



the Endless AGES

anthology

**edited by
Jaym Gates**

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Credits

Authors: Natania Barron, Dylan Birtolo, Bill Bridges, Richard Dansky, Matthew Dawkins, Delilah Dawson, Nerine Dorman, Berit Ellingson, Crystal Frasier, Dave Harlequin, Lawrence Hawkins, Nicole Givens Kurtz, Ann Lemay, Andrew Penn Romine, Na'amen Gobert Tilahun, Steffie de Vaan, Monica Valentinelli.

Editor: Jaym Gates

Vampire Developer: Eddy Webb

Fiction Managing Editor: Matt McElroy

Creative Director: Richard Thomas

Art Direction and Design: Mike Chaney



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PART ONE
THE BECOMING





TIGER

By Michael J. Martinez

The party had been one of the finest Samantha had ever seen, set amongst the paintings and sculptures of the Contemporary Art Museum downtown. Gilt with enough ostentatious wealth – gold-stemmed glassware, designer gowns, plastic surgery – to remain just on the proper side of gaudy, the venue was impeccably decorated, the mortals impeccably dressed and chosen to sate the palates of any number of Kindred, in any way imaginable.

And it was all for Samantha, for her coming out as a Ventrue, ready for presentation to the prince. It was a celebration among Clan Ventrue and its selected guests, all of whom gently questioned and harshly assessed her, even as they offered their hearty congratulations to her sire, David.

Samantha, however, had studied assiduously and done her work. She'd turned \$1 million in seed money into stakes in several online companies and venture capital firms through a mix of wise investment and head-turning supernatural persuasion. She learned the rites and rituals of the clan, handed down since time immemorial. She knew which Kindred in the city should be heeded and cultivated, and which could be safely dismissed – though never ignored.

She even picked the right undying designer for her evening gown, if the harpies' reactions were any indication. When Angelica Ruiz, the Toreador social media sensation, posted a selfie of the two of them to her four million followers, Samantha *knew* she had nailed it.

Then David's watch vibrated with a text message. And that's why she was in a limo now, heading toward Cooper Park, away from the party and the fun. It was time for her to be presented to the prince.

"Of *course*, she summons us in the middle of the damn party," David grouched, texting furiously. "Of *course*, she refuses the invitation to the coming out just so she could make her own little statement."

Samantha reached over and placed a hand on his knee. “It’s all right, David. From what you’ve told me, this really isn’t anything new. It’s how she is.”

He looked up and gave her a smile – the smile that ripped her out of her old life and charmed her into the Embrace. “You’re right. Can’t expect much more from a Malkavian, even a prince. You remember everything I told you, right?”

She nodded. “Of course. It’ll be fine. Everything else has been fine so far.”

The limo pulled into a parking area at the edge of the park, which was nestled in a shabby little suburban neighborhood far from anything interesting. In the distance, the lights of the city glittered, but they were obscured by yellowed streetlights and the peaks of aging rowhouses designed for turn-of-the-century laborers.

Turn of the *last* century. She reminded herself that such distinctions would matter here.

David nodded, and Samantha exited the limo. Two figures were waiting for her.

The first was a huge bear of a man, hirsute to the point of medically questionable, had he been living. This was the Gangrel named Hendricks, the prince’s sheriff, in charge of keeping the peace in the city. He’d already been part of Samantha’s education at several points, discussing the laws of the Camarilla and the importance of the Masquerade and how it would please him to no end to pull her limbs from her body if she failed to uphold them.

The other was thin and reedy, with a gray-green face that looked as though it had been pulled askew like Silly Putty. This was the Nosferatu Jocalo, the prince’s seneschal – her face to the outside world and, it was said, her chief source of information about the goings on in the city. There was no way of knowing, of course, because the Nosferatu were extremely reticent to discuss one of their own, no matter the boons dangled before them. Samantha had never directly talked to Jocalo before, but David and the Ventrué primogen, Gorman, hosted him on numerous occasions for both business and social purposes.

Hendricks acknowledged Samantha with a sneer and proceeded to pat her down roughly. Once assured she was unarmed, Jocalo motioned her forward and walked alongside her.

“Her Majesty has been looking forward to this, Samantha. She’s heard much about you,” Jocalo said. “You are to simply join her on the park bench ahead and sit beside her. Speak when spoken to and answer true. She’ll know if you’re lying and that won’t bode well for anyone.”

“I’ve nothing to hide,” Samantha said.

“Then you’re still young,” Jocalo replied with a smile that seemed to vertically split the lower half of his face. “Oh, and I strongly suggest that if she offers you something to drink...*decline*. Politely, but repeatedly if necessary. It’s a test.”

“A test of what?”

Jocalo shrugged. “I’ve no idea. Just don’t drink it.”

After about 75 yards, the Nosferatu stopped and pointed to a bench ahead. “There. Fourth one on the right.”

Samantha nodded and began walking toward the designated bench. She knew the prince adopted several guises, but that the one before her was one of her favorites – some even speculated that it was her actual face. Others scoffed at the notion. But there, on the bench in the middle of a shabby, garbage-strewn park, was the prince of the city, an immeasurably ancient Malkavian, said to possess immense power, both temporal and supernatural.

She was a little old lady with white hair, a wrinkled face with surprisingly rosy cheeks and a slight frame. She wore a plastic visor, a powder-blue, slightly stained Adidas track suit, and white sneakers.

Samantha sat down on the bench, her hands pulling her wrap around her bare shoulders. It was cold out, but although she could feel the chill, it didn’t bother her like it once did. Her hands simply needed something to do. There was something unnerving about the woman next to her, her visible age draped around her like an ill-fitting cloak, yet the pull of her presence unmistakably primal.

The old woman simply sat looking at the trees and the few passersby, the trickle of humanity on an early winter evening. A few workers headed home, a couple of young people headed out to drink, a few joggers trying to keep their decaying mortal bodies around a little longer. Samantha shook that last thought from her brain, startling herself. It had been less than a year, and already she was thinking of people this way?

“You get used to it.”

Samantha turned to the prince, who regarded her with a grandmotherly smile – or, rather, one that might have such love and wisdom within it if not for the feral curl at the edge of her mouth. “I’m sorry?” Samantha said.

“Humanity. You still want to relate to them, dear. I know. But you can’t. You’ll get used to it.”

And then the prince was gone. Vanished.

Samantha tensed up and looked all around her in a flurry. Where did she go? Was that it? She caught a glimpse in the shadows of Jocalo’s twisted, filthy face. A clawed hand told her to stay, to be calm. And so she tried.

When she turned back, the prince was in her seat again. Across her lap, a young man in jogging clothes twitched and gasped as his blood and life were inexorably drawn through his neck into the prince's waiting mouth. The man – strong, lean, sinewy – struggled as best he could, but the frail-looking old woman easily kept him in place. All he could do was look at Samantha with pleading eyes.

Several excruciating seconds later, the life faded from those eyes.

The prince quickly and carelessly wiped her mouth on the man's sweat-stained shirt, then dumped him off her lap onto the sidewalk. From nowhere, a man and a woman quickly appeared to pick up the body and rush toward the thin copse of trees behind them.

Samantha wondered how many bodies were back there.

"I would've offered you some, but I don't know your type," the prince said sweetly. "But it's your big night, so I'm sure your sire provided for you already."

"Yes....yes, Your Majesty. He did. Thank you."

The prince held out her Big Gulp cup. "There's this if you want it, sweetie."

"No, thank you."

She regarded Samantha quizzically for a moment. "You seem nervous. Are you nervous, Samantha?"

Summoning whatever reserves of discipline she had, Samantha put on her best smile. "Of course, Your Majesty. You're the prince of the city. I'm...nobody."

At this the prince shook her head slightly, a small, feral smile on her face. "You're barely one of us. Still fresh. Still...warm." The old woman drew a finger across Samantha's chin, and for a moment she saw the spitting image of her mother, her lovers, a dozen others in her life who had caressed her that way, all at once, sitting on the bench before her.

The prince withdrew her finger, picked up the Big Gulp and sipped again. "But you're not nobody. Think that way, and you'll be dead in a year."

Samantha tried to speak, but she couldn't think of anything to respond to that through the wash of emotions the prince's touch created.

It seemed the old lady wanted to say something further, but then thought better of it. She simply placed the cup beside her once more and went back to looking out at the park. "I guess we'll just wait now."

"For what?" The question escaped Samantha's lips before she could clamp down on it.

The prince looked at her quizzically, seemingly looking through her very soul for a long moment. Images of her sire and her clanmates involuntarily flashed through her mind in a chaotic jumble. “You really don’t know? That’s interesting,” the prince said. “How *fun*.”

Samantha did her best to assert control over her mind once more, deliberately thinking through her training, all of David’s instructions. There wasn’t anything about waiting for anything or anyone. “I apologize, Your Majesty. Was there something I should’ve known?”

The cackle that erupted from the old lady’s mouth was loud and sharp and hideous. “Oh, my. Oh, *my!* No, no, childe. It’s just that –”

The side of the old woman’s head exploded in a shower of blood, bone and gore, splattering Samantha abruptly in a disturbingly lukewarm spray. It took her a second to register what happened... and then she started shrieking.

She turned to look for Jocalo, only to find him against a tree, the stake through his heart pinning him to the bark and wood behind him. Hendricks – or what might have been someone else, hard to say – was on fire about 10 yards away, which caused Samantha to recoil instinctively. The others? There were muzzle flashes and pops and animalistic snarls all around her.

“Samantha!”

She saw David rushing up the path toward them, an automatic weapon of some kind in his hands. There were two others with him she didn’t recognize. It didn’t matter – David was coming to save her.

“You had best stay put, childe.”

With a gasp, Samantha turned to see the prince staring at her out of one good eye. Slowly, her bones and skin were knitting closed, but she still looked... well, like she’d been shot in the head.

“What’s going on?” Samantha gasped, trying to sound strong and failing. “What’s happening?”

“Hush, dearie. I need to talk to David here.”

David slowed as he approached the two of them, lifting the rifle and pointing it toward the prince. “What are you doing with my childe?” he demanded.

The old lady laughed out of the left side of her mouth, as the right remained something of a bloody mess. “Oh, just *stop* it, David! Goodness! You aren’t fooling anybody with that nonsense.”

Wide-eyed, David paused for a long moment. “Fine, then.”

He opened fire on the bench.

Bullets tore through Samantha’s body, spears of blazing agony that even her strengthened undead form couldn’t stop. Her arm, her chest, her leg... she

cried out as she slumped over, then felt a strong hand shove her forward to the ground. She hit the asphalt hard, her neck twisting.

Through the haze of pain, Samantha saw blurred motion, flashes of gunfire, and what seemed like torrents of crimson lancing through the air. Her ears registered the pops of guns, a veritable chorus of screams, and... guttural sounds, the likes of which she'd never heard before.

The blackness that finally overcame her next was a blessed relief.



Blood. So much of it. So full of power and age and pain. Samantha drank it in, let it flow through her being. She felt energized and enervated at the same time, as if the blood was invading her and consuming her even as it washed through her body and made it whole once more.

And there was laughter in it, too. Laughter and fear. Echoing. A fear as old as the world, so old and profound that laughter was the only response imaginable that wouldn't drown her soul.

Then the blood was gone, and Samantha tried to sit up after it, to chase it down. She was rewarded with a slap in the face that jolted her eyes open.

"Enough, dearie."

Samantha saw the old woman above her, licking her bloody wrist. Her head injuries were gone, though the blood in her hair remained. Her track suit was nearly covered in crimson from her neck to her waist, and her hands and arms were red to the elbow.

"What happened?" Samantha breathed as she tried to contain and subsume the powerful blood coursing through her.

"Bad men tried to kill me and I killed them instead. Then I saved your life because I'm nice like that," the prince said, as if she were delivering the latest neighborhood gossip. "Of course, I might yet take that blood back before the night's out, along with the rest of you. I'll have to see what Gorman has to say about this when he gets here."

Samantha clumsily shifted around so she could get back on her feet. "Where's David?"

The prince just smiled. "Bad men, Samantha dear. He was one of them." She sat down on the bench and patted the gore-covered wood next to her. "Come have a seat."

Dazed, Samantha nonetheless sat as instructed, despite the cooling blood. "You...knew."

"Of *course* I knew. I'm the prince. It's my job to know. Otherwise I wouldn't be a very good prince, now would I?"

“How did you know?”

“Oh, David was predictable. And his name wasn’t David. Doesn’t matter what it was, but fact is, he tried this before, about 30 years ago. Different city, different prince, same tactics. Ambush during a presentation, when you least expect the sire involved to strike. He left his childe to die then, too, and that prince ripped the childe’s head clean off in a frenzy. I have friends in lots of places, you know.” She held up a battered old Blackberry. “Old dogs, new tricks. Email is a lovely thing.”

She looked to see Jocalo’s body still staked to a tree. Hendricks’ ashes remained on the asphalt path. “You let your people die,” Samantha said quietly.

“They should’ve fought harder. Guess I need better people.”

“But why all this? Why not just, I don’t know, kill David and that’s that?”

The old lady took a drag from her Big Gulp. “Thought about that. Really did. But sometimes you have to make a big, messy, public point. I should be good now for, oh, another decade. Maybe.”

Samantha nodded. It...made sense. She looked down at the holes in her gown where the bullets had entered her, the dried blood now marring the fabric. She had little to say about it, and pleading for her own life at this point seemed pointless in the face of such power, which seemed to tangibly radiate from the old woman now.

“And besides,” the prince continued cheerily, “you have to stay sharp. Your David, he’s a kitten with a ball of yarn trying to trip up a child. But out there...there are tigers out there.”

“What tigers?”

The prince smiled – a genuine, sad smile this time. “I’ve seen empires rise and fall, girl. Seen the moon rise a million times over. There are things out there that scare me sane when I think about them,” she whispered. “And that’s why I still play these games. To stay *sharp* for when the tigers come out of the woods.”

Samantha tried to think of something, anything more to say. “Why are you telling me all this?”

The prince merely shrugged. “No idea.” She sipped the Big Gulp and scraped at air and liquid at the bottom.

A second limo pulled up to the parking area. Gorman didn’t bother to wait for the chauffeur. Instead, he bolted out of the back and made a beeline for the bench.

“Excuse me a moment, sweetie. Stay here while we figure out whether to kill you or not.” The prince got up from the bench and, a moment later, crossed nearly 50 yards in the blink of an eye to stand before Gorman.

Samantha couldn't hear them talk, but could see Gorman's body language change dramatically – from tall and tensed to slumping and small. It took but two minutes for him to kneel before the prince's thick-soled New Balance walking shoes.

Together, they walked back toward Samantha, who was trying very, very hard not to run away in a panic. “Mr. Gorman here has asked me to spare you, *childe*. So tell me, what have you learned tonight?”

Samantha knew Gorman would only care about David and finding out what plans he had, and what she'd known about them. Only the laws of the Camarilla would keep him from killing her outright – he'd have to be sneaky about it instead.

But a chance at survival was better than none. And Jocalo had told her to be honest.

“I learned what David's mistake was, Your Majesty.”

Both the prince and Gorman looked surprised. “Oh? What was his mistake?” the prince asked, her delight at the novelty evident.

“Money, politics, guns...he thought *those* were power. But those are just means to an end, to survive long enough to gain *real* power. To do what you just did to David and the others. To fight the tigers when they come for you.”

The prince smiled brightly. “Oh, that's the best answer you could've given! Well done! Of course, if we both live long enough, *I* could become *your* tiger.”

Samantha stood up and smoothed out her ruined gown as best she could. “I am grateful for all you've done tonight, Your Majesty. But you're already a tiger to me.”

The prince's smile faded quickly, replaced with a look of hard consideration. Finally, she turned to Gorman. “This one lives. And I'll know it if a single *hair* on her head is harmed. You hear me?” The prince held up a single, gnarled, blood-stained finger to the primogen's face for emphasis.

Gorman muttered quiet, obsequious words, then gestured Samantha toward the car. As she followed, she turned back to regard the prince, who had returned to her seat on her bloody bench.

“*Roar*,” she whispered with a smile, her bloody hand playfully clawing the air, her Big Gulp at her side.

THE BALLAD OF DEAD JASPER'S REBIRTH

By Na'amen Gobert Tilahun

Tuesday

The rain sings against the window, calling to me in beats.

wake wake wake/night night night/mon-ster mon-ster

There is only one window, but the curtains and the bars can only block so much of the outside world. The urge to remain in bed is strong, it takes several minutes to push myself into a sitting position. I reach for the knife under my pillow and cut away the long length of hair that has regrown. I was not clean or groomed when I died.

And the routine gives me something to focus on, to force myself to move.

I pull the strips of cloth from the pile below my bed and bind my chest. Pulling on the dark shirt and pants, I glance at the mirror and quickly look away. Weak and broken thing I am, but there's nothing to be done for that. It is the way I looked at my time of death.

I patrol my domain. The hospital is mostly quiet, some of the more nocturnal patients play games in the rec room, the night nurses chat and the orderlies try to look busy. None of them see me. Ever.

After death, things changed. The speed and strength, the teeth and claws are automatic responses. Other powers lie just beyond my reach. The only one I have perfected is what allows me to remain unseen.

My whole life prepared me for it, as if the power lived in my body long before my death. No one saw me growing up, not when I sang the lead in the choir, not as I tried to tell them who I was. My family saw what they wanted and hated what they imagined. I ran from that place before whispers and rumors turned into fists and stones, knives and sacrifices to a God that would not hear me.

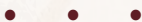
The walls speak to me as I follow my usual course through the halls.

Sandra is expecting a visit from her sister. Isaiah believes the doctors have changed his meds. Reshan is on suicide watch.

It is better inside when only the walls speak, not so many other voices. I notice their hesitation, the uncomfortable pause in their chatter.

I press hard against the wall, try to coax them into more speech but they refuse, going on with my herd's troubles. I trust the walls to tell me when they are ready.

I hunger but it is becoming harder to move. I return to bed, return to sleep.



Wednesday

The fog presses against the window, whispers slowly. I strain to hear.

creature of hell/your time has come/rise from your slumber/lest you sleep forever

I sigh, the fog is a notorious buzzkill. Rising is hard tonight, it has been this way since my life fell apart, the struggle to care. Memories of my mortal days are of rejection of family, of the church I loved, the long hard road from Texas to San Francisco - the gay mecca. I cut my locs short again, throw them into the pile in the corner. I should take it out to burn again soon. It fills a quarter of the tiny room.

I bind my chest, thinking of the looks I received on Castro St., fresh off the road. The names they called me. None would claim me, hire me, love me. I was as alone as if I'd stayed at home.

The walls are quieter tonight, the same hesitance as the last night but now it lingers between every word. I sit for a moment in the hall, back pressed against the wall, closing my ears to anything outside of what they want to tell me. Fear shivers through the wall. Its own? Or one of mine? They will not or cannot say.

I return to bed, the hunger growing in my belly but all my energy spent. I fall into another troubled sleep, where I'm back on my knees in alleys for men who laugh at me in front of their friends and make jokes but seek me out in the dark.



Thursday

The moonlight wakes me with loud giggles. I hate when the moonlight wakes me, the multiple high-pitched piping voices, as if it's a whole kindergarten class. I growl and rise from my bed.

I cut, bind, dress and open my door. The light outside my room flickers on/off on/off. I have yet to figure out if this is something I'm doing or a short. Maintenance has replaced the bulb many times.

I press my face to the wall, waiting to see if they can tell me yet. They are muttering but for the first time since I made this place mine it is too quiet for me to hear. It is useless to strain, their voice is not auditory, I have pierced my eardrums with knitting needles and still I could hear the walls. Outside my home, stars scream gossip they gather during the day, the moon giggles and shouts at its favorites, fog sings old songs lost for centuries, rain warns of its own poisons and a hundred other voices clamor, all with their own agenda. Here it is only the walls.

I move on, passing Deon and Lissa as they do a bed check. I nod to them, though they cannot see me. I move past Nancy, Daniel and Kira, the oldest nurses, seated behind the main station desk talking. I wander through the whole of the hospital. I sense everyone, sleeping or awake, the patients, the workers.

I find myself standing outside the chapel I never enter. The walls seem louder, seem to be leading me on and I raise a hand to the door carvings but turn away as a scream rings out.

Doors open, more and more of my people waking from troubled slumber to see what is happening. I move toward the scream, patients, nurses and orderlies moving out of my way automatically. There are fewer workers on the clock than during the day and many are trying to get patients back into their rooms, away from whatever I am running towards.

It's Julie. She's been in this building since before I claimed it, yet she still only looks sixteen. Pale blonde hair and sallow skin to match. Not long after I arrived, one of the male nurses wouldn't stop asking her to smile for him so she told him she was born without the necessary muscles. When he still wouldn't stop, she broke a plastic spork in half and carved frown lines deep into the corners of her mouth.

Some of the others called her Frowner. I liked her. Julie had no time for bullshit and she only smiled when she meant it. She had more integrity than most. And now her head is tilted too far back, mouth open, dark brown eyes wide, the whites pink with burst capillaries.

Her torso is outside of her room, her legs disappear into the doorway. As I get closer I hear the walls for the first time tonight. It is nothing useful, fragments.

murder

death

bleed

daddy

stranger

I kneel by her side, though the mortals keep their distance. I touch my fingers to the side of her neck, the warmth lingers but any beat or pulse of life is gone. I moved through this hall not an hour ago on my rounds and I heard Julie's heartbeat, strong and unhurried. I even thought I would feed from her tonight. Now she's dead.

I look up, many have been ushered back to their rooms but others stare at Julie in horror. In my mind their horror becomes blame. Julie is...was...mine, part of my people whether she knew it or not. I should have protected her, been there for her like no one was for me, kept her safe.

The sound of sirens, streets away yet but loud and getting closer. The speed people use when someone is dead but never when they are living in need. I move away from Julie's room.

I rest my forehead against the wall and though impossible it feels as if I have a fever, as if my skin is about to burst into flames. Julie is not the first of my people to die. Some are old, some are riddled with disease, some simply lose any drive and waste away no matter what. One was murdered, but that was by another of my herd, in a fight. This is not that, this is not messy, this is not a fight, this is not natural, this is not how it should be.

The truth I have been shoving back I first saw Julie's body and noticed her paleness roars forward. This was a feeding. Another of my kind fed from my herd, killed one of them without me noticing.

I move through my hospital, racing through all the levels, a scouring wind looking for a target, for the one who dared take someone who belonged to me. I start in the basement, the old rooms, haunted by remnants of violent deaths, when this place was more torture den than sanitarium. I do not catch the scent of another of my kind, nor on the first, second or third floors. I find myself outside the chapel doors yet again.

It is the only room I have not checked but I can't bring myself to open it. I have not been in a church since the night I died. I longed for death and expected to find it in God's house and found nothing. All the anger and energy drains from my body.

Maybe I am wrong, maybe I am imagining all this.

I barely make it back to my room and collapse on my bed before the ambulance arrives and I lie there listening to the sounds of them taking Julie away, the footsteps and heartbeats of non-herd members in my domain. They remind me that I am hungry and I bare my teeth at empty air until they leave. I sleep again.

Friday

Everything yells at me to get up through my window, moon, rain, wind, yet I am in a cocoon of silence. I hear my herd's heartbeats and they are fine, there is no need for me.

I am unable to make myself rise. I wake but spend all evening staring at the ceiling, the cracked faded lime-green paint revealing white plaster underneath. The city of San Francisco is covered in cracks. I didn't expect that but so much of the city carries the scars of earth and fire all the way down to its bones. Even the buildings that didn't exist during the quakes develop sympathy cracks. Just to fit in.

I was already cracked when I arrived, San Francisco just made the cracks wider, more noticeable.

The last man who paid for my mouth had a black cross on his cheek and I took that as a good sign, except then he had leaned forward and the pain started, my life being drained from me. The end rushed to me and I felt loved and happy and ready...

...then the taste on my lips, the burning of this horrible life, a sudden addiction.

As I take your first sip, I know this is not a good thing, that this will ruin me and yet I continue to drink until it is snatched away.

He pushes me to the ground, leaves me there gasping my mortal life away...

Others see me writhing and dying but do not care.

I drift to sleep again, where my mind lets me pretend for a little while.

Saturday

I should feed tonight. I know it as soon as I wake. The moonlight and fog are talking but I can't hear them over the hunger pounding through my head. I rush through my ritual hair cutting and binding and move out into the corridor. The night is lively, more than the usual patients are up and about, as well as more nurses and orderlies. People are moving in pairs and groups and the scent of fear hangs in the air acrid and sour.

Delila and Jason, two orderlies, wander by and I follow right behind them

"They said accident."

“What kind of accident results in all the blood disappearing?”

“Hey, I’m only telling you what the coroner came back with.”

“It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“Who do you think did it?”

“I thought you said they said it was an accident.”

“Yeah but who in their right mind actually believes that? Someone killed Frowner.”

“And drained her blood. So, vampire?”

I flinch at the word. Kindred, that is the approved term. I know that much, though it nearly cost me my new existence to learn it.

Delila laughs, shoves Jason’s shoulder. I follow them down the hall and around into the recreation room. They are both strong, either one of them would not miss a little of their total blood volume but I need to wait until I can get one of them alone.

I stop following Delila and Jason in the middle of the crowded rec room. I take a deep breath and then another, standing still as my herd moves around me, surrounded by their scents and sounds. I feel my herd through my whole body. Maybe because of the hunger, my focus, I hear something above the merged beat of my herd’s hearts. A beat not in time with the herd, a new beat, a stranger’s beat, and suddenly the walls are screaming.

STRANGER!

STRANGER!

STRANGER!

I fly down the hall, tracing the beat through my home. The beat doesn’t speed, they do not know I hear them, do not know I hunt. The beast in my chest is clawing its way free, it has already decided that this is the danger, this is the predator who has intruded on our territory. It makes no sense, a mortal is not kindred. The beast does not care.

I stop in front of the chapel doors. The sight of them allows me to claw back some measure of control. My palm lays on the curve of an angel’s cheek, the other turns the brass doorknob. I step inside. The draperies are red and white, the pews solid wood and all the way in front, at the altar, a woman kneels, shaking.

She glances up, once, quickly looks away but her breath steadies, just a little. I am not who she expected.

I walk slowly up the aisle. I stop before I reach her, and look up to the crucifix above her. I stare at Jesus. He stares back.

When I was a child I thought I could see compassion.

As an adolescent I saw love.

As an adult I simply got used to other men looming over me. I look away.

“You are in my home. Who are you?”

“I am Thea.”

I nod though I do not care about her name. I notice the pile of blankets behind her, the thickness of her scent.

“How long have you been here?”

“A few days.”

She knows what I am, it is obvious by the way her hands shake and slip over each other, the aborted moves toward her neck. I am more concerned by the fact that a kine who was not mine was in my home for so long without my noticing. How did it take so long?

“You’re being hunted.”

She nods, though I don’t need the confirmation, everything about her screams prey. The nervous darted looks, the back to the wall, the way she shakes as if she has not eaten or rested well in days.

“Why did you come here?”

“For the chapel.”

This answer is the first one that surprises me. I grew up in the church. I sang in the church. I loved the church but it all proved false. What happens to your belief when you get irrevocable proof that evil exists in the world but good is still silent?

“Why?”

“It protects me.”

I’m ready to laugh at her foolish faith when I remember she has been in my home for days without my knowledge. Perhaps the chapel has protected her, from both my notice and the hunters, but why her and not me? What makes her worthy of protection? I remember my hunger as my anger comes surging to the front and I know I could solve everything quickly. If I drained her, the hunter would give up and leave, my herd would be safe and my hunger satisfied.

“I’m sorry about your...friend.”

I nod at her. Julie was close enough to friend for me, the ghost in the walls. The secrets they tell the air, they tell to me and I feel close to them because of it. I have no illusions though, I am a monster. Crucifix Jesus whispers, *partake of my flesh, be healed, all flesh is my flesh, she is me, as are you*

I move closer to her and her heart speeds up.

“Are you going to kill me?”

There’s a shake to her voice but she does not flee and I stop.

“I am tired of running. He’s here anyway, the one with the cross on his face.”

Just like that it’s years ago, when you lived, when you were mortal. You came west looking for hope, for the community that everyone said was here, your people, they would understand you - the queer faggot snake-charmer back door commander butt pirate buttercup fairy, none of those names would follow you here but they used other names: mandingo freak nigger she-he darkie shim, the ones who were supposed to be like you were full of hate, contempt, but your lips, those they were happy to use, they were happy to take and take and take until what was left of you was worse than the soul-death that waited at home, the last one, you can’t remember his face as well as you can the alley where it happened, right off of Castro St., that is the place that you died, begging for help, begging for any of the shiny, pretty, people who passed by on the street to see, to care that this monster had you at his mercy but how many monsters had already tried to take your soul, your life? His face has always been a blur but you remember the cross, the deep black elaborateness carved into the meat of his right cheek, the one who made you.

Another scream drags me from memories, soon joined by many others and I am running again. Away from Thea - who is staring as if I’ve been still for a long time. Away from the chapel. Away from the temptation. I arrive at another scene like Julie, except that Mark’s eyes are open in fear not just death, his mouth is frozen in a scream we never heard, his head is twisted all the way around, flopping about like a doll’s as his door moves back and forth. He is laid backwards over the top of it, his back obviously broken. The cavity of his stomach has been scooped open, the intestines used to tie him to the door.

Patients and workers are staring, screaming, sobbing, blood draining from their faces. Julie’s death could have been a fall, could have been an accident, and yes it could have been a murder but one they could pretend to understand. This, this is not anything that can be written off as human. This is the animal, this is slaughter, this is revealing me to my herd.

Then I understand. The other kindred is not just hunting Thea but taunting me. He knows he is in my territory and does not care. I should return to the chapel, talk more with Thea. See what she can tell me about my opponent but the sight of Mark, strong, sweet, lovely Mark, killed like this, drags at my limbs. Another of my herd is dead, another time I did nothing.

I hear the head nurse Kira order a lockdown of the whole place. I return to my room. I have failed again. It is what I am best at.

I do not strip down tonight, it is all I can do to crawl into bed and fall into an exhausted stupor. Tomorrow. I will deal with all of it tomorrow. On the “Lord’s” day. How fitting.



Sunday

Everything is silent when I rise. The murmur of the moonlight and light rain gone, the grumble of the walls silent. I can hear the heartbeats of my herd but that is all, there is no sound of voices or movement. It is like a blanket has been laid over my hearing.

The other kindred is here.

I cut my locs and leave the binding I did not remove last night in place.

I step into the hallway. No one is out, they must feel the tension in the air, the blood ready to be spilled. I walk to the chapel, all my senses on high alert. There is nothing. The door opens easily under my hand and Thea is standing, facing the doors, hands clasped in front of her, eyes closed but cheeks dry.

“You feel it.”

“Yes.” She whispers and something stirs in me at the way her voice is steady, some remnant of pride for this woman who would go to her death without showing fear.

“Come.”

I see the exhaustion in her every step, the pain of running for too long, the willingness for it to end. I know that worn down posture. The chapel must have been shielding her from both of us because as soon as we emerge I feel him. He comes down on Thea from the ceiling and they tumble back into the chapel. I follow.

The plan is to wait until he is distracted by killing Thea then strike. He has been hunting a single prey for too long, the inability to hide the last kill - Mark - is proof he is fraying. Obsession is blinding. He has Thea on the ground. I see the cross burned into the paleness of his right cheek. I meet Thea’s gaze and it is calm, no censure in it.

“Yes, finally. Your God is dead. I am your new God.” He whispers. I remember. That voice. Those words.

I dive at him, my sire, the one who made me this. I knock him off Thea before he can bite down.

“No! Mine!”

We rip into each other, his strength is more than mine, I can feel it in the chunks he takes out of me but he is distracted, struggling to get back to Thea, not to win.

I use the distraction and leverage to slam him into the wall.

“Why?”

“Mine!” He snarls.

“Not her, why me?!” I slam him into the wall again, ignoring the furrows he is clawing in my sides, scoring my ribs with his claws.

He looks at me for the first time since I tackled him. His eyebrows slant down and it takes entirely too long for recognition to wash across his features.

“You. The pretty little boy, in the alley. I almost didn’t take you. Your faith was guttering, almost ready to go out. I pitied you. But her, her belief is still a bright flame.” He digs his claws into my sides and shoves up, up and away. I yell as my head slams into the ground, through the meager cushion of the carpet.

Thea’s voice rises in prayer so fast it’s a scream and I struggle to my feet. Thea is fending off the kindred somehow. My vision blurs but I dive for his feet. The kindred snarls down at me and tears at me with claws and teeth. I fight back, he is much older and stronger but he is distracted and I am angrier.

We roll across the floor, snarling and ripping into one another until we slam into something that clatters over us. He has me below him, hands wrapped around my throat, knees on my shoulders. I gasp and buck, trying to throw him off. I do not need air but the claws are sinking in, closer and closer to my spine. I hear the running footsteps of Thea. I think she means to escape but she is coming closer. Thea grunts and curses and something splashes down on the kindred above me and he screams, not in anger but in pain. Some of it drips around his body and onto mine.

My scream joins his as the liquid burns into my skin, my hunger comes roaring back, still unsatisfied. He is off me and turning, I see how the clothes he is wearing now sink into his pitted and scarred back. He is moving toward Thea but part of his leg is burned clean to the bone, it slows him down enough. And I am on his back.

He spins but I wrap my legs around his hips and cling to his back like a limpet. Ignoring the pain in my flesh from whatever hurt him I slam my teeth into his neck. I drink, growing stronger with each mouthful. The burns slowly stop hurting. I continue to draw until he collapses and is still below me, until my slurps bring nothing but single drops. I stop and roll away as his body begins to dissolve.

The blood of my Sire pounds through me, I can feel it changing me, making me stronger, making everything more. The walls come pounding back into my ears.

Bad kindred kept us silent, muffled the network. Would not let us warn you! It is good he is dead, he was a bad one of us.

It is clearer than ever and I wonder at the use of “us”.

“What was that?” I ask Thea as she leans over me. “What did you pour on him?”

“The bath of holy water.”

I start at that. “That is what burned so terribly?” I can still feel it gnawing into myself before I took his blood and health.

“I said my own prayer over it too, of course.”

There is something different about this woman. The light from the ceiling is not the only illumination, she glows, it is subtle and small but I see it. I smile.

“Help me up?”

“Of course. Thank you.”

I nod at her and take her hand. There is a slight burn in her touch, a warning, a buzz of potential pain. I let go quickly once I am standing. I should thank her for the return of my faith, because if holy water burns in the hands of a true believer then there must be something out there to oppose my darkness.

New strength or not, the exhaustion, the overwhelming feeling of worthlessness crashes over me again and I long for my bed. The body is gone. No one has come running so I must assume that he kept everyone away somehow. Another trick I do not yet know but I will learn.

“I go to bed. Be welcome in my territory tonight.”

I hope that she hears the other part of that. That I would like her gone tomorrow. She has brought my faith back but too much confusion. It would be better if she is gone, out of my sight while I digest the world she has turned on its side.

Monday

Thea is gone. I feel it as soon as I wake the next night. But there are others, the walls inform me.

Kindred come, powerful, listen to what they have to say

I am dressed and groomed, sitting on my small bare mattress when they knock. I do not answer but they enter anyway. A man and a woman, the inhumanity dripping off of them. She is Latina, dressed in a black business suit, dark hair pulled back into a bun. Contempt curves her mouth as she looks at me on my mattress and the pile of hair. The man who follows is African-American, a shade lighter than myself, dressed in a tank top and

board shorts, afro bleached blonde at the tips. He looks as if he should have a surfboard under his arm.

The last woman is a head taller than either of them. Her skin is a glowing mahogany and her figure a thick hourglass in a button down shirt and pencil skirt.

“Hello Jasper.”

I nod at her.

“I am Prince Mary Ellen, or Mistress Pleasant if you prefer. I rule this territory.”

I nod again and add a smile.

She nods back and glances around my room, unlike her guards - because what else could they be - she shows no expression.

“You know that usually what you did yesterday is illegal?”

She must be talking about draining my sire. I smirk. “I did nothing yesterday.”

She meets my gaze and a smile finally breaks through. “Exactly. Your Sire has been a problem for many, a nomad traveling up and down the West Coast, leaving problems in his wake. It is good to know he’s moved on...from my territory”

I nod to show I understand.

Toreador: Look at all the pretty bluster to cover up the rot. If she ever discovers the truth, if the clan should find out, they would be more mad than us.

I smile as the moonlight mocks her because I know what it means. I do not hide my rot, I am a dead creature and do not pretend, it is all right there for all to see.

She smiles.

“The Malkavian clan has long been without a Primogen in my city. Because of recent events you are now the oldest in the city. You would be... welcome on my council.” The two guards stiffen and I cannot help but smirk at the hatred burning in their eyes. That is temptation enough to say yes.

I think on it. Why would she invite me? Does she think my silence means I shall be a yes vote for her? She knows the violence that still lingers in the corners of my mouth so she knows I am a danger. I do not know enough to make a decision.

“I would think on it more.”

She nods and turns to leave, the guards following behind her.

Perhaps it is time I ventured outside of my domain and learn of my people. Her offer is one that would give me power, yet I am suddenly filled by

the wish to travel, to go forth to all the places on the globe thought to be holy and find things that mortals cannot find on their own. Thea has reawakened my faith and now I will search until I can find God and meet face to face.

The moonlight and walls murmurs approval at my plan.

The night is young and I have just woken, the hunger is sated by the blood of my maker still and lethargy still pulls at my limbs so I drift off into a restless sleep content to leave the exploration for one of my other endless nights.





BLOOD MOON

By Dave Harlequin

I love to drink. I'll never forget my first taste, when on a dare, I swiped a bottle of my old man's favorite beer. See, he kept this old fridge stocked full out in his workshop in the backyard, and on the weekends he'd always go out there and drink himself blind while listening to whatever game was on the old radio he had out there at the time. Baseball in the spring and summer, football in the fall and winter. The old man wasn't really an alcoholic, mind you, he just had his routines, and well, booze was part of that routine. He always held down a job, always kept food on the table, and never missed a bill or anything like that; he just had a weekend love affair with the sauce was all. In those stupid AA meetings, they call that being a functional alcoholic, but I never agreed with that; Pop had it under control, and not like most people say they do, either. He actually did.

Me on the other hand, well, I didn't get so lucky. At first I was just a typical teenager, hitting the bottle with my friends whenever I could get my hands on some, no big deal. Then I turned 18 and got the bright idea to go make something of myself and join the Army. I was gonna go learn some skills, go to college, and get paid to do it all. You know, go "*be all I can be*" as they say. Of course, that just ended up being a line of bullshit the recruiter told me. In truth, they shipped my ass directly to the sandbox as soon as they could, so I could go kill a bunch of people, walk around and get shot at all day, and drink myself to sleep every night. I know it was all probably way more complicated than that, but I never really felt like that's what I signed up for. I guess I was just another dumb kid who bit off more than he could chew.

Three tours and twelve years later, I was back home. Being from a small town in the south, I figured it would be the big hero welcome, you know with all that same hoopla and praises and thank you's they showered all over me when I signed up, or the one time I came home for the old man's funeral a couple months before I went back for my second tour. But as I soon found out, that wasn't the way things worked around here. See, they're all too happy

to talk about how much they appreciate the military, and how they all “*support the troops*” so damned much, but once you’re out they couldn’t give a rat’s ass about you, never mind the fact that it’s when you get *out* that you need the most support. But enough of my bellyaching about my past.

No, my *real* story begins about two years ago in the town of Sylva, North Carolina, a sleepy little one horse town tucked away in the Appalachian Mountains. About the only distinctive thing about Sylva was that it was one town over from Western Carolina University, and since that old college was stuck in a dry county, all the college kids looking for a drink would always head over our way.

We had three bars in town, and only one of them was any good for a guy like me. There was an Irish pub that I don’t think’s ever seen a single soul that was actually *from* Ireland, where you’d find most of your typical frat boys and the gold diggers they ran around with wasting daddy’s money and screaming about sports, and this old barbecue shack that turned into a half-assed dance club after dark where the rest of the collegiate types would pack in like sardines and drink until they *thought* they could dance worth a damn. I never could stand being in those places, and townies like me weren’t exactly welcome there anyway, so I hardly ever went there. And then there was Lou’s Roadhouse out on the edge of town, where most of those snot-nosed kids wouldn’t dare step foot.

Lou’s was a biker joint, just off the Blue Ridge Parkway, that’s been there for as long as I can even remember. Lou’s was run by, you guessed it, Lou, which if you’re wondering, was short for Louise. If you ever find yourself there, take my advice and don’t ever call her that, if you happen to like having teeth, that is. Lou was a tough old biker broad who made the best whiskey sours I’ve ever tasted, and took absolutely no shit from anyone. Ever. Don’t get me wrong, she was friendly and all, just didn’t take no shit. If you were a regular at Lou’s, and pretty much everyone that ever came there was, you knew there was two rules to being there; don’t ever say the word ‘whore,’ and don’t ever lay so much as a finger on her for any reason.

You see, Lou used to have a husband who’d beat her senseless just about every day. Stories vary as to what actually happened, but most folks agree that one day Lou finally got fed up with it all and killed that old bastard. Sheriffs found what was left of his body in the quarry, literally torn limb from limb. They ruled it an accident, some kind of wild animal attack, though I don’t think anybody in town actually believed it. After that, Lou disappeared for a while. When she came back to town a few years later she was a different woman. The tough, rugged, no-nonsense type of badass that she is now. She took over the bar, renamed it Lou’s Roadhouse, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I’m only telling you all this to try and explain what type of person we’re dealing with here, so maybe that one summer night when a certain stranger came walking into the bar might make a bit more sense.

It was getting late, around midnight I think, though I was pretty well on my way to wasted by then. The door crashed open, and in walked this tall, skinny, oddly dressed fellow who looked and smelled like he just crawled out of a dumpster. He had wild, disheveled, long hair, a scruffy beard, and a long trench coat draped over a tie-dye t-shirt. As you'd probably expect, he didn't get the warmest reaction from the locals, who immediately began hurling insults. I remember one of the boys in there yelled out "hey freak show, you're in the wrong place" and another yelled out "this ain't no queer bar" as everyone laughed. Quick as a fox, the stranger quipped back "oh my mistake there, bubba, I could'a sworn with all the leather and mustaches in here this was fire fuckin' island! Too bad for you boys I'm not looking for love tonight, I'm looking for a sweet little lady named Louise! Where is the old whore?"

About that time, you could've heard a pin drop, that is until glass broke in the back and Lou came storming out, baseball bat in hand. "WHO THE FUCK SAID THAT?" rang out like a siren, before something even crazier happened. Lou froze dead in her tracks, and dropped the bat with a clang as aluminum hit concrete. "How ya doin' sissy face? Knew that'd get you out here," he said with a sly smile before Lou laughed and hugged him. We all just sat there dumbfounded until Lou told us all to mind our business, which we did, as nobody wanted any part of that trouble.

As the night went on, the strange man sat at the bar chatting with Lou well into the wee hours. A few hours later most everyone had left except me, one guy who was passed out, and of course those two. As she did about every night, Lou finally looked over at me and said "closing time, Sarge, here's one for the road" and slid me a beer. I told her to put it on my Uncle Sam's tab and gave my usual excuse of settling up on next month's check. She just sighed and told me to take the trash out before I left. As I was dragging the two big bags behind me, I overheard Lou telling the man that I was the local drunk, and that I always drink more than my checks even cover, but she ain't got the heart to turn me away on account of me being a "crazy old PTSD case" as she put it. Pissed me off a bit, but what can I say? She was probably right.

Out back I was tossing the trash bags in the dumpster and finishing my last beer when out walks the stranger. At first he didn't say a word, just tossed me another beer with a wink. I nodded in thanks and cracked it open. Finally, he spoke up and said "so, Sergeant Shithammer, I hear you're the town alkie, that true?" I just looked at him and shrugged and told him I didn't really care what he heard and started walking away. "Hey, come on, I didn't mean to upset you, I like alcoholics! Every village needs the village idiot, it's the only way things stay fun," he said with an almost unnerving sincerity. "Lucky for you, I'm feeling generous tonight, and I think I can help you."

Before I ever had a chance to say no, or say anything for that matter, out came the teeth.

From there everything gets a bit hazy. I don't remember what happened after the guy bit me, nor do I remember much of anything else for the next few days. When I came to, I was in my house, my windows all boarded up from the inside with curtains stapled to the boards and the words, "DON'T EVER, EVER GO OUTSIDE IN THE LIGHT. YOU'LL DIE" spray painted on the wall. On my kitchen table I found a bottle of really good whiskey and a note from the mysterious stranger, half-assed re-explaining everything he told me before about being a vampire and telling me there was a few blood packs in the fridge, which there was. It also went on to explain that he was "bored with all this vampire stuff," and had decided to kill himself by walking into the sunlight. Exactly what was painted on my wall. Yeah, apparently vampires burn up in the sunlight, in case you didn't know.

I looked in the fridge and sure enough, there was a few packs of blood straight from the county hospital in there. There was also another note that read "DRINK THESE BEFORE YOU BITE ANYONE. DON'T WORRY, YOU'LL GET USED TO IT."

As I'm sure you can imagine, this was all way too weird for me, so I shut the fridge door, grabbed that bottle and turned it up. What happened next was horrible. At first it was just the old familiar burn of the booze, then my stomach started rumbling, and then I got that unmistakable feeling that it was all coming back up. I ran into my bathroom as fast as I could and started puking my guts out like you wouldn't believe. I'm talking about that violent vomiting too, the kind where you feel like your muscles are going to rip right out of your skin and your throat feels like it's being lit on fire while someone pulls your entrails out of your mouth. Sure enough, taped right to the side of the toilet was yet another note from the weirdo that made all this possible. I won't go into all the details, but it basically said that he knew I'd end up here eventually, and that this would be the final letter I get. He explained how vampires can't imbibe alcohol without becoming horribly sick, and that he told me he'd help me, and this is how he'll cure my alcoholism. Then he said that this was the best prank he ever pulled, and he can "check out happy knowing that the drunk asshole he met at his sister's bar just kicked the habit in the most hilarious way possible."

Looking back, what's really funny is his method might've actually worked had he just considered two things. One, I don't respond too well to pranks and jokes, especially sick ones like this, and two, I don't give up that easy, especially given how much I really, really love drinking.

I spent the next several days trying everything I had in the house. Liquor, beer, wine, cough syrup, mouthwash, hell, I even tried drinking a bottle of pure lemon extract that's been in my cabinet since I first moved in here. Everything had the same result, puke fucking city. I finally gave up and grabbed the blood bag. I was so weak and hungry by this point I didn't even care. I

can't tell you how unbelievably weird that first time was. I mean, I'm sitting there about to drink blood for fuck's sake. But once I finally got the nerve to take that first drink, it was the best thing I've ever tasted in my entire life. I've seriously never felt more instantly better than right then. Still though, it was a lot to process, I mean shit I just drank blood and actually loved it. I didn't even care if I was gonna throw it all up, I needed a damn drink.

But something was different this time. I didn't get sick. I mean, I got sorta queasy, but I didn't puke. Somehow mixing the blood and the booze together made it sort of okay. After that I mixed a half and half cocktail of blood and whiskey, poured it into a jar, shook it up a bit, and nursed it for the rest of the night as I watched some TV while I tried to process everything. Sometime around 5:30am or so I passed out.

When I came to, it was already starting to get dark again. I waited until I knew for sure it was all the way night, and headed out to take care of a little business. I knew I needed blood to live now, and I also knew if anyone would know how to keep my habit up, it was my good friend Benji.

Benji was this crazy old hillbilly who lived up on a mountain off Route 23 about 10 miles outside of town. He was a vet like me, except he had served back in Vietnam and had since taken to the bootlegging industry of making moonshine and would make ends meet by selling it around town. Cops never did nothing about it, either. Probably because they all got a jar for free out of each batch, he never sold to kids, and well, that's just how things went around here.

Figuring the hospital would be too well guarded, I swung by the local blood bank nearby, snuck in the back entrance via an open window. Filled up my backpack with as many blood bags as I could carry, and quickly made my way out to Benji's compound. After he let me in, I got right down to it, and just laid it all on him. To my surprise, he believed me, and even told me he had encounters vampires before. "Bloodsucking freaks," as he called them often did business with Benji on procuring blood in exchange for money and protection from "anyone who might be trying to cut in on his profits". After this, as I'm sure you can imagine, I was pretty shocked. In all the years I'd known Benji, I never knew about any of this, and I honestly had expected a much worse reaction from someone as paranoid and volatile as him. Long story short, he agreed to help me brew some of the stuff. Even came up with a pretty cool name for it, *Blood Moon*. So long as I procured the ingredients, paid him a modest fee, and of course never tried to bite him, he'd brew me as much as I wanted.

And that's exactly what we did for the next couple months. I'd go out and gather everything he needed, bring it all back to him, and handed over half of my government check to him. Long as my bills were paid, I didn't really need

anything else. Not like I could eat, or even wanted food anymore, and not like I had any outstanding bar tabs to settle. As weird as this whole vampire thing was, things were actually going pretty well, until one day Benji told me he'd finally figured out the right recipe.

I had been getting by mixing the stuff raw while I was waiting on the first batch, but it wasn't doing much other than taking the edge off, so I was beyond eager to try Benji's Blood Moon. It was a beautiful sight, let me tell you, a deep red that almost had a glow about it. It was sort of cloudy, but you could still see through it when you held the jar up to the light. It smelled awful, like paint thinner and rubbing alcohol, but that was to be expected with any moonshine, and it honestly didn't taste much better when I took that first swig. It damn sure worked, though, because what happened next was one of the weirdest experiences of my life.

Oh my god, that feeling! Just thinking about it now makes me ache. It's a rush like I can't even explain! Nearest thing I can compare it to is a long night of hard boozing and doing some pure cocaine while chugging energy drinks and popping trucker pills. The world rushes past me at 100mph and makes everything feel like it's slowed down to a crawl at the same time. Half a jar of this stuff and I hadn't ever felt better even on my best day when I was human. Benji filled an old plastic milk crate full of jars, and loaded them into his truck. I followed behind him, hopped in the cab, and he drove me home.

For the next month or so I was all set. I stayed in, sat on my couch, watched a lot of late night TV and drank myself blind every damned night. It was fantastic. I honestly haven't been happier since before the war. I imagine everybody down at Lou's probably thought I was dead or that I'd skipped town by now, seeing as how I hadn't been there since the night I got embraced, but I hadn't heard from any of them. I thought about going out there a couple times, but decided against it, as I'd just end up having to answer a bunch of questions that I just frankly didn't know how to. As I reached for my last jar, I figured it was probably time to pay ol' Benji another visit.

When I got there, I was dumbfounded. Benji came running towards the gate like a schoolboy and as soon as he opened it up the son of a bitch greeted me with a hug. Very out of character for the guy, if you didn't figure that out on your own. I asked him what in the hell he was so happy about, and he went on to tell me that his business had tripled in the past month and it was, as he put it, all thanks to that *weird ass Blood Moon stuff*. I told him that's actually why I was here, and he told me not to even worry about it as he already had me covered. When we walked inside, there was about five or six of Benji's cousins working in there, every damned one of them making Blood Moon; some of them brewing, some bottling, like some sort of hillbilly assembly line. Benji handed me another full milk crate and told me it was on the house. We walked out towards Benji's truck and he told me all about how ever since he'd been selling this blood moon stuff the locals were all about it.

About that time, I hit the damned ceiling. I said *Jesus fucking Christ, Benji, you're selling this shit to people? It's fucking blood, man!* He looked at me all wall-eyed and said "well, yeah, I mean it's a big seller, and it ain't hurting nobody, what's the goddamn problem?" I yelled right back, *I'm a vampire, you stupid bastard, regular people can't drink this shit, you're out there selling this to humans! You probably just made a whole fucking town full of other vampires!*

Benji said "you don't know that, Jack! It ain't turning nobody into vampires, not like real vampires, chill the fuck out!" I said, *I'm a vampire and I drink blood, and sooner or later I'm gonna have to kill people to get it, you realize what that means? You probably just fucking killed everybody within a hundred miles, cause now they're all gonna need it all the time too!* Suddenly, behind us in the dark shadows of the tree line we hear a raspy voice chime in saying "well, that's not exactly how it works, Sarge, but you boys do got a hell of a lot of explaining to do." Sure enough, out steps Lou, flanked by two behemoth-sized gorilla-looking dudes in three-piece suits. "We got some business needs taking care of, boys, and it's about time to settle up your tabs."

Benji took off running towards the house, but before he could get more than a few steps away, one of Lou's associates grabbed his head like he was palming a damn basketball and snapped his neck like something out of a movie. I jumped back in horror, and Lou grabbed me by my neck, lifting me right off my feet, and pinned me against Benji's truck. She said "do it" and her two pet monsters ran right up in the house. I couldn't see what happened, but I heard a couple gunshots ring out, some stuff breaking, then a lot of yelling and screaming, and then nothing.

Lou said "I had thought my idiot brother might've tried embracing you, but I never actually thought the lunatic would pull some shit like this." She shook me. "Do you have any idea what your stupid redneck friends have done here or what kinda trouble you've found yourself in with the Camarilla?"

Damn near panicked, I told Lou that I didn't know what the Camarilla even was, or that Benji and his crew were even making this stuff for anyone but me. I told her all about the stranger that night, what had happened to me, and how I had just woken up at home. About that time, Lou's two goons came walking outside and told her "they're here ma'am, we got them, you need to see this." Lou just nodded, told them to grab me, and she led the way as the three walked inside, carrying me.

Benji's compound was a wreck and the place was a massacre. Blood, guts, and body parts were everywhere, like nothing I'd ever seen, not even in the war. The goons pointed her to the back room, and she led us in there. If I could I would've probably had a heart attack right there after laying eyes on what I saw. Two bodies were chained up to the walls, gutted, with rubber tubes stuck in their arms, legs, and bellies, steadily draining blood into big glass jugs sitting

on the floor. Lou must have noticed how horrified I was at seeing this, because she looked at me and asked “you didn’t know about any of this, did you?” I shook my head no, and she turned to her associates and said “I believe him. Get these two out of here, I’ll take care of our new brother.” She then turns to me and says “I’m gonna ask you two questions right now, Sarge, and unless you want me to end you for good you better tell me the truth. What exactly do you know about all this? And what exactly is your role in in it?”

I did my best to explain everything - what I knew, what I didn’t, you name it. Lou explained, as I’d kind of figured out by then, that she was a vampire and was on a mission from the Camarilla - some kind of secret vampire government or something like that. Eventually, Lou took me back to my house where I showed her all of the notes, trying my best to go over everything that had happened again. Lou just sat there, listening and nodding her head. Lou spoke up, saying that it was all starting to make sense to her, seeing as how I didn’t know a damn thing about being a vampire, but just couldn’t wrap her head around what the hell I was thinking in the first place. When I told her I wasn’t really thinking about anything here and I was just trying to catch a buzz, she laughed like is never seen her laugh before.

