



The Witch of Criswell

An Ariel Moravet Occult Mystery

John Michael Greer

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CHAPTER 1

THE EYES OF THE CROCODILE

Darkness rushed past the windows as the train lurched and rattled onward. Ariel Moravec, two days past her eighteenth birthday, tried to distract herself with the F. Scott Fitzgerald short story on her e-reader, but this once the glittering prose and Jazz Age setting couldn't hold her attention. The train was hours behind schedule, the car she was riding empty except for her: most of the passengers had spilled out the doors at the big city she'd passed an hour back, hurrying through the harsh fluorescent glare across cracked floors to the escalators and whatever unknown destinies waited for them in the city up above. The rest trickled away one or two at a time at little trackside stations where cars waited in half-lit parking lots and streetlamps went on one by one in the gathering night.

For the fifteenth time in as many minutes, she stopped herself from reaching for the cell phone in her purse and seeing how late she was. No point in that, she told herself irritably. If he's there, he's there, and if he's not—

She made herself stare out the window into the night, tried to guess from the dim half-seen shapes how close her destination might be. Reflected in the glass, framed in straight black hair cut shoulder length, her face stared back: cheekbones just angular enough to make themselves noticed, nose and chin

small, skin light and unmarred by make-up. Big brown eyes looked moodily at nothing in particular. A pixie's face, her mother liked to call it. Even before she'd gotten old enough for that to rankle, she'd hated the description, though that was mostly because of the lectures that so reliably followed it. Ariel scowled at the thought, then considered the expression. Were there surly pixies?

A streetlight off in the middle distance caught her attention. It vanished behind some closer darkness before she could see any of the landscape around it. A little later another light came into view, further off, and then more: scattered houses with yellow-lit windows, cars dotting the darkness with headlights or tail lights, streetlamps carving circles of pavement out of the unknown, a strip mall with gaudy illuminated signs above a parking lot bathed in blue-white glare. The leading edge of a tunnel cut it all off suddenly, plunged her back into night. Minutes passed and then the train shot out the other side. As it turned, Ariel could see the city in front of her in a blaze of light: a dozen mid-sized skyscrapers of Art Deco vintage flaunting bright windows against a starless sky, three lamplit bridges flinging themselves across the Shetamunk River, glare of streetlamps turning old brick buildings into a symphony of lights and fathomless shadows: Adocentyn.

Another tunnel swallowed the train moments later. The loudspeaker overhead cleared electrical phlegm from its throat and repeated the name of the city, followed by something Ariel couldn't interpret and didn't need to. She extracted herself from her seat, put the e-reader into her purse, and went to get two big ungainly brown suitcases from the rack at the forward end of the car. A conductor peered in through the door ahead of her, spotted her, left again without a word. Lurch and rattle, rattle and lurch: the train left the tunnel, curved along a broad arc, and crossed the river under a blaze of sodium lamps. By the time the other bank came near the train was slowing. It rolled

on past another, slower sequence of brick walls and shadows, lumbered to a halt at the station a block or so further on.

The doors hissed at her and opened grudgingly. Suitcase in each hand, Ariel went out onto the platform, breathed humid night air edged with diesel fumes and shaken by the muted roar of the locomotive. A glance up showed her the sign pointing toward the waiting room. Blurred glass doors sighed and slid apart as she approached them.

Some train stations have their own distinctive character, but the Adocentyn station wasn't one of them. Worn black and white square tiles on the floor, worn wooden bench seats set back to back in rows as though leaning on one another for support, elderly brown-bladed fans hanging from the ceiling like thin-legged bats, a ticket office window over to one side with the lights on and a single weary clerk typing something into a computer: it could almost have been the station in Summerfield where she'd boarded the train that afternoon. The one difference that mattered was the tall old man in a dark gray suit sitting on one of the benches, who glanced up from a book, saw her, and got to his feet. Ariel braced herself and walked toward him.

