



THE AWAKENING OF MASTER MARCH

By Randy McCharles

The World's Ugliest House

Warlock looked at the house, reread the scribbled address on a torn piece of paper, and then looked back at the house. He immediately knew three things. First, that this was indeed the address he had been given, dead center in the middle of a quiet, older suburb. Second, this was likely the same location he had been brought to the previous evening, gagged and blindfolded and more than a little surprised. And third, that this was the ugliest house in existence, the monstrous concoction of lunatic architects run amok.

The house was large by any standard, two floors of crooked walls and flying buttresses, with gabled windows in places gables had never been intended. The roof zigged where it should have zagged, requiring the later addition of enough eaves to drain a battleship. There was a giant satellite dish that had broken its mooring and slipped downward until now the only signals it could receive would need to emanate from the neighbor's garage.

Warlock frowned at the miniature wooden steps that led from the cement front walk to a brooding oak door surrounded by exterior walls painted blue and pink. Warlock closed his eyes and looked again. Yes, still pink.

It was times like these that Warlock wished he had never discovered the *Discovery Channel*.

Stuffing the address into a pocket of his jeans, Warlock hefted his backpack to fit more comfortably on his shoulders and then approached the fence that guarded the property. The fence was picket. White, thankfully. And all of three feet high. Warlock reached down, carefully unlatched the gate, stepped inside, and relatched it.

The yard, he noted, consisted of grass. Just grass. No trees, bushes, or flowers. In one place the grass held an impression of some mystic framework since removed. There were diagonal lines and rounded corners and a couple of square areas where grass had grown in but failed to completely eradicate the evidence. One patch of grass boasted a rather large quantity of sand.

Shaking his head, Warlock continued up the cement walk and then ascended the very short wooden steps. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen wooden steps, but he clearly remembered stumbling on these ones as his abductors escorted him from their van and into the house. It was the right place, all right. There was even a white van parked on the street.

The oak door had had a five inch square hole cut out near the center at about eye level. He stared at it and knocked.

After a few moments he was unsurprised when a panel that covered the hole from the inside slid back to reveal an eye, a nose, and the edge of a frown.

"Who is it?" demanded a vaguely familiar female voice that apparently owned the partial frown. Its tone was certainly frownish.

He answered. "You can see who it is, so why ask?"

The frown did not like that answer. It continued to exist. The eye, as well, took on a glarish demeanor.

"Speak your name if you desire to enter. That is the rule."

"You should know my name," said Warlock. "I was here last night. You can't have forgotten me already."

"No name, no entry."

Warlock sighed. "Very well. My name is Warlock."

The eye continued to glare, and then the frown had the gall to giggle.

"Something funny?" asked Warlock.

More giggling.

"Look," said Warlock. "Even if you don't remember me, I remember you. Sister August, isn't it?"

The giggling stopped and was immediately replaced by indignation. “Are you mad! Never use our names outside. It is forbidden.”

“Right,” said Warlock. “And yet here you are asking for my name. If you’d just open the bloody door I wouldn’t be outside and we could bounce names off each other all day.”

“Idiot,” said the now indignant frown. “I can’t open the door until you give me the bloody pass phrase. So speak your bloody name!”

Pass phrase? Warlock let the events of last evening roll through his mind. Most of it was gibberish, so he examined the most gibbered parts seeking a pass phrase. Nope. Nothing. There was quite a bit about names, however.

“Oh,” he said. “I think I have it.” He cleared his throat and then dramatically exclaimed, “I have no name.”

Sister August’s partial features vanished as the panel slid back to cover the hole. Then came a loud clack as a heavy bolt slid back. Slowly, the door creaked open.

Warlock pushed the heavy door open wide enough to slip inside and saw that all of Sister August had vanished, not just her frown, which was too bad as he remembered her as being rather cute when she wasn’t glaring through a five by five hole. He closed and bolted the door. He wasn’t sure he was supposed to bolt the door, but it seemed reasonable. Now, if only he could figure out *where* in the world’s ugliest house he was supposed to go.

