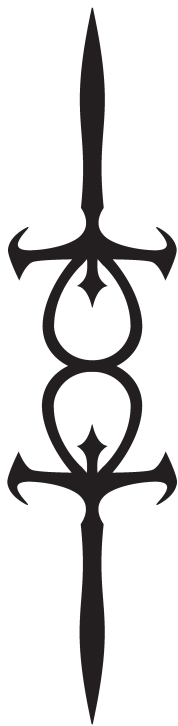


paths of
storytelling:
vampire



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prefude

Sometimes my job at White Wolf requires me to dig around in our archives. Mostly I'm looking for a long-lost CD with a particular piece of art or the layout files for an old book, but once in a while I stumble across old contracts, ad copy, and submissions.

A few weeks ago, I ran into this manuscript, in a folder labeled "Paths of Storytelling" and a hand-written note that said "No. Absolutely not. -SW." It looks like something we worked on right around the time of **Vampire: The Masquerade, Revised**. The cover sheet appears to be missing, so I don't know who originally submitted it, or even if it was done by one writer.

Since it's the 20th anniversary of **Vampire: The Masquerade**, I thought it might be cool to share this strange piece of missing history. I scanned it as best as I could, and we used some old assets from our fiction archive to make a pretty digital version. Enjoy this glimpse into what might have been.

- Eddy Webb

World of Darkness Developer

1.

This is a world of darkness.

It's a world much like our own. It has the same streets and the same television programs. But in this world, the creepy house down the street really is haunted. The mysterious murders that look like an animal attack were actually done by werewolves.

And there are vampires.

You have been chosen to become one of the undead, to join one of their "clans" as a newly created (or Embraced) vampire. One clan is the Gangrel, bestial vampires that can turn into beasts. Another is the Malkavians, seers and madmen all. And there are the Toreador, artists and dilettantes who value their ties to humanity.

Which kind of vampire will you be?

If you choose Gangrel, turn to section 2.

If you choose Malkavian, turn to section 3.

If you choose Toreador, turn to section 4.

2.

You're finally starting to relax after a long day at work, when you hear a loud knock at your door. Exhausted, you're about to ask your boyfriend Dennis to answer it, when you hear a deep voice calling your name.

You hop over and squint out a peephole. "Hello?"

A man, dressed in what can only be described as a study in black leather, flips a card in front of the hole.

"This is for you," he says with a sly smile.

You fasten the security chain and crack open the door. He slips a small card to you through the narrow gap.

"Tell no one about this," the man warns. "Not even that cute boyfriend of yours."

You slam the door shut and lock it. How did he know about Dennis? Curious, you examine the card in your sweaty hand. It appears to be handmade; it's decorated with

paw prints and pictures of animals. Opening it, you read the following:

YOUR WISH IS GRANTED.
VISIT HYDE PARK AT
MIDNIGHT TONIGHT. COME
ALONE. OR ELSE.

SIGNED, X

P.S. YOUR SAFETY IS NOT
GUARANTEED.

“That’s right,” you mumble. “How could I forget?” It’s been a while, but you do remember something about agreeing to become a Gangrel. Still, a private meeting at your local park with a stranger you’ve never met? Your head reels as you mull over your options. Just how badly did you want to become a vampire anyway? Hell, you’re not even convinced vampires are real. Maybe this whole thing is a publicity stunt for a crappy movie studio. City park. Dark night. Cosmic joke?

You lift the curtains on your front window to see if the creepy guy's still there, but the streets are empty. Whoever he was, he's long gone by now.

"Who was that, babe?" Dennis calls from the kitchen. Good thing he volunteered to make dinner tonight: spaghetti and meatballs. If what the card said was right, maybe this will be your last meal.

You're not sure if you should tell him the truth, but you've got a good thing going and you don't want to mess it up. Do you? After all, it is your anniversary. Still, you're not in the habit of keeping secrets from him. It couldn't hurt, could it?

To tell Dennis the truth and explain you want to become a vampire, turn to section 5.

To act like nothing happened and enjoy your anniversary dinner, turn to section 8.

3.

Your choice seems to have surprised the masked man with the black silk top hat. His eyes widen, a gesture so strong that you can see it even through the oval eye-holes of the half-mask and when he speaks, his voice holds a darkness that it did not before.

“You’re certain? You will take up the Broken Mirror?” The tone of his voice makes it clear that he thinks you’re crazy, but somehow that only firms your resolve.

You nod, with more confidence than you feel. “I’m sure.” After all, what are your other choices? You’re no art snob, and animal fur makes you sneeze. Besides—prophecy and omens? How cool is that?

“So be it, then. Follow me.” Without a further word, he turns and walks out of the room, with a steady gait that suggests the cane in his hand has some use other than support.

As you follow him, you realize you’re not headed back out into the main area of the nightclub, but instead have passed into some sort of private zone towards the back of the building. The noise from the bar fades out, until the only sound is that of your own

footsteps and the nervous pounding of your heart drumming in your ears.

You pass through dark halls and darker doorways as you follow the now-silent man deeper into the labyrinthine maze. Your earlier suspicion about his choice of accessory is confirmed as he murmurs a few words in some arcane tongue and the door-knob sized globe beneath his hand begins to emit a faint and flickering yellow-green glow.

You begin to ask him about it, but the expression he casts your direction silences your questions before they emerge from your lips.

The path forward is illuminated faintly by the cane's hellish flame as you continue into the darkness. You follow him down stairs, along hallways, and around corner after mind-numbing corner until you have no sense of direction or bearing.

At some point, you realize that the walls themselves have changed. Paint and plaster have been left behind, replaced first by grey brick, then rough-hewn stone. The tunnel itself takes on a surreal feel, as if the journey you are undergoing is no longer one person walking down a series of hallways.

You are an insect, crawling through the center of the earth, too small to be noticed by the human world above you.

You are a soul, transitioning from life to death, from Earth to the great beyond, from living to Limbo.

You are Everyman. The journey is eternal. It will never end. It never began. It only Is.

Or, perhaps you're just one human being, being led to an unknown fate.

After you've walked long enough that your legs are beginning to tire and you can no longer imagine where within the city, let alone the building, you've travelled, the masked man leads you to what appears to be a dead end. He pauses, fiddling with something in the center of the wall at the end of the tunnel. You bob and lean, trying to see past his shoulders, but before you can catch a glimpse of what he's doing, the entire wall groans and shudders.

He steps back to reveal a narrow gap, holding the light away so that only darkness appears beyond the opening.

"If you are certain... your destiny lies through there." His tone is ominous.

With more confidence than you feel, you nod and step through the gap, into the darkness. As the door slides shut behind you, you wonder just exactly what you've gotten into.

Without the glowing ball of light, the room appears at first to be pitch black inside. But as your eyes adjust, you realize that you can pick out shapes, even movement, around you.

You jump, and all around you, shadows and shapes parody your startled gesture. You squint and rub your eyes, and as the shadowy figures around you mock your actions, you realize that you are surrounded by mirrors.

Closer examination reveals that the room is filled with them. Mirrored tiles cover the walls, including the one that you think you just entered through. The floor and ceiling are similarly outfitted, giving a dizzying ambiguity of perspective. Floor-length mirrors, some in antique frames, some looking like they've just been ripped from a school gym locker room, are arranged at angles all around you. Some hang on the walls, others seem to float on thin air, are propped willy-nilly against one surface or are layered, partially covering another. Very subtle light radiates from behind several of the

mirrors, just enough to cast shadow and mar perspective.

“Forgive me,” a voice echoes in the chamber, refracted like the light, making it impossible to tell exactly where it originated. “I know many find this room to be... pretentious. But I do believe that symbolism is just as important as ritual for truly embracing the depth and import of such a momentous occasion.”

A man’s image leaps into place in a hundred locations around the room. Dark and dour, his black clothing is only accessorized by a single white tab at the center of his collar. The priest is reflected over and over again until there is an army of clergy surrounding you on all sides and you are no longer certain which, if any, of them are real and which are illusion.

“The journey you are about to undertake is unlike any you have been upon in the past. Are you certain of your choice?” The crowd of identical priests waits for your answer.

You begin to nod, but before you’ve finished the gesture, the lights go out. You are grabbed, hard, from behind. A thousand

hands, cold and unyielding, hold your body in place. A hundred mouths, full of icicle shards, cut into you. They pierce your neck, your wrists, your skin, stinging and slicing. For one endless moment, there is pain. For another lifetime, there is pleasure.

And finally, there is only the cold.

You wake to find yourself alone in the mirrored chamber once more. Or at least, you hope you're alone. Hundreds of eyes stare back at you, reflected in the mirrors. You're not entirely sure that all of them are truly yours.

You do know for certain, however, that you are hungrier than you could ever imagine being.

Several of the mirrors have been knocked askew. Their frames are slanted at strange angles, crooked angles, *wrong* angles. You realize that the placement of the mirrors seems to hold some sort of a message, but it's distorted because some of them have been disturbed.

The eyes follow you as you stand, waiting for you to make a decision. No matter where

you turn, they're watching you. Judging you. Reading your thoughts. Finding you wanting.

Another section of the mirror in front of you has been moved to the side, revealing a dark passageway beyond. You cannot see what lies through the doorway, but at least there are no mirrors there.

To straighten the crooked mirrors and try to understand their message, turn to section 6.

To escape the eyes that seem to bore into your very soul, and find sanctuary down the hallway, turn to section 9.

4.

“You are exactly what I have been looking for.” There is the hint of a foreign accent as a dark-haired man in a tailored three-piece suit addresses you. You take him in with a quick glance from head to toe. His coloring, cheekbones and styling of his shoulder-length hair are curiously out of step with modern appearances. Just under six feet, he is of a thin runner’s build. As he gestures to the crowd dismissively, you note the long, tapered hands covered with a fine line of old scars across the backs.

“What you and I must discuss is not for the ears of the rabble. Come with me.”

You feel no reason to protest, even when his uplifted hand caresses the side of your face in a strangely possessive manner. Perhaps it’s the eyes: steel blue, mesmerizing. All you can do is nod in agreement, falling into step beside his tall, gaunt figure. The two of you walk for several minutes without an obvious purpose, but heading away from activity and others. A smothering silence is broken only by the sounds of your feet, and your path is filled with more shadows than light.

“My name is Nathaniel Le Roi,” he murmurs, glancing over his shoulder before gesturing towards the façade of an imposing brownstone residence with a decoratively carved walnut door.

As he leads you up the walkway, you to take in the three-story building – noting the bars on the first floor windows and the locked gateway to the basement entrance to the right of the steps. There appears to be one room on the second floor, with a light shining through a space in the closed drapes.

While your companion fiddles with the door’s lock, a vague memory from French lessons long past surfaces and you comment aloud, “Nathaniel... the King?”

One side of his mouth curves upward in a smile, visible as the door swings inward, to reveal an entryway that is nothing less than an idealized recreation from the Victorian Era: Carved, ornate banisters and lush velvet drapery, a chandelier of flickering candles and vases of roses filling every flat surface in sight and overwhelming the air with their scent.

“Not a King here.” He pauses. “But, I strive to live with as many luxuries as this world can provide.”

To enter the brownstone at Nathaniel’s invitation, turn to section 7.

To decline and leave, turn to section 22.

5.

You skip over to the kitchen and pour yourself a glass of red wine. “It’s that Gangrel thing I was telling you about. Looks like I’ve been invited to a party.”

“I don’t know, babe. Sounds like it could be fun.” He wipes his nose on his sleeve; he’s up to his elbows in ground beef and spices. “You bringing your camera?”

You roll your eyes. “A camera? Come on, Dennis. I volunteered to get turned into a *vampire*. This isn’t a play or anything. This is real. Like, drinking blood and everything.”

“Uh-huh, sounds like it.” Dennis is only half-interested in what you have to say. He’s too busy shaping the next batch of meat balls. “You should go. It’d be good for you to get out there, meet new people.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” You bite back. Just that morning you had a conversation about how you were too clingy. “You know my lab work is really important to me. Those animals need me.”

