

Falls - Sample Chapters

By Eric Dontigney

Chapter 1

It started on a Tuesday, which is a bad day for things to start. I think it has something to do with process. Mondays and Fridays are good for starting things, but Tuesdays are good for working through things. In that spirit, I had spent the day alone, purging the stray tendrils of foreign energy that had built up on me. It builds up fast, if you let it, and it happens to everyone. People, places and objects all have energy and shed it, like pet hair. You pick up stray bits all the time. Like pet hair, a little bit is harmless. Let it go for a month or year, though, and suddenly it's clogging everything and giving you respiratory problems. For most people, even a tremendous amount of energetic clogging doesn't hurt them. For someone who works magic, it can be fatal. Not being in a hurry to bump up against fatal, I'm conscientious about dusting off that energetic pet hair.

So, given that it was Tuesday and I was cleansed, I thought it would be a quiet night. I mean, seriously, who expect to encounter an embodied primal force on a Tuesday? In an ancient temple, during the equinox, while standing in a ley line and a full moon overhead with some monks chanting: sure. It just doesn't play out that way behind a coffee shop on Tuesday night. Yet, no matter how much it annoys me, that is how it played out.

I had stopped by Java Jossie's for a pick me up. I always need one before my weekly round of Why-I-Should-Give-Up-The-Magic-Game lecture series with Father Bradley. Java Jossie's is widely considered the only place in a thirty mile radius to get a decent cup of coffee, at least by caffeine aficionados. It was decorated under the rather bohemian and always in-flux sensibilities of the owner, a late blooming entrepreneur of a widow who had caught the enlightenment bug. For the past few months, the customers had been soothed to the sounds of sitar music and presided over by small statues of Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva. The staff, a fiercely loyal group, had seamlessly adapted to this latest fad and taken to wearing kurtas and saris, or at least retail approximations, as their uniforms. Evidence of previous fads were everywhere, ranging from the enormous dreamcatcher hanging from the ceiling, a pentacle painted on the floor and a painting of a laughing Buddha on the wall.

The place didn't discriminate based on age, gender, occupation or dubious status as a mortal human being. Walk in at the right time and you can find yourself in line with just about anyone. Lawyers, musicians, and fringe types all stood patiently in line. So you understand just how good the coffee is at Jossie's, I had been in line for ten minutes to get my vanilla latte. Let me tell you, I don't stand in line anywhere for ten minutes to just to get coffee. I was convinced that they ground up vanilla beans and mixed it with the coffee to get that flavor. So, now you can understand the moral dilemma I was in when I caught sight of the kid out of the corner of my eye.

He was just a blur, really, but enough to catch my attention. Krin, on the other hand, I saw just fine. Krin was a typical small time, low-grade, black magic user, but dangerous enough to pose a threat to a teenage kid. I suppose he had a real, grownup name, but I didn't know it. I stood there wavering for a split-second. I threw a ten on the counter.

"I'm coming back for that," I yelled as I bolted out the door.

I followed Krin around the corner into the alley behind the coffee shop. He had the kid by the shirt, pushed up against the building. I try to be open minded, but Krin and I had bumped heads before. He pulled a zero on the credibility meter.

"Krin!"

"Mind your own business, Branch."

“You've got a kid pinned to a wall. What business do you think I'm in?”

Realistically, this was well outside my business, but it's not exactly like there is a magic 911 people can call. We have to police ourselves, which meant getting involved when you didn't necessarily want to or know all the details. Krin turned to say something to me, probably rude, and then his eyes went wide. I felt it a split second later. Power. I mean real power. Magic users like to think of ourselves as the unacknowledged rulers of the world. What we do is tinker and meddle. The stronger ones affect tangible change in the world. That takes some power. Actually, it takes a lot of power, but it also gives us all a misguided view of our importance. I was about to get the reality check equivalent of a kick to the crotch.

What I felt in that alley made the most powerful things I had ever done seem like cheap sleight of hand. There was so much of it filling the alley that I thought it might lift me up off my feet for moment. Krin may have screamed, right before he vanished into a ball of lightning, but all I heard was the pounding of my own heart in my ears. I didn't care much for it. If I had been capable of running at that moment, I would have. Damned ineffective nervous system.

