

AMERICAN GOTH

by
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THE STRANGER—COVENANT

As above, so below; as below, so above.
—*The Kybalion*

I know nothing of the ways of magic, still less of the ways of love except to say this: it leaves. All that loves, leaves. Death, though—death I know, as the face of my father when he told me my mother had gone while I slept the sleep of the very young child; I know it as a visitor, as an unwelcome friend, a friend who rings the doorbell at two a.m. to tell me that my life is gone and I have been again bereft. I know death as a voice on the phone, a sullen, angry voice from over a thousand miles away that hisses into my ear to tell me the last of the light has finally died.

Now, though, death wears my face and uses my hands as I slip the ties that bind me to this earth, to this breath, to this flesh as at last the red ropes fall from my wrists where I've been chained, an endless length and endless flow, the chain of red that falls.

I know how to do this right; I've etched the lines that spell the word to set me free.

I lean back against the wall and close my eyes with a sigh, for at last it ends, and this time I'm the unexpected guest, the sudden voice. The door is open to me and I walk through.



She walked on land, a rolling green field under a late twilight sky. Behind her were the woods, stretched endlessly across the rear horizon,

while before her, perhaps two hundred yards away, flowed a river. The ground rolled gently down and, intrigued by the white sheen of the water, she walked toward it.

Indigo sky that faded to a star-studded black spread across its far bank.

“Where am I?” But the question was flat, muted, because she was certain that she knew.

“You know this place,” her uncle’s voice sounded behind her.

“The Astral,” she answered. She wondered with strangely curious detachment at the name that had slipped out, previously unknown, and at her lack of surprise at her guardian’s presence.

“Do you remember what’s behind you?” he asked, his voice oddly muffled, as if the air were thick and humid though it was neither. In fact, the air smelled fresh, of early spring.

“The Tanglewoods,” Samantha answered. She pushed forward, inexorably drawn to the winking shore, and Cort followed behind, his pace unhurried.

As she reached the slope that gave way to the river, she saw it. “Star Bridge!” she gasped in recognition.

Ancient and monolithic, it spanned the widest part of the river and ended under an arch on a shore hazed in indigo light that stretched on forever.

She stopped a moment to stare at the river, the waters that flickered and flashed, a flow of opalescent white that gave the Astral its perpetual haze.

“I can’t follow you, Samantha,” her uncle’s voice said behind her as she stepped onto the first ancient red clay flagstone.

For the first time that she could remember, Samantha felt something—something akin to excitement, an almost delighted anticipation. She knew they waited on the other side, and she hastened forward.

“Samantha—you’ll be stopped—it’s not your time,” Cort called out to her back.

The stone railing was comforting, cool but neither cold nor damp and, oddly restored by the feel of the stone beneath her fingertips, she left the safety of the railing for the center of the broad walkway, her steps quick, certain. She’d walked this path before, crossed the bridge a hundred, perhaps a thousand, times before.

Halfway across, she could walk no farther.

There was no force, no gate, no...anything that she could see or feel. She simply could not move forward.

A figure stood another third of the way across, a figure made of light and shadow, male and female. The gauzy form eddied and billowed, and bits of cloudlike light flowed from it as it spoke, spoke in a voice she instantly recognized and could not name.

“What you seek it is not yet your time to find. This is not your path to the bridge—you must walk a different way.”

“But...but it’s not—”

“All things in their time, lovey, you’ll see,” the voice said gently, a voice she longed to hear, and Samantha couldn’t help but lean toward it. “You’ve made a promise—one you must keep.”

Right. She knew that, she remembered it, she just couldn’t remember why, and as she groped for the memory, a wind came up and tore at her. She tried to protest and she reached toward the figure, the voice. She could anchor herself against the wind, she could wait on the bridge for however long it took to—

“Samantha Cray, choose! Return, or remain stuck between—choose—*now!*” Her uncle called to her and she turned to face him, where he stood in the center of the maelstrom, pulled at by the forces that swirled around him.

She could stay, she could choose to do that, but she knew who she was, who she’d always been—a soul that kept its word—and she stopped resisting and let the wind catch her.

It pulled her backward and she swirled, caught up in a storm of light and shadow and laughter and songs that played in snatches while fear and lust tore through her veins and always, always, those eyes that looked deep within her *as she...fell...down.*

GRAMARYE

The lips of Wisdom are closed, except to the ears of Understanding.
—*The Kybalion*

I could feel the sun. Its brightness cut through my lids, its warmth pierced my skin. And before I opened my eyes, I could feel the tears build in them. I had failed. For the first time in my life, I had failed—failed at ending it.

Ah dammit. It wasn't so much that I'd wanted to die as I wanted... to question, to protest, to understand *why*.

"Don't open your eyes just yet," Uncle Cort's voice cautioned softly from somewhere to my left, "you've been out a while—they'll sting."

