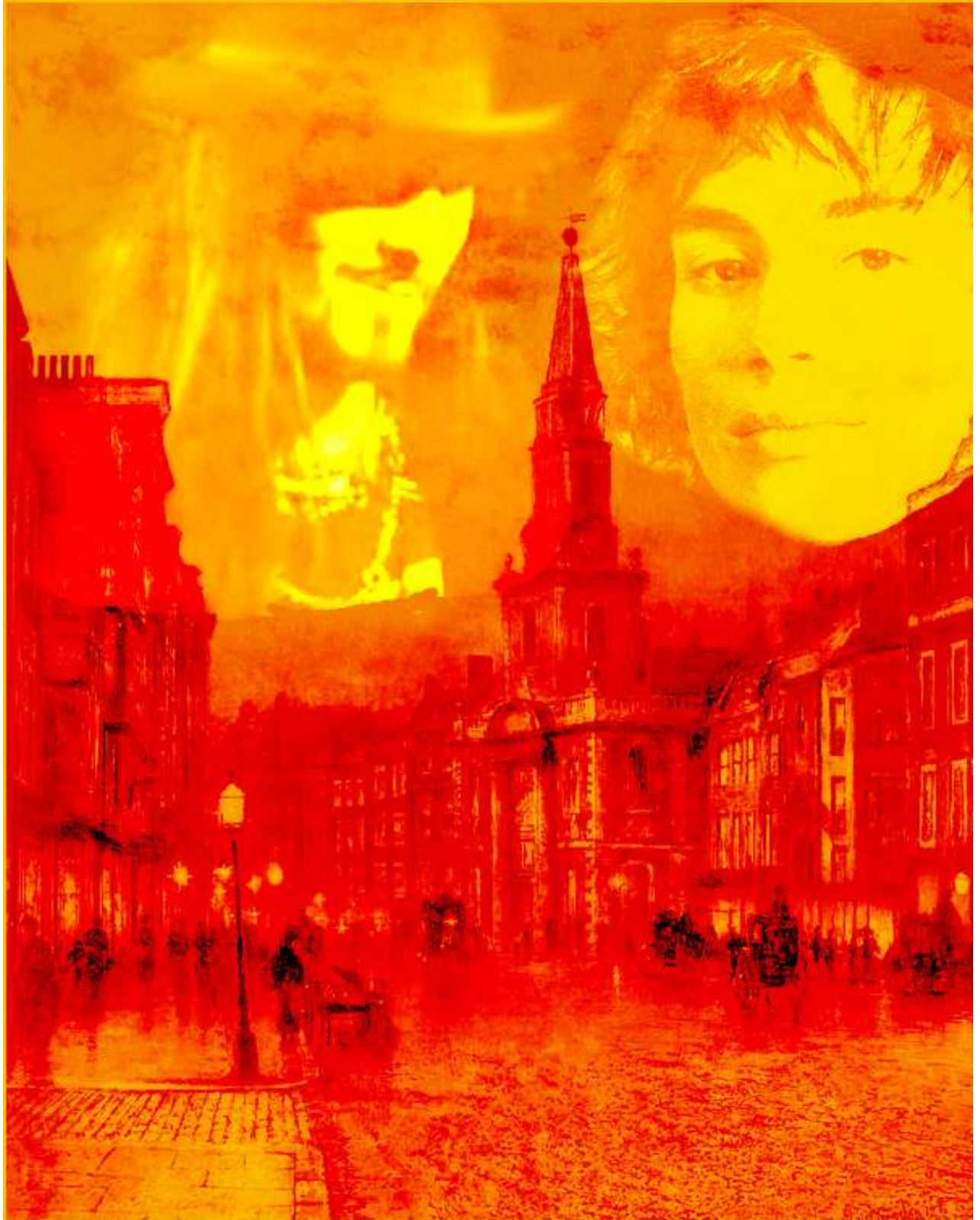


Ars Daemonica



C.C. Williams

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eBook Edition

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I – Beltaine Night

One name ... one simple name was all he needed ... but he had to locate the damned book first!

Turning another dank corner, Melizander followed the greenish light of Doctor Pogue's Heatless Lantern down another grimy, web-hung corridor. For weeks he had searched, poking and prodding the walls and bookcases of Somerset House, until he found what the Royal Society had long kept hidden—an undercroft. A maze filled with discarded ideas, experimental equipment and quite a surprising bit of rubbish. Had he not known better, Melizander would have sworn the warren of storage rooms had been abandoned since Sir Newton chaired the Society.

He entered the next space. Glassware, flasks and retorts, dimly reflected the emerald shine of his light. To the Society's credit the spaces were supremely organized; like with like, each chamber housed a myriad of items, all equally dust-laden. Yet still no books.

But he knew they were here—they had to be. First during his studies at Oxford, then later in his father's notes, he had discerned rumors of the crypt's existence. From bits and pieces, painstakingly garnered over time, those same minutiae had led him inexorably to the conclusion that the Society possessed texts which they kept hidden away—texts, books, tomes, all dealing with forbidden subjects—metaphysics of questionable ethics, grimoires of daemonology, and the like; those were what he sought. One in particular would help to still the chiding, disparaging voice in his head.

Melizander sneezed. The green illumination flickered and went out, plunging him into darkness. *Doctor Pogue's Bloody Worthless Lantern!* Unafraid of man or daemon, he certainly did not fear the dark, however the small chitinous creatures that lived there were another matter. Grumbling about ill-designed power sources, Melizander reached into a pocket for a candle stub and lucifer.

Ashe reclined, relishing the warm, etheric headiness of his cognac as he sank into an exceedingly comfortable leather wingchair. The dry smoke of a tobacco cigar—a new-style thing from some colony called Connecticut—married quite well with the cognac. His father was right—as much as it pained Ashe to admit—London was educational, even to one of Ashe's age.

The Phoenix Club, although a pale offspring of its Hellfire sire, boasted not only some of the finest refreshment to be had in Victoria's Britain but also a great number of Her Majesty's most handsome subjects. Despite their more peculiar interests, the members of the Phoenix men's club were singularly well-bred. He cast a languid eye over the room, making a few selections for later that evening.

Known to the membership as Lord deLancey, Ashe was nothing like his fellow Phoenicians. Not that he was not well-bred—his father was, indeed, a lord—and not that he did not share their interests—he, in fact, could exceed their depravity many-fold; nonetheless, Ashe was different.

He was a daemon.

Not some small spirit like the imps and gremlins whose essence the human artificers stole to power their machines, but a true power, an incubus, a daemon of lust and seduction. His mother, Ashtarte, was a succubus who had tempted the Nazarene in the desert; his father, Lord Nox, was general to Archduke Asmodeus; he, Ashtariel, was their only child. Daemon children were exceedingly rare as female daemons, loath to bear offspring, preferred to steal children's souls and deform them in order to raise them as their own. Ashe's mother had borne him to spite his father. Paradoxically, Nox had taken a liking to him, though Ashe found it difficult to consider his father's interest as anything nearly paternal. It was more an extended self-interest; Nox wanted the best for his seed.

