

Cultic

By Todd Maternowski

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"I assure you there is nothing to fear about the Tarot. The deck will not bite you. You have more to fear from the student sitting next to you than from these mere instruments of divination."

The class stared back at him with silent, amused expressions. Finally, the chubby brown-haired boy in a blue t-shirt spoke up. He couldn't remember the boy's name, but the young man had written a better-than-average midterm paper comparing *Chronicles* with *Kings*.

"But professor, isn't it dangerous to... get involved with the spirits?"

Nikolai smiled. He heard this question in all of his classes. Studying in Gdansk, he had asked himself this very same thing hundreds of thousands of times. His answer flowed from him like the refrain of an old folk song.

"The most important point to remember in our lessons here —and indeed, your life beyond the stuffy confines of this classroom— is the Hermetic maxim, 'As above, so below.' When you go outside, for example, do you fear getting eaten alive by bears? By lions? Poisonous snakes?"

Most of the class laughed. The boy looked confused. "No, well, not outside here. Not in the city."

"And in a park?"

"...no."

"Fine, then, what about in a lion's den in the middle of the Serengeti, miles from the nearest hospital, park ranger, or gun?"

"Well, then, yes."

"The spirit world is much the same. Keep your wits about you, and avoid the lion's dens and viper pits. And when you do find them —or when they find you, it doesn't really matter which happens first— don't go throwing rocks and sharp sticks at things you can't control. Keep to the simple stuff, and you should be fine. Does that satisfactorily answer your question?"

"Yes, professor, uh, thank you."

"Excellent. Now, who wants a reading?"

A young girl with a ponytail and a polo sweater raised her hand immediately. Nikolai invited her up to the front of the class, took her hands and asked her to concentrate on something very important in her life. Then he shuffled his Tarot deck and removed three cards.

"Divination is entirely interpretive, like all religious and spiritual experience. Here, the first card we have —The Lovers. Many possible meanings, but more often than not the most obvious one suffices."

The girl blushed and looked at her feet. He squeezed her hand slightly and continued.

"The first card is meaningless without a second card to begin to put things into perspective. Here, we have —the Queen of Pentacles. Again, many meanings. Many possible interpretations. But in this case, I go with my gut. Is there a woman in your life, a woman of no little mystery?"

The girl looked bewildered. She nodded.

"Ah! Tell me no more, please. The cards have set the stage. Now, the third one. The one that takes what we have and tells us something interesting. We have —the Five of Pentacles, reversed. Did I shuffle these? What this tells us is that you have experienced... or will soon experience... troubles with this woman. Of the romantic variety. Not good news, I'm afraid. Does this make any sense to you, young lady?"

The girl nodded again. Her upper lip quivered slightly.

"I apologize if it seems bad. But you never know how these things really turn out. I myself was unceremoniously dumped by no fewer than forty women in my early years at the university. Looking back, any one of those relationships would have proven a costly mistake, and diverted me from my true path. My path led here, teaching you bright young minds the joys of comparative religion."

He looked at the girl. She was barely holding herself together. He had encountered this before, many, many times. Time to act fast.

"Would you like to see me do a divination on myself?"

The girl blinked, then exhaled. "Yeah."

"Excellent. You'll see how it's all about the interpretation."

He shuffled the cards deftly. He'd owned this particular deck for nearly a decade. The edges were worn, the faces smooth and easy to draw. He had a dozen other decks, some older, some more expensive, but this was his favorite. He drew three cards and placed them face-down in front of him.

"And here we go. Remember, interpretation is key. There are no easy, Yes/No answers with the Tarot. That's pendulum work. So, in the first card we get—the Wheel of Fortune, reversed. Too bad, because my life is actually going quite well at the moment. Twenty years ago I would have killed for this card. And the second—King of Swords, reversed. Again, a bad card. Many meanings, most usually a bad man in my life. And third.."

He stopped momentarily. He had drawn this card tens of thousands of times. But this time, something seemed off. His students leaned in. The room was dead silent. He composed himself in a breath and used his performance voice.

"...Death. Meaning a great change will come, possibly an unexpected one. Change of fortune, a bad man, a great change... well, the obvious thing to do here is for me to keep on my toes. Expect the unexpected. And when it comes, roll with it until it's over. You see, the best part of divination is th—"

The bell in the hall rang, but none of the students moved to leave. Nikolai forced a smile.