“I have your attention?”

I opened my eyes and all I could see was the afterimage of Krin's body in the lightning. There was no love lost between him and me, but it was still a horrible way to die. More to the point, it was completely unnecessary if this was just to get my attention. There are easier ways to get my attention. I assure you. I tried to blink away the afterimage. Did he have my attention?

“Yes, you could say that you are the only thing that has my attention at the moment.”

“Good. There are things to discuss.”

“By discuss do you mean talking or me going the way of our dearly departed friend there?”

The boy, if anything with that kind of power qualifies for so innocuous a term as boy, cocked his head and stared at me. The stare continued for far too long and I felt a bead of cold sweat run down the back of my neck. I thought about saying something else and decided to keep my trap shut until the kid said something. An eternity later he straightened his head and gave me a ghost of a smile.

“Oh, yes, you're using humor. Very entertaining. I encounter it so rarely, perhaps you will make me laugh again. Simple talking will do for now.”

Some tiny, long dormant shred of a self-preservation instinct sprang into a swift and violent action to keep me from saying the next thing that came into my mind. Instead, it forcibly delivered a saner response out of my mouth.

“Talking it is.”

Chapter 2

The boy walked by me and onto the sidewalk. He turned his gaze on me and waited. Some core of resentment I have toward anything that close to omnipotence made me wait a moment before I walked after him. It was a stupid power play that meant nothing to the boy, which did nothing for my ego. What's a second to something that probably doesn't experience time in any linear fashion? It was a wasted effort, all in all. I accepted the inevitable and joined the boy on the sidewalk.

“Perhaps a ride in your,” the boy paused, “car. A degree of privacy is appropriate.”

I wondered how long it had been since this boy had last set foot on the mortal plane. He was familiar with the idea of a car, but the language was clearly foreign.

“Just a minute, let me get my coffee,” I said.

The boy gave me a flat stare.

“Look, I waited in line for better than ten minutes to get that coffee and I already paid for it. I'm going inside to get it. So either zap me with your godlike ball o'lightning or wait here for one minute.”

Don't blame my self-preservation instinct; it doesn't get a lot of exercise. The boy gave me another overlong stare before nodding. I went inside and, as promised, was back out the door in under a minute. I nodded toward the nondescript old sedan I drove. It had been a Ford in a previous life, but the exigencies of my existence had taken a toll the vehicle. The only original part was the frame. I called it Fordenstein in my puckish moments.

We climbed into Fordenstein and I drove us around making random turns and generally heading nowhere in a hurry. It wouldn't have impressed anyone trained in evasion, but it kept me occupied until the kid decided to say something. This took considerably longer than I would have liked. The experience of riding in the car seemed to be a novelty he wanted to stretch out. Then again, he could have been occupied silently destroying anyone eavesdropping. I didn't ask because I didn't want to know. My delicious vanilla latte was long gone and I found myself wishing for another before he finally broke the silence.

“You have a purpose to fulfill,” said the boy.

“Doesn't everyone?”

“No.”

It was something I already knew, but it was creepy to hear him say it out loud. Everyone wants to think they have a purpose to fulfill in life. The idea that most people exist just because and nothing more, it doesn't sit well. To hear it put out there with no emotion set my teeth on edge.

“I have purpose to fulfill. Are you going to elaborate on that or is this just a friendly reminder?”

“There is unrest.”

The urge to tell the boy that he had just described the human condition flitted across my consciousness. Then I got down to brass tacks. It wasn't people that he was talking about. If it had been, he wouldn't be sitting next to me. This left me with a nasty feeling that I was about to get the worst possible news. Even run of the mill magical problems were never simple. Magic can, literally, alter the laws of reality. Sometimes the changes were temporary or fixable. If the force behind them was powerful enough, they weren't. Problems that involved those kinds of forces were always terrifying to me and I suspected this would be one of them.

“Where is there unrest?”