It had been his father's idea that Ashtariel spend time observing humans. That had been some centuries ago—the Middle Ages, in fact—so he had spent more time than his sire had surely intended. But humans were such entertaining—and seductive—creatures.

Ashe laughed, taking another sip of cognac while exchanging glances with the Prime Minister's third son. *Poor boy looked dreadfully hang-dog.* He was almost certainly disappointed that Ashe had left him tied to the bench without bringing him to climax last night, although his ass had reddened quite prettily under Ashe's ministrations. Now the incubus again focused his preternatural attention on the young man, extending his infernal influence over the noble's conscious desire.

The attractive youth arose and left his companions, making his way across the room to stand in front of Ashe. The daemon saw the young man's erection clearly outlined through his trousers. Ashe stubbed out his cigar and rose, leaving the smoking lounge. *Perhaps tonight he would allow William to spend.*

This had to be the one.

Melizander stood before an oaken door; banded with iron, the portal had more locks than Victoria's knickers drawer. To his benefit it also had a nearby bracket with a torch that he coaxed to life with the last of his candle. The torchlight cast gigantic shadows as Melizander pulled out his pouch of picks and probes. Fashioned of iron and bronze, they had been his father's—the last few good things to come from him.

Milos Tristekedes had been a professor of mechanics at Cambridge. Melizander remembered sitting on his father's knee and watching as he deftly drafted plans and schematics, the young child entranced by the beauty of his father's drawings. Then Faraday's machine had split the world and changed the way things worked. And Doctor Tristekedes had changed along with them. Gone was the quiet, introverted scientist; in his place Milos turned hard and driven, obsessed with the new laws of physics. When once Melizander had sat alongside the great man, the younger Tristekedes now avoided the professor. When Melizander's mother grew sick and died, his father grew even quicker with back-handed reprimands and more fluent with snide disapproval.

Not always fast enough to evade his father's increasingly frequent rages, Melizander had taken to hiding in their garden shed, until Milos found him there and locked him in. His refuge now a prison, Melizander, trapped in the darkness with his budding hatred and the unseen crawly things, had brooded over his father's censure. Three nights later, his maternal grandfather, Lord Wollstone-Croft, had found him huddled in the dark, dirty and cold.

The two older men had yelled and screamed at each other in Milos' study, their angry voices rising through the old house. Milos' strident tenor battled with the bass notes of Lord Croft, while Melizander sat in a bath, the gray, scummy water cooling around him. The next day Melizander had left with his grandfather for Eton. He remembered looking back to see his father in shirtsleeves and a stained waistcoat, standing at the garden gate, fists clenched, as their carriage steamed away. That was the last time Melizander had seen his father alive.

Melizander fingered the slim tools; despite having been in his pocket, the metal implements were cold to his touch. He focused in the shifting illumination, studying the padlocks and clasps. These were no ordinary locks. Bronze and iron, inlaid with silver and gold, they had been specifically designed to be proof against daemons. Surely his goal lay just beyond this last obstacle. His tools arranged on the stone, Melizander set to opening the numerous locks.

William, bound and gagged, hung suspended from a rack of chains in one of the club's many private rooms. Ashtariel rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck, savoring the tension in his muscles. Though a daemon, he now possessed a corporeal body, subject to physical stress and strain—and arousal. He stood forth arrogantly as he took in the first bit of his evening's handiwork. William watched expectantly, patiently submissive, awaiting Ashe's attention.

Ashe walked towards the wall and its rack of diverse implements. "What's your pleasure, my young friend?" He fingered a light suede flogger. "Shall we start softly or ..." Ashe ran his hand across the equipment "... move directly to the evening's serious business?" His hand fell upon a vicious looking cat o' nine. William whimpered; the sound rife with need and desire.

The daemon's heart began to race as he considered how to fulfill the young man. The infliction of pain satisfied a primal craving of Ashe's daemoniac self, yet the gratification of the lordling's need held even greater contentment for Ashe himself. And therein lay his fundamental paradox: he cared for those who submitted to him, wanted to alleviate their latent suffering through pain and submission—a desire which was anathema to a true daemon for whom hurt and suffering alone were the goals. Pushing aside his philosophic challenge for the moment, Ashe selected the flail and turned back to William whose eyes grew wide with anticipation.

Softly the daemon stroked the tails down the young man's back and along his buttocks. Pale gooseflesh rose to greet the leather knots. Their bits of bright metal caught and reflected the light of the numerous candles. Ashe drew back his arm and let fly with the whip. "Let us begin."

Lightly manipulating the small bronze pick, Melizander felt more than heard the *snick* of the last lock. He blew out the breath he had been unconsciously holding. A thrill of anticipation filled the artificer's chest as he lifted the final hasp. He hauled on the iron-bound door; hinges groaned and creaked, filling the darkness with their protests. Slowly the

entry widened; stale, dusty air wafted into Melizander's face. Musty and papery, the dry atmosphere made him sneeze again. His faulty lantern flickered in sympathetic response.

Afraid of risking a flame near the books, he shook the lantern which flared to life again. The green glow preceded Melizander into the room. *Bloody hell!* More a closet than an actual room, the space was stuffed full from floor to ceiling. Shelves lined the walls, overflowing with scrolls, papyri and books of all shapes and sizes. The artificer caught his breath, overwhelmed by the sheer volume of materials. He had expected to find numerous works, yet nothing like this. It was as if the library of Alexandria had been stuffed in a broom cupboard!

His time was growing short. Clearing a pile of crumbled papyrus, Melizander set the lantern on a shelf and began to search through the documents. Treatises on mathematics, astronomical maps, alchemical discourses, many of which Melizander would have given an eyetooth to read fully, were quickly tossed aside as he rooted through the masses of compiled erudition. A small pamphlet caught his eye. *On thie Subjegaytion ov Daemonickal Enttities*. Not what he sought, but it might be of use. Melizander placed it in his satchel and continued his exploration.

Coated in dust and flecks of vellum, Melizander finally scanned through the last book. Nothing! Frustration welled in his gut. *It had to be here! It had to be!* He couldn't be wrong—for years he had searched—everything pointed to the Society having the codex. He had to be in the correct place. Otherwise, his father would have been right—and that was unacceptable. Milos' voice, cool and clipped, played in his memory, "No such effect is possible, because there is limited potential. Stronger powers cannot be employed as there is no manner by which to harness their essences."

Mechanists were all so purely scientific and narrow. Melizander believed—no, knew—it was possible to create larger, more complex machines, machines that would accomplish marvelous things. If he could make use of highly developed daemonic essences. To obtain those he needed to resort to daemonology—for what had once been black magic was now commonplace and would be his guide to proving his father wrong. But only if he found the book.

Ashtariel held William close as the young man screamed, releasing his pent-up need. The nobleman had been resistant and had determinedly withheld his surrender, believing his silence proved his strength. But Ashe had known better; employing skills and powers, both physical and supernatural, strove to provide William true liberation. Ultimately the young man let go his repressed desires and actually submitted, gave in to what he required of himself. Now the lordling's cries subsided to hiccoughy moans, and Ashe stroked William's brow. "Good boy, but such resistance is not necessary." As a reward he would allow William to—Ashe felt a sudden tingling along his spine.