What she said next, I’ll never forget. She said “you idiot, why didn’t you just feed from a drunk person if you wanted to get hammered so damn bad?”





The BECOMING

By Nicole Givens Kurtz

The ears appeared the morning after, a physical manifestation of an evening of black outs, lost memories, and mental fuzziness. Sturdy, but soft, they almost cleared Nyanika's mass of thick, black curls.

She touched her earrings, stroked the lobes, her fingers inching up the ear. As she did so, they became more and more furry. With each glide of her fingers along the cartilage and fur, her horror mounted. She hadn't imagined them! They were really there. Why couldn't she remember why?

She groaned, and felt them. Definitely cat ears!

With a frustrated scream, Nyanika crashed to the floor, her feet twisted in the blanket in her haste. The twin bed groaned in a laugh.

Determined to face the mirror and her new appearance, she snatched the covers clear and stood up. Once at the mirror, she pursed her lips, winced, and she touched the sharp edges of her fangs. Puffy and now bleeding, her lips had been injured. But how?

She couldn't remember. The ears wiggled as she concentrated.

That's a strange trick, she thought.

So much of last night lay just beyond her mental reach. She touched the corners of her mouth, avoiding her lips, and when she brought her hand away, her fingertips were covered with dark red flakes of dried, *something*.

Blood? Ketchup? Wine?

She pinched her arm and hopped around at the pain. "No, I'm definitely awake."

The scent of copper, old sweat, and fur lingered on her clothing. Nyanika stripped in frantic snatches of clothes. She had to get the scent, the *stench*,

off, shoving aside the internal nausea the odors generated. Deep splatters of a similar red had dried all over her pants, stained her hands, and her wrists.

She was covered in it!

“Greta,” Nanyanika said to the pile of blankets that held her roommate. Now she remembered they gone out together.

“Greta!” She walked over to the bed and yanked off the blanket to discover the bed empty.

Nanyanika stood with her arms akimbo.

They’d been together at the Underground, but she couldn’t even recall if they’d returned that way. With her roommate’s absence, she couldn’t ask her for details or clues.

Nanyanika returned to her mirror and tried to recapture the tattered fragments of last night. She put her hand over her heart, but nothing happened. No beat. No race.

She shut her eyes and concentrated. Her ears flickered at the muffled sounds emitting from the hallway and neighboring dorm room.

They felt funny when she touched them. Cartilage and fur, they captured more sound than her regular ears. The hell? How? They must be some prank. They didn’t feel like glue and cardboard. She tugged on the right one.

“Ow!”

Greta wouldn’t have glued them on. She knew how much Nanyanika loved her hair. Still, her ears burned from the tugging.

“Oh goddess!” What the hell has happened to her? Since her becoming, she hadn’t imagined this as a remotely possible side effect of being undead.

With a deep breath, she calmed her mind, and suddenly the images came fast, like a hot knife.

There was a security guard. The Atlanta Underground. The hairs on her neck stood up in alarm. Why did this single memory invoke that reaction?

He’d been taller, thicker, meatier. He worked out, but not to Arnold Schwarzenegger proportion. To some he would’ve been a scary guy, but to her, he had only seemed, well, *consumable*. No wedding ring. Probably childless, if his lewd gawking at the shopping and giggling teenage girls had been any indication.

Nanyanika had paused in the sea of moving bodies and clashing perfume and body odors to watch him.

Her eyes flapped open as the memory died out. Breathing heavily and sweating as she tried to chase it, Nanyanika huffed out an annoyed sigh. She had to know what she’d done on some level, because her body remembered, even while her mind blocked it out.

She tried again and closed her eyes.

Little else came forward. She squeezed her eyes tighter and struggled with the mental blockade, willing the truth to come forth.

And then it did.

The wall gave way, and the scattering of images and their accompanying emotions rushed through her. Pangs of agonizing hunger, no, *thirst*, had propelled her. She'd lost all logical ability and control without warning. Only feral need remained. Flashes of scarlet, wet warm blood, and his nauseating screams behind the mall, tucked into shadowy seclusion, Nanyanika and the guard...

Her eyes flapped open. "What? Oh, no, no, no..."

Yes, she'd fed before, sips, really. Not like this. Never like this.

She could still hear the blood collecting in his throat, bubbling like thick water, but she also heard the slurps that echoed through her.

You'll want to control that thirst, someone had said. She couldn't recall *who* had said that, but someone had whispered it in her ear, before she chatted up the guard. The words held warning, and she'd been foolish to ignore it.

Her face was hot with perspiration. Nanyanika hugged herself against the waves of nausea and repulsion rocking through her.

A spray of warm blood. Too fast. She'd torn into the jugular instead of piercing. She licked greedily, nipping her lips on her fangs. Her fingers ripped into the wound, hungry to get at more before it cooled and coagulated.

No! Stop! Stop! For goodness's sake, stop!

The security guard had...ceased. Ceased struggling, ceased crying, ceased living. His heavy, dead weight slumped to the ground, and Nanyanika followed. On her knees, she continued to plunder, to devour, to feed, until sated at last, she paused. Her hands sticky with blood, flesh, and torn bits of muscle, she glanced around. As the thirst receded, she finally recalled the outdoor mall, the shopping, and Greta.

She glanced down at the wide open eyes, the mouth frozen in a scream, forever etched in disbelief and horror. The ravaged wound in his neck hid her initial fang's punctures, but now it looked like a wild animal had ripped into him. She'd seen similar attacks in area around her village where panthers had attacked gazelles. Predator.

I'm no animal, no predator. I'm a person, a woman, Nanyanika Gouto. I'm still me. Undead, but alive.

Yet, the security guard's body begged to differ. She reached for her purse, but caught sight of her hands. Screaming, she wiped them on her pants, but it remained.

Sickened, she bent over beside him and vomited.

“It won’t come off. Damn it. Come. Off!” Nanyanika rubbed her hands hard against her pants, but her hands remained stained with scarlet.

The walkie-talkie squawked. “Aye, Tony. You there?”

Jumping to her feet, she snatched up her purse, and started down the corridor.

How could I do it lose complete control?

When she opened her eyes, she still saw his face contorted in fear, his body reacting to her fangs’ puncture and the slow drain of his life-force.

Numb. Cold. She tried to banish the images, but now that they’d started, they wouldn’t stop.

She hurried to the room’s door, the urgency to race, to flee, to escape pressed upon her, working in concert with the raw agony of her actions. Sickened, she crumpled to her knees, crawled over to the wastepaper basket, and threw up.

But she couldn’t escape it.

The horror was within.

Her normal was now on hold. Nanyanika’s soul closed over this secret.

A loud clang from the outside hallway forced Nanyanika to sit up, spilling the trashcan to its side. Her head throbbed, but she stood up anyway. Despite the newfound knowledge of what she’d done, Nanyanika had another problem.

She had cat ears, dark like a panther’s.



Nanyanika emerged from her dorm, thankful for the evening dark. The sunlight meant death. Now immortal, she wouldn’t risk losing it to the day’s golden promise. *Winter in the city is wilder than wind, especially at nightfall.*

She scowled against the cold wind. The evening’s magic and mystery fed exhilaration from its fingers. Nanyanika smelled Greta rather than saw her, just before her roomie slipped off the curb. Since being Embraced, Nanyanika saw better in the darkness, but she also could smell—everything. In the gloom of her native forest, her eyes had broken the shadows and shapes so she recognized objects and people better without light. That seemed to have stayed with her even in her new unlife. The night sky’s always lighter than the false illumination on the ground. Everything about her had begun to evolve, to change, but she’d never known any of her people to have, well, cat ears.

Despite the scores of people crawling all over the streets, Nanyanika felt alone. Except for the gnawing hunger. It remained with her.

“You lost?” Greta quipped, elbowing her with a smirk and knocking her out of her musings. “What’s with the thing? I know it’s cold out, but you’re covering up your—”

She reached for Nanyanika’s yellow and blue hood, but stopped when Nanyanika grabbed her hand, inches from touching it.

“Don’t. It’s cold and my ears are freezing.” Nanyanika let her go, and then offered a smile as if to take the sting out of her tone.

“It must be for you to cover up your hair.” Greta put her hands into her pockets, but she’d lost the amusement in her voice. “Where’s your pager? I’ve been beeping you for about an hour.”

Nanyanika shrugged. “Just been walking around, soaking up the night.”

“In this freezing weather?” Greta arched an eyebrow in question of complete disbelief.

“Yeah.” Nanyanika hunched back into her hood, hoping it hid her cat ears. Her stomach rolled into a tight knot as the images slashed through her memory.

Greta shrugged. “He must be some fine dude to get you out in this weather. What’s his name?”

Bruce. That had been the guard’s name. Scarlet lettering embroidered on his uniform’s shirt pocket popped into her mind. She swallowed down the acidic bile that pushed against her throat. She’d killed him. No, she’d torn into him like fried chicken wings. She wrapped her arms around her stomach, but she couldn’t banish the thoughts.

“Who wanted to go to the Underground last night, in this freezing weather?” Nanyanika retorted. Despite the chilly temperatures, people were out and about shopping.

“It *was* warmer.” Greta replied with a sweep of her hands. “Georgia weather be crazy like that. Besides, you’re from Africa. It’s always colder to you.”

Nanyanika pushed her hands into her hoodie’s pockets as they set off toward the UC. The university center would have people watching television and maybe playing a game of Spades. To be honest, Nanyanika longed for the late, still evenings spent back in her tribe’s forests. Thick with rich smells of wood and life. Sometimes the Laibon, the tribe’s guardians, appeared out of the dark, as if by magic, spooking her and her friends. Giving them a good scare. Memories of her childhood freedom to express herself, of wide open spaces that became other worlds, and the seasonal oasis that became home to goddesses, and nights spent racing against the moon made her homesick.

Greta suddenly clapped her hands in glee. “Oh. Yeah. About last night, did you hear? That security guard you were all chummy with was killed.”

Fear gripped her stomach and squeezed. Nanyanika paused and fought to keep her face neutral. The images sharpened, and her breathing hitched. She’d left her clothes, balled into a trash bag and stuffed into a dumpster just outside campus.

“I’m so glad you blew him off.” Greta added. “You could’ve been hurt too. You know?”

Nanyanika couldn’t speak. The Atlanta televised news recounted plenty of violence, but a security guard at the Underground made the headlines. What else did the police find that warranted that kind of attention in a city dripping with murder?

“I guess his throat was ripped out. They’re saying it’s some Satanic cult. That’s so 80s.”

Cult. Right.

“Anyway, I was listening to Tupac. He’s the truth! I know he’s West Coast, but look past that Nani. He’s deep.”

“Outcast, A Tribe Called Quest, and KRS-1 are deep. Tupac’s posturing. Besides, you only like him because he’s in *Poetic Justice*.”

Greta smiled and fingered her box braids. They fell past her waist, and often got caught in her big hoop earrings.

“Yeah, so, but he’s still speaking truth.”

Nanyanika shook her head when Greta pretended to pout.

“What’s going on at the UC tonight?” Nanyanika shifted the conversation. Experience had taught her that one didn’t debate musical choices for long and win with Greta.

Squealing tires caught her attention.

“Watch out!” Greta shouted and shoved Nanyanika aside as a sleek limousine came to an abrupt halt beside them. The rear door shot open and a man appeared, almost like a phantom onto the sidewalk.

“Nanyanika Gouto. Come with me,” he said.

“Dang! He’s gone all Terminator!” Greta said, but her tone lacked humor. “Who you?”

“Now.” His voice brooked no argument.

Nanyanika turned around, something about the tone, the power invoked in the words, forced her to comply. He looked the way you’d expect vampires to look, black leather pants, expensive clothing, and Italian leather shoes.

His coal-black hair, straight, fell like a curtain to his waist. Pale skin, all soft accent and wealth, the man's demeanor hinted at old world.

"Excuse me?" Nyanika took her hands out of her pockets. Run? Fight? Her instincts demanded an action, but then she thought about Greta.

"Come with us." The man repeated. Black eyes met hers, and narrowed. It sounded almost automated, like a VHS tape being replayed over and over again.

"Get lost!" Greta yelled, fists balled, and ready to strike. Twenty years being reared in a housing project had left her battle tested and ready.

Several pedestrians stopped, but no one interfered. Nyanika touched Greta's shoulder. "These aren't men you fight with."

Greta paused, huffed out a sigh, and then settled into a position beside her.

No, she'd seen men like these before, back in the village. They'd come to meet with the tribal leaders. All her instincts confirmed them to be vampires, like her, but the uneasiness wormed through her. Still, they'd tear Greta apart if she continued to interfere. Perhaps, they wouldn't to keep the Masquerade, but she couldn't take that chance. Nyanika recalled those stories about the other tribes.

"We are not asking, Ms. Nyanika Gouto." He'd used her whole Akunase name. The gentleman stepped toward her, and as he did the rear door opened.

The sleek black limousine, so quiet and shiny, had tinted windows. It sat menacing and silent, ready to bolt from the curb when the need arose. It was an extension of the man, sleek, dangerous, and fast.

"I've got to go with him." Nyanika turned to Greta. "I'll explain later. Just get back to the dorm."

"Are you crazy? You can't just hope into a car with a stranger, even if it is a limo. Serial killers come in all forms!" Greta grabbed her shoulders and gently shook her.

Nyanika nodded. It most likely wasn't safe. "Go home. I'll be there."

She couldn't let Greta engage with them. She shrugged Greta off and climbed into the limo. Soft leather seats gave as she slid across to the opposite side of the vehicle, behind the driver. The man got in and slammed the door after him.

Greta remained standing on the corner, her face a mask of concern mixed with terror.

A feeling Nyanika shared.

“What do you want?” Nanyanika interrupted the uncomfortable silence.

He didn’t answer. She hadn’t expected him to, really. In movies, the kidnap victim always tried the door handle to escape, but this limo didn’t have any.

She checked.

Alone with her kidnapper, she turned to stare out of the tinted windows as Atlanta slipped by in a blur of neon lights and flashy colors. The men across from her sat in such a stillness, he could’ve been a statue.

In no time they arrived at a tall, brick and mortar home. The driver opened the door and she got out. The kidnapper followed and pushed her toward the path that led to the front door. An interior light lit up the windows of the cozy, unassuming place. She looked up and down the quiet residential neighborhood. Nothing stirred.

They couldn’t take me to such a place to kill me. Would they?

“Go inside.” The man opened the door, held the screen door open, and ushered her in.

“Come on here, child. I ain’t got all night. I’ve got a plane to catch!”

All of Nanyanika’s fears melted on the spot. The voice of warmth and honey derived from none other than her former professor, Dr. Henrietta Annan. The professor had been not only her instructor in academics, but also in the ways of living behind the veil. It had been a few years, but she didn’t think the good doctor had been stateside. She hurried down the corridor, feeling light and free as the heavy load of guilt and frustration lifted off her shoulders. Now, she’d get answers to the ears.

“In here.”

The office held traditional masks, wooden statues, and pieces of Dr. Annan’s homeland. Amongst those treasures were scores of books stacked on bookshelves in neat picturesque rows. It looked exactly like what she imagined a professor of oral and African traditions’ office would. Dr. Annan stood behind her desk, sipping a glass of water. Her colorful hair wrap and matching dress seemed at one with the room’s décor. Dr. Annan’s tribe, the Guruhi, oversaw the other vampire tribes, including Nanyanika’s.

“Dr. Annan, I knew you were found of the drama, but why the show?” Nanyanika came around to hug her professor.

“I don’t have time to wait on you to get around to coming to me. So I sent for you.” At her feet, an open briefcase and in the chair, a suitcase. “I’m leaving for Ghana tonight.”

Nanyanika went back around to the opposite side of the desk. “You scared me half to death.”

“Those are new.” Dr. Annan gestured to her cat ears before resuming the transferring of items from her desk to her briefcase.

“Yeah. So, can you tell me what’s happening to me?” Nanyanika brushed a hand across her ears.

“You’re becoming a panther,” she answered as if she was ordering a super-sized meal at McDonald’s. Nothing odd to see here, just regular people becoming animals.

The image made her smile for a second before the irritation came back.

“Why?” Nanyanika crossed her arms and glared across the desk at Dr. Annan.

The professor raised an eyebrow at Nanyanika’s tone, and crossed her arms. After giving Nanyanika the once over, she sighed and tented her hands in front of her.

“It’s your beast that is out of control. You’re young...”

“I’m 23!”

“...and I’m 2100 years old. As I said, a baby.” Dr. Annan clicked her teeth and held up her hand to stop Nanyanika from saying more. “There’s an imbalance. As a vampire, your survival depends on blood, the life-force of human beings. As so, the Beast must be controlled...”

“I get that I’m a vampire, but what about these?” Nanyanika cupped her cat ears. Changing into a panther wasn’t part of her tribe’s lore.

Dr. Annan cleared her throat. “Yes, well, if the balance isn’t restored, you’ll continue to change into a panther. This complete lack of control, you demonstrated, tipped the scale.”

“What? I don’t want to be a panther!” Nanyanika’s throat worked to reverse itself, and her stomach’s lack of contents meant it would be acid coming up the wrong path. She’d never done anything like this since being Embraced. The recklessness of it obliterated her senses. Disoriented, she grabbed the wall for stability. What did she mean? Did she have to continue killing people just to stop from transforming into an animal?

Dr. Annan shrugged with indifference and began to collect papers from her desk.

“I want to understand. I don’t want to be an animal!” Nanyanika shuddered at the images of Bruce, the security guard’s torn body flashing in her mind. The blood. So much blood.

“You must control the Beast...”

“How? How do I control it? I don’t like the idea of killing people just to eat...” Nanyanika slammed her fist on the desk, making the professor’s glass rattle.

“Nanyanika, I’m not long for this place, and I must go.” Dr. Annan stood and lifted her suitcase from the chair. “I’ll leave you with this. We owe dual loyalty to the Aye, mortals, those that live among us, and the Orun, the spirit world. You’ve upset the balance between them. As a result, you’re changing into the predator, an animal. You’ve allowed the Beast to control you...”

“Not on purpose! What do I do?” Nanyanika blocked the Dr. Annan’s path.

The professor’s face broke into a smile, but it made Nanyanika step aside, for it held little warmth or mirth.

“That’s easy. Bring your spirit into balance.” With a nod, Dr. Annan swept from her office, her rolling suitcase trailing behind her.

Leaving Nanyanika alone with too many questions and far too few answers.

“Come.” The man returned and gestured for her to follow him.

She wondered if he knew any other words or if with her he’d reached the bottom of his vocabulary well. When she got into the backseat once more, she no longer feared him, but now all of her frustration had returned. Why send for her and not tell her the answers she needed?

The man didn’t get in after her, but slammed the door as if overjoyed to be rid of her. In the backseat alone, Nanyanika relaxed. The driver opened the slot of the window that separated him from her, and spoke.

“Back to Georgia Tech?” he asked. He’d turned in the seat, but she could only see his profile and smooth skin. His dreadlocks had been tied behind him with a thick black rubberband.

But she didn’t need to see him. She could smell him. And he smelled—*delicious*.

Terrified, Nanyanika’s mouth twitched. Her fangs elongated and a craving rose up against her throat, pulsating in frantic need. She swallowed to ease the hunger, but it served only to increase it. Her focus narrowed. A red tint filtered over her vision. A growl erupted from her lips.

The driver jumped, then turned all the way around. “You need to feed. If you delay it, the Beast will consume you. I’m assuming that’s what happened last night?”

Nanyanika froze. “No.”

“Uh-huh. Leaving it makes you lose perspective and control,” he said.

She wretched herself away where she’d encroached upon him, her face close to the opening. Startled, she hadn’t realized she’d even moved. She pinched her thigh and the sharp pain interrupted her hunger—for the moment.

“I can’t...kill anyone else. I just can’t.” Nanyanika threw herself back into the seat and looked out the window. “Just take me back.”

The driver nodded, but didn’t shut the window. He wasn’t afraid of her ripping his throat out the way she had the guard’s, and he clearly knew about the guard.

“What did you think you were signing up for? A new car?” The driver laughed.

“No, I...” She paused. She wouldn’t share or explain her reasoning to him.

She didn’t have to do that, but the hunger pushed at her mind, attempting to take control.

“Suit yourself, but the Beast must be fed.” The driver shut the opening.

Nanyanika wondered if the human had offered himself to her and she’d been too foolish to notice. She couldn’t trust herself not to destroy him if she had tried to feed. Again the images of Bruce appeared and she hugged herself tight as the limousine slipped through the deserted Atlanta streets.



Later that evening, the limousine dropped Nanyanika off at the university where it had claimed her. Along her nose what could only be whiskers had started to sprout. Her fear had returned and she knew less about how to stop the progression to panther than she did before. How did one restore balance between the Orun and the Aye?

She opened the door to her dorm and wham! Greta pounced on her, locking her in a tight hug. “Oh my God! I was so worried! I’ve been watching CNN to see if they found your body.”

Although Greta had initiated the contact, Nanyanika wouldn’t let her go. Her arms locked around Greta’s now squirming body.

“Nani, let go.” She laughed and wiggled against Nanyanika’s vice-like hold.

The movement only made Nanyanika tighten her hold—like a snake with a mouse.

“I’m serious. Let go!”

Nanyanika heard Greta’s pleas, heard the humor drain from her voice, and heard the rise of panic in its place, and yet, she couldn’t get her body to comply. It was if the Beast had shoved her into a corner and assumed command.

Now, Greta was screaming, and crying as Nanyanika snatched back her head by the hair.

“What the fuck are you doing? Nani! Stop!”

Greta’s shrieks seemed muffled by the thundering of bloodlust in Nanyanika’s ears. Yet, they managed to slice through the fog, and right into her undead heart.

If you don’t control the Beast and restore the balance, you’ll become a predator, an animal, feral and base for all time.

Nanyanika knew she couldn’t let that happen. Not just to herself, but she couldn’t rip apart Greta. She’d promised in the limo, not to the driver, but to herself, that she wouldn’t kill anyone else.

That started with her bestie.

“Great ancestors. Give me strength and guide me in this act.”

She didn’t know if she could, but she closed her eyes and focused on halting the Beast’s cravings within her. Her fangs scraped across Greta’s neck, drawing a thin trail of blood.

It ignited her hunger all the more, but it gave Greta the opportunity she needed. Greta managed to free an arm, and shoved her fingers into Nanyanika’s eyes.

Screaming in pain, Nanyanika let go.

Greta kicked her in the knee and sent her crashing to the floor.

“What. The. Hell!” Greta shouted, before fleeing from the room.

Stunned, hurt, Nanyanika stood. The Beast had receded, albeit temporarily. With the red tint gone from her vision, she could see the room’s debris. It looked like there’d been a fight. Chatter from the hallway filtered in through the opened door. All of Greta’s screaming must’ve alerted someone.

Snatching up her important documents and throwing a change of clothes into her duffle bag, Nanyanika limped out of the dorm room, down the staircase, and out into the early morning dark.

In a few hours, dawn would arrive and she must be inside before then.

Just as she reached the curb, a sleek black limousine appeared. The rear door window rolled down and the man who’d kidnapped her beckoned.

“Come. It will be morning soon and you must feed.”

“So you do know more words,” she said.

He didn’t smile.

With a last look back at the life she’d known, Nanyanika climbed into the limo.

Once seated, he said to her, “You’re not like them. Living amongst them is difficult without training. You must learn how to control yourself.”

She nodded. “Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

She couldn't ever see Greta again, couldn't put her in that kind of danger, now that she'd become something *other*. Her heart pinched in sadness.

Her people, the Akunanse, were renowned for their wisdom, their quest for knowledge. The chance to live forever and the opportunities it presented couldn't be ignored. For a poor African girl, this simple truth didn't require a leap of faith.

Only courage.

Which Nyanika had in spades.





FAMILY PHOTO

By Matthew Dawkins

Blot. Blot. Blot.

She thought the onomatopoeic word over in her mind as burgundy tears ran rivulets down her cheeks and stained the curled photo in her left hand. It was as if her tears targeted the faces of the smiling family members looking up. Four-year-old son with his favorite Action Bill in hand; precocious 13-year old daughter looking indignant about being there; proud — smug, even — father and husband, middle-aged, arms around both children, looking every bit the loving dad.

Fucker. Bastard. Charlatan. Counterfeit. Knave.

The paralyzing breeze nearly stole the photo from her hand, forcing her to clutch it tighter. With the sleeve on her right arm she cleared her eyes to see a little better. So very high up here, atop a skyscraper, standing on the edge, looking down the vertiginous drop — only a creased and bloody family photo between her and a fall to her death. Her likely death. She wasn't sure the drop would kill her immediately.

The wind picked up. This time it was victorious against her cool fingertips, gaining more purchase on the soiled photograph than her own grip could manage. Her head twisted abruptly to face westward as the snapshot, caught on a squall, flew free in the direction of the sunset.

Appropriate. Fly safe, children, man, family. You'll not be alone long. It's a promise. All of you..

Tentatively, she stepped one foot forward, dangling it over the 200ft drop. Her eyelids eased shut, and despite no necessity for breath, she forced her chest to inhale and express to compel some calm into her form.

Just one more step. One more. Or a stiff breeze. Come on. You can do this. End it. Please. Just drop. Nobody cares. Nobody will notice. You'll be ash on the road before anyone even realizes it's you.

But no. This is D.C. The buildings aren't tall enough. They've never been tall enough for a good drop. Damn this building. Any other city and you could have finished this. It's the city at fault. Step back. That's it. You're safe now. Stop beating yourself up. You lost them. Stop being so pathetic.

You can get them back.

She opened her gummy eyes, to observe she was several yards back from the precipice. She hadn't actively worked her legs, but somehow they'd pushed her back to safety while her willpower wrestled itself into submission. Tentatively stepping back to the fire escape, she picked up the shoes she'd kicked off by the staircase and slipped them back on, straightening her blouse and coat with a moan. She could feel the bones of her ribs and collar emerging through her musculature — her skeleton come to greet her. Such was her curse as a vampire; the appearance of the corpse.

A hunger stirred in her stomach.

Or perhaps it's in your heart.

It was time to move on, get a grip, master this turmoil.



She was no tourist. Knowing that looking up from any of the wide streets she could see one of the many monuments to some President, General, or other, held not one scrap of her interest. She remained fixed on the living, pulsating bodies walking the wet sidewalks with her. A steady rain fell and made the strolling beacons of life seem more vibrant than they would during a sticky summer night. They throbbed with blood and sex, these lovely living beings with their small lives and low intentions.

She knew she must have been an unpleasant sight; blood stains on her clothes and cheeks, an unsteady gait betraying her weakened body. Anyone looking closely would see a young woman brought to a prematurely decrepit age. Her eyeballs were sunken within her skull, her cheekbones too prominent to be regarded healthy. Her hands were cracked spiders. She kept them in her coat pockets.

Taking one step at a time, her saturated gaze bore into the men and women walking the night. Some dashed for cars, holding coats overhead like some Dracula cape as they laughingly attempted to avoid rainfall. Others stoically strode, umbrellas erect and pronounced, ignorant to the passers-by they struck with a pointed spoke or splashed with water accumulated in their protection's fabric.

A few — like her — braved the inclement weather with naught but a hood or the hair on their head. Such kine were unlikely to be travelling a long way. She paid close attention to such solitary wanderers, falling into a distant

lockstep with one woman in particular when she spied a wedding ring on the woman's left hand. Her senses were good, her eyesight sharp, and the glisten of gold caught on a car's headlight.

Perhaps she's like you. A married mother too afraid to return home. You could wait at a bus-stop with her, or accompany her to a shelter where you could buy her a drink and share some woes. She's probably seen worse than your emaciated face. She could help you. Drinking from her would be like—

She shook her head. The concept of preying on the kine had ceased to be appetizing despite its necessity. It always had to be couched in some other term, be given an excuse, or referred to as a mercy. A favor.

You could share some woes and some life. Share your life with her. She'll share her life with you. No doubt.

Snapping back to her intent, her pace hurried a little to keep track of the woman, a possible new friend with whom she could alleviate some guilt. Her jeans were quickly becoming drenched as the rain ran from the hem of her coat and soaked her thighs. The cold didn't bother her, but the wetness of her clothes drew her mind back to blood, and the horrendous disarray in which she found herself the previous night.

Ignore it. It's the past. Blood is blood, and a stain's a stain. It all comes out in the wash.

Absently pushing past an umbrella-wielding suit, satisfaction creased her face as she saw the solitary woman pass the radiant pink lights of a wine bar. The woman made her way through the door to the safety of warmth and alcohol within.

No, you don't drink wine, but you do have cash. Stave the appetite. You can nurse a red. You can buy her one, too. She will help heal your wounds.

Vaguely attempting to straighten her baggy outfit again, now logged with water, blood, and filth from the roadside, she caught up to the bar. With a hungry gaze she shouldered her way in.



The steward's stare was enough to remind her of her discordant appearance. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror beyond the bar, and realized she looked the part of some vagrant. Feeling embarrassment for the first time since what happened with dad—

You needn't feel humiliation over that.

—she dashed to the restroom and instantly took in her washed out look, her dirt-streaked clothes, and the coagulating blood in the lines around her eyes and mouth. Grabbing a handful of paper towelettes, she soaked each in hot water given up by the faucet, and dabbed at her marred face and collar.

The water beaded on her waxy skin. She dried herself as best as she was able, stifling the need to scream out.

It shouldn't be this hard. You don't deserve this. Make yourself presentable and sit near the mother you saw before. She's just like you. Explain what a rough night you've had. You have cash. Buy the both of you something strong. It'll help.

After several lengthy minutes she re-emerged, looking somewhat more respectable with her raincoat over her arm, her clean face, and her scrubbed fingernails. She immediately spied the woman she'd followed inside. To her dismay, she realized a man with a shock of white hair was sat with her. The way they spoke and gestured didn't convey the message of their being a couple. He looked significantly older than her, not that that was any indication. Her husband was older than her, once upon a time. She sat at the bar, office nobodies pouring out of work late for a numbing drink accompanying her.

They fill their bodies with poison while you fill yours with life.

Staring at the wine list overlong, she raised it to cover her face. In truth, she was making every effort to listen to the conversation of the woman — the wife and mother, she had every confidence.

"I've never been in your situation, but if it were me, I'd be looking for a way out." That was the man, a croak to his voice betraying a lifetime of cigarettes and hard alcohol. The crimson splotches on his nose and cheeks intimated a similar tale.

"I know. But what about the kids? I can't just do this to them. Not while they're in school, and Wayne's struggling as it is." The woman, the mother, the wife. Her voice was strained, defeated, tired.

You knew it. Just from her slope-shouldered, ectomorphic frame; the way her fingers clenched tightly around her coat lapels; the fact that among all those out in the rain she was the only one not combating the elements to check a phone. She was alone in a relationship filled with obligation, and you called it. You've got this down to an art.

It was a strange thing that whenever she was looking for an individual like this woman, she was able to find her. Some vampires were adept at reading mortals for their sins, their desires, their weaknesses. If it was something she could do, it was an unconscious effort. As she lowered the menu with a broad grin, the bartender awaiting her order took a step back in alarm.

"A bottle of this one, if you please, good sir." She stabbed one of the choices on the menu with a finger, and went on listening to the kine.

"I'm leaving the DMV in two days. You're all welcome to come and stay with me out of State. He doesn't even have to know." She closed her eyes as she heard the kind, older gentleman attempting to save the woman from a

cruel life of control. She'd received such offers before, but knew they were impossible to take while the grip of an abuser remained.

"But he will know. He'll find out. And he'll try to get me back." Her voice became ever more resigned.

She'd heard this many times before, of course. This had been her voice, once. The need to escape, but too many ties to cut, and the risk of them snapping back was too great. Her wine was delivered with a glass, but the smile hadn't left her face, even as the tears began to well up.

You need her. She needs you. You can save her from all of this. Be her guardian angel.

She was about to stand up from her barstool with bottle in one hand, glass in the other, when a heavy hand clamped on her shoulder.

"Stay where you are, Amy."

It took a few seconds for the name to register.

Oh God, it's Tabitha.

"Amy" hunched over, and gestured lazily at the empty stool beside her. "Go on then. Take a seat and give me the talking-to I know is coming."



Amy was irritated. She had the opportunity to sweep in and explain how she could preserve this woman and her family, protecting them from a fate she'd suffered too many times. Instead she was required to endure a lecture from an uptight vampire attempting to enforce their concept of law. With a lazy look at her new company, Amy poured herself a glass of wine. She didn't offer one to her "friend."

She's probably got a literal rod up her ass. You know the "Prince" here. You've heard how he treats his loyal servants. Especially the pretty ones.

"Amy. Are you listening to me? You've got to stop doing this. We're worried about you. You've been growing distant in the last few months. Your feeding habits..." Tabitha ran a hand through her long red hair, getting caught on a knot or two before extracting it and ordering a glass for herself. She looked healthy, a glow to her cheeks. Tabitha bore a genuine look of concern, the studded biker's jacket and harsh oil streak down the left side of her neck offsetting any soft appearance. Clearly she'd been working earlier in the evening.

"Distant, like a speck of light in a mineshaft, offering hope and life to anyone who follows the way..." Amy swished the wine in her own glass, raising it to her lips and keeping it there a few seconds to stain them, before lowering it to the glass-topped bar. "I am salvation to these people. You may

not understand it, but how could I expect you to? You're more wrapped up in politics than the night-to-night struggle against monstrosity."

Tabitha paid for her drink up front, and joined in with the make-believe imbibing. She eyed Amy carefully and pursed her lips awhile before responding. "Some are more monstrous than others. What you offer isn't a salvation. Marcus has made it clear you're to stop this. You're here by his mercy. You could be feeding without restriction. You know where the safe places are. When he opened the doors to outsiders like you—"

"—stop. I don't buy his demagogic faux-egalitarianism bullshit. If you do, you're even more his puppet than everyone thinks. I'm of course grateful to the great Marcus Vitel for his warm welcome to me, and others like me, but his edict isn't going to make me forget my life." Amy toyed with the rim of her glass, squeaking out a light tune to the ignorance of everyone around her. The noise in the bar was deafening to one as sensitive as her, but her musical accompaniment reached her ears. "I came to D.C. for the sanctuary to be me. Not to be one of the Vitel's autocratic paragons."

The Prince doesn't know what it's like. His blood is brought to him! It's not like he ever has to hunt.

Tabitha unbuttoned her leather jacket and made herself more comfortable on the stool. Clearly she thought she'd need to be sat for a while, as she extended her order to half a bottle without having taken a sip from the glass. "If you're trying to rile me, it won't work. Marcus has shown me how to suppress these connections to hang-ups that might push you to...bad behavior. You'd do well to learn. Seriously. You're not merely harming yourself, here. How many times have we had to clean up your mess?"

Amy battled to suppress a dry laugh, raising one of her withered claws and covering her mouth with the back of it as she smiled in a way showing every one of her yellow teeth.

Get this one. If she's not drinking Vitel's blood he's giving her something to make her a mouthpiece.

"I appreciate your counsel, but your hypocrisy stinks. That Vikings jacket you wear must be decades old. You served a Prince even after he was declared dead. And you're saying you've moved on from your neuroses?" She gestured at Tabitha with her wine glass, sloshing a decent volume on the bar and floor. It went unnoticed, the mortals oblivious to the increasingly tense display the two vampires demonstrated. No response come from Tabitha but for her briefly looking down at the gifted jacket she always wore. "Part of the deal of coming to this utopia of a city is I get to go where I want, helping who I want. I get to work my issues out on my terms, rather than being stamped on or having my food divided up like little coupons!"

She finished on a squealing rasp, her voice never the strongest, but the message reached its intended recipient. Tabitha was gripping the arms of her seat like she wanted to snap them off, but it lessened as she saw the vitae accumulating in the corners of Amy's eyes. "You hate it, don't you?" Her voice was soft, and she reached out to touch the hand pointing a glass at her. It was sharply pulled away. "You hate referring to them as food, and what you do to them. You hate what you are. You could stop, you know. Why don't you stop?"

Bitch is trying to goad you into suicide. She's got you all wrong. You're stronger than that. You will die one night, but it'll be on your terms, not at the urging of some Prince's lickspittle. Play nice though. You can use her. Use her to help you help others.

Amy grabbed a napkin and dabbed the blood beginning to stain her eyelashes, stuffing the red rag into her pocket. "I can't control it. I wish I could. You're right, but I've already chosen my partner, for the evening. You need to get him out of my sight, otherwise I won't stop." She gestured with her head at the elderly man who sat with her woman of choice.

The volume on the bar's music system cranked up as the hour hit, and the place reached capacity. The thrum of drinking bodies swam around Tabitha and Amy as they stared at one another, icebergs in a shifting sea of humanity.

Tabitha bit her lower lip and drummed her fingers on the bar as she gave a sidelong glance at the man. After a few moments' pause, she looked straight at her drinking partner. "I'll move him out of your sight without any breaches or bloodshed. Then how you proceed is up to you, but I strongly advise you take a cab to sanctioned feeding grounds, or think about how you intend to spend your coming nights. You owe me. Marcus knows what you do with your victims, and he's not happy. Too many eyes, Amy. Too many headlines. Don't push it any more than you have. He's not given to grand displays of charity."

Without awaiting a response, Tabitha threw a tip at the bartender, jumped from her stool, and closed her jacket. She spent one second still, looking at the sleeves of her coat, before leaving the bar. Within minutes the bar phone rang. Upon answering it, the tender nodded cautiously before darting to the white-haired customer, explaining in hushed tones that his car was being towed. With an angry expression turning to immediate apology, he made excuses to the woman and leapt for the exit.

Amy examined the bored glance the bartender — a beanstalk of a fellow with too much wax in his hair — was giving her as the customer abandoned the bar. In his expression was the clear assumption that not only did he know what was going on, but this custom of isolating a customer was part of the feeding ritual of many a common predator, Kindred or not. He shook his head and returned to serving customers.

The woman — in shock, and yet to place her glass back on the table — was left alone.



“I’m sorry to interrupt. I saw you left alone, and wondered if you’d mind awfully my sitting with you.” Amy attempted to sound as kindly and sympathetic as possible, but the excitement of getting her way forced the words from her throat in a gabble. She rolled her eyes. “Let me start again—”

“—no, it’s okay.” The woman began to rise from her seat, leaving money on the table and reaching for her coat, placed over the adjacent chair. “You can have this table. I’m leaving.”

You don’t lose her just because she thinks she’s alone. You’re there for her. You don’t lose her!

“No!” Amy reached out, her thin fingers clamping around the woman’s wrist, nails digging into her tendons. The woman’s first reaction was surprise, rapidly evolving into anger as she attempted to wrench away. Before she could cry out for help, Amy locked eyes with her and in a voice reverberating with force issued an order. “Shut your mouth. Sit. Do not move.”

Alarm scarred the woman’s eyes as she cast about looking for a safety line, too far out of reach. Nobody paid attention to the two women now sitting together, one rummaging through the other’s bag. Amy lazily disposed of credit cards, a work ID, sanitary products, and some loyalty cards, using the woman’s plate of half-eaten food as a repository for the unwanted inventory. She retained the cellphone and driver’s license, examining both for several minutes as their owner looked on in paralyzed fear.

In a voice projected at a pitch somehow cutting through the music, and reaching only the ears of the woman, Amy leaned forward and spoke. “Your name is Bethany Hopkins. Bethany, I know you have a husband and three children, and I know where they live. Your family looks beautiful, but I know you need to be free of them.” She displayed one of the photos from the phone, in which Mr. Hopkins sat on the edge of a trampoline with the children, all four beaming smiles at the photographer. “I know those smiles. It’s one I’ve seen time and again.” She leaned in to whisper in Bethany’s ear. “I will save you from them, and I’ll take on the burden. I promise.”

You made a promise. You must keep it.

Amy grasped Bethany’s hands, the vampire’s command keeping her frozen. Even unmoving, the mortal’s warmth filled Amy’s cold grip. “I’m going to allow you to talk, but if you cry out I cannot be held accountable for what my anger may compel me to do.” Through her peculiarly kind tone, the threat was clear. Amy’s jagged nails rested directly over the mortal’s radial arteries.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I’m going to save you. You’ll feel bliss, and calm, for the first time in years. I want you to want me to do it. Tell me you want me to save you.” Amy didn’t channel any gifts, but never removed her gaze from Bethany’s eyes.

The mortal, aware of the threat sitting across the table from her — a threat nobody else in the bar seemed able to distinguish — shook her head slowly, a defiant expression forming as she produced words she swiftly regretted speaking. “I don’t need saving. I think you’re confused, and in need of help.” She attempted to retract her wrists, but found them gripped with an agonizing tightness, like steel catheters boring beneath her skin and into her veins as the vampire applied undue pressure on her wrists.

“No, no, no.” Amy pushed down on the tendons and bone with her strong fingers, applying her unnatural strength against the woman as she struggled not to cry out. “Your life is terrible and I can save you. Your husband mistreats you. Your children mistreat you. I can save you from that, like I’ve saved all the others.” Her voice deepened, lost emotion and empathy, pouring out like a well-rehearsed soliloquy repeated nightly for a new audience.

Despite the pain, Bethany refrained from screaming out, staring bloody hatred at the Kindred holding her in place. “No! You’re wrong. My husband never did anything to me. I promise you, whoever — whatever — you are; my husband is a good man and neither myself nor my children need saving from him! Did you overhear my conversation earlier? That’s about a job! I’m just looking to work for a new employer, and my current boss isn’t taking it well. Please, just let me go. I can get you help.”

She’s so strong, but she needs to rest. You need to take on the burden of motherhood again. You need to take on the family.

“Shut your mouth. Follow me.” Amy led her partner from the bar, taking the cell and the license, without paying for drinks or taking the woman’s coat from the chair. It took five minutes for the bartender to realize neither of the female customers were going to settle their bill. As he slowly, almost ceremonially, cleared the table and picked up the woman’s coat, a flat look of acceptance rested on his face. He knew neither woman would come back, and he’d have to overcharge another customer to make up for the unpaid tab.

He softly folded the coat, walked through the kitchen, and dropped it in the trash.



Their forced march lasted two hours. The unkind weather never let up. It was past midnight and both women were soaked to the skin by the time Amy decided to stop. It was time to drive the misery from Bethany’s life. Staring

at the mortal, whose own gaze had quickly ceased to attempt drawing the attention of others', Amy felt a profound sadness wash over her.

She looks so much like you. You're right to feed from her—

"I am saving you."

You're right to save her. But do you have to take on the responsibilities? Why not be like any other Kindred? Save, and move on. Save, and move on.

"A woman has responsibilities. I was human when I had family. But they're all gone. I keep trying, but they keep going." At Bethany's confused glance, Amy waved her internal dialogue away. She often found herself caught questioning herself, or hearing something within questioning her. Sometimes she wondered if it was the remnants of mortal conscience. She'd once met a vampire who claimed he spoke with an inner "Beast", but hers always offered calm counsel. There was nothing bestial about it.

"It probably seems I've been incredibly cruel to you. You want to shout out, but you can't. You want to know why I've walked with you all this way." Amy reached forward and brushed the woman's matted hair from her face, bringing a spindly finger down to cup her defiant chin. "I wanted you somewhere safe, in a neighborhood I know, where I can save you. Anacostia has a rough reputation, but this is where I first saved someone like you. I'm going to save you and your family."

Save her. Genuinely, save her.

Amy swiftly grabbed Bethany and pulled the stiff woman into her arms, hugging her tightly before opening her mouth and pushing her fangs in the direction of Bethany's neck.

You should have jumped.

The blood began to pool as tears in Amy's eyes, once again. She hesitated. The mortal —taking quick advantage of the pause — attempted to break free. Amy's response came rapidly, the sudden physicality of the moment driving her to sink her fangs in the cheek, and then ear, and finally the neck of the woman held close to her.

Bethany screamed and struggled in Amy's arms, but the vampire's strength was too great for the petrified kine. Amy took in the mouthfuls of sweet, rich blood, feeling it worm its way across her tongue and down her throat, restoring to her skin the semblance of life and vitality. As she drank deeply, blood ran over her chin and down her coat, soaking into her clothes and those of her victim.

Bethany's ear hung loosely from the side of her head, the pain of her wounds dreadful, yet the feeding from her neck an inexplicably euphoric experience. Terror consumed her as she physically reacted warmly, even erot-

ically to the drinking, while her mind railed against the experience. As her eyelids grew heavy, she looked down over the vampire's shoulder, spotting her reflection in the pool of blood. Her blood. She spotted the face of the vampire drinking from her.

The predator's face had changed, exactly resembling her prey.



Bethany rolled out of bed a few hours after the setting of the sun. The events of weeks before were forgotten, the radical changes around the home, with work, and her family putting them from her mind. Switching on a bedside light, she looked at her form in the mirror filling the wardrobe door, the orange glow of the lamp illuminating her body. Immediately, she held up her left hand, smiling at the glistening of the golden wedding ring as it contrasted stunningly against her marble skin.

Bethany turned her head, appraising her husband still lying in bed. She ran her smooth palm over his thick right arm, hanging from beneath the duvet. He was cold to the touch. Delicately, she lifted his arm and tucked it beneath the thick layers, not one inch of flesh exposed to the cool night temperature.

Donning a dressing gown, she left the bedroom and made her way down the upstairs hallway, knocking on doors as she went. With each knock she called out to her children. "Time to wake up. Time to eat. Don't make me wait — mommy is incredibly hungry." Bethany padded down the stairs, her bare feet making soft slaps against the wooden surface. Happily making her way to the lounge, she stopped sharply as a breeze tickled the skin on her bare legs.

Looking towards the front door, she spotted a figure staring at the photos in the entry hall. It carefully pawed at the frames, adjusting any that were crooked, and lifting one off the wall to examine it closely. "They look like a wonderful family, Amy." Tabitha compared a framed photo on the bureau to the one in her hand, as she looked up at Bethany. "You can drop the mask. You've not shown up in court for nearly a month, so I checked out that bar I found you at, was passed an ID, and... well, here we are."

Bethany grabbed the iron poker by the fireside. It felt heavy, dangerous. "Kids — stay upstairs!" She held it out like a sword, slowly pacing to block the bottom of the staircase. "I don't know who you are, but I want you out of my house!"

Tabitha narrowed her eyes and bared her fangs. "How many families now, Amy? How many have you destroyed for imagined reasons? Do I have to destroy you, or wait for you to kill another handful of children before I do it?" She placed the photos on the wall unit, and brought her arms up in a

block. “I assure you I will snap that poker — and you — before it as much as grazes my hide.”

Bethany’s grip on the poker wavered, before she lowered it to the carpet. “Get out. Please. This is my house. This is my family. My kids are alive. They’re fine. Nobody needs to die. My name isn’t Amy; it’s Bethany. The person you’re looking for killed herself the night you met her. She made me. She saved me. Then she ended it. There is no Amy. She’s just dust in a bloody puddle. Please.” Bethany slumped onto the bottom stair, her head in her hands.

Tabitha stared at the woman folded before her, the Beast wanting to strike this pitiful excuse for a vampire. She wondered at how much damage Amy wrought in the name of “family”. She internally questioned how many more would need to die at Amy’s hands. She glanced again at the photographs on the wall. “I’m sorry, Amy. I can’t let you do this.”

Tabitha looked back towards the staircase. The mother, the defeated vampire, Amy, or Bethany — was gone. Striding forward, she called out into the suddenly cavernous house. “Amy? You can’t hide!” Only silence came as a response, from upstairs as well as down. A shiver cut through Tabitha’s Vikings jacket.

In a weaker voice, Tabitha spoke. “Is anyone there?”

On the table beside the foot of the stairs, a photo frame sat empty.





PART TWO
GOTHIC PUNK





Heart of Flesh

By Nerine Dorman

The artist's deft strokes create a vivid, almost three-dimensional effect to the mural. A tortured, contorted figure in chains sinks into what appears to be a morass of blood and broken bones, the paint splattered and sprayed in a way that gives shape to a Jackson Pollock nightmare married to HR Giger. The distorted subject is unmistakably meant to represent one of our kind, yet is aesthetically pleasing, if the viewer can stomach the gore. This makes a change from the usual bubbly script and bloated, cartoonish faces artists usually scrawl on walls. Too bad I'm supervising the cover-up of what some consider exceptional public art – it's all too easy to imagine our local clique of arsty-fartsy bloodsuckers squawking and flapping about this atrocity at our next little shindig.

Janzs's ghouls are sloppy with their gray acrylic, messing as much on their steel-capped toes as they slap onto the concrete pillar of the overpass. They'll be done in half an hour. Ah well.

Pity that it's night too, so I can't take photos, but this mural has been up for two days and by now someone must have had a camera in hand. This is the eighth piece so far, and our esteemed leader goes absolutely bat shit every time another mural does the rounds in the media. Because these pieces *are* attracting attention.

I can't quite see how these paintings threaten our secrecy. Sure, whoever the artist – Ezekiel – is, he's managed to take a stab at key personages among the Mother City vampires – and the facial features of this particular figure bear an uncanny resemblance to the leader of the sewer rats. Both are equally butt ugly. Is this mural a warning? Perhaps. I have a near-delicious shudder wondering whether I'll feature once Ezekiel has run out of more illustrious subjects. Or maybe I'm not high enough in the pecking order. Perhaps I don't have enough historical blood on my hands, like our darling prince and his retinue. After all, I've barely been knocking around for twenty years in this unlife.

And yet that name, it reminds me of someone from my past, of headier, madcap days as students. A boy with a beautiful smile and soft, paint-flecked hands – but no, it couldn't be. Someone – most certainly a vampire – is having a ball of a time taking a stab at the upper echelons, and I can't help but feel admiration.

I'd get skewered if I passed a flippant comment that the humans would merely see these murals as the doings of a street artist poking sticks at imaginary monsters. The days of serious protest art are over for them. But not for us. I'm no stuck-up artsy-fartsy, yet it still seems a shame to have to cover up the art. Even if it's detailing a litany of European vampire misdeeds since old Jan stepped off the *Dromedaris* in 1652.

Ruan slashes his brush over Ezekiel's tag, at the bottom left-hand corner of the mural. The ghoul can slap on paint all he likes, but next week there'll be another one, maybe this time on the off-ramp from De Waal Drive headed into Gardens. Or even on one of the bridges over the Eastern Boulevard – and those are a real bitch to cover up. The devil alone knows how many early rush-hour lemmings will get an eyeful on their way to the office. And Ezekiel is *fast*. He can paint one of these pieces in an hour, perhaps even less. I should know, because I've hunted him. If the artists among us know his true identity, they're keeping mum.

Well, no one's been tagging "Free Mandela" like they used to. There is that. Yet I sure as hell don't see how things are ever going to change for the Cape Town's undead population. The Anarchs will have to pry the prince out of his castle with a crowbar or burn him with fire. Or preferably both. If I still ate popcorn, I'd sit on the sidelines having a feast, but knowing my luck, I'll have no choice but protect that daft bugger and the rest of his retinue. Ah, the joyless loyalty of blood.

My phone bleats at me when the ghouls are nearly done. The green screen lights up with my sire's number.

Crap.

I paste on the demeanor of the loyal baby vamp who knows she'll make let out of the playpen early if she plays her cards right.

"Meester?" I say.

"Is it done?" Janzs snaps.

"Ja, meester."

"Then hurry up. And bring the Merc round the front when you get back. They've caught the bastard. We need to be there within the hour."

He kills the call, and I'm left staring at the chunk of plastic.

Double crap. Unease drills right through me. They've caught *him*?

It's going to take us at least fifteen minutes to drive up to Gardens, another fifteen for me to make myself presentable, and then my sire will most likely send me on half a dozen errands before he starts losing his shit because we're late.

He phones three times while we're driving, which is cause enough for me to curse his name under my breath. Not that the ghouls bear tales but one can never be certain. I swear if he asks, *where are you?* one more time I'll scream. I don't, however. I'm a good little monster who doesn't wear her unbeating heart on her sleeve.

Instead I sit quietly in the back and grind my teeth while staring resolutely out of the window. Ruan's steady hand steers the Beemer up Kloof Street and Geoff can't stop fiddling with the controls on the radio. While we wait for the front gate to open I notice a furtive pair skulking down the road opposite – they're too watchful, trying too hard to make out as if they haven't been loitering all this time while we were away. Ghouls or vampires, I can't tell. Their very presence is unnerving.

Under normal circumstances, I'd send one of ours after them, but we're in a rush, and besides, they're clearing off.

"Set an extra guard tonight," I tell Ruan. "Keep an eye out for shifty types."

"Yes, ma'am."

The Anarchs have mostly kept to outskirts of our domain, but with all the brouhaha of the murals and their graphic depictions of vampire-on-vampire violence, I'm uneasy. I recall all too well the humans' paranoia in this country a scant decade or so ago – the paranoia we, as usurpers, still feel on this continent.

There have been incidents, but mainly neonates who've gone where they shouldn't, *when* they shouldn't. Survival of the fittest – and the brightest – in my mind. I'm not about to go hunting outside of the city center unless I've got numbers on my side. And, in any case, what's the point of hunting when you've got an entire entourage? It's a bit of a buzz kill when you've got your sire's ghoul keeping tabs while you feed. Like having someone watch you pee. I try not to snort at that thought.

Yet here we are, the tattered remnants of Europe's finest clinging onto the heel of Africa, and the Anarchs can yell at me to "go back home, you stupid 1652s" all they like, but we're here to stay. Tenacious doesn't even begin to cover it.

Typically our prince, Ignatius de Waal, holds court in the most obvious place of all – the squat pentagon of the Castle of Good Hope. It's been in our hands since the late seventeenth century, and could withstand a small army, especially since De Waal has the defense force under his thumb.

The brown-clad soldiers at the gate wave our car through without so much as a second glance. Since we've left home, Janzs has kept up a steady stream of invectives aimed at the usual culprits – the Anarchs – especially the one who's responsible for our emergency meeting; the filthy government and their incompetence due to Anarch influence from upcountry; humans; the wind... *Especially* the wind. Mercifully I'm in his good books. For now. Who knows. Tomorrow he'll change his mind and have me scrubbing the hallway with a toothbrush.

It's almost a relief to march through to the long meeting room where, during the day the humans goggle at the art collection. It's a different story at night when we're up and about. It's not quite a boardroom and I don't think I've ever seen a table so long. A hundred people could be squished together. Tonight it seats only sixteen, with all our top brass and their chosen retinue present. The burgundy drapes are drawn tight, and the highly polished brass chandeliers bathe us in a sickly yellow light that only conspires to make us look paler and more ghastly – which isn't saying much, really.

The prince is late – predictably so. As his current favorite Clan Ventrue sycophant, my sire has been seated to De Waal's right, with my own chair again to Janz's right. Which means I have all the others glaring daggers at the baby vamp with pretensions. Their faces are all polite masks, but their envy seethes just below the surface. Some have fought for years to have their positions with our elders, who've been comfortable in their power for centuries, and here I am, a Jenny-come-lately – an erstwhile arts student on a bursary no less, who had somehow caught the big shot henchman's fancy during the 1980s.