Resigned to living for the moment, I sat up and opened them anyway, only to shut them again against the white glare that greeted me.

My arm...my left forearm burned and throbbed, and I felt the scratch of linen wrapped firmly along its length as I heard my uncle draw the curtains.

"That should be much better," he said, and I opened my eyes again, carefully this time. I blinked and found his large form seated in a chair by my bed, his dark eyes somber as they rested on me. He handed me a glass of water. "Here. Do you know where you are?"

He waited while I sipped, the glass thick and heavy in my hands, the water sliding like ice needles past my throat.

My uncle's eyes, set under a broad forehead and a thick shock of deep brown hair that even tied severely back could not be straightened

of its natural curl, were eyes I always imagined better suited to a tiger than to a man, and he held them steady on me. My father's eyes, despite their different color, had held a similar glow, though I knew that in fact he and Uncle Cort were not blood-kin, but somehow foster-related.

Although I had faint remembrance of Cort in my childhood, he'd become a permanent fixture in my life, my legal guardian in fact, since my father, a New York City fireman, had been killed in the line of duty when I was fifteen, orphaning me. My mother had died when I was two.

I nodded in answer as the spasm in my throat eased. "Leeds," I managed to croak out past the painful weight that had lodged in my neck—we were in Leeds, England, in the house Cort hadn't seen more than a handful of times since I'd become his responsibility, the house I'd been told my father had summered in as a boy. He'd wanted me to get to know it before we returned to the States.

"Do you know where you were?" he asked, and the air seemed to thicken as he waited for my answer.

I stared at the glass in my hand, at the water that swirled and sloshed, the whirlpool made reality that I'd created. I knew what he asked, knew what he meant.

"Yes," I said and squared my shoulders as I gazed back at him. I knew, with that deep knowing that comes from the very cells of the body, that I had just taken a step in a new direction; my next words would seal that fate. "The Mid-Astral."

"What do you remember?"

I remembered...everything. It left me feeling curiously blank. I sipped some more, destroying the pattern I'd formed, then took a deep breath. How appropriate, I mused, erase one thing to form another. There could be no more stalling.

"I...I made a promise," I said, shocked to hear the airy tone that came from my mouth.

Something flared in his eyes, a lightning strike of power or tears. When he spoke, his voice was gruff, choked, but strong.

"You're ready."



“There are tests, dear heart,” Cort explained, “tests for every level, and each with its subsets. Fail in any one and there you must stay—but you cannot be allowed to stay in any level that leaves you—or the Circle of Light Bearers—exposed and unprotected. And so you must resolve to pass all of them. Do you understand this?”

She nodded. She was, as he’d said earlier, ready. It was ironic, she reflected, that in attempting to end her life she’d found a new one, a new path, a new way, even a new name. Ann. That’s what she’d decided. It retained the heart of ‘Samantha,’ but since those whom she’d wanted to hear call her name were no longer alive, it hurt her to hear it spoken by others.

But this...this new path...it felt like her whole life prior to this, including her walk to the Bridge, had led her here. All things considered, perhaps it had.

“Good,” Cort continued, unaware of her thoughts as he continued to monitor her with another part of his mind. She would learn how to do that too. “First, there is the Light. Do you remember?”

It was automatic, the correlation in her mind of the Light to Nina, the friend she’d allowed herself to feel so much more for. Light...it had shone out from Nina’s eyes in steady blue and silver waves, had eddied from her body and back to Samantha’s with every glancing touch, it had enveloped her when they embraced. She had even tasted it in one, perfect, kiss.

Did she remember? How could she forget? She shivered involuntarily in her seat. To think in that direction meant pain, because remembering that loss, the tearing, wrenching knowledge that Nina had returned to the Light that sourced life, had moved beyond this world... it was enough to make her want to follow—and she’d already tried once. She’d honor her promise and not try again. She forcibly shut the memories away. It was not what Cort meant, anyway.

“Yes. Yes, I do,” she answered instead. She once more closed her eyes and took another deep, perfectly controlled breath. She focused on the mental image of the perfect white light, a sphere that hung in space, until she could see it without focused concentration. She let the light mass drift, envelop her; then she absorbed it, letting it crawl up from toes to crown until she herself was not only contained in the nimbus, but also made of it. It tingled, a warm and sharp prickle under her skin.

“Are you ready?” Cort’s voice sounded gentle, and to her physical ears, slightly faint.

“Um...how will I know?” she asked, uncertain in this new—and yet familiar—space.

Cort chuckled softly. “Because you’ll look like a soft white lightbulb.”

She felt herself smile even as she drifted further from the physical. “Guess I’m ready, then.”

“Good.”

Suddenly her awareness, her environment, changed. She stood on the same high plains she’d stood before, Cort beside her. He seemed... different... somehow, his hair longer, even darker, if that were possible, his features sharper.