A whiff of brimstone preceded the draft of air that fluttered the candles, as someone—or something—materialized in the room. The daemon quickly pressed a hand to William's head, urging him to sleep. A dark mass of shadows grew in the corner, stealing the light of the candles, and coalesced, taking on form and substance. Ashtariel recognized the armorial insignia of Decimus, his father's adjutant.

"*Ave, Domine Ashtariel!*" The daemon lieutenant saluted then leered at the naked youth asleep beside Ashe. "*Video tē esse occupatus.*"

"Of course, I'm busy, you great oaf!" Ashe hissed at the interloper, who in his mortal life had been a Roman general responsible for one or two small incidents of genocide. "What's the meaning of simply appearing unannounced like that?"

"Your father sent me. He wishes to see you."

Ashe let out a very human sigh. He did not wish to meet with Lord Nox; his father was always demanding and his demands could be so ... well ... so infernal. But putting him off would only exacerbate the difficulty of the eventual conversation. "Very well." He rose from the bed. "I shall make a brief appearance in Dis."

Decimus continued to eye William. "If you would like, I can keep your pet occupied while you are away."

"He is not a pet, and I would *like* that he remain alive, so I will most certainly *not* leave you with him!" Ashe flicked a hand and a blanket appeared, covering William.

Decimus snorted in disgust. "It is abhorrent how you care for these mortals. You—"

"Enough!" Ashtariel held up a hand that now sported long talons, hard and shiny like chips of obsidian. "Do not begin to presume, Decimus." Ashe stepped away from the young human and rolled his shoulders, stretching as the air about him began to shimmer, and revealed large wings, glossy-dark and raven-like. He unfurled them, reveling in the almost forgotten, yet oddly comforting, feel of his true physical form. "Let's get this over with."

The two daemons disappeared with a soft *pop*, as William slumbered unaware of his brush with Hades.

Frustration and disappointment pounded at the artificer's brain. With a groan Melizander lay back, the rough stone tiles poking at his shoulder blades. Resting his head on a forearm, he reconsidered his thought process. *Something is amiss*. But what? There were no other rooms; he had been through all of them. The book room had been the most heavily warded, which served no purpose if *the* book was not here. There had been no evidence of tampering—the locks had been pristine—so no one had stolen it before him. So, the logical conclusion was that it was here—and he had simply not found it ... yet.

From his position on the floor, Melizander ran his gaze over the small space, finally taking a long look at the ceiling. The stones were oddly shaped and strangely arranged, seemingly pieced together from random bits rather than the uniform pieces which characterized the rest of the construction. Rolling to his knees, Melizander grabbed the lantern and crawled out into the passage to examine its roofing. *Yes! The closet's was different!*

Reenergized, the artificer climbed the shelves, kicking aside scrolls and tracts. He wedged himself against the topmost shelf and began to poke and prod at the ceiling. Nothing moved ... not an inch, not a hair. *Damn!* He brushed away cobwebs, hoping to see some mark or clue, but the stones were unmarked. Nor, however, were they even, which struck Melizander as odd for such an otherwise well-executed construction.

He pulled the lamp nearer and that was when he noticed the shadow. The oblique illumination cast the shape of the numeral 3 against the adjacent stones. *Three? What could that possibly mean?* There were three sides to a triangle; three states of matter: solid, liquid, and gas; three primary colors: red, green, and blue; all sorts of triads. He needed some—any—context.

Melizander panned the light to the left and found nothing. Moving to the right, the light revealed a 1 and a 4. *314? Or ... 3 plus 1 equaled 4!* What type a clue was that? He still needed more.

Further along his lamp revealed another 1, a 5, followed by a 9, then nothing more. So ... what did he have? 3 ... 1 ... 4 ... 1 ... 5 ... 9. *Could they mean 314,159?* That did not appear to be meaningful. A series maybe? 3 plus 1 did equal 4, but 1 plus 4 equaled 5, not 1. So, not a series. Although the next group did make sense since 4 plus 1 equaled 5. And 4 plus 5 would equal 9. But how did any of that relate?

Maybe ... 31, 41, 59? Again, nonsense. 314, 159? Close—if it were 314, 157.

Melizander racked his brain. *Something* about the group of numerals was familiar. Then it hit him. Pi! The ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter! *3 point 1 4 1 5 9!* He needed a decimal point!

Quickly Melizander repositioned the lamp and looked for a shadow dot. There was none. But that had to be the clue—he was sure of it. Proceeding in a regular fashion, the artificer firmly pressed each tiled piece between the 3 and the 1. Finally, with a soft *snick*, one stone gave way, sliding upward as part of a larger panel. The section of ceiling swiveled to the side to reveal a compartment above the closet. Melizander shook his head. Secrets hidden within riddles wrapped in mysteries.

The thick oily waters of Acheron lay behind them as Ashtariel and Decimus passed over the countless, black metal tombs of the heretics. Before them stretched the Iron City of Dis, sprawled across the fiery landscape like an ancient whore upon a rocky couch. An ebony phallus pierced the blood-red horizon; the Archduke's Iron Tower, dominating the skyline, was visible from every corner of this plane. The daemons' goal lay not there but at the white marble palace of Lord Nox. Ashtariel laughed to himself as they landed before the mausoleum-like structure: Humans associated the color white with purity. *They should see this place*. Ashe's ancestral home was the pasty white of maggots, the bloodless, pale hue of dead flesh.

Unquestioned, Ashtariel and his escort strode through the corridors to Nox' war room, the most likely place to find his sire. Passing between great oak doors, they found Nox seated at a large granite table surrounded by his lieutenants. While Decimus stopped and saluted, Ashtariel strode forward.

"Greetings, Father! How have you decided to interfere in my life now?"

The general glanced at his officers and nodded toward the doors. "Leave us!" Nox rose from his chair and walked to the window that overlooked the ash-colored city. "Discourteous and headstrong, as usual. You are such your mother's child."

"How is Mother by the by?"

"The whore has taken up with Asmodeus! May she gag on his gigantic black prick! Which, given her more than adequate skills, is unlikely. Hah!"

Ashtariel was accustomed to his parents' volatile and ever-changing relationship. Rarely were their words to or of each other kind. "So she is well." The younger daemon joined his sire at the window. Dis spread before them; in the distance Ashtariel discerned Charon's ferry plying its way along the slow-moving, fetid Styx. The vista depressed him.

Nox clasped his hands behind his back and addressed the landscape. "I have decided that it is time for you to advance your training. You have dallied enough amongst the hu—"

"Dallied?" Ashe interrupted. "I am an incubus! It is my purview to incite lust and perversion!"

"You are a Prince of Hell and should make your mark upon the world!" The general turned to glare at his quarrelsome progeny. "Not simply fuck your way through the mortal populace!"

Ashtariel met his father's gaze, refusing to back down. "You are hardly one to criticize the amount of my fucking! You have lain with every hole in Dis—and then some!"

