

The Interview

Lawrence King

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For Daniel Hutchison

Prologue

The four of them are arranged around one end of an enormous conference table in the chancellor's study at Miskatonic University. The study is quite large, designed for meetings of the full board of directors. This formal room, like so many at Miskatonic, creates an impression of long-standing wealth and influence. Its imposing fireplace is lighted today, but the room is hardly cheerful, scarcely warmed by its soft glow.

Dr. Marianne Christianson, head of the Science Department, slides a manila folder across the table to her boss, the chancellor of Miskatonic University.

Dr. Thomas Mason, the chancellor, receives the folder and asks, "Do you think he's a good choice, then? Will Dr. Mackenzie fit in here, Marianne?" Dr. Mason is the head of this small review committee and the head of the college as well.

"I think so," she replies. "He's smart, young, and eager to make his way in the world. He would make a good addition to our teaching staff. He's also a writer; his dissertation at UCLA was compelling. Not many people moving into academia add anything to physics research. His dissertation extends Steven Hawking's early work on black holes in two significant ways. First of all, he calculates the energies involved for creating small black holes in the laboratory.

Second, he shows how much Hawking radiation might be produced from them and how we might harness this energy.”

“I read the dissertation,” says Dr. Shyam Gupta, sitting to the right of Dr. Christianson. He’s clearly excited by what he’s saying. “If the hole is stable and sized appropriately, the energy production is immense due to black-body radiation being constantly released near the event horizon. It could be a surprisingly safe and efficient energy source.”

“Safe, unlimited energy—a nice theory,” says Dr. Christianson.

Dr. Gupta continues, “I also saw him present a research paper on creating miniature black holes. The team he was working with at UCLA has made a lot of progress in proving how that might be done.”

“So the boy can teach, research, and write,” says Dr. Mason. “That certainly could get him a graduate teaching fellowship here. But what about our other projects? How does Dr. Mackenzie fit into our long-range plans?”

“The details are in the folder, Thomas,” says Dr. Christianson. “I’ll give you the bird’s-eye view, though, and you can read the rest for yourself later. First off, he’s a lucid, imaginative, and coherent dreamer.”

“And we know this how?” asks Claire Barry. Ms. Barry, the fourth member of this review team, has been quietly taking notes.

“I have a friend who was involved with UCLA’s dream research program,” says Dr. Christianson. “As an undergraduate student, Dr. Mackenzie was one of their paid dreamers. My friend was helping to wind down the research after their grant money ran out. Dr. Mackenzie’s participation was distinctive—that was why my friend first called me.”

“Did he know the purpose of the research?” asks Ms. Barry.

“No. The students were told they were part of a study to compile a dream dictionary of common themes and symbols that dreamers encounter. They were given basic training on recalling, recording, and summarizing their dreams. They were given information on lucid dreaming and some simple exercises to try to enhance the lucidity of their dreams. They were paid for their efforts as part of a work-study program.”

“Is he stable?” asks Ms. Barry. She’s looking intently at Dr. Christianson.

She responds, “A good question given the lucidity and directive nature of his dreams. Yes, I think so. As part of the study, the students were required to have quarterly MMPI and other evaluations to test their mental states. Throughout the two-year project he was fine. His scores show that he’s a bit of a loner, a bit repressed emotionally and sexually, but quite sane. I would say from his profile that he could be taught to transverse. The copies of his dream diaries that I was given show powerful lucid-dreaming states.”

“Transverse potential,” says Dr. Mason, thoughtfully. “Anything else?”

“Perhaps just a curiosity,” says Dr. Christianson, shrugging her shoulders slightly. “I think he might be one of the Kingsport ‘Kings.’”

This gets the attention of the group. Ms. Barry breaks the silence. “And how would you know *that*?”

“That was an easy one. Our routine background check provides a birth certificate,” Dr. Christianson says. “Although his last name is Mackenzie, after his mother, his father is listed as James King of Kingsport, Massachusetts. Although it’s a common enough name—not in Kingsport. It appears that he’s had no contact with his father since he and his mother moved to California when ‘Mac’ was about three years old.”