“Here, in this place. It is diffuse, but its qualities disturbs the Lords and Ladies.”

I nearly ran the car off the road. People prattle on about gods and goddesses, demons, devils and angels. At a functional level, they're all real. Or some very close approximation thereof. The real power though, the big, scary, end of the universe power, rests in the hands of the Lords and Ladies. The one rule, nearly the only rule, that everyone accepted without question was this: avoid the Lords and Ladies. They knew nothing and cared nothing about human beings. They were subject to no law, no boundaries, save the ones they had imposed on the primordial chaos. Rules they could change again at a whim. This was just damned peachy. The fact of the matter was that the errand boy they had sent could probably crack the whole damn planet in half without really trying.

“No offense, but what could possibly disturb the Lords and Ladies? They invented time, compelled the universe to behave in a rational way.”

“True. They did do those things, but it is irrelevant. What disturbs them is the qualities of the unrest. They say it feels of the Bound.”

If you've never felt the blood drain from your face, I recommend you pass on the opportunity.

“Wouldn't it be a bit of a contradiction for the Bound to be causing anything here?”

“Your language is limited. Suffice it to say that it is not impossible. It is the reason the Lords and Ladies are experiencing disquiet.”

I knew it was coming. I knew it and there wasn't one damn thing I could do to stop it. Impotence sucks.

“I suppose this is where I come into it, somehow?”

“You were selected.”

“By whom?”

“The Lords and Ladies. Who else could send me?”

I wasn't sure which to address first.

“I don't know who you are.”

“No?”

“I don't see how I could.”

“I am the Glynn.”

I wanted to cry. Bad enough to get involved with the Lords and the Ladies, but they sent their personal hatchet man to deliver the message. Now I knew exactly how long it had been since he last set foot on the mortal plane. Think world-ending cataclysmic events involving water.

“You said I was selected by the Lords and Ladies. Which one?”

“All of them. They requested you by name.”

“Of course they did. It's that kind of day,” I said. “Selected to do what exactly?”

“Determine if one of the Bound is indeed extending its influence here. Possibly intervene, if it should become necessary.”

I had to pull the car over. I thought I might vomit. I turned and looked at the Glynn.

“Let's set aside for the moment the fact that any agent of one of the Bound would be able to destroy me without a second thought. If, and that is a huge if, I am able to determine that one of them is exerting influence here, what do you expect me to do about it in the half-second I have to live before it kills me?”

“Summon me.”

“How?”

“With this.”

The Glynn reached out toward me. I thought he was going to hand me something until he plunged his hand into my chest. Make no mistake, I mean inside my chest. I stared down at his wrist and then looked at him in disbelief. He cocked his head in the same way he had when I had acted like a smartass.

“This may hurt a little,” he said.

My world exploded into agony. It felt as though I had shoved a fork into the world's biggest wall outlet. I had the hysterical thought that this might be a bit like what Krin had felt right before he died. I'm not the toughest guy out there, but I'd been through my fair share of physical pain over the years. No one has accused me of being a wimp in a long time. So understand me when I tell you that it was the most intense physical pain I have ever experienced. The last thing I remember, before I blacked out completely, was worrying that my spine might actually snap from the muscle spasms arching me forward in my seat.

Chapter 3

I don't think I was out for too long because it was still dark when I woke up. There was a moment of panic when I realized the car was moving and I was in the passenger seat. I looked over to see the Glynn at the wheel, looking rather amused while he drove. I started to say something and a spasm in my chest left me gasping for air. He never took his eyes off the road.

"That should pass quickly."

"Did I die?"

"No. I expected that your physical form would respond strongly, but it was the first time I have ever needed to do such a thing."

"You never did that before! What if I had died?"

"I don't believe you would have been chosen if what I was going to do would kill you. It would have been pointless."

I found very little comfort in that thought. There was a throbbing in my head that made me rub my temples. I would have given almost anything for a bottle of water. The Glynn tapped my arm with a bottle of water.

"You can read my thoughts?"

"I am able to do so now."

"All the time?"

