to run again, but the food seemed to anchor him.

"Mr. Harrison, we want to ask you about what you told the police when you were arrested," Sarah said.

The man just ate.

"We want to know about the Shadow God." Her voice lowered as she said the last two words, as if she were embarrassed of them. Or maybe a little afraid. Probably the latter. Thanks to their previous experiences, they knew that such things were all too real. And dangerous.

The words fell hard upon the man, who looked up at her as surely as if she'd cuffed his head. He had biscuit crumbs in his beard.

"It's all right," Richard said. "We understand about him. We just want you to tell us what you can."

“Can’t,” the man said, looking at his food but not eating it, as if it was suddenly denied him.

“Why not?” Sarah asked.

The man sat, head bowed.

“C’mon, friend,” Richard said. “It’s okay. Like I said, we understand about things like this. We’re not like the police or anyone else. We found you, didn’t we? We got you out of jail. Eat your breakfast, it’s okay.”

The man slowly went back to his food.

“Why can’t you tell us, Mr. Harrison? Is someone making you?”

“Not asposed to talk about him. Told all us.” The man’s words were slurred with sausage, biscuit, and egg, but he stressed the mispronounced one, apparently to make his point. As if with that, the conversation was over.

“Who told you?”

“He did. Hissself.”

“The Shadow God?”

Richard wanted to ask what the Shadow God was, but he knew that was the wrong question. Even if the man answered, it wouldn’t likely be with anything of use. But

mostly he didn't want to scare the man off by showing ignorance.

"I'd like to talk to him."

Again the man paused, mouth full. He looked askance at Richard. Assessing something? He shook his head.

"Why not, Mr. Harrison?"

Richard didn't let him answer Sarah's question.

"He'll be angry with you if you don't let me talk to him. You've seen him angry, haven't you? You know what he might do."

This visibly shook the man. He pushed away the tray, a half-eaten triangle of hash browns still on the cardboard plate.

"I think he ate Tom, man," he whispered. "You don't wanna go down there."

Richard pushed aside that disturbing detail and pressed his advantage. "The Shadow God will be angry if you don't take us to him." He shot a glance at Sarah, who was grimacing.

The man sighed, and gave them both a slow, pained

look. Then, he gobbled the remaining hash browns in a single bite and made a sound that Richard decided was him saying, “all right.”

~

Merid would die a slow painful death, I vowed. She spoke of this world—the Maker’s World—with glowing praise. She had said I’d be given a new body when I arrived here; one that would allow me to fit into the circumstances. A human body, presumably, since everyone in this world appeared to be human. That’s not at all what happened. I passed through that doorway and then it closed, but there was no adaptation. At least, not like Merid described. This wretched place twisted and ripped my beautiful body, its rules so much different from those of my home.

Now, I barely resembled my former self. My limbs slowly had retracted into my body. My bones could barely hold up my flesh. My exquisite wings, which once had glistened like jewels, hung limp like a cloak draped over my bulk.

But even as my body failed, my mind remained strong. My wits would save me. It was easy enough to intimidate and deceive the people I had found into being my servants. My worshippers. My army in the shadows. I would find a way to survive here. They would be my eyes and ears, and my hands as well. They had never seen a creature like me before, and believed me to be a god.

And so shall I be.

Merid's assurances that returning was easy were part of her lie. I had no idea how to leave this place. So I would conquer it instead.

~

The building was on 18th Street, in a south side neighborhood Richard might have avoided at night. Three stories of decay, graffiti, and abuse. Their guide said they needed to go down into the basement, the entrance to which was in the alley that ran along the east side.

Sarah had tried to get more information from "Mr. Harrison," (Richard was fairly certain that wasn't his real

name) on the drive over. The man had kept pretty quiet after giving them the address, even though Sarah asked all the right questions.

Was the location a lie? A trap? The man became more nervous as they got close, but when they stopped in front of the building, the back seat door flew open and he tumbled out.

Dammit! Richard had thought he had child locked the back doors. The bearded man recovered from his roll in a quick but awkward motion, and ran as fast as his long, skinny legs could move. His tattered coat whipped behind him. He didn't even look back.

Sarah called out after him through the still-open door. Richard considered chasing him, but for only a moment. Instead, he turned off the car's engine and looked at the building again.

"I guess we got what we needed from him," Sarah said.

If any of it was the truth.

"If you were some kind of... *thing* from Ardeyn, is this where you would head?"

“Me?” she replied. “No way. I’d use the few moments of lingering sorcery I had to conjure up some safe house. Or a vehicle to get out of here.”