It's pointless saying that I never asked for any of this, so I assume the expected airs and graces, and just make damned sure I prove that I'm more than a delightful bauble to decorate my sire's arm. He hasn't tired of me...yet.

The prince, when he makes his grand entrance with a dozen suited goons in tow, turns all of our heads. We can't help it. He's tall, classically good looking, like he could step out of a 1960s spy movie with his slicked-back blond hair. A white chrysanthemum has been popped in the buttonhole of his tux. He sits so still he may as well be a mannequin. Only his white-gloved hands seem to possess a life of their own, the fingers dancing on the highly polished oak table. De Waal rarely raises his voice above a murmur, and the chamber is deathly quiet when he speaks.

“Thank you for attending at such short notice. I do appreciate your willingness to aid me in this matter...”

Then I tune out, to a degree, because what the vampire has to say follows an almost verbatim repetition of his previous speech when he discussed (at great length and detail) the reasons why such subversive, dangerous art

would fester within the hearts and minds of all city folk, be they kindred and canaille, and result in the destruction of all we hold dear.

Damn it. So far I've only ever had an intimate acquaintance with his art, with the distraction of dulling it away. I want to gain the measure of the kindred who'd dare to cock a snook at the powers that be. And that maddening, thought lingers. What if? No. It can't be. Surely...

When De Waal reaches the rambling conclusion of his half-hour pontification, some unseen signal is given, and four of his ghouls drag in the prisoner.

Ezekiel is bird-boned slight, almost childlike in the grasp of the goons. Four of them to one tiny male. Hells, even *I'd* be taller than Ezekiel. The warm kiss of earth makes his skin color stand out in sharp contrast to all others present, who straighten in their seats, eyes glittering with malice.

Here, this shift in the chamber communicates, *is the source of all our trouble at present*. This vampire, this *native*, who doesn't know his place. Yet I have to bite back my own gasp when the unfortunate looks up from beneath his mop of knotted dreads, and his gaze hits me right in my unbeating heart.

No.

Oh, yes.

I know this man.

Twenty years ago at art school, when it was almost unheard of for a black man to gain an education. To love a white woman. Thulani *Ezekiel* Mabandla.

I had known that man. Known him mostly as Thulani, as he'd preferred to be called back then, rejecting the English name his mother had given him that was easier for the stupid umlungus to pronounce.

And then Thulani had vanished – shortly after I'd been seduced by Janz's promises of power and prestige. Fool that I still am.

Not Thulani now. *Ezekiel*. A prophet.

If it were possible for me to grow cold, I would. Instead I become even more of a statue. Now Thulani – *Ezekiel* – is kindred. Like me. This explains everything. And nothing.

Ezekiel blinks, the flash of ivory slashes a wry grin on his features before he drags his gaze toward the prince. *I see you*.

"We will have this aberration dealt with in the proper fashion," De Waal says.

Across the table from us, quite far down, Ann-Marie ten Velden, the leader of the Toreadors, leaps to her feet in a most unseemly fashion. For the briefest moment I cannot fathom, she pierces me with a look so filled with

loathing I nearly try to hide beneath the table. Then she casts her imperious glare on our prince. “Surely we can deliberate?”

“You object?” De Waal sounds bored – almost dangerously so as he fixes the female in his sights. “And you claim responsibility for this... Anarch?”

I grasp my knees, press my legs together. Oh dear god this is going to turn into a blood bath. I’ve always known that Ten Velden hates my guts, but I’ve always assumed this has something to do with her long-standing feud with my sire, but I still don’t want to see her ripped to shreds.

To my right, Thinus van Rheede, who heads up the Brujah, clears his throat, rises as well. He moves all calm, like he’s pulling a chair out to allow a lady her seat. “She has a point, my prince. So far all this Anarch is responsible for is a few – ahem – murals. That have been dealt with timeously.” He smirks at me then returns his attention to the prince.

“Please,” Ten Velden says. “This is so sudden. Let us deliberate. Privately. Elder to elder. Let this not turn into a spectacle to have jaws flapping.”

“In case you’ve failed to notice, this already is a spectacle,” our esteemed prince says, which elicits a few snorts of amusement from further down the table.

“Only because *you* ’ve made it one,” Ten Velden retorts, and this time an audible gasp does ripple through those assembled. The lady has balls.

“If we’d chosen to ignore –” She appears to realize the error of her ways and her mouth snaps shut.

De Waal twitches, and I fear he’s going to give the order to have the unfortunate female dragged from the room – but he restrains himself. I do the math. Apart from Ventrue, Brujah and Toreador are in the majority of vampires in the city. Carefully balanced strands of power and influence will be disturbed if he is seen to go against their wishes in public.

“Twenty-four hours, that is all I ask,” Ten Velden says.

“Why?” Janz’s voice cracks through the room.

“Ezekiel was ... *is* my ... childe,” Ten Velden finishes, her slight shoulders slumped.

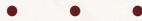
Well, *that’s* a bombshell.

De Waal hasn’t exactly been all that generous in giving permission for others to create progeny. In fact, I’m apparently the first since that Malkavian baby vamp who wiggled out during the 1960s. As for where the Anarchs spring from ... Anyone with good sense would not admit to their creation so readily unless there were some dire reason. So far as we’re concerned, the Anarchs spring up from the cracks in the sidewalk or are blown toward us across the Karoo – restless spirits no one can command.

The smart ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner measures out an interminable silence.

De Waal sighs, steeples his white-gloved fingers, then leans across the table while he studies the Ten Velden. “Very well. Though what you hope to achieve in a night and a day is completely beyond me.”

They lock gazes for an eternity. There is far more to this interchange than what is obvious. This is no doubt the tail end of a story no one has bothered to share with me, though I have no doubt the messy details will be splashed about soon enough.



They’ve tossed Ezekiel into a windowless cell known only as Die Donker Gat – The Dark Hole. The lack of illumination is so intense it presses with its fingers against my exposed skin and threatens to choke me as I venture down the passage. Twenty-four hours have passed, and my guilt has supped all too well on my conscience.

I’ve got five minutes tops before my sire notices my absence – the elders are having “less formal” discussions over refreshments before we depart for the execution. Whatever Ten Velden has hoped to achieve has failed. In fact, she’s been meeker than a church mouse the whole time. Van Rheede has been conspicuous in his absence – his proxy voted in his stead. The tally after the trial has been unanimous.

I must see Ezekiel. I must explain. Twenty years since that night I stood him up. The night he vanished. Back then I didn’t have the guts to tell him to his face that I’d started seeing someone else. Someone with *prospects*, as I’d thought back then. My head had too easily been turned by slick black German cars and glittering social events.

God, I’d been such a snotty bitch.

Who’m I kidding? I still am.

Five minutes. That’s all. As if that will ever assuage a mountain of guilt.

I tap on the door. “Thulani.” My voice is too loud in this echoing space. Small starbursts of color make up for the lack of visuals and the air tastes musty.

For a long while I fear I’ve come to the wrong place, yet those two ghouls standing guard by the entrance are a clear giveaway, along with the “under renovation” signs put up to keep mortals out during the day.

“What do you want, umlungu?” His words are dry leaves in the wind.

“I had to come. I’m sorry.”

He coughs laughter. “That you’re just like the rest of them?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Know what? That *he* was a vampire?”

“I’m sorry!” Sorry for a hundred, thousand things. Gray paint obscuring a riot of color. Old, unfulfilled love. None of that matters now, I suppose.

“Sorry won’t help me.”

“Why didn’t you –”

“Seek you out?” More coughed laughter follows.

“What happened? Why? How?”

“Why should I tell you?”

I drag my nails over the rough wood of the door hard enough to leave score marks. Janzs will no doubt notice that my pearl pink varnish is chipped. He won’t comment, but will ensure that I see his raised brow.

“You must ... know ... how it is.” I sound so lame. Bedraggled. A petulant, spoiled child.

“Let me out,” he says. “You know it’s the right thing to do. You *could* do it.”

“I can’t,” I whimper.

“You *won’t*.”

Silence settles after his accusation. By now the ghouls will have realized my misdirection. The others will have finished supping. The prince will pull on fresh, white gloves. Silence is a lazy cat stretching to sharpen its claws.

“If you must know, I was never Ten Velden’s first choice,” he whispers.

I gasp, press my cheek against the splintery surface.

“It was always you. So promising. She wanted *you* for her childe. She always did. And then *he* came, and he took you from her, and there was nothing she could do. He did it to spite her for an old slight. The prince had given his permission then Janzs had persuaded him to pass the honor to him instead. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, a Romeo below an absent Juliet’s balcony. *She* never meant to embrace me. She meant to leave me there but then she ... *she* must’ve seen something in me. She relented.”

His sob is clear from beyond the barrier. Thulani doesn’t need to elaborate on the reasons why a black man – now a vampire – would ever be accepted among the ruling elite of this city.

“You could have come to me!” I cry.

“Don’t be a dumb bitch. Stupid umlungu.”

It won’t take much to break the lock. It’s meant to keep prisoners in – not others out, but the ripples of my actions will spread, small at first but a grow-

ing tsunami. If I free him, I lose everything; a blood hunt will be called, I will be made anathema and cast out. My actions will damage my sire's position. And yet...

With shaking hands I slide my fingers across the bolt. The combination lock that will be as nothing to snap with my strength. I stand at the edge of an abyss, and I can't leap, can't let go. I'm angry. At Thulani. At myself. At this whole goddamned situation and the arrogance of our sires for whom we are no more than pawns in a game spanning centuries.

"You could have sought me out!" I half-shout then clamp trembling fingers over my mouth as the last syllable bounces down the passage.

Voices reach me – men talking hurriedly, worried. I've left it too late, and am bizarrely grateful that the decision has been made for me.



The wind shrieks down from the mountain that gleams a sickly green in the massive floodlights that illuminate its sheer face for tourists' benefit. Clouds boil down the ravines, but never quite reach where we stand in the quarry, encapsulated on all sides by shorn rock. The water is obsidian, shivering with cats' paws at each angry squall that shakes the eucalyptus and acacia that guard this sanctuary.

We've come to bear witness – a silent, dark-clad throng with grim, waxen faces that gleam in the ambient light from the city. No moon, but it's bright enough for *us* to see. I pity any mortal who stumbles across this tableau. He or she won't live to see another dawn.

The iron tang of vampiric blood reaches my senses, and my mouth fills with saliva at the thought, but then I pinch the webbing of skin between my right thumb and index finger hard enough to pierce flesh. The pain returns me to the present.

It's Thulani's blood I smell. They've broken his hands, crushed them until the digits are but mashed remnants of the gentle, long-boned fingers that once traced the contours of my spine. If it weren't for the two goons holding him upright, he'd be doubled over. He has been stoic throughout. Not even a whimper. Hardly a sigh.

He can't – or won't – look at me, at anyone. His dreads obscure his features.

De Waal is droning on about the fitting punishment – that Caine might have mercy on this traitor to our kind, for the litany of sins heaped upon him – to make any Dutch Reformed minister proud. Then again, I think De Waal had been attending the seminary before his embrace. This dog end thought doesn't detract from the enormity of what is about to happen.

They lift Thulani, as if he's some broken doll, and place him on black builders' plastic. He lies like one already dead. He doesn't so much as flinch when they knock the stake through his heart, yet I'm the one who has to bite the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood.

A hiss, a sigh.

Then nothing.

Dreamless torpor. Not true death, but in many ways worse than actual oblivion. For a moment I stagger against Janzs, and it is *my* body lying there, stretched out while they pack rocks snug next to me. Then the wrapping, like some bizarre mummification, only with heavy chains instead of bandages.

Two ghouls to swing him, once, twice, before letting go and the momentum dragging the package into the air and down, down, down into the still, deep water with nary a splash.

We stand long enough to make sure that he sinks (well, of course he does) and then the first ragged laughter breaks out when someone cracks a jibe about *those stupid kaffirs*.

The word is ugly, and I wish I could smear it from his face, but I can do nothing, because Janzs is laughing too, and then the rest join in as we begin our saunter back to the cars at the parking lot. The fact that my sire somehow contrives to step in a pile of dog shit is the only event that offers a modicum of savage pleasure – short lived because he makes me clean up the mess once we arrive home.

They should have killed him. Anything is better what they – what *we* did – because I am complicit; I did nothing. I stood there watching, my nails digging half-moons into the soft flesh of my palms while they tossed him in.

The quarry is easily twenty or thirty meters at its deepest. I catch myself recreating that slow subsiding, the sinking, the liquid pressure. The dim, filtered light tainted ruby by the tannins in the water. The mute, questing mouths of fishes, of the silt slowly blanketing the form in a slippery sheath. Forgetfulness in trickling layers, until in a hundred, a thousand years from now some unfortunate may stumble upon his resting place, pull out the stake and...

Deep shudders course through me at the oddest moment. I jerk. I stutter. I stare out of windows at nothing and everything.

You did nothing, stupid umlungu.

The next mural goes up at a favorite spot – the off-ramp leading to Gardens. Granted, the hand is most assuredly not Thulani's, but the message is clear in a graceful script:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

A bible verse. Of all things. From the book of Ezekiel.

My laughter bubbles just beneath the surface. Yet I'm there the following night, supervising the obliteration of this message. As fast as we erase, new verses spring up. Some hands are bold, some shaky.

Imprecations. Promises of wrath. Fire. Vengeance. More bloody bible verses.

Janzs starts muttering about how our own Night of Long Knives has come and I'm sent out with our goons to join the others hunting – lest we become the hunted ourselves.

It's stupid, really – this tit-for-tat aggression.

And I'm ill-suited to the driving around until the early hours *looking* for trouble while Janzs holes up in what can be best described as a panic room (though he prefers to call it his study). We're expendable. Just like some of our less prudent peers who go missing under mysterious circumstances in the aftermath of Ezekiel's descent into a watery grave.

Thulani – Ezekiel, I must think of him as the prophet – has become a figurehead – a Mandela for the Anarchs. He may have been just a street artist before this entire debacle but now ... He is an icon, a symbol of all that is wrong in the Mother City, of the stale, bloated ticks that suck the life out of her while the restless population seethes, trapped in the dross of a society slowly congealing, turning rancid.

The bible verses peter off, are reduced to but two words: *FREE HIM!*

I no longer bother covering those up unless they appear on the walls of our residence. They are too many. And clearly painted by more than one individual.

We know where you live. We can find you. We are leviathan, and we are many.

For each Anarch caught and staked out to greet the sun, one of our own suffers a similar, horrifying fate. My fear is thick and pads softly in my wake, its breath hot on my heels. The small hairs on my nape prickle, but whenever I turn, the streets are empty of kindred and I clasp the stock of my holstered nine-mm all the more tightly in a trembling hand.

I won't see them when they strike; they will come in the dead of night, red in tooth and claw. A black tide rising up against us, merciless and hungry. Oh, so hungry. My sightless eyes will smolder and smoke in the first kiss of dawn while Ezekiel slumbers on, secure in the knowledge of all who have failed him and those who will continue to fight for him, for his message.

• • •

The home is like any other in the run-down part of Woodstock, near Salt River Circle – a squashed, Victorian semi-detached badly in need of paint, its frillery long gone, and its front windows boarded up with wood culled from shipping pallets. Three Anarchs nest here, if our intelligence is correct. Ruan and Geoff radiate sour tension – they’re nervous as all hell, and I don’t blame them. I wouldn’t want to be the first to enter a vampire’s lair shortly after sunset. Anarch or no.

And I’m dicing it like mad, because it’s barely dark enough, even for an early riser like me. Some of the sluggishness has yet to leave my bones – so I’m hanging back, my piece heavy and reassuring tucked under my coat, the silencer nuzzling against my fingers like a dog’s nose. We’re banking on the fact that our quarry is still blissfully unaware of our arrival.

I have no taste for what I must do this night. Each footstep drags. Each small incident, from the yammering of a small dog three houses down to the suspicious twitch of a curtain from the house across the way makes me wish I could be anywhere but here. Our black SUV is a dead giveaway that we don’t belong in this ’hood, and the locals shy from us instinctively.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

That line returns to me; it feels as if it was left there just for me, and though we’ve long since covered it with the prerequisite gray, the words are etched in flame on the insides of my lids.

A heart of flesh.

Ezekiel, you bastard.

Geoff crumples with barely a sigh. He simply has no idea what hits him. Not that it matters anymore. Ruan, to give him some credit, has time to unclip his holster, but vampires have always been faster than their servitors. A small red dot blooms in his chest, but I don’t get to watch it unfurl, because he slumps over his now erstwhile colleague. I have perhaps two or three minutes before an alert resident raises the alarm that some crazy white woman is shooting folks out here.

The door opens as I move to bring my fist down on the wood.

She’s tiny, barely out of her teens, and she gazes up at me with frightened eyes. Yet there’s a resilience to her, a defiance that shapes her narrow shoulders and makes her straighten despite the fact that I could destroy her in an instant.

“You need to get out of here,” I say. “I’ve bought you some time.” My gun weighs down my hand.

And you’ve damned yourself.

The dark-skinned vampire who joins her at the threshold is ropey with muscles, his posture stiff as he slings a protective arm around the girl. Clan Gangrel, maybe, judging by the thick mane around his face, the cat eyes.

“Go get our things, Meisie,” he says without looking away from me.

The tiny slip of a thing vanishes into the shadows. I blink and she’s gone.

The male vampire’s stance, everything about him, says, *This is our territory. What are you doing here, interloper?*

“I’m sorry.” What else can I say?

He huffs like an angry cat, moistens his lips with the quick dart of a tongue. “Go back to where you came from, 1652.” Yet there’s no anger – just resignation. “You’ve done enough.”

I want to yell at him that I’ve saved him, that I’ve protected his coterie – however many more vampires there are inside – this night, but I am well aware I’ve not done enough. Not all the years of my silence, my obedience to my sire and the prince. I’ve stood by all these years, mute, nothing but a cat’s paw for the deeds with which they don’t want to sully their hands.

Now that I’ve leaped from the precipice, I’m falling, and it’s not as frightening as I expected. There’s a certain sense of potential, this letting go and the not knowing exactly what will happen next. How much time before my sire starts suspecting? Starts reeling me in through our bond? How many hours, minutes even, before they begin to realize one of their own has gone rogue? Oh, how the upstart has fallen from grace. Won’t the others have even more to gossip about now? I’ll be the flavor of the decade and Janz’s greatest shame. That alone makes it worth it.

Yet idle speculation matters not, because the next step is far, far worse than anything they could ever do to me.



I’ve never liked deep, dark water. Not when I was alive, and most certainly not now. It’s not that I worry that something awful with too many tentacles and fins lurks beneath the inscrutable depths (all right, there might be some really, really large fishes). It’s not just the darkness. Or the rocks slippery with their coat of algae. Or the cold that creeps slowly into my marrow. Or the mass of water pressing down, heavy, telling me that I need to stay down, where I belong, with the broken glass, old shopping trolleys and moldering bones.

Stop thinking about those things, you stupid umlungu.

I’ve stripped down to just my underthings, my clothing and weapons folded away in a neat pile – as if I’m coming back from this. Maybe I will. Maybe I won’t. None of this is rational, but my heart is down there, the heart of flesh I abandoned so many years ago. It no longer beats, the blood no longer flows, but it’s still precious to me.

Rubbish. You never spared him a second thought all these years until...

Until that first mural, months ago. Something about the fine chiaroscuro, the particular choice of color palette that awakened an old, old fever dream of madcap grins, cheap red wine and the tang of bitter herb smoke. Four AM at Spiro's diner, sharing foul coffee or watching the newspaper delivery boys unload their cargo behind Pick'n'Pay as we drunkstumble back to our digs. Sloppy kisses and groped breasts. We can never go back, but those memories are my bijoux.

All these things smear behind my eyes, unlocking a past I've kept tucked away. That now, in a grand and no doubt final gesture, I wish to draw the curtains one last time, take a bow. Then jump into the audience so they can tear me to shreds with their sharp teeth and wicked claws. I should have been Clan Toreador, not Ventrue. My mouth slashes into a bitter twist.

The water is as cold as I expect it to be and I sink like... Like a stone. I laugh and murky water fills my mouth. Momentary panic grips me because I no longer know which way is up nor down until my hands come into contact with the carapace of a motorcycle. At least I think it's a motorcycle.

I could be here all night. All rest of the day too. But I won't come up again until I find what I'm looking for. I shudder at the brief contact with slippery fish (at least I hope they're fish) as I grope in the darkness. Several false moments flash by when my questing fingers brush up against slick plastic, but it's once I grasp a thick chain that I know I've found him.

There's no swimming up gracefully. That sort of shit only happens in the movies. Instead I begin the painstaking dragging to the walls. Branches snag my hair, grasp at my prize, and it must be close to dawn before I break the surface and lug the bundle onto a shelf of stone jutting out into the water. No more. My muscles burn, and the need for solidity has me scramble onto the ledge in case some entity has been biding its time to snatch at me. (You never know.)

It's then that I understand that I'm no longer alone.

They must number at least a dozen – and I recognize the leonine features of the Gangrel and his diminutive companion among the others gathered here – holding silent vigil. Strong hands lift us up and deposit us on the grassy banks. Someone places a bolt cutter in my chilled grasp, and I go to work at the chains. Pebbles dig into my knees and tremors of exhaustion wrack my frame. I'm so thirsty. So very, very thirsty and tired. But I can't stop now.

Thulani appears almost peaceful, his mangled hands clasped over his chest as if he's in quiet repose. The stake comes out with a wet *schlopping* but the flesh doesn't immediately heal. They're watching, waiting to see what I do next as I lift his still form so that we create a mockery of Michelange-

lo's *Pietà*. A spasm passes through him the moment his lips nuzzle against my neck. Then the sharp pain bordering on pleasure as he latches on with his fangs. Thulani fumbles at my hair as his tongue rasps along the jagged wound, and the residue of my vitality becomes the ebbing tide.

I don't mind. Not really. I've always thought I would resist death's siren call, but that was when I wasn't caught in the eddy, spiraling in ever-tighter revolutions into that nothingness. Oblivion is there, waiting for me with arms outstretched. I've had a good inning. Never really did amount to much, did I? Never got to sire a child of my own. Never crawled out from beneath Janz's shadow. Never even left the country. Oh, but I did kiss the boy.

Some dim part of me tugs, says to get up, to pull away, but Thulani's hunger is stronger, dragging me with the unavoidable flow out to sea and far, far away where the sun never rises nor sets.

"Hey, hey."

The flat of someone's palm cracks over my cheek but the sensation is dulled.

"Damn it, Ezekiel, you nearly drained her."

"Shut up, Nazeem. Who's willing to help her?"

"Let her die. She's one of them."

Thulani lets loose a stream of invectives in isiXhosa and presently liquid fire drips down my throat.

"I owe you, sisi," he says.

Life wriggles past my lips, and strength floods me enough so that I grab hold of the stick-thin wrist that offers me vitae and lock gazes with Meisie, whose tiny stature hides a big heart.

"Thank you," I say, though the syllables are gluey with the thick blood coating my lips and tongue.

Her smile is tight and she withdraws her wrist under the watchful gaze of her companions.

Thulani's arms tighten around me and I feel him press a kiss to the back of my head. "My beautiful umlungu," he murmurs for just me to hear. "*My umlungu.*"



The Cook's Last Day

By Crystal Frasier

“Fear is the best spice.’ What a crock of shit. Every lick in the city spits out that same line like it’s insightful, but it’s not true, y’know?.” Tamra smirked, bending over her restrained guest. “Not the spice part. Spices are just chemistry, and for all the poetry and grunge music and weepy teenage soap operas, fear is just chemistry, too. It’s epinephrine. That’s what makes the blood taste different, and it doesn’t taste all that pleasant—bitter and a little musty.” She clipped her mass of dark hair up into a messy bun the other Treador of the city would consider outright offensive.

“I should know; I swallowed enough of it sucking on an asthma inhaler back when I was a wheezing baby boy. What they all like is the cheap, easy emotional high. Blood can carry so much more than sustenance.” She drew a paring knife across listless, newly-shaved flesh. A swollen, red bead sprang up in its passing, and she dipped a pinky into the blood and ran it across her teeth. It tasted round and shiny and rolled lazily from her gums down her spine and into something hungry and rumbling. The beast paced and sneered deep in her gut, demanding the morsel she’d denied it for six long nights. She fought past the base sensation and rolled over the flavor, dissecting out the bitter and mint, and the horrible sour-stale.

Almost.

“Sorry for the monologue,” she gasped at the effort of restraining the Beast. “It helps a girl focus when she’s hungry. Not that you seem to care.” She slapped her captive audience playfully and his head lolled lazily back, eyes trying to focus as he chewed forgetfully at the gag. “This is why you don’t follow strange girls into alleys, you fetishist asshole.”

“But can I really blame you? You’re just a slave to your hormones, the same as me. I think that’s what makes this feel so fulfilling.” She dropped eight white pills into a mortar and began grinding them to white powder.

“That’s all any of us are, the chemistry. I really thought, being dead, I’d be above that bullshit by now.” She added a few drops of water and the sharp scent of mint wafted up from the bowl. “But I still swear I can taste the *filth* in men. It’s disgusting. Women—especially women like me—we all taste fine, but after the shit I went through I can’t bring myself to ruin another woman’s life.” She pulled down the gag and slid the white paste into his mouth with a perfunctory “Swallow.”

The sudden addition brought up a gout of vomit and a string of woozy groans from the restrained body. “Fucking morning sickness.” She dug through the rack of hand-labeled bottles adjoining the bed, finally removing a glossy slip of film from one and popping it into her guest’s mouth. “This was so much easier when I just had the other girls at the club. A dozen girls like me; I get a pint or two a day, and they get a scary monster to put some fear into rough tricks like you. Rantipole did not like that arrangement, though. He cut them up right in front of me. Said I needed to learn how to hunt.”

She slid the remaining paste into her prey’s mouth and replaced the gag. “How does forcing your sex doll to hunt make sense?”

Her patient’s eyes widened momentarily as she filled a syringe. “What? Did the hospital bed give you the impression I was a doctor? Girls like me don’t get to be doctors. Not when you parents kick your ass the curb at sixteen.” She tapped the air bubbles free from the ketamine dose and added it to the IV drip. “No, I sold sex. I still sell cheap thrills, I guess. What I’m doing to you, I do for lots of vampires. For them it’s just about the buzz, though. Not about having to fine-tune your every meal just to feel normal. The only way we feel anything once you’re dead is to suck it out of the living. Then it’s back to the politics and the backstabbing and the posturing to kill time until your next fix. Honestly? As crappy as my life is—juicing up sacks like you with the blood chemistry of a pregnant rhino and helping a few undead losers get buzzed—at least being a nobody—”

“Tamra, where you at lady?” A hoarse croak sang from the front of the shop.

“Being a nobody means people leave the fuck alone,” she bellowed back. The metal-clad room—little more than a walk-in freezer with aspirations of guest room—exited directly into the small butcher-shop-come-apartment. Though small, it was tidy, and decorated well enough to be a target in such a miserable neighborhood had it lacked an undead landlord. A man-shaped measure of failure—toad-faced and pale—hunched by the wooden block table over which he’d draped a semi-conscious woman. He ran through his usual spot-grooming routine—rubbing gnarled hands against his shirt and licking bits of dried spittle and past meals from his lips—and straightened his spine as much as the long-bones allowed.

“Peabody? What do you want?” She looked at the limp woman besides him and shoulders fell.

The Nosferatu’s hand jerked and gesticulated like it wanted to escape. “I- I just- I needed a little, y’know... a little pick me up. And you said- you *said* when I helped you bag that juicebox last week- you said I could get two this time.”

“I dosed your first one up two days ago. You can’t possibly be hungry!”

“I’m not- I’m not hungry,” he said with a nod. “I’m just- it’s just been a really rough time this week, and I’m just, y’know, just I’m having a hard time dealing is all.”

Tamra watched Peabody’s subtle, spastic dance along his occasional refrain of ‘you said,’ and finally sighed. She pulled the girl—limp and pale and plated in chilled sweat—onto the block, and whatever trace of human still lived in Tamra’s corpse gurgled from the pit of her stomach. “You know I don’t like you bringing women by here.”

“Yeah, I know. I know. You said no girls, but this isn’t- I mean, this is just for once. Like a treat.” He circled the table, looking everywhere.

“What is she even on?” Tamra peeled back an eyelid to stare at the pinhole-sized pupils.

“I don’t know, like... meth? Or jones?”

“Those are very different drugs, Peabody. Do you remember which she was using?”

“Nah, she came like that. I mean, she’s got track marks, but she also got a face full of bad teeth. Either one, y’know, I’m not picky.” He rubbed a raw spot on the side of his face. “So, how come when I suck ‘em all strung out like this, I only get buzzed for like, ten minutes, but when you cook ‘em up, I get high for a day?”

“Clarithromycin.” She glared across the table at Peabody’s blank expression. “You stole one of my pharmacology books last time you were in here, I figured you must’ve at least read the pages I bookmarked.”

“I- yeah, I sold it.”

Tamra sighed and made a mental note to steal another copy. “Clarithromycin is an antibiotic, but it also slows down how long it takes your body to break down drugs.”

“Well then wh- why not just give her the clare?”

“We are not called it ‘clare,’ and I don’t just give it to her because that’s just one thing to use, and it reacts badly with some drugs. That’s why I have to let my little pet projects come off the ketamine completely before I can dose them and feed. And that’s why I need to know what she—”

“Hey, yeah, is this the juicebox we grabbed?” Peabody’s small voice rattled off the steel walls of the guest room. “How do you always make these ugly guys smell like pretty girls?”

“Get the hell out of there!” She bellowed in a register too low to touch in thoughtful company. “Pea, what is rule number one for getting your fucking fix from me?”

“I- I- I didn’t touch it. I just wanted to smell it.”

“What is rule number one?!”

“I don’t- I don’t go near your fancy feast.” Tamra continued to stare. “So we talk about yours. What about mine? Like, I really gotta know what she’s on. I need some of that.”

“Probably putting the poor thing out of her misery.” Tamra drew the scalpel across the girl’s shoulder, gaining her first reaction since entering. The human writhed and whimpered as Peabody held her back. The bead of blood spiderwebbed across the scars on her arm. Tamra dabbed her finger in a smear and touched it to her tongue. The beast growled deep inside, but she focus on the experience: round and cracked, dappled and bristling, and somewhere in the back musty and bitter and sweet. The air carried the slow, labored sound of heartbeats trying to push blood like mucus. Her scent dripped with fear and self-loathing and menses a week past. Around her the building groaned and cracked under the weight of years, and in the hall a match hissed to life in a puff of sulfur. The transom of her door shattered, the sound reaching her ear like gunshots. A half second later, a cascade of sound collided into Tamra’s awareness like a truck, and the world spun away from her.



The first sensation came from a hand tapping her cheek, but it was minutes before enough of her mind clawed out of the black haze enough to register the smell of saltpeter or the dull ache of words in her ears. Light made her head scream, but she could just make out Peabody’s outline crouched above as she lay on the floor.

“A- are you okay,” he gently bellowed.

Tamra shook her head, but couldn’t tell in what direction. “What happened?”

Peabody pointed to the tangle, scorched paper wrappers—the remains of common firecrackers. “You been out for maybe twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?” Tamra glanced at her chest, expecting to see a stake run through it. She threw herself upright, and leaned against the table. A cold, blue husk laid there; blood dripped across the floor, congealing on the

cold cement, but not nearly enough for a full human being. Desperate, lopsided marks dragged through the mess, like a dog licking up some spilled treat.

“He took my snack!” Peabody’s chin—newly grunged with smears of blood and dirt—quivered at the injustice.

“A vampire did this.” Tamra’s gears turned slowly as she processed the scene. “Why would anyone break into my home to suck down half-dead stoner?” Her eyes widened and she stumbled to the heavy, metal door of the guest room. Pulling it open revealed the empty bed and sturdy leather straps sliced tidily open. “No!” She slammed a hand into the steel paneling, and again and again until the metal buckled and sturdy, dead bones splintered. Her beast was little more than a half-starved mongrel, and it bayed for its stolen supper.

“I’ve been robbed.”

“I don’t care.” Sheriff Black’s face—sleek and clean, with the rosy flush of the well-fed dead—reflected little empathy for the base needs of survival.

“A vampire did this!” And in response to the elder’s accusing stare, she added, “Hunters’ would’ve had the decency to kill me! And dogs wouldn’t have ripped off half my meds. This was someone who knows it takes me a week to make myself a meal, and wanted to screw with me! Isn’t it your job to keep the peace for vampires in this town?”

“My job, *childe*—” Black took a long drag from his cigarette, and the warmth and light drained noticeably from the plush office. The hunger inside Tamra’s chest ached at the luxury of breathing. “—Is to keep everyone in their place. And your place is to be a hilarious reminder of Rantipole’s fuck-ups. You’re a bell that braying jackass has to wear around his neck to remind him just how seriously the Prince considers him.” Her chest swooned at the mentioned of her sire’s name, even as her stomach turned.

“I don’t really... see Rantipole that much.” She felt the tug in her chest. His blood in her veins longed to be near to him once more, ever ready to excuse the raised voices and raised fists. “He’s got newer things to distract him. I know he only keeps me around because the Prince makes him.” It was customary for the Kindred to care for any dead they tendered, disposing of those bodies that didn’t move about on their own and feeding and protecting those ones—like Tamra—who did. How long it took varied from clan to clan and city to city, but now a decade removed from her Embrace, she felt more than enough time had passed to stand on her own. God below knew Rantipole felt the same way, having cut her off from any contact but the two-room dive he permitted her to nest in.

“If you don’t like your place, *childe*—and who the hell would blame

you being that piece of shit's used rag—then learn the play the damn Game, find yourself some allies who aren't junkies, and crawl out on your own. Then maybe I'll give a shit about your problems. Until then, if someone fucks with you, then it's your sire's business, not mine.”

“But I don't like the Game! I'm bad at it, and no one likes me!” As much as the shadow society of the city embraced—even fetishized—androgyny, it had as much respect for a transgender woman in its ranks as mortal society. With her history and even her genitals publicly disclosed to humble her sire, few above Peabody's miserable station found any value in her loyalty or security in an alliance.

“Sad story. Not my concern. Beg a pint off your master, go kill someone, or starve to death in a gutter. Because until you actually play some part in this community, the only way I'll give a damn about you is the mild inconvenience killing you would cause me if you step out of line.”

“If I go out there, someone may try to kill me.”

“If you stay here, I promise someone will kill you.”

Tamra turned and took a heavy step towards the door.

“You're a fucking sad sack,” the Sheriff added with a heavy sigh. “Free advice, because everyone loves a handout: Don't look at this from who benefits. Death's a shitshow we all want a distraction from, and motives only work if everyone's fool enough to show their whole hand. You want to know who screwed you? Look for whoever knew when exactly they could lay you out with a damn firecracker.”

“What?”

“Out.”

“It- It's okay, girl.” Peabody tugged at her shirt. Black's dark eyes followed closely. “I'll help you catch a new one. Y'know, i-if you help me drug up something new for me, too.”

She spared a glance from the handsome sheriff to the twisted creature she'd walked in with. “I don't have half my supplies, Peabody. And all that's from barter with methheads and huffers and everyone else who hates being immortal. It's pure luck if they've got anything I need.”

“We can get you more supplies! I- I can get you hooked up again if you let me just, like, run around a few hours!” He lopped over the meet her averted gaze. “I'll do you a solid for free.”

She closed the oak door behind her as she stepped from posh office to carpet-lined hall. “What are you talking about?”

“Just- Just like gimme a list of what you need.” The sallow flesh creaked as he grinned ear the ear.

“Peabody, your little mudguzzlers aren’t going to have ketamine or de-lestrogen on tap.”

“You- you ain’t got no idea who you brew for, do you? I mean- I mean gutter rats like me comes to pick it up, but that’s just ‘cause no one respectable would be caught asking *you* for a favor.”

“What?” Her grip tightened on his withered arm.

“Yeah, there’s maybe a quarter of the court in this city who’ll get you back in the business of cookin’ them up party supplies by tomorrow night.”

The hunger stirred in her again. “And who were *you* picking up for tonight, Peabody?”

“What? Me?! Naw, girl, I help you because w- we’re friend, y’know? I work for you!” His words dissolved into a sloshing mess of syllables as Tamra threw him into the wall and pressed her mass against his chest. Her broad shoulders washed into his emaciated frame like a tide.

“Firecrackers,” She spat. “Fucking firecrackers aren’t going to do shit to a vampire. Unless!” She clapped a hand across his face and squeezed. Something hungry could smell the blood in his veins—so tainted and filthy just the smell made her sick—and longed to take it. “Unless someone knew exactly when I was turning up my senses to find out what some juicebox was high on!” With inhuman speed, she dashed his tiny frame to the ground.

“Unless some little toad I’d never expect was poking me to get a fix right then and there! Who sent you to pick up my lunchbox, Peabody?!”

“I- I can’t. I didn’t!”

Tamra tore at her wrist, biting through the veins and exposing a trickle of vitae so thick it quivered more than bled. “Drink it!” She rubbed the pumping wound into the Nosferatu’s squirming face. “Drink it you little puke, or I’m gonna drain every last drop of blood from that lice-infested sack of skin you call a body! And no one will care, because the only lick they care about less than me in this city is *you*!”

Peabody had tasted her blood years ago, when he first started begging cheap highs off a broken and battered girl new to the burnt out butcher shop on 17th Street. Broken and battered even then, the vampire had little to offer in trade beyond his simpering presence and an extra set of hands, and Tamra trusted neither of those without the softened heart an exchange of blood compelled. One sip from her veins years ago sealed their lasting tolerance for the other’s failures.

Peabody mewled one brief protest before his jagged incisors finally fell upon her wound, and he suckled the essence from her vein. Color flushed across his scabrous head as her needs and urges found root in his heart. Tamra finally pushed the parasite off and to the ground. New eyes filled

with love and hate and yawning need stared up at her as she wobbled. The Beast slunk back to the coldest corner of her stomach, and sleep suddenly seemed so much more pressing than feeding.

“Now. Who the fuck sent you tonight?”



The tiny, manicured trees stood emerald green against the red, weathered bricks, as brilliant at night as they would be midday thanks to the townhouse’s exterior lights. To the living, it was a gaudy abuse of garden lighting, but to the dead it was flaunting the divine mandates that banished them to the shadows—a little slice of daylight at 3:05 a.m.

“Because of course it’s him.”

“I don’t- I don’t think you need me anymore.” Peabody scratched at old marks in his arm; scars from long before his current addictions. “I should go. Probably?”

“Stay.” Tamra felt his eyes digging deep into her with just a little more intensity each time he drily chewed his tongue. Her own eyes desperately searched each window in turn—every casual brush of a curtain in the winds flooding her heart with longing and loathing at the possibility of seeing him again.

She finally broke her gaze away from the townhouse, and staggered through a few deep breathes to ease the pain of withdrawal. “Why Ranti-pole?”

Peabody struggled over a few words, and finally shrugged. She’d menaced his side of the story from the hunched little man on the two-mile stagger to the well-healed historic district, and ultimately the Nosferatu’s understanding of the scenario was no more enlightening than when he was playing dumb. “Why did you even come out here? He’s not gonna give it back. I’ll help you catch a new one.”

“I don’t want a new one,” Tamra growled. “I want *my* meal, the one I caught. The one I prepared. He doesn’t give a damn about me anymore; he doesn’t get to tell me how to feed!” She crossed the street in three large strides without intending to, and kicked in the front door with only slightly more intention.

A woman lay in the hall beyond—kindred, guessing by the sunken eyes, stink of cold flesh, and the smear of blood across her mouth. Broad, black pupils look up and—after a lazy hesitation—focused on Tamra. The prone woman gurgled more than hissed, and bared fangs in what—to her no doubt—was a threat. Tamra whipped a tired, hungry boot into the limp form and sent her skidding down the polished hardwood.

“Heeeeeey, noww,” a voice slurred from the living room, and her fury drained away into a pool of longing and shame. Her heart managed a laborious beat. “Yooooou leave Misty alone.”

Misty huffed in agreement, but didn’t move from the floor.

Tamra stepped around the corner, and there he lay sprawled across the crimson leather couch, melted into the furniture and turning even ounce of willpower towards raising his head in her direction. Blood clotted his tidy goatee, and spread like a luncheon on the coffee table laid Tamra’s meal, pale and dry.

“Heeeeeee... was quite filling.” A finger from his limp hand gestured towards the body. “And very... that’s a nice bit of spinny you used, getting him ready.” The soap-clean smell of ketamine filled the house. Rantipole struggled to lift himself and sloshed to the floor. Without a thought Tamra stepped to his side and gingerly lifting him back onto the couch. His leathery, warm musk crashed over her, mingled with the detergent-scent of drugs and metallic tinge of blood, and a thousand emotions struggled for dominance in the basest parts of her brain. She needed to scream. She needed hit him. She needed to cry into his chest. She needed his praise. She needed.

Confusion and offense crossed angular face. “I told you, you’re not tooooo come here anymore.”

She stared longingly at the empty corpse. “You took my meal,” she finally, apologetically accused.

He snorted and his lip curled. “*Your* meal. Childe, nothing is *yours*. *Yooooou* belong to *me*.”

“I know,” blurted out before her overwhelming disgust hit. Angry words caught in her throat. Her chest sank, “Please, I’m so hungry.”

“Dig someone out of the trash,” rolled off his lip. “Hunt. Do something. Feed yourself instead of just cooking up your precious little meals.”

“I would have just let you have it if you asked.”

“Ask?” He spat up a rich, red spurt of blood, and the smell of vitae rolled over the room. Tamra’s beast stirred. “I don’t ask for what’s mine. Myyyyy ladyfriend for the evening wanted on of your little treats, so I took it. In a more civilized age, the help accepted what was expected of them.”

“I’m not the help.”

“Shut up, dog.” His head lolled again and he gasped and heaved once, then twice.

Tamra’s senses broadened as her hunger overwhelmed her bloodbound deference. “Tummy ache?” Rantipole simply stared, annoyed and sweating. The flush of life from feeding was a drug unto itself, but the tainted meals

she prepared only added to the experience. “That’s morning sickness. My bloodbag was pumped full of titty skittles.” His eyes furrowed in disgust. “The ketamine is just to keep him quiet.”

“You poisoned me, you fucking fag—” He vomited and gout of fresh, red blood, and the humanity fled from Tamra’s mind. She fell onto his limp form, lapping up the wet, red mess from his shirt and chin, and tearing at the cotton to choke down whatever hint of a meal remained. Whetted but unsated, she tore deeper, plunging her fangs into the meat of his flesh. Rantipole slurred a howl of pain and rage. She could feel the bubble of vitae burning away, siphoning the life essence from his veins as he struggled to rouse himself from the stupor. Her jaw crunched through his trachea and fought for every remaining drop.

A century and a half older than her, Rantipole could and had crushed her with scant effort, but awash in confusion he could muster only a single preternatural blow before his will to fight fled. Tamra felt something bony in her arm crunch under her sire’s fist, but it was distant and dull, so far removed from the hot flush of life and age and purity. With only a moment’s pause, she willed a rush of life to the shattered limb and it snapped forward once again. She returned to her meal.

His body slumped to the floor, pale and unmoving, and Tamra staggered three steps forward. Ages—heady and condescending—pumped through her chest. A few swirls of ketamine Rantipole’s fury and panic hadn’t managed to cleanse swirled lyrically in her head.

She hefted the flopping girl on the floor and hurled her to the doorway, where Peabody still cowered. “Eat up.” A giggle escaped. “You’re going to need your strength.”

“Wh- wh- what you need?”

She slumped against the wall and swooned over the new depths of vitae inside her. “I think... I’m tired of being lonely. If no one in this town likes me, or wants to admit how much they need me, then maybe I feel like making some new friends.”

The Blood We Spill Never Stains

by Andrew Penn Romine

Carlie is pissed. Beyond the shadows of her secluded table, the dance floor of Klub Kobra is heaving with an urgent, animal tangle of bodies. Smelling of sweat, smelling of sex. Smelling of *blood*. She should be among the dancers already, accepting the offers of flushed, pulsing throats and pale, sleek wrists for suckling in the semi-dark.

Sacha, as ever, ruins her fun.

Perched on the opposite stool, the fucker grins at her from across the mica tabletop. Black shirt with red pinstripes, form-fitting leather jacket. Black, of course. A fat maroon scarf that makes him look like a puffed-up bird. Dark, wavy hair and fine, angular face. He's handsome save for that rueful pustule of a smile. Hard to believe it once commanded her devotion.

Her fellow Toreador, ever a scion of his decadent clan, has been many things. Artiste. Lover. Brother. For a laughably short reign, even a doomed Prince of some misbegotten city in the South. Somehow he escaped all that and now he's here in L.A. Again.

Sacha is eternally slick, the blood he spills never stains.

"Don't look at me like that, Carlotta," Sacha pouts, "I've got good news."

"Uh-huh," she replies, glancing hungrily over his shoulder at the fair-haired actor, dancing tongue-locked with his latest crush, a dark-eyed lad with smoldering looks. Her sweet, lost boys. Both are destined for stardom, Carlie knows.

Sacha follows her gaze and rolls his slate-gray eyes.

"Oh Carlie," he says, wrinkling his nose conspiratorially, "they're so cute. I've a mind to introduce myself."

“Don’t you fucking dare,” she snaps. Truth is, she’s already made them hers. The boys are devoted to her unto death no matter how much Sacha pours on his charm and affected French accent. He doesn’t need to know that, though. The Strip is fucking complicated, the overlapping territory of at least a half a dozen jealous Anarchs, and none of them have technically given her permission to make the boys her ghouls. But isn’t that what being an Anarch is all about? No rules.

“Who gave you exclusive rights to hunt here?” he asks, as if reading her thoughts. A low, dangerous growl rumbles in his throat. They might have shared a sire, but Sacha has always been a jealous sibling.

“Tell me your good news, *brother*,” Carlie takes his hand to distract him, though she can’t quite keep the venom from her tone.

Sacha shrugs her off and relaxes back into the booth, unwinding his ridiculous scarf.

“Very well,” he says his anger fading. “Grandfather is in Los Angeles. I think it’s time we granted him the delicious Final Death he fucking deserves.”

Carlie jerks upright in her seat as if Sacha has grabbed her. Grandfather? She hasn’t caught the faintest whisper of Octavius’ presence here, though she’s only been in town for a year. Her unbeating heart aches, remembering Lisette de Brassard, her beloved sire, beautiful as carved moonlight. Octavius, leaping from the rafters of the abandoned steel plant. Lisette, her surprised cry as Octavius overpowered her and drank his own progeny to a withered husk just yards away from where Carlie and Sacha hid, clutching one another in abject terror.

“He’s been hiding out here for decades. Even before New York,” Sacha says, stabbing the table with a well-manicured nail. He shows a hint of fang, too, grief cracking his usually unflappable demeanor.

“Don’t you fucking talk to me about New York,” she snarls. It had been Sacha’s unsolicited attempts at peacemaking in that city that had led their sire into the ambush in the first place.

“He has enemies here, Carlie. And he’s weak, sick.”

Sick? Kindred don’t get sick, especially not ancient Ventrue who have been kicking around since at least fifty years before Jesus Fucking Christ. His clan holds onto power — and grudges — at Old Testament levels.

“How do you know this?” she demands, suddenly wary. Sacha is skilled at omitting details, small and large.

“He has enemies here. They want to see him gone as badly as we do. Now’s our chance.”

She knows better than to ask him directly who these ‘enemies’ are, so she asks another question.

“And what am I supposed to do about it?” Even in his weakened state, she’d hardly be a physical match for Grandfather.

Sacha nods, a fisherman reeling in a hooked line.

“Carlie, you’re essential to the plan,” he says, “in all that time in New York, he never *saw* you. Only me. That’s why I’m the go between.”

“For these mysterious enemies,” she frowns. The prospect of having a hand in Grandfather’s Final Death is a morsel to savor, oh hell yes, but there’s no way she’s trusting Sacha. She’ll tell him to fuck off, let these unknown Kindred do their work. Revel in the news of Octavius’ exit from this world at her convenience, tangled in the arms of her boys.

“Listen,” Sacha hisses, leaning close, “if you won’t do it for Lisette, then do it for your boys.”

Carlie’s too shocked to respond.

“There’s only a few who know you’ve made those two pretty boys your ghouls. The stupid Anarch who owns Klub Kobra isn’t one of them.”

“What?” she finally spits, blood freezing. Sacha smiles.

“Two nights from now,” he continues smoothly, as if he hadn’t just threatened her, “there’s a big party up in Stanley Canyon. I’ve never been inside it, but the place is gorgeous. Very Italianate. Octavius is holed up inside. I can’t get near the place, of course. But you, dear sister?”

L.A.’s supposed to be the place where you can escape Kindred politics. Anarchy, every vampire for herself. Carlie shakes her head. This whole thing’s fucking fishy. But maybe it’s her chance to grab a little more for herself, after all.

“I want the club,” she insists, “if our mutual friends are powerful enough to take on Octavius, that should be cake.”

“Of course. Klub Kobra’s yours. Exclusive rights to feed, even. And—”

“And,” she continues, steamrolling whatever bullshit was about to trickle from his pale lips, “I want permission to Embrace my boys.”

Anger flushes his face with *vitae*, illuminating the peeved expression of a child denied new toys.

“This is L.A., Carlie,” he sulks, “you don’t need anyone’s permission. Especially not mine.”

“I doubt that. But *Mark*,” and she hasn’t uttered his real name since the bad old days following Lisette’s death, when they grieved together in an ill-advised blood bond, “you owe me this.”

That elicits a petulant shrug from Sacha, and he leans back in his seat. He's still pouting, but Carlie knows that they have a deal.



To get into the party, Sacha tells her, she'll need an invitation. A special token, a death's head. He directs her to a dive bar in the Valley, that fabled fucking land where concrete and second-hand dreams are poured down thick.

The joint's a boil of cement blocks and razor wire festering between a grimy stop-n-rob on the left and a squalid apartment block on the right. NINTH CIRCLE blares a hoop of neon letters in a failed bid to wheel into the oppressive sky. Sacha has knack for finding the shitholes of the world.

Near the door, a pack of posturing gangbangers give her the lecherous eye, passing around a blunt. She accepts when they offer, dragging deep. She'll only get stoned if she drinks from one of the irritating fuckers. She hasn't had time to feed since the club, so the idea is tempting.

"Looking for Coyote," she explains between puffs, feeling like the star of some Z-grade exploitation flick.

A young man with a wicked grin and three teardrops tattooed under his right eye jerks his thumb towards the door. She decides she'll ignore his obscene catcalls and pushes her way inside.

The Ninth Circle's as much a shithole inside as out. Bare bulbs do little to scrape the shadows out of the warren of dim rooms. G-funk oozes through blasted speakers, a stink of beer and tequila permeates the air, and under that, the heady perfume of sweat and blood and jostling humanity.

Then she sees her man, perched at the wood-veneer bar, pretending to nurse a bourbon on the rocks under the neon glow of a cartoon sun. He's stocky, swelling the seams of a leather jacket emblazoned with the words "El Coyote," in a gaudy gothic script. A frizzy, Lemmy-sort of beard frames the sharp planes of his face, and his mane of thick black hair is barely contained by a crimson dew-rag. Under an equally wild brow, bright, pale eyes lock onto her. Dangerous eyes. Paranoid eyes.

Wolf eyes.

"You're Coyote," says Carlie with an oily show of teeth that would make Sacha proud.

"Who the fuck are you?" Coyote growls in a faint, sleepy accent she can't identify. Not Mexican. Romanian? What the hell. Greek?

Potency radiates from the vampire and her smile falters. This son of a bitch is old, maybe as old as her sire. Older than Carlie, for damn sure.

Sacha omitted that fucking bit.

“I need an invite to a party. A friend sent me,” she says, hitching the smile back on.

“I don’t know your friend. I don’t know you.” Coyote’s words are fuzzy, like he’s about to nod off. He’s high on something, certainly not the bourbon.

“Sacha sent me,” she forces the words out like the curse they are. Coyote frowns, lips parting. His pupils are pinpricks. His canines are unusually long. His nose wrinkles, like he’s smelling something bad. Carlie pegs him a Gangrel, a Kindred who usually prefers the wilderness to the concrete jungles of mortals

“Not my friend,” Coyote slurs.

Carlie reaches deep for some of her preternatural charm, knowing it might be lost on the high old bastard, but she’s not sure what else to try.

“Not mine, either,” she agrees pleasantly, “but I really want to go to this party and he said you could help.”

Coyote snorts, and this time takes a long pull from his bourbon. He flags the bartender for two more and sets one in front of Carlie. Her stomach cramps at the smell. Never much for whiskey in the first place, she’s only taught her undead body to tolerate wine and the occasional vodka.

“Have a drink, whelp, and then go the hell back to the Westside, or wherever you hide your skinny ass when the sun comes up.” The Gangrel stands and downs the second bourbon. With a lingering glare at Carlie he turns for the door.

Asshole. She’s older than she looks. Then she sees it — fixed to Coyote’s ostentatious belt buckle is a little silver skull the size of a silver dollar. Snakes wreath the head like Medusa’s crown. That has to be Sacha’s token.

“The Medusa skull,” she points.

“Fuck. You.” He’s slurring. He belches in her face. Bourbon and old vitae.

Carlie loses patience, grabs him by the arm, forgetting what Coyote is.

The Gangrel wheels on her, flinging her into the bar with a sweep of his hairy arm. Carlie hits the floor in a spray of broken glass. Despite a dozen little cuts, she’s more stunned than hurt. Coyote snarls, every tooth suddenly sharp, and his canines the sharpest. His whole face lengthens in a bestial snout.

“Touch me again, I’ll tear out your throat you miserable —”

Carlie doesn’t hear the rest. She summons up her blood, springing back on her feet. She’s hungry, this side of Frenzy and bloodlust and ready for a fight.

Coyote, maybe remembering in his haze that the Masquerade applies here, even loosely, relaxes. He waves Carlie off like she's an annoying housefly. That pisses her off, but calms her down, too. He lumbers towards the exit.

The bartender's vanished and Carlie slumps against the bar, slamming her bourbon. It burns all the way down. When she's done puking it back up, she follows Coyote out the door.

The gangbangers are still out there, but muchly subdued, favoring Carlie only with stoned smirks. Three-Tears is missing.

"Where," she asks one of them, bearing down on him with every ounce of her Toreador charm. Nervously, he inclines his head down the sidewalk.

She doesn't have to walk far to find Coyote's Harley parked on the curb in front of a boarded-up taqueria. The bike's low and fat-tired with ape-hanger bars and a ridiculous coyote airbrushed on the fuel tank. One of its leather panniers is open. Rubber tubing. Spoons. A scattering of needles glitter like falling stars, trailing behind the taqueria.