"Yes, I have! Yet I have never claimed that as an achievement! It is simply entertainment." Nox moved to the council table and picked up a stack of vellum sheets, allowing each of them to drift onto the slab as he enumerated their contents to Ashtariel. "There are a great many events in the works—disasters, discord, even an assassination or two!" He held one sheet up and gestured with it. "The British colonies alone are sixty years over-due for a revolution! If that fool Revere had not fallen and broken his neck, they would be on schedule!" He added the sheet to its fellows. "Each and every one ready to be led by someone with drive and ambition—someone like my offspring!"

"Offspring!" Ashtariel crossed his arms and leaned arrogantly against the window frame. "Not your son?"

"You know what I mean—do not mince words with me! It is time you take your place within the hierarchy. I have pampered you too much already, allowing you to frolic about like some imp." The general strode away from Ashe, pacing about the war room. "If I cannot control my household, how can I be trusted to control my legions?" He turned to face Ashe. "Should this farce continue, I shall be the laughingstock of the nine planes!"

"Again, this has not an iota to do with me," Ashtariel fired back, pushing away from the sill, "but everything to do with you!" The young daemon strode toward the entry. "I am tired of listening to *your* plans for *me*!"

"Ash—"

"When you want to hear about *my* plans for *me*—"Ashtariel pulled open the great oaken doors"—come and find me—"he slammed the door"—yourself!" The corridor resounded with the satisfying *crash* as he strode out of the palace.

Melizander studied the square casket, brushed free of its coat of grime. Heavily carved and dark with age, the wooden box had been nestled among dust and cobwebs in its space above the ceiling. Melizander's hands shook as he reached to open the container. The lid squealed, echoing sharply in the subterranean darkness.

Inside rested not only a large book but also a velvet bag. Lifting the bag, Melizander heard metallic clinks. Curious, he opened the bag and poured out a shiny pile of silver—what looked to be variously sized and shaped beads. Further investigation and untangling showed they were strung together; three strands of silver beads—some round, some tubular, some circular, some with strange spikes—all arranged to form a sort of ...? *What?* The jewelry—if that is what it was—appeared too small to be a belt and too large and bulky for a bracelet. So necklace it was.

The artificer examined the necklace. At each end the strands were attached to two points where there were hooks, forming three increasingly larger parabolas. The piece was odd, yet striking, and affected Melizander on a visceral level. There was power here. He could feel it like a hum along his nerves, a scratching at his inner ear.

Somewhat unnerved, Melizander returned the piece to the bag and stowed it again in the box, turning his attention to the book. Leather bound and strapped with iron clasps, the tome dimly reflected the green light of his lantern. Gilt lettering spelled out the title he had so dearly sought: *Codica daemonica mechanica*. Written in 1433 by Antoine DeFourier, a defrocked priest, the codex was the first grimoire to posit the use of daemonic essence; moreover, it was rumored to be a veritably incontrovertible manual for daemon hunting. Melizander stroked the edges of the cover, unable to believe how fortunate he was, how close he was to achieving his dream. Granted there was still significant work to be accomplished, but now the dream lay within reach, had become real, concrete.

Having replaced the box's lid, Melizander locked the room and retraced his steps through the dusty cellar. Doctor Pogue's lamp flickered, fitfully lighting Melizander's retreat, as the artificer hurried to leave the crypt with its crawling denizens behind.

Ashtariel returned not to the Phoenix but to his townhouse. The house was elegant and well-appointed, as suited one of "Lord deLancey's" station, furnished in the latest style. The occasional spasm of objectivity forced him to admit a certain curiosity in a demon maintaining a household, particularly one in posh Chelsea. But it suited Ashe. He liked being part of the daily comings and goings of the neighborhood, the nannies parading their prams up and down the street, the children playing games in the small park in the center of the square.

Materializing in the parlor, Ashe reclaimed his human appearance as he did so. He had dismissed the staff prior to departing for the club, so the house sat quietly around him, welcoming in its normalcy after the all too hellish environment of Dis. A niggling doubt crawled around inside him. *Maybe there was something to what Father said.* Maybe he had become too attached to humans, too distanced from what he ought to be. *No!* He was not going to succumb to his father's view of the world and he was certainly not going to roll over and kowtow to his demands. He was his own master and would make his own way in the world.

The young daemon reflected on Lord Nox' words. It was not an unreasonable thing that the general should want him to be successful, although his father's definition of success would perhaps differ from his own. Perhaps there was a middle ground ... some way to be himself ... and still show his father that he was worthy of his legacy. He would have to think on that. Perhaps planning for the future was not such a bad thing.

Finally casting off the last unpleasantness of visiting his father, Ashe headed upstairs. If he hurried, he could still attend the Prince of Wales' ball tonight.

II – Lammas Night

Melizander slammed his notebook shut and pushed away the pile of papers. *Triple bloody damnation!* Three months had passed as he translated the French monk's Latin scribbling and in spite of everything he had nothing to show but garbled rubbish! *Fourier's babbling was worse than reading Nostradamus!*

He fingered the silver around his neck. The only promising result so far concerned the odd necklace: it indeed was meant to accompany the book. It acted as some sort of talisman for dealing with daemons. What it could do and how to use it remained mysteries, but its presence felt right to Melizander.

The artificer shoved his chair away from the desk and, standing, paced about his study only to stop and stare out the window. He felt trapped. Now that he had found the book there was no going back—no way to unring the bell, to put the genie back in the bottle—but he was making no headway. He covered the distance from window to hearth. He was snared, stuck in a limbo of Latin riddles.

His gaze fell on a small bronze box on the mantelpiece.

No! He had sworn that off.

Yet, seemingly of its own accord, his hand flipped up the lid.

Of course, it was there, resting on its bed of black velvet. When Grandfather had died, Uncle James received the title and Melizander had gotten *this*. Somehow Grandfather had recognized a kindred spirit—they had never talked about anything even remotely related to it—yet Grandfather had known. It glowed in the study's lamplight. Melizander softly traced the head of the bird that rose from the stylized flames that formed the bow. The shank of the key was engraved in a woven design, resembling the handle of a whip. He shivered.

Melizander had frequented the Club, availing himself of its ... services, to escape the tyranny of his own thoughts. At first it had been exciting in its newness, thrilling, forbidden. Then the visits had become riskier and even more taboo, spiraling into a moral darkness, an abyss of inhumanity. He had grown to crave the pain for the pain itself—it had become an addiction—a remedy for the pain over which he had no control. When Milos had died, that hurt—and his accumulated shame—had kept his compulsion at bay. Until now.

He raised his face to the mirror above the mantle, and his eyes met the dark eyes of his pale reflection. Shadowy circles of fatigue smudged his complexion, made to look even paler by his black goatee. He needed to shave and bathe before he betrayed himself.

Ashe's carriage chugged and sputtered as his driver braked beneath the Club's porte-cochere while a liveried footman, outfitted in the characteristic red and gold, trotted forward to open his door. Thin insipid tendrils of fog clung to the lamps that bordered the main entry. Hunched inside his greatcoat, Ashe avoided the oily puddles of leftover rainwater.

Beyond the entrance a small number of members milled about a late supper buffet, while others lounged or conversed in small groups. Retrieving a snifter of Armagnac from the bar, Ashe mingled, shaking hands and seeking interest for later in the evening.