“Don’t start, babe.” He quickly wipes his hands clean and samples the tomato sauce. “Stop reading into everything, okay?”

You give Dennis a sheepish grin and stash the invitation. “You know, I hear a lot of couples sneak into Hyde Park and make out there. You up for a midnight drive?”

Dennis solemnly shakes his head. “Got a big presentation at work tomorrow and I have to be there by six. We can always go later.”

“Fine.” You can’t help but feel a little slighted. It’s your anniversary, isn’t it? Shouldn’t you have a say in what you want to do? “If your job is that important to you, why are you here?”

Dennis drops the spoon. It strikes the floor hard, tomato sauce splatters everywhere. “Come on, you can’t be serious.”

Rage builds inside of you. You’ve been trying to tell him you want to be a vampire. Can’t he connect the dots? If you’re undead, you can’t be together anymore. Doesn’t he care? “Work always comes first, right?”

“You’re a real bitch sometimes, you know that?” He grabs a towel off the counter and starts cleaning up the floor.

You give Dennis the once-over. Other than a nice ass and his tall, thin frame, you can do better. Hell, who knows what fresh meat you’ll hunt down once you’re a Gangrel? That guy in leather looked pretty tasty.

“Just go, Dennis,” you say, checking your watch. It’s already close to ten o’clock, and it’ll take you at least an hour to get ready before you head over to Hyde Park. “I’ll talk to you some other time.”

Dennis gives you a blank stare. You know you’ve gone too far this time. “Fine by me.”

As soon as you hear the door click you swing into action. You’re halfway up the stairs when you realize Dennis still has your apartment key. Flying back down, you open the door to yell after him, but he’s already driven off. “Shit, shit, *shit!*”

Pissed off, you slam a lamp against the wall and shatter the bulb. Furious, you grab the invitation and shred it into tiny pieces.

Who knew that a piece of paper could be so dangerous?

Rocked with guilt, you bury your head in your hands. In between sobs you realize Dennis was right. You do need to get out there and meet new people, take risks you normally don't want to take. Your mind made up, you hop in the shower and carefully select your outfit: your perfectly worn-in and torn jeans, tennis shoes and a college sweatshirt.

Although you're furious you had a fight on your anniversary, you convince yourself you'll make it up to Dennis. Eventually.

You glance at your watch and swear in earnest. If you want to be on time for your meeting, you have to leave now.

To head over to Hyde Park for your Gangrel meeting, turn to section 11.

6.

You move to straighten the mirrors, staring intently into them as you painstakingly assure that each is perfectly aligned before going to the next. The perfection of each adjusted angle reassures you against the paranoid thoughts that flooded you moments before.

Time passes slowly as you work your way around the room, squaring each frame and centering it against the backdrop of reflections. You carefully wipe away each fingerprint, breathing on the glass and polishing it with the cuff of your shirt sleeve until there's no trace of your adjustments left behind.

At length you stand back and admire your work.

It is perfect.

“Have you finished?” A gentle voice behind you startles you. You jump back, narrowly avoiding crashing into one of the free-standing mirrors.

For a moment, in your mind's eye, the scene plays out differently and you see the tall mirror

tumble to the ground, shattering into a million pieces, all hope of understanding the message found within it lost.

You blink, to find the mirror still whole. Turning back towards the voice, you find an angelic figure waiting patiently to speak with you.

You believe it to be a woman, although her body is as willowy as a young boy's. Her hair is almost silver-white, loose around her shoulders. She is dressed in white silk, a robe belted loosely at the waist. The fabric undulates with each breath, but reveals nothing of the body beneath. A strand of scarlet rosary beads drapes across her chest.

"I'm to serve you, should you desire."
There is something, a twitch at the corner of her mouth, perhaps, that speaks of layers of meaning below the obvious one. So much import held in so few words.

All in all, she's a vision, and you wonder if she is, in fact, the truth you summoned by undoing the chaos of misaligned mirrors. You step closer and look deeply into her eyes.

They are full of stars.

“My name is Ariel. The Reverend said that you would be hungry?”

Your stomach gurgles.

She’s an angel. Her gaze holds the truth of the ages.

And she smells like food.

You must look confused, because she steps forward and takes the lead. Drawing a tiny razor from the lining of her belt, she raises it to her wrist, and before you can protest, draws the blade across the inside of her wrist.

You want to be horrified. You want to protest, to find her help for the wound that has left a trail of crimson slowly winding its way down the perfect snowdrift of her inner arm.

But more than anything else, you want to feed.

When she raises her wrist to your lips, you try to protest. But the scent of her blood, the sweet metallic tang is too much to resist, and when she presses your lips against her skin, your protestations are forgotten.

You lap at the scratch, intoxicated by the trickle of blood against your tongue. And when that does not sate you, you feel yourself bite into her wrist, burying fangs you did not know you possessed deeply into the vein there.

She gasps.

You drink, deeply. The hot coppery flow of her vital blood over your tongue spurs you on. Her moans turn from pleasure to protest, and as she tries to pull away you hold her wrist tightly.

“Stop! Not too much...” Ariel’s voice begins to fade. You hear another voice, a male voice, barking a command.

“Enough! We have business.” Somewhere beyond the cloud of crimson pleasure that has taken you over, you recognize the priest’s voice, and the inherent threat that it carries. Something about him is different now, however. Something feels familiar. As if you and he are two jagged pieces of a splintered whole, and somehow you fit together.

There is more, though. Something in his tone demands obedience, and you reluctantly pull away from your meal.

Ariel slips to the floor, limply, crimson still dripping from the wound at her wrist. The stars in her eyes have dimmed, and her rosary is skewed against the pristine white of her robe. You reach out to straighten the beads, and your fingers leave scarlet stains on the angel's gown.

“Lick her wound,” the priest commands.

You obey, although you are uncertain why. To your amazement, the wound your fangs left closes beneath your tongue, leaving only the scratch the angel had inflicted on herself to mar her perfect skin. Two robed figures slip into the room from behind one of the standing mirrors, and haul the angel off between them.

With the angel's blood still on your lips, you turn to the priest.

“Drink too deeply from the well, and it will surely run dry,” he says, handing you a cloth and gesturing for you to clean your face and hands. “In time, that choice and the weight thereof, will rest solely in your hands, but until you learn enough to choose... best to sip lightly.”

You're not certain exactly what the priest means, but you nod anyway as he continues.

"I am Reverend Isaac Murik. You have come here for a reason," the clergyman intones. "God has brought you here for a purpose. Are you ready to take up your duties?"

He waits for your answer.

To agree with Reverend Murik and take up your duties, turn to section 12.

To refuse the priest and try to ask more questions about your situation, turn to section 15.

7.

You can't—don't want to look away. When your arm bushes against Nathaniel as you cross the threshold, there is an inexplicable stirring of lust, causing your heart to pound. The sound is so loud to your ears, you are certain he must hear it as well.

Taking off your coat, while Nathaniel does the same, you comment, "I don't think I have been in a place this lovely in a long time."

He does not reply, but the smile on your companion's face is echoed in his eyes this time. He takes the compliment with pleasure while pushing apart a pair of sliding doors. "My refuge," he says simply.

Before you is another feast for the eyes: bookcases filled with texts and oddities, one lit marble hearth behind an ornate mesh screen, a sidebar stocked with decanters and various drinking implements and a variety of animal heads decorating the walls. You are drawn inside by the desire to see more and when you gesture with a tilt of your head to ask permission, he nods silently.

Your fingers run along the leather spines of one row of books, silently reading the titles—some in French and Italian—while behind you the room's doors slide shut with a soft click.

“I have read some of your work, you know.” Suddenly, Nathaniel is standing behind you, “There is artistry in your writing. You have such insight into how people think. What motivates them. It's a rare talent. Too rare.” His voice sounds strange to your ears. The only word that seems to fit is... covetous. “It can't be allowed to go to waste.”

“Thanks,” you reply, shivering the sudden desire to lean back against him, wondering what it would feel like to press your back to his chest.

“May I offer you a drink?” he murmurs. He remains equally still, but closer than a shadow.

Your head turns slightly trying to make eye contact over your left shoulder. “Whatever you're having,” you quip.

“Indeed?” he purrs.

You feel a light pressure against your side and look down to watch Nathaniel's right

hand snaking around your waist, fingers tracing a line up the middle of your torso. He closes the space between you, but there is no instant warmth like you'd expect, just a solid coolness. It reminds you of leaning against a marble pillar. His left hand slides up your arm, before coming to rest on your shoulder lightly.

Nathaniel whispers. "I was hoping you'd say that." His tongue traces the shape of your ear and starts to trail down the side of your neck. Your weight shifts from one foot to the other as you prepare to turn around, wanting to explore the taste of his mouth. Giving in to the moment, no matter how out of character it may be.

The pain of his bite startles you at first, feeling his teeth—no, his *fangs*—sink into your skin. You struggle to break free, only to find that Nathaniel holds you in a vise-like grip. Then, the panic gives way to a growing passion. His lips remain, teasing at your neck. A sudden, undeniable arousal moves through your body like a fever. Nothing in your memory compares with this—no lovers, no acts of passion measure to a fraction of what you feel, trapped in his arms. You shudder with release, only to feel the unexpected warmth of his kiss—surely his lips were cold on your skin initially—stir your body again.

He's drinking your blood, you realize in the dim recesses of your mind. And you don't mind. More than that, you want him to continue. Nathaniel's fangs sink in deeper and you moan, becoming limp in his embrace. No resistance, just pleasure.

Your pulse becomes frantic, pushing blood through your body, and then slows while Nathaniel drinks. You feel light-headed, vision starting to blur. The flames from the fireplace transform to a dull orange glow, seen through half-closed eyes. You hear the pounding of your heart again - loud in your ears, but so very slow. This is what it means to be drained. To die because there is nothing left for the heart to use.

Nathaniel's head lifts, your blood dripping from the corners of his mouth. His expression is one of satiation. His tongue sweeps over his fangs once, as if savoring that last taste of you.

He sinks to the floor, ignoring the nearby furniture, your body like a rag-doll in his arms. Your breath comes in shallow, uneven gasps. Dying. He tsks, "Know you your Shakespeare? 'And he will make the face of Heaven so fine, that all the world will be in love with night.'"

With those words, Nathaniel rips open his wrist with his fangs and presses the bleeding wound to your open mouth. The tang on your tongue hits like a small electrical shock. You have never tasted anything so rich, so good. You stir, limp arms lifting from the ground so your hands can grasp his forearm. You lap at the blood hungrily.

He whispers as the fingers of his free hand stroke the top of your head, “My childe, you will love the night. I know from your works, this was destined—already a part of you.”

Long seconds pass, while you drink before Nathaniel wrenches his arm away from your mouth. You howl in frustration. In that instant there is clarity as the revelation sinks in. Nathaniel is a vampire.

You are a vampire.

And you are starving.

To attack Nathaniel, turn to section 10.

To flee the room, horrified by the truth, turn to section 16.

8.

Convinced your anniversary dinner will be your last meal as a human, you enjoy it as much as you can. You even go so far as to light candles all around your tiny kitchen and whip up a batch of your favorite brownies.

“Why so enthusiastic?” Dennis cocks an eyebrow. “Was it something I said?”

You laugh. Typical male. “No, I guess I want to enjoy the little things. You know, because these moments won’t last forever.”

Dennis stuffs a meatball in his mouth and winks at you. Something about the way he’s looking at you gets under your skin. Sure, he’s a nice guy and all, but is he really the one you want to spend the rest of your life with? You imagine what it would be like to grow old with Dennis. Visions of your wedding, kids and a minivan flash in front of your mind.

The images nauseate you. You don’t want to grow old or end up in suburbia—with Dennis or with anyone else for that matter. Wasn’t that why you decided to become a vampire? So you’d never die?

Your mind made up, you realize you have to get rid of Dennis, quickly. Your meeting is in less than an hour and you still have to do your hair and makeup.

