

Except from *The Void: Fog Guard*
by Isaiah Everin

*“While Dark empty with Reason,
Light so full of Passion,
And Evil steeped in Greed,
Void is our Balance.”*

- Vacuus

Prologue: Part 1

“The human is very affectable; if it is told throughout its lifetime that something does not exist, it is a simple fact that if it should come across such a thing, it will fail to perceive it.”

- The Physician

Wagman, also known as the Taverner, sat in a bar that was many bars. The atmosphere: amber as the whiskey in his palm; the shadows: dark as evergreen foliage; the patrons: shallow and livid with impressions of pointless conversation. No one or thing could notice him. He is not a person. If he was once a person, it was on a forgotten day long before this one, and no one now living was there to see it when it happened. That is how natural things happen, how they should happen; no one there to see. Nature happens apart from people. “If a tree falls...”

He lifted the glass to his lips—more than once, as one does with whiskey—and the ice clinked against his teeth, but he didn’t feel it—and if he did, it would be a bad sort of feeling; those ones you notice because you know where they’re from and why they’re here with you. The whiskey slipped down the hollows of his neck, but he remained expressionless, for he didn’t feel this either. If he did, it would be a good sort of feeling—one with unknown origins, which is not here with you, which is not a feeling until it is felt, it lies in waiting. He might have felt these things once, but he’s forgotten it.

Things were on Wagman’s mind, though he wasn’t thinking of very much. The whiskey took care of that, as it should, and it came as a constant, like a bass line or a best friend. His hand only left the glass when the glass was being refilled, and then did they part for some time, for the bartenders of the bar that was many bars did not rush to fill it. Sudden movements around Wagman were implicitly not ideal, for while his mind seemed slow, his eyes seemed quick, and every movement of the body that he laid claim to was practiced and deliberate.

Few ever struck up a conversation with Wagman in the bar that was many bars, though regulars knew his presence as one knows the childhood stray cat that would come to the porch for scraps. Anyone who might have the willpower to notice him could not really say how long he had been a patron of the many bars that were one. Some jokingly thought that he had been in each for generations—as if he was a weary guardian looking over the lot of them—and they were so close to the truth with this supposition that never did it leave their lips, as so often does the truth feel beyond the bounds of sanity.

Wagman is the sound of trees falling. Wagman is the feeling of whiskey. Wagman is the nature of being unperceived until confronted. Wagman just wanted to enjoy his drinks and the absence of feeling. Wagman would soon be interrupted.

Prologue: Part 2

My country is the world, and my religion is to do good.
Thomas Paine

Charlie walked into the bar on Joachim-Friedrich Street, his fingerless-gloved hand holding the door open as wind whipped the jacket and hoodie that he wore and billowed out the folds of his dark cargo pants. He did not know what to expect to find here. It was somewhere between 1850 and 1860 when he'd last been as far into Europe as Germany. Since moving to the US with his father, he'd forgotten about the old countries, as did the rest of his kind who immigrated into "The Land of the Free" hoping for a new beginning. Of course, as is often the case, those beginnings came with a price for most, true freedom was had by few, and all that was out of Charlie's hands.

He stood inside, just a stride from the mottled wood of the tavern's entrance, and discovered that not much had changed in this part of the world. It wouldn't take a lot to convince him that this tavern had stood a century ago—while now there were neon signs outside and a TV showcasing football above the bar, the same feeling permeated throughout, and the worn surface of the bar told him how many had passed through. Few patrons drank anything more than lager or ale, there were a few smiles here and there between friends or associates, and Charlie could feel the stress and repressed emotions flow from their bodies and right out the front door. Every day as the sun fell, these men would gather here, as their fathers did, as their forefathers did, like clockwork...or worship.

Trying not to look too much like a foreigner, gawking and confused, Charlie quickly made his way to an empty table in a corner and sat down. As was so often true in his life, now he wasn't exactly sure what he was looking for. On the word of a fellow he didn't wholly trust, he had jumped on a plane to Berlin to find the man who many called the Taverner. Charlie had long since lost connection with the underground network that existed on this continent, so he had to trust the fellow's word on it that this would be his best chance of getting the information he needed and of hiding himself from those who sought him.

The last Charlie knew of European aether politics, Oberon was at the top of the food chain and most of Europe was under the watchful eye of the Fae. At some point their ranks were eradicated, or at least dispersed, by agents of the Authority, and there was no longer any safe way for those with aether in their blood to comingle and live outside of the Authority's gaze. Rumor had it that the Taverner was just about the only individual on the entire European continent who could point you on the path to what was the new underground, an organization called Dream's Hospice. How one man managed such a business was beyond Charlie's reckoning, but this was where he was told to go.