“You must be able to bridge—walk and balance—between worlds,” he told her as she found herself reflexively performing defensive and attack postures, the katas her father had taught her, with her guardian.

“I don’t understand,” she said as the forms changed, flowed, to push-hand techniques.

“As above, so below, dear heart,” her uncle said gravely as push-hands gave way to sparring. “What happens here will manifest in the flesh, the material world. Beings, what you’ve known before as monsters, demons, and angels, all appear on the Astral in true form, the soul represented and revealed, but they seem as ordinary people on the Material, the Mundane. Events on the Astral, on any of the many Plains, are followed by events in your daily, physical life. This,” he warned her as he swept her leg and she stumbled to avoid it, “is one of the many reasons you must learn to see every level, even when you’re fully on the Material—this is one small part of how you’ll be tested.”

She nodded from the ground. So far, she understood. The Aethyr was the energy, the soul or spirit level as some called it, of the Material, the place most minds drifted to in dreams, where haunts “lived.” The Astral...was something altogether different, and yet not, since it too had its ties to the physical. But while there was only one Aethyr, the levels of Astral, the Plains of existence, were infinite.

A message from the Aethyr could be delivered to the Material as a vivid dream, the sudden and unexpected fall of a cup from a counter, the coincidental meeting, the unexplained “lucky accident”; but one from the Astral took such energy to send, it might manifest as a flare

of flame in a fire, the sudden flight of a bird, or a feeling, a mere sense, of possibility.

“You cannot be forced to battle, not yet,” he said, holding a hand out to her, “not before you’re ready. Of course,” he grinned as he circled her, “they’ll try to trick you into it, and they’ll try to turn you.” He feinted and she successfully dodged.

“Who do you mean, ‘they’? What do you mean, ‘turn’?” She almost missed the side kick and blocked just in time.

“The Dark, love. They’ll want you to be one of them—you’ve ability, power, and you’re linked to the Circle, the perfect entrance to destroy it. That...they want more than anything. To devour, to destroy the Light.”

The volley he levied at her was sudden and fast and while she retreated, she held her stance and blocked effectively. “I would never do something like that,” she said, horrified at the thought that anything of that nature existed.

She managed it, finally, the first blow that got past his guard.

“Nice,” he told her, admiration evident in his tone. “Maybe you’ll be ready for your weapon sooner, *rather than later*.”



Dizzy. I felt dizzy and nauseous as I opened my eyes on the floor of the study. *Oh...this...sucks!* I thought as I tried to roll over. One moment, I’d been on the Astral, the next—

“Here.” Cort handed me a glass of milk and a nut-studded brioche. “Shut the systems down.”

At the first sip, I instantly cleared and after a few ravenous bites, I felt human again.

“Did you say a weapon?” I asked with real curiosity. I’d thought this was all head stuff, ethics and intentions, a new way, almost, of reading the environment.

“Yes,” Cort said slowly, “one that will carry, *cut*, as it were, through worlds.” He sighed heavily. “For now, its function is mostly ceremonial, but there have been times...well, not before you’re ready, anyway.”

I laughed at that. Less than three weeks ago I had tried to kill myself, had found myself in the strangest, most familiar place I’d ever

known, then had woken back to my body to find that the cuts on my wrist had been overlaid with a brand, an ankh melted into my skin. That had been part of the net, the spell Cort had literally cast to keep me alive, because it was the physical proof of my promise and my choice. That ankh now hung from my neck, above the sword pendant I wore.

“Try me,” I said, now fully revived after eating. “Let’s find out.”



It had been almost a week since our discussion about a sword, and had my plans not changed within the first few days of our arrival, I would have already been back home, back in the States, packing for freshman orientation at Princeton University.

Instead, in addition to the new world my uncle carefully and meticulously guided me through, there was the one we actually lived in: Whitkirk, a suburb of Leeds. Everything was strange, from the brick house that seemed older than the country I’d come from, to the way the town was laid out—groups of houses clustered together, their backs facing rolling greens, highways that suddenly became winding roads that ended in small squares, the pub that seemed to be an old factory in the middle of nowhere, then the sudden heavy bustle of Leeds proper as soon as you crossed into it...

I explored the house itself. The entire first floor was split into three parts: the front half was divided between a sitting room and the kitchen—that took up the front quarter, and while the building was old, the amenities in there were not. I only knew that because Uncle Cort had told me, not because I spent any real time in there. The back half, with a ceiling that rose to the second floor, was filled with carefully placed and arranged items of craft, of large sheets of metal pressed together between huge vises, delicately curved gold wires held with the tiniest of clamps, workbenches with weapons and armor covered in flaking dirt and rust, with brushes, oils, and whatever other mysterious tools would be used to examine and reclaim them.

The walls themselves were mostly exposed stone painted over in the palest apple green with furring strips fitted and wedged to their height to support the sturdy wooden shelves built onto them. These too were filled with more artifacts and weapons in various states of construction or recovery.