"The best part of divination will be your assignment for next class. Come Tuesday, we will focus on the Enochian system of John Dee, and how it compared to earlier grimoire work from the late Middle Ages. Class dismissed."

As the students shuffled out, a tall black-haired boy, noticeably older than the rest, lingered behind for a moment. Staring. Nikolai put his Tarot cards back in his black velvet case, then collected his papers together but when he looked up the boy was gone. The clock on the wall said 4:45. *Ah, crap in the mule, I'm late.*

Nikolai rushed out of the lecture hall and through the quads, responding to students and fellow faculty members with an enthusiastic greeting but still making his way north to Pub Row. He hurried through the quads, crossed the library parking lot to avoid the crowds, then crossed the street and entered Bill's Pub. She was sitting at a booth, waiting for him.

"I'm sorry I'm late, I just got—"

"It's ok, Nikolai, I just got here myself. How was class?"

"Good. Some familiar faces from last semester, despite the difference in material. I suspect some of these undergrads are treating me as a cult symbol."

"I'm sure you have no problem with that."

"It's not healthy. Not for them, anyways. Or maybe it is. The more, the merrier. Maybe in a few years lectures on ancient near eastern mystery cults will become popular enough for me to get one of the larger halls over in Physics building."

"And you could ask me to go to Avante's for dinner rather than Bill's for burgers."

"Ah, my darling, I can take you there right now. I just prefer it here, without all th—"

"I know, Nikolai, I know. I'm just messing with you. You people have no sense of humor."

"We don't?"

"Anyways I already ordered for us. The burgers should be out in a few minutes."

"...and for drinks?"

"Watney's Cream Stout."

"My love, you know me too well. I may just have to give in to your irresistible charms and propose to you someday. Perhaps after I've regaled you with the mating rituals of the Qipchak tribe and their relevance to modern—"

"Our burgers! Thank god."

He got up from bed in a cold sweat. He had not slept but for a few furtive spurts here and there, and always with troubling dreams that meshed in and out of his waking stupor. He looked at his clock. 3:00

exactly.

He threw off the single thin cover and went to his desk. *Fine. This one little thing, then back to bed. Early morning tomorrow.*

He lit the candle to the angel, burned some mugwort incense and got out his pendulum. After clearing his mind of all external concerns and focusing on the angel's seal in front of him, he felt its presence and began to ask questions.

"Was the Tarot reading I did in class today an accurate one?"

The pendulum, a small blood-red crystal he had purchased in a curio shop in Prague, swung over to *yes.*

"This change of fortune will be a bad one?"

yes

"Will it affect my career?"

yes

He paused for a moment. "Will it negatively affect my health?"

yes

"Will I suffer an injury?"

no

"No? Hmm. Will I get sick?"

no

"Will.... will someone hurt me?"

yes

"Will they hurt me, physically?"

yes

"Will they.. will they kill me?"

yes

Nikolai felt a strange vibrating sensation on the back of his neck and ears. The hairs on the top of his head felt like they were being brushed by a gentle hand. He swallowed a gulp of air, steeled himself and continued.

"Are you still there?"

yes

"Someone, someone is going to try and kill me?"

no

"Someone —wait." He paused for a moment, considering. "Will someone kill me?"

yes

"Do I know this person?"

no

"Have I seen this person?"

yes

"Is it a man?"

yes

Nikolai pondered this. *That older boy in the class.. I don't remember seeing him before.* "Will this happen within the next month?"

yes

"Will this murder happen within the next week?"

yes

He felt the chill creep up the hairs on both his arms, and a slight tickling sensation on the back of his ears.

"Will this murder happen tomorrow?"

no

"Will it happen... will it happen within three days?"

yes

His heart was pounding fast, slamming up against his chest as if it were trying to escape. "Is there anything I can do to stop it?"

yes

"If I find this person, I can stop them from killing me?"

yes

He sat there on the floor for hours, lost in thought. The candles burned down, the incense dissipated and the bright white rays of dawn slowly filtered into his room.

He got up from his cross-legged position and stretched. He wiped the tears from his eyes and went to the next room to make coffee.

