

Xavier Quinn sat by the deserted highway. A torn off piece of an American flag was tied around his head like a bandana. He looked in both directions, and behind him. Trusting it was safe, he pulled his feet slowly from the boots he'd stolen from the Lord Observer's closet and carefully removed his socks. He bit his bottom lip as he examined his blisters. He let out a sigh and propped his bare feet on his weatherbeaten guitar case, which he had written all over with white chalk dire and menacing slogans—

*Only mystics survive*

He sat there all alone, by the deserted highway, eating blackberries. Weeds broke up through the pavement, which hadn't been driven on for several years. This used to be a tourist area in the summer, but now it was just wild nature again. He liked getting away from the ruins of civilization because in them, he felt alone. Or he felt his aloneness. Out here, although he was alone, he did not feel alone. You can be alone and not feel lonely. Or you can be lonely and not feel alone. He liked being out here, no ruins in sight, because it was almost as if the Event had never happened.

Back at the camp they called him Hotfoot because he moved around so quickly. Even with the guitar on his back he was more fleetfooted than the rest of them.

He stayed silent during the creeds. He declined to recite the creeds like the rest of them. He would not pretend. The Lord Observer had counseled him to recite the creeds, but he would not. He had brought with him into the community the knowledge that only mystics survive. Reciting their creeds would lower his chances of survival. He knew it, but he could not prove it. Life gets more complicated when you know things you cannot prove.

The truth was that none of them by science could understand the world they were now living in. All classical speculation had failed.

X recalled playing a video game set in a fantasy realm filled with monsters and dragons and demonic forms where you had to go around and gather things. That was now reality, and America had become a fantasy realm filled with monsters and dragons and demonic forms.

"Don't you know it was always that?" she would say. He would nod his head in agreement.

The sun was setting. He was maybe 5 miles from camp. He would build a fire out here tonight. They would be looking for him.

He brought his notebook and pencil out and in the coral haze of the setting sun began to draw. No new songs had come to him since Sarafina's disappearance, but needing to put down something, anything, he had surprised himself by returning to drawing, a discipline he had not continued after he was maybe 8 or 9 years old. He was not very good at drawing, that's why he'd stopped.

Before the Event, he had avoided the dark at all costs. Dark before had been nothing more than a suffusive color the world became at night. But once the philosophic dark had settled so triumphantly over the world, he surprised himself with how quickly he adjusted. He could even be alone in the dark now. He could hear noises in the dark and not panic. If someone had told him he would become this way in the wake of the Event, he wouldn't have believed them.

Was it insanity that made him believe he was invincible? And he really believed it. Youthful immaturity, they said. But the Lord Observer knew it was not youthful immaturity, which is why he

watched X so closely from a distance. His masonic suspicions were inflamed by the way X moved through the cursed landscape.

He tailors the fire as the sun sinks below the mountains. He keeps his night offices in this ruinous and barren land, invoking aid to his adventurous song. Next to a lucid stream he calms his nerves with a soundless chant. The air out here is thick with th' angelic. By Acheron he strums and hums. By fraternal and mystic link he lifts his voice not against the silence but as part of it.

He has a scorpion tattoo on his right hand, the hand he strums with. He lifts his voice sadly to the pines, higher even to Ophicus, wherein his highest fears hang silent.

He unties the piece of the American flag he uses for a bandana, he shakes from his hair pestilence and war.

My sensitivity has brought me to a death, he thought. I can no longer see the good in a thing that has been used for evil, and what thing has not been used for evil?

He was hungry. He unzipped the small cooler he'd stolen from a campsite and pulled from the ice cubes a wet chicken breast. Most people stayed in the camp so they wouldn't be alone. He stayed because they had chickens.