"Ariel?" His voice was as deep as she remembered, and he seemed just as tall and gaunt as when she'd last seen him, though she'd gained more than a foot of height since then. Unruly hair, pointed beard, and great bushy eyebrows were silver, not the salt-and-pepper they had been, but his hands were just as big and angular as she recalled. Dark eyes, precise deliberate movements, jacket and pressed slacks and bow tie even on a hot summer night: it all brought memories surging back.

"Hi, Grandpa," she forced out. "I hope you weren't waiting all this time."

"No, I knew the train would be late."

"Oh. Yeah, I bet that showed up online."

He gave her a blank look. "I have no idea. Let me take one of those." He deftly extracted one of her suitcases from her grip. Her mother had chided her about that—"Don't let your grandfather take your luggage, Ariel, you know how old he is"—but she felt too tired and dispirited to argue the point.

"Shall we?" he said.

She managed a nod, went with him to the glass doors that faced the street.

His car, an old black Buick Riviera that looked as big as a battleship, sat against the curb half a block further from the river. They got her luggage stowed in the trunk, and then he opened the passenger door for her, closed it after her and went around. She drew in a long unsteady breath. Once he climbed in behind the wheel and pulled the door shut, she closed her eyes and said, "I just want you to know this wasn't my idea."

A moment of silence passed, and then the engine started. She opened her eyes again as the car left the curb.

A few minutes of driving got them through the bright lights and old storefronts of Adocentyn's downtown district, then past the old town green with the statue of Elias Ashmole on one side of it. She remembered the statue vividly from both of her childhood visits to the city. Green with two centuries of patina, the old archmage stood in the muted glare of streetlights, greatcoat open in front, wig spilling down over both shoulders in twin cascades of curls, eyes intent, lips slightly parted. One of Ashmole's hands held a tablet with words on it she still remembered, though they were in Latin and she'd never learned what they meant: VERUM SINE MENDACIO, CERTUM ET VERISSIMUM.

His other hand was raised up and outward, palm up. One afternoon when she was there with her parents—was it the summer when she turned seven, or when she turned ten? She couldn't remember—a pigeon lighted on it as she watched. It looked for all the world as though Ashmole was lecturing the bird, and she'd started laughing. Of course her mother

demanded an explanation and met it with an irritated look, and Britney mocked her about it for days afterward: one more entry in a long and bitter list.

She struggled with her recollections as the Buick drove on and buildings hid Ashmole's statue behind them. From the old town green, she thought she recalled, you went eight blocks east toward the shore where the tall ships used to dock, and then a left turn took you uphill on Lyon Avenue past quiet clapboard houses and commercial streets, to where the oaks of Culpeper Park loomed up green and anarchic, blocking the right of way. Was that it? Her grandfather's hands on the wheel answered the question; so did the sign that announced Lyon Avenue. One by one, dimly familiar blocks of houses and shops slipped past, and street signs murmured names she almost remembered, until the Buick slid to a stop at the curb beside a tall house with green-painted clapboard walls and white trim, triggering a burst of childhood memories. At the end of the block the great dark oaks waited just as they had all those years before.

She got out of the car, didn't argue when her grandfather picked up one of the suitcases again, followed him up three familiar steps, past the wall-mounted mailbox with DR. BERNARD MORAVEC on it in gold letters, and through the big oak door. Inside, every last detail woke another cascade of recollections. "Let's get your things up to your room," he said. "Then I imagine you'd like some dinner."

"Please."

"Pizza? As I recall, you used to like sausage and extra cheese."

"Yeah. I still do."

He nodded, as though that settled the matter, and led the way up the stairs.

The room that waited for her was the same one she remembered from eight years before, big and comfortable, with walls papered in a pattern of roses against a cream-colored

background, and a braided rug centered on the hardwood floor. A bay window looked out over the street and the roofs beyond it, toward the glittering lights and towers of downtown Adocentyn; another window, smaller, faced Culpeper Park. An ornate four-poster bed, a dark oak desk and chair, a big maple dresser and a matching vanity with a mirror completed the scene. The suitcases went over next to the vanity, Ariel thanked the old man, and he motioned toward the door and the stair beyond it.