“What if you didn’t have access to sorcery? Or didn’t know it was going to fade?”

“I’d still go somewhere else. You know, just try to fit in as best I could.”

“But what if you came though without context? You didn’t translate, you just showed up?”

“Get some clothes and—“

“And if you weren’t human?”

Sarah sighed. “Well, depending on what we’re talking about, the Earth’s rules would pretty quickly take over. If you were big, you’d have a hard time supporting your own mass. If you did have sorcerous abilities of any kind, and were reliant upon them, you’d suddenly find yourself in a very unhappy situation. Gravity, density, you know... physics—these things *matter* here.

“Yeah.”

“I might just crawl into the nearest hole and hide.”

“Yeah.” He looked back at the building, nodding.

“Yeah.”

“So not a cult leader or a priest. Not a sorcerer. A creature? It apparently ate Tom, after all, whoever he was.”

“Only one way to find out.” Richard opened his coat and pulled out the Glock 30s he kept in a hidden side holster.

Sarah rolled her eyes. “You live for opportunities to say shit like that. The action movie mindset will get you killed someday.”

“You know we have to go find it. We wouldn’t have come here if we weren’t going in.”

She sighed. “I know.”

The alley was a mess of toppled trashcans and junk. A short flight of concrete steps led down to a door reinforced with an iron plate. A man stood at the bottom of the steps, in front of the door. He wore a short, dirty jacket over a long sweater, grime-covered khakis, and a stocking cap.

“Nope, nope, nope,” the man said instantly upon seeing Richard and Susan. “You don’ wanna be here. Keep walkin’, man. Keep walkin’.” He waved them away and

glared at them, although still managed to avoid eye contact.

“Excuse us, sir, but—“ Sarah began.

“No, no, no. No ‘excuse me.’ No ‘sir,’ jest keep walkin’.” He waved them away again as if they were children.

Sarah pulled out what looked like a smartphone and tapped on a couple icons. Richard knew it wasn’t a smartphone—that was just the shape it took within the context of Earth. But of course, the guy in front of the door couldn’t know that.

With the press of a third icon, the man’s eyes rolled back and his knees buckled. Richard bounded down the steps in time to catch him before his head struck concrete. He set the man’s limp, unconscious body on the ground, amid the trash that collected at the bottom of the stairs.

“Nice work,” he said softly.

“I guess he was the temple guard?”

“I think our ‘Shadow God’ has to take what it can get.”

The door wasn’t locked. It had, in fact, been forced open in what appeared to be the fairly recent past. In fact,

Richard noted, the door was slightly bowed inward, as if a large weight had pressed against it. Despite his show of bravado, the truth was, he was getting more and more worried with each passing moment.

On the other side of the door he saw a room lit only by a single shaft of light coming from a dirty, high-placed window he hadn't noticed from the outside. The room was filled with trash and smelled of rotten meat and urine. To the right, a mass of ancient ductwork and pipes. To the left, a low corridor from which a woman emerged. She wore a parka a bit too small for her over what looked like a blue terrycloth bathrobe. Mismatched galoshes were on her feet. Her face was gaunt and creased, her eyes sunken.

“Who the hell?” She asked, her face alive with multiple, rapid tics. “The Lord don't want you here.”

Richard entered the room. He held up an open hand to make calming gestures, but he kept his other hand clutching the Glock beneath his coat.

“The Lord? The Shadow God? We're here to see him.”

“Oh no. He don't want you. He came here for us.

We live in the shadows, just like him. He's for us, not you."

"We don't mean anyone any harm." Sarah stepped into the basement room behind Richard. He hoped she had another cypher that might deal with this woman as neatly as she had handled the guy outside.

"We're here to pay our respects to him."

"I know you're lying 'cause you don't have any meat."

Meat. The Shadow God craved meat. This was not good. He pulled out his gun. "Look, ma'am, we really don't mean you any harm. But you need to step out of the way."

The woman backed against the wall. "No, please. Don't kill me. I'm just doing the Lord's work."

Sarah took the woman's arm. "We're not going to kill anyone." She pushed a ten-dollar bill into the woman's hand. "Go buy yourself something to eat. Something warm."

The woman paused for a moment, and then hurried up the steps clutching the money, striding over the man's sleeping form as if she didn't even notice him.

The hallway was very dark, but Sarah had a small

flashlight in her shoulder bag. Richard let her lead the way with it. He had his pistol in hand, but the situation for using it—if he had to—was less than ideal.