Feeling like he might already look suspicious, Charlie decided to suck it up and order a beer, keeping his voice low to hide his British-American accent to the extent that he could. No one looked at him, which wasn't necessarily a good sign (after all, the people Charlie dealt with didn't exactly have to turn their gaze in order to watch you), but he took it as sign enough to

occupy an empty seat at the bar. Two seats to his right, men in unbuttoned suits spoke in raised voices, their accents thick and caustic. Despite his long list of life experiences, Charlie never learned a word of German. The language didn't suit his palette.

He took a gulp of beer and stifled a grimace. It was bitterer than he remembered, and it had been decades since he had forced himself to drink beer in order to appear "native." He blamed his father for his hatred of the old world's liquid bread—their family took more naturally to mead, though in the last century, Charlie's tongue was best placated by harder spirits. Today, though, for the first time in at least a decade of regular drunkenness, Charlie told himself with a determined frown that a clear head would suit him, and that he should wait for someone to speak to him—whether it would be the Taverner or an agent of his, Charlie didn't know.

Thirty minutes and three beers later, the bartender asked Charlie if he was in Berlin to see the game. Charlie had no idea that it was the World Cup (indeed, had forgotten what it was like to have the time to care about these things), but he said that he sure was, because why not? Maybe if he had a chance he would stop by and sneak his way in, share a day with the locals and remember what it was like to be human. Charlie threw in that he was mostly in Berlin for family-related business, hoping that maybe the bartender would catch on. However, the lean-faced man just smiled, pulled a rag out of his belt, and started wiping off the counter.

Watching the black tattoo of an ankh on the man's bicep flex and bend, Charlie asked the bartender if there was anything interesting going on in this corner of town. "I don't know," the man said, his accent implicitly adding a raw edge to his words. "I like it in here. There's no bullshit like karaoke and pill-poppers. Just come in, order beer, drink, have a good time." Charlie nodded and said it sounded like his kind of place as he began to lay into his fourth beer.

Giving the establishment a cursory glance, there seemed to be no possibility that the Taverner was one of the patrons. The only person sitting alone was a woman in a pantsuit who looked like she was waiting for someone—girlfriend or boyfriend, it was so much harder to tell these days. Charlie had reveled in the 60's and 70's when the sexual revolution flourished in America, he had told himself that those were the years he was really born for, but now...he was just tired of all of it. The humans in the western world were now more concerned with identity than anything else, praising the invisible Church of Self whenever given the luxury and time to care. It made him miss the old country, the grain in the mill, the uncomplicated sunrise.

"You waiting for someone?" the bartender asked.

Charlie shrugged. "Aren't we all?" he responded loudly, enough alcohol in him to make him forget to care about standing out. The bartender nodded, thinking he understood, and asked if romantic troubles had Charlie down. "Ah, no, me?" Charlie scratched the bar's surface. "Happy as a clam." The bartender walked away to take an order from the woman in the pantsuit and her friend who had just arrived—Charlie had been right to be skeptical, he couldn't exactly determine the gender of the cohort, or consort, or whatever they were to one another.

As Charlie got halfway through his glass, the bartender returned and asked him if clams were happy. Charlie nearly spat out his beer, taking too long to understand the question. He laughed and explained it was an English saying. "But no, I haven't been in love for a very, very long time. I did the whole marriage and children thing, and it ended up being a shit more trouble than anyone ever let on." He drained his glass.

"I got you, man," the bartender crossed his arms on the counter and leaned over, the ankh on his arm absorbing the dim light. "The last woman I slept with told me she was pregnant last month, but I did not see her for three months. She tries to tell me it is my baby, but no way. She's

a whore. I'm not ready for kids, ya?" Charlie said that nobody is. "I said if it's mine, get rid of it." Charlie feigned an understanding smile.

With a fifth beer in front of him, Charlie decided it was time to be more proactive. He had come here to find a man, well, then he damned well better find him. He had assumed he would be approached within fifteen minutes of entering this establishment if he couldn't find the Taverner himself, knowing just how much he stands out to his kind. Well, if more active prying tipped anyone off that he was here, he'd have to deal with that when the time came.

He waited until the bartender was sufficiently preoccupied, and then closed his eyes and focused on the space around him—or rather, the space within the space, the complicated folds and weaves that existed in the tavern, woven by the words, thoughts, and feelings of every man and woman who had been inside. If any normal person paid an inordinate amount of attention to Charlie at that moment, they would feel like maybe his skin was a bit blurrier around the edges than it should be, they might rub their eyes assuming it was a fault of their own, and most people would stop caring to investigate. Such was the nature of the human race.