Downstairs again, he called in the pizza order on a land line in the kitchen. She went into the parlor, settled on a big sofa covered with worn brocade the color of pine needles, and looked around at familiar furnishings. Around the walls, soaring bookshelves strained beneath the weight of hefty hardback volumes, more than half of them bound in brown or black leather and marked with faded gold lettering on their spines. Between the bookshelves, where windows or doors didn't take up space, curious framed tables and charts hung on the walls, full of dense type and strange emblems, communicating nothing to Ariel but a sense of mystery. A big black grandfather clock stood over against the wall to one side, with three dials: one that showed the time, another that showed the phase of the moon, and a third with seven hands that marked the movements of the planets. Further in, the sofa, three overstuffed armchairs in random colors well faded with age, a musical instrument that looked a little like a small flat piano with an off-center keyboard, and two ornate brass Art Nouveau floor lamps took up their shares of the carpeted floor. A long ebony coffee table in faux-Egyptian style occupied the center.

After a moment she looked up. Yes, the little wooden crocodile still perched atop one of the bookshelves, toothy mouth agape, gazing down at her with black beady eyes. That cheered her. She'd adored that crocodile, and gone out of her way not to pay any visible attention to it, since neither her parents nor Britney had ever noticed its existence. Knowing it was lurking

there unseen, watching the room below as though pondering who it wanted to bite first, had cheered her through certain difficult hours.

Her grandfather came back in with a tray in his hands. "I hope a cup of tea will be welcome. The trip out here can't have been pleasant."

"No," she said, and then caught herself. "Yes, please, and no, not very." He nodded, put the tray on the coffee table; it held a Japanese teapot the color of a winter storm cloud, two mismatched cups, and a sugar bowl and a pitcher of cream, equally mismatched.

"It's been years since I last took the train," he said, breaking the silence before it became awkward. "I imagine it's not what it was." Golden tea splashed into one cup, the other.

"I think it was nicer when I was a kid." With a shrug: "I don't remember spending that much time sitting on sidings while freight trains went by."

"Still, here you are."

"Yeah. I'm sorry if that's a problem."

His gaze, unreadable, regarded her. "I was surprised when your father called me," he said. "We've never been close—his mother and I divorced when he was not much more than a year old, you know, and I saw very little of him after that. Of course I was at his wedding, but—" He shrugged. "A formality, mostly. And then the funeral." Neither of them had to say which one. "The two times you and your sister came here, when you were younger—I enjoyed those, though I gather your mother didn't. But I remember you from those visits as a quiet, pleasant, intelligent girl with a praiseworthy fondness for books."

"Thank you," said Ariel, past the lump in her throat. "That's—that's really nice of you to say that."

He nodded, acknowledging. "So when your father called and asked if you could stay here for the summer, he didn't have to make an argument for the idea."

"Did he say why they're dumping me on you?"

The phrase didn't dent the calm of his expression. "No, that wasn't something he mentioned. I was hoping you could tell me."

"They're taking Britney on college visits," said Ariel. "All over the country, Stanford, Dartmouth, Harvard, wherever. A road trip, doing all the tourist stuff on the way. Just the three of them, of course, and they couldn't even leave me at home. They're renting the house out for the summer, letting some stranger or other paw through all my stuff I couldn't pack—" She caught herself just short of tears, stirred cream and sugar into her tea as a distraction.

"You didn't go on college visits last year, I take it."

"I'll be starting community college in the fall," Ariel said. "Or getting a job if I can find one." Another shrug jerked angular shoulders upward. "Mom and I had a really big fight—this was six years ago. She told me that if I didn't do all the stuff you're supposed to do, I wouldn't get into a good college, and I told her I was okay with that." She gave him an uncertain look.

He met it with the same unflappable calm. "In my day, getting into college took decent grades, an application, and a modest check. I take it that's not the case now."

She shook her head. "Not a chance. Not if you want to get into one of the big name schools. You've got to take all the right classes, get into all the right afterschool things, have all the right opinions on all the right subjects, suck up to all the right teachers so you can get them to write letters for you, and it just goes on and on. Britney's at it seven days a week."

"And you're not."

