

**THE PATRON SAINT OF
NECROMANCERS**

Stefon Mears

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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For Melissa, as always

*Many thanks to
Bill, Lori, Rob and Wendy
for catching what needed to be caught.*

Authors Note

Ars Portlandia stories take place in a world that is very like our own, but is not our own.

Thus, you might be able to visit some of the locations described in this book, such as the Witch's Castle in Forest Park. Others, however, have been fictionalized or invented whole cloth, like Gripper. Where I have fictionalized or invented, I have tried to maintain that unique Portland vibe.

In much the same way, religions such as Vodou, Candomblé and Shugendō exist in this world, as do other practices such as Hoodoo. I have done substantial research in my attempts to keep my portrayals true to the spirit of those beliefs and practices. I have, however, taken liberties for dramatic purposes. I hope that devotees of those religions and practices will forgive any mistakes I have made.

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HEATH STOOD ON THE CUSP OF REDEMPTION. Redemption in this case was a bar called Gripper.

From the outside it didn't look like much in the best of times, and in the dying sunlight of a July evening, it looked downright uninviting. No windows in the front. No sign. Nothing to attract the attention of wandering tourists – or worse, locals not in the know who might mistake it for a neighborhood watering hole.

Gripper wasn't looking for people who might be curious about a dog shit brown stucco building sandwiched between a salvage shop and a musical instruments store. People who wanted to talk about the Blazers or the Timbers or the Thorns or the Winterhawks or the Ducks or the Beavers.

The sports fans and the bike-riders and the hipsters could buy their Pabst Blue Ribbon somewhere else. Gripper catered to a specific clientele, and the only people welcome there didn't need a sign to tell them what it was.

Patrons entered through a red door with a purple symbol in the center of the frame that looked like a stylized number

four to the casual observer.

Heath knew it was the symbol of Jupiter from one of those musty old grimoires. He still thought it looked like a stylized number four. But planetary magic was Maggie's shtick, and it was her bar.

Not a hundred feet away traffic still buzzed up and down Burnside, some heading across the Willamette for the west side of Portland or points beyond, others on their way back. Everyone in a hurry, but Heath couldn't bring himself to move.

If he was honest with himself, Heath would have admitted nerves did as much to stick his red-and-black Hawaiian shirt to his back as the heat and humidity. But this was not the time for introspection.

This was twilight, that perfect moment when the shadows vanished but the street lights hadn't kicked on. When the whole world grew sharp and clear to the eye. Great time of day to cast certain charms.

And a great time for a drink in the company of his peers.
If he was welcome.

Heath patted the mojo bag in the right pocket of his black jeans, hoisted his backpack a little higher on his right shoulder. He spat left, then right, then knocked. Three knocks, because it was a Thursday.

As the door opened, a hit of air conditioning lifted Heath's spirits immediately, but his breath caught when he saw who was holding the doorknob. She looked like a frail old woman, seventy-five if she was a day under a hundred. Skin so white her wrinkles were all but translucent. Locks of silver gray that dangled to her shoulders and a turquoise dress that fit her like a queenly robe. Powdery-sweet perfume hung about her like a personal fog.

But Mrs. Halloran's green eyes held sharpness that could cut steel. And the silver torc around her neck, twisted Celtic knot work, was the resting place of a familiar spirit with

a nasty reputation.

Heath had to swallow hard before he could speak. He could hear laughing and talking and strains of Greek folk music coming from inside, and he drew hope from the merriment. He could even smell a hint of garlic fries past the perfume.

“Good evening, Mrs. Halloran.”

She arched an eyebrow as she looked up at him, and allowed just a touch of her old-country Irish lilt to flavor her words when she said, “Heath Cyr. The twilight boy.”

Heath forced a tight-lipped smile and ground his teeth. Some people called him “Twilight” because he walked the line between spirits and humans. Others because they considered his magic somewhere between one flavor and another.