“Hey, babe? I have an idea.” You bat your eyelashes. “Didn’t you say you had a big presentation due tomorrow?”

Dennis wipes his face with a napkin. “Yeah, I do. Unfortunately.”

“Why don’t we pick this up tomorrow, then? After work. That way you have time to prepare.”

He gives you a strange look; he suspects you’re up to something. “I could use an extra hour or two of sleep. What are you going to do?”

You smile sweetly. “I just figured we’d have more time tomorrow. In bed, I mean.”

“Now that’s something I can live with.” He leans over and kisses you. “Okay, I’m game.”

Your plan worked. Dennis scarfs down the rest of his plate and grabs his things. On his way out the door, you give him a long, wet kiss good-bye. Locking the door behind him, you

fly up the stairs to your bedroom and ransack your closet, wondering what vampires wear.

After trying on several outfits, you don your favorite sweatshirt and jeans, favoring comfort over style.

You're ready for your meeting. Turn to section 11.

9.

Feeling a thousand gazes on your back as you depart, you escape down the dark hallway. As you leave, you think you hear a soft chuckle from the room behind you, but you don't hesitate long enough to investigate it. Whoever—or whatever—was there surely intended you no good.

The hallway stretches out in front of you, long and dark. You leave the light of the mirrored room behind you, trying not to think about who was back in there with you.

Or whether they're following you.

They could be... right behind you.

You break into a half-run, concentrating on what's ahead of you. Stairs. A seemingly endless series of stairs, spiraling up from the belly of the building. You climb them at a sprint, flight after flight, until you're certain you've left whatever was in the mirrored room with you far behind.

You turn your attention upward. Somewhere up there in the darkness, you sense something. An almost imperceptible easing

of the blackness. A whisper of murmured reassurances. The faintest stirrings of a breeze against your skin. The scent of... food.

Your stomach growls, and you're hit with a hunger stronger than you have ever remembered. Without willing them to do so, your legs pick up the pace, propelling you further and faster up the stairs towards the faint light and the smell of sustenance.

As you draw near, the subtle glow of illumination reveals itself to be a thin outline of light coming from around what appears to be a doorframe. After your time in the darkness, the light beyond seems almost blindingly bright. But equally intense is the scent of sustenance, just beyond the door.

Hunger wracks your body, making your hands shake with need. You scramble at the door until your hand falls upon a lever of some sort. You jerk and claw at it, until the mechanism gives way and the door suddenly swings inward, spilling you out of the stairwell and onto an open roof.

A cacophony rises at your appearance. The noise is coming from a circle of small buildings surrounding you. Three or four of them, no

bigger than bus stop stations. Each is filled with a flock of highly irritated birds.

The pigeons protest your presence, flapping violently within the confines of their wooden prisons. As you draw near, the closest coop goes mad, birds beating themselves against the chicken-wire windows in an attempt to escape from your presence. Claws rake against one another as they struggle, and the night air is filled with the scent that drew you up here.

You act before you can think, thrusting the door open. A whirlwind of wings buffets at you as your victims flee.

You drink. And when the broken body in your hands offers no more sustenance, you throw it aside and snatch up another, too injured to have escaped with its fellows, and drink that as well.

“What’s this now? Look at the mess you’ve made!” A woman’s voice with a slight British lilt to it scolds you. You turn to face her, dropping the last, limp body from your bloodstained hands.

She looks at you, elbows akimbo, hands on hips. She's a dour-faced woman of what appears to be middle years, wearing a tweed skirt suit and sensible brown alligator-skin shoes. Her short auburn hair is carefully coiffed in curls and her makeup is sedate but expertly applied. She frowns at you, her disapproving stare makes you incredibly aware of the ludicrous picture you must present.

There's something about her, something beyond what you can see. She feels like you felt when the darkness overtook you in the mirrored room. Like she's a part of you, in some way. The feeling doesn't provide you with any comfort, though.

"You're another of the Reverend's now, aren't you? Damned shame, that one, making childer and then not giving them the teachings they need to feed without musing up my coops. It's going to take me hours to get all them home and settled in now!"

You apologize and begin to introduce yourself, but the woman waves off your explanations with an imperious gesture and orders she obviously expects you to obey without question.

“Enough of that. I’m Amelia Kettlesworth, but you may call me Mrs. Kettlesworth. There will be time for introductions on your part when you learn who you are. Until then, you’re nothing but mouthing the words, so no sense in wasting the air. Gather those up there, and put them down the chute. That goes to the incinerator, so there won’t be questions.”

There’s something about her tone that makes you certain there’s more to what she’s saying than meets the eye. She doesn’t want to know your name. That way you stay anonymous.

“Hurry up now. We haven’t got all night.” She nods towards a basket big enough to hold the half-dozen pigeon carcasses you’ve left scattered around the rooftop, and then towards a small metal door set in the side of the stairway.

Caution signs warn “Danger! Refuse Depository: Dangerous Drop and Incinerator Below. Insert only Trash!” The warnings clang through your vision, echoing in your head.

Danger! Danger! Danger!

She doesn't want to know your name.
You're not a person to her. You're just trash...

You begin to gather up the dead pigeons,
but you can feel Mrs. Kettleworth's glare on
the back of your neck.

You killed her pigeons.

You reach for another of the dead bodies,
its wings splayed at unnatural angles.

You glance back over at the woman,
surreptitiously. She's still glaring at you. Is she
closer than she was before?

The last pigeon lies near to the refuse
chute door. Unlike its companions who were
mottled browns and blacks, this one was white
as any dove. Pure, before you took it, but
smeared now with garish red where you ripped
its throat open with your bare teeth.

Mrs. Kettlesworth moves closer.

You pick up the last body, and place it atop
the rest in the basket. Its unblinking eye stares
up at you from the pile of its kin.

“That’s it,” the woman says, stepping up behind you. “Now into the chute.”

You can feel her tension behind you, sense her plans for you as clearly on the stink of her perfume as if she was speaking them aloud. She’s going to get revenge for you destroying her pets. The chute is just shoulder-wide, and the drop must be 20 stories.

You open the chute, and she moves behind you. You only have a moment to make your decision.

To fling Mrs. Kettlesworth down the chute before she can shove you in, turn to section 24.

To throw the basket of dead birds at her and escape, turn to section 27.

10.

Nathaniel stands, one hand pressed over the wound on his other forearm. You inhale and the scent of his blood is irresistible. Like a starving animal you leap up at him, desperate for more. Your gaze fixes on the dark red smears marring the perfection of his translucent skin.

Your tongue draws across your teeth remembering the taste, and you become aware of your fangs for the first time. Unfortunately, that second of distraction gives Nathaniel the opportunity to backhand you with a blow that sends you hurling against one of the tall bookcases. The impact makes a loud clatter, as the books fall in sections around your body.

Nathaniel glares, his gaze never breaking contact. “Do not try that again, my childe. I am older and far more powerful than you.”

You growl, crouching on your knees, one hand on the ground for balance as you gingerly touch the bite marks along your neck then the fangs in your mouth. For a moment despair threatens to overwhelm you.

“Other sires would not be so generous with their own vitae. They will let their progeny take only what is needed in the embrace and no more. On the other hand, I prefer to deal with a reasoning being.”

“Why?” you shout, filling the room with your cry.

“To settle a debt. To take my revenge. To replace what was lost.” Nathaniel’s eyes remain cold. “Your embrace will fulfill all those needs. And I think you are worthy.”

He continues. “The very fact you seem to realize what has just transpired here, the fact you have some control over your Beast even now is further proof. You have not asked, but you know what I am and now what you are.”

You turn your head to the side, unwilling to look at his face.

“I *know* you are hungry.”

The mention of food makes you shudder, reminds you of the clawing hunger inside and your very fragile self-control. You can still taste the ghost of Nathaniel’s blood on your tongue and down the back of your throat.

He takes a step towards you, careful as any hunter trying not to spook their prey. “My childer take names from Shakespeare, whom I adore. I have given some thought to it and because of the circumstances involved I think you will be called Morgan.” The last words rise in pitch, almost but not quite a question.

“I don’t care what you call me,” you exhale bitterly. “You have killed me.”

“Not so, my dear,” Nathaniel counters, “I have opened up a new world for you. I am your sire, your teacher. One day, Morgan, you will not even remember what it is to be mortal. But first, you must dine.”

As before, he reaches out a hand in invitation, an offer to help you rise from your still-crouching position. “I have food waiting for you. A small buffet for your selection.”

You look at his hand, his face and back down again, trying to make a rational decision, fighting to control the blood hunger that seems to build with each passing moment.

To accept Nathaniel’s offer, turn to section 13.

To reject Nathaniel’s offer and flee the room, turn to section 16.

11.

You decide to clear your head by running over to Hyde Park. You quickly reach the wrought iron gates, climb over them, and jump down onto a patch of lush, wet grass. The closed park is heavily wooded; the further you wind between the trees, the less you see.

“Okay, I’m here!” You shout into the darkness. “Come out, come out whoever you are.”

“Stop being so damned loud,” a voice snarls. You think you’re hearing things, because it sounds like the voice is coming from *above* you. “So, you want to become a Gangrel? Why?”

“I don’t know,” you reply, keeping your voice calm and steady. “Sounded interesting and I really like the name. What does Gangrel mean, anyway?”

You hear a sinister laugh that makes your skin crawl. The voice makes some off-handed crack about someone you’ve never met. “Oh, Beckett would have a field day with you, wouldn’t he? Juicy little lab rat that you are.”

Have you been followed? How do they know all of this about you? You try to move your head, but can't. Your feet are frozen in place. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," you whisper to yourself. "Silly old Gangrel."

"Silly? *Silly?*" The voice roars so loud you're scared your ears will explode. "*Gangrel aren't silly!*"

You're not going to put up with some stalker bullshit. Are you? You're not happy with your boyfriend, you haven't gotten a raise in two years, you live in a shitty part of the city and now some random asshole is going to make fun of you?

"Look up," the voice commands you."

You lift your head just in time to see a fuzzy blur of fur, claws and fangs slam your body to the wet ground. Terrified, you try to fight back but the animal is way too strong for you. The second you open your mouth to scream, the beast's fangs rip a hole in your neck and the blood drains from your body.

"Fuck!" You want to cry, yell or do *something* but you can't. Your head is telling

you that this... thing... is unnatural. Wrong. Dangerous. Seductive. Powerful. You can't escape, because this was meant to be. You were supposed to die like this, in a park, alone. It's fate.

The creature tears itself off your body as if an invisible hand slapped its face. You turn over and curl up into a little ball. You were safe in Dennis's arms. Maybe you should have listened to him. Nothing can save you now.

Something cold and slimy drips into your mouth; the minute the liquid touches your tongue your whole body is drawn toward it like a moth to a flame. The creature presses its wrist against your mouth and its blood electrifies you, filling your body with liquid fire. If you had to describe it, you'd say it felt like a thousand orgasms happening all at once, only they're exploding in and out of every bone in your body, oozing from your pores.

The sensations don't stop there. Everything—from the sounds of an owl screeching to the smell of freshly dug earth—feels different, sharper. Overwhelmed with sights and smells and sounds, you're desperate to hunt; to run through the forest and revel

in your natural instincts. Suddenly, a fierce pang of hunger grips your body, demanding satisfaction. Just when you think you'll die of starvation, you catch a whiff of the only thing you'll ever need, ever again: blood.

“Let's see what kind of Gangrel *you* are,” the beast challenges you. “Just remember, Santi wants you alive. So don't die, kid. There's too much at stake.”

Who's Santi? Bound and determined to survive the night, you drag your body to the source of the smell. Two pits are on either side of you. To the left, you detect the powerful stench of animal blood. To your right, the fragrant smell of human blood fills your nostrils.

To roll into the hole on your left and feed off the blood of animals, turn to section 14.

To drop into the pit on your right and drink from a human vessel, turn to section 17.

12.

Although you're uncertain of what exactly the priest means by asking you if you're ready to "take up your duties", you nod.