Another set of steps took them deeper and darker into the bowels beneath the old building.

“I hear something...breathing,” Sarah whispered.

Richard heard it too. A wet rasp.

“I hear you as well, girl,” a low, rough voice came from the darkness. “I knew you would come. It is the traditional tale, is it not? The brave but foolish knights prying into the dragon’s lair. I’m afraid if you’ve come here looking for gold you will be disappointed.”

Sarah flicked the flashlight beam around the room. She stopped.

There, amid ancient pipes lay what at first looked to be a pile of rotting garbage until the light flickered across the sparkling, jewel-like wings that lay draped uselessly atop the mound. The pile shuddered as clawed limbs struggled to adjust its position, its body a quivering mass of ropy flesh. All around it, on the wet floor, lay what appeared to be bits of broken pottery.

Entering the small nimbus of light, on a long neck that slid across these bits, was a vaguely reptilian head with a mouth filled with canine-like pointed teeth exposed in a rictus grin. A forked snake's tongue darted out of the mouth. Large, flat eyes like yellowing disks stared at them.

It was precisely what it claimed to be. Those pottery shards were scales.

A dragon.

“A wise warrior would leave now,” it said as though each word was a new ache. “Do the inhabitants of your world not know to fear my fiery breath?”

“Not a chance,” Sarah whispered to Richard, never turning away from the beast. “That would never work in Earth's context.”

The dragon's head cocked at an angle not entirely unlike that of a curious dog. “You do know of dragons, then. And you know that I am not from here.”

“You're from the recursion of... world of Ardeyn,” Richard said. “We know about it. And about the gateway you came through.”

“We've been there ourselves,” Sarah added.

“Ardeyn, I mean. It’s wonderful.”

This made the dragon choke out a laugh. Richard wasn’t sure he wanted to know why.

“This is the Maker’s World. I came here thinking *it* would be, as you said, wonderful. It is not.”

“Our world has different rules than yours,” Sarah continued. “You didn’t translate here. The path you came though is sometimes called an inapposite gate. Sometimes, a paradox room. If you’re quickened, you translate though, and get a body that works in the context of your new surroundings. If not, you come though physically.”

“Your words don’t all have meaning to me, but the concepts are simple enough. It explains much. What it doesn’t explain is your purpose here. Have you indeed come to slay?”

“No,” Sarah said.

“Not necessarily,” Richard said. The smell of rotting meat was stronger here. Surely, some of the stench came from the beast and his dying body, ravaged by Earth’s physics. But there was more to it than just that. The words *He ate Tom* echoed in his mind.

“Not necessarily,” the dragon repeated. “Such bravery. And do you think you possess the might to do so.”

Richard steadied his pistol with both hands, making sure the dragon could see it, although he realized that the creature might not even know what it was.

“Look,” Sarah said, “we don’t need to be ‘dragon slayers’ here. I’d say you’ve only got a few days left even on your own. We don’t need to kill you. Our world is doing that.”

“Yes,” the dragon whispered.

“And I’m guessing it’s not a pleasant death.”

“No,” the whisper came more softly still.

“Maybe we can help you.”

What? Richard elbowed her arm. She turned to him. “You’ve got the portal cypher,” she whispered.

“You want to rip another hole in the universe just to send this thing home?”

The dragon’s voice grew louder, but coarser. “You wield magic that can send me back to my realm?”

“Sort of. It’s not really magic. Magic doesn’t work here. It’s an object tied to the Strange...” He stopped. Why

in the world was he explaining this to the dragon?

“It doesn’t matter,” Sarah said. “All that matters is that we can send you home. Do you want to go back?”

“Why should I ever want to leave such a paradise?” The dragon said, strained voice dripping with sarcasm. “Here I live in filth, can barely move, and can be condescended to by children about the workings of sorcery.”

“Sarah,” Richard said quietly, teeth clenched, “we should talk about this first.”

“Why?” Sarah whispered back.

“It’s a dragon. It eats people. Terrorizes whole towns. It probably should die.”

“Ah,” it said, “finally words of truth spill from your lips.”

Apparently, the creature’s hearing worked as well as legends said it might, even on Earth.

“No,” Sarah said. “Because I know enough about Ardeyn to know that dragons respect pacts. The dragons all are still bound by the Red Pact that keeps you out of the Citadel of the Harrowing in Kuambis, right?”

The dragon did not reply, but nodded in a very human way, slowly. Reluctantly.