"DeLancey, old boy!" a senior minister of the Exchequer called out. At the Phoenix there were no titles, all were equals. "It has been aeons since we last saw you—and you missed my dinner party!"

"Philberry, you exaggerate grossly!" Ashe gripped the fleshy palm; exaggeration was not the only gross aspect of Lord Philberry. "It has been hardly a month. I do apologize, though—I had business in Constantinople."

"Another time then, my boy!" The minister puffed copiously on a cigar. He glanced left, then right, and spoke to Ashe in an overstated stage whisper. "Have you heard tonight's news?"

"I cannot say that I have." Ashe could just imagine what petty drama or intrigue had infatuated the old pederast.

"Xander has returned." The old man nodded knowingly.

"Who?"

"Xander ... you know ..." Philberry scowled at Ashe. "Atherton's little pain slut."

Ashe knew of Percy Atherton, a cruel little man more sadist than Dom, but this Xander was unknown to him. Although someone who endured Atherton—repeatedly, according to the minister—certainly piqued Ashe's interest. Young William had taken a commission in the Royal Navy and left London—and Ashe—behind.

"Perhaps you should introduce us."

"If you promise to share." Philberry smirked and licked his flabby lips; the old lech was a notorious voyeur. "Come along—he has challenged Staunton to a chess match."

The pair walked to the club's game room where a small group had gathered to observe the players. As they neared the table, gooseflesh rose on Ashe's arms; a sense of danger prickled along his spine, like a chill wind. There was magic—powerful thaumaturgy—in the room; although it felt strangely vague and unfocused.

Ashe nudged forward to better view the chessmen. Staunton's immaculate figure hunched forward over the board as he considered what appeared as a weak position for his king. His opponent was strikingly handsome: lengthy dark hair, pulled into an unconventional queue, swept back from a long, pale face with strong cheekbones and a neat goatee. The young man's brow beetled as he watched Staunton interpose a pawn. Steepling his fingers, Xander tapped his chin and whistled softly through his teeth before deftly moving a bishop to capture Staunton's lone, remaining knight. "Check ... and mate."

Staunton briefly contemplated the pieces then tipped his king in resignation. "Well played, my friend."

"You are gracious, sir. It was more luck than skill."

Philberry barged forward, pulling the young man from the table. "Nonsense, my boy, you are very skilled! But come, here is someone you must meet—I would like to acquaint you with Asher deLancey."

The darkly attractive man gripped Ashe's extended hand, sending a shock along his arm. He was the source of the magic! Refusing to show any weakness, Ashe shook hands and met the man's brooding gaze.

"A pleasure, Mister DeLancey." A wide charming smile brightened the man's face. "I am Xander Tristekedes."

Melizander's breath caught in his chest and he stood entranced: Asher deLancey had the face of an angel. *No*, he thought, *his was the rich, heavy-lidded beauty of Caravaggio's Saint John—chaste, yet sensual*. However, Melizander could tell this man was no saint—and certainly not chaste. DeLancey's eyes had taken his measure, undressing him, as Minister Philberry introduced them. *In truth I would not mind his taking my clothes off!*

"The pleasure is entirely mine." DeLancey's voice was a rich tenor with dark undertones. "Join me for a drink."

Melizander nodded his assent and followed Asher to the lounge. There, each armed with a brandy, they had engaged in small talk, bandying anecdotes and quips, appraising one another. The artificer found the lord charming and articulate, not nearly as shallow or vain as his stylish appearance would have suggested.

DeLancey questioned him relentlessly, almost to the bounds of the Phoenix' quite relaxed sense of propriety, wanting to know about his parents, his education, his profession. All but the last Melizander answered honestly. Abashed by his inability to make sense of Fourier's text and disconcerted somewhat by Asher's intense interest, he lied, saying he was at leisure thanks to his grandfather's bequest.

As best he could, Melizander interjected his own questions. DeLancey, however, seemed immune to discussing himself, giving short, almost terse, answers. This quirk of humility appealed to Melizander; too often the men he met were enthralled with their own successes or failures, regaling him with stories that held little interest for him. He tried steering the conversation to the arts and literature; deLancey was well-read and evinced great taste in music, but always returned the focus to what Melizander thought or felt.

The intense scrutiny made Melizander both slightly uncomfortable and exceedingly flattered. It had been a great while since a man had taken such interest in him.

Asher called for more brandy.

Melizander found himself following the movements of Asher's mouth, less than the words it spoke. He wanted to taste him, to drink the brandy from his lips. He was growing hard in his trousers. Somewhere he had lost the trail of the conversation.

Another round came. Melizander's eyes traced the reflection of the lamps along the curls of Asher's hair; he was particularly intrigued by where it curled over his collar along his neck. He yearned to place a kiss ... just ... so ...

Suddenly deLancey got down to brass tacks: "I want you—now!" His words slurred slightly ... or maybe it was Melizander's hearing.

"The Club has rooms—" Shame clawed at his guts.

"No! Let's go someplace less ... formal."

Melizander wanted to be with Asher—alone. "Then let us go to my house."

"Very well. My carriage is outside—I'm taking you home."

Ashe was drunk. Literally.

Never in two thousand years had he been intoxicated by liquor. It simply did not affect him—he was a daemon after all. But now his thoughts were muddled, his tongue fuzzy, and his legs unable to support him well.

Seeing Xander Tristekedes had set off something within Ashe's brain. Feeling that occult tingle had made him curious to find out everything he could about the young mortal. But that magical aura had nullified Ashe's daemonic powers: he had attempted to exert his influence upon him—to no avail. Nor could he discern the man's thoughts. Tristekedes was somehow protected.

Robbed of his advantage and determined to discover the source of the protection, Ashe had quickly decided to invite the young man to share a drink, then resorted to old-fashioned charm and seduction. Xander had been seductive and charming in his own right; his disarming smile would occasionally appear to chase away the dour, serious expression that seemed his usual mien. He had a genuine quality to his character that fascinated Ashe; it called to some jaded piece of his psyche. Fortright and honest, the mortal had good-naturedly answered Ashe's barrage of interrogation. Even revealing the estranged relationship he had shared with his father. *I'm not the only one with a difficult sire.*

Xander had tried valiantly to turn the conversation away to more mundane topics, but Ashe had persisted. *And learned nothing about how he resisted my powers.* Not that the daemon had expected him to admit to being a great wizard. A wizard who just happened to stumble into the Phoenix Club. Ashe snickered at his own humor.

The additional alcohol should only have loosened Xander's tongue, not befuddled Ashe's mind. But rather than remaining focused he had become increasingly distracted by the dark, handsome human across from him. Ashe was certainly no stranger to attractive men, but there was an enigma to Mister Tristekedes. A riddle hiding behind those dark, liquid eyes that Ashe wanted to swim in. A puzzle concealed by long, nimble fingers that had toyed with the stem of the brandy snifter. Ashe imagined those fingers on his skin and shivered. Too late he had realized what was happening; too soon he had succumbed to his desire for the mystery man.