Mrs. Halloran turned the occasional nickname into “the twilight boy” because of the color of his skin. Not white as his mother, though his brown curls matched the ones growing out of her scalp. Not black as his father, though their dark brown eyes were a perfect match. Somewhere in between, like so many things in Heath’s life.

“Been a long time since you last knocked on this door, Heath Cyr.”

“I’ve been a bit busy.”

“Sure, and we’ve all heard a bit about that. Banished a duke of Hell, some are saying.”

Heath chose not to point out that it was a marquis. And that it was less a proper banishment than a remarkable piece of trickery if he said so himself. Instead he gave a noncommittal one-shoulder shrug.

Mrs. Halloran smiled. But she didn’t move to let him in. She didn’t close the door either, though. Finally, she said, “You weren’t thinking I was going to let you in here carrying that bag o’ tricks. You haven’t been gone that long.”

Heath turned a relieved sigh into a chuckle as he handed over his backpack.

Mrs. Halloran moved aside, but before Heath could finish a step she put a hand on his chest.

“Start something tonight, twilight boy, and I’ll finish it.”

Heath raised his hands in mock surrender. “Never doubted that for a moment. I just want a drink.”

Mrs. Halloran looked him up and down, and though she stood a good foot shorter than Heath’s six feet, without using the slightest bit of magic she managed to make him feel small.

“I suggest you stick to that.”

She moved off then, and Heath let the door close behind him. Air conditioning soothed his skin while he got a good look at the interior of Gripper for the first time in many months. Nothing had changed.

Seven large tables in the center, painted the colors Cornelius Agrippa attributed to the planets in his books. Or at least, that was what Maggie had said when Heath asked why the little square tables were all brown but the big round ones were colorful. Black, blue, red, yellow, green, orange and silver. Like they belonged as marshmallows in a breakfast cereal.

Heath had then asked why not nine? Or at least eight, depending on how she felt about Pluto. That question only got him a smile, but at least Maggie had a good smile.

The ceiling was painted as a star field, black, with swirls of red and blue for nebulae and scores of little lights for the stars. There were floodlights arrayed around the perimeter, if needed, but the little lights kept the bar feeling cozy without getting dim.

Only five patrons so far tonight, all of them people Heath recognized. But his eye was immediately drawn to the bar itself. Not the heavy-set man with the balding pate and the ill-fitting shirt and cargo pants, but the gorgeous Brazilian woman he was talking to.

It wasn’t her caramel skin or her soft brown hair or the slender curves barely concealed under the light fabric of her

midnight blue dress that drew Heath's attention.

It was the black heart behind the beauty everyone knew as Vizinha.

HEATH SMILED AND FOCUSED ON THE SMELL OF GARLIC FRIES. Anything but the presence of Vizinha, the last person walking this earth he wanted to see right then.

Well, not quite the *last* person, but close enough.

The garlic fries, however, were a Gripper specialty, and the batch smelled fresh. Enticing. Heath hadn't eaten anything since that turkey sandwich around noon. And with Heath's quick metabolism, carbs were a must.

So he inhaled deep the tang of the garlic until he could almost taste the oil of it coat his tongue. And he tried to ignore the flare of adrenaline twitching in his stomach at the sight of Vizinha, so soon after that bout of nerves at the possibility of Gripper turning him away. Tried to pretend his stomach was just growling with hunger.

Vizinha adjusted on her barstool to let him know she'd spotted him, and Heath had to bite his cheek to keep from turning to look at her head-on. Didn't help that the heavy guy she was talking to had blatantly spun around to give Heath an unfriendly gaze.

Heath's hands wanted to pat at his bag of tricks for reassurance, but Mrs. Halloran had it. Yes, there were things he could do without it. Plenty of them. And he even had a trick or two he could have used to get it back, if he were anywhere else. But this was the only bar worth going to for a guy like Heath, and with Vizinha here...

Did Maggie know both he and Vizinha were going to be here tonight? Was that why Mrs. Halloran was watching the door – and right now watching Heath from over near the restrooms to his left?