As the locksmith drilled out the new deadlock bolt on the door Nikolai called up his good friend Simon who worked at one of the used bookstores over on 57th. He needed the name and a ride to a good botanica where he could get two prayer cards to St. Michael, a lodestone and some angelica, rosemary and rue. As he dialed he held three freshly-plucked hairs from his head and a small headshot from a Thelemite newsletter he had reluctantly contributed to years ago. He normally wouldn't stoop to this level but he felt he needed to try everything he could think of to stop this.

Simon's answering machine picked up. He hung up without leaving a message.

After the locksmith was finished he wrote a check for the man and bolted to the Div School Pub for the morning meeting. He was late, but no later than usual, and slunk silently into a chair at one of the tables in the back. Some of the busybodies were discussing the logistics of tomorrow's big book sale but he took no notice, choosing instead to study the most minute details of anyone who crossed through the pub door.

Most of them were students, grad students from the nearby quads pursuing advanced degrees in fields only recently separated from his own academic pursuits, birthed less than a few hundred years ago from the womb of spirit and the occult. English. Physics. Mathematics. Musical Theory. Comparative Literature. Chemistry.

Now of course the students think of his pursuits as 'quaint' or 'erudite.' Nikolai smiled to himself. A thousand years ago —heck, a hundred years ago— these students would have screamed in orgiastic ecstasy as they watched him burn at the stake. His personal library, his writings, all in a code only he and a handful of other practitioners could decipher and understand. His work erased after his death, meaning posterity would have to re-learn the basics of his craft from scratch after his untimely demise at the hands of an errant wagon-wheel or plague-ridden flea.

A young girl walked in dressed entirely in black, with the Incan symbol of greeting tattooed on her arm next to a Celtic cross and another symbol without a real linguistic history but understood well enough. Bats' wings emerging from a rather morose looking human skull with red ruby eyes and, inexplicably, eyebrows and an angry frown. She glanced over to the Divinity School professors passionately discussing the organizational details of the book sale, then lost interest in them forever, turning her attention to a medium cup of coffee, a bag of skittles and a raisin muffin. Nikolai had not seen this girl before but he had seen dozens of her clones before in his classes, with overly-romanticized visions of what heresy really was. *She has no ideas of what dangers we true heretics put ourselves in every moment of our lives, and afterlives.*

The girl was followed shortly by a well-muscled male in his 20s, wearing an ill-fitting long-sleeved dress shirt and pleated dockers. The man looked his way, seemed embarrassed and turned away. Bought a soda, refused the change, and left as quickly as he came. *That's rather odd behavior. And only carrying one book, no backpack.*

A thin, pale male undergrad passed the awkward male on his way out, paying no attention to the

professors loudly debating the placement of booths and looking longingly behind the pub's counter for someone. Probably a girl. The thin boy stood there for a while, not ordering anything, rocking from leg to leg until his curiosity was satisfied and he walked out. As he neared the pub door he glanced directly at Nikolai, past the loudmouthed talkers between them, and his gaze lingered for a fraction of a second before he disappeared into the hallway outside. *What... what did he look at me like that for? Was he merely pretending to wait for someone behind the counter, to throw me off his trail? Why did he single me out of all these twenty-odd professors?*

Before a minute passed the early-lunch crowd streamed in, and Nikolai could not take it any longer. He politely mumbled an excuse and got up to the bewildered stares of the other faculty, and pushed past a young man in a black White Sox baseball cap and another with the name and insignia of his high school emblazoned on his bookbag. Nikolai walked out into the hallway and saw dozens of people but not a familiar face. *I'm tired. I need to re-focus. My mind is not mine own right now.*

He ducked into the men's restroom twenty feet down the hall from the pub, picked the farthest stall from the door and bolted the latch. He hung his bag on the hook, pulled down his pants and sat down. A small amount of urine trickled into the bowl as he held his face in his hands and closed his eyes. *Focus. You're becoming a paranoid.* Someone else entered the restroom and turned on a faucet. *No one is out to get you. If there were, they would have got you long ago. In an alley in Gdansk, or in that basement in Krakow.* The faucet stopped, and the sounds of the paper towel dispenser echoed through the tiny bathroom. *You've got many enemies, but.. no, no. No. You are not that important. No one would take that risk to eliminate you. Your articles have their critics, and the death threats from angry American southerners, French wiccans, former Soviet bloc dictactors... no, you're not that important. The center of the universe is not here in this last stall in a div school men's bathroom. You are not—*