Reining in his wayward senses, Ashe escorted Xander to his waiting carriage. The night air was cool and rain-washed, helping to clear Ashe's head. Xander stumbled and clung to Ashe's arm. The mortal's eyes widened as he took in the state-of-the-art daemon-steam carriage. An attentive footman helped them into the rear compartment.

Ensnared in the richly decorated box, Ashe flicked on a lamp and studied his guest. Xander was closely examining the interior, running his fingers across the upholstery; his gaze fell on the lamp and he motioned at it. "Those are bloody worthless ... poor power design."

"Screw the bloody lamp!"

Ashe pulled Xander into his arms and claimed the young man's lips with his mouth. Xander's lips were lush and insistent, tasting of brandy and smoke. He held the mortal firmly, pressed close against his wiry frame; the contact thrilled Ashe, his heart racing in his chest. Xander raised his hands and buried them in Ashe's hair, trying to pull him even closer.

As the carriage chugged through the quiet London streets, Ashe rolled them across the bench, coming to rest atop his thighs. He wanted to touch Xander, feel his skin against his own. Releasing the embrace, he scrabbled at Xander's clothes, untying his cravat and fumbling at the buttons of his waistcoat. He disposed of the tie over his shoulder and turned his attention to the studs of the young mortal's shirt. Frustrated, he simply tore open the clothing; one or two of the studs glinted in the lamplight as they sailed across the compartment.

Ashtariel gasped. Hard and cold in the green light, three strands of silver beads shone against Xander's chest. *A treminae!* He had heard of such things, read about them in scrolls, but they had passed from human knowledge centuries ago. No wonder Xander—or whatever his name was—had such powerful protection. This man was a daemonolator!

The shock of the discovery had driven the last of the liquor from Ashtariel's brain. In its place sprouted the germ of an idea—the perfect thing to present to his father and prove his ambition—a real live daemon-hunter! Ashe laughed at his own ingenuity.

"What's wrong?" Xander mumbled.

"Nothing, my precious." He leaned in and kissed the handsome daemon-hunter. "Nothing at all." He simply had to circumvent the most powerful magic he had ever encountered.

Melizander awoke in his own bed, squinting in the pale light that struggled through the window. He reached to the side. *Of course it was empty.* He remembered Ashe leaving in the wee hours of the morning. That was not his only memory:

He recalled his fingers coiled in Ashe's hair, the full dark curls like silk in his hands; Ashe's hands and mouth as they covered his body with soft, moist caresses; his body quickening when Ashe's mouth took him to the root, drawing his climax from him like molten lead. He remembered the scent of Ashe's skin, redolent of cinnamon and cloves, and the taste of the lord's seed as it sprayed across his face, suffusing his senses with a briny masculinity. He recollected the soft warmth as they lay together, their bodies recovering from the stress, their fingers intertwined and stroking.

But a darkness clouded the memory. Ashe had been clearly disconcerted by the necklace. Melizander, fingers numb and awkward in his intoxication, had been unable to open the clasp and remove the piece. During their lovemaking, Lord deLancey had avoided touching the strange jewelry. Regret niggled at Melizander. *He must think me odd and foolish.*

Strangely, the artificer felt no ill effects from too much brandy and too little sleep. In fact, he felt more clear-headed than he had in weeks. Stretching mightily, he rolled over and spied the calling card propped against the bedside lamp. It was Asher's; he had penned *At your service, A.* along its margin.

Melizander smiled. *I am not so foolish after all.*

He enjoyed another great stretch and then padded to make his morning toilet. It was going to be a wonderful day!

III – All Hallow's Eve

Ashe looked about his dungeon—all was in readiness. Beneath the banal perversity of his usual equipment lurked a deeper secret, the culmination of extensive research, the result of numerous called-in favors—both on the mortal plane and the Nine Hells. The entire room had been rebuilt from the ground up. What on the surface looked to be a typical playroom with its bench and chains, a thorough selection of ropes, whips and other implements was in actuality a three-dimensional binding. A binding designed to cancel out the considerable power of the *treminae* and to immobilize its master, Melizander Tristekedes.

For two months Ashtariel had courted Xander, enjoying his company and encouraging his obvious attraction; all the while avoiding any contact with his bloody silver necklace. In the last month the man he had met as Xander had at last revealed his real name. Ashe smiled at his success; seducing Melizander and gaining the daemon-hunter's trust had hardly been unpleasant or distasteful. Ultimately, that trust and Melizander's native honesty had led the young mortal to tell his tale of degradation and notoriety at the hands of the Phoenix master, Percy Atherton. The story had aroused both Ashe's anger and his flesh. Sensitive to Ashe's physical excitement, Melizander had agreed to take their relationship to the next stage, playing further into Ashe's trap.

Now, standing in the middle of that trap and mindful of his ultimate goal, Ashe again had to quash his anger at Atherton's insensitivity. With not insignificant guilt, he also quashed his pity for Melizander's humiliation. His feelings for Melizander could carry no weight against his father's approbation.

Excitement thrilled through Melizander. He had finally broken the riddle of the codex!

The necklace—called a *treminae*—seemed to thrum powerfully, recognizing its name. The silver piece was a potent talisman, hidden for centuries, which would protect him from daemonic influences. As well, he had learned that the *treminae* could be used to call daemons, as well as to bind and command them. The codex was a compendium of complex rituals to utilize the various properties of the charm.

Now that he had concrete results, he could be completely honest with Asher and tell him the full truth. The months of having to obfuscate and dodge Ashe's interest in parts of his life had been tiring to Melizander's conscience and trying to his sense of honor. Ashe's attentions had garnered his trust, something he held close and dear. He had already disclosed his embarrassing association with the Phoenix Club, which Ashe had taken easily in stride. But as far as the book was concerned he had needed to be able to say, "Here is my proof!"

Melizander smiled. Never had he imagined he would gain two great gifts at the same time—a man who loved him and success in his dearest dream—yet he had them both; and Asher deLancey was to thank. Since meeting Ashe, he had made great strides in deciphering the book; it was as if Ashe's presence in his life had unlocked something within him, some source of inspiration and insight. Ashe had also unlocked pleasure in Melizander's life, given back to him, clean and clear, something that had been sullied and dark. Anticipation filled him as he thought of the bright future that lay ahead for him and Ashe.

Calling for Philips, he sent a note to Ashe, accepting his invitation to dinner that night.

Sending the young boy away with a ha'penny, Ashe quickly tore open the envelope and scanned its contents. Xander—in the small quiet place in his heart, he still thought of him by that name—had accepted his invitation to dinner, ostensibly to meet his parents. Ironically, Ashe had invited his father, not to dinner, but to make peace between them by offering him a full-fledged daemon-hunter.

Ambivalence tore at his conscience, torturing him with a pain no rack could match. As cruel as Ashe had ever been, this trap seemed ever so much more daemonic. He laughed a bitter chuckle. *Father will be so proud.* But at what price? Tristekedes was a daemonolator, his life forfeit simply due to what he was. A small part of him screamed, *but Xander was so much more! Honorable, caring and trustworthy!* Qualities that Ashe had apparently left at the door.