Ah, Heroin. Of course. Carlie's done it, hell, she's enjoyed a buzz for *every* season. First time she's ever heard of a Gangrel smackhead, though. The only things she thought they craved were the wild places and fresh warm *vitae*. Living forever fucks you up, though.

Soft moans drift from around back of the taqueria.

Carlie follows the sounds to the back of the taqueria. In the grimy shadows of a dumpster, Coyote cradles Three-Tears like a lover. That was fast. The prey's pants are down, his groin scarred with needle tracks and his eyes glazed and sightless. The Gangrel's face is buried in Three-tears' tattooed neck, feeding. The gangbanger, the source of the moans, trembles in Coyote's wiry arms.

This is a regular rendezvous. There are needles everywhere. Husks of plastic lighters. There's even a fresh syringe within reach. Medical-grade. The Gangrel's got connections.

Coyote's noisy slurping slows and Three-tears' moaning grows faint. Carlie doesn't have much time to make a decision. She's got to get that Medusa skull while the Gangrel's distracted. Becoming a vampire made her fast, but can she move fast enough?

Maybe she doesn't have to be.

Carlie reaches out and quickly plucks up the unused syringe, then darts forward and stabs the needle into Three-Tears' crotch, right into the fucking femoral artery. He thrashes weakly as the overdose takes hold, but Carlie

doesn't feel too sorry for the stupid kid. Coyote was going to drain him dry, anyway.

Carlie leaps back into the shadows. Coyote flops over, roaring. Glass bottles crunch beneath his weight. Coyote's beard is matted with bright, delicious blood. Carlie pushes her hunger away. Coyote struggles on his back, eyes red and vacant as he scans the shadows. Carlie slips up to Coyote and takes hold of his belt. With a crack, she separates the Medusa skull from his buckle while the euphoric Gangrel drools *vitae* on himself.

"Thanks, Coyote," she pats him on the belly. The talisman is heavier than she expects, and slightly warm to the touch.

Carlie's halfway down the block when the Gangrel comes crashing out of the alley. His hands are twisted into claws, his face is the leering snout of the Beast. He howls like a goddamn lupine, a real *coyote*.

A red scrim clouds her vision. She's burning too much of her own blood to stay ahead of the Gangrel for long. But then she's in her convertible and peeling out into the cool San Fernando night.

Coyote chases her for a few blocks but she finally leaves him howling in front of an all-night Thai joint.



Just before dawn breaks, safe in her bed, she finally feeds. One of her movie stars, then the other. Just enough to recover from her confrontation with Coyote. Maybe a little more. Who knows what she'll find at Octavius' party tomorrow night.

"Take more," the dark-eyed boy moans, untangling himself from her embrace and reaching for his pills. No, she needs her mind clear. She pets him absently, still mulling over what she'll wear to the party.

The silly boy starts to gasp. Another overdose. She winces, thinking of Three-tears dead behind the taqueria. Can't let that happen. With a rueful smile, she takes a sharp thumbnail to her wrist, then offers it to her ghoul. He drinks, and his drug's poison is diluted in her blood. Her blonde boy, strumming his acoustic in a chair by the bed, watches with wide, hungry eyes. Carlie beckons him to drink, too. Just to be fair — just a drop or two.

He leans close, stretching out his neck again, the wounds where she'd fed earlier barely healed. As her lips find the fluttering butterfly of his life's blood, Carlie's overcome by an urge to Embrace him now, goddamn the risks. It takes every bit of strength she has to pull back.

Pale, breathing shallow, her blonde boy moans. Her other boy cuddles close.

"Soon, soon," she assures both of them.

• • •

Octavius' compound is easy enough to find. It's practically the only house in the canyon, and its brutalist concrete walls and columns invoke a strong whiff of Imperial Rome. She flashes her invitation to the bouncer in the vaulted foyer, a hulking Nosferatu with a grotesque overbite. His bat-like ears are incongruously delicate, budding flowers from the dark boulder of his skull. Some of his monstrous clan manage to find a marginal acceptance in Kindred society with unwavering loyalty to powerful patrons like Octavius.

He appraises Carlie with rheumy eyes. She decided on a black homburg, peacock feather. Oxford button down, also black. Night watch skirt. Thigh-high boots. She taps the Medusa skull, affixed to her lapel as a brooch. Questionable but necessary fashion choice. His gaze lingers on the skull for a moment so Carlie stares back imperiously.

"Welcome to the villa," the Nosferatu finally grunts, waving her inside. Carlie hides her relief beneath an arched eyebrow, but she's all too aware that he watches her go.

The theme for the party is Roman Orgy. Some Kindred are even in togas, dappled in simulated torchlight (no open flames, of course) lounging on cushions in a low, fortress-like hall. Ghouls proffer wrists and necks and thighs for the sampling. Still other ghouls, stoned out of their minds, fuck like rabbits in squirming piles of flesh. A mash of dirgey guitars is piped in through hidden speakers — a vague Arabesque style that's dialed to 11, but Carlie can still hear the moaning. It's oh so fucking garish, more Hollywood vampire than anything, and not quite what she expects from a staid elder like Octavius.

A wrinkle creases her brow. Is this even real, Carlie wonders, a prickle of fear dancing up the back of her neck. Where has Sacha sent her? She passes a conversation pit where three dark-haired women and a man laugh deliciously over the fish belly corpse of a young woman they've been sharing. Carlie gulps down her hunger. Real fucking enough.

Kindred and ghoul alike regard Carlie as she passes, appraising the newcomer with varying levels of cautious indifference. She imagines their thoughts.

Who are you to be amongst us, child?

What service can you do us?

In whose service do you already belong?

Good question.

She fumes, plopping down on some empty cushions next to a three-some of bone-thin ghouls mewling in each other's embrace. One slithers up

to her, cooing pitifully. Carlie pushes it away with a hiss. She counts seventeen vampires in the main hall, not including the Nosferatu bouncer in the foyer. At least three times as many mortal guests. A scattering of servants darting in and out of velvet-curtained doorways. One of those doors might lead to Octavius, but which one?

There's an inside man she needs to find. Belasco. Sacha unfuckinghelpfully neglected to tell her what he looks like. Why is she doing this again?

She pours her gaze down on the ghoul she'd just rejected, filling — *him* — up with thoughts of how beautiful he is, how terribly, achingly beautiful. Ah yes. *Her* boys, she reminds herself. That's why she's here. The ghoul slithers close to her again.

"Do you know Belasco?" she asks him, nuzzling him under the ear. His blood smells sweet but she's stronger than her hunger.

"N-no, mistress," he breathes eagerly, "but I'll find him."

"Do it." She releases him.

He doesn't move, his liquid black eyes pleading.

"Fine," she says, irritated. A quick nip and suckle under his ear elicits deep moans from the ghoul, and if she's being honest, restores her mood a little bit, too. He's been drinking — absinthe, from the hint of licorice in his blood — but the buzz is a welcome distraction from her unease. She promises to nibble him again when he's found Belasco and the ghoul scurries off with a pathetic grin plastered on his face. She ignores the plaintive begging of his left-behind companions. One little drink won't hurt, right? But she needs to stay alert.

Ten minutes later, the ghoul still hasn't returned and his companions are annoying the shit out of her. Carlie moves on, making small talk with a pair of Ventrue brood-sisters while they wait for their ghouls to drink at the absinthe fountain. She's growing hungrier, but politely declines the invitation to join them.

Another twenty minutes pass and the ghoul-boy's still missing. Carlie's insides are already squirming when she catches sight of the Nosferatu bouncer again. He's left the foyer, and is cutting across the hall, fugly head on a swivel, angry eyes looking for someone. Looking for *her*, she suddenly realizes, limbs turning to ice. She slinks back into the shadows. Fortunately, he hasn't seen her yet.

A waiter carrying a silver tray, wearing a rustic metal collar and little else, disappears in a curtained archway. Carlie ducks after him. He startles as she rushes by, his tray clattering on the dark marble floor of the long, narrow hall. If questioned, he'll surely remember her, but she plans to be long gone by then.

She flies along the dark marble floor, past polished concrete walls and heavy wooden doors. A turn into another hall. Past the clangor of a kitchen, where food for the mortals is being prepared. She'd better find Octavius' chamber quickly. This sort of exertion's burning through her blood fast.

Where are the goddamn stairs?!

A right turn, then a left through a cloakroom, then an interior courtyard of colorful Moorish tile and a trickling fountain.

Off the courtyard, a short flight of stairs leads down. Thank fucking god. Carlie leaps down to the landing, then skids to an unsteady stop, the heels of her boots skreeling on the tile.

The Nosferatu waits for her on the landing, arms crossed, a wall of implacable undead muscle.

"Can I help you?" he says, his hideous face strangely placid.

She peers past him. The shadowed stairs continue into the depths of the compound. Another marbled hallway. More doors.

"Powder room?" she half-jokes. She juts her chin out in proudest Toreador style. Still gotta primp and preen, even if you don't need to piss anymore.

The Nosferatu blinks, unmoved by her feeble attempts at deception.

"I'm going to ask one more time." His deep, baritone voice is honey laced with scorpions.

"Belasco. I'm looking for someone called Belasco."

She tenses to speed back up the stairs.

The Nosferatu smiles, his mouth a tangle of razored ivory.

"Well, then. You're in luck," he says, jabbing a clawed thumb at his chest.

"I'm Belasco."

With shaking fingers she pries the skull from her chest and drops it into the Nosferatu's baseball glove hand.

The Medusa skull pleases Belasco, just as Sacha said. A child-like smile flutters his deformed lips and he lovingly tumbles it through his webbed fingers, lingering on the gemstones set in the eyes, touching each snake like a lover. It's a gorgeous bauble, sure, but this is too damn easy. It takes every ounce of control she's got left not to give into her fear and run.

"Calm yourself," the Nosferatu says, "I'll take you to see Grandfather."

Grandfather. How much does Belasco know about her?

"Octavius?" she asks, making sure they're talking about the same old bastard.

He nods. "This talisman is more special than you know, childe," he says, handing it back to her, "It will keep you from harm."

She bristles at his patronizing tone, but pins the skull back onto her lapel. Belasco turns and descends the stairs at a brisk pace, and Carlie guesses she's out of choices except to follow.



The Nosferatu leads her to a vault-like door on yet another level down, deep into the hillside. It's like a bunker, a crypt. Carlie shivers, and her head feels light from exhausting so much *vitae*. She should have drunk deeper from that ghoul. Belasco's leathery mitt moves with surprising delicacy over a digital keypad. There's a beep and the door opens. He ushers her inside.

Within is a large windowless room, spare as the rest of the house, paneled in beige marble and icy slate. Cool, fluorescent lights glow from recessed slots near the ceiling, lending the room a frozen demeanor. There's only the one door.

A slab of gray marble in the center dominates the room. Rectangular, three feet high. Carved panels along the side depict a mixture of bucolic and military scenes from ancient Rome. A figure lies atop it, shrouded in a cloth of black and red.

Not a shroud, Carlie corrects herself, a toga.

She turns to ask Belasco what she already knows to be true, but he's closed the door on her with a barely audible click. The handle's stiff as a mortal's cock. No way out, now. Carlie stands at the door for a moment, cursing Sacha for leading her into this trap, her skin crawling as she waits for Grandfather to rise off his sarcophagus.

Except he doesn't.

Has he already gone to Final Death, then? She approaches the slab.

It's Octavius, sure enough, laid out on the tomb, his arms crossed peacefully, the folds of his toga arranged carefully around him. His flesh is shriveled, almost black, and for a moment she thinks he's been burnt up by fire. But no, she can count the freckles on his desiccated arms, delineate the wisps of white hair tangled in the leaves of the silver laurel crowning his head. His eyes are closed, but caught in the fangs of his open mouth is an antique gold coin. Fare for the boatman.

A silvered spike juts from Grandfather's chest, right where his heart would be. The ornate stake is inscribed with a liquid writing alien to Carlie. It's almost, but not quite, Arabic.

Is the bastard truly dead, or is it just Torpor? Will Belasco fetch her when she finishes him off, or kill her? Too many damn questions. She can't

quite shake the feeling Octavius' sunken eyes'll flash open, *hah-hah*, all a big fucking joke played out on you, poor stupid Carlie, and her short unlife will be fucking over. She sniffs the air, and beneath an odor of dry, musty rot comes the cloying traces of ancient blood.

"Oh, he very much still lives," confirms a silky voice from close by, "but the thread of his unlife has grown very thin indeed."

Carlie starts, baring her fangs in reflex. A woman has appeared in the room, though she doesn't remember hearing the door open again.

The vampire, because she could be nothing else, is tall, with long black hair loosely collected in a plait that sways to her calves. She wears a shimmering white suit, the cut vaguely Chinese, but the elegant sweep of her brow and deep-set eyes lends her a Mediterranean air. Carlie founders in the pools of her violet eyes and the exact details of her appearance elude her.

"Welcome to my home, Carlie. I've been wanting to meet you." The woman speaks with a honeyed, cultured accent that Carlie can't quite place, and power rolls off her like a desert heat. Some deep voice is screaming in the void of her mind. *Run. Run, you idiot!* But where?

"I'm—" Carlie stammers.

"At a loss. My name is Tanit. Octavius was, for a thousand years, my bitterest enemy." Despite her apparent triumph, Tanit's smile contains no warmth.

"Was?"

Her smile widens, and her fangs glint like chips of ice.

"Oh, I have won our long game at last. He's utterly at my mercy." Tanit is at Carlie's side, one lithe arm draped around her shoulders, but she's careful to avoid touching the skull pinned to Carlie's chest. She catches the scent of sun-baked wood, the mineral tang of old rock. The dry, oven-hot fragrance of desert flowers. Carlie turns her head to look at where Tanit's wrist rests lightly on her shoulder. A small charm in the shape of an asp descends from a delicate silver bracelet.

Carlie hungers to take the wrist in her mouth, pierce the alabaster flesh and —

"All in good time, childe," Tanit replies, slipping around the sarcophagus opposite from her. She's not a goddamn *childe*. Carlie shakes her head, summons up a little Blood. She thinks of Sacha and then her boys and the yin-yang of hate and love makes her feel a little more like herself again.

"Why am I here?"

Tanit's laugh is like the buzz of delicate insect wings.

“Did your brother not explain? You are here to kill Octavius.”

Carlie tears her gaze from Tanit, blinks down at withered Grandfather. So small. Helpless. Like Lisette.

“Sacha has tasted already, but there’s a drop or two of blood left in him yet, childe. You’re *owed* it.”

Carlie licks her lips, her own words to Sacha coming back to her. The hunger swells inside her and her fangs lengthen for the feast. Only a drop left. To diablerize Octavius is sweet revenge and maybe more; for a neonate like her to drink the blood of an ancient is a violation of every law that she knew back in the east. What potency remains in his black, ancient *vitae*, she wonders?

The last of Lisette, for certain.

Tanit’s smile is too eager, though. Carlie retracts her fangs with no small effort.

“There’s a price,” she says, unwilling to meet Tanit’s gaze lest she be caught again in those eyes.

“Yes,” Tanit says with a trace of impatience. “You may drink, and we both see our ancient enemy earn his just rewards. You may have your club and your precious movie stars.”

The air crackles as Tanit pauses to let her offer sink in. Carlie looks back up into the treacherous shoals of her beautiful face.

“And what do you get, mistress?”

“Everything Octavius took from me. Including you, of course.”

Me? Bound, again, to a powerful, probably ancient vampire she doesn’t know and hardly trusts. Whose ultimate motive toward Carlie and her boys is a house of fucking mysteries. It’s a terrible deal. Los Angeles is freedom, not more blood bonds. Isn’t it?

But Octavius *would* be dead. So goddamn dead.

Carlie snarls, the Beast inside her howling in agreement. Her resistance against the hunger finally shatters and she falls on Grandfather’s corpse, tearing out the rotten tissues of his throat. She sucks, she laps at the tarry *vitae* pooled in his shredded carotid artery. So very little to drink, but his blood nourishes her completely, a finer vintage than even Lisette’s *vitae* that welcomed her to unlife.

Red flowers like fireworks burst upon her vision as she tears deeper into Octavius’ corpse. *Must. Drink. It. All.*

“Enough, childe.”

The icy pressure of Tanit’s hand frosts her shoulder. Carlie looks up from the remains of Grandfather. She thinks of Coyote in the alley, crazed

with blood and heroin. Tanit seems to float in a reddish haze. Carlie's mind is remarkably calm. Clear. The ancient *glows* with power and malicious intent. In the piercing gaze of the woman's eyes, Carlie sees her own eventual, but no less certain, dissolution.

With her chin still in gore, her left hand closes around the silver filigree of the stake in Octavius' ruined chest. It's warm as blood to the touch. *Like the Medusa skull*. Belasco said it would keep her from harm. She meets Tanit's ancient gaze, unafraid. Snakes and insects squirm in vampire's eyes. The snake charm dangles from her offered wrist. Carlie feels the compulsion but is unmoved by it.

She thinks she's won.

She'll bind her, Carlie realizes, and use her to her own ends. As she had no doubt already bound Sacha. Sweet revenge for Tanit against her ancient enemy, to own everything that he'd once possessed All of Octavius' bloodline pulsing in Tanit's own black *vitae*. And when Carlie's usefulness ends, Sacha's, too, they'll be drained as dry as her sire, as dry as Octavius.

And so will her boys.

She hurls herself at Tanit's wrist, teeth bared in hunger, in Frenzy. She takes the ancient's wrist in her mouth.

"Yes, and now things are finally as they should be," Tanit purrs, the fragrance of her potent blood as overpowering as the desert winds. But in her arrogance, she is undone.

The enchanted stake slides in so easily, puncturing her ivory jacket and alabaster flesh and finally, the *vitae*-rich vessel of Tanit's ancient, withered heart. She collapses at once to her knees, dark blood pattering the marble floor.

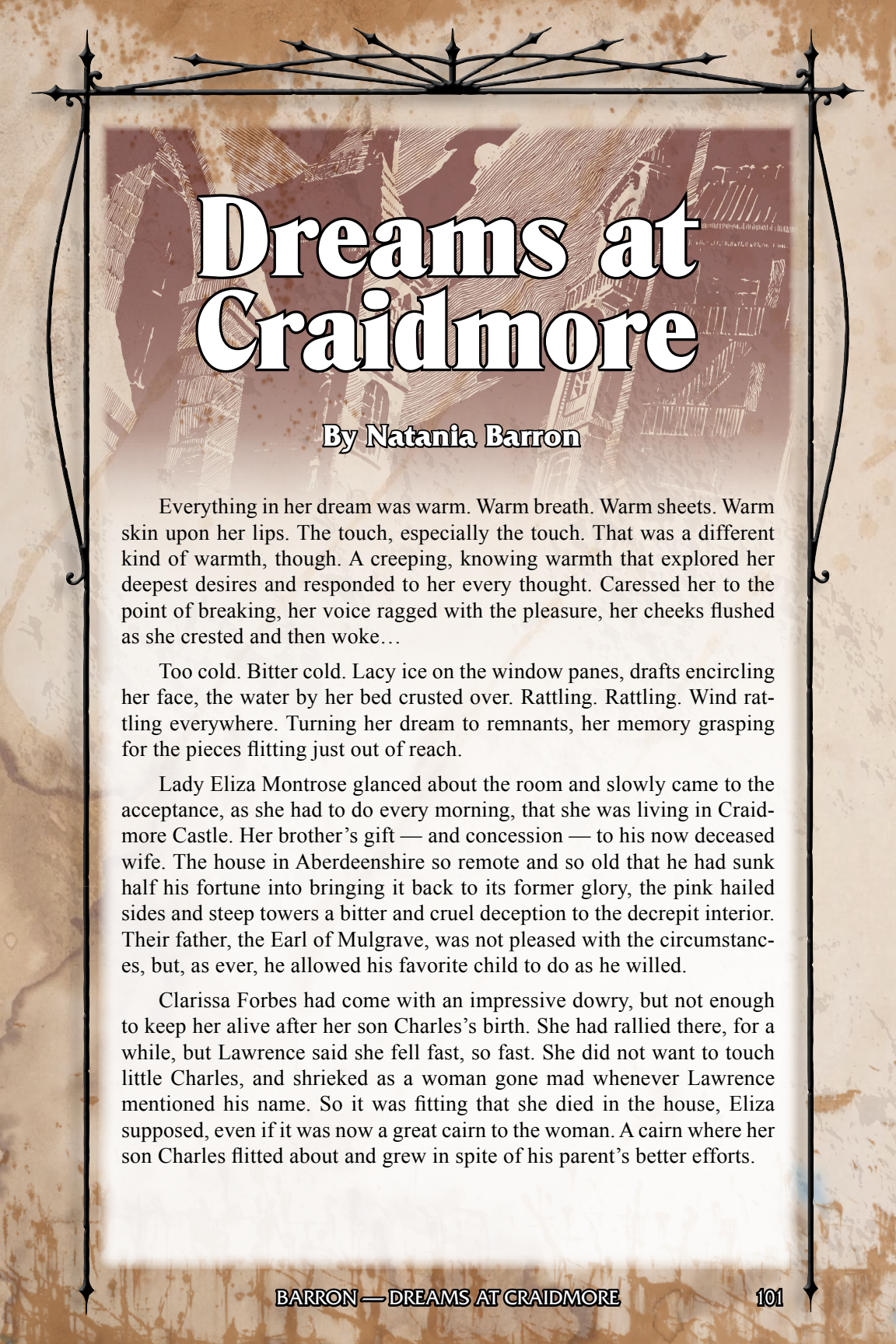
"Ahh —" Tanit gasps, the light of her consciousness fading quickly.

"Like Sacha said," Carlie gasps with effort, "I'm owed this."

"N-no, t-this was *my* triumph, my right," Tanit breathes faintly, "I would have g-given you everything, childe."

"You already have," Carlie replies, thinking of her boys, blonde and dark.

Carlie bears down on Tanit's wrist and drinks deep until at long last her hunger is finally satisfied.

The page is framed by a decorative black border with a central crest at the top. The background features a sepia-toned illustration of a castle interior, showing a large hall with a high ceiling and a figure in the distance. The title "Dreams at Craidmore" is written in a large, white, serif font with a black outline, centered over the illustration. Below the title, the author's name "By Natania Barron" is written in a smaller, white, serif font with a black outline.

Dreams at Craidmore

By Natania Barron

Everything in her dream was warm. Warm breath. Warm sheets. Warm skin upon her lips. The touch, especially the touch. That was a different kind of warmth, though. A creeping, knowing warmth that explored her deepest desires and responded to her every thought. Caressed her to the point of breaking, her voice ragged with the pleasure, her cheeks flushed as she crested and then woke...

Too cold. Bitter cold. Lacy ice on the window panes, drafts encircling her face, the water by her bed crusted over. Rattling. Rattling. Wind rattling everywhere. Turning her dream to remnants, her memory grasping for the pieces flitting just out of reach.

Lady Eliza Montrose glanced about the room and slowly came to the acceptance, as she had to do every morning, that she was living in Craidmore Castle. Her brother's gift — and concession — to his now deceased wife. The house in Aberdeenshire so remote and so old that he had sunk half his fortune into bringing it back to its former glory, the pink haled sides and steep towers a bitter and cruel deception to the decrepit interior. Their father, the Earl of Mulgrave, was not pleased with the circumstances, but, as ever, he allowed his favorite child to do as he willed.

Clarissa Forbes had come with an impressive dowry, but not enough to keep her alive after her son Charles's birth. She had rallied there, for a while, but Lawrence said she fell fast, so fast. She did not want to touch little Charles, and shrieked as a woman gone mad whenever Lawrence mentioned his name. So it was fitting that she died in the house, Eliza supposed, even if it was now a great cairn to the woman. A cairn where her son Charles flitted about and grew in spite of his parent's better efforts.

That was why Eliza had come. At Lawrence's bidding, and in spite of her better judgement, she'd left London in October and found herself as a kind of middling — and she felt, meddling — female substitute for Clarissa. Eliza was a spinster, so their father, Lord Montrose, had no better use for her. And their mother was long dead. There were no other children, and considering that Charles was the singular heir — not just to Craidmore castle, but to their greater properties, too — even Eliza couldn't argue with the reasoning.

Shivering, Eliza rang for Mary, the lady's maid. That woman was never in a rush, and so she decided to at least get some of her journaling in before the day began. It would not do to fall behind on the very few things that she could still do now that she was away from London and her small but important group of friends. Approaching thirty meant that she had to endure the marriages of most of her classmates to more and more loathsome men and smile about it. At very least there was a significant lack of dinner parties and engagement parties to worry about.

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December 14, 1910. Craidmore castle, Flyth, Scotland; Aberdeenshire.

I woke to strange dreams, but nothing of true note. Yesterday afternoon I had a letter from Augusta to tell me that she was planning her wedding in June and would very much like me to attend. I have composed a letter in reply a thousand times, for I do not want to make the trip but find it difficult to put that into words of kindness. In all truth I do not wish to see her again, not if I have to endure her fawning over Mr. Clarkson one more time. In fact, her letter was full of such compliments to the man, wrapped around a vague hope that I would join them in Bath for the celebrations. The mere thought makes me ill at ease.

The weather is, again, abhorrent. The castle is wreathed in fog, which they call haar, near every morning. And the sun only ventures out for mere fragments of an hour a day. If that at all. It is damp and cold and there is little I can do to keep out the chill even with all the servants about the house.

Lawrence has been despondent and does not respond to my cries for him to seek companionship again. It has been nearly a year since Clarissa's death and I do not think it does him well to stay here. In fact, I do not believe it well for any of us to stay here. Charles is English as much as he is his mother's son, and I am surprised Papa has not insisted on our return. He says, when he writes — which is rare! — that it is about keeping appearances, and we should not so easily shun Clarissa's people and their ways while Charles is yet young.

• • •

Eliza sighed, returning her pen to the inkwell. Her fingers quaked with the cold, even though someone had been in earlier to stoke the fire. It never seemed to matter, did it? The perpetual chill was all around.

Once she was dressed and ready, Eliza went downstairs to the breakfast room to eat with Lawrence and Charles, as she had done every morning since her arrival. As per usual, Mr. Smith the butler was present, going over the day's duties. Smith was a proper butler from London and while he did not get on well with some of the other staff, he at least knew how to run a house in a more civilized manner.

While their days were a monotony, it was a welcome monotony for Eliza, so when Lawrence stood and announced that he was going to France, even Smith looked taken aback.

"I am tired of languishing in my own despair," he said, pressing his hand to his chest as if it pained him to admit to such emotion. His pudding-pale face was still bereft of passion.

"That's no reason to go to *France*," Eliza said. "What on earth would you do there, anyway? Your French is barely passible."

"I have friends there, from Oxford. And they wish to show me a proper spring," Lawrence said, sitting down again and looking around uncomfortably. He added with a shrug, "Of course, I'll take Smith with me."

Eliza knew well enough her place, knew well enough that arguing with her brother — even when he was not overcome with grief — would never end well. He had taken the mantle of their father and tempered it with the iron resolve of their mother, and the combination ever left Eliza in the wake.

"What about Charles?" she asked at last.

"Well, didn't you come here to look after him? It isn't as if our lives are terribly intertwined these days, and I doubt you will miss me much," said Lawrence, avoiding looking directly at his sister, a habit he'd had since childhood and one that ever annoyed her.

"Very well, Lawrence. But I do hope you do not tarry long. It's a difficult time of year to travel, and your son needs you," said Eliza.

Lawrence stared down into his cup. "He has already lost his mother, the truly important figure in his life. Why would *I* matter?"

There was nothing to be said about the matter, really. Eliza had no sway over her brother's decisions and whims; she had no money to her name, no real inheritance. No husband. No beauty and charm. She had

her name, her breeding, and that was all. As she watched Lawrence's brougham vanish into the haar the next morning, she thought on their departed mother, Mary. For Eliza, her mother was but a memory in her mind, grown more vague with each passing year. She had dark hair and dark eyes, and if she closed her eyes she could remember the hairline. Smooth and rounded, her brow pale and unlined most of the time. Except when she was dying. Then it was pinched and lined, pained.

Family was such a foreign concept to Eliza. Her mother's people were from Continental money, and she a single heiress with no siblings. Father was the eldest of three brothers, but they had both died young and while they were related to a great many of the gentry in Britain, they had never been tremendously social people. Lawrence's good marriage was the focus of their entire lives, especially when near everyone agreed that Eliza was simply not the kind to settle down and marry.

Eliza shivered into her stole while she shook off thoughts of her mother's face. Her mother's eyes. Her mother's ghost.

When Lawrence left it was less about having Eliza stay on for Charles and more for having someone to keep house. Charles had a nanny — two of them — and he was too young to need any other interaction. In the afternoon, Eliza scheduled an hour to spend time with him, but he was often too tired or too fussy to be of any particular interest. After three weeks of unsuccessfully scheduling these little meetings, she let Rose the nanny know that she would spend some time during weekends with Charles, as time would allow, and she would expect weekly updates as to his status.

She had never thought much about having children, really. And they rarely were of an interest to her, especially so young. Still, Eliza knew that keeping the home in good order, the home that one day would be Charles's, was the best kind of love she could offer. It took a few weeks to get a decent enough English butler, and a Mr. Busk was put straight off to work. As there would be less need for others, she saw to it that the staff was reduced to the bare bones.

Eliza saw that extra rooms were closed off, as well. Craidmore had been ostentatious for a while, filled with hope for the future. But Eliza knew well that Lawrence's fortunes were not bottomless, and if he was going to be spending money without much regard in France, then she needed to manage the house right.

• • •

January 5, 1911

I do believe that the business of managing the house suits me. Judging by the reaction of some of the staff they were unused to women speaking to them in such matters, or else at least English women of good breeding. The cook, in particular, glowers at me with scorn. Mrs. Fitch, I think her name is. It's hard to remember all these Northern names, and I leave it to Mr. Busk to keep the rest of them in order. I don't think they much fancy my English butler, nor my decision to close some of the rooms and dismiss them as well — but this is not the time.

The haar has been rather dense these last few days, so much so that sometimes I awake with the strangest idea that we are entirely engulfed in clouds. That perhaps the world has gone on around us and we are separate from all, limited to the fringes of some faerie world. It's easy to believe that London is but a figment, that my time and life there were but a window into a diminishing world. And all there is is Craidmore, and all there will ever be is Craidmore.



“Someone to see you, Lady Montrose,” Mr. Busk said.

Eliza had been worrying over more sums of the estate, and the candle had burned down so low that she'd had to draw the ledger close to her face and squint just to make out the details.

Blinking up at Mr. Busk, she asked him to repeat himself.

He did and Eliza stood and went to tidy her hair. She squinted outside. It was indeed dark. And so strange that anyone would be visiting at this time of night. The nearest neighbors were miles from here.

“Who is it, then?” asked Eliza, when the butler failed to elucidate.

“A Mrs. McEwan,” he said, then cleared his throat. “I am told by the staff that she is an old family friend of the Forbes. She knew Clarissa when she was a girl, and was held in high regard by the locals.”

“This isn't a way-station,” Eliza said, “but I suppose I shall present myself to the best of my ability. Do show her in.”

Eliza sat a little straighter and wished she had worn more than a day dress. But she hadn't anticipated on seeing anyone of note that day, nor any day at Craidmore, as the weather was beyond deplorable. She needed more fabric between herself and her stoles if she was going to manage avoiding freezing to death.

It took longer than she might have expected for Mrs. McEwan to present herself, and Eliza nearly gave up and rang the bell for Mr. Busk in

annoyance. But just as she was about to give up altogether, a tall woman appeared in the doorway, Mr. Busk right behind her.

The woman was draped in head to toe in ermine. Quite the statement for a person without a title. She wore heavy boots, but they were of good make. Her face was strongly cut if not a little pale, and she wore her hair braided and down one shoulder, it being the color of fallow wheat. Her features were both strong and fine but reminded Eliza not of the people of the North of England, but those even farther up and away. Were it not for her strangely dark eyes, the woman was the picture of a Norse Valkyrie.

“I present the Lady Eliza Montrose,” said the butler as Eliza stood.

“Most pleased to make your acquaintance, milady,” said the woman, though her voice was tinged with the vowels of Aberdeenshire.

“And this is, as I mentioned, Mrs. McEwan, milady,” said Mr. Busk, not budging from the doorway. He did not need to explain his distaste for the woman, nor of her above her stature introduction. Eliza was glad of his presence.

Eliza felt warm. Confused. There were lines in Mrs. McEwan’s face she swore reminded her of something. But not of people, of places. Mountainsides. Valleys. Rivers. Just looking upon her face gave her a full dizzying sense of wanderlust for a world she had never seen with her eyes, but had dreamed of all her life. Rounded hills, sweeping greens, marvelous waterfalls. A land of sunshine and brightness, of sultry warmth and delight. A world she had dreamed of almost every night she’d been at Craidmore.

Mrs. McEwan calmly removed her hood and smoothed her hair, much of which had caught to the thick velvet. It gave her lovely, sharp face a momentary childish look.

She must have been a striking child.

“I’ve not been to Craidmore since little Charles was born,” said Mrs. McEwan, not moving from where she had committed her feet. Her smile was slow but genuine. “I knew Lady Clarissa, you see. I came to pay my respects.”

“That’s quite kind of you,” said Eliza, not daring to walk any closer. “But it is an odd hour, and a few months too late. You know, she’s been gone now since June.”

Mrs. McEwan nodded. “And I’ve been away, you see, for the better part of the time since then. My house is not far from here, just to the east. Och, it’s not much, not like Craidmore. And yet, I’ve always felt the houses were connected. Built from the same stone, I’m told.”

“Fascinating,” Eliza said. Her words were cold, but in her heart she believed it to be remarkable. She had never thought much about the surrounding buildings, nor the village. And not just because she could scarcely see them through all the fog. She had been trained since a very young age to perceive her lesser man as ghosts, wandering through the world but scarcely spoken to or acknowledged.

In many of her lessers, Eliza’s tone would have curdled their spirits in just a single word. But Mrs. McEwan did not seem so bothered by her bearing at all. She smiled, almost, but then brushed back some of that flaxen hair and raised her brows.

“I apologize for having interrupted you, Lady Montrose,” she said. “I do know the way out.”

“Far be it from me to turn away a friend of Clarissa’s, but I was not aware she was so friendly with the locals,” Eliza said. “She did not write to me of you.”

Eliza watched Mrs. McEwan’s face for any detection of the insult, any response to her words. But she said nothing, nor did her face give away her insult, if any had been given.

“I don’t doubt it,” Mrs. McEwan replied. She shrugged, an elegant gesture, the collar of her dress moving subtly against her pale skin. It made Eliza think of a cold running brook and worn stones made smooth by ancient waters. “Lady Clarissa was ever of a mind for bigger and brighter things. I’m afraid I was what reminded her of home. I’m a simple woman, with simple needs. I only wanted to return a gift she’d given me a long time ago.”

“A simple woman? What of Mr. McEwan?” asked Eliza, watching as her guest reached into a small satchel at her hip and produced a small, silk bag.

She did not look up from it when she said, “Oh, I’m long ago widowed, Lady Montrose. I half forget that he was here. My friends call me Rana, though. And you may if you like.”

Eliza cleared her throat as Mrs. McEwan came closer. She pulled a long golden chain from the pouch she’d produced, and from it fell a single green stone set in a delicate cage setting. It was a lovely piece of jewelry, and did indeed look as if it was something Clarissa, who was ever on about baubles and jewels, might have worn.

As Mrs. McEwan dropped it into Eliza’s open hand, she found it was quite cold. They were not close enough to touch easily, and yet Eliza found herself thinking a great deal about doing just that. Touching Mrs. McEwan’s skin. It was not the first time she had seen a woman and had

such confusing thoughts, but she had been able to keep such distractions at bay, especially now that she lived so far from Augusta. What they had shared together had been a common bond of this persuasion, though neither had spoken it. Until Augusta had found that horrible man and decided to get married. Hadn't they promised to be spinsters for the rest of their lives?

It had been so long since Eliza had a friend. So long since she had known the touch of another.

But not this woman. This woman was wrong in a thousand ways, and Eliza knew it. Her level of familiarity was beyond reproof, and her immovable face besides.

"Very well," said Eliza, clutching the jewel in her hand and giving Mrs. McEwan as cold a smile as she could manage. "I will be sure that this is taken care of. Perhaps Charles should have it as part of his inheritance."

"Oh, it's hardly worth much," Mrs. McEwan said. "But it does belong here."

Once Mrs. McEwan was shown out of the house, Eliza made it very clear that Mr. Busk was not to allow her back in again.



January 15, 1911.

I am unwell. I cannot express to which point it is, exactly, though my whole body feels sore with melancholy. I have barely managed to sleep these last few nights, and Charles has been ill with a cold, as well. I can hear him coughing down the hall. While I have changed rooms, I now feel as if the edges of everything are just too sharp for me.

Worse even, I have been getting the habit of sleeping in the daytime, simply because the light gives me headaches. Sleeping at night seems impossible.

Augusta has written, but I have not read it. The letter is heavy for its size and I know it must be riddled with more praise for Mr. Clarkson. Just writing down his name makes my gorge rise. Of all the men we ever came across — Mr. Clarkson! Augusta was clearly swindled by his new money and all of his promises of maritime adventures. I will not write to her for a while again.

Lawrence has also written to let me know he's arrived safely. He is bored with Paris and is considering going further south into wine country. He has not asked after Charles or after me, but he has thanked me for my work here. He is impressed with my abilities to run the house, and remarked that it was a shame no man has found me capable of doing so. But

he is lucky to have me, that I realize. I don't much like my own brother, but he is my blood. And what else is an aging woman like myself to do? I must be indispensable, else I shall be relegated to the poor house.

We had a queer neighbor visit the other night, and I did not much like her. For one, she dressed far beyond her stature. I'm not certain how a woman of such meagre means — she lives in the adjacent farm house — supports herself in such a fashion. She returned an item that was once Clarissa's. I have every suspicion that she stole the necklace and, after months of guilt eating at her like maggots at a corpse, she came to return it. And in the middle of the night! She cannot be a native to these parts, though her accent is true enough. I do not like her and have instructed Mr. Busk to disallow her from the property at all costs. There is a danger in becoming too comfortable with the people of this place. It may be that I remain here until the end of my days, but so be it. I will not debase myself to their level.

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Eliza Montrose dreamed of Rana McEwan in vivid color and sound. The panting and the pawing, the grand rising of their bodies together, the smell of sex twining with the smell of the green grass around them. Waters rose and fell as the brook about them swelled like a lake, and drowned them both. But the touch and their breath mattered not. Forests rose around them, animals were born and died and returned again to the earth, and still her pleasure mounted as if time was inconsequential and impossible. Eliza ran her fingers through Rana's long pale hair, each section spilling down her arm like golden waterfalls. Their tongues sought one another, their hands and mouths never full enough of flesh. Their springs ran deep, and they were together like earth and sky, like river and rock.

When she opened her eyes, covered in sweat and her hands reaching at the air, there was someone knocking furiously on her door. It was dark outside, so once again she had fallen asleep after dinner and slept well into the night. She squinted around the room, her new room, and felt her bearings slip. For a moment the stone walls were not the walls of Craidmore, but of a smaller house on the same property. The farm house. Rana's home.

"Lady Montrose!"

It was Mr. Busk. He was pale as a sheet of paper.

"I'm so sorry to be waking you at such an hour," he said, breathless. "But the worst has happened."

Eliza shook her head, trying to dispel the dream, hoping that the butler would have no idea what her flushed cheeks indicated. "Continue," she said.

“The nanny — she’s gone off the premises with little Charlie,” Mr. Busk said. “Out into the dark. She told Mrs. Fitch... begging your pardon, milady, but some unkind words about you and your family.”

“Where is Charles?” she asked.

“Well, we found... we think we’ve found him. At least, Mrs. McEwan said...”

“Mrs. McEwan?” Eliza almost spat her name.

“The child caught a mighty chill, and she’s taking care of him while the driver, Mr. Mackenzie, is taking the nanny into custody down in the village,” Mr. Busk explained.

“And what am I supposed to do? Is Mrs. McEwan holding the poor thing ransom?”

“I don’t believe so, Lady Montrose. At least, the message didn’t seem—”

Eliza brushed by Mr. Busk, and the rapidity of her movements made her feel powerful. She was being brash and rude, she was showing her status. And her displeasure at the situation.

It had been a long time since Eliza had ridden a horse, but in her younger days when she had courted the idea of marrying, she had been well known for her skill. While she hadn’t considered riding for one moment since arriving at Craidmore, the idea suddenly sent a flush of blood to her face. Yes. She would be a romantic hero for once. She would take matters into her own hands, small though they were. If Lawrence could run away, well then, it left her to do what needed to be done. Charles was her only connection to the bloodline, the last in the earldom.

Angus, the groom, looked shocked when she entered the stables, her hair a wild mess about her head and her eyes wide.

“I want the best riding horse you’ve got,” she demanded.

Angus looked behind her, as if expecting a more suitable rider to appear. When none did he said, “yes, milady,” and gestured for her to follow him down the long row of stalls. It smelled of sawdust and horse dung, a familiar scent of childhood that Eliza had longed for time out of mind. She recalled the sweeping fields of Tunbridge Wells, the home of her youth, great Lockney Castle their home, complete with its turrets and 14th century moat. That was a happy life, before she learned how wrong she had been made, before she had been sidled with so much responsibility.

The horse Angus produced was indeed fine. An Andalusian by the looks of her, she was the color of rain-washed oak bark, with eyes set like coals.

“Her name is Patience. Will she do, Lady Eliza?” asked Angus.

“She suits well,” she replied.



As Eliza flew across the field toward the farm house, mist swirling underneath her steed’s hooves, she found the cold did not bother her so much, out in the open. The haar had settled, filling up the deepest places between the trees and the fields, and it did not scare her as it had once. She reflected on the strangeness of the day’s events, and how she had been so wrapped up in the duties of the manor that she had neglected the out of doors. And why? Because the mist frightened her. Because the landscape was foreign. Yet even in the dark, it did not feel foreign. It felt bright and welcoming; it felt like home.

The farmhouse loomed out of the fog, square and wide with lit windows emerging from the rolling field. The lamplights cast wide auras of gold, their gas flames flickering eerily.

But the home did not look frightening. It had the bearing of many farm homes in the community, surrounded by hedges and a proud little yard. But within there were hints of something else. Eliza slowed her steed and drew closer, noting the colorful drapes inside the house, the drawn curtains of goodly fabric and make. Mrs. McEwan was no farmer’s wife, to be sure.

There was no one to greet her, so Eliza made quick work to tie up Patience and took a moment to smooth her hair, remove a bit of chaff from her riding dress, and take a deep breath. This McEwan woman was going to have to learn to know her boundaries if she wished to stay on. The little farm was profitable, and a benefit to the village, but sheep could graze on any green hill. Mrs. McEwan was not a fixture, and whatever sway she had been given by the previous owners no longer had power here.

The front door opened before Eliza reached it, and Mrs. McEwan stood in the threshold. The light from behind her illuminated her pale hair but did not warm her skin. She was still so pale.

All the words Eliza had prepared abruptly vanished. To see Mrs. McEwan in her element — for surely the brightly adorned rooms behind her were — was arresting, to say the least. She was wearing a robe and little else, reminding Eliza of the strange hour. And yet why did it feel so bright? It was past midnight, and still Eliza had this giddy sensation that she was again in green fields and pastures in broad daylight. Just looking at Mrs. McEwan gave her the strangest sense of disconnection, of detachment, from the time of day and the place.

“I’m here for Charles,” Eliza said at last.

Mrs. McEwan nodded, "Of course."

She did not add any proper address.

"I could have the constable after you, as well," Eliza said, pushing past Mrs. McEwan into the room beyond.

"That would be most vexing, considering he's just been here," Mrs. McEwan said, closing the door behind them.

Eliza tried to comprehend the rooms about her, but came up short. Every detail was seen to, a vast color palette of texture and pattern. Mrs. McEwan kept the house in a French style, yet vivid enough that it almost recalled the onion domes of Russia. Paintings of no minor provenance festooned the walls in a dizzying assortment. At a quick glance around the small parlor, Eliza noted two Goyas, two Constables, and an unmistakable winter landscape by Gude.

If she was in a brighter mood, Eliza would have rushed to view the paintings, but the impropriety of it all left her seething and rather unable to do much of anything.

"I'm something of a collector, you see," said Mrs. McEwan said, passing in front of the Gude and for a moment looking as if she could have vanished seamlessly into it. "But not of children. Charles is sleeping over here."

She knelt by one of the sofas to reveal a wicker basket, in which slept the little boy, curled up. While his cheeks were scarlet, his skin was pale. More pale than was good for his constitution, something that Eliza knew well enough. Seeing her mother wither and die she remembered how important the coloring of one's skin was to their health. In the end, her mother had jaundiced entirely.

Eliza knelt across from Mrs. McEwan, using all her strength to keep her eye contact limited. There was danger in staring too long. Not because she believed Mrs. McEwan had any power over her, only that she had a way of seeing through all the walls Eliza had so painstakingly built around her.

"He's got a fever," Eliza said, brushing the soft curls from Charlie's face. His little cherubic visage tightened for a moment and then relaxed again as he fell back to sleep.

"Precisely why I didn't want to run him across the field in this weather."

"Why did the nanny come to you?" Eliza asked.

Mrs. McEwan raised her brow, the first indication that she was surprised or impacted at all by Eliza's presence. "I intercepted her."

“In the middle of the night,” said Eliza, standing. She folded her arms across her chest as if it would help her ward off the woman’s charms.

The pale woman pursed her lips and then said measuredly: “I know you’re accustomed to a certain level of authority, Lady Eliza, but I assure you that you are out of your depth with me. I find your airs insufferable, and while I’m certain you are well-bred in every manner, you are a rather miserable person to deal with. I was hoping you were not like your brother, but I’m sad to say I’m mistaken.”

Eliza’s face grew hot, searing down her cheeks and chest. She had the sudden desire to strike the woman, this Mrs. McEwan, for speaking to her in such a disrespectful manner. But while she wanted to be angry about everything she’d said, it was the last bit that stung the most. She was nothing like Lawrence.

“I will be taking Charles home, and if you have until tomorrow to leave the premises,” Eliza said at last, steeling her voice. She made a good show, so she felt.

Mrs. McEwan sat down on her sofa, the silken robe sliding down her shoulder and leaving it bare for all the world to see. “Very well. But he is ill, very ill. And I know how to fix him. And you will find, as much as you would like to evict me from this property, the deeds are rather final about the matter.”

That proved to be true. And while Eliza wanted to pour all her time and energy into the eviction of Mrs. McEwan, the deeds were in such a disarray and Charles so sick that she found herself unable to focus. The new nanny came from Aberdeen, a meek little woman named Tulley. She was good enough with her job, but pressed that Charles showed some disturbing symptoms.

The fever came and went. Sometimes his feet would swell; other times his hands. Eventually they would go bright red, then turn white, then he would scream. Cool towels helped to some measure but never enough. The doctor had never seen such an illness before, and Eliza began to think, in her madness, that it was something brought on by Mrs. McEwan. To her knowledge, and before the nanny’s suspicious abduction, little Charles had been the peak of health. It was true that Eliza had a difficult time being around him, and avoided truly motherly duties when possible. But there was a certain detachment she always had, and continued to have.

She stood often above Charles’s crib, looking down at the child, and wondering why she felt nothing looking at him. While she had always struggled with the trappings of the feminine, and wished a thousand times over that she had been born a man, it was as if Charles were a void when

she looked upon him. She did not hate him — in a way hating would be easier. It would be an emotion. But she felt absolutely nothing. Neither hate nor love. Just an engulfing nothingness.

No, that was not true. Something else lingered. Duty.



February 1, 1911

I find myself at a crossroads of difficulty. I have written to Lawrence about Charles's state, but I doubt it is enough to send him back to Scotland. His sparse correspondence has been littered with all the trappings of a distracted man writing letters en masse and ignoring the piles of mail gathering around him. He describes the city and the lights, tells me of the painters and the fashion, and then asks me how I'm faring. I wonder if he ever knows who he's writing to. Then, we have never been close.

The doctor has come and gone, and I have insisted that we attempt the trip to London, but he finds that madness. The child will not survive, he tells me. It is as if his blood boils in his body. The words of Mrs. McEwan ring in my ears daily, but I am unable to bring myself to admit defeat. I do not want to see that impertinent woman again, not if she is to insult me and disrespect my title. I have no mind as to what kind of creature she may be, but it is beyond my knowledge. That she could know what Charles is afflicted with! La, but what a woman.

If there is no improvement in a week, I will at least make the trip to Edinburgh with Charles. There seems to be no other way, and the local doctor here is a scarcely more than a cottage druid.



“Get Mrs. McEwan.”

The words came out of Eliza's mouth so fast, she had to cover her lips. Outside, the window panes were streaked with ice. The windows rattled.

Charles was convulsing now, more every hour. His little body twisted and shook, his face contorted in pain. Then still, so still. Every time he went still, Eliza was certain it would be for the last time.

The doctor, Huse, did not question her. In fact, he looked altogether relieved at her mention.

“Yes, milady,” he said.

Eliza used the time to dismiss herself and gather her wits. Even just a little. She had to remind herself to breathe, as just watching the dying child was enough to frighten her out of even the most basic functions.

It would be important to meet Mrs. McEwan again, on better terms, if she was going to ask her of a favor. She realized that, now. She would have to start over again.

Mr. Busk informed her, as she reached the landing, that Mrs. McEwan was already arrived. She hadn't needed to be fetched — she was coming to the house to inquire after the eviction, since she had received a notice.

Staring at her across the way, Eliza recognized that the strange woman was far more suited for Craidmore than anyone else had ever been. Not Lawrence or Clarissa, and certainly not herself. Like the Gude painting, there was a stillness about Mrs. McEwan as she stood there, her long white fur sweeping the floor, and it somehow made sense. More sense than anything. As if she had been rooted to the walls and the stones themselves.

“Leave us, Mr. Busk,” Eliza said.

From elsewhere in the house, she could hear the sounds of the doctor fretting, the child gagging.

Mrs. McEwan said nothing.

“I need your help, Mrs. McEwan,” said Eliza.

“Call me Rana,” she said.

Eliza swallowed.

“Do you want my help, Eliza?” asked the woman.

Eliza nodded, taking a step back. Mrs. McEwan had not moved forward, yet there was no denying the pressure in the room had changed.

“Then begin by calling me Rana. Later I may ask you to call me something else — but for now, Rana will do. It is a better name than that of Mr. McEwan who left this mortal life so many years ago.”

“There was no Mr. McEwan in the archives,” Eliza said. She had looked, spent hours of the night poring through her brother's records.

“No, I suppose there wasn't,” Rana said. She walked across the smooth stone floor and looked around her, surveying the house as if for the first time. “But we've been here a long, long time. Longer than Lawrence and Clarissa, and indeed the previous inhabitants, the unfortunate Prestwoods...” she trailed off and then turned.

Eliza watched as Rana approached her. Her movements were so measured, so precise, so full of grace and beauty, that it was difficult to remember why she hated her so much. Indeed, it was difficult to remember why she even brought her here in the first place. The woman's body was lithe and limber and Eliza fought back memories of her dreams, dreams

where their legs and arms had been intertwined, where their lips had traced rivers down each other's backs.

"Mrs. Mc... Rana," whispered Eliza.

Rana leaned forward and took Eliza's chin with her fingers, her cold, white fingers. She smoothed her thumb across Eliza's bottom lip and then smiled.

"You needn't hide from me, daughter of Sappho," Rana said, her voice low. "You've been a terrible beast to me, but I may yet find a way to punish and reward you. If you agree to my terms."

Eliza blazed with heat. Her body trembled at the woman's touch, and she longed to take her, to taste her. As Rana slipped her hand down Eliza's stomach, she felt the blood rush to her sex, her heart flit about in her chest like a wounded bird.

"I will agree to your terms... as long as you..."

Rana's smile widened as her hands slipped lower, lower, then up to Eliza's breasts. For just the briefest of moments her fingertips lingered there, encircling the erect nipple beneath her dress.

"As long as I save Charles. Yes, I can do that. I haven't told you my terms, though," Rana pointed out.

"If you save him, you save my line... and there will be nothing left for me to hold dear if you don't," Eliza said. She felt as if she'd had seven cups of wine, as if the whole world was fog around her and the mist, the haer, was Rana, and Rana was the mountainside, and the creek and the burn, and the craggy rock and the shining loch.

"Then take me to him, and I will see to you afterwards."

• • •

Eliza stood over Rana's shoulder and watched the woman take the child in her hands. They had gone to Lawrence's old quarters since the fireplace was larger, and the room warmer. It felt foreign, yet fitting. If the child lived, someday, this would be his room.

For a moment, brief as a butterfly's wing, she thought she saw in Rana's eye a hungry expression, as if the babe in her arms was ripe for the tasting. But then it passed.

"His blood is the problem," Rana said. "I will need to... manipulate it slightly."

"Do what you must. But where is the doctor?"

“He knows my methods, and wishes to have no part in it. I have asked him to look in tomorrow morning after the babe has slept well and nursed again.”

Eliza was still trembling, her body flushed from her encounter with Rana on the landing.

“It is a taxing business,” Rana said, “to perform such work. And I will need nourishment afterwards. Will you give that to me?”

“Anything you ask,” Eliza said, breathless.

Rana held out her hands, long fingers spreading out over the child. Then she closed her eyes. She began to mutter low words, guttural and of a language that Eliza did not know. It reminded her of the ocean, of vastness, of spreading out and leaving the earth and being something greater and wiser, and far older than a simple human being. It was air and terror, lightning and mercy, wisdom and sense of fracturing and rebuilding.

Rana’s hands began to tremble, her voice gaining strength. The child on her lap went silent, gasping for breath.

Every moment was a torture. The clock down the hall chimed the hour, then another hour, and there was no clear time, no continuity. It was death and life and birth and palsy, all folded together like neat sheets, then torn together and sewed up again.

It made no sense, but yet it was the most sense Eliza had ever encountered. It was all she had been building up to, her entire life.

Just when she thought she could bear it no more, the child arched its back and then flushed pink, its tiny hands shooting out and grasping the air. Charles then began to cry, cry like the child he was, afraid and alive and fighting.

Eliza rushed to him, but Rana held up a hand in warning.

When she looked into her eyes, Eliza saw that Rana was crying tears of blood.

“Get the nanny,” Rana said in a rasping voice. “And come back when the child is secured.”

It was a strange word to use, but Eliza complied. Tulley did not ask any questions and remained out of sight of Rana, but was elated to see Charles recovered. The small, mousey woman had a true affinity for the child, and that put Eliza at ease. She told the nanny that she would be re-joining them in the nursery in a bit.

Eliza shut the door behind her and, without thinking much about it, barred it.

The blood on Rana's face should have frightened her, but it did not. It enticed her.

"You moved the blood," Eliza said. "Inside his body."