When Charlie opened his eyes again, he was partway into the Fog—one of the four constituent dimensions of the Quartox, the layer of aethereality that permeated the physical world unseen by mortal humans. He still saw the bar, but also much more than that—around the bodies and minds of the bar's patrons he could see clouds of emotion and intention, words carrying mental energy out, ears sucking it in, shadows of the cogs turning. That wasn't his concern, such sights were to Charlie as blades of grass are to anyone else—background environment that, when analyzed closely, is far more complicated than we ever remember.

No, now he was using this "second-sight" to look for members or traces of his kind, the Aether-Touched. The possible signs were as numerous as there were types of Touched—there were those like him, and many others like the Fae, the half-breeds, the bloodsuckers, and all the shades between. Of course, if one wanted to remain hidden, there were ways.

The first thing Charlie noticed was the friend of the woman in the pantsuit—how he hadn't noticed immediately was beyond him, and he blamed the five glasses of beer. The reason it didn't look too much like a man or a woman was because it was neither—it was a dryad, or at least the child of one, living as a human in human society, as most of the Aether-Touched were forced to do. Its presence indicated very little of whether or not Charlie would find the Taverner, since members of the Fae, like the dryads, were the most common Touched in Europe.

The second thing Charlie noticed was the ankh on the arm of the bartender—he wasn't Touched himself, but it was certainly put there by someone who was, though whether or not the man knew this was impossible to tell. Aside from that, there was nothing of interest in the entire tavern. Charlie gave a few long glances in each direction to be sure, before fully returning to reality just as the bartender came to ask if he'd like another round, to which Charlie nodded.

An hour later the bar began to fill with the late night crowd. Charlie had nowhere to be and no leads to follow outside of this bar. He understood the need for an "underground" for his kind to feel safe within, but he'd never had to strain himself to find it. Clearly, things were far more difficult in Europe since the Fog Guard's base of operations moved to America—after all, it had always been the Fog Guard who allowed for some leeway in the lives of the Touched when mediating the laws of the Authority. Without the direct influence of those like Charlie and his father—individuals who had sympathy for the hard life of being Touched in the western world—it would make sense that this new network, the Dream's Hospice, would hide itself well.

The bartender noticed that Charlie was alone for a while as he continued to serve him beer after beer. On the ninth, he asked Charlie what his family business was. Not quite paying

attention to the man anymore, his eyes stuck on a windy tree outside, Charlie responded, “Oh, looking for grandchildren.”

The bartender laughed. “*Grandchildren?* You look like forty. Married that early?” Charlie glanced up and realized what he’d said. He played it off as a language mishap, explaining that it wasn’t *his* grandchildren he was looking for. He changed the conversation to something dull enough to make the bartender lose interest.

On his tenth beer, Charlie began to hit that sweet spot of insobriety (a place most normal people would reach on beer three or four)—the spot where you get an objectivity about yourself and your environment that you’re normally unwilling to accept, but you aren’t so far gone that you can’t focus on anything important.

This was when he noticed it...as the bar had filled, one spot at the counter had remained vacated the entire evening, and at that spot sat a single glass of what looked like whiskey. It hadn’t moved, and the bartender had not acknowledged it. Charlie hit the counter with his fist in frustration, a sound lost in what was now a veritable crowd—he couldn’t afford to be this unobservant anymore. If he missed some vital sign, it could mean the end of everything.

Mulling it over, he wondered what sort of power was at work here. He hadn’t seen anyone sitting at the bar in the Quortox. It is possible that someone could bury themselves so deeply into the aether as to be nearly invisible, but why they’d leave a whiskey cup as a sign of their presence was a mystery. No, it was unlikely that the Taverner was using such simple tricks. As he thought it over, Charlie realized this went back to what he had thought when he first entered the bar—this could be ritual worship, one of the oldest kinds.

Recognizing the feint at work, Charlie realized he should take some precautions to not be noticed as he made his next move. He laid his bare fingertips on the surface of the bar (he still hadn’t removed his gloves or his jackets), and hummed a flat “Om” under his breath, feeling his presence melt into the wood. The one person in the room who happened to glance at him lost interest quickly as Charlie’s presence was replaced by still air, and the observer’s gaze slipped into the cedar grain.

After this was done, Charlie got up and sat in the empty seat. No one noticed his movement through the groups and pairs surrounding the bar, or that he had sat down, just as they hadn’t noticed the full glass of whiskey that belonged to no one. As he settled into the bar stool, feeling some fellow with a leather jacket shove past behind him, nothing happened. There was no feeling of some hidden trap being set off, there was no new presences who he hadn’t taken account of, it was just a barstool.