Just A Roadie

Immediately inside the entrance was a large cloak area with a couple dozen light jackets draped on hooks that were a little too low to the floor for Warlock’s liking. The architects hadn’t even taken advantage of the lower hooks to add additional shelving above them. It was a crime.

Counting the jackets, Warlock smiled at the thought that at least several of his abductors probably lived here, which could almost make up for the ugliness of the architecture. This house was starting to get interesting.

Adjacent to the cloak area the entryway opened into a spacious parlor, the very room where he had been untagged and unblindfolded last evening only to find himself surrounded by a dozen young woman between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five.

He had felt like Sir Galahad in Monty Python's *Holy Grail*. Only, while he had less scruples than Sir Galahad, these ladies of Castle Anthrax had considerably more scruples than their younger counterparts and had shown no interest whatsoever in his virility. Well, that's what you get for calling on a house full of witches rather than a castle of virgins. But no matter, Warlock's grail consisted of just one of the dozen women. And it was she, alone, who greeted him now in that spacious parlor in the world's ugliest house.

They had found each other two days ago in a candle store. Warlock was browsing for anything that might spruce up his image, but couldn't decide between black candles or red. Valerie held an armload of long white candles she was about to purchase.

Warlock couldn't remember having ever seen a more striking woman, and somehow mustered the nerve to ask her opinion on his candle dilemma. She was blonde, of course. Warlock was mad for blondes. But it was the set of her nose and the shape of her jaw that kept drawing his attention. Valerie kept asking if she had lipstick or a food crumb on her chin. Each time Warlock answered, "No. You're perfect."

Valerie had seemed only vaguely interested in him until he told her his name. That was when she suggested they have lunch and she told him about her interest in magic and witches. After telling each other their life story, Valerie mentioned that her coven needed a twelfth to be complete. Warlock took the hint and told her that he might be interested, which resulted in his kidnapping. He never did buy candles.

"Greetings Initiate," intoned Valerie, the witches' High Priestess.

"Uh, hi, Val," said Warlock. *Damn*. Why did he always get tongue-tied around the woman he was interested in?

Valerie batted her eyes at him, and then shook her head, sending long blonde curls dancing around her brow and shoulders. "If you intend to join our coven you are going to have to follow the rules of the house. You must call me Sister April."

"Right," said Warlock. "But look, you're the High Priestess, right? How come you're just *Sister April*, like the rest?"

Valerie smiled. "We are all just Sisters, even you. *If* you pass the trial."

Sister? Warlock thought, *Even me?* Then his brain caught up to the worst of what Valerie had just said and his heart began

hammering. "Trial? Er. Wasn't that last night with the kidnapping and the candles and the chanting and the chickens?"

"Chickens?" asked Valerie, confused.

"That's a joke," said Warlock, mentally kicking himself because women he was interested in never got his jokes, but at least the distraction had slowed his heart. Last night was bad enough. He didn't really *need* a trial. "They only have chickens in the movies," he added. "But wasn't that whole ritual thing my initiation? Aren't I a member now?"

"A joke. I see," said Valerie, allowing a slip of a smile. "Last night was *our* joke, to gauge if you are serious about joining the coven. Your real trial is right now."

Oh crap, thought Warlock. *Now the chickens come out.* "I can only stay an hour," he said, looking for leniency. "I've got a gig tonight."

Valerie widened her eyes. "A gig?"

"You know," said Warlock. "With the Seriously Damp. Loud music."

Valerie ran a hand through her curly blonde hair, the movement sending a thrill down Warlock's back. You couldn't beat blond hair.

"I know what a gig is," she said, half laughing. "I didn't realize you were in the band. I thought you were just a roadie."

Why? thought Warlock, *does everyone insist on putting just a in front of roadie?* Despite his desire to grind his teeth, he tried to sound cool. "Hey. Roadies are important. We set up and tune the instruments and amplifiers so that the band members sound good. They'd sound like crap without good roadies."

"I thought you said the Seriously Damp hated you?"

Damn. Of course I told her. "Sure they hate me. How can they not hate me? They'd sound like crap without me. They're jealous."