"I am ready," you say, with more confidence than you feel. But now that your hunger is sated, you're anxious to begin whatever it is that this new existence holds for you.

The priest leads you into another chamber, this one cavernous in size. The floor here is hardwood, polished to a high gloss despite its apparent age. The walls are covered in row after row of ceiling-high bookshelves. Similar shelves are arranged in rows, dividing the room into aisles narrow enough that you could touch a shelf on each side with outstretched arms.

"Welcome to the Repository," Reverend Murik says, sweeping an arm out to draw your attention to the room like a game-show hostess displaying a new car to the audience.

Books of all types fill many of the shelves. At a glance, you see modern graphic novels

stacked haphazardly beside leather-bound tomes and magazines from the 1950s. Leather hides inscribed with ornate-but-faded illumination are heaped beside piles of children's books whose once-garish primary color illustrations have also dulled to muted tones with time.

“Members of Clan Malkavian have, throughout the years, gathered this material and brought it here to be studied. Each piece was chosen because it resonated for the individual who brought it here. Each item is a piece of the puzzle. Somewhere in here lies the answer.”

“The answer?” You follow the priest's gaze out over the shelves. At first you thought they were filled solely with books, but as you examine them, you see that here and there, other media is also evident: VHS tapes, wax audio tubes, paintings and sketches and even player piano scrolls.

The bedlam makes you nauseous. It's a visual version of a first violin practice, as performed with a chainsaw by an epileptic on a fiddle made of alley cats.

You clench your jaw, fighting back waves of revulsion, even as your fingers ache to begin setting it to rights. Just one shelf, one spot of order in the midst of all *this*, and you'd be okay.

But before you can act, the priest begins with his explanation again. You force all of your attention upon his words, just to try to keep the clutter from driving you mad. “There are those who believe we—the Kindred—are cursed. That this state, with its hungers and needs, is a punishment from God levied upon the first of our kind for unforgiveable actions.” The priest frowned, shaking his head at this last thought. “Some believe that this is a permanent state. That the sins of our forefathers blight our souls beyond any chance of redemption. That this is why we have the Hunger for blood. The Beast that drives us to frenzy. Why the sun can destroy us and our hearts no longer beat. Why we have no souls.”

“What do you think?”

“Personally, my views are simple.” the priest answers. “The good Lord is a mighty God. He asks much of us. He is not an easy master to serve. He does not forgive lightly. But He is

just. If there were no chance of redemption, he would have simply punished the sinner and let that be the end of that. He would not give us the opportunity to redeem ourselves, without the possibility of doing so.”

You shake your head, confused at the clergyman’s rambling explanation. “You think there’s a way to cure vampires?”

“To call it a cure would mean that our state is a disease. I believe—as do many of the eldest and wisest of our clan—that just as God offered Adam and Eve’s descendants his only begotten son as an answer to the weight of the Original Sin levied upon their ancestors, so he offers us the opportunity to transcend the sinful state we find ourselves in... a way to become more than what we are, and to leave the curse of thirst and rage behind us.”

“Vampires... but no drinking blood? No having to hide from the sun? How is that possible?”

The priest smiles at you. “The Good Lord works in mysterious ways, my childe. But He also provides us with all the answers—if we’re willing to do the work to find them.”

“And you think the answer is... here?” You look around the Repository.

“The secret to Golconda is contained within these walls. I do not think it. I do not believe it. I know it. I have faith. The question, my childe, is... do you?”

The priest waits for your answer.

To begin your work in the Repository, turn to section 18.

To refuse the duties Reverend Murik has set before you, turn to section 21.

13.

Waving off his offer of help, you stand up. “I can barely think for the hunger.”

“I know.” He sounds almost sympathetic. “Everyone who is Embraced has experienced this. And you will find that this need will be the base reason for everything you do, but you can strive to control it.”

You dust off your clothing, and wipe at your neck with water from one of the decanters, hands shaking slightly. “Embraced?”

“It’s what we call the act of changing a mortal to Kindred. What you call a vampire,” he answers. “That is your first lesson. You are Kindred. You are also of Clan Toreador. We are the artists, the shining lights of grace and civility among our kind. Remember that.”

Nodding absentmindedly, an idea occurs to you and you start to uncork the various bottles on the side bar, but the smell of alcohol only seems to assault your nose, rather than entice as it once did. “Don’t you keep blood in bottles, like in the movies?” You turn, looking at Nathaniel again. At your sire.

A grimace shadows Nathaniel's face and then is gone. "No. I prefer fresh. And if you are ever offered such, do not take it." He gestures with a pointed finger for emphasis. "Not unless you watch every step of the process. Try never to drink blood if you are not certain of the source. There will be times you will have no choice—but hopefully they will be few and far between."

Again, you nod to confirm you have heard his words but the conversation starts to wear on your patience and self-control, "You mentioned food. Where?"

Nathaniel offers the first smile since he attacked you. "Only two blocks from here. A friend has offered me hospitality tonight. I intend for us to both partake."

As you both head out of the house, putting coats back on, your sire comments. "Take note—your body will adapt to room temperature unless you spend blood to alter that." He locks the front door. "That lesson will keep for another night. But that does mean you must observe the weather and what mortals are wearing if you wish to blend in."

Standing on the stairs you look out at the street and notice something odd. “Everything is brighter somehow.”

“Ah,” murmurs Nathaniel. “It seems we get a hint of the gifts of the blood you will develop first.”

As you head down the steps, this time ahead of him, you can feel your sire’s gaze resting on your body. “There will be plenty of time for that as well.” His pace quickens, to stride at your side. “I am so pleased. I think you will be a credit to me and to our clan!”

Turn to section 19.

14.

You stumble into a dank hole in the ground and find yourself surrounded with the carcasses of freshly-drained possums, mice and foxes. Pissed off, you grab one of the furry corpses and squeeze its tiny body to a pulp.

Someone has played a sick joke on you: animal blood has been splashed all over the sides and edges of the pit. You're about to jump out and hunt down something with a pulse to eat when you feel that thing inside you—your Beast—sneak toward the only siren call you'll ever answer to: the sweet, intoxicating smell of human blood.

Furious and desperate, you refuse to be grossed out by the dead mound of small woodland creatures. You let out a guttural cry and fling the furry bodies up and out of the pit, clawing your way through to your prize at the bottom.

Someone—or *something*—has bound and gagged the one person you thought would never leave you. Dennis, the boyfriend you recently broke up with for the third time in six months, lies there in front of you as naked and

as helpless as a baby. Thin cuts decorate his body; he's smeared in his own blood.

The Beast inside you is getting stronger by the minute. It doesn't care that Dennis is whimpering or scared; it wants to shred his flesh and suck every last drop of marrow from his tender bones. Not only does your Beast demand you pay tribute to the Gangrel you've become, it commands you to rip Dennis's heart out and stuff it into your face while it still beats.

The human in you recoils at the thought of drinking Dennis's blood. Just yesterday you were planning a trip to the Caribbean where you would bathe for hours under the warm sun drinking pina coladas. Now? The thought of drinking something fruity makes you want to puke. The only thing on your mind, the only thing you'll ever want ever again, is blood.

"Must feed. Can't... Need to feed." Your Beast assumes control of your mind and body, forcing you to sink your fangs into Dennis's bare flesh. The coppery-tasting liquid floods your cold veins and temporarily satiates your Beast, but you cannot release Dennis from your grasp. Not yet. Not until your hunger

subsides. You suck and suck and suck until the last drop of blood leaves your former lover's frigid body.

Horrified by what you've just done, you sink to the ground and wonder who else you'll kill to satisfy your thirst. You gently roll Dennis's body to the side of the pit, beg for his forgiveness, and feebly cover him up with loose dirt.

Your hunger abated, you fall on your knees and wonder what kind of monster you've become. Gingerly, you touch your face to see if your face is still there, only to discover that a pair of short, stubby horns has erupted from your skull.

"Are you okay down there? Do you know where your sire is?" The male voice sounds friendly enough, but you know appearances can be deceiving.

Squinting, you spot a pair of glowing red eyes peering down at you. For a split second, you wonder if this guy might be your sire, but you don't recognize him. Then again, you're not sure if you could. Everything happened so fast. One minute you were arguing with a tree, and the next...

“Don’t talk to him,” a voluptuous dark-haired woman purrs, slithering out of the wall behind you. “He’s boring and dull. Stick with me and I’ll teach you the ropes. Not that crusty old bookworm.”

Who will you talk to? To speak with the friendly voice in the park, turn to section 20.

To address the mysterious woman in the shadows, turn to section 23.

15.

“Duties?” You don’t know what the priest is talking about. “I don’t want duties! I want answers!”

The priest sighs, but nods. “Of course you do. Forgive me, my childe. I forget, at times, how confusing this can all be to those who are newly baptized into this existence. Come with me. I will explain all that I am able.”

The priest leads you down a dark hallway, and through a long series of stairways and tunnels. There are seven steps in the first stairway, and two sets of thirteen in the second. As you follow him, you contemplate the possible meanings of these numbers.

Does it bode well? Or ill? Does the fact that the smaller stairwell (with the more traditionally “lucky” number of stairs) came first mean that you made the right choice about joining Clan Malkavian? Or is it an omen of some upcoming fortune, some situation you haven’t encountered yet? And what of the double-dose of “bad luck” numbered stairs? Do they cancel out one another, or is it a sign of exponentially-increased misfortune?

You're so deep in your thoughts that you almost run into Reverend Murik's back when he pauses before a bank of elevator doors. You look around and realize you've left the tunnels behind, and are now standing in what looks like a modern office building lobby. The floors are marble tile, inlaid every fifth intersection with a disk of tarnished bronze. The interior walls are a muted buckskin color, textured like suede. The exterior is smoked glass from floor to ceiling. Through it you can see a busy street scene with cars rushing past in a constant stream of head and tail lights.

In the elevator alcove, an ornate mirror in a gilt frame reflects back a distorted image of the city street. You meet your own eyes in the reflection, and wonder who exactly it is that is staring back at you.

The elevator opens, and Reverend Murik ushers you inside. The doors close, and the car jostles and begins to ascend. A chime sounds, thirteen times, before the doors slide open once more.

Murik leads you out of the elevator and through a heavy double door with "Reflections, Inc." inscribed on the glass. On

the other side, he escorts you through an office area and back to a private meeting room. Like the lobby below, the entire exterior office wall is glass, from floor to ceiling. Through it, you can see the city arranged around you, lit up like a Christmas tree against the night sky.

“They say that we’re madmen,” the priest explains. “That our entire clan is tainted with insanity.”

You nod. You’d heard the rumors, but figured they were like those that said all the Gangrel had fleas or that becoming a Toreador was really just acquiring some sort of supernatural STD.

Reverend Murik looks out the window over the city. “And, of course, they’re right. We’re mad, to a man.”

You blink. This wasn’t how you expected this conversation to go.

“The Truth, however, is far deeper than that,” the priest continues. “They think we’re crazy because we don’t fit in with their reality. What they don’t realize is that their reality is

just a mirror. It's a consensual creation that reflects back to them what they want to see."

You try to listen, but you find yourself counting the windows in the building nearest to this one. Some are lit. Some are dark. The pattern blends with the priest's speech.

"Madness isn't an illness." Two bright windows and three dark.

"It's not a curse." One dark, two bright, and one with a curtain pulled.

"It's the ability to see between the cracks—" A whole row dark.

"—in the mirror of consensual reality that humanity has built for itself—" Two dark, one half-drawn shade and two light.

"—and understand the nature of Truth that lies behind and beyond that reflection."

You understand what the Reverend means now. Somewhere in the space between his words and the pattern of the lights across the street, it's all become clear.

He turns, to face you. “There is a library, down below. We call it the Repository. Members of Clan Malkavian have brought artifacts and information there for... decades. Centuries, perhaps. There are times when one of our line is called to seek for Truth amongst these offerings. To find the secret which will free us all.”

“The choice, of course, is yours. It must be. Free will and all that. But I do hope you will consider taking up the duties you have been chosen for. It is, I believe, your destiny to help us find the answers we’ve searched for throughout history.”