Well, the power of this feint would have to be in the glass in front of Charlie. It was probably a tribute. Charlie was told that this was where he’d find the Taverner, so if this was a tribute to anyone, it was likely to that stranger.

Unsure of what results he might uncover, Charlie picked up the glass without hesitation and took a gulp. The fluid was oaky and bitter, but filled Charlie’s chest with pleasant warmth. He set the glass down and waited. Nothing changed other than the bubbling heat in his stomach from the harsh liquid. The crowd around him remained just as loud and increasingly obnoxious. Well, maybe he’d been mistaken; maybe it was just a forgotten drink.

As he was about to give up and leave the bar for the night, someone to his left said, “So you’re looking for grandchildren.” In the corner of his eye, Charlie noticed someone who hadn’t been there moments before. Turning his head, he discovered a man sitting in a barstool that hadn’t existed ten seconds ago—in fact, it was of an entirely different model than the others in

the bar. The surface of the bar extended itself to accommodate this new patron, and the man held a glass in his hand with an identical amber whiskey.

“Well what the bloody hell was that?” Charlie said, too startled to remain appropriate. The man looked at him with deeply weary eyes, and the lines in his face hardened that gaze into something flat and oppressive. “I didn’t see you here earlier,” Charlie said.

“I was here,” the Taverner said. “I was also elsewhere.” He looked away and scratched his neck with boney fingers, no longer deigning to give his full attention.

“Alright,” Charlie said, scratching his head. “Well that’s a trick not many Touched can pull off.” The Taverner didn’t respond to this observation.

Charlie wasn’t totally sure what had just happened—the Taverner had not been hiding in another dimension of space in the bar, which was obvious because he was seeing the man on the physical plane now, and yet no one else noticed the visual shift that just occurred.

“Well, yes, I am looking for some help,” Charlie said. The Taverner continued to stare across the bar and Charlie watched him, waiting for some kind of response. The man wore a grey wool suit with no tie, his shoes were scuffed, unpolished leather, and there was a bronze watch on his wrist that wasn’t wound or was broken. Looking through the space that the Taverner occupied was like staring through a heat haze, as if the man had spoken truly—he wasn’t entirely here, he was also elsewhere. Then it clicked.

“Wait a second,” Charlie said, as if the Taverner was about to go anywhere. He dropped his voice to almost a whisper. “Are you a god?”

The man took a long sip of his whiskey, swallowed it slowly, the muscles of his neck flexing as it went down, and then he shrugged. “Something like that,” the Taverner said.

Chills ran down Charlie’s back in a way he hadn’t felt since the day he had watched the angel Rift take his father away in shackles from between the cracks of a fence. If this man was a full god, there was reason to be intimidated—as far as Charlie knew, the Taverner was supporting the underground network that called itself the Dream’s Hospice. Such networks were in direct opposition to the laws of the Authority. For a true god to live on Earth and oppose the Authority could lead to worse than a death sentence. It was the exact reason Charlie’s father had been taken into custody, the reason why Charlie himself was being hunted.

While Charlie’s kind still had to follow many laws of physics in their daily lives, gods had fewer such constraints. They were more aether than real, and their essence existed in what was closer to metaphysical space. Charlie had a feeling that a similar glass lay sitting in many other bars across Europe, all as tributes to this god, giving him presence in every single one. He was drawing on the power that the taverns held in the minds of their patrons, at least somewhat present in each space that evoked the ritual of letting one’s load off in such establishments, something Charlie’s “uncle” Falstaff was accustomed to. This was old power.

Charlie realized it was both dangerous and pointless to discuss that matter further with the Taverner. The god had accepted his presence and was willing to talk, so Charlie would talk, knowing that the greatest upside to speaking with gods was that their power made it much easier to go unnoticed. “I need help finding a progeny of my progeny,” Charlie said. “And a safe place to lay my head down.”

“The second is easy, if you can pay the fee. The first will take some time,” the Taverner sighed heavily. “I will need your name and the length of your blood line.” Charlie looked around the bar nervously and started scratching his fingers. “No agents of the Authority can hear you now,” the Taverner said stoically.

Charlie took his gloves off for the first time since entering the bar and scratched the back of his head. “Alright, well,” he said and coughed. This was his only shot at having a chance of freeing his father. If he was lucky, revealing his name to a god was probably the most dangerous thing he would have to do in the coming weeks—though Charlie wasn’t a lucky man.

He picked up the glass of whiskey in front of him and downed the remainder in one swallow with a happy grimace. “I am Charles Reed I, once passed, born 1769, son of Peter Reed, otherwise known as the god Epimetheus.”