Nikolai stopped. He held his breath. The person at the faucet was still there, standing, waiting. Less than ten feet away from him. He could not see his shoes, or which way they were pointing. *Towards me? Was I thinking aloud? Does this person have special gifts, the ability to sense fear like a dog?*

He let out a false cough and waited for a response. The person at the faucet said nothing, did nothing. No paper towels, no running water, no squeak of the shoes on the filthy tiled floor. Nikolai waited for a short breath of eternity before he stood up, pulled up his pants and buckled his belt. He inhaled deeply, grabbed the bag from the hook on the inside of the door and opened it.

"Professor!"

The slouching young man staring at him was six and a half feet tall or taller, with short, curly black hair and glasses far too small for his angular face. It was Grisha, a Slovenian student who had taken several courses from him and always had the most interesting questions. Questions so radically different from the rest that he often thought Grisha had tapped in to some alien intelligence, acting as the oddly-shaped mouthpiece for some exotic spirit from Sirius or beyond.

"Grisha, I, uh.."

"I'm sorry, Professor." Grisha reached his huge hand into the pocket of his overcoat, with a sudden look of extreme sadness on his unshaven face. Nikolai flinched.

"I'm so sorry," Grisha said as he removed a pack of tissues, took one out and blew his nose. "I was not able to take your Comparative Religion class this semester due to my student-work schedule at the library."

Nikolai exhaled, a broad grin covering his face.

"Oh? That's too bad, Grisha. I have always look—"

"Excuse me, Professor. The crucial functions of my biological form demand much of me this morning," he said as he hastily pushed past him and into the waiting stall. Nikolai watched him close the stall door, smiled to himself, then washed his hands and went out.

She giggled. "Maybe it's the Knights Templar. Or the College of Cardinals. Rome has good reason to want you dead."

He smiled at her, then looked down at his food. Ziti and salmon in a light lemon cream sauce, with a side of two California rolls and a small handmade ravioli salad. Forty-two dollars. He could get seven orders of burgers & beers with that at Bill's. Or two worthless New Age books on modern spirituality written by some upper-middle-class kayaking enthusiast from Santa Fe who gleefully mixes occult systems thousands of years in the making together like spirit soup just because they prominently feature the number 3.

He didn't want to know what her entry cost. Still, if it really was the end of the world, they would eat overpriced luxury food and MasterCard would eat the bill. And like it.

She must have noticed his lack of response. "Are you, you're not serious, are you? I mean, this isn't the first time."

"No."

"'No' you're not serious?"

"No, I, I don't know. No, it's not the first time."

"You got five death threats from that *Salon* article about the rigged Diebold electronic voting machines in Ohio. Three more from your article about how there are no such thing as the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. A half-dozen from that radio show interview you did in Poland about the new regime in Belarus being pawns of the old KGB."

"Some of those were funny, though."

"You've spent a lot of time and energy pissing people off."

Nikolai sighed. She was right, when she said it like that. He poked at the salmon with his fork.

She adjusted herself in her seat and looked behind him. "Who did you make angry this time?"

He picked up a roll, then put it back on his plate. "I'm not sure. Could be anyone. Last month the *Tribune* misquoted me on my essay about Southern Baptists. I came across like a raving Slavic madman. Accusing the Baptists of being proto-fascists with father issues. It was terrible."

"No one takes that rag seriously, Nikolai," she laughed. "If you're not getting death threats than you're not trying."

"I did get one from that, already. Written with letters cut-out from the Walmart advertisements. Said something about wanting to stand over me and bleed on me. Actually bothered me a little."

She looked astonished. "Why didn't you tell me? If it bothered you.."

"Ah, it passed. It's nothing."

"But you think it's related to this?"

"I don't know. Probably not. Let's just drop it."

"Why don't you contact the authorities?"

"And tell them what? About how an angel spoke to me through a pendulum at four in the morning? I'd rather not, thank you."