"I am capable of manipulating blood, yes," Rana said, standing slowly. The tracks of her tears had smeared red down her cheeks and flecked her white dress. "His veins... there was a kind of a blockage. Possibly there from birth. I was able to dissolve it. It should not be a problem again."

"And now?" asked Eliza.

"I will not condescend to you, Eliza. I believe you know precisely what I am, and what I ask of you. You know that I am cold. I weep blood. I avoid the sunlight. I live in an old home festooned with priceless art. I am widowed, but centuries ago."

Eliza nodded, knowing the word. Not wanting to speak it, but reveling in the pleasure of it, still.

Rana took a few steps closer to Eliza, and then pointed down to the ground. At the very back of her mind there was a quiet whisper, a sense that perhaps this was a dangerous route, that as prey she would never be on equal footing with this creature.

This vampire.

But the danger was too tempting, and so Eliza knelt before Rana McEwan.

"Do you want to have my body?" Rana asked. "I can give it to you. It is not my greatest pleasure to perform such acts, but I have seen your eyes and know your heart. I can grant you that wish, that great connection, where others cannot. I will not ruin you, nor will I shame you."

Eliza, breathless, could barely nod.

"Once, the woman of this very manor, Lady Prestwood, was my treat. Her husband was old and palsied, and she... needed to understand that her pleasure was important — nay, essential — to her happiness. Then came Clarissa, and while she was willing for a time, she threatened to be my undoing. And when she became pregnant she began lifting up rocks better left to the lichen."

"I would never do such a thing," said Eliza, reaching out her hands to touch Rana's thighs. She slid her fingers along the delicate material, feeling the weft and weave across her skin. She had never wanted something so much in her entire life.

And Rana did not refuse her.

She laughed. “No, but you shall do other things for me. Great things. And you shall be rewarded, though you pay the blood price.”

When Rana’s teeth broke through Eliza’s skin it was the breaking of a dam, the rushing of a brook across the stones, the great burst of speed beneath the fleet steed’s hooves, and onto that dreamlike world of green, nestled in the dark, and on the lips of a vampire.





PART THREE
**SIGNS
OF GEHENNA**





polytechniou

By Lawrence Hawkins

Dear Mother,

On these long nights full of questions, your silence provides better answers than your presence ever offered. Before? You spoke to me of God, of fate, of a necessary cruelty. You spoke of duty, honor, faith, and other such delusions. You spoke of your apocryphal Abyss beneath us, of the toll it took from you. All lies. And now? You are ashes in my ink pot. You are the words I write and the lack of answers they provide. You're just an echo. A consistent lie.

Thank you for this. If you had not taught me this truth, I'd have never escaped.

Tonight, I run out of ink. Out of you. Tonight?

I think I will be free.



Tonight? Thessaloniki burns.

The cattle writhe and run through the streets. They burn down edifices that you'd never even recognize: coffee shops, franchise restaurants, carriages of steel with golden crosses as their coat of arms – chevaliers. It's all an act of fury against a tribe you didn't live to see - Americans. It pleases me. Of all the edifices that linger in this age, this is the worst among them.

It so reminds me of you, an iron hand, velvet-lined in foreign names. It held the young and idealistic by the throat. These Americans attempted plays at power, but failed spectacularly. They attempted rule with honeyed concessions and games of false praise. They failed. Spectacularly. Then, when all was lost? When the fire came and the voices peaked? They believed their might would save them. They believed in their strength of arms, in their knights and soldiers, in their righteousness. And yet? The gates came crashing down. Fire found them anyway.

Can you imagine, Mother-who-is-no-longer-my-mother? Can you remember your fear? Can you remember the crashing gates? How I turned your strength turned against you? Can you remember how our shadows dueled, black fingers intertwining one last time? Do you still feel my lips on your neck, my teeth tearing? When you first escaped me, how I raged!

Now? All is well. You gave me the greater gift, more than any siren could offer. I dug and suckled at your soul, but in the end? You left me only truth as an inheritance.

You gave me nothing. I watch the kine in a kind of frenzy. Soon, I will join them. This is the last vial of ink. Let us savor it. At the end, I will have questions. But of course, Mother, I expect nothing of you.



I let the Tourist drive – I hate the streets as they’ve become. They’ve always been so noisy, always full of dogs, but this isn’t the kind of busy I recall. People mill about now, from frappe shop to cigarette stand, cigarette stand to boutique, and from boutiques, back to frappe shops. Even on a night of revelry against the wealth that binds them, they dress with a wealth they lack. They smile with a shine they pay to falsify. The Tourist likes to stare at skin in the sudden stops and starts of stilted traffic. I prefer to close my eyes. Mother, it disgusts me how docile they are.

It is unkind of me, I know. It isn’t them I hate – how could I hate such little things?

I see you in the stones – your games of influence still playing themselves. We’ve held these streets for a century. We saw the Turks flee and reveled in the avenues. We filled the bathhouses with blood. We painted our own icons on the cobblestones and danced among the blades and bullets. And yet? Even now, on this sacred night of Polytechniou? They play. I can see it in their eyes. I can taste it. They’re still so well-conditioned, Mother.

They ache for stronger fingers on their throats. I can sympathize.

The Tourist rolls down the window to toss out a cigarette. He whistles a girl over. She shouldn’t listen, but of course she does. She shouldn’t come much closer, but of course she *must*. When the Tourist smiles, her blood rushes to her cheeks and her belly and her crux. It’s sharp. Immediate. He asks her what she’s drinking – frappe, of course. He asks her where she’s going. She once knew, but now? Of course she doesn’t. I linger in the back, sliding deeper into the shadows. She doesn’t see me, doesn’t want to see me, as she slips into the passenger seat and he slips a hand into her shorts. The Tourist likes to fraternize. He keeps driving, at least.

I keep my eyes on the streets, listening as the night grows louder. Someone throws a trash can into the front windows of a Ruby Tuesday’s. I see it

in them, Mother. Frenzy. I smell it. How many more centuries will it take for them to admit they're afraid? That fear will liberate them

I was hoping to tell you I'd won this city from you, my Prince. No, not tonight.

It is good to feel hope scratching away on the page.



Komneni is waiting in the amphitheater. I don't know how they brought three men.

The Tourist whistles, easing in his new friend by the small of her back. Intimate. Sweet. She's receptive to his gentle touch and tone, the mushy American accent of his Helleniki. I watch – not out of personal interest, but as I must. As Ductus. As a little king among kingless company. She hears my steps. I let her hear them. Her smile fights to stay strong. She's too polite to stare.

At the black of my skin, the wrong kind of black, too deep-set and murky for my features. Soon, she notices the odd length and jointing of Komneni's busy fingers on a smartphone – three here, seven there, elegant if alien as they tap away. She clings to the way the Tourist doesn't see anyone but her, the way he's just so happy with it all. He sees her worries and he smiles. She softens into his hold. I smile at her, too. She holds on a little tighter. This? I admit, pleases me.

"Nothing for us?" asks Komneni, of me. I shrug. They shrug. "Later, then, I'm sure."

"After the dance," I promise. "I knew that you'd outdo yourself. How, this time?"

Komneni shrugs again, glancing at the pretty boys. They gesture, and all three of them lift their shirts. Each of them had taut, tense abdomens – footballers, perhaps. Each of them has matching ink, Team Iraklis in Greek letters. They grin like lion-slayers and trowlers of filth. Proud of their labors and endurance. Komneni shrugged yet again. "Loss leader is the term. My shop does well by word of mouth. I've garnered much attention on the buzzing air. Useful."

I want to slap the brick of plastic out of their hand. And yet? I smile. Bound in blood. I settle into that little heat, that calming anger at the edge. "We should begin," I say. "Before I feel the need to hurt you, sibling." I smile. They smile in return, nodding to the steel drum they'd carefully painted in symbols the footballers and pretty girl would never know.

"Before I feel the need to hurt you," they echo. "Let us partake in our socialization."

The Tourist snorts, which makes his lady friend laugh. “Can you believe these two?”

“I... Can’t,” she admits. We both smile at her. She shudders. Good. *She knows.*

“You shouldn’t,” he says. “They’re assholes. Damyan doesn’t believe in God. Kommie? Believes, but thinks God made the world for them. They’re assholes, baby. And I’m sorry.”

She flinches at that last part. ‘I’m sorry’. Even through a haze of alcohol, approval, and the subtle chain of our Tourist’s gift of influence, *she knows*. I can’t help but smile wider.

Komneni nods, ignoring the anger of their footballer customers. They’re getting bored, delayed in whatever pleasures they’d been promised. “God speaks to us all, brothers, and for this? I am eternally amused. I give nothing in return, and yet? He gives me wisdom. He gives me raw materials. He gives me perspective, as any old master must. I stand on His shoulders. Or His spine, Damyan? Is God standing or lying in the mess He made - what do you think, boys?”

The footballers are furious, bound up in Orthodoxy like so much of this state. The Tourist grins, like it’s all one big joke. They laugh, because of course they have to. They laugh. The Tourist laughs. The girl. Even Komneni laughs. The gifts of blood at work.

Komneni chuckles, already falling into the rhythm and cadence of ritual. “Children, you misunderstand. God is not a beast in one or three parts. God is an architect! And if that architect is chaos? Then I must study His chaos. If that architect is order? So must I study His order. I think...” They wave the phone about, before tucking it into a pocket. “God is captured here.”

“So we have Him, sibling?” I lean into the thin affection, the bond of blood. *Of pack.*

“Guys, guys... Can we get on with it?” The Tourist’s fingers come up tacky from his new girl’s waistline. His pupils are widening. He’s already forgotten to breathe, for minutes now. He’s angry – still a Methodist or some such thing, still clinging to the rags we’d buried him in. Our youngest brother is ready, a beast in the throes of his nature, and yet? Conflicted. If the girl noticed? She didn’t say, still couldn’t ‘believe it’. Instead, she presses her breasts into his back, enjoying the way he stiffens. Not the way she assumes, I could have told her. I can see his face.

“Let’s begin,” I say. I nod to Komneni, who nods to the Tourist. All smiles, us.

Our Tourist walks over to the footballers, best friends for all of moments, or so they feel. He leans into two of them, arms over shoulders, elbows

around their necks. All he has to do is stand tall. All he has to do is squeeze and stretch and twist with the might my blood has given him. The snaps break the Tourist's spell. The girl stares, and I see it – that momentary thrill.

There is a lust before they scream, Mother. Before we all scream. We all ache to end.

Komneni's nimble fingers slide into the last footballer's eyes like biting snakes. He falls. The girl? Shudders and sobs now, turning to her beloved Tourist in raw confusion. He throws her over the steel drum, presses her neck to the sharpened edges. "I'm sorry," he says. Honest.

Komneni speaks with all the tones of the church mother they'd been so long ago. "Let us be brief. Enough words have been wasted on old ashes and lies." Those nimble fingers, made stronger than steel by gifts my blood had given, press down on the pretty girl's throat. The back of her neck opens. The skin over her spine splits. She drains into our vessel. "As the fool God has given us this bounty, let us take and drink – not in His honor, but our own, as one!"

"As one," the Tourist mutters, staring at the pretty flesh going dull and limp before him.

"As one," I answer. I take the players by their chins, press their necks to the steel.

That pooling drum arouses such a feeling in me, Mother. The expectation, it thrills and horrifies. It is everything and nothing like the nights you held me. It's the first night, when you broke me open. It's the nights that passed, when you gave your flesh and blood as a 'gift'. You bound me to you, Mother. You fed me poison. You *domesticated* me. And as I watch Komneni bleed the last of them, going on about God and elders, kinship and some Great Jihad? I laugh.

One broken chain leads to another. And so we drink, lifting the drum over our heads.

One broken oath leads to another. And so we bleed, fangs to wrist, into the drum again.

One broken God leads to another. And so we drink again, a communion of each other.

I can see it in their eyes – the love - and I admit, it thrills me. The domestic devotion in the Tourist's eyes when he looks at me, when he licks my left wrist clean. The distant, bitter love in Komneni's hollow gaze as they lap at my right. They love me as I loved you, Mother. Falsely, but fully. Few among the packs knew just how much, or they might interfere.

And I admit? I love them in return. But only so much. I still could snap their necks. Instead? A level glance. A whisper. Each once knew something,

and then knew something else – my invented truth. I'd given fairly. Equally. Their love for me was natural in the bonding rite. For their ductus, their bishop. Leader in the fray, against the domestication your kind cultivates.

It's a lie, Mother, but so is love. I refuse to love most, never again. We are not yet free, so I cannot be the end of love, but with every drop I avoid? I own a little more of my own heart.

"Come, brother and sibling," I call. "We have games tonight. It's Polytechniou!"

It is good to be running out of ink. Tonight, perhaps? The fires will devour you.



Nothing is wasted, but everything is waste. You told me this once. I still treasure it.

You meant to inflict upon me a sense of time, a mortal fear of idleness. I fear you have succeeded. For even now? I dictate. I set terms. Even now? I lord over the night. I accept this limitation, as I am a creature of infliction. I drive my pack to action. I drive my sect to war. I drive the cattle against the grain you've fed them, against the gentle lies of wasteful industry.

You would have hated the games I host tonight. You would have loved the *efficiency*.

The packs of Thessaloniki, visited by packs of Anatolia, Macedonia, Athens, Sofia in Bulgaria... We stand among the many, among the kine, and we watch them celebrate. Around the great bonfire my priest Komneni had so recently constructed, they dance and share in drink or drug. The amphitheater was sacred ground to them – no police nor soldier could walk upon it, the hallowed ground of university. For our revel and their annual rebellion, it is fertile ground.

And as they dance in shadows? The first game is underway. Let's call it Glimpses.

Sometimes? A pair of lovers would stray a little too close to an unusual clique. Through a haze of hidden minds, obedient shadows, or their own drug-addled ignorance, they'd cross a threshold. They'd feel a cool touch on their flesh. They'd look up from each other's bodies and their wine and they would *see us*. As we are. As we've remade ourselves. As horrors in the night.

They'd catch sight of a water-logged corpse walking among them or some woman with a lamprey's open maw. A girl from Sofia who likes to play with bones and metal wire, kinetic sculptures bound together by the wounds they inflict on each other's flesh in motion. Perhaps they'd see Komneni or one of their many cousins, bending bodies far past the breaking point. Bust-

iers of broken ribs. Wings of peeled arm-bones and ragged flesh. They make the kine into leather, even as they still breathe, all to thank the hands that break them apart and reshape them.

And sometimes? They see me. My little contributions.

Sometimes, they'd see their own shadows, leering or warning them. Sometimes, subtle fingers would nudge them, trip them into the fold of flocks that are no friends of theirs. I feed my guests well. I stir a creeping dread upon the mortal celebrations. And sure enough, I see it, my treasured moment: the thrill of mortal terror. They live in that lust.

My new family has many rites and rituals, such games and gruesome pageantry. You would have approved, I think. You might have even joined us. We are more united, more aggressive, more engaged with the world of kine than you elder elites ever were. We've sewn ourselves into their veins at the most primal level. Rather than hide and pull strings at a remove? We stand close and let them tremble. Your kind used to think of themselves as heroes and villains of the night. No.

You were edifices, but like this amphitheater? Lies crumbling on top of other ruins.

We *live*. We welcome what would end us. We are the death of gods and heroes.

And our second game tonight? Is the Fire Dance.

We paint ourselves in red, a dozen priests at work to lash their flocks into a froth. Komneni comes to me and our Tourist, marks our faces and bare chests with the dregs of the drum we'd shared as one. "It is so fascinating," they chant, "How the urge for death is so intricately tied into a life experience. I've made minions without fear – useless. So be afraid. Be of value. Be more than you were. Be free of bonds, and that freedom? Its name is fear."

I smile. Nearby, a woman sees and flees, screaming. My last Glimpse of the night.

And as you once taught me, Mother? A host leads. And so? I am the first to dance.

I stride forth among the many mortals, stripped bare and beautifully black before the flames. Within my breast, an old dead thing starts to panic – a withered heart. But the paint and passion has me now. Instead of drowning in terror? I drink it down. I exult in it. The roiling shadows, once full of warnings for the mortal crowd? Now, those shadows come to me as I call. The crowd parts at the dozen rivers running by their feet. They turn towards the exits, only to see a painted many looming over them. A painted *One*. As the terror rises, I feel it flowing into me.

I culminate. The painted lines break open on my skin, and out of them?
Your beloved Abyss opens wide and I am not afraid.

I am *Fear*.

The masses scream. The packs roar back in eagerness, eager to see me fail. They think so little of us, Mother, of the bloodline that liberated all the others. They see the Abyss burst from my skin and they see weakness. They see vulnerability. They see mere shadows. They think that we *burn*, Mother. And we did once, didn't we? We were so proud, weren't we? You were favored for your pallor, even as my dark skin embarrassed you. "My poor black Berber, what will I do with you?"

I lived in fear of your displeasure, enthralled by the little pleasures your lips might yet inflict.

Now? I prefer pain. I roil in an unearthly gait. I draw the eyes of those who fear me. I draw the hoots and cackles of the packs who do not know me, but think they do. I draw their expectations to a peak. I stand before the flames we've erected. I smile, because I *know*, Mother. And as you never could. As my once-proud clan never could.

I *walk* through the open fire. Terror fills me, but I do not burn, for I've fed upon the fearful.

I have *transcended* them.

I step through to the other side. Now they cheer, but I can hear their arrogance dying.

The others dance, as we all must do the Fire Dance. Some leap. A few throw their weakest brothers, sisters, siblings through the flames. The mortals watch. Some crumple into themselves. Some fight, only to be pushed back in broken pieces. Some? Sob. But many? Many of them cheer the bravery of my brethren. Many feel that thrill, that terrible lust. They see the end and laugh. They think they're safe. So when the dance is done, I start the last game.

I gesture. Shadows swallow the flames. Against all order and all reason? The night wins.

And as those shadows recede, they see it: an artwork of four charred bodies. All of their dancing, all of their singing, all of their impassioned speeches about justice, freedom, their freedom from oppression? They were praises given to our ruinous pyre, to the charred dead. Komneni has outdone himself, wrapped their visages in their own blackened bones. Hints of flesh peek through like prisoners, still hissing and aromatic. They captured terror itself.

The last game? Revelation. As the light dies before them, we step forward as one.

Understanding breaks across them, and as cattle must, once they smells the abattoir, they flee. We let them. And once I give the cry, once I shout, “The night is ours!”?

We give chase.

I cannot hold them back, Mother. I would never try. I am a voice, but no authority. There is no such thing. Only lies, terror, fire, and darkness. I am all of these now. And we are nothing. I watch them revel, tear, and shred. I watch them drink and frenzy. I watch the truth and smile. We are loathsome beasts, but there is a visceral appeal, is there not? One just cannot look away...

I am running out of ink, Mother, but there is one more thing I must ask you.

One more question you have no voice to answer.



There is a power in exposure, Mother, in being unclad in the night. In utter nakedness.

It’s part of the terror, you see. It’s part of the lust for life, the only truth I know. When I loved you? It was all chemicals and curves. When I knelt for you? It was the bite, the blood, the little and larger deaths you offered me. When I served you? It was blind devotion to a world and to Traditions that did not survive the coming of mere animals with torches. You betrayed me.

No. You *expended* me and you *expected* me to be expended. *Waste*. Terror saved me.

Now? Terror lives inside my skin, in hungry fingers breaking stones older than this country, this new republic and its spiraling poverty. My feet crack cobbles you once strode upon, influencing half a dozen armies. My body breaks around the blackness, a vessel of a culture you stole from me, one of many veils you tore away. You planted this seed, Mother.

Now I follow screaming, writhing, and the warmth of blood. One light yet remains.

I’d watched her as I teased the flocks with glimpses. I’d watched her as I walked through the flames unscathed. I watched her as her eyes grew wide with revelation. I picked her, because unlike the rest? She saw. From the beginning, she saw and searched for an escape. She’d tried to urge the others. She could hear my silence following her, hear the chanting die behind her. She felt me between her heartbeats, I suspect. I lived inside her aching legs and hungry lungs. I did not run. I didn’t need to. For all her cleverness, I could not lose her. She was the last light left.

It was difficult, the work of two hours, but I waited. I let her cleverness lead her astray.

She stares at a dead end like a traitor. She turns to face me, keys between her knuckles.

“That won’t help you,” I whisper. There is no other sound to defy me here. I raise a hand and the shadows expand. The dark wells up like water, drowning out everything but us. She gasps among the murk, fighting to breathe, unable to see. I brush past her, feel the heat of her bare shoulder going numb. I cross her stumbling path, righting her as she trips. I watch her run through half a dozen expressions – hope and anger, disgust and determination.

And finally? Yes. The fear. The lust of it. When she runs? She runs into me.

I hold her in my arms. First two, then four, this six. Ten curling fingers, then a dozen slivers of shadow pressing her into my nakedness. She flinches, but I whisper. “I am not here to violate you, girl.” She punches with her keys, and I let her. The wound won’t bleed. “I am not here for your pride, to celebrate my power. Struggle as much as you need. Then, listen.”

And she did. She fought. She kicked. She screamed into the echoing black, as useless as a scream underwater. It stole her strength. It stole her sureness. She struck at my eyes, my throat, my genitals, but none of that mattered in the black. None of it mattered as I am, Mother. I watched all of her options bleed into the black sea of my true birth. I feel her collapse into me.

“There,” I whisper. “I needed you to know that you are not a hero. Do you see this?”

She leans into my neck, too weary even to bite. The irony. “I don’t want to die yet.”

“Why?” I ask her.

“I...” she hesitates. “My mother. My lover. I wanted to be a doctor, wanted to...”

“Your mother will live if you die tonight. Your lover, as they love these days? Will remember you for months at most.” A pointed lie, for when was love ever so revered as now? “There will be doctors, less doctors than wounds, as long as there are bodies. Do you see this?”

She struggles again, an aftershock, a tremor against my cool flesh. “Why?” she asks me.

“Because I need you to understand. I am going to take from you, but I don’t want you to think this was some act of the devil. I don’t want you to kiss your icons or crawl up to your cathedrals. I don’t want you to seek support or answers from the people who would rob this of you. I need you to see this.” I hold her again, all of my limbs supporting her. Nose to nose.

“I need you to see,” I say, “That this moment, this fear? This lust? Is the only truth.”

This was no game of the night. This was no glimpse, no revelation. This was *mine*.

“What is your name?” I ask her. Nika, she tells me. *Victory*...

I let her slip to her knees and I join her there. There is no prayerfulness, no low humility. “I hate you,” she whispers at my grip, even as I feel her fading. Crumbling. Falling.

“Yes,” I agree. “Now...” I let the shadows fall. Let the starlight return. The fires of rebellion and the Now, I demand of her soul. “Before I take from you, beg your god to stop me.” The words crossed between us, my gift of blood. The order locked into her mind, a prison.

And on her knees, she whispers to me. Begs, so hoarse. “Please. Do not kill me.”

I revel in that fear. “I said beg to your god!” Again, I push her mind. “Beg Him!”

“Save me,” she whispers in my ear. Intimate. Afraid. “I promise. I can understand!”

I recoil, rising to my feet. She slumps low, lips to the stones. I stare at her.

“Black God, save me from the dark. Save me from the lies. I swear, I believe in you!”

And now my question, Mother. I cannot get that sight out my mind. I cannot get the anger of it out of me. I tore a little village to rubble, startled a baker into his own kiln. I threw their tiny cars across the streets into the taxi traffic. I roared and raged, lost to myself, across the Polytechniou. I need to understand it, Mother. Why? Why, when I take everything they have, do they praise us?

Why, when I am nothing to be praised, do they find meaning in me? Is faith the only answer to despair? How do I destroy you, Mother?! Answer me! How do I kill God?

She’s lying here, half-broken, already blackening from my blood in her veins. My Nika.

My *Victory*. And yet...

Tell me, Mother, how might I unmake every wretched thing you’ve built?



upon This Rock

By **Bill Bridges**

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”

Father Pascal winced and turned toward the voice, the hoarse, gravelly *basso profundo*, and gestured for the figure to sit. The shape stepped from the shadows, its stone-like skin matching perfectly the roughhewn walls of the cathedral, its rocky wings wrapped tightly about it, its head hung low, its eyes looking at Pascal with the yearning he had seen in so many of his flock. The pleading look of those who had felt the sting of God’s absence.

“Stanislaus,” Pascal said. “It has been many weeks since you last came to me. I feared... well, let us not speak of it. You yet live.”

“Live?” Stanislaus said, sitting down upon the chair beside Father Pascal’s desk, rubbing his hands together anxiously. “It is a form of life. I slept. For weeks, you say? I was sorely hurt by the congregation. Even my thick skin cannot long endure flame.”

Pascal nodded and sat behind his desk. “I heard the commotion, but feared to go down to the cellars. And when you did not appear the following night...”

“I survived. I know all the hidden places in the church. There is no one left alive who knows them as I do. I crept deep, where I could become one with the stones. I fell into a dreamless sleep, beyond the reach of my burns.”

“What do you intend to do now? Twice you have failed against Konstantin. Perhaps you should surrender your war.”

“And let the church fall to his heresy?” Stanislaus’s eyes gleamed and his lips curled back, revealing sharp fangs. “No, Father. I have told you before, in this matter I cannot be the lamb. I must be the wolf.”

“Then what do you need from me? You know I cannot oppose Konstantin in any way. His power is too great. Already, his secret congregation has grown larger than my own.”

Stanislaus grimaced, and Pascal heard the sound of stone grinding on stone as the gargoyle's jaws tensed. "Ever since the Malkavian came here with his poison gospel, my church — our church — has suffered. I have prayed many times for a sign, an answer to this plague. Was it my own sin that brought him to us? My hubris? Is his doctrine — his wicked welcoming of Gehenna — a rebuke of my own fallacious creed?"

Pascal nodded and rubbed his eyes. "You have asked that same question over and over, and you know that I have no clearer answer now than I did when you first asked it months ago." He stood up and walked around his desk, placing his hand on Stanislaus' head. The stone skin was cold and rough to the touch, like unpolished marble. "Perhaps Konstantin is not a rebuke but a message? What if his teachings are true? Pride blinds us to what we do not wish to see in ourselves."

Stanislaus leapt to his feet and knocked the priest's hand away. He stomped toward the door, his wings stretching out as if warding off Pascal's words. "Lies! He peddles lies, Father! He would bring about Gehenna this very night if he could!"

"Does he know you are awake now? What will he do to you?"

Stanislaus stopped and turned slightly back toward Pascal, but his eyes were unfocused, as if watching someplace else. "He is down below. Five of his ghouls are with him. They prepare for a new sermon. Soon, his congregants will begin to arrive. You had best unlock the doors, or he will punish you."

Pascal's face went gray. He walked back around his desk and opened a drawer, pulling out a key ring. "I didn't realize it was so late."

"Go, Father," Stanislaus said, walking out the door into the shadowed hallway. "Do not worry for your church. I will save it yet."



Stanislaus pressed a stone in the wall and heard the muffled sound of a latch opening. He pressed another section of the wall and it gave way, swinging in, revealing a tight passageway. He slipped inside and pressed the door closed behind him.

He shuffled down the narrow hall, scrunching in his shoulders to keep them from scraping the walls. It was pitch black, but he knew the way intimately. All the hidden passages and tunnels were his, and his alone.

Some of them had been built by previous owners of the cathedral, including cardinals whose family ties involved them in rum smuggling. Where better to hide contraband than a church? Other tunnels he had built himself, painstakingly over the last century, with chisels, shovels and his bare, unnaturally strong hands.

This was his cathedral, not theirs. He had dwelled here since well before even the oldest mortal member of the congregation — Aaron Newell, 88 years old — had been born. He knew every square inch of it inside and outside. He knew its strengths and its weaknesses. He knew even the dark void below, the steadily growing sinkhole beneath the foundations. He had spent many nights shoring up the walls, fighting a long, slow war against the earth's entropy. A war he was winning.

The war for the church's heart, however, was nearly lost. *Konstantin*. The cursed Malkavian priest. He had come to the cathedral, all the right papers in hand to claim ownership. To be its *bishop*. Mortals were so easily tricked by his kind, by the Kindred.

The Malkavian did not realize that the church was already occupied. Was already Stanislaus' *territory*, his home ground. Konstantin didn't care. Possessed of a righteous passion of his own, he made the cathedral his.

Stanislaus banged a fist into the wall as he remembered their first encounter. He had watched and waited, judging the newcomer, waiting to see if he was boon or bane. At first, he was astonished and amazed at the idea that another Kindred shared his faith, his love for the Lord and his knowledge of scripture. But that soon soured, as Konstantin's particular take on scripture became apparent. He was nothing less than a heretic, a snake in the garden, a sinner who threatened to doom the souls of all those who listened to him.

Most of the mortals never saw their new bishop. He was always "away on church business," leaving the services and confessions to the care of Father Pascal. All the while, he began building his secret congregation, attracting them from outside the church. At first, they were only his ghouls, but soon they grew. His sermons spoke to something in the broken souls who walked the streets, and they came, sinners before an angry vampire.

He had built his new church below the mortal one, in the cellars — the deep rooms that Stanislaus had shored up himself, had prepared as his own chapel. That was where he first confronted the interloper, the madman who had invaded his saintly haven. He remembered the stinging words they'd exchanged.

"Devil," Stanislaus had hissed, "begone from this place."

"So it is true," Konstantin had said, marveling as he looked Stanislaus over, taking in his squat body, his curled wings, his horned brow, and his rocklike skin. "I had heard that the Tremere's pet had abandoned the church years ago, but something told me that you were still here. Could it have been the continuing series of assaults in the nearby neighborhoods? Even you have to feed. You cannot subsist on cobwebs and gravel forever."

"You claim my hunting grounds? My cathedral? The Prince will not support you. I have prior claim."

“He has already tacitly accepted my residence in the city. I suspect he has forgotten you exist. But it does not matter — we are not enemies, you and I. We can share in God’s bounty. We are both His servants. I wear the cloth, you...the cross.”

Stanislaus had actually spat at him, a gob of blood. “Heretic! I have heard your sermons — nothing takes place here without me knowing. You speak of Gehenna as if it is a reward, a dispensation for you and your flock alone. You care not that it would mean the deaths of all the mortals who worship here. Your “god” is the Beast Within. It is your own soul, mirrored back at you through darkened glass.”

“Fool,” Konstantin whispered, although his whisper thundered through Stanislaus’ ears like a blow. “I do not read the gospels of sheep, the false words of the Nazarene. I am a prophet of the true Anointed One, the Neaniskos of Gethsemane. The Eternal Youth who was the Grandsire of my Sire. Do you tell me that you still — *you*, in your fallen state — believe the precious lies chanted in the pews above us? Heed me, gargoyle, for I bear the true gospel of our kind, the secrets of Grace for the Undying and the promise of exaltation when Caine returns!”

His words penetrated into Stanislaus’ heart and extinguished his passion. He felt tired and gray, his ardor for the Salvation a distant memory. Weeping, and ashamed of his tears, he fled, running down corridors and slipping into a hidden passage before the Malkavian and his ghouls could see him. He collapsed, bereft of purpose, knowing that his years — his century — of faith were false.

Only later did this wicked notion leave him, and he realized that it had been but the dark art of the Malkavian, seeding his madness into Stanislaus’ heart. It was the curse of his kind — of all gargoyles — that they be servants to all sorceries of the mind. Konstantin had used his clan’s bloodright against Stanislaus’ weakness.

Stanislaus now slowed his relentless pace in the corridor and reached out his senses, anchored to every cubit of the church’s grounds. More of Konstantin’s congregants had arrived. The cellar below was nearly full of them.

He had slept in torpor longer than he had imagined. The long-planned for night was already here. He had lost weeks of preparation; he had to move now, while they were all gathered. Konstantin had initiated his Annunciation Night, when he would give communion to all and choose one among the Elect to be transfigured, to suffer the Embrace and walk the night eternal. His entire flock would be here, in the matter of an hour.

Stanislaus rushed forward, finding the winding staircase in the dark, and descended. He had so little time left. Precious days had been stolen from him.

He had waited weeks before he dared to confront Konstantin the second time. He'd skulked in the hidden passages and slept during the day merged into the stone, in case Konstantin's servants discovered him. They did not. He hadn't even initiated a search. He was waiting for the gargoyle to come to him.

Although the dimming of the faith that Konstantin had inflicted proved fleeting, the Malkavian had still wormed into Stanislaus' conscience. He had suffered nightmares every day, chilling visions of coming before God on Judgment Day and being condemned for betraying his faith. He had long believed that even one of his fallen kind could serve the Lord, and could hold some unheralded purpose before heaven. But these dreams tore that solace from him, and ended with his burning in the hot sun of God's gaze.

He would awake shaken. Even though he realized these were the doings of Konstantin, unconscious terrors awakened by the Malkavian's lunatic Discipline, they still caused Stanislaus to hide in despair. It was only after these mental wounds had faded, after weeks, that he again worked up the courage to confront his tormentor.

Konstantin was giving a sermon before his most valued flock, his ghouls, numbering seven. The Malkavian read from his blasphemous version of the Bible, with chapters non-existent in any known apocrypha. Some claimed to be from before the Flood, written by the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, the half-brothers and sisters to Caine. Others were written by unknown disciples, followers not of Jesus but the Neaniskos, the naked youth spoken of in Mark.

As Konstantin read these words, Stanislaus descended on stony wings from the rafters and slammed into the false priest, knocking him down and toppling his lectern.

The Malkavian was a poor fighter. Stanislaus' potent blows landed over and over, and his thick skin prevented the priest's hidden knife from penetrating him.

Konstantin cried out and his flock came to his aid. Stanislaus batted them aside easily — at first. But they became blood-maddened, possessed of an unholy fury, fueled by Konstantin's words. They broke the pews to splinters and tried to drive the wood into Stanislaus' back. Again, his stone skin deflected their thrusts. Then they toppled the candles and lit the curtains on fire, throwing them on the gargoyle.

He struggled to free himself and found it surprisingly hard, even with his strength. He flailed at the bodies weighing down the burning cloth, hearing the shattering of bones as his limbs struck out, but still they piled onto him, heedless of the flames themselves.

He screamed in agony as the fire finally scorched his skin. Once again, he fled, tearing off the burning fabric and taking wing across the room and into the corridors. He could feel himself losing consciousness, his wounds too severe, the burns too pervasive across his whole body. He crawled into a tunnel he had dug himself, one that no mortal — not even Konstantin — would be able to find, even if they tore the church apart stone by stone. He let his body sink into the stone of the walls, to become as stone, with only a portion of his shape remaining visible, and he fell into the deep, unfathomable sleep of torpor.

And now he was again awake, and the chosen night had arrived. He followed the stairs down as deep as they led and then felt his way through the nearby passage to a yet deeper set of stairs, these one cruder, hewn from stone by his own hands. They went below the lowest cellar, issuing into a cave directly beneath the cellar pews of Konstantin's dark chapel.

Here Stanislaus slowed and crept cautiously. His eyes were useless here but he did not need them. His senses extended into the earth, into every crack and crevasse of the grounds. He sensed the yawning pit before he reached it.

The sinkhole.

The void at the heart of his cathedral. The hole he'd spent decades of his unlife trying to fill. Even he, with wings that could bear him aloft like an angel, had never dared to plumb its full depths. It reached down, down into what he imagined was the very pit of despair at the heart of Hell.

He stretched out his hand and felt the hard wooden brace he had hammered into place, one of many he had erected throughout the cavern to support the sagging cellar floors. Hundreds of hours of expert carpentry and masonry, unnoticed and unknown to anyone else but Father Pascal.

The humble priest had been his only friend these last years, when he had discovered Stanislaus by accident and, instead of reacting fearfully, he had offered tender comfort to the lonely soul who had for so long hidden in the walls. When Konstantin came, Pascal had shielded Stanislaus by pretending ignorance about him. The Malkavian seemed to accept that Pascal, who clearly knew about the Kindred, was no threat to him. But neither was he a sycophant, and so Konstantin had refused to induct the priest into his secret church, preferring to use him instead to distract the mortal flock above.

If Pascal had suspected what Stanislaus now intended to do, he might well rebel and warn Konstantin. Stanislaus did not want to test that. He preferred that Pascal remain his friend, until the end.

When the church walls came crumbling down.

He stretched out his wings and launched himself into the air, spiraling in the blackness up to the rafters, the interlocking weave of beams and braces beneath the chapel. He settled himself into an alcove. Through the slight cracks between the wooden floor, he could see the guttering candlelight, and hear the words of Konstantin as he began his evening sermon.

“Know ye,” the Malkavian intoned, “the gospel of our Sire’s Sire’s Sire, the Neaniskos of Gethsemane. The Gospel of Mark tells us of him: ‘A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.’ Exegetes have struggled to know him. They cannot. Only we can know him.

“Clement of Alexandria teaches of his Embrace by the Nazarene: ‘And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near, Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And straightway, going in where the youth was, he — Jesus — stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.’

“And so he was made one of us, the Childer of Caine, as was Lazarus. Like Jesus before him, he was of the blood of Malkav, and so knew the true ways of the world, the holy fervor of the Lord.

“The Neaniskos passed from the knowledge of mortals, hidden like all of Caine’s kind. He taught the mystery of the Kingdom to his Childer, who taught them to their Childer, who taught them to me. I am his prophet in these modern nights, and I am come to tell you that the time is nigh when the linen will be stripped from us all and we will be naked. But we, too, shall seize the stretched-forth hand and rise, even though all others perish. Not even the eldest among us can withstand the Judgment of the Fathers, not without the blood of the Neaniskos. The blood that flows through me.”

Stanislaus tightened his hands into fists, suppressing the urge to smash through the floor and throw himself again at Konstantin. His blasphemy was beyond all forgiveness. His heresy was staggering in its error. To equate the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, with a *Kindred*? A Malkavian, no less? This doctrine could not — *must* not — stand.

“For this is my blood of the new testament,” Konstantin continued, “which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” Stanislaus could hear the creaking of the floorboards as people stood and shuffled toward the altar. This was the part of his sermon where Konstantin gave his blood to his

ghouls. “But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Perversion. Stanislaus ground his fists into tight balls, wishing he’d had Konstantin’s neck in between them. *Soon. Very soon, when they were all gathered closer together...*

“Let us read from The Book of Nod: ‘And the Antediluvians will make for themselves an Empire of Blood/ They will rule with iron talons/ They will wrench the hearts of all still alive/ And the full sum of the earth’s living will come and live in the Last City, called Gehenna. And there will be a reign of one thousand years, and there will be no love, or life, or pity, the mighty will be as slaves/ the virtuous will be made foul/ every good gift, and every perfect gift will be tainted/ by the Father of Darkness, whose power will come from/ the nether realms.’

“This is the fate of our brothers and sisters, the unshriven. I bring you the Secret Gospel of Malkav, the lost scripture of Nod, wherein redemption is vouchsafed to those who have heard the Word. It is for the ears alone of my Childer, who ye shall all one day be. But tonight is but for one...”

Stanislaus knew that one among the crowd had stepped forward. He knew without needing sight or sound where every being in the room stood. That one was to be Konstantin’s Childer.

“See? He comes, naked but for a linen cloth — his burial clothes. Death is but a passage. I shall roll away the stone from the door of thy tomb, and you shall remain with me this night and I shall teach you the mystery of the kingdom of God.”

The young man — Stanislaus knew the one, chosen from among the most loyal — and Konstantin came together. Stanislaus could imagine Konstantin’s arms around him, his fangs poised at the man’s neck. A murmur went through the crowd. Blood was now flowing.

Stanislaus launched himself from his alcove and glided at the main beam, the central pillar where all the braces met. With all his might, he smashed into the thick wood, sending a thunderous crack through the chamber and into the chapel above. The floor sagged, slid, and as the beam crumpled, gave way to the void.

It was over in the span of two heartbeats. The chapel collapsed and all the congregants with it, into the vast darkness, their cries drowned by the splintering of wood, the crumbling of stone, and the rush of dust and vapor. Moments later, the floor above cracked and the entirety of the church — pews, candles, stone columns, stained-glass windows — slid into the hole. Like a carpet yanked through a hatch, the whole church went as one into ruin.

Stanislaus fell. The weight of the entire church drove into him. The elders among his kind knew the secret of moving through rock as if it were liquid, but he did not. He knew when he had shattered the beam that he would lead his church down.

He thudded into hard ground, the bottom of the hole, closer than he had imagined. The detritus of his centuries-old haven drove into him, pinning him beneath its impossible weight. The sharp ends of the very beam he had used to destroy it pierced his back and slid through his engorged heart, paralyzing him, freezing his limbs, reducing him to a statue.

As consciousness flickered on the edge of torporous darkness, he sensed movement above him, on the walls of what had once been the chapel. A figure, clinging to a hanging tapestry, climbing arduously upward, through the rubble, to the surface. Konstantin.

Stanislaus cried, a tear of blood escaping his closing eyes as darkness took him: “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”



Father Pascal climbed down the rough-hewn stone stairs, the handiwork of Stanislaus. The candle he bore flickered ahead of him, revealing the maze of wood and rock he had to traverse. In his other hand he carried a chalice.

He knew the way by now, but the debris was so pervasive, it was impossible to remember every safe route. A careless step and he might find that the sinkhole still had secrets to reveal. He no longer need to wear the moist cloth wrapped around his nose and mouth, to mitigate the stench of the rotting bodies. Most of the flesh had deliquesced and dried by now.

When he came to the end of the stairs, the slanting beam led further down. It had taken him weeks to clear the path, but he'd finally made a slender passage. He slowly walked it, delving into the former sinkhole, now a mound of rubble.

He came to the small clearing he had carved from the broken remains, and knelt down, placing his candle on the floor.

“Greetings, old friend,” he said, addressing a stony arm that poked from the mound. “Good news. I have finally inherited the church grounds. The legalities are complete. Konstantin has not returned. You need not fear his influence here anymore. I am the caretaker now.”

He placed the chalice beneath the arm, and then reached into his jacket, pulling out a chisel and hammer.

“Your ministry will live on, Stanislaus. I will see to it.”

He bent forward and applied the chisel to the gargoyle's frozen arm. He tapped the hammer onto it, driving it through the stony skin until a small trickle of blood came forth, dribbling into the chalice.

He put down the tools and picked up the chalice with both hands, preparing to drink. He closed his eyes in prayer.

“And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church...”





Justice

by Dylan Birtolo

Rohesia hesitated at the door of the church, stopping for a moment to bow her head and bring the crucifix hanging around her neck up to her lips for a quick kiss. She muttered a prayer of forgiveness as she crossed the threshold and reached the basins of holy water flanking the last row of pews. She dipped her fingers in. The mixture burned just enough to make her aware of the pain. Rather than push it down, she embraced it as she brought the holy liquid up to her forehead and traced a cross that felt like fire against her skull.

Thus anointed, she walked down the center aisle, smiling and nodding briefly to the other parishioners she passed. She knew them all. She was an integral member of this church for fifteen years now, recruiting the faithful and encouraging their attendance. Her usual seat in the first pew waited for her. All the other seats were taken; any new arrivals would be forced to stand. She smiled, pleased with the results of her years of toil and service.

Suddenly, she felt a chill down her spine and a burning sensation that made every cell in her body scream. The primitive part of her brain shouted at her to run, to get out of there by any means necessary. Danger was coming. Turning around, she saw the priest enter from the back room, an altar boy in his shadow and carrying a Bible. The motion was subtle, but Rohesia noticed how Father Clayton reached up under his robes and rubbed at his arms just like he did every time she was near. She was surprised he hadn't realized it was her presence that gave him that chill.

The priest was a wonder to behold. She couldn't help but stare at him, despite how much it burned. It was like staring into the beautiful comforts of a furnished castle lit by a large, comforting fire, and knowing that you will never be able to enter it. All you will be able to do is see the beauty and warmth, never to feel it again. It had her hypnotized, and made her want to cry for the sheer purity of it. Rohesia looked away, staring down at her tattered, worn Bible before she lost her composure.

As the mass progressed, she continued to bask in the pain of being in Father Clayton's presence. She read along in the Bible, even though it sounded strange to her ears not to have mass conducted in Latin. She doubted that would ever change. It had been hundreds of years, but English still sounded out of place to her. When the time came for Communion, Rohesia was the first to accept the blessing. Getting closer to Father Clayton intensified the sensation until each step felt like she was walking through a furnace, but she did not falter. When the wafer touched her tongue, the intensity of the pain almost made her gag, but she was no stranger to the holy fire. She accepted it with a smile, feeling a warmth in her heart separate from the intense heat around her.

When the mass was over, she stayed behind to help clean up the church, making sure all of the Bibles were put back in their proper places and the pews were all spotless. It was less necessary these days considering the crowd they attracted, but it still made Rohesia glad to help however she could. She didn't need to look up to feel Father Clayton come back in from speaking with the crowd in front of the building.

"You don't need to do this, you know. It's one of the chores specifically for the altar boys. They need to maintain and look after the church as if it were their own home."

Rohesia stood up and turned to face the priest. She clasped her hands together and bowed, not daring to look him in the face and be once again enraptured by his Faith.

"I like doing it, Father. It lets me feel like that I can still help. I want to do whatever I can."

Father Clayton reached out and took one of her hands in both of his. If his presence was a burning sensation, his light grasp made her feel like her hand was plunged into molten metal. She sucked in breath out of force of habit and had to catch herself from stumbling. He immediately let go of her hand, dropping it like it was toxic and taking a step back.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know..."

"It's alright. I should go. You have another mass to prepare for."

"Rohesia..."

She didn't listen to what else he might have to say. She turned and sprinted out of the church, using all of the willpower she could muster not to summon a supernatural burst of speed. Even the rays of the sun felt cool compared to the heat of his presence. She looked down at her hand as she ran, expecting to see scorch marks where he had touched her. If there were any, they had already healed.

Rohesia dropped into her car, turning the key in the ignition so hard that it snapped after the engine turned over. She'd fix it later. Right now, she needed

to get out of there. As she pulled past the entrance to the church, she saw Father Clayton standing at the top of the steps. He had a frown on his face and his shoulders sagged. He held up his hands in prayer and bowed to her as she left.

As she drove through the streets, Rohesia calmed herself. She knew his touch would burn. That was not the problem. In fact, she welcomed the pain. If it was up to her, she would have let him hold onto her hand until it burst into flame and she crumbled to dust at his feet. It would be fitting. That wasn't what necessitated her hasty departure. She couldn't have him realize that the success of his entire parish was thanks to a vampire. If he knew that, he might start to doubt his faith. She couldn't allow that to happen. There were far too few faithful in the world today. The world needed him.

There was only one thing for it; it was time to move on. It had been a good fifteen years, but even if it were not for this incident, she would need to leave. People would start to question why she hadn't aged; how she looked the same now as she did when they first met her. Makeup could only go so far. She needed to find another church, somewhere she could start fresh with another person of true faith.

When she went home, it took all of five minutes for her to pack her belongings. There were few things in her life that were worth keeping. Even without her unnatural haste, it couldn't have taken more than half an hour to gather up everything worth salvaging. She planned to be gone and two towns over before anyone thought to look for her at her home.

Rohesia traveled North. It had been a long time since she had been to New England, and perhaps it was time to return and see what it was like now. She drove through the night, enjoying the break from the glare and the decrease in traffic. Somewhere around one in the morning, she stopped and checked her supply. Only five packs left. She would need to find a hospital soon. That would be a simple enough task. The harder job was finding a church to support that was worth the effort and would bring her the painful salvation she deserved.

She started her search in the smaller towns. Experience had taught her that they were a more fruitful target. Plus, she usually did not need to deal with the politics of other cursed and soulless monsters. Over the days and weeks, her circle tightened, until she found herself in the suburbs of Boston, still looking for a suitable church to support.

On one such foray, she turned a corner and found herself staring at a mosque across the street. Instantly, all of her muscles froze. Rohesia could feel the heat of the fire as the mosque burnt to the ground around her. Screams of unearthly pain echoed in her ears as people were burnt alive and their skin curled back in a crisp. Her nostrils were filled with the odor of burning flesh and hair, strong enough to make her gag. Several of her knightly brethren had

done just that, curled up in the corners of the mosque, their stomachs voiding themselves in a sickening splatter.

A knight in a surcoat covered in soot and blood grabbed her by the shoulder. You could barely see the red Templar cross underneath all the filth. His face was blacked from ash and thick where blood dripped down the side of it to turn the ash into a paste. He spoke in old English, familiar to her even though she hadn't heard it in years.

“Make sure no infidels escape! Let them all burn in the fires of God!”

With those words he shoved her outside to guard the entrance, her mission clear. She did as she was ordered, slaughtering anyone who came through that door who wasn't a member of her company. She was forced to watch as she skewered people crawling out on their stomachs, one hand reached up in the universal sign of mercy. A sign she was compelled to ignore.

A blaring horn shook her out of the memory and back to reality. She jumped in the seat hard enough that the top of the steering wheel cracked under her grip. She let go, and her hands trembled, drumming out a staccato beat when they hit the dash. The impatient driver behind her blared on his horn again, now with extra length and fervor. Rohesia stared ahead, unable to see her surroundings beyond what was only a few feet in front of her face. She turned the wheel and inched forward, pulling over to the side of the road. The other driver swerved around her, blaring his horn the entire time and shouting at her through his window, but she didn't notice.

The concept of time completely fled without leaving any trace of where it went. By the time Rohesia was aware of her surroundings, she was in a completely different section of the city and it was dark. She got out of the car, wanting to feel the air on her skin, hoping that it would help pull her back into awareness.

She had gone a few blocks before she felt a prickling sensation. It was an itching feeling, the kind that is a warning of the pain to come. Rohesia embraced the feeling, searching for the source. It took her a while, but she managed to track it down, finding a young man whose aura had the pure color she was looking for. He was a man of Faith.

Rohesia followed him, keeping a safe distance so he wouldn't see her, but making sure never to lose track of where he went. Over the next few days she spied on him. His name was Kevin, and she learned where he lived, where he worked, and most importantly, where he went to church. Her soul ached for the week to end, for Sunday to come so she could attend mass where a true believer worshipped. When that day arrived, Rohesia waited until Kevin had been inside for a few minutes before she followed him. She didn't want to take any chances. As she approached the door, she bowed her head, picked up her crucifix, and muttered a silent prayer to the Almighty.

She closed her eyes and a smile crossed her face as she picked up her foot and prepared to cross the threshold. She was sure that at long last, she had found another church to help. Surely it had to be worthy if it attracted a man with Faith.

Her eyes shot open and wide as she stepped inside. Rather than the painful burn of the devout, she felt a cold chill like jumping into an ice-covered lake. The hairs on the back her neck stood on edge and her upper lip curled back in a snarl as she surveyed the scene in front of her.

The pews were half full, but the only parishioner of true faith was Kevin. The others were all standard church goers – those going through the motions but not having the true sense of devotion and belief that hurt her kind. She ignored them. What caught her attention and held it was the priest. Not only was he not a man of Faith, he was a soulless demon like her. It was an affront and a spit in the face of all that was good and holy. Rohesia tightened her fists until the nails punctured her skin and she began to bleed.

She walked forward, discretely wiping her hands on her dark pants, trying to hide the blood from anyone who might glance her way. He noticed, though – the fake priest. She saw his nostrils flare when the blood first ran free and his tongue briefly dance out between his lips, too fast for a human to notice. She forced herself to sit down, and go through the motions of mass. Every prayer was muttered through clenched teeth, and when Communion was offered, for the first time in her life, she refused to partake.

At the end of the mass, she stayed in her seat, watching as the others filed out of the building. To her surprise, Kevin stayed behind and approached the altar to speak with the charlatan. He asked some questions about the church, but in the middle of his asking, he froze in place. The monster reached out and tilted Kevin's head back, exposing his neck. He looked up at Rohesia and grinned the smile of a soulless predator.

Rohesia burst into motion, tossing aside the entire pew in front of her as she charged forward. The wood splintered against the stone wall. The fake priest tried to twist and position Kevin in between the two of them, but Rohesia was too fast. She maneuvered around Kevin's body and slammed the full force of her momentum into the priest's chest with her fist. He soared through the air, breaking through the altar with a crash until collapsing in a heap at the back of the church.

“What's going on?”

There was no time to worry about Kevin. She didn't know what her opponent was capable of, but she was sure that such an injury wouldn't leave him out of the fight for long. She sprang forward, hoping to land on him before he had a chance to recover. He saw her coming and held up a hand as if to stop her. She brought her fist back, ready to pound it through his chest.

The vampire priest turned to mist as Rohesia's fist came smashing down with enough force to crack the stones. The cloud retreated, moving away a few steps before coalescing once more into a humanoid shape. The monster dusted off his robes while he looked at his opponent, his wounds already starting to heal. He locked his gaze onto hers, and Rohesia felt a chill that froze her muscles in midstride.

"Impressive strike. I was going to offer to share my meal with you, but now I see I've misjudged your nature. I think I'll make you watch while I feast on this human you care so much about."

He grinned and turned to face Kevin. As soon as their eyes met, Kevin stopped cowering. He stood up straight and walked towards the vampire, his feet scuffing on the steps as he climbed them. He lifted his head back, exposing his neck once again. The fake priest looked up at her and showed his fangs.

"I've always found the truly Faithful to be a wonderful delicacy, wouldn't you agree?"

Rohesia let out a wordless scream of rage, breaking the mystical hold on her body. Her muscles burned with the heat of blood as she sent it pouring through her system. The vampire inched closer to Kevin's neck, but Rohesia moved on a different timescale. She grabbed him by the neck and spun around, picking him up off the ground and twirling him like he was a toy. With a sickening crunch, she slammed him into the cement floor.

Reaching over, she grabbed a shard of stone about the size of her hand, slamming it into her opponent's right shoulder, sinking deep through and pinning him to the ground. She stood up and dropped her foot against his chin and jaw, forcing him to turn away from her and Kevin, applying enough pressure to make it clear his jaw could shatter in an instant. Only then did she slow her mad rush.

The charlatan screamed as best as he was able to, given everything that had happened in the space of a few seconds. His free arm flopped around, not even trying to do anything in his pain-induced madness.

"But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."

The vampire under her heel stopped his screaming and flopping, reaching up to grab at her leg with his free hand. She twisted her boot, reminding him of his precarious situation.

"What are you talking about?"

"The Bible, the good book, which you profane by your very existence, let alone playing a charlatan and corrupting those of faith!" As she spoke, Rohesia flexed through her leg making her prey flap around in vain.

“Let me go!”

“No. You will be removed from this earth so that you can no longer taint a holy place with your presence.”

The vampire chuckled and Rohesia released a bit of the pressure through his jaw, surprised at his reaction. He glanced at her out of the corner of one eye.

“You can’t stop us. We’re everywhere. You think I’m alone in this? You think this was my grand plan? You came to the wrong city.”

“Who leads you?”

“He’ll do far worse than you ever could if I tell.”

Rather than speak, Rohesia compressed her lips together into a thin line and ground her heel against his cheekbone. The vampire priest tried to grab at her leg, but she swatted it away with the back of her hand.

“Wait! Doesn’t your precious Bible talk about forgiveness?”