Wrong direction for his attention.

The smell of the garlic fries wasn't holding his focus, so he listened to the sound of his loafers scuffling on the wooden floor while he made his way between a big orange table and a bigger purple one toward the far end of the bar.

Only felt like the walk took half an hour. That might have been because conversation in the room stopped. The three old witches in the corner – two women and a man, all with enough gray hair to make a quilt – were now watching what Heath did *not* want to turn into a show.

The Greek folk music playing over the hidden speakers came to an end. Now he could hear the boards creak just a little under his weight, and some kind of thumping from back behind the bar.

Still, Heath kept that smile on his face like a shield, while on the inside he prayed, “Papa Legba, keep an eye on this little fool. Make sure nothing bad follows him home tonight.”

Finally he reached the bar, and Heath sighed as he eased down onto the padding of the end stool and slid his hands along the bar top. The bar itself had hundreds of star charts lacquered into place along the top and sides. Worn and scuffed now, like Heath felt himself, despite his youth. But the star charts were all intact under the thick coats of lacquer.

Heath tried to take that as a good sign.

No mirror behind the bar. Not at a place like Gripper. The last thing Maggie needed was some idiot getting drunk and calling something up out of a mirror that she would then have to put back down. Instead she had six shelves of alcohols, from the cheapest bourbon anyone could talk themselves into swallowing to a smattering of Irish whiskeys so old that Mrs. Halloran's grandmother might have been on a first-name basis with them.

And that didn't count the unofficial things that Maggie didn't keep on display, but everyone knew she had. Old school

absinthe replete with wormwood, tequila flavored with spirit worms, ouzo with a touch of hemlock, and others Heath could barely remember.

The tension in the room began to weigh on him. It seemed that everyone expected him to say something. He started drumming his fingers as though he felt relaxed, instead of tight enough to snap in a strong breeze. He could feel Vizinha's eyes on him.

Maggie bustled in from the back of the bar carrying a cardboard box. Heath always thought Maggie looked like an ex-boxer, complete with the broken nose and the muscled kind of fitness under her black tee shirt and blue jeans that some guys found sexy. She kept her red hair buzzed close, completing the image. Her one concession to the traditional American ideas of femininity was the touch of eye makeup she wore to highlight her clear blue irises.

The moment Maggie saw Heath she stopped and smiled. And just like that the tension shifted. Maggie's smile had that kind of effect on rooms.

Vizinha went back to talking to her companion. Heath could place the guy now. Drake, short for Mandrake. The kind of guy who liked to put on robes, fire up the incense, and conjure demons in his living room. The kind who called himself a Karcist.

"Heard you did a big favor for one of the homeless-by-choice kids," Maggie said, setting down the box on the floor where no one else could see what was in it. Maggie called everyone younger than her a kid, even though she couldn't have been more than five years older than Heath, which would have made her about thirty.

Not that Heath would ask.

Maggie grabbed a pilsner glass and started filling it with Deschutes Hefeweizen. "Convinced a demon not to kill him because he was already dead or something?"

“Something like that. Wasn’t a favor though, unless you count undercharging him.”

“*Undercharging?*” said Vizinha. “For *your* work? Is that possible?”

Heath started to turn, but caught himself. Instead he took the beer when Maggie offered it.

“Well, you impressed the hell out of the kid anyway,” said Maggie loudly, “and *we’ve all heard.*”

“Yeah,” said Heath with a chuckle. “Got the feeling he was going to use that story to get people buying him drinks all over town.” He raised his glass to Maggie. “Very good for business.”

Heath savored the crisp taste of the Hef while Maggie turned her attention to putting things away under the bar.

“You shouldn’t have interfered.”

Harsh words, but a man with a high voice has to work to sound impressive. Heath turned to see the speaker, Drake, glaring at him. Vizinha smiled and fluttered her chestnut eyes at Heath.

“A client came to me with a problem,” said Heath with a shrug. “Don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“Depends on who sent that demon,” said Vizinha. “Doesn’t it?”