“Should we consider this an asset or a liability?” asks Dr. Mason.

“Good question. Ultimately an asset, I think. It helps to explain some of the images in his dream journals and speaks to his potential in that area. He may have some of his father’s capabilities, although heredity doesn’t seem to play a major factor in that.”

Dr. Mason closes the folder that Dr. Christianson gave him. He pushes it back to her across the table. He says, “Let’s send the young man a letter of interest and set up an interview. Do you think we could have him here during Ostara? It would be lovely to have him here with a full moon! We can interview him for his teaching skills and to get an idea of how well he might fit into life at Miskatonic. If things work out, let’s have him teach for a year before we involve him in our greater plans. It would be good to have him think of Miskatonic as ‘home’ before we complicate things.”

Dr. Mason says, almost to himself, “I might have Brown Jenkin interview him as well, to check into the other matter.”

The mention of Brown Jenkin simultaneously elicits a smile from Dr. Christianson and a look of disgust from Ms. Barry.

Dr. Mason concludes the discussion, “If nothing else, wouldn’t it be better to have him here, working for *us*?”

Chapter One

Dressed for Success

The beach in Santa Monica is lovely on this spring morning. Although it's only 7:30 a.m., the temperature is already in the sixties, and the sky is blue and clear. It's supposed to be in the high seventies later in the day. I'm wearing cutoffs and a polo shirt. I'm barefoot, and Howie and I are enjoying a walk along the shoreline only a few blocks from our apartment. In one hand, I'm holding my flip-flops. In the other, I have Howie's leash.

Howie is an Italian greyhound. If you're not familiar with the breed, think regular greyhound, only smaller—much smaller. Weighing in at twelve pounds, he's oversized for the breed standard. Some are much smaller. With a short velvety coat and cockeyed ears, we get a lot of comments. I used to think it was all about Howie, but lately I've begun to realize it's the contrast. Where Howie is miniature, I'm tall. It's the combination that sticks out in people's minds: "Look at the tall, skinny man walking the skinny dog!"

I don't mind. Howie's family. Against my mom's wishes, I got him as a high school graduation present to myself. Rescued from an elderly breeder that passed away, Howie came

full-grown but with a lot of puppy energy. As an undergraduate, he rode around in my backpack and was very popular in study groups. Now he's ten years old, and I'm trying to start out in college again—this time as a professor.

I finished my doctoral dissertation this last winter and am scrambling to find a teaching job. My PhD in Physics turns out to only be useful in a few areas: the military, energy production, and academia. Not wanting to further the evolution of weapons of mass destruction or promote nuclear energy, I've been looking for teaching posts. My motivation is threefold:

1. I have to make my first student-loan payment in less than six months, and I'm almost broke.
2. I can't really afford to live in my little apartment now that my work-study job has ended.
3. Although she would love it, I do *not* want to move back in with my mother.

Luckily, I'm flying out for my first interview today. Honestly, I don't even remember sending a letter of inquiry to Miskatonic University in Massachusetts. I applied for a lot of graduate teaching fellowships online, though, so it's possible. I remember uploading my qualifications to an academic headhunting website, too. Maybe the referral came from there. In any case, I received a promising letter of introduction from Miskatonic University. They're paying for a two-day "greet, tour, and evaluate" trip to see if they want to hire me.

Howie's enjoying our walk along the beach. He's running off the leash now, along the edge of the water. "Would you like to live on the East Coast, Howie?" I ask. He looks up at me quizzically and pauses for a moment. Then, like a rocket, he launches himself after a seagull.

For a minute I worry about how he'll adjust to New England. Massachusetts has a beach, but it's not like this one. The winters in the Northeast can be brutal. I'll have to do a little research on dog clothing—sweaters and such.