“Not for those who have no soul.”

Rohesia put all of her weight through her foot and stomped through the vampire’s skull to the ground underneath. He didn’t have time to scream before she incapacitated him. She’d need to take care of the body to make sure he was put to rest for good, but first she needed to check on Kevin.

He was huddled against the first pew, trembling so hard he was unable to move. His eyes were wide, white around his entire pupil. Only when she got close did he blink, and his eyes started to focus. He saw her coming for him and backpedaled away, sliding across the carpeted floor.

“No! Get away from me! You’re one of them! A monster!”

Rohesia opened her mouth to say something, but realized there was nothing she could say. She was a monster; she couldn’t deny it. Kevin managed to get his feet underneath him and stumbled to the door, falling through it as he burst into the sunlight beyond. Rohesia watched him go. She’d need to keep an eye on him. Most kine did not do well once exposed to the horrors of the night. But first, she needed to take care of the body.

As she took care of the vampire, making sure he could never return, she pondered over his words. If a vampire had set up a network of phony churches, she needed to stop him. That was a crime against everything that she believed in, and she couldn’t let it go unpunished. There was no one else with the ability and inclination to do what had to be done. Perhaps it was time once again to take up the mantle of the warrior.

Over the next several days, Rohesia split her time watching over Kevin and searching for other churches that might be infested. Thankfully, Kevin’s

faith never wavered. He never spoke to anyone about what happened and continued to attend church regularly, just a different church. It wasn't led by a true believer, but it was at least a human who seemed to have good enough intentions. Rohesia was willing to bet that Kevin didn't even remember the incident. She stayed in the shadows, not wanting him to see her and risk triggering a psychological catastrophe.

During that time, she managed to find another church led by a vampire. As soon as she crossed the threshold, Rohesia felt it. Churches led by the truly faithful burned, churches led by humans were just buildings, but the churches led by these imposters chilled her with their unholy aura. She kept up her rituals, but was not surprised to find the holy water wasn't properly blessed.

The vampire recognized Rohesia as soon as she arrived. The woman matched her stare and seemed to offer a challenge without saying any words. She knew why Rohesia was here. Years of training warned Rohesia that it might be a trap. When mass was over, Rohesia filed out with the rest of the church-goers, filtering her way through them and around to the back of the building. Trap or not, she wasn't going to let the imposter escape now that she had been found out.

Rohesia found the back door to the priest's private room, attached to the back of the church. She grabbed the handle and shoved, forcing the lock open. The wood around the lock splintered, but in the space of an eye blink, Rohesia was inside the chamber and had the door closed behind her.

The other vampire was waiting for her, and matched her speed as she rushed forward and grabbed Rohesia's wrist, attempting to throw her to the ground. She held a wooden stake in her other hand, point whistling as it rushed through the air. Rohesia went with the pull, dropping to the ground and forcing her opponent to over-commit. She brought her knees up into the imposter's abdomen, so that she rolled over and crashed into the ground. She scrambled to her feet before Rohesia could press her advantage. The two women stood at opposite sides of the room, staring at each other and looking for an opening.

"The violence of the wicked will drag them away, because they refuse to act with justice."

Rohesia rushed forward, twisting at the last moment to let the stake pierce her skin, but off target. It scraped across the right side of her chest, a superficial wound that would heal quickly. In exchange, Rohesia got one hand around her opponent's vestment. She tightened her grip and hoisted the charlatan off the ground and into the wall behind her. With her other hand, Rohesia punched, delivering a blow hard enough to crack several ribs.

The fake priest was fast, and continued her assault, pulling back the stake and trying once again to drive it into Rohesia's chest. Only centuries of experience saved her as Rohesia snapped her elbow out, catching the other wom-

an's forearm and splintering the bones. The stake dropped from a limp hand, and Rohesia snatched it out of the air. She circled her arm around, piercing the woman's skin and applying just enough pressure to crack a couple of the ribs, but stopping before penetrating the heart.

"Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence."

The charlatan spat in Rohesia's face.

"You'll never find him. He knows who you are and what you are. He's going to keep bleeding your precious faithful and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Then I shall have to kill each and every one of you until he decides to reveal himself."

Rohesia drove the stake deep into the vampire's heart, pinning her to the wall. After she took care of the monster, she took some time to clean up the chambers with the reverence they deserved. She was not capable of blessing or consecrating anything, but she could at least clean and organize the room. Hopefully, that small gesture would be a start towards purifying the profanities that occurred here.

Now that she felt Kevin was safe, Rohesia dedicated herself to finding the corrupt churches and making good on her claim. Over a period of two weeks, she found three more churches and proceeded to exterminate their fake priests. She didn't waste time tracking down the ringleader. She knew enough of vampire politics that he would need to make himself known to her. She was disrupting his territory, and if he wanted to continue to have others under his thrall, he would need to handle the situation. She was making it clear that none of his lackeys would be up to the task.

So it was that she wasn't surprised when the imposter of the fourth church vanished as soon as the service was over, leaving behind an invitation for Rohesia.

"I have been aware of your movements and am somewhat offended at the affront you have taken towards my perfectly legitimate business. It follows all the regulations and laws of our local prince, but I can see that you are inclined to take offense at my enterprise. Clearly we must meet to resolve our differences. I shall await your arrival at the following address this upcoming morning, three o'clock sharp. Please, do not be late. I would hate to have any injustices occur as a result of your tardiness.

Respectfully,

William Hughes"

Rohesia's eyes narrowed as she read the message. At long last she would be able to bring the affront to God to an end. She decided to patrol the ad-

dress during the day, scouting the potential field of battle and knowing where any traps might hide. A good warrior did not enter battle recklessly. The site picked out by her adversary was a warehouse, old and tattered. It was in an area of the city that didn't see much traffic, even during the middle of the day. The windows of the building were covered with so much filth that they were impossible to see through.

In short, it was the perfect site for a battle away from prying eyes.

When the time for the battle came, she parked a few blocks away and opened a locked case stored in the hidden compartment of her car meant to hold a spare tire. Inside were the arms and armor she used during the battle at Constantinople, and for the following years as a hunter. They were unnecessary now, but wearing them felt like a form of divine service. They reminded her of her cause, and the closeness to the Almighty she used to have. While she never repaired the armor or blade, she cared for them and kept them safe from the ravages of time.

The maille was tattered and torn in several places, hanging loose especially at her left side where there was a gaping hole from a lance that would've killed a normal human. She belted her sword around her waist, feeling comfortable with the familiar weight against her left hip. Her tunic had long since been lost. It was not as resilient to age as the metal was.

Rohesia knelt and pulled out her crucifix from underneath her armor, holding it up to her lips and praying. When she finished, she stood and felt the rush of blood through her body as she willed herself to get faster. She dashed to the meeting site, rushing through the door and standing in the middle of the warehouse. He was here. She could feel it. The cold was intense, but there was also a slight burning. How could he possibly be a man of Faith as well as a vampire? It didn't make sense, but there was no mistaking the sensations.

As he walked out in front of her, she understood. He was impeccably dressed, wearing a suit that practically shined in the limited moonlight filtering through the gritty windows. The heels of his expensive shoes clicked on the cement as he walked towards her. Behind him was one of his lackeys, someone that she had never seen before, but clearly a vampire. He wore vestments, something that made her hands tighten into fists just at the sight. And to make matters worse, he had one of his hands wrapped around Kevin's neck, a tight grip just a fraction of an inch from being lethal.

As she glanced around, she saw two other vampires approach on opposite sides, each one of them holding an enthralled human captive. Each of the humans burned with the intensity of Faith.

"I see that we have managed to capture your attention. That's a good thing. I'm also glad to see that you believe in the value of punctuality. I would hate for there to be more bloodshed, especially from the truly devout. They

are a rare breed these days, wouldn't you agree?" He smiled as he gestured to the enthralled humans, as if their presence was not obvious enough.

"Then said Jesus unto him, put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."

The vampire behind William snorted and spoke up before his superior had a chance to say anything.

"That's a little rich since you're the one with the sword. Seriously, you look like you got lost on the way to the Ren fair. Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is irrelevant. And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them."

William held up a hand behind him, snapping out two fingers in a curt gesture that cowed the younger vampire before any words left his lips. "Hold your tongue, Aaron. We are in the presence of a celebrity. Tell me, Rohesia, is that the same sword you used to kill so many of your own kind?"

"It is."

There was no mistaking the glint in his eyes and the desire. His smile shifted from a mask to one of true happiness. Rohesia narrowed her eyes and once again looked the man over, searching for anything that could jog her memory. But he was just another affront to the Almighty.

"You killed my sire. I remember it well. I've been waiting for this moment for centuries. You've grown soft and revealed your weakness. You care for these insignificant cattle as if they mattered. And now, they will be your undoing. At last, I will have my justice. If you even think of denying me, I'll have them all slaughtered and turned. You can't save them."

Rohesia met William's gaze without blinking or changing the expression on her face. The space of a few seconds stretched out the tension in the room. Rohesia burst into motion faster than any eye except for William's could follow. She charged forward, drawing her blade and leveling the tip out in front of her. William sprang to the side, getting out of the way of her attack.

But the attack was not meant for him.

The weapon sank into Kevin's chest all the way up to the hilt, sticking out through his back and piercing Aaron through the heart. Rohesia rested a hand on Kevin's head, cradling it as she tore her blade free and lowered him to the ground.

"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

His body had barely touched the floor before she burst into motion again, this time veering towards one of the other vampires with a human captive. Again she

sank her weapon deep into the faithful's chest, impaling both of them on it in a single stroke. She cradled the woman's head as she eased her body to the ground.

"What are you doing? You're a monster!" William screamed at her, still in the same spot he sprang to when trying to evade her first attack.

Rohesia sprinted to take out the third vampire and hostage pairing. This way she knew their souls would be saved and they would have a quick and painless death. She cradled the final member of the faithful to the ground, wishing there was another way. But they died with Faith, and now their souls had gone on to Heaven.

"We are all monsters. I learned that even before I became what I am now. *And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*"

"I will have my vengeance!"

William let loose a cry that sounded with all the fury of his years, and he charged forward with a speed that matched her own. She swung the blade, hoping to end the combat before it really began, but he ducked underneath the arc and slammed his shoulder into her abdomen. The impact forced her back and she barely managed to jump out of the way before his fingers tightened around her throat. He continued to charge, pressing his advantage and keeping her on the defensive. He batted her blade aside, but she expected the maneuver and it left him open as she slammed her heel into his hip, making him crumple to the ground. Pushing off of his arms, he launched himself backward, putting as much distance between them as he could manage.

It was Rohesia's turn to advance. Her blade sang as it blurred from one side to the other, cutting through the air and coming dangerously close to ending the fight. Within seconds, William's clothes were covered in gouges, tinged red from blood even though the skin underneath had healed. Now that she was no longer off balance, it was clear who was the superior fighter.

William twisted past her blade, receiving a deep gouge in the arm, but managing to slam both fists into her torso and drive her back a step. It wasn't much, but Rohesia noticed he took a deep breath and adjusted his stance. When he did, the darkness tightened around him in response. Rohesia rushed forward as black bands appeared over his body and four tentacles sprouted from his torso. She sliced at him, but the black band around him turned her attack aside. Before she had a chance to recover from her charge, a tentacle clubbed her in the chest. She sprang back, jumping out of range as a second tentacle swiped through the air where she was, attempting to grasp a wayward limb.

With this new threat, Rohesia circled around, dancing in and out of range, seeing how far William could reach. When she thought she had it figured out, she advanced, waiting for an opening. He lunged at her, matching her speed,

and she danced away, staying safe, or so she thought. One of the tentacles extended and wrapped around her arm, picking her up and tossing her into a wall. It buckled from the force of the impact and the sound of shearing metal echoed through the warehouse.

Not wanting to give up the advantage, he pounced, springing forward and reaching out with all four of his dark appendages. Rohesia ducked under them and slashed at his stomach. He pulled back, trying to dodge the blow. The weapon cut through one of the black bands and bit into the skin underneath. Rohesia had no time to savor her small victory as she sprang away, managing to jump over a tentacle as it swiped through the air where she had been standing a moment before.

Rohesia retreated, staying out of his reach and approaching one of the corners of the warehouse. Some sense in her screamed, and she ducked, just as a tentacle formed out of the darkness in the corner to try and grab her neck. William laughed as he advanced on her, another shadow limb extending from the darkness to her right. She was forced to charge forward, right into William.

The first tentacle tried to knock her back, but Rohesia dropped down to one shin and ducked her head, sliding underneath it. She sprang from coiled legs, leaping up over the second attack and dropping down on top of William like a lethal dart. He dropped onto his back, and swept a tentacle up in front of him, curling it around her arm and stopping the blade just inches from his throat. He squeezed, grinning as he heard the muscles and bones in her arm straining, attempting not to break. Rohesia growled in response.

One of the tentacles in the wall reached out and grabbed her left arm, pulling it back and towards the ceiling. He forced the tentacles to pull harder, threatening to tear her apart. She still refused to scream.

“I’ve won. This moment, is mine.”

He grinned up at her with a feral glint in his eyes.

Rohesia dropped her blade, the weapon falling toward William’s chest. Using another burst of speed, she snapped her hips up, ignoring the popping sound coming from her right shoulder. She brought her feet up above the hilt of the blade and then snapped them down, driving the weapon through William’s chest and pinning him to the ground.

The sudden shock made him lose his control enough for Rohesia to tear herself free. She dropped to the ground and grasped the hilt in her left hand. In one smooth motion, she wrenched it free and circled it over her head, dropping the edge down in a blow that sent William’s head rolling across the warehouse floor.

“Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it fully.”



Lies, Damned Lies

by Richard Dansky

It was not true, Genevieve decided, that there were lies, damned lies and statistics. Statistics in and of themselves were never liars. Instead, they were something worse - if you weren't careful, they told you exactly what you wanted to hear, every single time. And armed with what they'd told you - because it was math and therefore logical and infallible - you'd promptly march yourself right off a cliff.

She sighed, adjusted her model, and ran the numbers again. It was getting late, almost 4:30, and she wasn't sure the simulation would complete before dawn. That meant letting the sim run during the day, when she wouldn't be there to babysit it in case something went wrong, and it meant not being able to report anything to Wilberforce before nightfall.

She shook her head, brown curls spilling everywhere. Wilberforce was not known for his patience.

As if on cue, her phone buzzed. Fumbling, she pulled it out of her purse - God, she missed caffeine - and there was a message from Wilberforce staring back at her. It contained one word: WELL?

RUNNING ONE LAST SIMULATION, she typed back, praying auto-correct wouldn't retroactively turn her words unintelligible. With Wilberforce, that was the last thing she needed. I THINK I'VE ISOLATED THE ANOMALY.

Another buzz. ETA?

5:30 IF I'M LUCKY. NIGHTFALL IF IM NOT.

She hit send and waited, hoping for silence. A second ticked by. Two. Ten.

It buzzed. Genevieve nearly jumped out of her chair and the phone clattered to the floor. When she bent to pick it up, the text consisted of two words: BE LUCKY.

• • •

The office Wilberforce stood in was not his own. He didn't have one, really; he carried his world with him wherever he went, wired and connected in ways his elders and peers would seemingly never understand. To the uninitiated, he looked like a generic tech exec endlessly chasing that next unicorn valuation - black turtleneck, khakis, quietly ostentatious Breitling watch and neatly trimmed goatee. To the other Kindred of his generation, he looked like a bad decision, a detour into intangible businesses they saw no profit in.

To his young childer and ghouls, he was something else entirely. They were the ones hammering out his text messages for him, using the technology he so assiduously invested in but never seemed to find the time to learn himself. They were the ones exploring this brave new world on his behalf, while he remained safely behind and took credit for their discoveries - not that any of them would ever dare complain.

And to Oriel, who a thousand years ago had filled the gutters of a dozen cities with blood, he was an interesting investment, if not an indispensable one.

It was Oriel he stood with now, watching the sky turn pink over the Omaha skyline. Most of the others had long since slunk off to their havens, cautiously declining to race the dawn. Wilberforce, however, preferred squeezing every last second out of the night. An extra fifteen minutes every twenty-four hours might not seem like much, but over the centuries they added up.

He looked over at where Oriel sat, motionless, a raptor waiting for the slightest movement on the ground. Bald and hawk-nosed, the image fit him as perfectly as his bespoke suit and omnipresent black gloves. He, too, liked the mornings. It was how Wilberforce had first attracted his attention.

Now Oriel shifted, cocking his head at Wilberforce, smiling just a little bit at the younger vampire's impatience, so painfully visible in his posture. "She's sure?" he asked.

Wilberforce frowned. "She's thin blooded. She's not sure of anything. But this is her best guess."

"Send her in." Wilberforce half-turned toward the door and the older man stopped him. "After sundown. Like you said, she's thin blooded. I don't trust her to stay awake and coherent for the next ten minutes, and this conversation's liable to take a good deal longer than that."

"We don't need to talk to her."

"You're telling me this?" Oriel reached down for a delicate porcelain teacup and took a sip of something very thick and very red from it. "But trust me. If we just compel the information from her, we'll get only what we know

to look for. If we ask, she'll cheerfully give us everything we didn't know we needed. We just have to pay a little attention."

"It seems an unnecessary delay," Wilberforce grumbled. "When I was young, we knew to serve our Sires and our betters. The stakes, so to speak, were clear. Now you and I, with all our centuries between us, are waiting on some young nothing in order to make sure she gets her nap."

Oriel chuckled. "Don't mistake practicality for lack of vision, and don't dismiss your asset so quickly. This sort of work is precisely why we brought her into the fold. If she's right, then it's worth a little patience. And if she's not..." His voice trailed off.

"Discarded?"

"Oh, heavens, no, not my call at all. She's your responsibility. You decide what to do with her then." He sipped from his teacup. "Now, would you be a good fellow and get the blinds?"



The office Genevieve walked into was not large. Large offices, she'd learned long ago, were for those insecure in their power, and who needed the conquered space of the room around them to show visitors and underlings who was boss. The office she'd been summoned to, on the other hand, had no need to remind the vanquished who had won. Instead, it spoke of such elegant and unthinking power that it was clear that the vanquished in question were no longer around.

Windows dominated two walls, an unthinkable luxury for most Kindred. Stretching ceiling to floor, they offered a stunning view of the city, from riverside to residential neighborhoods fading in the distance. In the center of the room was a desk, massive and unadorned, with two chairs on one side of it and one chair on the other. Wilberforce sat in one of the two chairs on the near side. On the other side of the desk was something, someone else entirely. It was all Genevieve could do not to run, not to throw up, not to collapse whimpering on the understated carpet as she locked eyes with the man who clearly owned this place, and Wilberforce, and her.

Then Oriel smiled, and Genevieve felt the awful grip of his presence loosen. "Welcome," he said. "Take a seat next to Mr. Wilberforce. He's spoken quite highly of your work, and I'm anxious to see it."

Genevieve shot a glance at her boss, who gave the tiniest of shrugs to acknowledge the truth of the statement, then nodded impatiently toward the empty chair. Laptop tucked under her arm, Genevieve rushed to fill it.

"Give us the executive summary," Wilberforce said before she'd fully finished seating herself. "Save the math for later."

“Right.” Just breathe...or don’t, Genevieve told herself as she fired up the presentation. Same stakes as always, just life and death. The image of a map filled the screen, and she carefully placed it on the desk so Oriel could see it. “The problem Mr. Wilberforce gave me was shipping losses. Obviously the clan has leveraged its position here to take advantage of the city’s agribusiness reach around the world, and that means shipping raw and refined product worldwide. But our shipping losses have been, on average, about six percent higher than expected. Not a huge amount, certainly, and you could suggest that the original predictive models had failed to take into account climate instability as-”

“Summary,” Wilberforce said, grinding his teeth like Sisyphus paying attention to detail.

“Ah, right.” Genevieve swallowed, looked at Oriel, swallowed again, and tapped the screen. Swarms of dots began popping up across the map. “Here’s all our losses. The distribution looks random, right? But if you dig deeper, you find there’s an underlying network. Shipping factors. Specific crew members. Departure times. Go deep enough, and you find the connections.”

“Interesting.” Oriel leaned forward. “What I’d like is two things. One, a list of all the names who are part of this web. We’ll be making their positions available shortly, I think. And two, a more detailed report on how you put this together that I can study at my leisure.”

“But, sir, I’m not done.”

“Oh really?” Oriel stared at her, grinning. Next to her, she could feel Wilberforce’s shock and horror that she’d dared speak back to the creature - not a man, not for centuries, she understood that now - that held both their lives in its hand. “I think you’ve given me quite enough to go one, Miss Genevieve. You may go. I look forward to your deliverables, and to acting upon them.” He leaned back in his chair, then spun it to face the window. It was a dismissal, merciful and elegant, and she nearly stumbled as she raced to take it.

Wilberforce caught her near the elevator. The dismissal, it seemed, had been for him as well. “What the hell were you trying to pull there?” he demanded. “This isn’t some fucking unconference in San Francisco where you can walk all over trust fund babies who think they’re angel investors. Oriel is power. You don’t drive the conversation with him, not now, not ever.” He jabbed the “down” button angrily.

“You don’t understand,” Genevieve said. “There’s a piece of the data, a key element that-”

The elevator door whispered open. “Forget it,” Wilberforce said. “He has asked you for things. You will deliver precisely what he has asked for. And

you will take the next elevator.” He stepped into the car, turned, and glared at Genevieve until the doors mercifully shut.

Seconds passed. Eventually, Genevieve pressed the “down” button for herself. And then she tapped the screen of her laptop, where the network of pulsing dots collapsed into a single one. “They don’t understand,” she whispered to herself. “There’s someone behind this. And I know where they are.”

• • •

“The reports are good,” Oriel said thoughtfully. “The breakdown’s almost comprehensible. You did well plucking her out of that little pack of ruffians who’d inconvenienced her with semi-immortality. If I’d been paying attention I might have taken an interest in her before all that unpleasantness.”

“Thank you.” Wilberforce shifted uncomfortably where he stood. “And you have my apologies for her impertinence.”

Oriel shrugged. “I told you. I wanted to know what she wanted to tell us.”

“But you didn’t let her finish.”

“That’s because showing’s better than telling. Damn it, Wilberforce, you’d think you would have learned this by now.”

“Are you saying-”

A buzz from the intercom cut him off. “Mr. Oriel, we’ve detected activity on the card you requested we follow.”

“And?” The old man’s face was alight with glee.

“Multiple purchases. Plane ticket, hotel reservation, luggage, certain supplies at a hardware store, a few other sundries.”

Wilberforce made as if to speak, but Oriel silenced him with a gesture. “And the ticket is for?”

“Curacao, sir.”

“Ah. Thank you. That is all.” Oriel leaned back. “And that’s the rest of what she wanted to tell us.”

Wilberforce frowned. “She’s running? I can put a stop to that.”

“She’s not running away. She’s running to.”

“To what?”

“To the thing she really wanted to show me, of course. And now I’ll let her.”

• • •

She had a name, Don Ribiero, which she was pretty sure was false. An address vaguely near the touristy Punda neighborhood, which she was sure was only slightly more reliable than the name. But the data said Willemstad, despite the fact that the nearest of the hijackings had been over 300 miles away. And if Oriel and Wilberforce weren't going to let her tell them, then maybe she could show-

She stopped dead in the middle of throng headed for customs. Other passengers surged around her, cursing and complaining, while her mind raced. She could show them. She could show them. Maybe this had been her idea, to demonstrate initiative and bring back incontrovertible proof. Or maybe the seed had been planted, the little push given. Whoever had been taking the clan's shipments was surely a force to be reckoned with, more than she could hope to handle. Which meant she was, what? A fishing expedition? Bait?

Deep in the pit of her stomach, Genevieve felt a cold certainty about those hijacked ships. Whatever the official manifest said, it wasn't soybeans and wheat that the mysterious hijacker was after.

Briefly, she thought about turning around, booking a ticket back home and hoping nobody had noticed her absence. But the logistics of all-night flights from Omaha to Curacao had been nearly impossible to pull off. A return trip wasn't going to happen, at least not today. Better to carry on, then, or at least hunker down in a hotel and figure out what to do next.

She collected her bag and waited patiently for a taxi to take her to her hotel. Punda was one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city, and she knew from business travel back in her breathing days that hotels in old buildings meant small rooms with smaller windows. Easier to secure against the sun, usually easy enough to bribe the cleaning staff to stay out as well.

Her hunch proved right; her room had one window, narrow and tall, looking out over the water of Sint Annabaai. Genevieve checked her watch. Four hours til sunrise. Maybe enough time to go and get a meal, or maybe best to sit tight and try to think through what she was actually trying to accomplish here. Was she actually going to try to make contact with the target? If so, what was she going to say? How was she going to protect herself if (when, her sober self whispered) things went badly.

She walked over to the window and rubbed the back of her neck. Long flights were as rough on Kindred backs as they were on mortal ones, she decided ruefully. And if she was going to have to cover over the window in preparation for morning, she might as well take advantage of the view first.

It was beautiful, she admitted to herself. Across the water, multicolored lights twinkled, giving hints of the brightly painted buildings they adorned. The channel itself was black and smooth, reflecting the lights in slow, undulating patterns. A single boat made its way lazily northwards, its cabin lights low, its engine barely humming. Most of its running lights were extinguished, and it-

Genevieve froze.

There. On the boat.

The cabin lights flared to brightness. She could see a silhouette within, feel ancient eyes on her as the boat slid past. Then, a sense of what felt like amusement, and the boat was gone.

She blinked.

There was no sign of the craft, just shadows on the water and what looked to be early morning fog rolling in.

Genevieve allowed herself one very small, “Oh, God,” before turning and setting about barricading the hotel room door.



Genevieve awoke in the evening, refreshed. The foil she’d put up over the window was still there. The chair she’d wedged under the doorknob remained undisturbed. And she herself seemed to be unharmed. A call down to the front desk established, after a complicated back-and-forth, that there were no messages for her, and no packages either. Frowning, she checked her phone. There were no messages from Wilberforce, no emphatic demands or meeting requests or angry threats. Either he’d bought the hasty explanation she’d left for why she wasn’t at her desk, or he’d abandoned her.

Either way, she was on her own.

The thought was sobering. She freshened up, chose what she hoped was an outfit that didn’t immediately scream “tourist”, grabbed her bag and its contents and headed out. The address that the analysis had spat out she’d long since committed to memory; having it written down somehow made it seem more threatening, and final.

Out front of the hotel, the concierge waved down a cab, then gracefully assisted her into the vehicle. “Have a lovely evening, miss,” he said, then shut the door and the cab, a shiny black Toyota, was wheeling its way into the street.

“Where to, miss?” the driver asked. She gave him the address and he shook his head. “Why do you want to go there? There’s nothing on Dockweg, not at night, not for a pretty lady. Let me take you someplace nicer, a club maybe?”

Genevieve shook her head. “Just drive, OK?”

“You’re the boss,” the driver responded, and turned up the radio. Classical music flooded the car, occasionally interrupted by rapid-fire chatter in Dutch. Beautiful houses and bars slid by, to be replaced by stores and then industrial buildings, until finally the car came to a stop.

Genevieve looked around. “What is this place?”

“Address you gave me. Shipyard. You sure you don’t want to go somewhere else?”

She shoved a fistful of bills at the driver instead and stepped out into the night. Empty hulls, oily water, weeds poking up through cracked asphalt - she was a million miles away from where she’d expect to find the ancient predator whose presence she’d felt the night before. Yet here she was. Dimly, she was aware of the taxi taking off, its wheels spitting up gravel as the driver wasted no time heading back to where saner fares could be found. Out on the water, she could see lights moving - party boats, most likely, or slow container ships starting their long journey from the island’s refinery out to sea. But where she stood, there was nothing. “Damn it,” she said to herself. “I could have sworn the model was-”

And then the night came down and swallowed her.



Genevieve was on a boat when she awoke. The gentle rocking told her that much. A look around the small but elegantly furnished cabin told her that it was a rich man’s boat: leather upholstery, polished brass, polished teak furniture and ostentatiously placed crystal tumblers that she guessed were Waterford. She sat up. There was no one else in the room, and the doors at either end were unguarded. Wincing, she forced herself to her feet and tried the nearer one. It was locked.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot allow you to leave quite yet.” The voice came from the opposite door, and Genevieve whirled.

A woman stood there, arms folded across her chest and expression quizzical. Her features had a faint Latin cast, and her black hair was cropped short.

“I’m sorry,” Genevieve said, “but who the hell are you?”

“I think I am the one you’ve been looking for,” the woman said, and smiled. “Why don’t you be a good childe, and sit.”

Genevieve felt her will crumpling like a fistful of tin foil. This was the power she’d felt the night before, this was the implacable mind and the ancient will. She felt herself dropping into a chair, her bag tumbling to the floor beside her.

“Better,” the woman said. “Now, let us talk.” She stalked over to where Genevieve sat and settled into a chair opposite, all coiled power and easy grace. “Start with your name, and why you want me to think you are here.”

The younger vampire gaped. “You’re Don Ribeiro,” she stammered. “You’re the one.”

“Dona,” the other woman corrected her. “Though technically I can no longer claim the title, I’ve grown accustomed to it. Now, again. Who are you, and who sent you? The fools in New York?”

“Omaha,” Genevieve gasped. “I’m Genevieve Cole, and I’m from Omaha.”

Ribiero nodded. “Ah, the thin and hungry men. Drinkers of cow’s blood and merchants of corpses in shipping crates. And they sent you to stop me?”

The urge to defend Wilberforce rose up in Genevieve briefly; just as quickly she shoved it back down. “No, I’m here on my own. I just had to see, had to find out if the model was accurate. To see if you were here. And you are...” She felt herself trailing off, her face flushing red.

The older vampire pursed her lips. “I should kill you. Should have killed you the second you set foot on the island. That would have been the safe choice, the wise one. But your blood is so thin it would barely be worth the effort. And I cannot imagine who thought sending you to beard me in my own den was a good idea.”

“I told you, it was my idea!”

Ribiero shook her head. “You may think that. The dry men may allow you to think that. But trust me, just because you do not see the leash does not mean it isn’t there.”

“It’s not that,” Genevieve protested. “I... I think I’m here to warn you.”

“You? Warn me?” Ribiero laughed. “Of what?”

“That you can’t hide anymore.” Carefully, she reached down to her bag and pulled out the sheaf of printouts she’d brought with her. “The world’s gotten too small.”

“The ocean is very large. I’ve vanished into it before.”

Genevieve shook her head and proffered the papers. “You don’t understand. It’s not a matter of looking for you. It’s a matter of looking for the tracks you leave. Every time you take a ship, every time you buy fuel, every time you take on crew, it leaves a trace. Put them all together and I may not find you, but I’ll find the you-shaped hole in the rest of the map. And then I’ve found you anyway.” She shoved the printouts at her. “It’s all here. Everything that led me to you. Look.”

“It occurs to me that you are the only one who knows how this works,” Ribiero said, ignoring the offering. “It would be very easy to make you disappear.”

Genevieve glared at her. “Kill me if you want to. It’s not like I can stop you. But you can’t kill the data. You can’t murder the patterns. Someone else will just figure it out eventually, and then they’re going to come for you. Come for you for real.”

“Let them come.” Ribiero stood abruptly, her patience clearly gone. “If they are young and weak, then I’ll feast on them. If they are old and strong, I’ll vanish into the shadows like I always have.”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Genevieve found herself on her feet, found herself shouting with no idea why. “You can’t vanish. Not anymore. There’s no more shadows except the ones they let you have!”

Ribiero took a step closer. “In five hundred years, no one has let me have anything,” she hissed, her voice quiet and dangerous. “I do not intend to let that change now.”

Genevieve turned away. “Do you understand the technology we have now? What we can make it do? How small the holes you used to slip through have become? You’ve been stealing from some very old, very smart Kindred who have figured out that they can use people... Kindred like me to put this to work for them. It doesn’t matter if they don’t understand it because we understand it for them - and you don’t. You can’t just sail over the horizon any more because they can already see that far.”

“Ah.” Ribiero nodded, then glanced at the ceiling of the cabin. “I think I see what you are trying to say. I must ponder it for a moment. I regret to say, you must stay locked in here until I finish my deliberations. It is, of course, for your own protection.”

“Of course.” Genevieve dropped back into the chair, numb, as Ribiero exited the room. From somewhere outside, she heard shouting, and then something heavy striking wood. Maybe Ribiero had understood how easy it was now to be found. How once the eye knew to start looking, it would never stop until it had found its prey.

Her phone buzzed. Puzzled, she pulled it out. There was a text, from Wilberforce’s phone.

GOOD WORK. SIT STILL. WILL HAVE YOU OUT OF THERE SOON.

“Oh, shit. The phone.” The phone. Easy enough to trace, even with the precautions she’d taken. She’d led Wilberforce right to Ribiero, and now he would end her in the way he ended all his other problems: with extreme, precise violence.

For some reason, the thought made her sad.

There was more crashing now, and screaming, and some gunfire. The boat shuddered, and then went completely dark. Somewhere, heavy wood crunched and splintered.

Then, silence and the sound of a door opening. Ribiero stood there, clothes liberally splashed with blood. She was wearing Wilberforce’s watch.

“Apologies for that. Now, correct me if I am wrong, but this analysis you speak of. This tracking. Can the data not also be, shall we say, manipulated? Can the hunter not be lured with easy answers? I ask merely as a curiosity.”

Genevieve sat very still. “This...you fed noise into the system so I’d get this result. It was a trap all along.”

“A message to the dry men, yes. Do not try to find me. The day may yet come when your techniques and your tools are good enough to bring me to heel. But let me tell you this: any tool can be turned against its master.”

She yawned. “We’ll be docking soon. A driver will take you back to your hotel. You may stay in Willemstad as long as you wish, though stay too long and your masters may start to ask questions.”

“They’ll have questions,” Genevieve said.

“They will. And that is why I will give you no more answers.”





sundowning

By **Dellah S. Dawson**

The thing about oblivion, the thing they never show you in the movies or tell you in their pretty poems, is that death is very quick... but dying takes forever.

No, that's not quite it.

Cairn's pencil hovers over the black leather journal.

The thing about oblivion is that you're oblivious to when it begins.

Still not right.

She looks up at Nevin, swiping her bangs back. They were perfect when she got here this morning, but after a day of sitting by his hospital bed, hovering and tutting and calling nurses and lifting her velvet Mary Janes when his pee bag spilled across the gray tile, everything about her is out of place. She chose his favorite dress and petticoats and stockings today, hoping it would cheer him up. He's been out of it, mostly. Tomorrow, it's Emily the Strange pajamas, because if she's going to suffer, she's going to be cozy and look slightly evil while doing it.

"Cairn?"

She hops up, the journal forgotten. She's by the bed, her hand in his searching one, in moments.

"Yes, Master?"

Nevin turns his gaunt head and chuckles. "Don't... don't call me that."

He's always been thin and pale, the lucky bastard, but now she can see every muscle and tendon in his neck, every blue vein on his bare scalp. His eyes are sunken into violet shadows that he used to paint on, but there's no artistry to dying of cancer. Hospital gowns don't come in black. Everything here is white and bright or gray and dull. They wouldn't even let her bring

jar candles or incense. Fire hazards, of course. If they knew about her lighter or her razor blades, they'd be very upset.

"Nevin, then," she says gently, her fingers soft in his bony grasp.

"You came." His voice is raspy, quiet. He says it like he doesn't quite believe it. Like she would just leave him because he disappeared for six months without calling. On the phone, he gave her an address, and she'd hoped it was a pretty surprise, that he'd be waiting in a tea shop in his emerald green cape, holding a box of dark chocolates filled with blood-red cherry juice. This quiet desolation was not what she'd expected at all.

For someone obsessed with death, she considers this entire situation so... distasteful.

"Can I get you something? I brought your favorite tea cakes." She inclines her head toward the crisp paper bag beside her coffin-shaped purse.

"Tea cakes," he says, wistfully, before falling into a coughing fit. "Darling, I wish. They'll only let me have liquids now. Pudding and Jell-O and broth. How low the mighty have fallen."

He lifts a styrofoam cup and slurps through a bendy straw, his cheeks sucked in. The silence that follows is painful and as heavy as the rain they used to dance in as it pummeled the gravestones in their favorite cemetery.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she says, unable to hold back, unable to keep the petulance from her voice. "You disappeared. I thought you'd been changed. Snatched, and living as the Chosen without me. Partying with Dracula and Blade. When you called today..."

"Sorry to disappoint." He looks down, then tosses his head back in a mad, fluttering laugh. "You thought I was Chosen? Quite the opposite. I just didn't want you to see me like this. Tubes and bruises and the boring kind of pills. Kind of kills the masquerade, doesn't it?" He holds up his arms, plastic lines dangling like chains and bracelets had, once. "I had to give up vests when they put in the port. Had to take out the earrings and lose the crucifixes for the MRI. Couldn't wear lotion or cologne or makeup for surgery. Everything good about me got scrubbed off. I didn't want..." His arms drop, and he sighs, a sad whisper of breath. "It's not as pretty as I thought it would be, this wasting away. I feel nothing like Edna Pontellier or Annabel Lee. Artifice is vastly preferable to this reality."

Cairn hurries to her journal and scribbles that down. He's always been good at this sort of accidental genius, as if the muse whispers little tidbits in his ear when no one else is listening.

"Get down what snippets you can for posterity," he says, showing a glimmer of his old humor. "They'll be in with more drugs in five minutes, and I'll turn into a gibbering fool."

She looks up fondly, licks her lips, and tastes black lipstick. "I always liked you as a gibbering fool. But I have an idea."

His eyebrows raise, or they would, if he still had them. "I am not," he says slowly, "going to buy you absinthe again."

She blushes, remembering that party, one of many. "Not that. I have an idea about how to make you better."

The good cheer sloughs off his face, leaving a withered old man behind. Cairn had no idea twenty-two could seem old, but Nevin looks more like her great-grandmother now than the dashing boy in a top hat she met at the bookstore. "Nothing can make me better. They've tried everything. Believe me. There's nothing left. I'm more tumor than man now."

"*They* could help," she says with a knowing smile.

His hands flutter up briefly and fall on the pastel green blanket like dead bats. "Darling, the jig is up. The curtain is falling. There is no Them. Vampires aren't real. We had fun pretending, but now it's time to stop gluing on fangs and drinking red wine and playacting that we'll be young and beautiful forever. It was all a lie. A pretty lie, but a lie nonetheless." His head falls to the side, his fine gray eyes quivering shut. "Give it up. Go live a real life."

"This is real," she says, holding out her belled black skirt to curtsy.

His long fingers pluck at his gown in a sick imitation of a bow.

"This," he says with grave finality, "is real."



She's back the next evening, dressed in her black flannel pajamas, her hair up in twisted braids. With a book open in her lap and a pomegranate in her lunch box, she curls her feet under and prepares to wait. Nevin's breaths are shallow and fast, and he sometimes cries out or twitches in his sleep. When the nurses come by to prod and poke him, he doesn't rouse. Cairn is patient, though. She can wait.

"Cairn?" he whispers, even quieter than yesterday. "You came back?"

"Oh ye of little faith." She grins and dances to the side of the bed, holding up a piece of paper. When he doesn't look, she nudges his bony shoulder, ever so gently, until his head rolls over. "Look, silly. I brought you a present."

His weary eyes scan the flier. She pasted it together using letters from newspapers and magazines and torn-up pages of Edward Gorey drawings, then ran off a hundred copies and stapled and taped them all over the city. On telephone poles, on phone booths, on the sides of construction fences and clubs and funky little shops. She even put on her combat boots and

ventured down some dark, dripping alleys, in case that was the sort of place *They* preferred.

“Needed: VAMPYRE,” Nevin read. He gives a sad little giggle. “Let’s not beat around the bush, darling. Ahem.” His eyes find the next line. “*Will-ing childe seeks embrace of loving sire. Let me serve you forevermore. Was once a young, stylish, and handsome Daniel Day Lewis lookalike, but my time in this body is limited. Cancer is a bitch. Claim me before the afterlife does.* And then you’ve listed your pager number.” He lets the paper fall to his chest and pins her with an angry glare. “Oh, honey. Please tell me you don’t still believe this shit is real?”

She steps forward until the bars on his bed bite into her thighs. “I do. I have to. For you. For us.”

“And has anyone paged you yet?”

With a squeak, she turns away and fetches her pomegranate, dipping red-stained fingers into the messy fruit.

“Oh, Cairn. They did. And they made you feel silly, didn’t they?”

She pops seeds into her mouth and chews, letting the red juice drip down painted lips.

“Tell me, darling,” he teases.

She looks down and swallows. “I called, and a voice said *Blah blah I vant to suck your blood.*”

He nods slowly and looks at her like she’s a sweet child who can’t stop touching the stove. “And yet you left them up anyway, didn’t you?”

In a tiny voice, she whispers, “I have to keep hoping.”

Nevin’s gaze swings out the window. Beyond the thick glass, ugly machinery whirs on a bed of gray gravel, heaters and air conditioners and fans. It’s the most depressing thing he’s ever seen, and it’s not what he wants to watch as he takes his dying breath. The clouds are heavy and dark, the sky too angry to turn violet.

“It’ll rain soon, darling. Your sins will be washed away like angel tears.”

“Maybe.”

But the mischievous smile between her dimples tells him that not all the signs are outdoors, where the rain can dissolve them. He’s always loved this about her—the mix of softness and impishness poured liberally with blood and black ink. He didn’t know how she’d take the news, whether she’d fall in his lap crying or rage at him and stomp around, but he didn’t expect this... this sweetness. This forgiveness. This stupid, damnable hope. People like them—broken, strange, abandoned—didn’t hope.

Well, people like *him* didn't hope. He was a foppish brooder, and she a naively morbid bon vivant. They were both loners until they found each other. Now he was leaving her for the far shore they'd spent so many drunken nights discussing as if it were a romantic travel destination and not a cold, dark crypt. Of course she'd be looking for answers, for a way out.

Of course she was only fooling herself.

Of course he'd keep letting her do so.

One of them should still be able to dream.



His eyes flutter closed. Time passes. A nurse hurries in, lines of annoyance etched on her face. Cairn picks at a thread on her sleeve as the nurse presses buttons and pushes syringes into tubes. Nevin's eyes fly open, find Cairn, go unfocused, and then he sighs, his face dreamy and distant with relief. And he's just... gone. Not dead gone, but drugs gone. Funny, how they'd both agreed to stick to alcohol, to eschew drugs, to avoid the perils of addiction and keep their intentions and minds and hearts pure, and now he seems to spend most of his time doped out of his mind.

So not goth.

"Did he eat?" the nurse asks Cairn. The woman has sensible blond hair and claw bangs and chews her gum like cud. Cairn looks at the untouched tray on his bedside table and lets her lip wrinkle up.

"He ate babies," she says in a monotone. "Just hundreds of them. Blood everywhere." She waggles her red-stained fingers, and the nurse gives her a familiar withering look.

"If he wakes up again, see if you can get him to eat some ice cream. He needs calories if he's going to keep fighting. Maybe he'll actually listen to..." Brown eyes sweep up and down the pudgy pixie in black. "You."

As the nurse leaves, Cairn's pager beeps, and she fetches it out of her coffin purse. The number is local, and she squeaks her excitement. Maybe this is the one. She used the right words and added beautiful images and if anyone is worthy of a real vampire's attention, it's Nevin. He's loyal, committed, noble. He was once beautiful, which she suspects they like. He would respect their rules and brush his hair and cut a dashing figure, like Brad Pitt in *Interview with the Vampire*. As the Louis to her Lestat, he's had plenty of practice moping elegantly.

Pulling a chair over, she drops the heavy hospital phone in her lap and dials the number. It answers on the third ring.

"Greetings," she says in her most cultured voice.

There's a pause, and then a sigh. "Honey, I don't know what this is or what you think it is you're doing, but you need Jesus. He's the only one that can save you. He died for your sins. Stop serving Satan, and—"

Cairn hangs up with an angry click. That banshee sounded too much like her grandmother at every family gathering, pushing lace-collared dresses covered in a vomit splash of flowers into Cairn's hands and slipping Bible verses into her Christmas presents.

Replacing the phone, she tiptoes back to the chair by the window and lowers the blinds almost all the way. They won't go the last three inches, no matter how she tugs. The machinery outside, lit by the room's light, resembles some twisted playground, and it's not the pretty kind of grotesque. Turning her back to the window, she picks up her pomegranate and pops another seed in her mouth. She's a creature of the goddamn night, and she won't leave until the sun comes up.



Sometime, much later, her pager buzzes in her lap and wakes her from unfriendly dreams. She's curled up in a ball, and some horrible nurse has tucked a hideous green blanket around her. Nevin is trapped in another nightmare, moaning and thrashing like a mouse caught in a trap. She hates to see him like this. He's different without his long, blond hair, and there's a mad desperation about him that makes her uneasy.

Unfolding, she stretches and stands and checks her pager. Another local number. She pulls the phone across the room and dials.

"Hello?" she says, dreading the worst.

"I hear your call. I will find you," a voice says, and she goes cold down her to toes.

"Who is this?"

The only answer is the click of a phone hanging up.

She throws her pager in her purse and leaves it on the bedside table beside the phone as she retreats back to her chair. She's not answering any more pages.



"Cairn?"

The girl blinks and rouses slowly, and Nevin is reminded of a kitten with a round belly full of milk, asleep by the fire, even it's really just a cold, sterile hospital room in the darkest dead of night. Why the sweet creature has decided to stand vigil on his deathbed, he doesn't know. His parents disowned him long ago, and she's one of the few people who know that, although she doesn't know the real reason. Perhaps she's trying to make up for that with-

drawal of love by sacrificing herself on the altar of boredom and depressing shit. He's asked her to leave, sweetly, several times, and she's refused. Given his druthers, he wouldn't choose to have anyone stick around just to watch him slowly die. It's bound to be ugly, and he abhors ugly.

"Go home, darling. I wouldn't be here if I didn't have to be. You don't need to subject yourself."

He uses his proper voice, and she smiles like she's seeing an old friend for the first time in forever. Cultured, soft, aristocratic. He watches a lot of British dramas when he can't sleep, which is always. He thinks of it as his vampire voice, but it's the only one Cairn has ever known. At least until she showed up in the hospital and heard what's left of him, sputtering and stumbling over simple words.

"I'm waiting," she says. But she doesn't say what she's waiting for, and he's always been able to tell when she's acting cagey.

"And why's that?"

The toe of her scuffed Mary Jane twists against the tile and she looks eight instead of eighteen. "Nothing..." she says, and they both know that's a lie.

"Waiting for me to die?"

Her black-lined eyes fly wide open.

"Never! How can you say that?"

He gives a sad pantomime of an insouciant shrug. "Because it's going to happen. It's creeping close. I can feel it, like the night wind through a window I'd thought was shut."

Cairn turns and glances out a three-inch gap under the curtain. It's just a strip of black outside, and yet she tugs at the hideous fabric like she can force it down through fear and sheer force of will.

"It's not close. It's not creeping. There's still time. You can fight it."

"Listen, darling. Cairn." His old smile ghosts across his face for the briefest moment. "*Karen*. I really can't. I literally can't. I've tried. It's bigger than you think it is. Exhausting, really."

A cold silence falls like snow between them, and for the first time, Cairn looks lost.

That's when they hear a lopsided shuffle out in the hall. Ragged, flapping boots appear under the striped privacy curtain that dangles across the door. As they watch, the figure wraps long, dirt-stained fingers around the curtain and slithers into the room.

Nevin doesn't know what it is, but it sure as hell isn't a nurse.

“And this is the childe,” the thing says, ending on a slightly interrogatory note.

Nevin can barely breathe, and not in the usual way. He’s fantasized about vampires since discovering Anne Rice, and he’s always hoped to swoon into the arms of his own Lestat one day, red blood pearly up on a flawless throat. But this... thing? It’s like something that crawled out of the sewer in an old Max Schreck movie. Maggot-white skin. Misshapen, bat-wing ears lined with the sort of curling hair that one finds nestling in the noses of old men. Bulbous, yellow-tinged eyes with distended black pupils that don’t quite seem to focus on the same thing. It’s clad in all black, heavy rags torn here and there and slicked with filth. Its hands are like sausages left in the fridge for a year, slender and frozen white and tipped with cat claws. Nevin can’t tell if it’s male or female, old or young, evil or sympathetic. All he knows is that it’s no joke, no costume, and everything about it repels him utterly.

“Yes. Thank you for coming,” Cairn says, her usual frightened squeak veering toward formal. She gives her awkward little curtsy, her eyes wide and puddled with fear.

“We will not be disturbed,” the creature says. One white hand gestures back to the door, which slams shut, shrouding the room in darkness.

Its voice is quavering but confident, as if it’s mildly curious but doesn’t really care how the night turns out. Nevin wonders, briefly, if it’s deciding whether or not to murder them both. Considering it can shut doors without touching them, it clearly has powers against which a frightened girl and a dying boy have no defense. If it goes for Cairn, he doesn’t even have the strength to throw his bedpan at it.

“Thank you for coming,” he says, giving a smile he knows full well veers toward ghoulish. “We are glad to receive you.” He inclines his head in a bow. “Please forgive me for not standing.”

The creature seems to glide across the room to stand at Nevin’s bedside. It smells of cold, moldy stone dripping with foul water. As it fingers the many tubes connecting Nevin to the machines and medicines keeping him alive, it hisses in disgust.

“Artificial arteries. This is no blood. Chemicals. They reek. Unnatural.”

“I think this one’s sugar water,” Nevin says, reaching up to boldly flick the IV fluid.

The creature snorts a laugh and looks down, its gray lips drawn back over long teeth that overlap its lower lip and have left permanent indenta-

tions in its chin. “Such foolishness. As if there were sweetness in a slow death. I am Erich. Tell me: what do you know of vampires?”

At the word *vampires*, a cold chill zips through Nevin’s already frozen bones.

This is it.

Finally.

A real vampire.

A way out.

And yet.

As Nevin looks Erich up and down, he feels no warmth, no hope, none of the exhilaration he’s always expected. Nothing in this thing calls to him, except for the possibility of not dying. Because whatever he is, Erich isn’t human, and he very much looks undead.

Nevin clears his throat. “I know what I’ve read. All the books and movies. Stay out of the sunlight, avoid garlic and crucifixes and holy water, sleep in a coffin, drink blood.” Nevin shrugs. “Not dying. The usual.”

“But you know so much more than that,” Cairn breaks in, her beringed fingers clenched on the arms of the hospital chair. “He’s an expert. A disciple. He knows all the texts. He’s the most—”

“Sleep, child.” Erich waves a hand, and Cairn slides down, eyelids fluttering closed. She snores like a kitten, too. Nevin wishes he could cover her up with his blanket; she looks so tender there, so fragile. “Now. Tell me. In the beginning, there was only... whom?” The monster cocks his head at Nevin and waits, hairless eyebrows drawn up like a patient teacher.

Nevin swallows as his heart ratchets up, jittering like a rat caught in a bucket. Is this hideous monster... testing him? And is this a test he wants to pass? Cairn was right, though. He did a lot of reading on the subject, back before death was inevitable.

“Caine,” he says. “The first vampire was Caine.”

Erich smiles, which is slightly more terrible than when his face is neutral. “Good. This is good. Now, tell me a secret.”

Nevin’s eyes rattle toward Cairn as he licks dry lips. “What kind of secret?”

“The kind that would be considered a fitting offering for your Sire.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“No one does. That’s not a secret.”

“I’m gay.”

Erich shakes his head. “Dig deeper. These statements cost you nothing. A good secret hurts to give up.”

Nevin takes a deep breath, or as deep he can. “I killed my brother.”

At that, Erich’s head tilts like an insect giving Nevin its full attention and possibly considering ripping off his neck and laying eggs in the neck hole. “That is a worthy secret.” He nods, almost regal. “Tell me more.” His long fingers steeple as his mouth curls up like desiccated skin on something long dead.

“His name was Bryce. We were home alone. I’m four years older. *Was* four years older. At the time, I was eleven, and he was seven. We were playing hide and seek. I couldn’t find him. I looked...” Nevin trails off, remembering that evening, half a life ago, when he ran laughing through the back yard, checking behind trees and in the shed and in the fort at the top of their swing set. He recalls how swiftly night fell, how his shouts went from congratulatory to worried to terrified to begging. The words, *You win, Bryce. Come out now, and I’ll give you the rest of my Skittles* rest forever on his tongue. How many times did he say that? A million times at least.

His parents came home late from a movie. They were angry at first, then they forgot about him altogether. They spent all night walking, driving, looking, friends joining hands in the woods out back and marching with flashlights. The next morning, the police dogs found Bryce down an old well, his body swollen to fit the narrow tunnel and his skin purple and puffy.

The boy’s last words to Nevin? “You’re never going to find me.”

Nevin’s throat constricts, and some machine over his shoulder beeps like crazy. That only fuels the panic. The numbers rise. His heart rate is over 130, his blood pressure 190 over 100. He looks to Erich, eyes pleading, but the monster regards him coolly. A nurse runs in looking annoyed, moving as if she can’t see Erich at all. She messes with the machine long before she looks at or speaks to Nevin, as if it’s the machine that really requires such worry and not a living, breathing, dying person.

“Panic attack?”

He can only nod. His throat is closing up. He’s running hot and cold, and he imagines he can feel the tumor inside pulsating with the rush of new blood, growing and forcing itself ever larger, pushing everything inside away.

The nurse holds up a syringe, presses it into the line. Nevin imagines a cool balm worming into his bloodstream. The numbers fall. The beeping stops. He can breathe again. He smiles. All the while, Erich stands to the side, a still statue watching the drama unfold with a gleeful and horrifying grin on his monstrous face.

If the nurse sees him—but she can't. She can't see him or smell him or hear his occasional, ratlike snickers. If she did, she'd say something. At one point, while she's futzing with her drawer of medicines, Erich briefly capers around her, wiggling his fingers and dancing a mad jig, but she doesn't so much as twitch. For all his hideousness, Erich has strong magic, the kind Nevin always coveted.

"Better?" she asks, as if the question can have only one answer.

As if he doesn't feel horrible every moment now, no matter what drugs they pump into him, because he can feel his body dying around him, a charred house on the verge of collapse.

But he just gives a ghost of a smile and says, "Yes, thanks," and she nods curtly and leaves.

"You still have strong feelings about this Bryce," Erich says before the curtain is done swaying in her wake.

"It haunts me every day." Nevin's heart wants to race, but things are going slow and slurry now, like he's underwater. He doesn't want to smile, but he can't stop himself. "I think that's when I started being fascinated with vampires. When I thought that there might be a way to bring Bryce back and make things okay. When I started trying to figure out how to cheat death."

Erich shakes his head, a teacher subtracting a point. "It was too late. By the time the child was found, there was no living tissue left. And creatures that young make poor progeny."

"I know. And he was kind of an asshole, anyway. I mean, I guess all little kids are. Sociopaths and dictators. But if he'd lived, then my parents wouldn't have hated me, and things might've been okay."