“So you’ll swear a pact now. We’ll send you back to Ardeyn and you’ll swear by the pact of... Jackson Street that you’ll never harm another intelligent being. No more killing humans, or qephelim, or dlamma, or anything that is intelligent and free-willed. I know you need to eat meat to live, but you’ll have to get by on deer or whatever other animals you can hunt. No more destroying villages or farms or anything like that, either.”

The dragon seemed to literally chew over the thought. Finally, it spoke. “I ask for only one stipulation.”

“Here it comes,” Richard said under his breath. His hand tensed on the pistol’s grip.

“There is another dragon. Her name is Merid. I do not want to be pact-bound from giving her all that she deserves.”

Sarah shot a glance at Richard. Even in the dim light, he could see her eyebrows raised in question. Richard shrugged and shook his head.

“Fine.”

“So be it.” If it was possible for a creature to convey a wicked grin through words, Richard thought the dragon did just that.

Richard’s cypher took the form on earth of a bright green plastic ring with a cartoony skull on it—the kind you’d have got as a prize from a cereal box years ago. With a twist, it activated and created an area next to him where the air bent inward, as though a giant finger pushed a hole through it, revealing scintillating light beyond.

The dragon crawled forward with limbs much too thin to support its great bulk. After long, agonizing moments, it reached the light that came from the open hole. It bathed in it. And then finally turned its head back to Richard and Sarah.

“I am most interested in these concepts you spoke of. Translation. Cyphers. And this ‘Strange.’ I shall be investigating them further.” With that, he spread glistening wings like windows of stained glass, pulled a muscular, taught body from the floor as scales quickly grew across pale flesh. Lanky, clawed limbs carried him through the portal, serpentine neck carrying a regal, reptilian head held

high.

“If the Estate gets reports of a dragon flying through the Strange—” Richard began.

“We don’t know anything about it,” Sarah finished.

~

Joy. That was the feeling that surged through regenerated veins in outstretched muscles as my wings took me high over the green hills of Ardeyn.

Joy. Relief. And thoughts of revenge.

Four Winds

by Bruce Cordell

My journal was crowded with the maps of a hundred cramped cave rooms and connected tunnels, notes and diary entries, and several dozen sketches of the crystal formations I had found exploring Melody Cave. My name, Naira Horsecapture, was scrawled in gold ink on the title page. Below that, I'd written *makohloka*, which means cave in the language of my Latoka ancestors.

Normally, I waited until I got home to make an entry into my journal. That day, however, I paused at the cave entrance, pulled out a pen, and recorded my discovery of a chamber I'd never seen before:

2 PM

I extended my exploration of the Crown Gallery today looking for frost work, or the petroglyphs I hope for most. I found a few new formations, but no ancient artwork. When I returned to the surface, I stumbled across a new chamber. I've been that way a hundred times; strange I

didn't notice before. So I'm going to call it the Paradox Room.

No time to check it; my batteries are almost dead. I'm strangely elated, all the same. The grandfathers tell stories about these caves. They talk about one underground room in particular, which comes and goes like things tend to do in legend, a room filled with images of a time when Thunderbird yet hunted the skies and the Lakota still roamed the plains.

They're just stories, but . . . who knows, maybe I'm a day away from finally locating a petroglyph underground, made by Lakota medicine men hundreds of years ago.

Tomorrow, I plan to find out what's inside.

~

My mind whirling with the possibilities, I fumbled the journal as I returned it to my pack. It fell into the deep pool at the cave entrance.

“Holy shit!” I yelled. I fell to my stomach at the water's edge, plunging my arms in to my shoulders. The

cold was shocking, but not as much as watching the sinking journal evade my fingers and fade into the black of the drowned tunnel. It sank into a space too tight for me to follow even if it hadn't been filled with water.

I spent another hour anyway, fishing around the pit, hoping the book would float back up so I could grab it. All I got for my trouble was soaking wet, a chill that set me shivering for hours, and bloodied knuckles. My cave diary was gone.

And with it, everything I'd accomplished since I'd returned to the reservation. When my father died, my mother was inconsolable and needed company. But she wouldn't leave the res to come stay with me, even though I was working on my dissertation at the university.

So I came home, to the res, to live with my mother, to the place I swore I'd only return to *after* I'd obtained my PhD. I'd always claimed, to myself and anyone who asked, that the doctorate wasn't an end itself; it was a way to connect with my past. It's possible that was even true.

Which is why during the first few weeks after my return, I was almost inconsolable myself, until dumb luck

saved me.