For another minute I worry about my car. Can my 1999 Toyota RAV4 even make it to Massachusetts? I'll have to do a little more research on getting a newer car or see if I can get by at Miskatonic without a car. I've been thinking it would be environmentally responsible to have an electric car. Do they have charging stations in Massachusetts?

"Slow down, Mac," I say to myself. First there's the interview.

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I'm checking my suitcase. Not being much of a traveler, I wonder what I've forgotten. I have the usual underwear, toiletries, and socks, of course, but do I have the right clothes? I assume that I need a button-down dress shirt and sport jacket for the interview, but is a tie necessary? Could I wear jeans? I nervously pack slacks and an emergency necktie in addition to more casual clothes. Better to be prepared.

The coordinator of this visit, a Ms. Claire Barry, indicated there would be some kind of "meet and greet" reception party when I get there tonight. "Do you think I need fancier clothes for the party, Howie?"

Howie is sitting on the end of my bed, his paws folded in front of him. He's been watching me intently. He knows I'm going somewhere and knows he's going to be spending some time at Mom's. She's going to come by and pick him up from my apartment on her way home from work.

I get out my tickets, maps, and information about Massachusetts and Miskatonic University. I don't really need the map; a driver is picking me up from Boston airport. Still, it's nice to visualize where I'm going.

Naturally, I've been doing some Internet research on Miskatonic. The campus is a few miles outside of Arkham, Massachusetts, on a 150-acre plot. Founded in 1775, it is one of the

few US universities established before the American Revolution. Although it is not one of the Ivy League schools like Brown or Columbia, it's certainly old enough and well pedigreed. It's a small university with about 4,000 students and 380 academic staff members.

The Internet claims that its specialties are literature and oceanography (it is only a half hour from the coast.) The online catalog of classes indicates plenty of physics classes that I could teach. Hopefully they will allow me to concentrate on some of my specialties.

The photos of the campus are impressive, if a bit austere. Many of the buildings are so old that they have that gothic look. If there's Internet access on the plane, I'll see if I can research the architecture a bit. The administrative building looks like a medieval cathedral or castle, and some of the other buildings are quite striking. I wonder if there's on-campus housing or if I have to find a place in Arkham.

The doorbell to my apartment interrupts my thinking. I see that my taxi to the airport has arrived. The driver picks up my small suitcase and backpack and puts them into the back of the cab. I say goodbye to Howie and lock the apartment behind me. The journey has begun.

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Later, on the plane, I have a realization: *I'm going to get this job.* Since the letter of inquiry arrived, I've been feeling it getting closer. The job, I mean. I know that sounds a little crazy, or maybe desperate, but it's not that. Sometimes I know things before they happen. Sometimes I can feel when something is a sure thing—and generally it is. I have that feeling about Miskatonic. My life there is “getting closer.”

I've also had one of my dreams.

I remember almost all of my dreams. I was trained to do that as part of a work-study research project at UCLA. As an undergraduate I was paid to do dream research. I still keep a

dream journal, and I can generally record several of my dreams every night.

My numinous dreams are different, though. They seem portentous. They stand out from the other dreams. They also generally come true. Not in a literal sense, not always, but almost always in a recognizable way. My backpack is under the seat in front of me, and I pull out my dream journal and find my notes on the dream I had about Miskatonic.

It was like this: I'm standing in a lecture hall in front of a green blackboard. A piece of chalk is in my hand. Rows of seats are arranged in tiers going back and up so that everyone has a good view. The hall has high ceilings and is well lit with arched palladium windows. The room is old, stately even. Although it has some modern touches and AV equipment, it looks like it's been in use for at least a century.

The hall is full of students, and they're all looking at me intently. In the dream it's not scary, though. I'm their professor, and they're just caught up in my lecture. It's a comfortable feeling and one that I've had as a graduate teaching fellow at UCLA. The difference is that it feels like home. It feels like it's *my* lecture hall. It feels like these are *my* students.

The classic *Star Trek* episodes had a weird lighting technique. It made a character or scene "stand out." In the midst of the otherwise well-lit Starship Enterprise, one actor (usually Captain Kirk) would have moody, shadowy lighting. His face would be strangely highlighted amid the shadows.