"No. The connection is new. Soon it will narrow. However, should you have dire need or encounter the Bound, you will be able to summon me by concentrating."

"Seems like a lot of pain for such a small thing."

"The connection was simplicity itself. The pain was from the rest of it."

"The rest of it?"

"The Lords and Ladies deemed that your meager abilities would be insufficient to ensure your survival until the completion of your task. They instructed me to augment you. You should be capable of living through an encounter with a servant of the Bound. I would have preferred to empower you to handle the entire task yourself, but those were not my instructions."

"Speaking of my task, any thoughts on where I should start?"

"The Paths."

"Lovely. It gets better and better."

I cracked open the water and downed the whole bottle. It helped a little. I leaned back into my seat. I wondered if I should take over the driving duties and then let it go. I had the feeling that even if the Glynn ran over a dozen people that somehow it would never land on me. Besides, he was wearing the only real smile I had seen on his face.

"Do you like driving?"

"Yes," said the Glynn. "I like it very much."

"Isn't it a bit mundane?"

"Perhaps for you."

I rolled the idea over in my head. I guessed that the Glynn only experienced corporeal form once or twice in a millennium and then only to exact some horrific punishment onto a transgressor. Driving was something so stupidly simplistic that it probably bordered on the sublime for him. We drove through the city at random and the Glynn proved to be a capable driver. While he drove, I dozed to try to shake off the aftereffects of my, ahem, augmentation.

"I am summoned," announced the Glynn.

He altered course and delivered us to my place. It's a small house with thick walls that I love beyond reason. We got out of the car and looked at each other across the hood. He glanced back at the steering wheel for a split second. Maybe it was because he was wearing the face of a teenager or had enjoyed the driving so much, but I softened a little toward the Glynn.

"If I manage not to get myself killed in all of this, you should come back here. We'll take another drive."

A wary look crossed the Glynn's face and I felt a touch of pity for him. Not a lot of friends for someone like him, I suppose. His casual killing of Krin made more sense to me.

"You speak honestly?"

"Yes. I mean it."

"I would enjoy that a great deal."

"You know, I think I would too. That is, if we can skip the electrocution."

The Glynn looked at me without blinking.

"Humor, again. You are very amusing. I think I like you."

I started to say something and realized I was about to speak into empty space. That annoyed me, mostly because I expected something more dramatic. A flash of light or a puff of smoke would have been enough. I went inside and headed straight for the kitchen. A gallon of water later and I felt a little better. I wandered into the living room. The light on the answering machine was an angry red eye, blinking at me furiously. Great, lots of messages. Everyone had been on me for years to get a cell phone, but I didn't care much for them. I pressed play on the machine. It cheerfully informed me that I had three messages. The first two were from Father Bradley, which I had expected. The last message I didn't expect.

"Sam, it's Jean. I'm in town. I'm staying at that little bed and breakfast we used to go to. Come see me, please. It's important."

Jean. How many mistakes can one life handle? I chastised myself for that. Mistakes were made and we went our separate ways, but she hadn't been one. It still didn't mean I wanted to see her. Seeing her either meant a conversation or an argument I didn't want. We were like...I drew a blank and groped for the right descriptive...sex and chocolate, offered my overtaxed psyche. It was too close to being a literal truth for my taste. Better and better, I thought. It had just been one of those days.

Chapter 4

The fact of the matter is that I hate the sound of a phone ringing. If I could have gotten by without one, I would have. So when the first thing I heard in the morning was the phone ringing, it just amplified what felt like the mother of all hangovers. I swung at the phone and knocked it off the table. It bounced around on the floor and I could hear a voice coming up at me from the receiver. I succumbed to the human imperative to make contact and picked it up.

"Make it good."

"Christ, Branch, that's a hell of way to greet a friend."

Nope, one problem too many. I hung up the phone.

It started ringing again.

"Whatever it is, I'm not interested. I'm already on something here, Matt."

"Just hear me out, Sam. You know I only call when it really matters."

The pounding in my head receded enough for me to start using my brain.

“Are you still on speaking terms with Carmichael?”