Everyone knew about the caves on the res, at least enough to warn kids to stay out. I'd certainly never given them a second thought. But upon returning home, I had a lot of feeling sorry for myself to accomplish, combined with too much time on my hands. On one of my long walks, sounds like someone plinking on a piano drew me to investigate. The noise echoed up from behind a tumble of boulders. There I found the water hole and the cave. I named the place after the "music" the water made as it rose and sank each day.

Finding a new section of unexplored caves inspired me. Maybe I could still obtain my Native American Studies doctorate, but with a different dissertation: I emailed my advisors that I was going to explore the cave systems on the res and bring back definite proof that my ancestors used underground rooms as sacred spaces.

My advisors were doubtful, but I got permission to try. After that, I explored the cave every day. Over the months, Melody Cave became more and more important to me as I gathered clues supporting my PhD dissertation.

The details of which I'd kept in my journal. Without it, I had no record of my exploration, no clues to offer my advisors, nothing to build my thesis from . . . I had no PhD.

I recalled advice I'd received when I first left the university: *Instead of viewing unfortunate events as tragic, we should choose a context in which they become transformational. Loss is a natural part of human existence because it initiates change. Instead of resisting change, we can learn to—*

“Blah, blah, blah, SHIT!” I yelled. First I'd lost Dad, a change no amount of cheap advice was going to make acceptable. Then I'd come back to the res for Mom, which was only bearable because of the cave project. Now that I'd lost the journal, was it really reasonable I could turn to something else? No. I wasn't done yet. “Change” could go chase itself.

I returned to the cave the next morning, determined to make a new start, beginning with the Paradox Room. I had a brand new journal and enough batteries to power my LED flashlight for days.

I paused near the pool where the water comes

gurgling in every morning and out every night. Nope. My lost diary hadn't reappeared on the edge since the day before. That would've been too easy, I suppose. Trailing a few choice obscenities, I entered the cave.

When I got to where the Paradox Room entrance should've been, it wasn't. Maybe a trick of the light hid it, or maybe I was just looking in the wrong place. Multiple times, I tried to find it. Finally, I went all the way to the Crown Room and then headed back toward the entrance, like yesterday, before noticing the opening again: a crawlspace barely large enough to admit me.

Flashlight stretched before me like an offering, I shimmied on my stomach through the cramped opening. The floor was covered with talcum-fine dust that smelled like smoke. The cavern beyond opened up some, and my light showed it as a fairly smooth space, almost like the interior of an eggshell just big enough to hold a grown woman. Standing, my fingertips grazed the rough ceiling, reminding me of sandpaper.

And there, waiting centuries in the dark before that moment, was a simple square symbol scratched into the

stone. At each of the square's corners, a third line branched outward. A petroglyph.

The hair on my neck stood on end and a funny feeling curled in my stomach. Someone had been in the Paradox Room before me. A long, long time ago, perhaps, but there it was. It's exactly what I'd been hoping to find, but the etching unsettled me.

I suspected the petroglyph was a version of Uname, a holy symbol of the land and the winds that blow over the world, indicated by the lines radiating out from each corner.

Excitement gave a tremble to my hands as I traced the design. When I finished, air whistled through the room. The sound of stone sliding on stone vibrated up through my feet.

"Hello?" I said.

My answer came from the symbol itself; it scraped out of the wall and would've fallen if I hadn't caught it. I found myself holding a rock cube. A filigree of repeating, intricate shadow-lines covered all six of its sides.

I stared at it, mouth hanging open in raw amazement. The delicate designs spiraled into ever finer

patterns, seeming to go forever. I couldn't drag my eyes away from following them down and down.

A voice whispered to me while I was rapt, in the language of my past. I couldn't move, couldn't turn away, couldn't shut my ears. I had to listen. I knew little of the language, but somehow had no trouble understanding everything said. The voice echoed from the Paradox Room itself, reminding me of my heritage. Parts I knew, but some was wholly new to me. The voice told me of the creation of the world, the buffalo cycle, and the founding of the Four Directions. It told me of the spirits of the wind, of Thunderbird, the one the Lakota called Wakíya, of life on the plains before the coming of the White Man, and more.

Then the floor dropped out beneath me and I plummeted several feet. Instead of falling onto hard stone, cool grass caught me. What the hell? I groped to my feet again.

I saw a river of stars overhead, each pinprick as bright as Polaris. And there sailed the moon, larger than I'd ever seen her, luminous as a bonfire. Beneath the nightscape, tall hills pressed their silhouettes into the

twilight, and the odor of wildflowers and honey lingered on a night breeze.