My dream journal says, "Star Trek lighting," because it was like that in the dream. I was the featured actor. I was the one getting the special lighting treatment in my own lecture hall, just like Captain Kirk got special lighting on the bridge of his starship.

That's how I know I'm going to get this job. The lecture hall is already mine. I'm the featured lecturer.

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Flights going east across the country take all day. Even with a morning flight from LAX I spent most of the day on planes and then a ninety-minute trip in a hired car. We make it to Arkham near sunset, and as we approach the university gates there's just enough light to admire the campus.

Miskatonic University *is* impressive. It was built over two centuries and features some of America's most monumental architectural styles. Granite, sandstone, and brick are the featured materials, and some of the buildings are like medieval castles complete with turrets, colonnades, cloisters, and bell towers. The grounds are well maintained, and I feel like we've entered the estate of European nobility. Using a circuitous utility driveway, we pull up to the main administration building, University Hall.

Getting out of the hired car, I can't help but stare. The building is imposing. It stands tall at the head of an oblong grassy area and looks like it is carved out of solid granite. A sense of ponderous age assaults my senses. This building will be here long after my passing. It is both solid and graceful. It seems impossible that flying buttresses and filigreed window casings could be made of stone!

A cool wind blows across my face, making me shiver. I realize that I'm not alone, and I step forward to meet a woman standing in the entrance portico.

Extending her hand, she says, "I'm Claire Barry. You must be Dr. Mackenzie."

Ms. Barry looks extraordinary. Although in her fifties, she has a youthful bearing and an energetic handshake. What I notice first, though, is her shock of orange-red hair. This color, clearly out of a bottle, complements her almost-black skin perfectly. With striking looks and an easy-going manner, she seems larger than life. She's wearing a yellow blouse and a russet-

colored skirt and jacket that accentuate her slight figure.

“Nice to meet you,” I lamely say, noticing that her long fingernails are painted the exact color of her hair.

“You look a little tired,” says Ms. Barry, motioning me to follow her into University Hall. “That’s not surprising, considering your all-day trip.” I take my suitcase and backpack and follow her into the foyer of this grand building, back toward a hallway to the left of the entrance. As I follow, she continues speaking. “Let me show you our visitor’s suite and you can freshen up before our meet-and-greet party tonight. This building was built in 1750, and although it’s drafty and cold in the winter, it has some beautiful rooms.”

At the end of the hall, she opens a tall door, and I see what she means. If this is the visitor’s suite, they must have been expecting royalty. We’ve entered a sitting room with a travertine floor, white paneled walls, a travertine and alabaster fireplace, and lovely modern (and comfortable-looking) furniture. An oriental rug is centered in front of a fireplace and subdued lighting warms up the entire space. To the left, I see an opening into a bedroom with more of the modern furniture to contrast with the three-hundred-year-old dark wood paneling and vaulted stone ceiling. The effect of both rooms is one of amazing luxury.

“I’m sure you’ll be comfortable here, Dr. Mackenzie. The bedroom is through there and a bathroom beyond. You have an hour or so to get ready for our cocktail party. I’m not sure if that’s enough time for a nap, but you can at least take a shower if you like.” She’s smiling and getting ready to make her exit. “The meet-and-greet is at seven, and I’ll come by to take you there.”

I’m putting my suitcase down, still taking in the room. It has arched gothic windows looking into a walled garden. The dwindling twilight barely illuminates a cherry tree in early

spring bloom.

As Ms. Barry heads to the door, I stop her with a question. “How should I be dressed tonight?”

She turns to look at me, and her smile widens a bit. “Nervous?” she asks. “You needn’t be. Although the university faculty may tend to dress up for holiday parties, it’s more a matter of form than it is of judgment. You brought a suit, didn’t you?”

I pull my sport jacket and slacks out of my suitcase and hold them up. Ms. Barry looks less than impressed.

“A tie?” she asks.