No matter how honorable Melizander was, he was mortal, doomed to die. Nox' anger and contempt would endure for millennia. Crumpling the stationery, Ashtariel went to dress for dinner.

Melizander stood nervously on the stoop, watching the sun set the horizon alight as he awaited Ashe's doorman.

"Good evening, Mister Tristekedes. Please come in." The door had been answered by Ashe's butler.

"Good evening, Dobbs," Melizander answered. "How are you?"

"Well, sir, thank you for asking." The aging servant escorted Ashe into the library. "Lord deLancey asked that you await him here. May I offer you a brandy?"

"No, thank you." Melizander stood in the middle of the room, shifting his weight from left to right.

"Very good, sir. Lord deLancey will be down shortly." Dobbs silently closed the pocket doors, isolating Melizander with his nerves.

The artificer paced about the room, glancing at book titles and studying the artwork. As usual, Ashe had demonstrated impeccable taste, in both the décor and the furnishings. His hand strayed to the *treminae*, where it lay beneath his starched white shirt. He had tried not wearing the piece but he would soon be overcome with concern for its safety; the jewelry had become more and more his personal touchstone. He often found himself, as now, unconsciously fingering the silver beads. Tonight the necklace itched madly, scratching at his nerves. Annoyed, he clasped his hands behind his back.

A soft *shoosh* announced the opening of the library's door. Melizander turned, expecting Dobbs, but was presented with Asher, looking dashing and trim in his tailored evening wear.

"Goo—arrgghh!" Melizander's greeting was strangled in his throat as the *treminae* became a ring of fire around his neck. Doubling over, he grabbed for the talisman, tearing at the collar of his shirt. The pain was intense, but quickly began to fade when his hand grasped the metal beads, which were ice cold to his touch. Slowly he straightened up, gasping to catch his breath.

Ashe stood stock-still in the entranceway, a shocked expression frozen across his features.

Melizander moved toward him. "Ashe? Are you well?" The lord did not move, but remained stationary, his hand still positioned on the door handle. "Bloody hell, man! What kind of prank is this?"

He stumbled back as the air about Ashe began to shimmer, as if waves of heat rose from the library floor. While Melizander stood by, Ashe's form began to shift. Gone was the tailored evening wear, replaced by black leather trousers and some sort of tight-fitting singlet that gorgeously displayed his muscled chest. And wings. Wings! Black, glossy-feathered wings!

Melizander knew he was having some type of hysterical hallucination—he must have fallen and hit his head. Yet Ashe remained silent and still as any statue.

"Bloody ... god ... damn, man! What is the meaning of this?" He regained his feet, carefully stepping closer to his paralyzed lover. "Answer me!"

Melizander watched as Ashe's lips moved, slowly forming words. "*Treminae* ... has ... bound ... me!"

"*Treminae*? How did—? Bound?" Abruptly the wings made sense, and recognition flooded into Melizander's brain. "You ... you are a ... a ... daemon? How? Why?"

Again Ashe struggled to form an answer. "I ... am ... in ... cu ... bus. You ... are ... daemon ... hunter."

"I am no—" Suddenly Ashe's world crashed in as he went flying across the library to collide with a bookcase. He hit the floor, surrounded by a rain of books. Looking up, he perceived a towering black figure in front of the hearth. The *treminae* again began to burn him; this time he recognized it as the warning it was. *A little sooner would have been good!* He recalled an illustration from the Codex and raised his arm, hoping to direct some power at the newcomer since the *treminae* appeared to know what was going on. Nothing happened.

A red lash of flame streaked from the interloper, wrapped around Melizander's outstretched arm and wrenched him off the carpet, to hold him suspended six feet above the floor. He glanced back at his transformed lover. Apparently the talisman—or perhaps just himself—had limited use with multiple daemons for Ashe had regained control over his body and was striding across the room.

"Do not injure him, Father!"

The towering blackness had resolved into a giant in ebony armor. A rumbling bass voice issued from the closed helm. "The mortal has raised power against a Prince of Hell! His life is forfeit! He is damned to the pit beyond the boiling blood of Phlegethon!"

Swinging slowly in midair, Melizander watched as Ashe—that was how he still thought of him—grew larger to match the armored colossus. "He did not know what he was doing!"

"Ashtariel! Why do you plead so? Was is not your plan to deliver the daemonolator to me?"

Melizander found his voice as, disconcertingly, a small internal voice pointed out that he now knew a daemon's name. "Ashe—er, Ashtariel—er, whoever you are! What does he mean by 'your plan'?"

Ashtariel turned to look at Xander—it was vaguely unnerving that they were eye to eye—and reached out to touch his face. He realized the taloned hand was probably not that comforting for the mortal and curled in his finger, using a knuckle to stroke Xander's cheek. The young man flinched.

Melizander's recoil stabbed at Ashe. Taking a deep breath, he again met Xander's gaze. "Xand—"

"Melizander—my name is Melizander. Not *Xander*!" He spat the last.

The anger and disgust in the voice tore at Ashtariel, yet he plunged forward. *I brewed this cup myself, now I must drink the lees.* "Melizander, he speaks the truth. I ... I planned to ... magically bind you and deliver you to Hades."

"So, I was to be sacrificed to your father." Melizander's voice had lost its heat and become cold and flat. "Why?"

"It is ... complicated."

"As you well know, I am not unfamiliar with a complicated father."

Ashtariel was aware of his father's scrutiny. "I ... I wanted to impress him with my independence."

"Did you succeed?"

"I do not think so."

"I see." A pained expression crossed Melizander's face. "Were my feeling for you real? After all, you are an incubus."

"Your feelings were—are—your own. The *treminae* protected you from my influence." He met Melizander's gaze, refusing to look away. "However, it did not protect me from your influence. Or my own stupidity."

Lord Nox exploded. "Great Satan's balls! Let us take the daemon-hunter to Hades and be done with all this chatter!"

Ashtariel turned on his sire. "No! I will not be done with this chatter because I am not done with him! I came to Earth on your urging to learn about mortals. And learn I have!" He turned back to look at Melizander. "I have learned that they are honorable and kind. Funny and gracious; trusting and trustworthy with incredible character." He waved a hand, dismissing his father's magic, and caught Melizander as he slumped. "And I learned it all from you."

Gently he laid the mortal on the settee. "I know you can never forgive me; but I shall always remember you, Melizander." He bent to place a kiss on the pale forehead.

Listening to Ashe, Melizander had recalled the pain he had endured with his own father and what lengths he had gone to in order to alleviate that pain, including planning the destruction of a daemon. Ashe's journey had not been significantly different. Of course, he was an incubus and his father was a daemon prince, but he was just as desperate as Melizander to prove himself, to separate himself from his father's shadow. *How can I not forgive what I was willing to do?*

The artificer pulled himself upright. "For you, it's Xander."

Ashtariel smiled—which was slightly unsettling because of his fangs. "Xander it is!"

"Argh!" groaned Lord Nox. "I have no time for such weeping sentimentality!"

A female voice chimed in. "Oh, Nox, you need some softening up!"

"Mother!" exclaimed Ashe, turning to the incredibly beautiful woman who had appeared in the library. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to visit your father." The succubus walked to Lord Nox and hooked her arm around his. "Decimus told me he was visiting you, so I had to come too."