To accept Reverend Murik’s offer and begin your duties, turn to section 12.

To refuse and set out on your own, turn to section 21.

16.

Food. All you can think about is food. Blood. There is nothing to eat... No. Nothing to *drink* here. You have to get out. Get away and think about this. Away from him. From the man who did this do you.

With a guttural growl, you backpedal as you stand up, putting space between you and Nathaniel. You start to circle the perimeter of the room, moving to the doors.

Nathaniel pivots, mirroring your moves. “My childe, you do not want to do this.”

“Back up!” you hiss and grab at one of the glass decanters on the sidecar.

Bringing it down the edge of the furniture with a crack, shards spray out, covering the floor and chairs, embedding in your clothes and cutting lines on your skin. In your hand, you hold the remains of the bottleneck, a weapon brandished to force Nathaniel to keep his distance.

With your free hand, you push open one sliding door and step into the entryway with a quick glance behind to make sure no one lingers there to trap you. Nathaniel remains in a fixed spot, his hands upraised to show they

are empty as he cajoles, “You can’t go outside alone. You’d be in danger. Please don’t do this. Trust me.”

You grab at a drapery tie and use that to hold the sliding doors shut, trapping him inside while you escape. Then, you run out the front door into the night. You scoff at his warning; how could things possibly become any worse?

When you reach the street, you look over your shoulder and see Nathaniel’s silhouette in the window, watching you from the house, unmoving.

Distraction comes in the form of laughter. In the dark, some distance away you can hear it: the sound of a woman’s high-pitched laughter. It bears the promise of food—and you are so hungry.

After running a few blocks in the direction of the noise, you spot her leaning against a streetlamp, talking into her cellphone, while rummaging in her purse. Stupidly, she’s not paying attention to her surroundings. Because her blond hair is in a high ponytail and she wears a low-cut top you can see the woman’s neck clearly. You can almost feel the pulse of her blood calling to you.

There is an alley entrance not ten feet from where she is standing. Easy enough to pull this woman out of the light and take what you need.

Just before you commit to the attack, a door opens, casting light onto the sidewalk, not far from where you stand.

Jazz music pours forth, a slow, seductive melody, and there is the clink of glasses and the sound of more voices. You tilt your head toward the sky, inhaling. There is blood on the air, a good deal of it, coming from this establishment. It's at this point you notice the sign above the door, "The Gilded Cage."

"Leave it open, Steven," says a woman's voice. "The night air is refreshing and you never know what surprises might come through the door."

You look away from the jazz club, across the street, noticing the blond woman has finished her call and is starting to walk away, closer to the alley.

To go after the blond woman, turn to section 25.

To explore the blood-scent in the Gilded Cage, turn to section 28.

17.

Lured by the irresistible scent of human blood, you claw your way over to the edge of a deep hole in the ground. The sides of the hollow are slippery and you can't seem to get a grip. Reaching just a little bit farther, you wind up sliding all the way down to the bottom, landing in a chilly pool of congealed blood.

The consistence and temperature of the blood appalls you, but you taste it anyway, hoping it will satiate your hunger. It disgusts you. Frustrated, you splash the blood all over the sides of the hollow and howl in anger. Your steps uncover a pile of half-buried plastic bags. Nice. That human blood you smelled? Donations from a local blood bank.

You're just about to leap out of the hollow when you feel the pitter-patter of a thousand, tiny feet squirming all around you. Without hesitating, you reach down and grab a large sewer rat and drain it dry. Its blood doesn't taste very good but it holds your hunger in check--for only a brief moment--but you need more. A lot more.

You drop to your knees and suck the blood out of every rat you find until the Beast inside you quiets down long enough for you to plan your next move.

“They’ll do in a pinch,” a man steps out in front of you. “Animal blood can be useful if you’re stuck somewhere.” His imposing frame frightens you, but there’s something about his tense demeanor that tells you he’s important. “My name is Karsh.”

You pick out a plump rat and pop it open like a grape. “First name or last name?”

“Just Karsh.”

“Well, Karsh, do you mind if I eat? I’m still pretty hungry and um... I’m kind of new to this whole Gangrel vampire thing.”

“That’s part of the reason why I’m here,” Karsh replies, leaning against the wall of the hollow. “We’ve got a few things to discuss.”

You’re too busy sucking on a rat to respond, but you do your best to politely wave your approval. Karsh frowns. It’s obvious by the way he fingers his beard that he disapproves of you, but you’re not sure why.

“Before you became a vampire, were you aware that we existed?”

“Nope.” You shake your head, tossing another carcass on the growing pile of fur.

“The most important rule of being Kindred is that your existence must be kept secret from the prying eyes of mortals. We call this the Masquerade and, though we vampires have our differences, it is the one rule we all agree upon. The Masquerade must be protected at all costs. If one human learns that we exist, and that human tells another human, then all Kindred are threatened. Your sire, for example, is a threat to the Masquerade.”

“Why?”

“Your sire can barely call himself Kindred anymore. Gangrel must control our Beasts, the demonic force that resides deep within our chest. Otherwise, its animalistic nature will spring from our bodies and change it in unfathomable ways.”

Karsh’s words make sense, though you don’t want to tell him that. You’re anxious to hear what he has to say so you can go exploring.

“Can you give me an example? I mean, what’s the worst thing that can happen, right?”

“Imagine a pair of bony, stunted wings sprouting from your back or your eyes changing their shape into that of a large fish.”

“Ouch,” you say, fingering the features on your face to show Karsh you’re listening. “Will I turn into an animal? What’s that about? Are the Gangrel werewolves...”

“No, the Lupines are our mortal enemy.”

“So then how do we all get along? I mean, are there other laws of the night or something?”

Karsh gives you a cold smile. “There are laws and those, like myself, who will enforce them. Then there is the Camarilla, a complex organization connected from city to city by an intricate court system. If you choose to join your local Cam, you’ll answer to Prince Julius Morganti, a formidable-but-fair leader. Regardless of what you’ll decide, eventually you’ll run into the Primogen of your clan, an elder vampire that goes by the name of Luna Santi.”

“Santi... Santi... That name sounds really familiar?”

“Oh?” Karsh cocks an eyebrow. “Do you believe that she Embraced you?”

“No, no,” you say, shaking your head. “I think my sire mentioned something about needing me alive.”

Laughing, Karsh extends a hand and pulls you to your feet. “Well, you are alive, after a fashion I suppose. I wasn’t sure you were going to make it this far.”

“Me, neither,” you admit, putting your hands in your pocket. You suspect Karsh isn’t telling you all of this for your own benefit, but for his, too. From what he’s told you, Kindred life appears to be terribly complicated. You’re pretty sure you didn’t sign up to become a Gangrel to belong to some mysterious club or answer to a Prince you’ve never met.

“So what’s up with the Gangrel, then? Do we all have to join the Camarilla?”

Karsh chuckles. “Your sire is rare, for a lot of reasons. Unlike him, most Gangrel are independent. From what I hear, he’s been

making the rounds. He's pretty friendly with a Toreador, goes by the name of Nathaniel Le Roi."

You shake your head in disbelief. Who cares who your sire makes friends with? You still haven't met him yet. Shows you what he thinks about you, doesn't it?

"What about the other Kindred? Aren't there other clans out there?"

"Clans, bloodlines and different groups of rogue Kindred that band together. A select few, like Beckett for example, choose to live as an Anarch, which is a kind of modern gypsy that roams from place to place."

"Sheesh. Karsh, this is... a lot of information to take in."

"And I haven't even told you about the Path of Humanity or the Book of Nod yet."

You've had enough lectures for one night. "Okay, Karsh. Let's focus on the moment here. Right now, what do I need to know?"

"If you succumb to your Beast and your body morphs into a mutated animal, I will train the new Sherriff to hunt you down and kill you to protect the Masquerade."

Your jaw drops slightly but you manage to regain your composure quickly. “Okay, then. Note to self: don’t piss Karsh off.”

Karsh winks at you with a knowing look in his eye. “Now that that’s out of the way, I’d like to invite you along with me to meet your sire.”

“What do you mean you’ll take me to him? Isn’t it back in the park?” You check your watch. It’s almost one-thirty. Already? “Oh.”

“We’ll be safe traveling underground,” Karsh continues. “The tunnels in these sewers are ancient, built before the city’s first trading post even existed.”

“What choice do I have?” As new as you are to this whole Kindred of the city park thing, you don’t want to be suckered into trusting another vampire without reviewing all your options first. “This isn’t an ultimatum, is it?”

Karsh shrugged. “You can always go back the way you came.”

Where will you go? To jump back out and go to the other pit, turn to section 14.

To follow Karsh into the sewers, turn to section 29.

18.

You set yourself to the task at hand, certain that if anyone can discover the Truth here in the Repository, it is you. The priest has put his faith in you, and you refuse to let him down.

As you look around the Repository, you quickly realize that there is no way you can work amidst this type of clutter. There doesn't seem to be any sort of organization system in place, so you set about to establishing some sort of order to the archives.

Hour after hour, night after night, you group the artifacts in first one fashion and then another. By era. By media. By material. By geographic region or language or content. And then, frustrated by the contradictions unveiled by your classifications, you pile them all together and begin sorting again.

Silent acolytes bring you sustenance as if sensing when your hunger is growing. Sometimes they bring vitae still-warm from chalices encrusted with jewels and religious icons. Other times, they kneel before you, offering their own wrists and throats for your holy communion. The angel is never among them.

But still you work.

Occasionally new information is brought to the Repository. It appears while you slumber, and you wake to find some new snippet of data, some new reliquary of potential enlightenment waiting for you to catalogue it. To decipher it. To weave it into the tapestry of Truth.

The more you learn, however, the deeper your confusion becomes. Just when you think you've begun to grasp one truth, you turn over a piece of paper and discover evidence that unravels every thread of hypothesis you've woven so far.

Time passes. You learn so much. But never the Truth.

To set out on your own, turning your back on your duties, turn to section 21.

To continue your studies, turn to section 42.

19.

Nathaniel gestures with a nod of his head, “I am taking you to the Gilded Cage. The owner is Victoria Ash and it is important you make a good impression on her. She is...” He pauses in thought, looking for the right words, “...the social arbiter of our society. Something of a records keeper, combined with gossip columnist. The formal term we use is Harpy. And she is powerful.”

A young couple holding hands comes out of the dark, drawing near. They pass and your head turns, sighting on them. Your hands shake as you clench them into tight fists. The urge to feed is so strong.

As if he can sense how close you are to spinning about and attacking, Nathaniel grabs your upper arm in his hand, a vise-like grasp. “We are almost there. Patience. You will be able to sate your hunger in safety.”

You nod, closing your eyes and slowly opening your hands. You start to inhale, and stop, startled by the realization that you have not been breathing until this point—you took

in air only to speak, to question, not because you had the need. Your right hand lifts over your heart. Silence.

“Oh my god,” you exhale in quiet wonder.

Nathaniel looks at you, the steel blue eyes narrow, “Come. You are going to draw unwanted attention.” He drags you away with a thoughtful, frowning expression on his face. Minutes later you stop, and he knocks discreetly on door beneath a recessed neon sign. “Steven, it’s Nathaniel. Victoria is expecting me.”

The door swings outward, and for the second time tonight you enter a strange place you have never seen nor heard of before. In this case, the atmosphere is of a hole-in-the-wall jazz club; empty tables, a bar running the length of one wall, with a matching mirror behind it. In a far corner an elevated stage with permanent piano and space for a signer and one or two instruments.

The burly man who you assume works as the club’s bouncer greets Nathaniel. He gives

you a once-over as your sire explains, “This is my childe, Morgan. I have come to make introductions to the harpy.”

Steven nods. “Unreleased, I assume?” His bass voice is as rough as his battle-scarred face.

Nathaniel nods.

Your nose is assaulted by the smell of old blood that permeates the room, layered with something fresh and ripe. Your patience starts to shred. “Where?” you hiss in Nathaniel’s ear, demanding. “I need it. Now.”