Heath spun his stool so he faced them both.

“Is that what this is about?” he said to Vizinha, talking right past Drake. “Kicking my ass last year wasn’t good enough for you?”

“There will be no fighting in here,” said Maggie, not pausing whatever she was doing under the bar. “So keep it civil.”

“Look,” said Heath to Drake. “I don’t know what your issue was with the guy, and I don’t care. You want to go after him again, go for it. But if he comes back to me for help, well, I’ve got to pay my bar tab somehow, don’t I?”

“Too right,” said Maggie, still clinking bottles down there like she was either looking for something or getting to her spring cleaning very late.

“You need a lesson,” said Drake, standing up. He threw a twenty down on the bar. He narrowed his eyes at Heath and nodded slowly. “Yes, you do.”

Exit Drake, stage right, pursuing Furies.

Heath sighed and sipped at his beer, but Vizinha was still staring at him. Smiling.

“What?” he finally said, without looking.

“Oh, nothing,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to raise a dead issue.”

She pulled a fifty from her cleavage and dropped it on the bar before sauntering out like she was walking a runway.

“Maggie?” said Heath. When she popped her head up to look at him, he continued, “Do other people get to drink here without getting threatened?”

“All the time,” she said. But then she winked. “But not the interesting ones.”

HEATH STAYED ANOTHER COUPLE OF HOURS AT GRIPPER, and by the time he left he’d remembered why he liked the place. It was in full swing – two dozen patrons scattered around, talking loudly over the Irish folk music now coming out of those hidden speakers. A young couple in the corner even danced.

And without Vizinha staring him down, Heath enjoyed himself. Three games of darts. A good conversation about High John the Conqueror root with a pair of *curanderos* who worked around the east Portland suburbs of Gresham and Milwaukee. Even two small commissions – cowrie shell readings for competent practitioners who trusted their magic for everything but divination.

Nothing like leaving a bar with more money in his pocket than when he came in. Heath was all but whistling when

Mrs. Halloran handed him his backpack beside the front door.

“Practically a welcome back party for you,” she said, holding onto one strap to keep him from taking the backpack just yet.

“Oh, they were testing me all night. Details about the big story. Wanting to know what work I’d been doing lately.” Heath shrugged. “Making sure Vizinha didn’t shatter my nerve.”

More than fifteen forms of magic practiced by the people in this bar tonight, from shamans to western ceremonialists to Druids to Taoist sorcerers. And every one of those systems agreed on a single truth – magic was for those who dared.

“A fair question.” Those sharp eyes were probing for something. “You were gone a long time.”

Why wouldn’t she let go of the backpack?

Heath looked at her hand, then back at her.

“Is there something you want to know?”

“Everyone knows she took you down. Brigid knows you never denied it. But no one seems to know *why*.”

Heath felt his joy at the evening ebb away.

“And no one needs to,” he said in a hard voice. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to leave.”

“All right, all right,” she said, a mocking smile edging her lips as she let go of the backpack. “It’s my duty as door guardian to remind you that you’ve been threatened twice tonight. Once explicitly by Mandrake. Once implicitly by Vizinha. As soon as you pass through this door, I am no longer responsible for you. So try not to get killed.”

That last made Heath blink, but she must have seen his quizzical expression because before he could ask she added, “I’m not eager to see my granddaughter cry, and I think she’d miss you.”

“Good night, Mrs. Halloran.”

The old bat said something noncommittal as she moved off, and Heath opened the door, though he took a moment to

gather himself before stepping across the threshold. He should have thought to prepare for this in advance. Instead, he couldn't leave without improvising. And it had to be something quick and easy, or he'd draw the attention of the whole bar again.

He dug through his backpack past the candles and bags of herbs and other paraphernalia for his pure silver, ten-ounce flask. He uncapped it and waved it back and forth in front of himself, where the cinnamon flavoring of the thrice-blessed rum could tempt his own nose as well as the spirits.