Ashe shrugged, transforming back to his mortal form. "Well, Xander, I did invite you to dinner with my parents. May I present Lord Nox and Lady Ashtarte?" He helped Xander to his feet, straightening his rumpled dinner jacket.

"Mother, Father, I would like you to meet my lover, Xander Tristekedes."

Melizander bowed. "Charmed, I'm sure."

Later that night, after the parents were gone and the library returned to order, the hunter and his daemon climbed into bed.

"Xander, please take off that damned necklace!"

"Make it worth my while?"

Ashe hit him with a pillow. "I am always worthwhile. I'm an incubus!"

"That you are!" Melizander struck back and rolled atop him, pulling him in for a kiss.

The daemon sneezed, and the light flickered out. "Bloody worthless lamp!"

Amor vincit artem daemonica!

About the Author:

C.C. Williams says, "My love of the written word began when I learned to read at the age of five—instilled by my parents who were voracious readers of anything from a biography to a Zane Grey western.

Writing came soon after. Inspired by Asimov and Tolkien and house bound through frequent illness, I turned my small hand to the epic fantasy. Well, it was fantastic, but hardly epic! But the bug had bitten. Thanks to great teachers in my school years, I honed my skills through journal entries, serialized stories and several stints on school newspapers. Then I discovered boys . . .

Growing up in a smallish town makes one very aware of one's differences. My attractions to my teammates and school friends became fodder for my imagination with illicit thoughts feeding my dreams and fueling my pen.

College brought escape and exploration not only on the printed page but also in life. Able to choose who I wanted to be, I set upon a course that continues to draw me forward even now—two decades later."

After moving several times about the country and Europe, C.C. Williams currently resides in the Southwestern United States with his partner JT. When not critiquing cooking or dance show contestants, he is at work on several writing projects.

A finalist in numerous contests, C.C. has had his work appear in such collections as **Frat Boys**, **Brief Encounters**, **Best Gay Romance 2012**, as well as the forthcoming **Wild Boys** and **The Love That Never Dies: Undead Erotica**.

He invites you to find out more at ccwilliamsonline.net, or to join him on

Facebook at facebook.com/c.c.williams.author,

GLBT Bookshelf at bookworld.editme.com/ccwilliams

Goodreads at goodreads.com/CCWilliams.

Discover other titles by C. C. Williams:

Novitiate – Now available in print and eBook!

No-vi-ti-ate (nō-vish'ē-it,-āt') n. The period of being a novice.

Ten stories, ten waypoints, ten steps along a path.

The stories collected in Novitiate represent the first leg of C.C. Williams' journey from a sometime storyteller to a published writer.

From the sweet, simple beginnings portrayed in Midnight; to a rough and rocky courtship in Busting the Greenhorn, an AllRomanceEbooks™ Category Best Seller; to the dark and edgy psychology of The Prisoner, a Best Gay Romance selection for 2012, C.C. Williams portrays men facing their most difficult challenges—their own hearts—when confronted by something deeper, more permanent than what they had initially sought.

After Hours

*Ryan and Axel work together at Trattoria Louisa. One night they catch some co-workers hooking up with unexpected results **After Hours**.*

Busting the Greenhorn

Tech blogger, Jake Landon, is on a mini-vacation. Having escaped San Francisco for the quiet Russian River, Jake seeks nothing more than a relaxed three-day-weekend getaway. Stetson-wearing horseman, Chet Hairston, is an old hand at stallion breaking, He's used to having things his way ... or else.

Crossing paths one night in a restaurant, the two men begin a game of cat and mouse. Each unfamiliar with their opponent, neither man is sure of the ultimate goal ... just his own raging desire. Can the strong, masculine rancher rope in Jake's passion? Could a willing and adventurous city boy be the one to fill that void in Chet's bed?

Busting the Greenhorn rides hard and puts you away wet!

More

Phillip is a newly-minted architect, alone in Philadelphia. One day a chance meeting at a local cafe leaves him obsessed with a dark-haired neighbor.

Marco is a hard-working contractor who's a bit of a show-off. Aware of Phillip's attraction, the Italian stud reels him in like a fish on a line.

*But who will be left wanting **More**?*

The Pickup Game

*Noah Armstrong is a physics student with a major crush. Jerry Gresham is a fraternity boy with a minor secret. Both of the guys enjoy basketball. One night while playing hoops they discover that they have more in common than just **The Pickup Game**.*

The Prisoner

A Best Gay Romance 2012 Selection!

Military college roommates Jake and Charley are an unlikely pair; Jake, compact and muscular, is a wrestler, while thin and wiry Charley is a long-distance runner. Yet together they have found love.

The strength of their relationship is brutally tested when Charley is set upon by a group of fellow cadets, led by the sadistic Trey.

Unable to face the humiliation of the attack, Charley leaves, giving no warning or explanation to Jake. Evaded by Charley, Jake goes on with his life.

Years later they unexpectedly meet one night at a bar. Jake is fascinated by the new, mature Charley, who invites him home where Charley pulls Jake into a role-playing scenario. What follows is a descent into darkness.

Unprepared for the psychological confrontation with his past, Jake is shocked at the depth of his own pain and anger as together the two men explore their lost love.

*Which of the two men was really **The Prisoner**?*

The Spirit Parlour – A Book Vamps Recommended Read!

Aldo Spiker is just a guy who sells books—or so he pretends. Having inherited more from his fortune-telling mother than simply her shop, the Cajun bookseller is drawn into a mystery when Tommy Roget shows up at closing time one night. With the help of his ex-lover, Detective Mike Tribini, Aldo has to figure out what to do about Tommy. His attraction to the young man could lead Aldo someplace he hasn't been in a long time.

Tommy Roget is a college student with more than homework to worry about. His parents died under mysterious circumstances; now after a near-miss on his motorcycle, it seems that someone is targeting him. Is it just his imagination or is he in real danger? With the police at a loss, Tommy is referred to Aldo by an old family friend. Drawn to the dark, aloof Cajun, Tommy hopes he can provide answers and maybe something more.

*Mystery and romance are in the cards at **The Spirit Parlour**.*

Summer Stock

Action-film star Jeff Woltors and Pulitzer-nominated director Robert Jamieson hooked up when they were in college. That fling ended badly and has colored their lives and love affairs for years.

Brought together during their alma mater's annual summer theater festival, the two men reconnect, resurrecting those old feelings and straining a tenuous truce to its breaking point. Can two men overcome past deceptions and mistakes to achieve what they've always wanted?

***Summer Stock** brings drama and tension to center stage as Jeff and Robert try to resolve a conflict fifteen years in the making.*

The Takedown

Peter is a landscape designer. Leaving behind big-city Chicago, he relocates to a small town to help out his best friend, Mark, who's the hottest guy in Grandville—and straight.

After the death of his father, Mark is working hard to keep the landscaping business he inherited afloat. He persuades Peter to go into business with him; but is Peter's design sense all that he's after?

*One Saturday night, beer and MMA lead to a contest that neither man will soon forget. Who will get away from **The Takedown**?*