Steven’s right eyebrow arches up, giving a quizzical expression to his face. “Unreleased and brand new. Interesting.” He calls out over his shoulder. “Victoria, the Primogen of Clan Toreador is paying you a visit.”

From behind a round table in a shadow-filled alcove, a woman leans forward, her face and upper torso caressed by indirect light. She has been there all the while, secluded and still. You had no idea she was there.

Even in your single-minded focus on finding sustenance, you are momentarily stunned by the sheer physical perfection, the ideal that she embodies. Victoria is a platinum-blonde like the classical screen sirens of film noir. Her elaborate 1940s hairstyle is pulled away from her face by a vintage set of sapphire-studded pins. She wears an electric blue silk gown that clings to every curve and radiates that icy sex appeal Alfred Hitchcock only dreamed of capturing in his movies.

She looks first at Nathaniel, takes a drag from her cigarette set in an elaborate holder before turning her attention to you.

“This is Morgan,” Nathaniel gestures in introduction. “We’ve come to take advantage of your generous offer of hospitality.” He smiles and places a kiss on her uplifted hand—the custom of older times, but something that seems so natural to them both.

A soft “ah” passes from her lips and her eyes twinkle with amusement. She addresses your sire, “I expect you need to make a phone call?”

“Actually, I think I had better handle this in person. May I leave Morgan here?”

“Of course.”

With a quick shake of his head, Nathaniel tells you to stay while he heads to the back of the club, passing out of site through a bead-curtained doorway.

Victoria tucks a loose curl behind one ear as she fixes her grey-green eyes on yours. Her tone of voice is business-like. “For Nathaniel’s progeny I extend consideration. Tonight is my death-day gift to you. For the future...” She shrugs, “I am sure you will find your footing in no time, but if you need a back-up, there will be expectations. And exchange of favors.”

You nod, not sure what the woman means, but remembering Nathaniel’s words of caution. This woman is a powerful vampire. How to proceed?

To tell Victoria you need to feed, turn to section 46.

To ask Victoria to explain about ‘favors,’ turn to section 48.

20.

“Sure, I could use some help getting out,” you shout to the man with the burning red eyes. “You’re not going to kill me or anything. Are you?”

The man leans over and pulls you up and out of the hole as if you were made of air. As soon as your feet touch the soil, he lets go of you and feebly attempts to brush the mud off of his khakis. “My, you *are* newly hatched. Tell me, how did it feel?”

Confused and a little creeped out, you take a few steps backward toward the hole you just came from. “How did what feel?”

“Oh, I would stay out of the shadows if I were you. We Kindred may prefer the cover of night, but not all of us lurk in that realm of darkness. My name’s Beckett. What’s yours?”

“Um...” You’re not sure whether you should talk to Beckett or run away from him. Although the rest of him looks somewhat normal, he has the eyes of an angry albino cat. Truth be told, Beckett looks more like a

frumpy college professor than a fierce vampire. In addition to his muddy khakis, he's wearing a field vest and a crappy-looking fedora. If it wasn't for his glowing, red eyes, you'd swear he was a character out of a pulp adventure novel.

"Fine, I'm sure this is all way too much for you right now. Still, I would like to know how it felt."

"How *what* felt? I ate my boyfriend on our anniversary. Do you want me to tell you about *that*?"

Beckett regards you with disdain. "I just wanted to know how it felt to be transformed from mortal to Kindred. It's been a long time since I've had the opportunity to talk to a neonate. You see, I'm on the hunt for something, a piece of knowledge that's very important for our future."

"I don't give a damn about your hunt," you snap at him. "I'm a monster."

Much to your surprise, Beckett seems to be *agreeing* with you. "Yes, I can understand how that must feel. Tell me, what were you before

you were Embraced? I'm guessing some sort of loner, no doubt? You're obviously not very good with people."

For whatever reason, Beckett makes you feel incredibly young—and not in a good way. "I was a lab rat, a scientist who worked with animals."

"Ah," Beckett says with a knowing smirk. "Yes, that makes perfect sense. Troubling, as all this is, I must leave you now before..."

"Before what?" You imagine a ghostly shiver shooting up your spine. It's obvious that Beckett knows something you don't. "What's out there? What won't you tell me?"

Beckett gazes deep into your eyes. It may just be your imagination, but you swear your Beast recoils at the sight of him. "If you want to be a Gangrel, you'll have to figure some things out for yourself. Use your instincts and sniff out the truth."

"So why'd you drag me out of that pit then. To quiz me? Some help you are. That's sick."

Laughing, Beckett thumps you hard on your back. “Oh, I’ve been called many things, but sick is definitely not one of them. Even Sascha would disagree with you on that one. Tell you what. You seem to have a lot of spunk. If you’re feeling adventurous, you can walk with me and meet a friend of mine passing through here on her way to Chicago. Can’t guarantee she won’t eat you, but you never know. Inyanga has a thing for younger members of our clan.”

“And if I’m not?”

“Then I’d suggest you hide and hide well. Perhaps find a hole in the pit I dragged you out of?”

You pretend to mull over Beckett’s offer, but your mind is already made up.

To crawl back to the shadows in the pit, turn to section 23.

To visit Inyanga, turn to section 26.

21.

You may not know much about things like enlightenment and the great beyond, but you know that you're not about to spend the rest of eternity in a library. Something tells you that the Truth is out there, somewhere, in the city, not sequestered in a bunch of dusty books in some priest's basement.

You make your apologies to the Reverend, then find your way out to the street. The noise here is deafening, a discordant orchestra of vehicles and machinery. The sky overhead is dark, but neon and traffic light up the surface streets until they're brighter than you remember daytime being.

It's all so loud, so bright, so chaotic. It takes almost physical effort for you to tune out the worst of it and get control of yourself so that you can navigate the city streets without shielding your eyes or stuffing your fingers into your ears to dull the incoming sensory onslaught.

Eventually you acclimate, though, and can turn your thoughts to the important challenges facing you. Safety. Sustenance. Survival.

You'll need a place to sleep through the day, and those southern-facing windows that seemed like such a bonus when you rented your apartment are suddenly a major health-concern. Even the bathroom has a skylight, which limits your choices for sleeping to "in the closet" if you plan on finishing out your lease.

You find yourself counting basement windows as you pass them, and wondering how many of "your kind" will be sleeping the day away behind their painted-over panes.

Food's another challenge. You don't know how often you're going to have to feed, but your first meal is already feeling like it's wearing a little thin. As you pass through the night-crowds on the sidewalk, the other pedestrians are all starting to smell a little... appealing. Even the bums huddled back in the alleyways are causing a reaction in your belly that was once reserved for steaks hot off the grill.

The idea both nauseates and excites you, and as your stomach begins to rumble, you consider backtracking to the mirrored room and visiting the angel for a late-night snack.

You turn back, but your wanderings have taken you out of the area of the city you're familiar with. Comfortable condos and brownstones have made way for abandoned storefronts, cavernous warehouses and the occasional industrial factory. There are no more briefcase-wielding business-folk hurrying home from overtime shifts. The only presences on these streets are those that gather in tightly knit packs in doorway alcoves or drift back into the shadows when you turn to look their direction.

As you try to get your bearings, you realize that you're being followed. It's nothing concrete; you can't actually see someone tailing you. But the hackles standing up at the back of your neck don't lie.

You try to stay calm, but there's a definite feeling of being stalked... of being *hunted*. Your pace quickens, first to a speedy walk, then a half-run. You don't bother slowing when you get to the other sidewalk. After a few blocks, you're sprinting, trying to trace your meandering path back out of the ghetto and back towards civilization.

Your instinctual navigation fails you. You dart down what you think is a connecting street, buoyed by the promise of heavy traffic and bright lights just beyond, only to find yourself at a dead-end.

The streetlights have been broken out here, the storefronts locked up tightly with security bars, and the only car on the street looks like it was stripped of its wheels, radio and any fenceable parts years ago.

You turn back towards the arterial road, hoping to double-back before you're trapped, but it's too late. A figure in a long trench coat slowly walks up the center of the street towards you.

“So, this is the Reverend's latest progeny...” The voice is painfully well-enunciated, each syllable razor sharp. “I've been curious about that library he's been gathering down in his basement. So well protected, and he's been dreadfully recalcitrant about sharing even the slightest tidbit of information on its contents. How fortunate, then, that the Good Father allows his latest apprentice to wander the city streets alone.”

The swarthy skinned vampire smiles, fangs glistening despite the darkness. “Fortunate for me, that is. Perhaps not so much for you.”

You begin to protest, but an army of ethereal servants springs from seeming nothingness around you. They grab you, impossibly strong despite their translucent forms, and hold you in place as their master approaches.

Ghostly voices keen and howl in your ears as the other vampire closes the space between you. Spectral hands cover your mouth so that you cannot scream as he begins his interrogation.

It takes a very long time for him to believe that you know nothing.

It takes an even longer time for you to die.

THE END

22.

In the distance, you hear the sound of a car horn, loud and piercing. It startles you, as you spin about, looking out into the night to see if you can locate the source.

The rush of adrenaline seems to have the same effect on you as if waking from a deep sleep. You realize you know nothing about the man you have followed and were about to enter a strange house in an unknown area of town.

This isn't like you at all. Something is wrong here.

"Listen," you say, while taking a step backwards, "I completely lost track of the time. It's later than I realized and I have an early day tomorrow. Why don't we do this another time?"

"I thought we were getting along so well." Nathaniel looks at you with a quizzical expression on his face.

You smile in reassurance, even as you experience an ever increasing feeling of danger. “Oh yes. It’s just the timing. Tonight’s not good for me.”

“I see.” He looks away at the ground, as if lost for a moment in thought.

In the time it takes you to blink, Nathaniel suddenly behind you, his hand over your mouth. Your eyes widen as you hear him murmur in your left ear. “Tonight is exceptionally good for me, however. I have been planning this with you in mind.”

You struggle as arm wraps around your body, unyielding. Then you feel his teeth rip into the side of your neck. No. Not teeth, they are too sharp for that. Nathaniel has *fangs*.

Even in the horror of that realization, you continue to squirm, hoping to break free, but he is too strong. You start to feel light-headed and lethargy envelops you, arms and legs going limp, until you stand upright only because Nathaniel is supporting your weight.

The loud thudding in your ears is the sound of your heartbeat. It mingles with the sickening slurp of his mouth against your neck. You can feel the trickle of warm blood escaping from his lips to slide along your skin and over your collarbone.

You sway, gasping for breath as he picks you up in his arms, head bent with fangs still embedded in your neck. You see the cloudy sky overhead, with the moon in eclipse for an instant, then it is replaced by plain painted ceiling, quickly followed then an ornate scene involving cherubs and fields as Nathaniel carries you into the house and then to a nearby room.

The pain in your neck abates as he lays your body across a brown leather couch. “Know you your Shakespeare?” you hear him ask, but the sound is so distant. Your eyelids are heavy, but you know once closed, they will never open again. You are dying. Nathaniel is a vampire and he has drained you to death.

His face comes into your view, blocking the pastoral scene above. You think how strange it is to see your blood lingering on his lips.

“Fear no more the heat o’ the sun, nor the furious winter’s rages...” he intones, while pressing his gashed right forearm to your mouth.

The tang on your tongue hits like a small electrical shock. You have never tasted anything so rich, so good. You stir, tongue lapping at the blood. When you have regained enough strength, your hands clasp his arm tightly, the better to press your lips to his skin.

When he pulls away, saying gruffly “Enough,” you first feel abandoned, then empty. What he gave you is but a taste of what you need. You feel so empty inside, worse than the greatest hunger you can remember. You are starving and all you want is blood.

More.

Now.

To attack Nathaniel for more blood, turn to section 10.

To flee the room, horrified by the truth, turn to section 16.

23.

Against your better judgment, you decide to face the mysterious woman who emerged from the shadows.

“Well, better get this over with. What else can happen tonight?” You tentatively wave a hand, pressing against the wall of the pit, but nothing is there.