“Sure. Why?”

“You're going to smooth the way for me. Do that and I'll hear you out.”

“No one on the planet can do that. He hates you. You stole his wife.”

“I did not steal his wife, Matt! For God's sake, they'd been divorced for two years.”

“He doesn't see it that way.”

“Look, this is the deal. I'm not asking for him to talk to me, see me or do anything else that would tarnish his stainless steel self-image. I just need access to ground he controls.”

“You mean...”

“Yes, I mean.”

“Shit, man, what are you into?”

“Nothing you'd believe. Now are you going to do it or not?”

“Okay. Okay. I'll do it.”

“Good. Start talking, I'm hearing you out.”

“You'll have to see this for yourself, Branch.”

“You're certain we can't do this over the phone.”

“Oh yeah.”

I relented and took down the address where he wanted to meet. It was a shady part of town, not horrible, but not great. A gray area, the kind of place where magic thrives and magic problems brew. I probably should have told Matt no, but Carmichael controlled access to the Paths and I couldn't get in without his permission. I got myself cleaned up and took a ride out to see Matt. I found him in waiting in front of an old, rundown apartment building. He was chatting with a woman I recognized. She read palms for people in the park and was homeless about half the time. Her name finally floated up from the dim reaches of my aching head. I walked up to the two of them and shook hands with Matt.

“Hi Matt.”

“Branch.”

“Hi, Emily.”

I offered my hand to Emily. Homeless, dirty, she was still a human being that I had never known to hurt anyone. She smiled and took my hand. She let out a little cry and snatched her hand back as though it had been burned. Matt and I shared a glance.

“Emily, are you alright?”

She gave me a pain-filled look and massaged the hand she had snatched back.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “You couldn't have known.”

She spun on her heel and walked away fast.

“What,” said Matt, “do you suppose that was about?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I doubt it, but we'll talk about that some other time. Let me show you why you needed to see this.”

Matt led the way into the building and we climbed several flights of creaking stairs to the top floor. He paused in front of a door and opened it with a key. I used to ask him how he got the kind of access he did, now I just accept it. We've all got our gifts. We stepped into a lousy apartment that had been conscientiously maintained.

“You a real estate broker now, Matt?”

“In there,” he said, pointing through an open doorway.

I fervently hoped that there wasn't a body in there. Bodies weren't Matt's style, but he was the go-to-guy for the local authorities concerning the occult and otherwise unexplainable. I was his go-to-guy for the stuff he couldn't explain. I considered it a dubious honor. No one wants to be considered an expert on the stuff so bizarre and horrible that no one else has the expertise or stomach for it. I stepped into the other room and came up short.

“Well,” I said to no one, “that's new.”

Chapter 5

I had never seen a ritualistic arrangement like the one in that room before, which meant very little in itself. That's not why Matt called me in. Magic users have preferences. Of course, acknowledging power can be difficult and attributing the results to prayer is a popular method of denial. Others prefer ritual magic, like the Wiccans. Every method has its advantages and disadvantages. Being a pragmatist, I preferred a direct approach. I skip the middle man and go for direct energetic manipulation. It's a trade-off. I gain speed but lose out on the protections offered by ritual and prayer. The other advantage is and the reason Matt called me is that, in a situation like this, I could get a sense of what a ritual was all about. Just like a flash of bright light leaves an afterimage on the eye, working with energy leaves an afterimage, an imprint, on the world. The stronger the energy, the stronger the imprint. If you know how to look, you can see it.

“What do you think?”

“I'll let you know in a minute.”

I moved farther into the room to get a closer look.

“I won't be disturbing evidence will I?”

“No, the cops and forensic people have come and gone already.”

I focused my attention back onto the room. Something or someone had died in the room, based on the amount of blood. Then there was the smell, sickly sweet and stomach turning. It's one of those god awful smells that comes at you when you aren't expecting it, like during dreams and barbecues. I fear sometimes that it will be the last thing I smell in life. The idea keeps me up at night.

