

Coffee Shop Masquerade

Nauman Farid

"Demons."

"Demons?"

"I don't believe in demons, okay? But . . ."

"Demons aren't visiting us any time soon, don't worry. It's too cold for most of them."

The woman shakes her head. "Bear with me, I'm about to tell you something strange. I called a cousin on Monday, right? She lives in Dublin. We talked for a few hours about life and stuff."

The man nods slowly.

"Somehow, I brought up the fact that I was super interested in occult magic back in high school."

"Weren't we all . . ."

"I told her how I had wanted to buy a fancy grimoire, but it was two hundred bucks, and I felt bad asking my mom."

"What kind of grimoire?"

"Some compendium written by a nineteenth-century cultist. It was an edition of *The Lesser Key of Solomon*."

"There's also a *Greater Key of Solomon*, isn't there?"

The woman nods. "I did some research, and apparently most of those grimoires were written a few hundred years ago. People just slapped Solomon's name on them."

"Did Solomon really have a ring he used to control demons, then?"
The man's gaze falls briefly on his fingers.

"I don't think so. But that doesn't really matter. My cousin told me that she bought a newly translated grimoire a while back. Was on the pre-order list for a whole year."

"Must have been quite special to take so long to be translated."

"It was in a mixture of Hebrew and Greek. A sort of derived language."

"Did she read it cover-to-cover? See anything interesting?"

"That's the thing! She's read bits and pieces. She was flipping through it during the call and then she told me about a ritual she thought I'd like. I'm even considering buying the book now."

"God have mercy on us all . . ."

"Basically, this ritual involves a lot of praying and good timing. You're supposed to start by fasting for ten days, bathing each day at sunup and sundown."

"Fast every day and break it, or fast for all ten days?"

"All ten days. You can drink holy water once a day. And then, when you finish fasting and have purified yourself, you need to start praying. There are *nine* different ways you have to invoke God."

The man grimaces. "Does God even approve of demon summoning?"

"I mean, we're asking Him to send one down – "pretty please" – and not just calling the demons ourselves, and we'll use them for things like the laundry, or sweeping the floor . . ."

". . ."

". . ."

". . ."

"Anyways! You pray for thirty days at sunset. And the last day has to fall on the night of a full moon. And in that last sunset, you must sit and wait in perfect stillness after you finish praying."

"Sounds like a horribly roundabout way of meditating."

"Let me finish! The grimoire said, 'And it will be as if fire is all that encompasses your sight, and thunder engulfs your very thought, and there will be a great flash of li—'"

"How do you ensure the water is holy? Is it Catholic-blessed or Eastern Orthodox-blessed?"

"Uh . . . the grimoire didn't say. But it was written in the 1200s, so

probably one of those?"

"On the night of stillness, can your chest move when you breathe? Can you blink your eyes? Can you scratch your tongue with your teeth if it gets itchy?"

"Erm . . . you have to breathe lightly, keep your eyes closed, and—"

"Must I recite all those prayers by memory, or can I write them on my palm?"

The woman coughs. "Don't worry about these trivial things. All you have to do is be really, *really* in the zone. God wants to know your intention."

"If you say so. What happens when this demon is summoned in a . . . bright thunderclap?"

"Well, you get two demons the first time you perform the ritual. You subjugate them with a hexagram 'two cubits tall and two cubits wide, drawn on milk-white paper.' Essentially the Seal."

"So, we don't need Solomon's ring to use his Seal? Does it have to be paper? Could we put the Seal on a pair of jeans?"

"The grimoire said that you can have it sewn on an item of clothing for general use. But, it's got to be paper for this ritual specifically."

"What if the demons aren't subjugated? What if you summon a particularly nasty pair of them, like Duke Gremory or Beelzebul, and they want to eat you?"

"Lady Fortune favors the brave. You should probably have some holy water and an ingot of silver beside you, as a last resort to send the demons back into Hell."

"Hmm . . . I'm allergic to pure silver. Gives me bad hives."

"Hives are nothing compared to having your soul dragged away!"

The man considers this as he takes a long draught from his thermos.

"See, this ritual doesn't require anything crazy. *And* the prayers match up almost exactly with some Latin ones I saw on the internet."

"Could you actually fast for ten days on nothing but holy water? Sounds wretched."

"I don't believe in demons! But imagine, just for a second, that this is the real deal. Wouldn't it all be worth it then?"

"You know I'm a doctor, right?"

"It's your second year of residency."

"As a licensed medical professional, and yes, residents are li-

censed . . . let me tell you that if you put all your energy and conviction into something as convoluted as this, you will definitely see fire and hear thunder. Why is that?"

"Because you're so tired, you're hallucinating. I know, but—"

"You want to be a journalist, right?"

"Investigative journalist. I got hired last week by the *Harbinger*. Biggest paper in town."

"Does your boss know about this ritual you're going to *personally* investigate? How it'll reduce you to little more than a husk for two weeks?"

"You don't have to be mean about it . . . and no, I haven't told her. Not yet anyway."

"Demons . . ." The man sighs. "Demons are among you. Around you. Most demons masquerade as people. Use your work to weed them out, exorcise them for an eager audience."

"But what makes someone a demon? Should I be suspicious if they have weird or unsettling habits? I doubt I've ever called you a demon."

"I didn't know I was weird."

"You're from Europe! You also drink cherry juice like I drink water, and you put garlic in everything."

"All exotic and dark and dangerous things began in the Old World. It just happened to be that I also like the movie *Fargo*."

"What about the garlic? Garlic in eggs is . . ." The woman gags.

"It's good to build up a tolerance to spicy things like garlic. Cherry juice is a very soothing drink that pairs with everything, even eggs."

"You put a bar of copper in your jug of juice at home. It's like that one fish some company made into iron, for iron deficiency. I've never even heard of people being copper deficient!"

"Most people are deficient; the impact is just minimal. Besides, the exchange of ions with the copper gives the juice a kick. I drink it when I have to work the day shift at the hospital."

"I know, I know. Some sort of 'exotic' coffee."

"Precisely. My point is . . . you can find demons. Start by looking where you least expect them. Philosophers, for example, are usually soft-spoken academics. Their writing is indicative of a fierce and fiery soul. Doctors are seen as paragons of humanity. Yet, some chase wealth, others prestige. Judges are supposed to be moral and just. What if a judge comes to power with ill-intent?"

"You're a doctor, you're supposed to be moral, and you just started waxing philosophical!"

The man laughs. "We've been friends for six years. If I'm a demon and you haven't noticed yet, I've already won. I don't need to be worried about you."

"I investigate very well, I'll have you know."

"And I manage very well with blood, and keep calm under pressure. You humans need doctors like us."

"You're such a practical guy. Too practical. *Unnaturally* practical, even."

The man looks at his watch. "Speaking of practicality . . ."

"I'll practice fasting for a few days before the ritual!"

"You should read an actual book. Get your mind off this nonsense."

The woman sighs slowly. "Any recommendations?"

The man pulls out a book from his bag, setting it on the table. "This is one of my favorites. There's a reporter in it. A journalist, really."

"Oooh. We should have sat near a window though. That title's black on black, I swear."

The man smiles. "It's called *Interview with the Vampire*."

Nauman Farid is a sophomore at UND, majoring in biology pre-med. He's always been a huge fan of books, and confesses that he sometimes reads until six in the morning. He wants to write a novel one day, and possibly build a castle (but not in Europe, it's too rainy). Most exciting of all, he wants to become a surgeon.