"I thought you said that you hated them, too? That it was only a matter of time before you formed your own band."

"Sure, sure," said Warlock. "That's how it's done. You roadie for a while to see how the business works, then you can start your own band without getting screwed by everyone."

Valerie nodded, but seemed troubled. Warlock kicked himself for sounding like an idiot.

"So this is a paying gig, is it?" she asked.

"Sure, sure," said Warlock. "Well, not really. The club is going to feed us after the show. That's payment, of a sort."

Valerie took a step toward him. "Let's see if I've got this straight. You've got an hour to pass your witch's exam before running off to get kicked around by a band that hates you, all so you can get a free meal at two in the morning."

Warlock thought about arguing with her, about trying to win her over to his way of thinking, about getting her to understand the very complex realities of a musician's life, but in a rare moment of clarity in the presence of a woman he was interested in he thought better of it. Instead he said: "Welcome to the music business."

As if to confirm that he had said the right thing, Valerie smiled.

"Well," she sighed. "Since we don't have much time we had better get started."

Trial By Conundrum

Valerie walked over to the fake fireplace. This was not your typical fake fireplace, with fake wood and natural gas and a flue that would never accommodate smoke from a real burning fire. No, this was a fake fireplace befitting the world's ugliest house. It was, in fact, a fireplace painted onto the wall with bright acrylic paint. The stone mantel above it, however, was quite real.

On the mantel stood a small, silver gong. There was an equally small hammer hanging from a silver chain attached to the silver frame that held the silver gong. The hammer was also silver. Valerie grasped the small hammer by its handle and tapped the gong, which created a sound not the least bit reminiscent of *Anna and the King*. It was, Warlock decided, a gong appropriate for mice.

Nevertheless the sound was sufficient to bring ten young women running and soon the room was filled as it had been the evening prior: one witch short of a coven plus one initiate. Warlock craned his neck looking for chickens.

"Behold the initiate," intoned the High Priestess, Valerie.

"Behold the initiate," chanted ten witches.

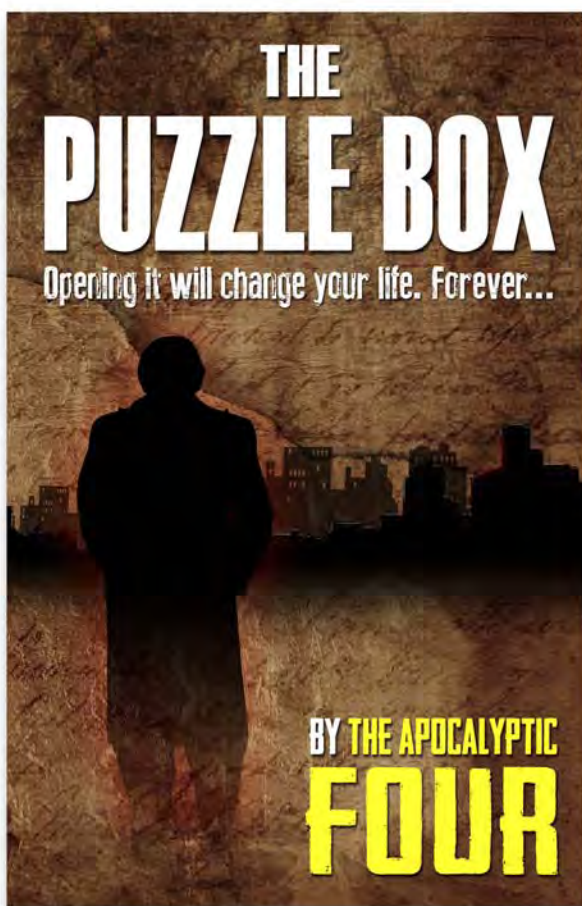
Valerie walked around behind him. "Having returned to the coven of his own accord after being unafraid by the hazing—"

Hazing? If they call last night's incense and chanting a hazing, not a one of these girls had watched Animal House. They didn't know the meaning of the word hazing.

Valerie continued, "—the initiate seeks to pass the trial and earn a coven name."

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