The hallmarks of ritual sacrifice were all in place. There were black candles scattered across the room, wine and some arcane symbols, but all similarity ended there. In ritual sacrifice you expect certain things, like inverted pentagrams, candles at the points, and upside down crosses. This room was all wrong, which was saying something given that the frame of references was a satanic ritual. Everything was a jumble. Pagan runes and indecipherable text were scattered throughout. There weren't any altar or ritual tools, though it was possible the latter were taken when the killers left.

“This is wrong,” I said to Matt.

“I know that. There's nothing right about ritual sacrifice. Christ.”

“No, I mean everything here is wrong.”

I looked over at Matt and could see he was right at the tipping point between academic detachment and fear. Given that I was a little afraid, it seemed a healthy response on his part.

“Look, Matt, you knew something was off or I wouldn't be here. Spill.”

“There was no body.”

“So, they took it with them.”

“They didn't. The blood, it's all confined to this room. You could maybe get a body out without dripping too much, but no way you could get one out with zero evidence. Your turn.”

“On the surface, this looks like a ritual killing, but what ritual? What school of thought? This is pure chaos. There isn't a unifying principle here. You know as well as I do that ritual magic requires some governing architecture to protect the practitioner. Circles, pentagrams, holy water. Structures that control and direct the flow of energy. There's nothing like that here. This is either a cover up or somebody is insanely stupid.”

“Do you read anything from the room? You know, the other stuff?”

“Are you high?”

“What?”

“You want me to open myself up to that?” I gestured to the insanity. “If, for argument's sake, this falls into the category of insanely stupid, there could be anything lurking around in there. I'm not doing any kind of open reading until I've got a better idea of what happened here.”

“What should I tell the cops?”

“The truth, which is that as far as either of us know, there is no direct occult connection here. Of course, you understand that by us, I mean you.”

“Of course”

“This is a hodge-podge. If I had to guess, I'd say it's a red herring. Someone just trying to divert attention with a fake occult connection.”

“And if it isn't?”

I looked back into the room, trying to draw some meaning from it.

“Tell them to keep it sealed off. Tell them that you need to spend more time researching or studying it.”

“You didn't answer my question.”

“If it isn't, there's nothing for them to do. Nothing they can do.”

Despite what I had said to Matt, I wanted to read that room. I was a feeling that bordered on compulsion. I didn't trust it. I was still way off from the Glynn had done to me the night before. I was jittery and off-center. That was not the time to act on impulse. I didn't dare touch power until I had a better idea of what would happen when I did.

“Did you talk to Carmichael?”

“Yes. I had to listen to a ten minute rant about what a prick you are, but he agreed. In fact, what he said was, 'Tell that jackass he can have what he wants.' He really hates you.”

“I know he does.”

I had known Carmichael would say yes. There is a code of conduct. He controlled access, but he didn't control the Paths themselves. It was common ground that any of us could walk. To deny me access would have drawn down a degree and magnitude of attention that he didn't want. Personal issues had no bearing on a request like mine. I needed access for magic reasons and a denial would have to be for the same reason. It was a reason he couldn't provide. He may have hated me, but he knew I took this part of my world very seriously. By using Matt, I had made it clear that this wasn't personal. The niceties had been observed. I turned to Matt.

“Thanks, I owe you one.”

He waved it off and said, “Just let me know if you pull anything from this mess. Someone died and I'd like to be able to point the police toward a body. Empty coffins don't give families much closure.”

“I let you know if I find anything.”

I went outside and found a pay phone near the apartment building. I prematurely mourned their eventual passing. It was a sign of the times and nature of change, but I like them. I fed a couple quarters into the phone and started to dial in the number to the bed and breakfast where Jean had a room. My finger hovered over the last button for so long that the machine dumped my quarters into the little change slot. I hung up the phone, collected my quarters and stuffed them back into my pocket. I'd like to say that something noble motivated the action, but it was simple anger. I had told her, warned her, not to come to me again for help. I'd get back to her when I was good and ready, if that day ever came. I walked over to my car with healthy sense of self-righteousness. Someone had died. I had more important things to do than deal with Jean.

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