"Papa Legba, tap your cane. Distract my enemies so they don't see me as I pass." He poured some rum on the sidewalk. "Papa Legba, tap your cane. Confuse my enemies so they can't hear my footsteps as I pass." More rum. "Papa Legba, tap your cane. Help me get home swift and safe."

One last jigger of rum on the sidewalk, then Heath capped the flask and started walking toward the Max station with a confident stride. He slipped the flask into his bag, and just on the edge of his hearing he began to detect a distant tapping sound.

The lights were green for Heath, and he reached the Max station and boarded his light rail train just as the doors were closing so it could depart. All the bench seats of the car around him were empty, but the air felt foggy. Misty almost. And syn-copated with the bumps and jolts of the rolling train heading west, he could hear a distant tapping as of wood on concrete.

That tapping continued as he left the train and walked through a sleepy northwest neighborhood to his apartment near tremendous Forest Park.

Once upon a time, Heath's apartment had been a guest house, or perhaps an in-law house, in the backyard of a good-sized home. But that family was gone now, and whoever bought the land had gotten the permits to turn the house itself into four apartments. And the management company, well, they seemed to have gone and forgotten about that little guest house.

Oh, Heath was sure they hadn't forgotten it entirely. But they hadn't raised his rent in six years, and he didn't pay any of his own utilities. Not even cable, Internet or telephone. In fact, Heath suspected he could have stopped paying rent and G&H Management might never have noticed.

But that would have been wrong. And Heath had no intention of offending whatever spirits were keeping him in a spacious, stand-alone one-bedroom apartment with its own loft and basement for five hundred fifty dollars a month. So every month he paid his rent, and when he did he set out an extra offering to those unnamed spirits.

Wouldn't do to be ungrateful.

Monthly gardeners kept the local native plants in line in that backyard. Ferns, roses, rhododendrons, Oregon grapes, and of course tall, mighty Douglas fir trees. A half-dozen of them. Heath's apartment was practically situated in the woods. He even liked to sit on his little front porch on a nice spring evening when he did his carving.

Unlike the bar, Heath's front door was white, with a hand-painted, black, equal-armed cross and old-fashioned key. Not as formal as the veves of Vodou, but it served as his own connection to Papa Legba at the threshold.

Heath heard the tapping all the way to that front door, and it didn't stop until that door was closed and locked behind him.

"Thank you, Papa," Heath whispered, leaning back against that door in the darkness.

Someone knocked.

THE SHARP SOUND MADE HEATH JUMP, but he dropped his backpack by choice. He kept the lights off, and reached down beside the doorframe for his tire thumper. Eighteen inches of aluminum bat.

“Who’s there?” he said through the closed door, smelling the Hefeweizen on his own breath. Surely no one could have followed him. Not with Papa Legba tapping his cane.

“Could you open the door, please, Mr. Cyr?” Man’s voice. Someone used to authority. Didn’t identify as police, though, which Heath considered a good thing. He’d never had uncalled-for police show up at his door for a good reason.

“It’s closing in on eleven o’clock at night, and I’m not expecting any visitors. That means you’re trespassing. So I’d appreciate it if you left without my calling the cops.”

“You’ll have a hard time proving trespassing, Mr. Cyr. Since I own the land.”

Heath shook his head and turned on the porch light. He opened the door, not trying to hide the tire thumper in his grip. The man standing there was wasn’t too much older than Heath. He had a thick, Scottish jaw and nose, and hair black enough to vanish against a midnight sky. He had the kind of white skin that had red undertones.

And he was wearing a black suit, with an unwrinkled white shirt and a black tie.

Who wore suits at this time of night?

With the door open, Heath could hear the frogs and crickets discussing this strange man on his porch. They didn’t sound like they liked his presence any better than Heath did.

“I suppose you have a deed or some other kind of proof of that, do you?” said Heath.