Night? Stars?

I'd entered Melody Cave at about nine o'clock in the morning, but my eyes told me that the sun had gone down, *and* I wasn't in the Paradox Room any longer . . .

That realization was difficult to accept, but there it was. I was outside. I must've hit my head and blacked out for a while. Maybe someone had dragged me out of the cave . . . Or maybe I'd hit my head and was *still* hallucinating, because the more I looked around, the more I understood that everything was wrong.

The moon and the brilliant starscape perfectly illuminated the rolling hills spreading away from me on all sides; I was down in some kind of grassy basin. On the hilltops, figures danced silently, ignoring me completely: People in robes, people with no clothes; people with headdresses of feathers, of fur, and of antlers; people whose heads were buffalo, cougars, and crows . . . I glanced away from the heights, shaken.

My outfit was all new, too. Instead of boots,

trousers, shirt, and coat, I now wore moccasins, a robe cut from buffalo hide, and a variety of leather bracelets, necklaces, and similar adornments.

My flashlight, my extra batteries, my normal clothing, even my new journal, were gone. The only thing I had from before was the patterned cube I'd dislodged in the Paradox Room. Now it looked less like a stone cube and more like a lantern made of hide stretched tight over a regular frame. But the words the chamber itself had somehow spoken came back to me, making what I was seeing easier to accept. Though I was confused and scared all the same, because I'd been told something crazy: The Paradox Room was a "portal" to a realm different than Earth. I'd triggered it by entering, like some kind of Native American version of Narnia—

The light dimmed and I glanced up. A shape occluded the stars and the moon, with wings outspread like an eagle's if an eagle were the size of a town. It fixed enormous, hungry eyes on *me*, down in the basin, and screeched. The sound was hunger, thunder, and wrath. I recognized it. *Wak'iyq*. Thunderbird.

I probably screamed then.

The gargantuan thing circled overhead. An unbelievably massive, living, angry thing. With a beak and talons.

During my time caving, I'd avoided drowning, falling, and losing my way underground by not panicking during dangerous moments. Sometimes, when things become ridiculously terrible, it snaps me out of my fear, allowing me to act in the moment.

The same thing happened when Thunderbird dove at me. Plus I had the advantage of instruction from the cube. I don't believe in souls or magic, but *something* in me—that up until that moment had been closed tight as a fist—opened.

Whispered instructions of the Paradox Room matched a sudden intuition. I called on a gift it promised me in that place of night, dancing totems, and thunderous birds.

I lifted my hand and asked the Spirit of the North Wind to save me.

Nothing happened.

Thunderbird folded its wings and dropped out of the sky like an arrow aimed at me. I tried to run, but there wasn't anywhere to—

Mist blew up, white, opaque, and beautiful. It pulled me into hiding. The Spirit of the North Wind had decided to help me after all. Grateful was too pale a word to apply to the surge of emotion charging through me.

Thunderbird's tremendous roar sounded several more times, but I didn't move. I couldn't see through the swaddling mist, and since I hadn't been snatched up and borne away into the night, I presumed it couldn't see me either. That didn't mean I wasn't on the edge of wetting myself in terror. The screeches seemed designed to flush out prey and it took an effort not to bolt each time I heard one.

I managed to sit tight. Frustrated hunting screams grew softer and softer over several minutes, until they became distant thunder. The fog dispersed.

I said, "Thank you." I wasn't sure whom I addressed, but it seemed right.

"Don't thank me, I didn't do anything," a voice

replied.

The last bits of mist evaporated, revealing a man aiming a pistol at my head.

Oh shit, really? “Well. Then . . . I’d *thank you* to point your weapon somewhere else, mister.” I sounded calmer than I felt.

The man grinned. The barrel of his gun didn’t waver. He said, “Not bad. You managed to evade becoming supper as if trained for it. For a shadow, you’ve got some power. And wits.”

The gunman had on jeans, black boots, and a blue coat. Over that he wore a weird metallic harness, studded with winking lights. Sparks jumped and snapped from the harness, sending little trails of smoke up wherever the bolts struck the ground. But the guy didn’t seem to mind.

“Shadow?” was all I managed to say. I’d seen some odd folks on the university campus, but this freak had them all beat. I think it was the gun that put him over the top. Seeing it trained on me made my legs feel like water. “My name’s Naira.”

He said, “Nevermind. Just hand over the cypher and

I'll leave you to it.”