Suddenly, Erich is sitting on the edge of Nevin's bed, the creature's weight resting against Nevin's foot under the blanket. It is not a comforting touch. "This is a very human thought, that things could be otherwise."

"I was eleven." Nevin shrugs. "*One two three four five six seven, all good children go to heaven. Except Nevin.* That was caught in my mind for years, that insane thought, that mad rhyme, like a dog that wants to go outside and can't get anyone to open the door."

Erich flicks his long fingers. "Children and dogs. Pah. These are insignificant creatures. Grubs. What you might become, what you could become, is so much grander. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me."

"Isn't that from the Bible?"

Erich sneered. "So is Caine, if you believe that childish line of reasoning. The point, grub, is that Gehenna is approaching, and the old ones shall

overrun the world and make a wasteland of your little society. Humans are nothing but fodder and snacks in the war. All will be lost in blood and fire. And this is why I have come to answer your call. You are nothing now, a broken moth beating against a dying flame. But I offer you the chance to become a soldier in this war. I will teach you, and others like you. To fight, body and mind. And if we are able to turn the tide, you will live forever, savior of your clan and world. Do you see?"

"And I would be... like you?"

With a snort of derision through his long teeth, Erich slowly pulls the blanket back, revealing Nevin's long, thin feet. They were once graceful in his collection of dandy boots and Monkstrap shoes, but now they're floppy, bloodless purple things, the nails hard and yellow and cracking off.

"How horrid, to be ugly," the creature says in a mocking sing-song. He takes Nevin's big toenail between long claws and twists sharply. The entire thing pops off. Nevin doesn't even feel it. "We are the Damned, the Creeps, the creatures of the sewers. But we are sharp and savvy and long-lived, like rats and cockroaches. The ultimate survivors. There is always another dark hole for us to scurry to. But unlike your brother, we thrive there. I'm offering that paradise to you. It is a rare gift and not one to be taken lightly."

The fluorescents are kind to no one, but up close, they reveal the tiny horrors of Erich's body. The black veins in the tips of his long, ragged ears. The crust around his bulging eyes, gold as old piano keys. The wormlike gray-white hairs staggering across his scalp. In all his dreams of this moment, when a vampire offered Nevin the embrace of life everlasting, Nevin had seen a creature of unending beauty by his side. A Lestat. A Galadriel. A vision of grace and style. That his wish would come true at the hands of the secondmost horrible thing he'd ever beheld was life's second cruelest joke.

And yet... how wonderful would it be to not feel so frail, so broken? Nevin's soul had been crushed long before his body was, but he yearned to be whole and powerful again.

"How does it work?" he asks.

In the next heartbeat, Erich looms over him, one sharp nail trailing a hot scratch along Nevin's long neck.

"I bite here. I drink. You drink from me. The transformation, unfortunately, brings pain. It may twist you, mind and body, further than where you now lie. But if it takes, you will be strong beyond compare, with mighty gifts passed down through my lineage."

The drugs are swimming in his system now, and Nevin is having a hard time making the dots connect. "That's it, then? You bite, we drink, I get ugly, I live forever?"

Erich's smile is a twisted thing. "There will be a third and final test, of course."

"There always is."

"You'll need to feed immediately."

A sad laugh. "Can't remember the last time I was hungry."

"You will be, childe. And look was luscious morsel awaits you."

In a flash, Erich is across the room, his long fingers cradling Cairn's shoulders. "This one is weak of mind. She thinks this is all a game, a joke. She could never survive in the shadows. Not like you, who have faced such darkness and managed to crawl back out again and again." His fingers splay over Cairn's ink-blue hair and his eyes close. "Tea parties and dresses and little cakes shaped like skulls. Her mind dances a tarantella. Forever a child. Wouldn't last a day of Gehenna. Would probably offer candy to the first Tremere who knocked on her door. Better that she nourish you. Better that you carry her with you, in you, as you begin your new life. She'll feel nothing. She sleeps. She dreams. Those such as her are fit only for food and fodder." He steps away and flicks his fingernails against his teeth with a judgmental click. "Do not pretend that you believe her foolish fol-de-rol."

Nevin struggles to sit up a little straighter and stares at Cairn. She really is like a kitten, a silly and playful thing chasing butterflies while the rest of the world burns. He likes that about her. She wants to love death, but really, she's celebrating life. When he first met her, when she was Karen, she'd been such a sad, lonely girl. He found her sitting by a stack of Poe in the book store late one night. He'd bowed and tipped his hat, and she was his forever. Just like adopting a kitten, actually. He took her to tea parties, to midnight movies, to goth bars. He cooed over her new outfits and taught her how to use eyeliner. She'd accepted him, looked up to him, and that meant something.

Because Bryce wasn't able to do that, was he?

Nevin's parents kicked him out, and he rewrote the story just for her. Told Cairn he'd chosen to find his own place, get a job full-time at the coffee shop. She'd been so impressed, had clapped her hands together and laughed. He didn't need college, after all. He was going to be a vampire, wasn't he? She loved his attic room in the old Victorian, adored his old black Miata, went into raptures over his coffee art. He was living her dream life. He'd purposefully made himself into something that would inspire her. Something that would keep her from putting any more pretty scars on her wrists.

And maybe that's why he had hidden his illness from her. He'd wanted to keep showing her the dream, and all he had left was the nightmare.

But what Erich offered him now? It wasn't what he wanted.

"Can't it be a nurse?" he asks, aware of the tremor in his voice.

Erich's lips lift in a sneer as he bends over Cairn like a shroud. "Either way, this one ends her story tonight. I can turn you, and you can drink from her. Or I can drink from both of you."

"That doesn't seem fair."

Moving in a dark blur, Erich reappears over Nevin, his long fingers wrapped around the metal bed frame and his cold breath reeking of fish and death, brushing against Nevin's skin. "Look. Look at me. Here, close. What is fair? No one promised you fair. Justice is not part and parcel of life or death. Make your choice. As my sire did not offer me one, I consider this a gift to you."

Nevin's heart wants to pound but can't. His nerves want to spark, but they fall limp. He can only lie here, barely able to move, even less able to think. But he knows his answer, doesn't even have to think hard about it.

"Do it, then."

Erich sighs a long sigh and leaps lightly onto the bed. His knees splay over Nevin's body, and his long fingers gently tilt Nevin's head, just so. The too-long teeth part, scratching along Nevin's throat as if marking the X on a pirate's treasure map.

"Prepare yourself, my childe," he whispers.

Nevin's cold fingers wrap around the metal bars of the hospital bed, feeling like they're carved of frozen bone. He braces himself as best he can, but nothing could prepare him for the sensation of nearly having his throat ripped out by the monster's gnashing teeth, which share none of his fingers' delicacy. Hot blood drips down Nevin's gown, and his eyes focus on a cluster of warts behind Erich's ear, every cell in his body screaming revulsion. It's odd, how the drugs allow him to experience his own murder as if he were a bystander, cold and calculating. His eyes flash up at the machine and note that his heart rate is under 60.

Erich pulls away slightly, placing a hand over Erich's neck like a mother shushing a talkative child.

"We are almost to the point on which the process balances. When I tell you to drink, you must. And you cannot stop, even if your body demands it."

Nevin is so tired, so sleepy. He can't even nod. All he can do is blink.

Erich puts his lips back to the ragged hole, and he sighs as he gulps deeply. The vampire's body goes soft and heavy as he moans blissfully, his eyes closing. Nevin watches his heart rate fall down to 30 before he reaches to the bedside table, his fingers scrabbling inside Cairn's coffin purse. Pull-

ing out the lighter he gave her for her seventeenth birthday, he flicks it on and holds it to Erich's back.

As if underwater and watching from far away, Nevin sees the hideous monster catch fire in an explosion so sudden and powerful that it lights the bedclothes aflame. Erich pulls back from Nevin's neck, shrieking and clawing at his back, his eyes blood-red and mad until they're nothing but black holes in gray ash.

Across the room, Cairn wiggles awake and gasps. "Nevin! What happened?"

"What had to," he says in his regular voice.

"Where is he?"

His hands sift blindly through the ashes. "Where he belongs."

As Cairn leaps up and beats at the fire with her blanket, the fire alarm goes off, water spraying out of the ceiling. Nurses run in with carts, screaming. The fire is out, and nothing is left of Erich but a charred bit of coat and a carpet of wet powder. It coats Nevin like snow, and he settles down and smiles. He feels light, so light, as if the tumor evaporated with the vampire. For the first time in a long time, he feels good. Calm. At peace. Beautiful.

Nurses scurry around, pumping his chest, using paddles, pushing more drugs into him. He watches, smiling, benevolent. Cairn is holding his hand with both of hers, black tears streaking down her face.

"Hold on," she says. "Just stay with me."

Nevin squeezes her hand and closes his eyes.

"You're never going to find me," is the last thing he says.





PART FOUR
**MODERN
NIGHTS**





Redder Than Red

by Monica Valentinelli

4:24:30 p.m.

Tuesday, 28th of December

Chicago, Illinois

In two minutes and thirty seconds the sun will fall below the horizon. Ten seconds later, I will recite a 24-digit authorization code to open my vault. Then, I will feed until my thirst is sated, and I will finish my preparations. Tonight, I will capture or stake Ayisha Jocastian, my greatest enemy, whom I've been hunting for five years, seven months, 13 days, and fifteen hours. I have vowed to hunt no other vampire until she is dead, for she killed my childer, Estaban, and she must pay according to the laws of our kind, the Kindred.

More importantly, she must answer to *me*.

Holding my body taut, I resist the urge to disarm the safe that keeps me secure during the daylight hours. The vault is comfortable enough; it has zero windows, eighteen ceiling tiles, ten emergency blood bags, six floor tiles, four bookcases (containing sixty-five books arranged by date of publication), two stakes, one bed and—

Ring! Ring! My black phone chirps one, two, three times before I pick up the handle. One of my ghouls, Alyssa, calls it “vintage” because it has a rotary dial and a land line. I do not know how to use a cell phone, and I do not plan to learn. Too many variables I cannot control.

“Hello?” My question carries two meanings. It is a greeting to ask who the caller is, and how they accessed my unlisted number. I press the receiver against my ear, listening carefully. If the caller breathes, they are mortal and could be a spy or a ghoul. If not, vampire.

“Rebecca Fleischer, this is Stephan Ashworth.” Ah, better yet. Vampire *and* ally. Stephan has many words attached to his name—Alastor, Ventrué,

British, WWI veteran, hero—and one we share in common. Kindred. “I am calling you on a secure line as you requested.”

“Yes, good. Hello.” Stephan is my partner for tonight’s hunt. While I want revenge, Stephan’s interest in Ayisha is purely political. Her capture would net him a prize and the respect of the Camarilla’s highest authority—the Inner Council. Nothing personal, for him. Not like it is for me.

“Did you confirm she’ll be at the warehouse tonight?”

For the past several months, Ayisha has been paying ghouls to print and distribute copies of a forbidden tome called the Book of Nod in exchange for thaumaturgically-sealed vials of her blood. An abomination and waste of vitae. We believe the ghouls are organized and have anticipated that possibility, but we cannot be sure until we get inside the facility tonight.

“Yes, at that warehouse on Belmont and Knox near Cicero. It is on the south-east corner of the intersection. Smells of gasoline and toner. Heavy traffic during rush hour, but dies down after seven p.m. I counted 392 red bricks, three garages, and nine boarded-up windows. Two vents on top of the building. Forty-seven—”

“—the building is made out of brick, you say? That will make our entrance more difficult if my man on the inside fails, but it can be done. Entrances and exits?”

“If the garages are unlocked, five. If not, two. One door to an administrative office, and another via a fire exit in the back.”

“Well your efforts are making my job a lot easier. Have you thought about becoming an Alastor? Being a member of the Camarilla’s secret police is a helluva way to spend your unlife. Beats dancing in clubs and feeding on frat boys.”

“I just want Ayisha.” Stephan, to my knowledge, has never lost a childer. He does not understand the gaping hole in my chest, a pain that I still feel for the loss of my progeny. He cannot comprehend Ayisha’s deep betrayal, either, when she turned her back on her Clan. I do. I want to peel the flesh from all 206 of her bones after I break every one of them in four places. I want to hear her scream so loud the dead will wake from their graves. I want to watch my ghouls bind her to a marble effigy of my childer and record the sight of her burning flesh when the sun rises. I want...

“Well, if you change your mind. When am I picking you up again?”

“I will meet you at nine o’clock outside of the Hilton on Michigan Avenue.” I am not staying at the Hilton, but Stephan does not need to know that. He is my ally, sure, but he is still a vampire and can never be completely trusted. “I will bring the briefcase as we agreed.”

“Good...good... And Rebecca?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“You can thank me *if* we survive. It will not be easy to take a vampire down in a room with dozens of mortals.” I can practically taste my bitterness. Flat ale and sour lemon. Despite years of tracking her, I have not captured my quarry, the heathen and *antitribu* Ayisha Jocastian, yet. She has more words attached to her name than Stephan does: Anathema, wanted, heretic, vampire-killer, diablerist. Unfortunately, we share one specific word in common: Malkavian. She hears voices, and believes they are the souls of the dead vampires she has eaten; I fixate on counting and numbers. For her, a fitting punishment that may one day be her undoing. For me, a way of being.

“Is she as bad as they say, then?” I wonder if Stephan underestimates Ayisha, because they are about the same vampiric age. I think he forgets that though she was Embraced in 1922 by a powerful sire, her maker—Sennacherib—is more potent than his sire. The Alastor will not survive if he judges strength based on appearances. No vampire ever could. “And these ghouls... So many.”

“We do not know if they are all ghouls, but we should proceed with that in mind. Remember, Ayisha is leading a particular strain of Noddists that is filled with fanatics.” I do not acknowledge Stephan’s moment of insecurity. One is all I will give him. “Whether they are ghouls or mortals or vampires, every one of them has placed their faith in her and the Book of Nod. We should treat them all as hostiles.”

There is an uncomfortable silence on the other end of the line. No doubt, Stephan is calculating how many—I counted forty-seven hostiles during my last reconnaissance—might lose their lives in our raid. A warehouse slaughter would not only be difficult to cover up, it would put the secret of our vampiric existence at risk and incur the Primogen Council’s wrath. I suspect Ayisha knows this, and is using our need to be careful to her advantage.

That is two moments of hesitation. “Are you backing out on me?”

“No, luv. Just feeling a bit out of my depth, yeah? New Alastor and all of that. Besides, I should never have let you do all the planning. The Justicars would stick my head on a pike if they—”

“My plan is solid.”

“Yeah, I know. Like old Winnie said, ‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat’. You’re the brains, I’m the muscle, and I just have to live with that. You can’t deny there’s a lot on the line, luv. I’m under a lot of pressure to make sure our raid doesn’t fail.”

My plan was solid, but should it fail? There would be severe consequences. Chicago Kindred may be forced to flee the city or go into hiding within a matter of nights. Not because of the threat Ayisha poses by herself, but

because the lore she's attempting to distribute would serve as proof of our vampiric existence. Mortals, such as they are, do not suffer from a lack of curiosity, and renewing their obsession with our kind could eventually lead to a bloody, epic battle, one we may not be able to win. Not in the modern nights, if I was to believe Stephan. Not anymore.

"Everything will be all right," I lie. I despise Ayisha and all she stands for, and I understand the obligation I have to my Clan and to the Camarilla. Stephan does not have to remind me of that. If I had to choose between her and her operation, however, I know there is a ninety-five percent chance I would make the selfish choice.

Ninety-nine point nine, to be more precise.

9:18:06 p.m.

Four hours, 53 minutes, and six seconds later, Stephan Ashworth pulls up in front of the Hilton in a black SUV with tinted windows. It is a Chevrolet, I think. Expensive, but not gauche or inconspicuous; it is the perfect vehicle to blend into the darkness of this bitter, cold night.

I stamp out the cigarette I'd been pretending to smoke, and climb in quickly to further the illusion that I was freezing.

"Wow, you look great," Stephan says, as if we were close friends instead of allies. I am wearing a reindeer-themed sweater to further the illusion I am not a threat.

"You look prepared." My partner is dressed for battle: head cleanly shaven (a wasted exercise, for his hair will grow back tomorrow), black military-issue tactical vest, police uniform, a yellow patch that reads S.W.A.T. My outfit, on the other hand, is practical but ordinary: my boots have no heels, my leggings give me freedom to move, and I wear no jewelry or perfume that can be detected by another vampire.

"Thanks, I guess." Stephan quickly changes the subject. The Alastor is two centuries younger than me, and has not come to grip with the fact that, as we age, most vampires do not get offended because of a badly worded greeting. If we did, we would wipe each other out of existence for the smallest of slights. Our kind was petty, but not stupid. "How much time do we have?"

"If we take 41, we will be arriving at our destination in approximately twenty-nine minutes, depending upon traffic. Less chance of an accident or getting pulled over if we drive along the lake.

"Sounds reasonable enough."

"Your inside man will leave the facility at ten o'clock sharp to have a cigarette," I remind him. "The door will be open from ten to ten fifteen p.m. That is your window of opportunity to enter the building. I will not be far behind."

“And our chances of success?” Stephan is used to my methodology by now. We have spent the past few weeks planning every detail, and he understands how my mind works.

“I need a minute to review the situation.”

“Always.”

We are both silent and contemplative on the rest of the drive to the warehouse. He turns the radio on and listens to Al Jolson. I spend those precious moments calculating the odds of our victory by assigning numbers to the players involved. I am number one, Stephan is two, Ayisha’s three, etc.

“When the gray shadows creep... And the world is asleep...”

I was halfway through numbering the ghouls and mortals I spotted when Stephan asks me a rude question. “Did you feed well, luv?”

“Did you?” I roll my eyes and glance in the rearview mirror to make sure no one is following us. I try to avoid counting the obnoxious displays of holiday lights, but they are colorful and omnipresent. A white snowman here, a gold reindeer there, a cluster of seven blue trees there. Ten red wreaths attached to light poles so far, and that number is increasing with every passing mile.

I tremble and sink lower into my seat. We took the wrong road. We should have taken I-90/94. I cannot help but whisper: “Eleven, twelve, thirteen...”

“What’s that, luv?”

“It is nothing.” I jerk my head to focus on the road and notice the traffic has died down some, as expected. I sigh involuntarily when he merges with I-90/94. We are close to our destination and, for the moment, safe. “I think you should know, the odds of our survival are too variable to calculate.”

“And?”

“There are six additional factors we must consider. One, the warehouse is a ruse and the Noddists are operating out of another facility. Two, Ayisha Jocastian has commandeered multiple locations. Three, she is not acting alone, and has teamed up with other vampires. Four, we are outmanned by a factor of 2.5 to 1—and that is if,” I say, wagging my finger, “there are only forty-seven ghouls and mortals in that warehouse. Five, our disguises won’t work. Six, our plan...”

“I know the risks, luv,” Stephan says, pulling off to park on a side street near the facility. “but there’s no more time to plan. All this talking, all this scheming, and in the end it’s one vampire clawing up another vampire until one of us is dead.”

“I do not understand. Then why ask for my help?”

“Common enemy, lack of resources, plus you’ve got great connections to all sorts of Kindred like that Brujah arms dealer we bought those grenades

from... You name it, luv. The minute the Council found out Ayisha was republishing that accursed Book of Nod right in their own backyard, suddenly several vampires had business elsewhere. I have to work with any Kindred I can get, no offense, and she must be stopped at all costs.”

“So what am I? Another pair of fangs for you to command?” I grab my suitcase out of the back seat and mentally review its contents. It is filled with enough stun grenades, smoke bombs, and tranquilizer darts to create four distractions, render twenty ghouls unconscious, and fill the air with smoke for six and a half minutes. There are also four packs of heroin, just in case we need an alibi for the raid. I pocket a pair of flash grenades, and hand him the briefcase. “You may have convinced yourself I do not matter, Stephan, but your chances for success increase tenfold because I am here. Oh, and by the way? Those were not cheap.”

“Ah, luv, don’t get all sentimental on me now. I do need you.” After he puts on a S.W.A.T. helmet, Stephan grabs a customized baton. The back end of the weapon is a stake—just in case he has to confront an enemy vampire. Efficient. “It’s just that everybody dies, even sorry vampires like us.”

I do not know how to respond, so I offer: “Take care of yourself in there.”

“You too.”

10:07:15 p.m.

I am approaching the red brick warehouse. With any luck, Stephan is already inside, waiting for me. I worry, though, that the Alastor overestimates his vampiric powers. The first part of our plan rests on the shoulders of his inside man—a local ghoul he has been cultivating for four months. This ghoul is Bound to him, to do his bidding. If Stephan has successfully commanded his ghoul, the second part of our plan rests on his ability to force his will upon a handful of other ghouls. They will each take a grenade or a tranquilizer dart, and start attacking each other. In the commotion, Stephan and I would then be free to corner Ayisha Jocastian who, with any luck, would be utterly distracted and furious she has lost control over her fanatics.

My role is to back up Stephan’s efforts, and to reserve my energy for a direct confrontation with Ayisha. Using my powers, I disappear knowing I cannot be seen by the naked eye. My illusion does not last long. I notice one, two, three, four security cameras have been installed in the front of the building since last night. They, on the other hand, would capture my visage—and the fact that I am not breathing.

Instead, I pull my hood up and shiver as if I am cold. I am ready to run if I have to, but I stop myself from panicking. If anyone is watching me, they would make themselves known soon enough. To distract myself, I take out a cigarette and start smoking, furthering the illusion I am a native Chicagoan freezing her ass

off. I take a drag, fill my lungs with smoke, and count to ten before I exhale. The closer I get to the door, the more I fear Stephan has been captured or staked or worse. I feel conflicted: I want to kill Ayisha, but I also want Stephan to survive.

There is now an eighty-five percent probability I would choose murdering Ayisha over saving Stephan. I note the 14.5 percent difference and the fact that these feelings make me uncomfortable, but I have no time to sort them out. I am standing in front of the yellow-painted door, and it has been flung wide open. There is no soul in sight. Either Stephan has taken down the guards, just like I planned, or he has been captured.

Or, I correct myself, Ayisha has captured him and is planning to consume his soul—just like she did to my childer. There was only one problem. Other than Stephan’s vague description of a young, black-haired lady in a green dress, I have never met the Anathema before.

I sprint down the narrow hallway toward the main warehouse repeating three words over and over and over again.

“Must. Kill. Ayisha.”

10:11:30 p.m.

The door to the main warehouse is open a half an inch; artificial light is spilling out and into the hallway. It illuminates the linoleum floor that has one, two, three, four.... No! With considerable effort, I draw my attention away from the spotted tiles to that thin sliver of light. I pull out a flash grenade, stand in the shadows, and use my vampiric powers to enhance my hearing.

A feminine voice says: “...you’re a fool...”

And: “...if you think...”

Then, Stephan says two words before he falls silent. “She will...”

Is Stephan Ashworth, Alastor and loyal member of the Camarilla, betraying me? Is he colluding with Ayisha? The possibilities enrage me; I feel the Beast within my chest stirring, stirring, stirring—but I cannot, will not, lose control. I sing it a lullaby, and pray to Malkav it will go back to sleep.

10:16:00 p.m.

I fling the door open, pull the grenade’s pin, and toss it at a black-haired vampire dressed in a tell-tale emerald green ball gown: Ayisha Jocastian. Then, I slam the door shut, waiting for the grenade to explode.

“You bitch!” I hear Ayisha screaming, and I open the door. The Anathema has fallen to the ground, covering her eyes. Then, she shudders and gasps for breath. Breath. Breath, as in human! As in...

“That. Was. Not. Ayisha!” I yell, frustrated that I was fooled so easily. “Where is she?”

I spin around and notice that the elaborate printing machine is staffed and guarded by dozens of dark-haired women resembling the picture I had of Ayisha—and they are all wearing the same dress. Stephan is tied, helmetless, to a cheap chair with his hands at his sides; the baton and his briefcase are nowhere in sight. His mouth has now been taped shut, too. Voluntarily? I could not tell.

“Who?” The woman keeping an eye on Stephan looks genuinely confused. She gestures to the dozens of gown-wearing women still blinking and shaking their heads from the effects of the grenades. To make matters worse, they reek of ink and oil. “We are all Ayisha Jocastian. Who are you?”

“I am the sire of Estaban Julio Hernandez,” I say, hoping for a reaction. I get none. *Dammit*. Ayisha Jocastian is probably long gone by now. Laughing her way to freedom. Reciting the Book of Nod. Feeding on another vampire.

“We don’t know who that is.” The women sway back and forth, as if they’ve been hypnotized. I glance up, but do not see any security cameras taping us. Thank Malkav.

It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to extend my fangs and let my Beast fully consume me. I lock eyes with Stephan, concentrating all of my will, and hope he will not resist me telepathically.

“What the fuck is going on?” I shout. “Quickly!”

Stephan winces. “Trap. They’ve known about you for weeks.”

“How?”

“Ayisha picked her people well. My inside man double-crossed us. Wanker.”

“And the briefcase?”

“Look out!”

I spring forward and crash into Stephan’s side, knocking us both to the ground with a loud bang. The force of the impact is so great it breaks the Alastor’s chair. Splinters of cheap plywood stick to my coat and sweater, but I have no time to pick them off. I quickly untie one of Stephan’s hands, jump to my feet, and roll away from him in anticipation of another attack.

Ayisha backs away, watching me carefully. “So, you can enhance your senses and disappear. What else I wonder? Can you commune with ghosts like I do?”

I could not believe what I was hearing. “You were...testing me? Why?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Estaban told me to. He says nice things about you, you know. You are smart. You are obsessed with numbers. And...” Laughing, the Anathema takes a stack of loose papers and casually tosses them around the room.

“And?” I close my eyes, resisting the urge to pick up the one, two, three, four, five pieces of paper nearby. Instead, I goad her into fighting me. Stephan can take care of himself. Ayisha is mine.

Ayisha Jocastian smiles, baring her fangs. Her low cut dress and dark hair matches the others, but that was where the similarity of their appearance ends. It is her face that is different. I quickly study it, memorizing every detail. Ayisha has tan-colored skin, almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, and pouty lips.

“Estaban said you would taste wonderful, and he misses you.”

10:27:08 p.m.

The thought of my soul being consumed fully by the monster that stands before me unleashes my Beast. I struggle to control its bloodlust. I want to tear her fine dress to shreds, sink my fangs into her scrawny neck until she falls unconscious, and crush her skull with my bare hands. Worse, I feel my Hunger gnawing, gnawing, gnawing at the pit of my stomach.

Through eyes of my Beast, I no longer see Ayisha Jocastian in a glamorous, green dress with hundreds of sequins I dare not count. I picture a rotting, animated corpse with stringy hair. I see her as a dead thing in a scarlet shift stained with the blood of her victims, human and vampire, minus one, clean white spot she has reserved for me. *My* blood.

“Call off your accomplices, Ayisha.” I speak slowly and purposefully to stall for more time. If I attack her now, I am in danger of becoming like her. “This is not about your ghouls or Nod or the Camarilla. This is personal. Just you and me.”

“Liar! Fortunately, your little Alastor is a weakling, or so my spirits say. My lookalikes will occupy him. But what to do with you?” The Anathema tilts her head to the side. Pointing at her temple, she says: “You would fight your own childer? He’s in here, you know. Haunting me.”

I do not bother to correct her delusion. Instead, I prepare to toss my last grenade at her, desperate to weaken this monster who consumes our kind: “I can and I will, Ayisha Jocastian. I condemn you and all the ‘souls’ you carry to your Final Death on behalf of my childer, my Clan, the Camarilla and, most importantly, me.”

“Like hell you will!” she says, lunging at me with preternatural speed. “You will—”

This time, I anticipate her attack. Before she can finish her sentence, I yank the pin and throw the grenade at her. I turn away and shut my eyes to avoid being blinded by its bright, bright light, vaguely aware how grateful I am for the thickness of my winter coat. Ka-boom! It explodes in 3, 2, 1 seconds. Pieces of shrapnel fly in every direction, cutting through satin and flesh, drawing blood.

Ayisha's blood. My blood.

I temporarily enhance my senses to smell the blood of my enemy. A sweet, coppery scent assails me, and my Beast laughs. "More," It roars. "We must have more. You must taste her."

"You will pay for that," Ayisha croaks from the floor.

The grenade has temporarily slowed down the Anathema, but she is not knocked out. I circle around her, vaguely aware that Stephan has his hands full with her impostors. I see one, two, three, four flashes of green out of the corner of my eye. I ignore them as best I can, and wait for my enemy to get back on her feet.

"Blood never lies, Ayisha." I remove my ruined coat. "Listen to Esteban, Ayisha. Listen to every voice of every vampire you have consumed body and soul."

"No!"

"Yes!" I cry as I lift her off the ground and grab her shoulders. "You knew this day was coming. Listen!"

I lock eyes with her, using my vampiric powers, and pray she will fall victim to her own madness. I shake her body hard—once, twice—until her eyes open wide with surprise first, then fear. I do not release her until her jaw slackens and her head rolls to the side.

"Y-y-y-y-y-es," she stammers. "I hear them. Oh, I hear them! Sennacherib is angry with me, Rebecca. My sire says it's true. Yes, yes, yes. You may b-b-b-bite me. Yes. It's a fair trade for killing your Esteban. But do it quickly. Oh! On the wrist. Yes, please. On the wrist. Just a little blood. A little!"

I grab the Anathema by the wrists, and stroke her arm gently. Her body is as limp as a rag doll, but I know the effects of my powers are not permanent. Like the grenades, they are temporary measures. Unless I kill her, she will keep coming back. Unless I maim her, she will kill me.

Wasting no more time, I pull her arms as hard as I can and pull them from their sockets. Ayisha howls with rage and rushes toward me; she is too fast for me. When she snaps her teeth, she punctures the skin of my neck. Before she can sink her fangs any deeper, I jerk my head backward as hard as I can; the force of my movement rips my neck open.

Ayisha stumbles forward, and I kick her flat on the ground. Instead of feeding on her, as my Beast commands, I stomp on her spine and break it. I chant to myself over and over and over the words "justice is done", for fear I might kill her or worse—diablerize her and become what was, become the monster.

"Rebecca! It is done, luv. You hear me? We got her."

Stephan's voice snaps me back to reality. I find the nearest lookalike, pull her close, and bite down. Her blood is nourishing, but its flavor is weak. It does not have the honeyed taste of revenge.

11:46:29 p.m.

True to my original plan, we have set fire to the books and equipment and alerted the authorities. Stephan pulls in several favors, and has convinced the right mortals that the burning warehouse was the site of a prostitution ring. He tells the police I'm a concerned citizen doing my civic duty and he's cleared me of any wrongdoing. Ayisha, who we have bound, gagged, and staked in the back of the SUV, is never mentioned.

In his falsified report, Stephan further notes that several of the survivors did not know who they are or what they are doing at the warehouse. His recommendation is that they should be released. He left out, of course, that he pushed his will upon a few of Ayisha's victims, forcing them to forget the events of the past few hours. By doing so, the accounts of tonight's events will be too erratic and confusing to corroborate—a classic move to protect the Masquerade, to obscure the truth of our existence.

We were right not to kill Ayisha's lookalikes, I think, though I would not have minded a little slaughter. Thankfully, the Alastor was able to recover the briefcase before the cops did, and planted enough heroin to further our ruse. What Stephan could not convince the police of, other Kindred and their loyal ghouls would.

"How do you feel, luv?" Stephan asks me once we are back on I-41. There are dark circles under the Ventrue's eyes, and I can tell he is worn out. It must have taken all of his resolve not to murder every single one of the Anathema's pawns. "Are you satisfied now that Ayisha is captured?"

"You mean after hunting the killer of my childer for five years, seven months, 13 days, nineteen hours, and fifty minutes or so?" I glance back at him with a wry smile. "Until the next time."

"Sorry, luv, I didn't quite catch that last bit," Stephan says as he speeds up. The night was still young, and the Alastor wanted to drop me off before he delivered Ayisha Jocastian to his Clan elders. "Next time?"

"For vampires like us, there will always be a next time."



Love to Ashes

By Steffie De Vaan

Rain pelted the window, and wind pushed through ventilation slits to dance with threadbare curtains. The city lights mingled with the downpour to paint the Parisian sky in a pale rainbow. The scene was lovely, romantic even, and perfect for tonight. Sephone thought she could feel her heart flutter as she studied the dark woman sitting at the room's only desk. She hadn't breathed in years, but now she inhaled deeply to savor her love's perfume. Tonight was the night. The mortal at the desk tensed, eyes flitting to the corner where Sephone hid, before returning to the iridescent blue beetle in front of her.

She sees you.

The voices spoke to Sephone unbidden, but they never lied. The mortal's conscious mind was cowed by the cloak of the unseen that draped Sephone's unmoving form, but the animal part of her brain still screamed "predator!"

Sephone remained where she was though, mesmerized by the light and shadow playing on her love's face. The mortal's eyes were dark pools that held endless fascination, even if deep lines now marred the skin around them. Those lines had once been a testament to Nita's good-humored nature, scrunching up her face whenever she laughed, but they'd long become a concession to the grind of years. The mortal's cropped curls, too, had turned from black to gray. Sephone's heart, close to resuming its beat mere moments ago, fell silent. Time was whittling away her love and death awaited the mortal – an even greater divide than the one that separated them now. Sephone shook at the prospect of losing love and hope to the unrelenting march of time, but quickly buried her anxiety under piles of denial. That loss would *never* happen. Not after tonight.

"Relishing the view, my pet?" Yanis' voice drowned Sephone's senses. Sephone resisted the urge to moan, refusing to give her sire what she wanted. She struggled to keep her attention on her love – this was *her* big night, after all – even as the blood in her veins ran hot.

“Look at me.” Steel hid in that silken purr, removing all thought of disobedience. Sephone’s eyes turned to her master. Yanis was beautiful: petite and perfect, with luscious auburn curls and sky-blue eyes that made no attempt to hide the cruelty that governed her life. The elder absorbed the light of stars and moon, until nothing remained but what little she allowed to escape.

Yanis’ mouth quirked up in response to the adoration that was rightfully hers. “Good girl.” The approval gave Sephone goosebumps. “Now let’s fetch your prize.”

Sephone watched as Yanis glided to the mortal’s side. The dark woman’s eyes darted up, looking straight through the predator as her mind dismissed the phantom. She turned the beetle over in trembling fingers and scribbled a few words while the hairs in her neck slowly rose on end. Sephone could hear the mortal’s heart race, saw her legs coil under the table, as instinct triggered a primordial flight response. Yanis’ grip on her mind was iron-clad though, and it wasn’t until the vampire bent down and – ever so softly – caressed her hair, that the mortal’s mind finally bucked against the power. Her eyes turned wide as she witnessed the horror smiling at her, while her legs finally pushed up and away from the chair. Too late now. Yanis yanked the mortal towards her and spun her in one smooth motion to face Sephone.

Sephone walked forward, shedding her unseen cloak, with hands splayed at her side to prove she posed no threat. “Don’t be afraid, Nita,” the neonate tried to assure her love. “This is good for you. For us. You’ll see.” Her voice was not as beautiful as Yanis’, but perhaps the mortal recognized her cadence and affectation? Nita stilled as she met eyes with Sephone. *Save me*. Sephone would, of course. That’s why she was here.

“It will all be over soon, Nita,” she offered as she set her mouth to the mortal’s neck. “We’ll be together.” Then blood, warm and succulent, overrode any conscious thought or compassion she might have had. Only blood remained, and a small blue beetle falling to the carpet.



Sephone watched as Nita swiped the key ring from her target’s Armani coat. Her sister held the ring up like a trophy and smirked, before turning her back to leave the man and Sephone alike. The dismissal hurt, as did the reminder that Nita had learned in a single year what Sephone hadn’t in a decade: to remain hidden to the mortal mind while moving. Sephone had taught the neonate *everything*, only to be met with scorn as her student outpaced her. How to navigate the court of Prince Villon, how to please Yanis, who was the dark sun in both their lives, how to capture the minds of mortals: Nita outshone Sephone in every field but the one of *seeing*, and rewarded Sephone for her teachings with mockery.

Resentment bubbled up in Sephone as she – forced by her own limitations – remained still until the business man had finally moved on. “Wait up!” she called as she hoisted the heavy duffel bag over her shoulder and hurried after Nita. She regretted the words almost immediately – she sounded weak and pathetic – but Nita appeared too intent on their mission to notice.

“Why? Yanis said to get the keys, get into the safe, bring her the package. Wouldn’t want to keep her waiting.” Then as if it were a mere afterthought: “Wouldn’t want to spend a second more with you, either.” And just like that, Nita disappeared again.

Sephone struggled to control her burning rage. *She* was the one entrusted with this task; Nita was just the help. Yanis had told *her* about the security guarding the safe. Her vision narrowed as she scanned the street and everything that was not-Nita fell away. Maybe she should let Nita go on her own, let her set off the alarm and create a slaughter of security guards. Expose herself and force Yanis to – to – what? Admit that Nita made a bad child, after Sephone spent years begging her to turn the mortal? Kill Nita as a liability? Rage fled before overwhelming loss. Sephone had loved Nita from the moment the Creole woman walked into the lecture hall and admonished her students to sit down. She’d spent three years at Sorbonne feigning an abiding love of insects to get into the advanced entomology class where students received more personal attention. Even after Yanis took her into darkness, Sephone kept an eye on the object of her affection. She manipulated research grants and sent her small gifts, like the blue beetle Nita had studied the night she died.

The night Nita died. Sephone’s dreams of being together, of finding love and salvation in nights that were filled with blood and murder, had turned into a nightmare. Nita *hated* her. But with Yanis neglecting her new child it fell to Sephone to tutor Nita and keep her alive – and she wouldn’t fail now.

Squinting, she searched the street again. *There.* Nita’s outline was a blur even to Sephone’s superior sight, and she hurried after her sister without bothering to call out.

The pair walked on in silence. Nita still cloaked in the unseen, while Sephone walked openly. Mortals parted instinctively for the hidden predator, then retreated entirely for Sephone who followed shortly behind. They found reasons. Badly bleached hair, mismatched clothes, and the snake tattoo curling around her neck clearly marked her as a miscreant. Best stay clear, lest she mug or stab them. The reasons for avoiding Sephone were all legitimate and logical. Except they weren’t. Sephone saw it clearly in the sickly orange light that surrounded them. She was death and they knew it, on some level.

They left the broad lanes that gave the city its famous wheel-spoke geography, and moved to the back streets where Haussmann’s vision had never

reached. The maze of alleys and steps was small and crooked, and the tower of black stone jutted up like a knife from a wound. Guardians lurked on outcroppings of higher floors, moving only when not looked at directly. They didn't fool Sephone though. She saw *everything*, even the rain of dirt and blood that fell on the building and drenched the pavement. Sephone wrinkled her nose, though Nita seemed unaffected by the horrid sight. It never occurred to her that the younger vampire couldn't see the rain – her sight was a companion that Sephone had long stopped questioning.

Don't go in, the voices whispered – as if the rain wasn't enough warning. Sephone ignored them. Yanis had told her to retrieve the package, so she must.

Nita, sensing her discomfort though, rolled her eyes and snorted. “Wait here. I'll go.”

“No.” The reply came immediately, forced by Yanis' demands and Sephone's own desire to see Nita safe.

Her sister raised an eyebrow in reply. The gesture was supposed to mock her, but Sephone felt her heart catch. Nita had given her the same look of skepticism when Sephone pitched her “Extensive Essay on the Myths involving the Acherontia Styx” – a pompous work that had been meant (and failed) to impress her professor. The look perfectly captured the sharp, back then good-humored, wit that Sephone had fallen in love with.

“Do you think Yanis would send *me* along if it were a matter of remaining unseen?” Though of course she would. How else to fuel the laughter their sire and Nita shared at Sephone's missteps? “They have a guard that can see even you.” She waited, hoping for another quirked eyebrow, but was met with silence.

Sephone entered the building first. Nita followed behind and to the right, still cloaked in shadows to signal that she didn't trust her sister's information. The walls shone red in the glow of chandeliers mounted in the high hallway. Runes and drawings of coiled serpents dominated the otherwise barren walls. Five doors led off from the hall, easily opened with the stolen keys until the third revealed a stairwell leading down. Another door then, falling shut behind the sisters and trapping them in a narrow hallway designed to offer no hiding place from the monster that lurked at the far end.

The creature raised its head slowly, sniffing the sweet scent of vampires on the air, and turned to fix them with its empty sockets. The monstrosity didn't have to stoop in the high hall, but only barely. Four mismatched arms branched from its muscular torso, and a mouth filled with razor teeth gaped hungrily where its belly sat.

Sephone heard Nita gasp. She wasted no time reassuring her sister though, instead bringing up her duffel bag and pulling out the engraved shotgun as

the monster set off on a loping gait towards her. She squeezed off two shots, hitting the creature squarely both times, and barely managed a reload before it barreled into her. The impact knocked her into Nita, who scurried back to keep her footing. The creature made no effort to dodge the gun as it sat wedged between their bodies and, hoping for the best, Sephone squeezed off another round. Recoil tore up her shoulder, while bits of teeth splattered the wall behind the beast. Now it looked down, reaching for the gun and pushing it aside. The monster bore down on Sephone, jaw unhinging to reveal more razor teeth, and wrapped its arms around her until she felt her ribs crack. That was not an issue – she didn't need to breathe. The teeth tearing into her neck, however, were another matter. Sephone screamed as the creature ripped off a chunk of flesh, exposing dead arteries underneath. She struggled in vain to turn the gun back and up, even as the teeth came down again and-

“STOP.” Nita's voice carried the power of a sledgehammer, boring through the creature's skull into its brain. It hesitated only briefly as the mental programming of its masters rushed to blunt the unwelcome command, but the delay was long enough for Sephone. Pulling the shotgun abruptly up, she fired off the last round. The creature's skull exploded and gray bits rained down on the two vampires. Still the monster twitched, hands grabbing at Sephone as she reloaded a third time. It stopped moving after the fifth shell, though she put a sixth in it for good measure.

Sephone opened her mouth to thank Nita, but the voices spoke first: *that wasn't done for you*. She knew they were right. Yanis' had commanded they go out, pick up the package, and return *together*. The rescue had nothing to do with Nita's feelings towards Sephone. She felt deflated as hope fled her, but nevertheless rose from the floor and willed cold blood to knit the wound until only a scar remained.

The door at the end of the hallway gave way to a safe filled with strange paraphernalia and a single rune-marked package. Cold flames rose as Sephone reached for the package, but she didn't – *couldn't* – stop. *Retrieve the package*, Yanis had said. The flames reached up, swirling around her forearm in red and black without burning. The runes flashed as her hand closed around the brown paper, then dissipated along with the flames. Had the spell failed? Was it a fake deterrent? Sephone looked at Nita, but her sister only shrugged. Nita was right of course: didn't matter why it was so easy, as long as they got what they came for.



Sephone's room was decorated in dark velvets and silks, a token of the beauty Yanis demanded in all things. Her sire had been pleased at the retrieval of the package, but less so at Sephone's disfigurement. She'd chided her child for failing – as if Sephone had done anything other than follow *her*

instructions – and bid her apologize endlessly. She'd stood motionless in her sire's reception room, proclaiming "I beg forgiveness" for three nights until she was ravenous with hunger. Even Nita had pitied her and finally implored their sire to forgive Sephone. She'd been excused then and allowed to move under her own volition, even if she was barred from going outside to feed. The hunger, which would have made her sick and weak as a mortal, now only served to make her angry. She felt like an addict craving a fix and a parched man in the desert, all at once.

We smell blood.

So did Sephone. That was why she was lying on the canopy bed, looking up at an embroidery of Hera, Athena and Aphrodite engaged in a decidedly unconventional judgment of Paris, and ignoring the presence of Nita in the other room. It had been Yanis' idea that the sisters have adjoining bedrooms – a gift, Sephone had thought at the time, which had turned out to be torture as Nita became more vocal in her hatred.

Where did you go wrong?

The voice's question triggered a resentment that could no longer be ignored. Nita's ingratitude made Sephone itch as if a thousand bugs crawled through her veins. Didn't she appreciate the gift of eternal life?

You mean the Curse of God.

Shut up! This was the first time Sephone had addressed the voices directly, and she felt their approval wash over her.

The Embrace wasn't a curse. It was a gift! Nita would have died without me!

Oh yes, you did it for her.

The sarcasm caught her off guard. She *had* done it for Nita. No one wants to die.

No one except souls lost eternally in darkness.

Sephone closed her eyes against the accusations. Nita had been so alive when she taught at the Sorbonne. She'd been the anchor of Sephone's existence then, much like Yanis would be later. Night had come for Sephone though, and old age for Nita. She had to act, or Nita would have died and-

And what does she take to her grave?

The memories of my life. An unbearable loss for *her*, rather than Nita.

Sephone opened her eyes and got up.

The door separating their bedrooms was made of redwood and carved with displays of lust that mocked the distance between them. Sephone knocked: once, twice, thri-

Nita opened mid-knock.

“Do you remember me?” Sephone ventured.

Silence.

“I was in-” she tried again.

“In my class.”

Nita *did* remember her! Warmth rushed over Sephone. “I-”

“I attended your funeral. Well, your memorial. No body since the Seine is so very, very large. I spoke to your parents. They were devastated.”

Sephone closed her eyes. Had Nita brought her parents up deliberately? To remind her of the pain she caused? Rage rose again. Sephone needed to change the subject lest the conversation ended in violence. “You saved my life.”

A short shrug. “Yanis would have blamed me.”

“No, I mean before. When I was-” *alive*. “I planned to kill myself that day, but then you walked into class and you had a black beetle and-” She stopped. “Do you remember?”

A sigh now, a mortal sign of exasperation Nita hadn’t unlearned yet. “Is this going anywhere?”

“I just- I thought we could talk. Maybe.”

“You *killed* me. You took me from *my* parents. I have a brother. I will never get to meet his daughter. So no, let’s not talk.” Nita moved to close the door.

Desperation warred with rage. Nita had intervened with Yanis on her behalf, surely there must be some affection. “I didn’t! Yanis-”

“Yanis did *YOUR* bidding.” The snarl was a challenge from one monster to another, before Nita regained control. “She made me. But *you* killed me.”

The door closed. Hope of reconciliation, fueled by Nita’s mercy, faded to darkness. Rage turned to the boil, bubbling over until the world was red. Sephone screamed incoherently at the door, hitting it with her fists until the bones in her hands broke. Still she screamed, spitting blood and wordless curses. She hated Yanis. Hated Nita. Hated this cage of endless nights. She would end it all.

END IT.

• • •

Sephone stood amidst the ashes of her rage. The bed lay broken, mattress and bedding torn to shreds. Furniture lay smashed and the wallpaper had been

torn off. Lines of blood were drawn over the floor and walls: some elaborate runes and patterns, others angry smudges as Sephone had broken her fists against them. She looked down at her hands, now misshapen and crooked. She closed her eyes and willed blood-

Don't.

The voices were right. *Rage* had driven her to madness this time, but any effort to heal would leave her in the clutches of hunger. Anger and blood were as inescapable a cage as Yanis' hold on her.

Look.

She scanned the room. It was a mess, but she already knew that. What did the voices want her to see? She closed her eyes, opened them and then opened them again. The room was awash with sickly light. Red shades moved through it – one tearing up the room in a mimicry of Sephone's rampage. A single apparition, no more than a blood red blur, pointed to a sliver of wall laid bare behind the shredded wallpaper. Something was drawn on it. Sephone moved slowly, almost hesitantly, to peel it off. Does Yanis want me to see this? She suspected her sire didn't, so she shouldn't and-

Fuck Yanis.

Yes, fuck Yanis. In a single act of defiance – the first since her Embrace a decade ago – Sephone hooked a broken finger behind the wallpaper and pulled.

Yanis' face looked back at her. Sephone stared at it in confusion. Her sire was vain and beautiful in equal measures, so why would she paper over a mural of herself? Taking another piece of wallpaper, she pulled again.

Not just Yanis. A painting of Yanis – timeless and lovely as ever – flanked by two women Sephone had never seen: a tall blonde and an equally pretty, but smaller brunette.

What am I looking at, she asked the voices.

No reply.

Sephone closed her eyes, leaning into the wall and caressing it like a lover. Her fingers traced the outline of Yanis, as they had countless times with the real woman. Chiseled cheekbones. Cold skin. Love. Passion. Hunger. Emptiness.

Still running fingers across the wall, she moved to the brunette. Anger. Pain. Loathing. Hate.

She knew what she was looking at now, but still her hands moved to the blonde. Love. Hope. Betrayal. Loneliness.

You see it. The voices. For the first time, Sephone could discern the speakers. They came in choruses of two. All of them female.

She *did* see it, clearly now.

Her own desperation to retain the memories of her life; clawing at things that were once hers by right of being mortal, and all the while dragging Nita down into darkness with her.

Yanis' ravenous thirst for conflict. Not content to make her childer love and hate *herself* – to rip them apart inside every time they looked at her – but setting them against each other. Sephone had used Nita to remember what it felt like to be alive, but Yanis had used them both.

A game that played on until the elder grew bored of it.

Stop her.

Sifting through the wreckage of her writing desk, Sephone retrieved a small pill box. She had purchased it from a street vendor years ago, attracted by the relief of the Sacré-Coeur on the lid. A broken chair leg lay next to it: round, easy to grip, and fearlessly sharp on its broken edge. She reached for it without thought and slipped the wooden piece under her belt, then flicked the pill box open with her thumbnail. A small blue beetle waited inside. It had broken when Nita's dying body crashed down on it all those nights ago, but Sephone had saved it nonetheless.

She rose. The hunger that had threatened to overwhelm her moments ago was gone. The rage was still there, but it was calm and focused: a phoenix poised to strike, rather than a wildfire blindly lashing out. She weighed the path ahead of her, half-expecting the thought of harming Yanis to paralyze her with inaction as it always had before. Nothing – no hesitation or remorse, just serenity now that the decision was made. She stepped out into the long hallway leading to Yanis' rooms.



Yanis perched on a reclining sofa. She didn't acknowledge Sephone as she stepped in, or even move at all. The package lay beside her: brown paper torn off to reveal an iron vial. A heady scent rose from the unstoppered neck. *Vitae*. Thick, full of power and *toxic*.

A trap, whispered the voices. Sephone froze, until she realized the voices didn't mean a trap for *her*: The ancient blood, poisoned with unholy magic before its location was "leaked" to Yanis. Vampires built their empires on blood, and the temptation of such a prize had overridden the elder's caution. She had sent her childer to retrieve the package – and the rune magic freed Sephone from the chains of Yanis' blood.

Sephone didn't stop to consider why. Spared no time wondering if she was exchanging one master for another. Yanis' vulnerability was a gift – and she would take it. She pulled the chair leg from her belt and approached.

The elder's sky-blue eyes narrowed. "STOP."

Sephone knew it wouldn't work: she was free. Yanis, however, was caught by surprise. Annoyance turned to alarm. "STOP."

Droplets of blood rose on Yanis' skin as the elder forced her muscles to move, warring with the poison that paralyzed her. Sephone swept the chair leg forward just as Yanis shot up. On a good day, the elder moved like lightning. Sephone wouldn't stand a chance if not for the poison. As it was, the makeshift weapon tore Yanis' neck open from left to right. The elder stumbled back and Sephone struck again. This time she aimed for Yanis' belly, catching her under the ribs and pushing up to pierce her sire's heart. Coagulated blood oozed from the wound as Sephone twisted the chair leg. Just like that, the fight was over. Yanis crumpled to the floor as the wooden weapon finished what the poison started.

Freedom. Revenge. Exultation. The voices rose in a chorus that drowned out the world. Sephone knelt, sinking her fangs in her sire's neck





Numbers

by Ann Lemay

“Would you like to be friends?”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Idiot Lasombra who used to be a killer-for-hire. He’s perfect, he’s going to be even more perfect once I get my hands on him. I’ve been looking for someone just like him forever. He’s exactly what The Plan needs, and he’s ruining everything—including his own small-minded plans in the process — by trying to kill me. How stupid can this evening get? I mean, he’s only the entire reason I was in town in the first place. All I did was ask if we could be friends. I didn’t mean to startle him, he’s a Lasombra for crying out loud — I fully expected him to hear me lurking about in the shadows. Shadows are supposed to be his domain. I was being polite by lurking in them. Hi, here I am. I wasn’t even trying to sneak. Augh. Asked a question, a nice question even. And the most unhappy blam blammity blam of all ensued. So of course I ran. I’ve seen what those bullets of his do.

I just didn’t expect him to follow me and corral me to this place — I mean, I realized he was corralling me but then I got curious and dammit all, I wanted to know what *his* plan was, so I went along with what he was doing. That... was perhaps not wise. I really should have acquired more information before doing this. Cat. Curiosity. All that.

Still. Figures the one person I’ve ever considered taking on as an ally would have been the one to finally get a sense of the boogiething giggling in the shadows.

So. Very. Annoying.

Though I do think some of the single-minded intent he’s been showing today probably has to do with being embarrassed over the screech of surprise he let out before turning on me. I have to say though, it was a very nice shriek of surprise. I’ll have to tease him about that someday. If he

doesn't kill me today, that is. That would be a bit of a problem. Bah. Stupid Lasombra assassins.



Let me give you a little context while I hone my skills hiding from a fellow vampire who can control the very shadows I'm attempting to hide in. I know. Shut up. He'll have to calm down at some point. I'll just keep moving in the meantime. The odds are still good, he's rattled and not tracking me as well as he should. Of the two, I'm older and more spiteful. I'll outlast him on that alone.

Honestly, I normally wouldn't begrudge him any of that, I mean I feel for him. I wasn't exactly thrilled to find out what I'd been turned into myself, and no one likes another vampire getting the drop on them. Insult to injury when one is a Lasombra whose main hobby is similar to mine: vampire extermination. We're kindred souls, he and I.

Vampires are horrible. I say that most earnestly. After all, the reason I have a Plan is because I took the greatest of exceptions to being turned. My resentment for being thrust into the world of the unliving is without bounds, and will last until the heat death of the universe. Well. Unless everything goes according to The Plan, at which point, I get to walk into the sun in about 53 years, give or take a few months. There are some possibilities involving some idiot human starting a nuclear war (sub-plan 34b involves not letting that happen, if you must know, as I like humans just fine), but otherwise, I'm fairly on track here.

My Plan, though, requires this baby Lasombra, who has an indecent grasp of his clan's abilities. Grossly so when one considers his sire is dead and he's figured everything he knows all on his onesies. He's going to be horrifying powerful long before he should be. And I'm going to do my utmost to ensure that 1- it happens, 2- he survives the process and 3 -he becomes my staunchest ally in the process. Without him, I'm looking at 549 years and just, no.

I need him. Let me hide in this bright corner here and obfuscate the hell out of everything before we go on. There. Now, for a little background.

Officially, even though it's a known-only-to-myself-and-my-sire sort of official, my job is to ensure we don't feed ourselves into extinction.