“Looking for ussssss?”

You turn around, more than a little frustrated. Just how many vampires are there in this damn city, anyway? “Yeah, I guess so. Who’s ‘ussssss’?” You mimic, half-hoping your bad joke will draw the vampire out so you can get a better look at him.

“Why, Dmitri, this one has a sense of humor. I like her even more than Ariel.” A woman cloaked in black smoke steps in front of you. “The name is Cassandra. Cassandra Veil.”

“Pleasure.” You’re not sure what the protocol is for meeting a new vampire, but you extend your hand out anyway. “I’m guessing you’re a Toreador?”

“Why yes, I am. Good guess.” The corners of Cassandra’s lips curl into a seductive smile. “Dmitri, don’t be shy. Come meet your fellow Gangrel. After all, you are the same generation, I suppose.”

The other vampire almost trips over Dennis’s corpse to get to you, but when he does you recoil from the sight of him. Compared to Cassandra, Dmitri is downright monstrous. His misshapen spine looks like it had been broken in three places then fused into a permanent twist. You can’t tell which of his arms is worse: the midget stump or the one shaped like a pipe cleaner. And his ears? Two, bat-like things spiraling toward the ceiling; you assume he has excellent hearing. The only thing remotely human about Dmitri is his perfectly-shaped nose.

“We’re related?” You don’t want to be rude but you don’t believe for a second Dmitri is anything like you. Anything “but,” maybe.

Cassandra slips an arm through yours and whispers in your ear. “Oh, but he was like you. Young, fresh, full of ideas. Until his sire tortured him and made him drink the blood of his baby.”

“Kind of like what happened to me,” you confess, wondering if underneath that

grotesque face, Dmitri is as scared as you are. “Only I didn’t get the chance to say goodbye to my boyfriend or my animals. Well, *ex*-boyfriend.”

Dmitri’s head bobs up and down in agreement. “Take you to sire. Make payment.”

“You know who my sire is?”

“Sure,” Cassandra teases. “Everyone knows who your sire is.”

“Then what do I have to do to meet him?”

Wagging a slender finger, Cassandra scolds you gently. “Tsk, tsk, little one. I need you to do something for me, first.”

“Name it.” You’re dying for a little payback and you can’t wait to give it to him.

“You haven’t even heard what it is yet,” Dmitri whines. You hate to admit it, but you have to wonder what connects a hideous thing like Dmitri with someone as beautiful as Cassandra.

“Lay it on me.”

“Well...” Cassandra begins. “You see, all Kindred have to answer to a higher power in order to survive. Unless of course, you believe

you can do better on your own, which is something a large number of rogue vampires will regret soon enough.”

“Rogue... vampires?” You want to hear more about what Cassandra is hinting at, but she ignores your question and moves on.

“Dmitri and I belong to the most powerful group in the city, called ‘The Sabbat’. Our mission might sound familiar to you, especially if you followed politics when you were alive. We simply want to be free to exercise the dark gifts granted to all us Kindred.”

You never really followed the elections, but you suspect most politicians are sneaky bastards. “Doesn’t sound too bad, but I need some time to think it over. Do I have to make my decision now?”

Dmitri grabs your hand. “You’re family now. No waiting.”

You jerk your hand away and take a large step back. “Nuh-uh. I may have wanted to be part of the Kindred, but I’m not going to sign up for any group just yet. Can’t you give me a tour or something?”

Cassandra grins, revealing a set of dazzling, white fangs. “Sure thing, sugar. Tell you what. You can either decide to come with us, or we’ll lead you to our mentor. What do you say?”

You realize you don’t really have much of a choice. You’re alone in a pit with not one but *two* vampires that obviously know more about being Kindred than you do. “What about my special powers? Don’t I get some of those?”

It was Dmitri’s turn to laugh. Coming from his twisted throat, he sounded like he was choking on a bone. “Super vampire. Wears funny cape.”

“If I teach you how to use your Disciplines, will you join the Sabbat?”

“Maybe.”

“There you go, then. Join us and learn how to use what God cursed you for.”

“Or...”

“*Or*,” Cassandra stresses. “Simply lift that trap door over there and chart a new course with our *dearest* friend, Karsh.”

“I take it you don’t have a lot of love for this guy?”

“You could say that,” she snarls. “Oh, before you meet Karsh, you might want to fix your hair... there’s a... um...”

It’s not just your hair that’s messed up, you feel like you’ve been living on the streets for months. You’re covered in mud and god-knows-what-else and don’t have anything else to change into. “What? Do I have horns or something?”

Dmitri stoops over a small pile of clothing in the corner. He tosses you a hat—Dennis’s hat.

“Thanks for the warning.” You pretend Cassandra’s advice is meaningful, so you put your boyfriend’s hat on and smooth out your hair. Oh, crap. Your boyfriend--Dennis--is *dead*. He may not have been the best boyfriend, but he didn’t deserve to die. Did he? Your chest aches with sadness and guilt, but you don’t have time to wallow in self-pity. Cassandra is waiting for an answer. What are you going to do?

To lift the trap door and talk to Karsh, turn to section 29.

To join the Sabbat, turn to section 41.

24.

It's her or you.

You prop the basket of dead birds on one hip and pretend to struggle with the door to the incinerator chute with your free hand. "I can't quite get it..."

You watch as Mrs. Kettlesworth draws nearer. You can't believe you're considering this, but you can tell by the way she looks at you as she approaches, that it's her or you.

"You ninny. It's a simple matter." She reaches for the incinerator door, and you yank it open at the same time and try to shoulder her into the chute.

Unfortunately for you, the old bat is cagier than she looks. She steps out of the way, and you are forced to pretend that you slipped in order to cover your assassination attempt.

"Watch it! You clumsy oaf!" She steps back and brushes the rust stain from her suit where you pushed her against the iron chute door. She pulls a linen handkerchief from her pocket, and works at the stain until there's

nothing left. For a moment, as she fusses with her outfit, she seems like nothing more than an uptight dowager. There's nothing of the conniving murderer you sensed before.

Maybe you were wrong about her. Maybe she's not really out to get you. Maybe she doesn't resent you for killing her pets.

But there's no sense in being careless about it.

You slowly back towards the exit from the roof, still carrying the basket of dead pigeons.

"Wait— on second thought, there's no use wasting those." She turns towards you, and you once again sense a glint of something in her eye. Is it malice? Resentment?

"I mean, they're dead already. They may as well be good to someone." Is there a hidden message in her words? Is she really talking about you, rather than the birds?

You glance around the rooftop, but your options are limited. Mrs. Kettlesworth stands between you and the incinerator chute, and the doorway to the stairs down is still most of the way across the roof from you.

“You can take them downstairs, and tell your sire what you’ve done.” Disapproval coats her voice.

What you’ve done. What you’ve done. You’ll have to pay for what you’ve done—that’s what she really means.

“Perhaps he can find use for them in feeding his flock.”

She’s not fooling you. You know what she really means. Either she’s going to destroy you, or she’s sending you to your doom. It’s as clear as the moon in the sky above her: This will not end well for you.

She begins slowly walking towards you, her frown deepening as you frantically scour the rooftop for an escape route.

You can see the rooftop of the next building over. It would be a long leap, but it’s a story or two lower, so maybe if you got a good run at it, you might make it. On the other hand, you must be ten stories up, and as far as you know, none of your new vampiric powers include the ability to fly.

If you don't make it on the first leap, it's a long, long way down.

Mrs. Kettlesworth is walking towards you. You've only got a second to make your decision, and your options are limited.

To dart back into the building and try to escape, turn to section 27.

To take your chances and try to leap to the next building, turn to section 39.

25.

Although you are intrigued by the sounds and smells from the open door, your instincts scream at you to feed first and that your meal is getting away.

Faster than you can ever remember running before, you cross the street darting between parked cars, careful to stay in the shadows. The woman takes no more than ten or twelve steps, while you have moved some 50 yards to close the gap.

It makes perfect sense. After all, vampires are always fast and strong in the movies. It's part of what makes them dangerous. What makes *you* dangerous.

The woman is taken completely by surprise when you grab her arm, yanking her off-balance and into the alley. The fear in her eyes is arousing.

As she inhales to scream, you react instinctively, hitting the side of her face with the back of your hand. She whimpers, head turned to the side, exposing her neck to your eyes and fangs.

The world turns red as you savage her neck and shoulders, desperate for blood. You bite repeatedly, each time pulling away to swallow before sinking fangs into her scented skin, while the woman makes sounds like a wounded animal. She softly pleads for you to stop, but the sheer taste of liquid life sliding along the back of your throat is erotic.

This must be what Nathaniel felt when he was draining you. Powerful. Intoxicated.

The terrible craving abates while you kneel among the refuse littering the alley, bent over your prey, enjoying the mingled scent of jasmine perfume and blood while you pause in feeding. The woman moans as her gaze fixes on your face. Her voice is sandpaper rough as she begs, "Please. Stop. ...hurts." Her neck most closely resembles an over-used pincushion. It's impressive that she is able to speak at all after what you have done to her.

What *you* have done.

The feeling of remorse pounds like a sledgehammer. What have you done? You've become a monster and the proof is before you, crumpled like a broken doll against the

building wall. Shaking your head in denial, you wipe the back of your hand over your lips, smearing her blood on your face.

“Are you just going to leave her like that?”

The deep voice comes from your left, towards the street. Illuminated from behind by the scattering of streetlamps and other sources is a man of middling height, with close cut brown hair.

This stranger wears a worn leather biker’s jacket, blue jeans and boots. Standing with legs apart, arms hanging loose at his sides, the man carries himself with the confidence of a fighter. This may be bolstered by the presence of two other people flanking him, dressed in similar clothing—a woman with curly red hair and a man of Asian descent.

You have no idea how long they’ve been standing there, watching you.

“I don’t know you,” the group’s leader says flatly. “This means you are new or foolish.”

Your sharp eyes catch the shine and shape of fang in his mouth. You exhale in relief,

tension easing with the realization he's not the police and from his behavior, not the woman's boyfriend.

"New." You touch the side of your neck in a self-conscious gesture.

His gaze tracks the motion of your hand as his eyes narrow. The man looks away, exchanging a glance with each of his companions. His head tilts to the side, as if listening to something, but you hear nothing.

"New, I can believe. Foolish is something left to be determined."

The red-head leans forward, gesturing to your still breathing victim who is clinging to consciousness, "You are in violation of the Camarilla's First Tradition: 'Thou shalt not reveal thy true nature to those not of the Blood.' This mortal knows what you are. In most cities this will cost you your life." She places emphasis on the last two words, her lips curled up in a strange sort of smirk.

The Asian man moves quietly along the opposite side of the alley, flanking you, to

mirror his companions, who are blocking the exit leading to the street.

“In this situation, you really have only one option.” Their apparent leader speaks again, “Make sure she never speaks of what she saw. That or face your own death.”

Momentarily stunned by his words, you close your eyes. Will the horrors of this night never end? Now you must be a killer as well?

To make the death as quick and painless as possible, turn to section 31.

If you can't bring yourself to take the woman's life, turn to section 43.

26.

Beckett transforms into the shape of a large wolf; he nuzzles your hand, urging you to follow him. The wolf takes you deeper into the park, padding softly on a well-lit path marked by colorful bricks. Together, you wind through an impressive display of topiary trimmed into the shape of large animals.

One of the animals, a sleek leopard, regards you with great interest.

The wolf howls loudly and runs off, leaving you alone with the deadly cat. You feel your Beast straining against your chest as if it, too, wants you to change your shape—but into what? What could possibly help you defend yourself against a jungle cat?

“Thanks for nothing, Beckett.”

The leopard leaps on your chest and knocks you to the ground. Before you have a chance to react, it clamps its jaws around your waist and flings you up toward the tree tops. You sail high into the air, bounce off a tree branch, and hit the ground hard. You wince in pain, but

realize you don't hurt as bad as you think you should. In fact, your muscles and skin stretch back to normal. Your body has absorbed the damage. You're okay.