"I just mean if it's bothering you this much..."

"It's not. I don't know, I shouldn't have even brought it up. Not here."

"Nikolai, I love you but let's get something straight. Mystery cults. Religious conspiracies. Hypocritical Christian sects. Eastern bloc dictators with unhealthy love of fascist cultic imagery. You've spent a great deal of time and energy telling pretty nearly every soul on the planet that their most cherished beliefs are wrong."

"But they are wrong! If they only knew the truth of what they imagine to be true—"

"Nikolai, no one wants to hear that. And some people will feel like you are personally threatening them, their way of life."

"Someone has to. Someone has to expose the lies of the powerful. To help the powerless drop their self-imposed shackles. A better world will not happen by accident. We have to make it so. And it starts with distributing the right information."

"So noble. I bet the 'powers that be' will probably disagree with you about that."

"Of course they will. Or, they'll agree with everything I write, and feel threatened enough to silence

me." Nikolai sighed, stabbing his salmon with the sharp prongs of his expensive silver fork. "Let's talk about something else. This food is good, but not forty-two dollars good."

"Shhh, if you say it too loudly the chef will come out here and brain you with a cleaver."

"Christ in a bucket..."

He slid out of the chaos downstairs, passing two of his own books marked down to half-price on a table. The book sale was in full swing that morning and it wasn't even noon yet. The early bird collectors had descended on the first floor like a pack of starving wolverines, wolverines who knew the full value of secondhand Archaeology textbooks and early mis-translations of the *Gilgamesh* stele.

He normally enjoyed the crowds, the friendly faces excitedly asking him about his current and future projects. But not today. He ducked out and went upstairs to the tiny third-floor men's restroom for a small break from the social noise.

When he got there it was dead silent. *Ah, finally.* He took the last stall, farthest from the door as usual, pulled down his pants and sat down. The salmon from last night was hitting him hard this morning, causing his intestines all sorts of embarrassingly loud discomfort. *Thank the gods for the crowds and the noise downstairs.* He loved coming to this little-used restroom. So peaceful. Few of the students even knew it existed.

He tried pushing out some gas but it wouldn't pass. He relaxed for a bit, and went over his itinerary. Book sale until two in the afternoon, then meet with Greg in the Law School quad and get the keys to his Civic. Drive out to Cicero to the botanica, pick up the prayer cards and the herbs, along with a list of ingredients Greg wanted for some legal rite. Hit the supermarket on the way home for a gallon of milk, a dozen eggs and a 24-pack of ramen for this weekend. He would try to avoid leaving the apartment if he could help it. *Better get a six-pack of Watney's then, too.* He would start work tonight on a new novel he had been putting off for the last few months, watch some tv, take the phone off the hook and finish up some long-overdue projects.

Finally, it came. A loud, whining squeak that echoed off his backside and the muffled porcelain of the toilet bowl. That's when he noticed the next stall was not empty. A pair of polished black dress shoes had just stepped inside the stall, turned toward the stall door and stopped.

I shouldn't be embarrassed. Everyone passes gas. No one knows it's me, anyways. Nikolai watched as the dress shoes scooted closer to the toilet, waiting for the pants to fall and the unmistakable sounds of man expelling excrement.

He smiled to himself. *Such a filthy place. We hide our—*

Suddenly the shoes rose off the stained tile floor. A *thunk thunk* on the adjoining stall's toilet bowl, followed immediately by a *click* of the hammer of a gun four feet behind his head.

Nikolai closed his eyes tightly and tried to force a smile. "You know, the gun is a coward's weapon—" A single shot echoed off the restroom's walls. Nikolai's head and torso slumped over his knees. His arms fell to the stained tile on the floor. A pair of black dress shoes jumped off the rim of the toilet seat in the next stall and landed heavily on the floor. The restroom door opened, then closed.

About the Author: Born in Madison, Wisconsin, Todd studied Ancient Near Eastern religion and early Judeo-Christianity at the University of Chicago before heading into the real world. He has since worked as a ballroom dance instructor, bass player, mediator, credit specialist, art preparator, janitor, journalist, copy editor, armored car money counter, mambo dancer and satirist. He lives in Dallas, Texas with his hyper-creative wife and baby girl.

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