“I do.” The man patted the left side of his chest, implying paperwork in a jacket pocket. “But rather than dig it out, let me prove it this way. Six months ago I was auditing the work of my management company and noticed that more money was coming in from this location than expected. Would you care to guess how much?”

Heath got a sinking feeling in his stomach. Six months ago would have been at about the height of the problems Vizinha had sent his way during their war.

“Well, I did a little digging and found an old rental contract that everyone else seems to have forgotten about. Looks like you’ve been enjoying quite the bargain, wouldn’t you say?”

“If you’re here to evict me—”

“Perish the thought.” The suited man said the words just the way Heath’s daddy used to say them, which made Heath wonder if the suited man had lived in New Orleans. “I’ve done some checking around about you. You seem to be a model tenant, for what that’s worth. Never any noise complaints, no calls to the police. Your checks have arrived on the third day of the month like clockwork, and if you’ve ever needed a plumber or anything, I can’t find a record of it.”

“So you just wanted to meet me?” Heath smiled, but deep down he knew he couldn’t get rid of the suited man this easily. “Well, I’m glad to make your acquaintance. Now if you’ll excuse me—”

“But that wasn’t all I found out.” The man tilted his head to the side. “Rumor has it that you make your money selling Voodoo charms.”

“No, that’s not right.” Heath shook his head with the certainty of absolute truth.

“But I heard about a conjure hand you put together for a man named Jenkins—”

“Hang on.” Heath narrowed his eyes at the suited man and got a smile for his troubles. “Most of my clients don’t even know the term ‘conjure hand.’ Not in this part of the country. They all call them mojo bags, and so does Jenkins. What do you know about it?”

“The question, Mr. Cyr, is what do *you* know?”

Heath stared at the man and sighed. He stepped out on the front porch and locked the door behind him, tire thumper still in one hand. Just in case. In the background the frogs and crickets got worked up over this development.

“Why did you try to snow me with Vodou talk? Obviously

you know I'm a conjure man."

"I haven't lived in New Orleans since I was a kid," the suited man said. "I can't keep all the terms straight."

"Well," and Heath realized he was raising the tire thumper in what might have been interpreted as a threatening manner, but he didn't lower it. "Hoodoo is magic and Vodou is religion. Seems pretty clear to me."

The suited man stared at the glistening aluminum of the tire thumper.

"I hope I haven't given offense."

"Not to me." Heath shrugged and lowered the tire thumper. "But if you go telling people I claim to practice Vodou, you'll likely offend *them* on my behalf. Then you and I will have a problem."

"All right," the suited man said, raising his hands in surrender, then straightening his tie. "Mind if I get to the point then?"

"I'd like nothing better."

"Mind if we go inside? This is a private matter."

"Nope." Heath shook his head. "I don't discuss business in the house."

The suited man grimaced and looked about, and Heath began to think he'd get the rest of the evening to himself after all, but the suited man finally nodded.

"All right then. Here it is. I presume you know who Saint Cyprian is?"

"Which one?" Heath stifled a yawn. He was just about talked out for the night.

"You know which one. Revered by practitioners of the *ars magica*. They call him the patron saint of—"

"Necromancers. Sure. Cyprian of Antioch." Maybe Heath could find a way to speed this along. "Not that the Church would agree with the common folk about that patronage. What about him?"

“Do *you* revere him?” The suited man got intense with that question, holding his breath and staring at Heath as though he could see through to Heath’s soul.

“Can’t say I’ve had much to do with him. I use Saint Cyprian oil when it’s called for – and I make my own oils – but that’s about it. I’m not one of those guys who keeps a statue of him and goes through the whole annual nine-day ritual to him or anything, if that’s what you’re asking.”

The suited man continued staring for a moment, tempting Heath to raise the tire thumper again. But finally the suited man nodded.

“I believe you.”

“Well thank God for that,” said Heath. “It was going to keep me up all night. Can I—”

“And I want to hire you. The true *Black Book of Saint Cyprian* has been found, and I want you to get it for me.”

The frogs and crickets stopped chattering.