Ariel shook her head again, harder. "No way. I told Mom I'd rather flip burgers and live cheap than do all that crap, just so I could waste my whole life working seventy hours a week for some sleazy corporation the way she and Dad do. She was so mad she screamed at me for like an hour." She looked down

again, wincing at the memory. "But that's how Britney became the perfect child and I became Mommy's little failure."

The doorbell chose that moment to ring. Her grandfather got to his feet and went to answer it. On the way out of the room he glanced back at her and said, "What you're saying, I think, is that you want a life, not just a career."

She was still staring when he came back with the pizza. He ducked into the kitchen to get an ornate iron trivet, set that on the coffee table, put the pizza box down on top and opened it with a flourish. A wave of steam loaded with scents reminded Ariel of just how long it had been since her inadequate lunch in the train's café car. The old man motioned for her to help herself, and she extracted a wedge dripping with cheese. Before she bit into it, though, she said, "I didn't think you'd understand."

One of his eyebrows went up. "No?"

"You've got a doctorate."

"My Ph.D. was paid for by the federal government, back when I worked for an agency with a three-letter name. You'd recognize the letters."

She stared at him again, the pizza momentarily forgotten. "You were a *spy*?"

A gesture with one hand brushed aside the word. "An intelligence analyst, mostly. I spent twenty years working in an office building in Langley, Virginia, reading stolen documents from the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and writing reports on their military plans. That was easy for me, since I grew up speaking Slovak with my parents and English at school, and so the agency sent me to Georgetown University to get a doctorate in political science so I had the background I needed. Then the Iron Curtain came tumbling down, everyone in my department was offered early retirement, I took it, and then went on to make some tolerably successful investments in Slovakian industrial firms with money I'd saved. Since then? Off the leash, you might say. For the most part I've pursued my

own interests." He gestured again, indicating the slice of pizza in her hand; she blushed and bit into it. It was just as good as she remembered.

"Same pizza place?" she said when she'd swallowed.

"The same chef. It's only been eight years, you know."

She took another bite, let herself bask in the flavor.

"But I'm sure that's the other half of the reason your mother thinks I'm a bad influence," he went on. Ariel wondered what the first half was, but decided not to ask. "She wanted to know why I didn't go into the business world once I retired from the agency," he went on. "I don't think she appreciated my answer much."

"She probably wishes Dad was in line for a bigger inheritance."

He winced but didn't argue the point. Looking away, he extracted a wedge of pizza, bit into it. Once he'd swallowed: "But you're here and she's not. I trust you'll take advantage of that fact and have a pleasant summer."

Ariel managed a first tentative ghost of a smile. "You know, I think I'm going to try." The smile faltered. "But I have to call her tonight and let her know I'm here."

"And you'd really rather not." When she nodded: "Don't worry about it. I'll call her in a little while. She doesn't like to talk to me, so it won't take long."

"Thank you. Seriously, thank you." Another bite of pizza vanished. "You're being really nice, you know. Let me know what I can do around the house, okay?"

"Certainly, if you like."

"I don't know if there's anything else I can do, but if there is, let me know."

The old man took another bite of his slice of pizza. Somehow the movement reminded Ariel of the crocodile on the bookcase. "Who knows? Something might come up."

An Ariel Moravec Occult Mystery

Eighteen-year old Ariel Moravec does not expect much from a summer with the grandfather she hasn't met in years; a respite from her dysfunctional family, perhaps, and a brief delay before she has to face an uncertain future.

A few days after her arrival, however, she learns that her grandfather is an occult investigator tasked with hunting down the perils of the Unseen. Offered the opportunity to assist him on a case, the curious and enthusiastic Ariel leaps at the chance...

But strange forces are stirring in the little farm town of Criswell, where a famous witch lived in colonial times. Has old Hepzibah Rewell's curse awakened, or is the evil magic the work of someone living?

Caught in a tightening net of bitter local rivalries and strange happenings, Ariel must find out...or her own life may be at risk.

John Michael Greer is the award-winning author of more than fifty books, including eleven fantasy and science fiction novels. Greer served as the Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA) for twelve years. He lives in Rhode Island with his wife Sara and blogs weekly on politics, magic, and the future at www.ecosophia.net.

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