The truth is that when it comes to rock hard reality, despite internal wars, clan upheavals, and the occasional human discovering the Masquerade and things generally turning to shit until the situation got handled, vampires have actually managed to sustain a very healthy population expansion. Too healthy. This is serious. We could eat ourselves into extinction.

What most of my kind don't know — and humans haven't even thought of — is that systems were put in place long ago to prevent truly obnoxious

levels of kindred expansion. I'm not talking "follow these societal rules yadda yadda yadda" here. I'm talking "keep the leech numbers in check, or else", very specifically. One of these checks-and-balances systems in particular is under my sole supervision. Oh happy day, to have been embraced for this purpose and none other. My joy knows no bounds. (I might be a tad bit vexed by this still, yes. I did not ask for this. I aim to make someone pay for this. Many someones, even.) As I was saying, this system was foisted on me what feels like ages ago and for the most part, it was working just fine up until the last couple decades or so. However, of late, it's mostly been kind of a stop gap solution. And depending on the decade, an iffy one at that. That's not even factoring the pox upon my life that is the Sabbat. They put rabbits to shame at times, it's not even funny. More than enough to tempt one into diablerie, assuming gobbling up one's fellow vampires could ever be a useful solution.

Sadly it's not. I've thought about it but the numbers just don't back it up, plus it's the kind of thing that draws attention fast, and the Please Avoid This At All Costs kind of attention no one wants. Not even me. You would not believe how uptight the secret police of the Camarilla are about that. So diablerie. Definitely not anything I'd be interested in, other than for sheer unadulterated spite. Spite being why, I admit, I do run the numbers again on that plan just in case by some sort of magical fortune, they turn up unicorns and roses for me. Because it would be so viscerally satisfying, to be able to just munch my way through the legion of the undead. Unfortunately it turns out that such a plan would be brief and wend really badly, no matter what variables you throw at it. At least it's easy to influence some idiot or other into it often enough to keep me entertained, with a bonus of sending a great many of my clan mates into a tizzy each time. Whoops, the numbers are turning to a lullaby. I'm getting distracted here.

Vampires. We're very inconvenient. Our blood-sucking numbers keep growing. And because some of us refuse to play nice and follow the rules, we run the risk of ending up, well, outnumbering our primary food source. Humans not exactly being as convenient to raise as cattle (despite what some of our more precious cinnamon bun whack jobs would have you think), too many vampires is a problem. A big problem. One that's been recurring nearly every twenty years or so, this past century. Not that any one notices. Except me. Because this is where I come in. I have a method, you see. One that I created on my own, after being introduced to the frabjous joys of vampiredom. One that suits me far better than the random madness driven crap my predecessor was fond of, and is far more effective to boot. Elegant even, dare I say.

Through various means, some technological and some mathematical in nature, I keep track of my brethren. I keep track of the living as well. I account for all the other critters that go bump in the night or any other world they favor as much as possible, and account for their impact on the food

chain. I figure out the possibilities. I account for all the variables, pull in all the alternatives. I live with the data, fill up my little head to bursting, until the harmonies are so strong I can barely hear myself think. I crunch the numbers every moment of every day, I proof the math to the point where it's not even an afterthought — it's become reflex, my way of life.

And then through trickery, tedious plotting and gleeful murder, I bring the numbers of my brethren... down. I make sure to remain unnoticed. I am discreet. An accident here, a fire there. The suggestion of a court location with high probability of future earthquakes, or setting up the discovery of a court by the Order of St George or some other pack of hunters. Misunderstandings between courts, early demolitions, a light bulb delivery switched from regular to extra high UV... the possibilities range from the minor to the catastrophic, and they are endless.

I make sure the outcomes stay reasonable, of course, as mandated by my Sire. But there is an important nuance to understand here. I am the one who defines what is reasonable or not. There has to be some perk to this job. You see, I'm the one gifted with one of those lofty ancient titles no one ever hears about. I am the *Tabula Rasa*. My job is to keep the vampire population under a comfortable limit so that the current human numbers can sustain us without arousing suspicion.

But I also have a Plan.

Hmm. Apologies, for a moment. There is a need for less explaining, and more dodging.

"You cannot hide from me, vampire," my prey calls.

Oh my god, did he really just say that? All solemn and noble-like?

"I can hear you giggling, vampire."

What, was I supposed not to? I mean c'mon, really?

"I may not see you, foul creature, but I can hear you. My shadows will find you."

...well. It *is* hard to keep up my kind of see-me-not going when you're surrounded by fire, sitting on your ass and choking on laughter, I admit. No loss in pride there. It'd also help to un-peel my hands from my mouth if I really want to answer him, I suppose.

"Look," I clear my throat then sidle to the side, fast. "We're going to have to get you better lines, okay?" Yep, there go the bullets, plinking away at where my head was seconds ago, splinters of wood flying — whoops, more sidling. Sidle sidle sidle. More bullets. Liver, heart, spleen. Someone's getting vindictive. And I'm running out of sidle space here. I look up and shrug. He may be hiding in the damn shadows, but with all the fire and flickering, at this point

he probably won't see me unless I somehow land right on him. I hope I don't, though it would be kinda funny if I did. And fair turnabout, if you ask me. I gather myself and leap straight upward, scrabbling inelegantly up a rotting beam. Nope, no baby Lasombra to land on. Ah well. I sidle some more.

Plink, plink. Dribble. Woosh. Aw, c'mon. Really? More fire?

"Can't we talk about this like civilized beings?" Ack, that came out all on its own and it is time to find another beam to jump to right then and there. I am so glad no one can see me flailing like a drunk marmoset. A moment later I get a solid grip again, and I don't even need to worry about not being loud because holy flying squirrels, what is he lugging under that coat of his, an entire armory? 37. 64. 87. Violin strings soaring through the room, each one building up to a lovely chorus of instant death. Yeah, definitely a clip fed gun thing. Which is sadly the limit of my gun knowledge, really. I just like counting the bullets, not shooting them. Granted, this is the first time I'm actually counting them while I'm also the one being shot at. I think I'm doing pretty well, all things considered. I'll just ignore the sad trombones echoing my every leap, and remind myself that not being shot is more important than grace, just right now.



Right. Back to The Plan, while I hop about the rafters, and sidle some more. Really, you would think that being the (only) one with The Plan™ should make things easier on me. I mean, no one knows what I'm up to. My sire's been deep in torpor pretty much since she turned me, and besides, she'd think it was all a grand lark anyway the crazy old coot. It's why I never bothered to kill her first. It's safer to keep her for last, because it caters to her ego and also, to her love of pranks on a cosmic scale. Take out the extra vampires, if the silly childe can get them then they don't deserve to live, and isn't it a grand ole joke anyway? Probably why she chose me to replace her in the first place, bet she didn't even think my skill with mathematics was of relevance. She turned me, made sure I knew what my job was, laughed at how angry I was about the whole deal, gave me her *bibliothèque*, her contacts and access to her accounts and turned in for a centuries-long nap. As a result of it all, I've got titles and various personae in our sociopathic mess of a society that gives me a solid public facade. I'm riding off an ancient super-secret title and position with a lot of behind-the-scenes knowledge and funding, even if no one actually knows anything about it. Oh, I had to do research for decades to prep for the job, it's not like she downloaded anything useful in my head right off the bat. Locked myself away with the books, read up. Trained. Counted. Built up aliases and very subtle information networks. Showed masterful restraint and did not murder every vampire I met. And once I was ready, I started my work. Kind of like Batman, only I firmly stay in the shadows, thank you very much. Less angst too.

Oh, extra bonus, for some reason I'm not stuck in the universal brain suck of doom like the rest of my clan, for which I am endlessly grateful. Most of my clan annoys the hell out of me anyway, now that they no longer scare the living daylights out of me. Sure, maybe I'm a little too focused about laying waste to all of the undead, but on the whole considering how few of my so-called kin make sense even on their better days, I'm pretty copacetic with this. I may be hyper obsessed on some things. But still, it's cool. I'm functional. Which, of course, pretty much everyone else would disagree with, if they knew that is. This amuses me to no end. I am the boogiething in the night, hear me giggle. Pffft.

Of course, none of those factors are of any help to me right now, and most of it is my own damn fault. Because sanity is not something that is having anything to do with my current plan (not The Plan, just today's plan), or this day in general. See the bullets hitting the wall above me. Smell the accelerant dribbling down the walls each time one of the cursed things plinks away more marble. Witness the cherubic sculpture die a shattery death under a hail of very peeved ammunition. Feel the heat of the flames licking at my feet, the walls around me, the slab of wonderfully solid wood I'm hiding behind. Solid, flammable wood, dammit. I repress the urge to shout "Burn, vampire, burn!" because it is a horrible line and I'm not giving my Lasombra any more corny lines to kill me with. So no, this situation is not part of my plan — not part of any of my plans, thank you very much — and I find everything about it to be entirely objectionable.

See, my job may be to keep our numbers down.

But my Plan is to take out every vampire in existence.

It just may take a little time, but that's okay. Time is a commodity I have in spades. And I really, really hate vampires.



Time to focus on the prize. I don't entirely hate this one particular vampire, even though he's being impossible at the moment. The way the numbers sang when I integrated him to the plan made for too wonderful a symphony for hate to be involved.

"I have sealed any and all escape route from this room, evil creature." He is so very solemn. It's adorable.

Whoops, gave myself away. And there I go making like a grasshopper again, and off he goes shooting again. I have to stop giggling at the corny lines, seriously. It'll be the death of me. I jump one more time, the clean parabolic arc music to my ears. It's the first elegant move I've made all night and the numbers make for a soothing arpeggio among all the gunfire and the previous chorus of sad, mocking trombones.

There. I know where he is now. Geometry. Simplest of math. Gets ‘em every time. One more leap and — bother. Oh, so much bother. The little shit—I mean, the lovely lovely Lasombra who should totally be working with me—has already learned to *shadowstep*. He’s not old enough to shadowstep. I am not OK with any of this shadowstepping business. Any calculation I’ve been making showed it as a fringe possibility and even then. We’re absolutely in crescendo calculations right now. My luck, let me show it to you. He’s absolutely gross, he’s just messed up my numbers and I am not pleased. I swear and scramble for more cover. The bullets pause for a moment.

“...that was very rude.” Oh, the disapproval. The heavens themselves would weep in the face of such reprimand.

“You can *shadowstep*.” There. Have some disapproval of your own, my prim wee one. Turnabout is fair play.

“Is that what it’s called?” That level of casual smugness he injects in those few words is ridiculous. I’d complain, only he’s earned to the right to it. I am not saying that out loud though. Not a chance. I scabble upside down and bite my lip, throwing in a few extra variables as I start calculating possible outcomes to bring this situation to the culmination of my choice. Good thing I don’t need to breathe unless I want to speak, and that the acridness of the smoke isn’t annoying when you’re dead. Then the beam I’m hanging on from creaks alarmingly *right above me* and my eyes go wide as I stop everything. New possibilities. Wonderful new possibilities. Luck and mayhem dance through the numbers, on my side for the first time all day and present me with a glorious, perfect new plan. *The Magic Flute’s* overture trumpets gloriously in my ears, and I know exactly what to do. He’s really not going to like this one. I give myself a swing and haul upwards, catching on to anything Lasombra I can get a grip on. And then hang on for dear un-life.

The squawk of startled outrage is already the best reward, and while his first move isn’t bad at all (launching himself off the beam while trying to use me to soften the fall), clearly he’s not aware of my specialty. I allow myself a moment of self-satisfaction there. Don’t know everything about me yet, do you baby Lasombra? I’m hardly a brawler, but all it takes is a bit of a twitch and the appropriately calculated mass shift to ensure he cushions our fall instead. Things clatter to the side (is that a grenade?) as we land and the sound he makes right afterward is not a happy one. Me? I’m amused. Also, shifting my grip to keep a better hold on him, all the while flipping through ideas as to what to do next. Too bad we’re not ticklish, as a whole. That’d have been a hilariously entertaining tactic. At least for me. No, I’m not entirely right in the head. I’m a vampire, remember?

An uncomfortably large piece of flaming wood falls right next to us, and we both pause in our struggles to look at it. That was really close. I tighten

my grip as he tries to elbow me off. Sometime stupidly huge, heavy and sharp keeps hitting my leg but I valiantly ignore it in favor of clinging even harder. The muttered word “cockroach” drifts to my ears and I narrow my eyes, tightening my grip through sheer spite. I’m very good at things spiteful. That’s when he breaks something on my hand (glass, vial, small) and I shriek and roll away, right through a wall of flame and thankfully to another not so burny spot. Acid. That felt like acid. Who uses acid — ooooooh. Oh my sweet, innocent Lasombra. Go back to hiding in your shadows. I have your number now.

“...you tried to use holy water early on, didn’t you? Did whoever you threw it at just laugh at you?” I’m not actually faking the sympathy. That had to be an extremely embarrassing moment for him, what with his living career having been one devoted to the art of killing. Also, it’s hilarious. Wish I could see his face right now.

“I hate you.” So much feeling. Even the shadows look annoyed. I’m starting to feel a little slighted here.

“Nonsense, you don’t even know me.” I eyeball the rest of the room and listen carefully to the calculations going on the back of my head. There is a lot of fire to go with all the other fire in the room, and I am perhaps starting to feel uneasy. Dying would definitely mess with The Plan. A bullet skims past my hip, taking away fabric as it goes and to my utter dismay, I snap.

“Stop trying to kill me and let me make friends with you, dammit! We want the same thing!” I maybe even stomped my foot there. Not wise, considering the floor is less than solid. With all the fire surrounding us.

The bullets pause once more. I can practically feel the shadows above glaring at me in confusion.

“For a vampire who wants to die, you are working very hard at not letting me kill you.”

“What? No, not that you —” I take a deep breath, make a face at the smoke that comes with it, square my shoulders and though it breaks my heart, I put away the swearing for now. “I want to kill all the other vampires before I die. All other vampires die first. Me after. That’s the Plan!” Well, maybe. I still flip flop on the last part. Someone would have to stay behind to make sure nothing else crawls out from a rock once the job was done. Just to make sure. “Dead vampires. That’s what I want. That’s what you want. See? Common goal! Perfect for friendship! Why are you being so difficult about this?”

The shadows grow more confused. It’s really impressive, the way he telegraphs his emotions.

“Oh.”

“...really? Oh? That’s all you’ve got? You nearly take my head when I ask you to be friends, chase me all the way in here, set the place on fire then

try to shoot me using, so far, 104 bullets with that ridiculous enormous thing that looks like a gun, and that's all you have to say?"

"Yes. We can be friends." He pauses and the shadows wave briefly. "104? I was at 97."

"104. Numbers is what I do." I wave back, dismissively, then lose any level of coolness I had by squawking and doing a little dance when an ember lands on my shoulder. Off. Off of my shoulder, evil burning thing! I finally divest myself of the thing with no grace whatsoever, and then my brain catches up to what he just said. The flutes are positively smug. "Wait, what? Did you say yes? Just like that? Yes, we can be friends?"

"You're telling the truth. Of course I said yes."

This is too easy. Nothing is ever this simple. Well, all right, 104 bullets and far too much fire later wasn't simple by any stretch of the imagination, but still.

"...how can you tell?" I sound suspicious. I don't care.

His reply is sheepish. So sheepish I can hear the choir of baah-ing in the background.

"It, um. Makes sense. Now that you mention it. I should have seen that, considering how long I have been researching you. And following you. It explains a lot, even."

"Pfff. You were turned how long ago, thirty years? 31, tops? That is not a long time to be researching me, baby Lasombra." Whoops. Said that last bit out loud. I take a step to the side and the ember taking a shot at my head flies harmlessly past to the ground. Ha. Take that, stupid fire.

My Lasombra drops from one of the beams above (ha, one of two I'd calculated as most likely) and holds his weapon at his side, hand away from the trigger. I stare. 1 — the thing is huge, that's ridiculous what is that thing even, and 2 — he's fast enough to put that finger right back on the trigger before I blink, so I don't know why he'd think that would matter to me. Honestly. Unlike him, I wasn't embraced yesterday. He looks at his hand, then back at me.

"I am being polite. It is a gesture. Of good-will." So solemn, that child. First thing, teach him about contractions. He raises an eyebrow at me and it occurs to me that I might be glaring at his trigger hand while making plans for his future. I might be glaring a lot, at that.

He sighs, and considering he's not the one who has been shot at, nearly set on fire and acidified, I don't really feel he has any right to sound so put-upon. "No, you are still frowning. With great suspicion." Ugh. "Still frowning." Now he looks amused. "I will take peeved." He walks closer slowly, ignoring the fire and I don't care what people say about my clan, there is one insane

vampire in this room and it's not me. The fire isn't even phasing him. I go from peeved to piqued in a second, right there, and my mouth opens without any direction from my brain.

"Heard what you did to your sire. Laughed for days. I mean, killing your sire right on your awakening, that's got to be a first." Butter wouldn't melt. Well, if not for the fire... He stiffens at my smirk, and gives me a mildly aggrieved look. A piece of burning timber falls on his shoulder and he flicks it off with haughty sniff. Ass. Showing off like that.

"I did not mean to. It was a reflex. I had no idea what was going on."

Any more sulking and my Lasombra would be sticking his lower lip out. And I am distracted from the fire, just like that. He is adorable and I probably have the stupidest grin on my face right now. Class, *sanguisuga major*, sub-class, embarrassed hit-man *adoribilis*. Makes you just want to pinch his cheeks and emit little high-pitched auntie sounds. Too bad he'd shoot me if I tried.

"Heh. No one's let you live it down, mmm?" Oh dear heavens, that was a pout. So. Tempting. Pinch, pinch. Eeeeeee.

"He thought I was a banker. It was my cover, it was meant to be my last job. I—" A sigh and he looks despondent, the moment so brief I nearly don't see it. "It is irrelevant. My past is of no consequence. Only one thing matters now. You will help me kill vampires?" Soulful puppy dog eyes. He actually can do that. I'm torn on a fairly even fifty-fifty as to whether he's doing that on purpose or is entirely unawares.

"Aw, that's cute. No, actually, you'll be helping me." I sidle. Closer this time. One tiny sidle, then another. "My plan has a bit of a bigger scope than yours. Because my plan is to kill all the vampires, cuddlypuff. Not just a few here and there, then hiding for months between each kill." I smile gently. "Which works, but only if you aim to take a ridiculous amount of time to kill all vampire. I could crunch the math for you, if you'd like?"

He blinks slowly and I can practically feel the gears turning in his brain. While the gerbils have a run, I do some thinking of my own, some involving fire, most involving happily realizing that he has no issues with how I'm talking to him, which is pretty telling. That's focus right there. I like focus. I'm a devoted practitioner of the religion of focus myself. And math. And speaking of gears, unlike most people whom I deal with, his turn pretty fast actually.

"I like this plan." Talk, dark and solemn as he is, I could swear there's the ghost of a smile somewhere in that. He pauses and tilts his head to the side. "We should probably get out of here before the bomb goes."

"Well, the Plan is a bit more complicated than just that but — wait, what?"

Bomb? You set a bomb to get me? I rated a whole bomb for myself?”

“Your habit of disappearing from sight is irksome to the extreme. You rated three bombs. Staggered sequence.”

He smiles sweetly, grabs me by the shirt, hauls me over his shoulder and charges upwards for the nearest dying shadow.

Three bombs, all for me? Oh yes, he’ll do. I’m keeping him.



I am the *Tabula Rasa*. I still have a job. The one thing about my job, the one rule I’ve given myself that is not the secret official one but the kill-all-vampires one, is to never be rushed. You go too fast, you affect the numbers too much and someone will notice. My Lasombra was moving too slow. I was too. With him helping, I can move a bit faster, but more importantly — I can diversify.

It’s not as fast I’d like it to be. The best option for that is nuking the entire planet, but it’d be a bit of an overkill. As I said — I like humans just fine. It’d be rude to wipe them out.

But that’s ok. I’m in this long term. I’ve got time.

And today? Today, thanks to my new friend, my projections are looking just a little bit more... reasonable.





The Draug of the Deep

By **Berit Ellingsen**

*I'm standing alone, I'm watching you all
I'm seeing you sinking
I'm standing alone, you're weighing the gold
I'm watching you sinking
Fool's gold
— Fool's Gold by The Stone Roses (1989)*

The procedure was surprisingly simple. Replace all the blood in the subject's body with a balanced saline solution, inject a little of the special mixture, then slowly reintroduce the original blood. Then more blood. And even more blood. More than double the initial volume. But neither that nor the subsequent transfusions that were needed to top up the subject presented much of a challenge for the corporation that performed the experimental procedure. Recently donated and properly stored blood for medical use was not difficult to get hold of for a company so large and so powerful that it had several small clinics and scores of doctors and nurses in its employ, even though it was not in the medical business. Nor was it difficult for such a company to gain access to a private operating theater in which to carry out the procedure, with the most modern life support equipment on stand-by. Anesthetists with cutting-edge expertise in artificial life support had not been hard to find or entice to the project either. Word of the experimental procedure had been leaked to the right people via the right channels, which garnered the attention and intense curiosity of a small subset of research surgeons who viewed attempts at pushing the limits of life support on the operating table almost as an extreme sport. All, of course, to make such procedures safe for patients with near fatal injuries who were so close to death that anything the doctors could do to prolong their life for a few more hours in order to patch them up was acceptable. That these experimental procedures also tested where the border between life and death lay, whether it could be pushed a little further out, what the depths

to which a patient could sink and still be retrieved by modern medicine were plumbed, was a bonus.

Thus, the procedure was carried out quietly, completely in private, with only a few dedicated and ambitious experts performing it. It was done surreptitiously for several reasons. First and foremost because it might result in a revolutionary medical protocol or even patent which could be sold at a high price to military forces around the world as a new and improved procedure for the surgical treatment of combat injuries, or to companies whose employees regularly performed high-risk operations in extreme environments. Perhaps it could even be sold to private clinics and medical practitioners who treated Formula-1 drivers, professional mountain climbers, and other kinds of athletes who regularly risked serious injury or death. The public, on the other hand, had no need for the knowledge. State-run hospitals with low revenue-potential would only hear about it in and have personnel trained in the highly specialized procedure in due time.

The few medical reports that were made of the experiment state only a few adverse effects on the patient. A few uncontrolled tremors right before and immediately following the infusion of the secret fluid. At that moment the heart and lungs were completely still, and the patient was closest to the edge of death, before the machines again took over the beating and the breathing. The patient's body temperature remained low, even after the blood had been reintroduced and the operating theater slowly re-heated, but this was assumed to be a temporary effect of the strain of the procedure.

Afterwards, the patient regained consciousness very quickly, and following a recuperation that lasted only a few days, scored significantly higher on cognitive and mental tests than prior to the experiment. Subsequent tests in a pool at the same specialized dive medicine facility where the procedure was carried out showed that the patient was now ready to carry out the final part of the experiment.

Ten Years Later

After weeks in the specialized hyperbaric facility on the diving vessel, we finally board the personnel transfer chamber, a steel sphere barely large enough for four people. On the way down, Val, Jack, and Dave spend the time arguing which one of the movies *Jaws*, *The Abyss*, or *Le Grand Bleu* is the best.

"The Abyss has a giant alien water phallus at the end," Jack says. "Can't beat that."

"Le Grand Bleu has sex with dolphins," Val shoots in. "That's real giant dicks, not just watery ones."

"In *Jaws*, the shark needed to shoot the oxygen tank a lot faster," Dave claims.

“Huh?” we all say and look at him. We’re getting used to his random comments and quirky humor, but he still manages to surprise us. He already refers to our personnel transfer chamber, our diving bell, as Diving Belle. Too much booze, Ecstasy, Madchester music, and living it up in Aberdeen when on-shore is my guess. Most professional divers are athletes and take care of themselves as such, but that doesn’t go for all, especially not in the offshore business. Those divers tend to work hard and play hard with the rig crews and ship mates up top.

Jack, on the other hand, is military or former military. I can smell it on him. The obedient scent of shoe polish and gun oil and manly hypervigilance. Like the rest of us, he’s been careful not to talk about his past, but he took a strong stance on the Falklands War once it came up in the accommodation chamber one night.

Val’s American. At first I thought she might be military too, but she’s much harder to place. With her air of discipline and confidence she seems used to demanding environments and risky dives. Maybe she’s an experienced rescue diver, cave diver, or nuclear diver. Maybe she’s all three.

Val’s named after the famous TV diver Valerie Taylor, Jack for Jacques Cousteau, and Dave for David Attenborough. We don’t know each other’s real names. The pay is so good we don’t need to. Just one descent to repair this spot on a pipeline that’s been leaking on and off for the last ten years. Remote Operated Vehicles have been down there to patch the pipe, but they’ve either malfunctioned or the leak’s started up again, causing the pipe to hemorrhage even more crude oil. A small but bothersome leak for the company, enough to finally send divers down to a near-record breaking depth of four hundred and forty meters.

In the so-called mesopelagic zone, which stretches from two hundred to a thousand meters under the surface, there is a theoretically a small amount of sunlight left. But that’s not taking the November darkness of the North Sea into account, nor the gales that lash the ocean at this time of year. Outside the tiny circular portholes in our personnel transfer chamber the descent is black from we hit the frothing waves on the surface, then it’s like the darkness congeals into an entire ocean. As we are lowered further, even the booms and clangs from the large diving vessel above us slowly vanish. I turn up the volume on the speakers through which our support crew pipe music from the radio down to us. “Smells Like Teen Spirit” comes on and we start singing with our squeaky hydrogen voices which only special voice electronics can make intelligible, while we grind imaginary guitars and drum in the air, ignoring the swinging and creaking this creates in the descending chamber.

The radio has moved on to The Stone Roses and Fool’s Gold when finally reach the bottom. By that time we’ve calmed down, each of us is sitting inside our own private bubble of focus, breathing slowly and calmly to prepare for the job. When the chamber finally touches down it shudders a single boom

out into the darkness. Then it's silent all around. The music from the radio cuts out and the voice of McKinley, our supervisor and dive master, comes through the speakers. It's time to go out.

We've been living for weeks inside two steel cylinders that make up a hyperbaric chamber and its personnel quarters at the right pressure to be able to withstand the 44 atmospheres at 440 meters under the sea. By staying at the right pressure we don't need to decompress for as long as we're on the job, which otherwise would take months. Breathing a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen, hydrox, further prevents decompression sickness and makes us able to work at all down here. In addition to those gases there's a tiny bit of nitrogen thrown in to prevent the feared mental confusion and seizures of High Pressure Nervous Syndrome. An umbilical cord as thick as a person supplies our personnel transfer chamber with power for light and equipment, breathing gases in the right mixture, hot water to keep our suits and the chamber warm, and communication with McKinley and the crew upstairs, who maintain all the valves and dials and gas tanks up on the ship. In addition, our Diving Belle has tanks of bailout gas mounted in the racks outside in case of an emergency, , as do we when we leave the personnel capsule.

Today, Dave's our bellman, the person who stays behind and keeps the umbilical cords that stretch from the chamber to our drysuits in order when we exit. I'm glad Dave's inside, because I don't trust his zaniness. But I'm not sure it would have been any better to have him out there with Val and Jack and me either.

Half an hour later we've got our helmets, our lights, our gloves, and our death-defying pro-diver spirit on, and are ready to go. Dave turns the wheel that opens the hatch in the floor of the chamber for us, which reveals a moon-pool of trembling water that is kept out by the higher pressure in the bell. One by one we lower ourselves into the of ice-cold, black water.



The bright yet narrow beam from one of the four lamps that is lit on top of Diving Belle is the only light around us. It blazes like a beacon in the oceanic night and points in the direction where we need to go. Upstairs has informed us we should be less than fifty meters away from the leak site, but the beam doesn't manage to pierce the darkness for even a third of that distance. We nevertheless stay on the narrow path of our underwater beacon for as long as we can.

The deep sea is probably the closest to an alien world you can ever come without leaving the planet. In the light from the personnel transfer chamber the seabed is a barren flat, drawn in stark monochrome, with pitch black shadows and magnesium-flare highlights, like the old photos from the landings on the moon. The substrate is even and featureless save for a stone here and there, and covered with a very fine sand that billows up with every step

we take, like the lunar regolith. At four hundred and forty meters the density of the water remains the same as at four meters, so movement is not slower or more impaired. It's the pressure that's much greater, pushing against our lungs and making it very hard to breathe. Even with the special gas mixture we're using, which was developed recently for work at extreme depths such as this, we can only take small gulps of air at once, much like climbers at very high altitudes. This makes us out of breath very quickly, so all movement must be slow and deliberate and swimming is out of the question.

After about fifteen meters, the light from the bell is still visible, but beam is so dispersed we can only navigate by using the compasses on our suits, the strong lights on our helmets, and Val's lamp. She's up in front. Other than the sound of our labored breathing and the crackling in the communication equipment, it is dead quiet. The deep sea stretches like a wall of darkness around and above us. Fortunately, the seabed is sloping downward a little, making it easier to walk, to the shelf where the pipe rises up from the abyssal plain, three thousand meters below us.

"I see something," Val says over the communication system in our helmets. We hope it's the pipe, but when we continue a little further, we see it's a Remote Operated Vehicle, a ROV. Judging from its size and bulk, it's several years old.

"I'm going closer for a better look," Val says. As we approach the ROV, we recognize the logo on its side as being that of the company which has hired us. The elongated, neon-yellow body has several deep scratches on the side and both propellers are missing. From the rust and the ashen barnacles that have fastened themselves to its side, the ROV has been lying here for a long time.

"Is that the ROV that was sent last?" Jack asks.

"No," McKinley says. "It's too old. Must be one of the ROVs they sent down there in the mid-eighties, before my time."

"What, did their Miami Vice technology not work?" Dave says from the bell and laughs at his own joke. He really shouldn't, as we're only two years out of the nineteen-eighties.

"How many ROVs did they send?" I ask.

"Three," McKinley says. "The second never reached the target. The last one sent back the most recent images we have of the leak, before that sub too vanished."

"Have they let the pipe keep leaking since then?" Val asks.

"This is completely confidential," McKinley replies. "And if any of you tell anyone else of this, such as the press, the bosses will know who talked and they will ruin your lives. Believe me."

“So that’s what they did,” Dave concludes.

“It was just a tiny leak,” McKinley says. “Hardly noticeable in the flow. But there’s new environmental regulations now and the company’s started getting day fines from the government about it.”

That explains why they’re putting so much money into this repair.

“Bring the ROV over to the capsule so we can get it up,” McKinley says.

“Negative,” Val replies. “It’s way too heavy for us to lug thirty meters. We’re at four hundred meters, not a hundred and forty.”

“Aww, if it’s too heavy for our little lady she can get some help from the guys,” McKinley stupidly comments. Old age and bigotry doesn’t always win.

“Fucking Scotsman,” Val replies. “That ROV is a wreck not even worth the winching.”

We continue in the direction which the radar upstairs says the pipe is. From here, even the brightness of the capsule’s light is weak.

“Ever been as far away from the capsule as this on any dive before?” Jack asks.

“Ooh, Jack’s afraid of the dark,” Dave mocks from the bell.

“No,” I reply. “Never. And that’s easy for you to say, Dave,” I add. “You come out here next time and we’ll see how fearless you are.”

“Ha ha ha, twat!” Dave laughs.

We continue into the darkness, guided by Val’s light. At least we can follow our own footprints back. A slight current in the water, or change in temperature, tells us we’re getting closer to the precipice, beyond which is the true deep sea, where the pressure is so immense even specially built ROVs and bathyscaphes have trouble going there. Seventy-five percent of the Earth is covered in water and humans haven’t explored more than a tiny bit. It’s best not to think too hard about how little we know about the deep sea, and how close we are now to that ever-darkened world.

It’s not long before Val again says she can see something. This time it’s the pipe. A fat cylinder going in the perpendicular direction of our path from the bell. As we close in on it we feel the icy draft from the abyss a little more, penetrating even the warmth of the tubes of hot water that is coursing through our suits. Fortunately, the point of leakage is clearly visible. There are several minor holes in the metal, together making up a substantial longitudinal gap. Even though the flow is now closed, costing the company millions of pounds in lost revenue each day, in addition to the fines, we can see lumps of crude oil on the pipe and seabed here and there, looking like pools of dried blood.

“Let’s stay away from those,” Val says, passing her beam over the nasty emissions.

As the images from the last ROV indicated, the holes in the pipe sit close enough for a simple cover-and-weld job. No need to cut out and replace this stretch of the pipe. Since we’re paid per shift spent down here, I can’t quite decide whether I’m relieved or disappointed over that.

After filming the entire leak spot from all possible angles with our helmet cameras for McKinley, we start on the walk back to the chamber while the engineers upstairs discuss the best way to solve the problem.

“Damn!” Jack suddenly says.

“What’s the problem?” Val asks.

“My suit’s leaking,” Jack replies. “Must have snagged it on the holes in the pipe.”

“You’re bleeding,” Val says. I turn towards him. Red is billowing out from Jack’s arm. The slight current has taken it and pulled it out into a long thin cloud, which stretches into the darkness.

Jack clamps one hand over his arm.

“Stand still,” I say, “we’ll get you patched up in no time.”

We have stickies to repair small nicks in the suit. But with our thick gloves it takes time to fumble them out of the pocket, pull the protective cover off, and press them onto Jack’s suit.

“I’m freezing,” Jack says by the time we’re finished.

“Is your hot water leaking?” I ask. It’s disastrous if his suit gets filled with water on the inside.

“Maybe it got clogged from a patch,” Val says.

“Return to the capsule immediately,” McKinley decides.

We set off in as high a tempo as possible. Jack soon starts lagging behind, so we take him between us and continue. He’s shivering and shaking with cold, because the gas mixture we breathe conducts heat much better than normal air, so we lose body heat a lot faster than up top, and the water is barely four degrees C. The slight incline and dragging Jack makes the walk very long and hard. It’s barely fifty meters, but it’s the hardest fifty meters I’ve ever done. We’re gasping the hydrox air and move as if through syrup, but finally we’re close enough to the bell to reach its beacon and slow down a bit.

A swift, violent motion in the water behind us pulls Jack out of our grip. Jack screams in our ears, a choking, shivering sound. Val and I grasp for him, but we are far from quick enough. Jack vanishes into the darkness.

“Jack!” Val says, and starts to go after him.

“No!” I say and grab her arm.

“What the hell’s going on down there?” McKinley shouts.

“Something took Jack,” I yell, dragging Val back into the beam and towards the chamber.

“Get to the bell,” McKinley roars.

I pull Val along, then push her ahead of me up into the moonpool while I scan the darkness around us.

“What the fuck?” Dave says when we are inside, the hatch is closed, and our helmets are off.

“Dave disappeared,” Val says.

“How?”

“Maybe a shark,” I say. “Pulled him out of our grip.”

“What the fuck?” Dave repeats.

“There are no sharks this deep,” Val says.

“Yes, there is,” I say. “But only a few. And no species that’s been reported of attacking divers before.”

“What else could it be?” Val shudders.

“Giant squids,” I say. “They sometimes wash ashore, twenty meters long or more.”

“Or the Draug,” Dave mocks.

“The Draug?” I say.

“From Scandinavian folk tales. The Draug is a revenant of mariners who died at sea. They appear at night during storms, looking like living corpses dressed in fishermen’s clothes, sailing a vessel broken in two. Seeing the Draug means you die soon. It’s a baaaad omen.”

“Come on,” I say. “That’s not funny. We lost Jack less than thirty minutes ago.”

“Let’s not have our imaginations run wild,” McKinley says. “We’ll do a radar sweep for sharks and other fish in the area. Maybe we’ll even find Dave.”

Four hundred fathoms deep

The radar finds nothing, of course, no school of deepwater sharks or giant squid or killer lantern fish or anything else predatory. And there is no sign of Jack. No mangled corpse floating around the chamber, no suit remnants or helmet, not even a chewed-off arm or a leg. It’s as if he was truly swallowed up by the deep.

“I’ve seen this movie,” Dave whimpers. “And it doesn’t end well.” He flips on the switches for all four floodlights, even though it will eat our power a lot.

“Well, the company’s not paying for you to sit on your bums,” McKinley finally says. Six hours have passed with the search. Each day fine is costing them fifty thousand pounds, in addition to the cost of the shut pipe.

“It must have been because he was bleeding,” I say and look at Val and Dave in turn. “One lone shark could have smelled it three kilometers away and that’s too small to blip on any radar.”

“What do you suggest we do, then?” Val says.

“We’ve got the steel cover,” I say. “We know exactly where the leak is, we have the welding torches. We can get the job done in two hours or less.”

“We just have to be careful not to attract that shark again?” Val says.

“Even if we were to just fasten the plate and not seal every single seam, a ROV could finish the job.”

“I’m not going out there,” Dave says.

“I thought you weren’t afraid of sharks, or the Draug?” Val says.

“No, no, no, I’m not going out there.”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake,” McKinley crackles in the speaker. “Now is not the time to lose your nerves.”

“How many dives have you done?” I ask Dave.

“More than your mum!” Dave poutes.

“Come on, how many?”

“Hundred, hundred and twenty, maybe.”

“And on how many of those have you seen sharks?”

“None,” he admits. “But I’m not going out there! I’m not!” He starts shaking his head and clamps his hands over his temples.

“We do need a bellman,” I say.

Val nods.

“Can you do that?” I say, speaking extra loudly to break through Dave’s panic. “Dave! If Val and I go outside and finish the job, can you mind our umbilicals for us?”

Dave stares up at me, pupils dilated in fear, or something more chemical. “O-of course,” he finally stutters.

This time I go first, pulling the strap of the big diving light over my shoulder. There’s barely room, with the thick umbilical, one welding torch, and its gas tank. Val lowers herself down into the moonpool and together we stand on the seabed outside. The multiple beams from the top of the chamber create a bright flower-shaped circle of light.

“I’ll get the cover loose,” I say. “Keep an eye out for me.”

Val takes the diving light and holds it up, even though it can’t pierce the darkness a fraction of the distance of the chamber’s beams. It’s to feel safe more than anything else.

I loosen the clamps on the curving steel that sits on the bell’s rack, carefully, so as not to snag or drop anything. When that’s done I take the light and Val and I pull the cover between us down the thin lane created by our previous footprints in the sand.

When we come to the place where Jack disappeared, Val doesn’t say anything, but I can’t help tilt the light down to search the tracks. Only a few scattered footprints deviate from the steady path we created on the way back to the chamber. A few extra steps that turn away from the direction of the other footprints, and that’s all. Jack’s final traces in this realm. There is no curtain of blood hanging in the water, or rags floating, or anything else.

“Come on,” Val says and shudders.

At the leak site the beam from the dive light seems fainter and smaller than that of a keyring Mag-Lite. The light shakes with Val’s shivers, but whether it’s from the cold of the water, which seems to have turned even more frigid, or fear, I can’t say. She helps me hold the cover in place, so it fits well over the long crack in the pipe.

“Turn away,” I say, and flip the welding glasses of my helmet down. The arc at the tip of the torch is blindingly cerulean, like a blue star. I hear those exist out there, as unbelievable as that sounds. The light is infinitely brighter than the diving lamp, but too small and strobing to illuminate our surroundings much. Announcing our presence in the darkness, on the other hand, it does excellently. I want to keep looking over my shoulder for incoming dangers, but I can’t. I need to keep my eyes on the job and the slowly thickening scar of fused metal that the welding torch grows along the edge of the cover. I must trust that Val will be able to spot any problems before they arrive.

“Are you... are you doing all the seams,” Val gasps after a while.

“Twelve points,” I say. “That should keep it in place until a ROV can seal it entirely. I’m done.”

“Let’s go,” Val says.

I extinguish the welding torch and it gets really dark around us.

Val sets off, her arms and legs pushing hard against the merciless physics of density and pressure. Her huffing and gasping is all I can hear over the communication system.

“Val,” I say. “Slow down a little.” Panic down here can be the last that you do. But she continues, and even does a few ungainly leaps, like those

astronauts on the moon, for faster progress. But on hydrogen gas, there's no way she can keep that up for more than a few jumps.

"Val," I say again. "If the shark is still around it had plenty of time to attack while we welded. It is not very likely to return, especially since none of us are bleeding."

She stops and can't say anything for a good while. What little I can see of her face in the helmet is ashen.

"Come," I say. "Let's go back together."

She breathes, nods, then starts walking more carefully, but still at a relatively high pace. She does not slow down until we are back in the bright beam from the bell. But then I see the Draug. A dark form that scuttles quickly from the seabed and up into the chamber's open hatch. In the black shadow beneath the bell it's impossible to make out any features other than a body of rags or thick smoke waving in the water. For a second I'm not even sure what I saw was correct. Was it a hallucination caused by beginning High Pressure Nervous Syndrome? Hydrogen narcosis is known to give more bizarre hallucinations than nitrogen narcosis. Or it was simply brought on by the stress of seeing Jack vanish? But then I'm not in doubt anymore.

"Get back here," Dave yells in our helmets. "Help! I need help! Something..."

"Hold on, Dave!" Val gasps. "We're on our way!" She pushes her way ahead of me, with long determined strokes, nearly swimming with all the gear on. She drops the diving light, curls up into a ball, kicks off hard from the seabed, and shoots up into the moonpool. Above me, one of the beams from the bell starts rolling wildly, like an eye in a faint. Then the tiny porthole right below the moving light is spattered with red.

I quickly peek my head up through the pool, grab the handles of the hatch, then sink back again. No point in turning the wheel, the weight of the hatch will keep it in place. Then I yank my umbilical cord hard, pulling the communication, the hydrogen flow, the oxygen gas, and the electrical wires, free from the grip of the hatch. On the other side, the cut umbilical drums against the steel, whipping like a snake from the hot water and gases flowing through it. I don't stay to watch the show, but swim as quickly away from the chamber as I can.

The bell is filled with hydrogen and oxygen, two extremely explosive gases, in a non-flammable mixture. But it only needs a little more oxygen, or a little more hydrogen, and a single spark, say from a severed umbilical with the gases separated and the electrical wires exposed. The personnel transfer capsule makes a resounding whump! and jumps once on the seabed. The solid curving walls manage to contain the explosion, but it's safe to say nothing is left inside. Instead, I grab the welding torch and swim over to the ROV and pull it with me back to the leak site on the pipe. There, I flash the arc back on and finish the welding I started two hours earlier.

Without the hot water trickling through the tubes of the suit it is cold, but since the water remains a few degrees above freezing, there is no risk of getting petrified. I'm almost finished with the job when the Draug finally attacks. I drop the torch and wrestle him. I could have put him on fire with it and he probably would have burned even down here, but I have other plans for him. He is strong though, and shrieks inside my head:

"Heh-help me! Help me! I knew they'd send people if the pipe continued to leak! They left me to die here when the job was done! B-but I couldn't. I couldn't die!" All the while he grapples me, like a man about to drown. Ten years or however long he's been down here, alone in the cold and the darkness, needing no air and no food, must have driven him completely insane. Ten years in what truly is Davy Jones' Locker, even with the half-sleep of our kind, would ruin any mind. No wonder he punched the pipe and crashed the ROV so other divers would be sent down, however long it would take. We have nothing but time. From the mass of ragged diving suit and shed flesh that is left of his body, a milky-white, fish-eaten eye pleads up at me.

I don't reply, but pull him to me, almost like a hug. Yet, even in his crazed state he instinctively understands what is about to happen, and fights me as hard as he can. He leaks so much of the blood he's taken from Jack and Dave, I wonder if it might actually attract a shark. But finally, I have him where I want to, push my helmet off with one hand, and clamp my mouth over his throat like a lamprey on its host. The essence that flows from him into me is more potent than I ever thought possible. It is pure liquid euphoria, and I can feel myself grow stronger with each second that I drain him. This is what I came here for.

When it is done, I drag the remnants of him, along with the ROV, the torch, and my helmet to the edge of the precipice. Here, the current is strong like a swiftly flowing river, and frigid as a glacier. I sense the immense drop ahead like an endless chasm in the darkness. Upstairs and on land, other agents will make certain the tapes from the chamber and the recordings of our conversations are erased or go missing. The explosion in the bell will be marked a terrible work accident, killing the three deep-sea divers. But since the pipe is now sealed, there is no reason for anyone else to come down here. My swim back to land may be long, but with my renewed vitality it will be easy.

Yet, as the rush of increased power fades, I can feel it as a stain on me, greater than the first kill. I have removed myself one more step from what I once was. From now on there will be no more red cheeks or fake breathing. I let go of the dead diver and he's immediately taken by the current, pulled up for a short distance, then flung out past the precipice and down into the endless dark.

"An offering," I whisper, "for many sins to come." Deep below, the abyss howls, but whether it's the one inside me or the one outside, is impossible to tell.



About the Authors

Natania Barron is a writer with a penchant for the speculative. She's decided that growing up is overrated and, quite frankly, there's no better way to spend her extremely limited free time than flitting about in imaginary worlds. She's got a thing for the Gothic, steampunk, and squid. That about sums it up.

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Dylan Birtolo has always been a storyteller. No matter how much other things have changed, that aspect has not. He still tells stories, in whatever format he can. He currently resides in the great Pacific Northwest where he spends his time as a writer, a gamer, and a professional sword-swinger. His thoughts are filled with shape shifters, mythological demons, and epic battles. He has published a few fantasy novels and several short stories in multiple anthologies. He has also written pieces for game companies set in their worlds including BattleTech, Shadowrun, Legend of the Five Rings, and Pathfinder. He trains with the Seattle Knights, an acting troop that focuses on stage combat, and has performed in live shows, videos, and movies. Endeavoring to be a true jack of all trades, he has worked as a software engineer, a veterinary technician in an emergency hospital, a martial arts instructor, a rock climbing guide, and a lab tech. He has had the honor of jousting, and yes, the armor is real - it weighs over 100 pounds. You can read more about him and his works at www.dylanbirtolo.com or follow his Twitter at DylanBirtolo.

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Bill Bridges is an award-winning writer and designer of numerous games. He was one of the original developers of White Wolf's World of Darkness and is the co-creator and developer of the Fading Suns science-fiction universe. He is a Fellow at Atlanta's Mythic Imagination Institute and a

member of the Horror Writers Association. He sits on the boards of the C.G. Jung Society of Atlanta and the Broadleaf Writers Association.

Formerly Senior Content Designer on CCP Games' World of Darkness MMO, he is now a full-time freelance writer. He was the lead designer of the award-winning Storytelling system rules for White Wolf's World of Darkness games, and designed and developed the award-winning games Mage: The Awakening, Promethean: The Created, and Werewolf: The Apocalypse.

His novels include The Silver Crown and Last Battle (both for Werewolf). Bill has written for Chaosium and helped develop Last Unicorn's Star Trek: The Next Generation and Star Trek: Deep Space Nine roleplaying games. He co-wrote the scripts for Viacom's interactive horror movie Dracula Unleashed, Interplay's Starfleet Academy, and contributed to world design for Segasoft's Emperor of the Fading Suns.



The Central Clancy Writer for Ubisoft, **Richard Dansky** has written for games including The Division, Splinter Cell: Conviction, Driver: San Francisco and many more. He spent 4 years in-house at White Wolf, where he worked on over 100 titles, and he is the developer for Wraith: The Oblivion 20th Anniversary Edition. He is the author of six novels and a short story collection, and he has a large library and an impressive scotch collection. You can find him on Twitter at @rdansky.



Matthew Dawkins is perhaps best known for his role as The Gentleman Gamer on YouTube, where he's run a channel since 2009, covering roleplaying game reviews, interviews, discussions, and minutiae. Outside his online work, Matthew is a resident of Salisbury (home of Stonehenge and the Cathedral with the United Kingdom's tallest spire!) and a regular writer for Onyx Path Publishing, having contributed work to books for both World of Darkness and Chronicles of Darkness lines. He's recently begun a foray into book development, acting as co-developer for the upcoming Beckett's Jihad Diary and solo developer of the V20: Dark Ages Companion.

Matthew's a longtime roleplayer with an array of playing and running experience across more games than he cares to remember, though his perennial favorites remain Vampire: The Masquerade, Wraith: The Oblivion, and Mummy: The Curse; all of which he's written for in recent years. In every field he's supported by his wife, who loves him dearly but believes most of what he talks about is utter bollocks. His favorite color is Cappadocian grey.



Delilah S. Dawson is the award-winning author of the *Blud* series, the *Hit* series, *Servants of the Storm*, a variety of short stories and comics, and *Wake of Vultures*, written as Lila Bowen. She teaches writing classes online at LitReactor and lives in the north Georgia mountains with her family. www.whimsydark.com

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Nerine Dorman is a South African creative who is glad to say that all those hours spent reading SFF haven't gone to waste, despite her mother's dire predictions. She loves fantasy RPGs, long walks with her dogs, and occasionally performs live with her experimental folk band A Murder. You can stalk her on Twitter @nerinedorman.

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Berit Ellingsen is the author of two novels, *Not Dark Yet* (Two Dollar Radio), and *Une ville vide* (PublieMonde), as well as a collection of short stories, *Beneath the Liquid Skin* (Queen's Ferry Press). Berit's work has been published in *W.W. Norton's Flash Fiction International*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Unstuck*, *Litro*, and other places, and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and the British Science Fiction Association Award. Berit travels between Norway and Svalbard in the Arctic, and is a member of the Norwegian Authors' Union. <http://beritellingsen.com>.

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Born in the New York Catskills and raised in the swamps of Florida, writer and illustrator **Crystal Frasier** has lived a life marked by extremes and stark transitions. Crystal discovered the World of Darkness in college, and the strange journeys that define her life provide ample fuel as a storyteller, and later as a writer. Her better known works include *Green Ronin's Blue Rose* romantic fantasy roleplaying game and various installments of Paizo Publishing's *Adventure Path* series. A proud lesbian and transgender woman, Crystal hopes her visibility helps draw other members of the queer community to gaming. She loves drawing, coffee, downtown markets, tabletop gaming, and spending lazy days at home with her wife and corgi.

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Dave Harlequin is a professional author, journalist, producer, and entertainment personality from Charlotte, North Carolina. He is the co-founder and editor in chief of *Nerd Nation Magazine*, a digital "nerd culture and entertainment" publication, former editor in chief of print horror publication *Stiff Magazine*, and a frequent contributor to dozens of other news/press publications ranging from genre press to mainstream media. He has served as a screenwriter and producer on over a dozen independent films, and serves on



the awards committee for both the NC Modern Film Fest and Frightmeter Horror Awards. Additionally, Harlequin is a regular on the convention circuit, and works with South Carolina based non-profit organization Big Fandom Greenville as their public relations director. In his spare time, Harlequin enjoys cooking, gaming, travelling, home-brewing craft beer, and drinking fairly ridiculous amounts of coffee.

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Lawerence Hawkins is an avid writer, gamer, media consumer, and should really address his growing pile of audiobooks. He has worked on a number of upcoming Onyx Path projects, including *Changeling: the Lost*, *Vampire: the Dark Ages*, and *Geist: the Sin-Eaters*. His hobbies include living the Black experience, ludonarrative mechanics, intersectional sociopolitics, and karaoke. He writes, rants, and makes obscure references on Twitter, @peregondusoir.

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Nicole Givens Kurtz writes the popular cyberpunk mystery series, *Cybil Lewis*. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous horror, science fiction, and fantasy anthologies. Visit *Other Worlds Pulp* at <http://www.nicolegivenskurtz.com>.

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Ann Lemay, if you listen to her co-workers (and they would know best), is a fire Pokémon by day; by night, she fights crime as part of an elite super-team with her cats.

As part of her civilian cover, Ann Lemay has been working in the video-game industry since 1997. Born in Montreal, Quebec, she was raised on *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, and has been reading, watching, breathing, and living all things science fiction and fantasy for as long as she can remember. This is Ann's first print sale. She is pretty stoked about that.

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Michael J. Martinez is the author of *MJ-12: Inception*, the first *MAJESTIC-12* spy-fi thriller from Night Shade Books, as well as the critically acclaimed *Daedalus* trilogy of Napoleonic era space opera novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Cthulhu Fhtagn!*, *Unidentified Funny Objects 4*, online at Paizo.com and as part of the Geeky Giving story bundles for charity. He lives in the New York City suburbs with his wonderful wife, amazing daughter, two cats and three chickens.

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Andrew Penn Romine is a writer and animator living in Seattle. When he's not wrangling words, robots, cavemen, or dragons, he dabbles in craft cocktails and sequential art.

His fiction appears online at *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Paizo* and *Crossed Genres* as well as in the anthologies *Fungi*, *After The Fall*, *What Fates Impose*, *By Faerie Light*, *Coins of Chaos*, and *Help Fund My Robot Army*.

You can also follow his day-to-day adventures at www.andrewpennromine.com or on Twitter @inkgorilla.

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Na'amen Gobert Tilahun was born and mostly raised in Southern California and fled for the wintry cold of the Bay Area as soon as he could. He has an addiction to books and cannot stop himself from gathering more and more. He writes poetry, fiction, essays and other stuff, and sometimes they find homes. His words have appeared in *faggot dinosaur*, *Stone Telling*, *Spelling The Hours*, *Collective Fallout*, *Full of Crow*, *The Big Click*, *io9*, *The WisCon Chronicles*, *Fantasy Magazine* and *Queers Dig Time Lords*. He is also co-creator and co-host of the geeks of color podcast: *The *New* Adventures of Yellow Peril + Magical Negro*. His debut novel, *The Root*, will be released this June from Night Shade Books. You can find him talking shit on Twitter @Naamenism and www.naamen.org

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Steffie de Vaan is a Dutch author and roleplaying fan. Her first taste of the *World of Darkness* came through *Vampire the Masquerade* in the 1990's, and it has remained her favourite game ever since. She has since branched out to the *Chronicles of Darkness*, and has written for *Vampire the Requiem*, *Promethean the Created* and *Changeling the Lost*. *Cavaliers of Mars* and *Chill 3rd Edition* top off her RPG writer resume, and still has plenty of projects left on her want-list.

Steffie lives an eerily quiet life when she's not writing, content to be with her family, playing RPGs with friends, reading books, and creating LEGO adventures.

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Monica Valentinelli writes stories, games, essays, and comics for media/tie-in properties and her original works from her studio in the Midwest. She's a former musician of 20+ years and a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Creative Writing program who now writes full-time. Recently, Monica has contributed to V20 books such as *Dread Names*, *Red List* and *Ghouls & Revelants*. When she's not obsessing about deadlines, she designs jewelry and dabbles in other artistic endeavors. For more about Monica, visit www.mlvwrites.com.



About the Editor

Jaym Gates is an author, editor, and publicist. She's edited *War Stories*, *Genius Loci*, *Eclipse Phase: After the Fall*, and many more. She's also written for the RPGs *Firefly: Smuggler's Guide to the Rim*, *Blue Rose*, and *Tianxia: Blood, Silk, and Jade*, and has short stories in a number of anthologies and magazines.

She can be found on Twitter as [@JaymGates](#), or at her website, [jaymgates.com](#).



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