Reluctantly, I pull my tie out of the suitcase.

Ms. Barry looks from the clothes to me and back again. “Yes, that will do,” she says, turning to leave.

“You mentioned a holiday,” I say with a question in my voice.

Without turning back, Ms. Barry says, “Tonight’s the beginning of Ostara.”

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An hour later, a chime sounds in the sitting room. I’m almost dressed—just struggling into my necktie. I feel much better after a shower and am looking forward to meeting my colleagues at the party. I fuss some more with my tie, then realize the chime was probably some kind of doorbell.

Ms. Barry is at the door, and she’s holding a necktie of her own.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she says. “This belongs to my son, and it will go much better with your shirt and sport jacket.” She’s smiling again, and I realize this is probably the way she smiles at her son. Maybe I remind her of him. Maybe he also has trouble dressing properly.

“I don’t mind, if you help me put it on,” I say. “I’m having a heck of a time getting the two ends to be even.”

“Of course,” says Ms. Barry. She deftly puts her son’s tie around my neck, and ties it in a few seconds. She was right, too, it looks like it was made for my sport jacket.

“I thought you said they wouldn’t mind how I looked,” I say, inviting comment.

“That’s not exactly what I said,” clarifies Ms. Barry. “I said that dressing well for tonight was more a matter of form than a means of judgment. I also think that first impressions are important, and I want you to make a good impression.”

I’m not sure how to respond to her kindness, so I say, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she says.

“You mentioned Ostara. I don’t think I’ve heard of that holiday. Is tonight a special occasion?”

Ms. Barry looks puzzled for a minute, then asks, “Did I say Ostara? I meant Easter, of course. It’s this Sunday, and we like to celebrate it at Miskatonic. Ostara is just an old word for the beginning of spring. Easter’s an old holiday, you know, based on the lunar cycle. It’s celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox. The early Anglo-Saxons used it as a time for planting spring gardens and to herald new life and new ideas.”

I’m wondering how the resurrection of Christ fits into all this, but not being a churchgoer I make no comment.

“Shall we go ‘meet-and-greet?’” asks Ms. Barry, pointing to the door of the visitor’s suite.

I follow her down the corridor nearly all the way to the grand entrance hall, but we make a turn down a short hall and through a doorway at its end. It opens into a small, lovely ballroom.

The room is square, with twin fireplaces on opposite sides. Both are lit, and they add to the warm glow of the room. An inlaid wood floor is in shades of honey-oak with ebony accents. A rich tapestry covers much of the stone wall opposite the doorway. A bar has been set up near the fireplace on the left, and a few small tables and club chairs furnish the rest of the room. The ceiling is quite high, with amber-shaded lights hanging from imposing wooden beams. Flanking the tapestries, arched windows look out into the same garden I see from the visitor suite. It's dark now, but the garden is bathed in moonlight.

The room has about a dozen people in it, and Ms. Barry guides me toward a group seated at one of the tables.

“Dr. Mason, I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Mackenzie,” she says, brightly. “Dr. Mason is chancellor of Miskatonic University.”

Dr. Mason is pale and lean and rises to shake my hand. In his late sixties or early seventies, his hair, eyebrows, and small mustache are surprisingly dark. He is wearing a black evening suit and tie. His clothes look like they were tailor-made just for him. I'm clearly underdressed for this evening.

“Glad you could come out east for a visit,” says Dr. Mason, smiling warmly. “It's almost impossible to find good teaching staff these days, and you are highly regarded at UCLA. It's hard to get to know people in just one day, but I hope we can at least start the process.”

I'm thinking, *Not well regarded enough for UCLA to hire me*, but I say, “That's nice to hear! I'm looking forward to meeting some of the people I might be working with.”

“Then, let me introduce two of your colleagues,” says Dr. Mason. “This is Dr. Marianne Christianson, the head of the Science Department. She would be your boss and advisor. Marianne has had the pleasure to mentor quite a few new faculty members here at Miskatonic.”

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