“Cypher?” I said. Fear and confusion made me slow. “All I’ve got is this.” I lifted the cube, which still retained the lantern-like shape it’d taken upon arriving here.

A grin creased his face. “That’s the one. The Four Winds. Give it.”

I didn’t want to give it. So I said, “It’s mine! I found it in a cave near . . .” I trailed off. I had only the vaguest idea where we were now, or where Melody Cave and my home might be in relation.

The man motioned with his gun. “Just put it down and back away. You seem to know what a Colt can do at least, which is more than most shadows around here ever figure out. So don’t make me use it. Not that I care if I end you; you’re not even real. But I don’t want to attract Thunderbird again.”

I couldn’t help myself; my head jerked up and I scanned the sky. No big bird, which was a minor blessing at least. All the dancing figures were gone, too. My assailant and I were alone in this dreamland of native spirits.

Except, that wasn’t true. Wherever this crazy place

was, it knew me, and maybe I could ask for help a second time. I wouldn't mind more mist to hide me.

I took a steadying breath and sent a silent prayer to the Spirit of the North Wind again, letting a hunch guide me. But something different happened. Having acted as I'd pleaded once, the spirit seemed tired, and perhaps a bit annoyed.

I'll do whatever you ask, I whispered, just help me!

Then you must wait, replied the breeze.

But the guy was in a hurry. "Now!" he yelled. I was out of options. So I put down the cube and backed away.

"Just so I know who's robbing me," I said, "how about a name?"

The man motioned me to move farther back. I complied, which put me too far away to rush him, had I been foolish enough to consider it. He bent and retrieved the cube.

"Diego Diamond is my name; it's got kind of a ring to it, doesn't it?"

I gave a half-hearted nod. It sounded made-up to me, like a moniker an online forum troll would take to hide

his identity.

He laughed and said, “Remember it, shadow, maybe it’ll bring you luck.” He stuffed the cube into a satchel, then fiddled with a setting on his iron harness. “But now I bid you *adieu*.”

“*Adieu?* You’re French? Diego doesn’t sound French to me,” I said, trying to stall for time. The spirit had said to wait.

He flipped a switch. The lights on his harness winked in new patterns. I smelled ozone.

Then Diego paused in his adjustments and said, “How do you know about France?”

I said, “I know about France because, duh, the Internet. I don’t know why you think I’m some kind of shadow, but I can assure you I’m as real as you. What I don’t know is what a cypher is, unless it’s that cube you just stole from me. But never mind all that—I get the sense you’re going to leave me here in this lunatic place, and I don’t even know where here is. How about you rethink things and lend a gal a hand?”

Diego was studying me, eyebrows lifted. “You

claim you've got a spark? Or that you're really from Earth, like me? Well, you're screwed if you don't know how you got here. And I kinda hate to tell you this, but you probably won't last long. The Native American gods of this recursion are plenty pissed . . . then again, maybe you'll do alright. You sorta look like you belong here."

"What the hell are you talking about? What's a recursion?" I said, my heart hammering my ribs. "We're not on Earth?" I already knew we weren't, but I hadn't been prepared to hear it said aloud. Everything about this place, starting with my newfound capacity to speak with the wind, screamed that I'd gone far from anything I'd ever known. That, or gone insane.

"Yeah, we're in a recursion seeded by Lakota myths. It's small, but the foundational rules make it dangerous. Not too many recursions allow angry gods to just wander about. Which probably mean things are going to end badly you for. But I've got what I need. In fact, I've pretty much stripped this place of everything valuable."

I understood then. It explained why Thunderbird was hunting the plains. Diego was a goddamned thief, here

to pilfer relics of the Lakota they didn't even know they still possessed. That *we* didn't know *we* still possessed! The warmth of outrage flickered to life inside me.

Diego's mouth continued to run, but he wasn't paying close attention; just enough to keep the pistol loosely aimed. He was concentrating on final adjustments to his harness, which I deduced was a machine for entering and escaping this . . . recursion, and mining it for anything of worth.

Would the Spirit decide to help me before Diego pulled off his theft? I balled my hands into fists. I wondered if I had it in me to risk a bullet stopping him, if the Spirit refused me. It seemed unlikely.

Diego studied one particular array of lights on the harness. One by one, they turned from red to green. "Almost there . . .," he said, his other hand flicking more switches.

"Almost where?" I said, building up my courage to rush him.

He didn't answer. Instead, he slapped a red contact. The harness spat out a circular doorway of tearing energy.

Through the opening, I saw a city. Skyscrapers, cars, people hustling up and down the pavement. It could've been New York, Chicago, Seattle, or some other major city. Only a step away through Diego's technological contraption.

"That's home, shadow. For me, at least," he said, smirking.

A wind out of the North cooled my neck, chasing away the warmer summer evening breeze. It tousled the grass and the man's hair. My breath began to steam, as did my assailant's. I wasn't going to have to rush a gunman after all.

Diego Diamond had time to look up and open his mouth for a question. But the Spirit of the North Wind howled into him with winter's pitiless fury. He stopped moving. As he did, the hole in the air leading back to Earth snapped shut.

Afterward, I couldn't do anything but stare at the man frozen into an icicle before me. I'd done that. Or rather, it'd been done on my behalf; it was on my head. I'd killed someone. All I'd wanted to do was slow him down.

“Damn,” I whispered. I was a murderer, and I felt like retching.

The distant thunder grew louder; it had been for a while. Which meant Thunderbird was returning. I had no time for a crisis of conscience. I had one chance to salvage the situation.

The iron harness peeled off Diego, but only after I toppled him to splinter the ice. I concentrated on not thinking about how cold and brittle was the man’s skin, how vacant his eyes, and how great my culpability.

I also retrieved what he’d called the Four Winds, and the pistol.

The thunder became a scream of a hunting deity spying its prey. The figures had returned to their stations on the rolling hills above me, their dance begun anew.

The Spirit of the North Wind whispered chill in my ear, *You slew the plunderer that was to have been Thunderbird’s sacrifice. Now you must take his place.*

I whispered back, *No sacrifices tonight.* I added to myself, *Goodbye Mom. You’re going to have to try it alone for a while.*

Then I beat the harness against a rock, over and over. The tiny lights shattered and went dark. Electricity bit my fingers. But I kept smashing the harness until it was a bent and mangled wreck.

The gargantuan eagle flung itself out of the sky. I held the broken apparatus over my head, screaming a raw-throated offering. The harness was ripped from my grip, leaving my palms numb. The wind of its passage pressed me to the ground, but Thunderbird winged away, apparently appeased.

Escaping the dead ends of the reservation, getting my PhD, exploring the cave . . . they'd all been second choices. Because my first choice—what I wanted most—wasn't on the table. At least, I hadn't thought so. I'd been wrong.

I went up the hill to meet the dancers, starlight showing the way in the summer night.

About the Authors

Monte Cook has worked as a professional writer for more than 20 years. As a fiction writer, he has published numerous short stories and two novels. As a comic book writer, he has written a limited series for Marvel Comics called *Ptolus: Monte Cook's City by the Spire*, as well as some shorter work. As a nonfiction writer, he has published the wry but informative *Skeptic's Guide to Conspiracies*.

His work, however, as a game designer, is likely most notable. Starting in 1988, he has written hundreds of tabletop roleplaying game books and articles and won numerous awards. Monte is likely best known for D&D 3rd edition, which he co-designed with Jonathan Tweet and Skip Williams. In 2001, he started his own game design studio, Malhavoc Press, and published such notable and award-winning products as *Ptolus*, *Arcana Evolved*, and the *Book of Eldritch Might* series. As a freelance game designer he designed Heroclix and Monte Cook's World of Darkness, and has worked on the Pathfinder RPG, the Marvel Comics massively multiplayer online game, as well as numerous other games and related projects.

In 2012 he founded Monte Cook Games, where he created the hit RPG Numenera and is co-designing The Strange.

Bruce Cordell is Bruce is an award-winning game designer. He's worked on Dungeons & Dragons over the course of 4 editions as a writer and developer (including D&D Next); to date he's written over 100 D&D products, including *Gates of Firestorm Peak*, *Return to the Tomb of Horrors*, *Expedition to Castle Ravenloft*, *Gamma World*, and the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide*.

He's also a novel author. His credits include nine novels, mostly set in the popular Forgotten Realms world. His most recent publication is *Spinner of Lies* (2012), a sequel to the acclaimed novel *Sword of the Gods*. He also wrote the Abolethic trilogy (2008-2010), and several stand-alone novels.

Bruce joined Monte Cook Games in 2013, where he conceptualized and is co-designing The Strange.

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Published in the United States by Monte Cook Games, LLC

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Ply the dizzying ways of the Strange. Explore Ardeyn and Ruk, or delve deeper into Earth's shoals to discover—or even create—deeper, more alien recursions.

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