You roll over, only to see the face of an ancient woman with very pronounced cat-like features. Her hair is mottled with gray and silver strands; her ebony skin is lined with the memories of a thousand lifetimes. The matron extends a hand and pulls you to your feet.

"That was your first lesson," she instructs you, sweeping her arm from the damp grass to the rustling trees. Although she looks human, you sense she was Embraced long ago, in a time romanticized in history books. "Beckett has brought you to me, Inyanga, because you are young and full of burning questions. You even smell like a suckling babe."

You aren't sure what to ask Inyanga, even though you secretly agree with her. You don't like being compared to a baby, though—you're not *that* young. To her, though, you probably are. "What do I do? I don't even know who made me this way."

“That’s your choice. While most Gangrel are independent, your sire has aligned himself within the Camarilla. I view the Camarilla as our government, one that protects all vampires. Sure, it has its own laws, but it also keeps us from succumbing to the darkest parts of ourselves and from those who threaten us. Without it, the world we know would be threatened by the witch-hunters who walk in the light.”

“What’s the alternative?”

You wait patiently for Inyanga to respond. She turns away from you, tilting her head toward the trees. It might be your imagination, but you think the forest is speaking to Inyanga and she’s talking back to it. “Many Gangrel favor a solitary path. Though, I would not recommend that one such as you walk the path of an Anarch... yet. You still have a lot to learn and could benefit from the teachings of your sire. You’re much too young to declare your independence. There is safety in numbers for one such as you.”

Inyanga sniffs a fresh breeze, her nose crinkles in disgust. “Do you believe in the devil?”

“What?” Her question throws you for a loop. “You mean the red skin, horns and forked tongue kind?”

“I suppose I should have expected no less from a fledgling. The idea of great evil, do you place your faith in that?”

You were never religious; you’ve always placed your faith in data. The idea of selling your soul to the devil doesn’t freak you out. “No, definitely not. I’m guessing I’m one of the Damned now, but I don’t think the devil has anything to do with it.”

Inyanga then describes a group that makes the hair on your Beast’s back stand on end. “The Sabbat is our equivalent of the devil. There are many monsters that walk this earth, but they are an abomination.”

“Sounds like you really hate the Sabbat. Can’t you stake them or something?”

Her lips curve into a disapproving frown. “This, childe, is the choice you now face. Prove your worth to the Gangrel clan and meet your sire. Or, seek out what hides in darkness, and learn what you should be afraid of. Either path will teach you a valuable lesson.”

Although you wish living your life on your own terms as an Anarch was a third option, you realize that Inyanga is not the type of vampire you can simply suggest things to. Mulling over your options, you realize the wisdom in her words. She's asking you if you want to rise to an incredible challenge or if you want to ignore her advice altogether. It's clear she believes you're so full of confidence you think you have more answers than she does.

Do you? You never considered yourself to be an arrogant person. Well, maybe a little. You did try to control your relationship with Dennis and look where that ended up. This is your chance to make things right—at least with your clan.

To prove yourself as an upstanding member of the Gangrel clan, turn to section 32.

To learn for yourself why Inyanga hates the Sabbat, turn to section 41.

27.

Certain that a moment spent longer on the rooftop will result in your death, you fling the basket of dead birds towards Mrs. Kettlesworth and dash for the door that led you here. Pigeon carcasses flutter everywhere, blanketing the rooftop in a gory snowstorm of feathers and blood.

Although you're certain you can feel her right behind you the whole way, you manage to sprint across the roof, throw open the door and dart through it.

As the heavy metal door clangs shut behind you, you hurl yourself down the stairs, leaping down several stairs with each bound. Your heart should be pounding; your breath should be coming in ragged gasps. Instead, the stairwell is silent, except for the sounds of your escape: the slam of your weight against the metal stairs each time you land, the echoes of your hurried steps, and the squeal of your shoes as you wheel your way round the corners at each landing.

You're sure the door shut before Mrs. Kettlesworth could have slipped through.

You don't think she's behind you.

You're pretty sure, at least.

But there's that feeling again, the one that starts at the base of your spine and traces icy fingertips up your back. You look behind you, but there's no one there.

No one you can see, anyway.

On the next landing, there's a door leading out to the seventh floor of the building. You dart through it and slam the door shut behind you, quickly enough that you're certain no one could have followed. You jimmy the locking mechanism, forcing it closed and then bending the cheap push-bar so that there's no way someone from either side will be able to pass through it.

And then you wait.

No one tries to open the door.

You're safe. At least for the moment.

You look around, and find yourself in a long hallway. Other halls branch off at right angles at either end. A series of doors,

identified by discreet brass nameplates and room numbers line the hall. Across from the stairwell door, there's a single elevator. A small alcove with a hanging mirror provides space for people to stand while waiting for the elevator to arrive.

Is it a hotel? A professional building? You're not sure, but something about it doesn't feel right.

From around a corner, you hear voices.

"I know I heard something, Mikael," one says.

"No one's supposed to be on this floor," the other replies. "Reverend Murik will have our heads on a platter if someone's messing around up here."

There's the sound of a bullet being chambered into a pistol before Mikael's companion responds.

"Not if we take care of it before it becomes an issue..."

You look around for somewhere to hide, but the hall is bare. You try several of the doors, but they're all locked.

The only possible concealment comes from a shallow alcove near the elevators. If whoever is looking for you walks past, you should be fine, but if they look in, there's nothing to hide behind.

Or, you could try to explain yourself to the two voices that are rapidly approaching your current location.

To try to hide, turn to section 30.

To give yourself up, turn to section 33.

28.

For the second time tonight you enter a strange place you have never seen nor heard of before. In this case, a hole-in-the-wall jazz club; every table empty, a bar running the length of one wall, with a mirror behind it. In a far corner there's an elevated stage with a permanent piano and space for a signer and one or two instruments.

The burly man who you assume works as the club's bouncer gives you a once-over, before looking across at a booth whose occupants can be concealed by velvet drapes. "Victoria?" he asks.

The glow of a lighted cigarette in the darkness indicates there is one person relaxing in the shadows. A woman's voice, smoky and sensual, calls out. "Let this one pass."

Steven's right eyebrow arches up, giving a quizzical expression to his face. "Interesting." The man steps aside, allowing you entrance, but you get the impression he has memorized your face and also determined that in a fight you would be easy for him to take down.

Seated behind a large round table, the woman leans forward, her face and upper torso caressed by carefully-placed lights. The fingers of one hand are wrapped around an empty wine glass while an old-fashioned cigarette holder rests in the other.

Even in your single-minded focus on finding sustenance, you are momentarily stunned by the sheer physical perfection, the ideal that she embodies. Victoria is a platinum-blonde, like the classical screen sirens of *film noir*. Her elaborate 1940s hairstyle is pulled away from her face by a vintage set of sapphire-studded pins. She wears an electric blue silk gown that clings to every curve and radiates that icy sex appeal Alfred Hitchcock only dreamed of capturing in his movies.

She takes a drag from her cigarette holder and comments off-handedly with a slight smile which allows you to make note of her fangs, “I suspect you are hungry.”

She is a vampire. That is both a relief and a reason to panic. You twist your body, the better to keep an eye on her and on the

bouncer, Steven. You feel increasingly nervous about being trapped in an unfamiliar place, where you would have to fight to get out again.

“Relax, childe. If you were going to run anywhere, you had either the wisdom or the luck to find my door. The Scourge and Sheriff won’t harm you in my domain,” Victoria pauses, a thoughtful look on her face. “Unless I ask them to.”

The woman tucks a loose curl behind one ear as she fixes her grey-green eyes on yours. She places the cigarette holder across the crystal ashtray at her side and proceeds to pull the stopper from a green-glass wine bottle, pouring a finger’s width of dark red liquid into the glass in her right hand. A second later, the aroma of blood fills your nose and you take a few steps closer to Victoria and her table, as if compelled.

She addresses you in the manner of a business negotiation. “Your sire is Nathaniel, correct? You do match the description.”

“You know the man who did this to me?”
Reflexively, your left hand lifts up to feed the
bite marks that scar your neck.

“He has promised to owe me a favor if I was
able help you tonight. For the future...” she
shrugs, “I am sure you will find your footing in
no time. So, Morgan, child of Nathaniel, how
can I assist you?”

*To tell Victoria you need to feed before you
can talk, turn to section 47.*

*To ask Victoria to explain about ‘favors,’ turn
to section 48.*

29.

Karsh's chiseled frame stands next to a massive, tiled pillar that looks like it's strong enough to support the entire city sprawling above you. He fingers his beard, then beckons you over to him. Together, you wind through a deep network of tunnels that twist and turn for miles. The deeper you go, the chattier he gets. You can only make out about half of what he says, but one thing is clear: he won't stop stressing the importance of the Masquerade.

"While we are more powerful than humans, the Masquerade allows us to thrive as a society. Without it, the world would be plunged into chaos. That's one of the reasons why the relationship between a sire and child is important..."

Blah, blah, blah. You want to listen to Karsh's speech, but you can't stop thinking about who your sire might be and what he looks like.

"Every vampire is different, every clan unique," he tells you. "We Gangrel were born to hunt."

You think you remember your sire telling you something about that. “What? Like a dog or a pigeon?”

Karsh freezes in his tracks. “You might want to rethink that last statement.”

“I’m just asking...”

Before you can blink, the elder vampire puts you in a head lock. You feel your Beast rising to the surface, but you tell it to calm the fuck down. Pissing Karsh off is *not* a good idea. His skin is cold to the touch, but feels hard, like a slab of thick marble. “Generations of vampires have come before you, little one. You’ll want to talk less and listen more.”

“Yes, sir.” You manage to croak.

“Hmmp,” he grunts. The next time you blink, he is halfway up the tunnel. “Hurry up, they’re waiting for you.”

“Why me?” You catch up to him and exit the sewers through a slimy doorway into the basement of a butcher shop. Long slabs of skinned meat hang from the rusted ceiling. Ragged saws threaten to erupt from of the

wall at any moment. Karsh doesn't seem to care that you're a little freaked out; he marches down a rickety stairwell, taking you deeper underground. You're just about to ask Karsh where the fuck you are, when you hear the roar of a cheering crowd.

"Welcome to *Extreme Wrestling Warfare*, where Beast meets Beast in a showdown to Final Death or torpor, whichever comes first. Tonight, we welcome a special guest to our fair city. Your favorite *luchador*... the one... the *only*... El Diablo Verde!"

The announcer's voice is faint, but his words are unmistakable: you're about to enter a *vampire* wrestling match.

"You can't be serious," you whisper underneath your breath, hoping Karsh won't smell your fear.

"Santi has an unusual way of leading her clan. In life, she was a huge sports fan, so it makes sense she'd utilize the arena to welcome new Gangrel to the fold."

"You call this welcoming? Let me guess, survive two minutes and I can finally meet my sire?"

Karsh regards you with disdain. You wonder what he'd do to you if he didn't have to answer to the Prince. "More like thirty seconds."

It's been a long night for you, but the Beast inside of you is itching for a fight. It smells the danger and begs you to rise up and meet it. "I'll do it, for my sire."

"Good, in you go." Karsh tosses you head first into the ring.

"Now just wait a second..." You mull over your options. If you want to stay on Karsh's (and probably Luna's, too) good side, you should stay and fight. Still, you realize you might have another option. There was someone waiting for you in the shadows, wasn't there? Maybe you should find out what she wants.

To jump out of the ring and backtrack to meet the woman filled with dark secrets, turn to section 23.

To take on El Diablo Verde, turn to section 32.

30.

Discretion is the better part of valor, and you duck into the elevator alcove, hoping to avoid detection.

There's nothing here to hide behind, not even an armchair or lamp, so you press your back up against the wall and think "I'm not here" thoughts with all your might. You picture oatmeal. Rain. Glass windows. Anything unnoticeable, and pray to whatever gods might be listening that they stay in that other hallway.

The voices come nearer.

"This way?" The first man seems skeptical.

"Yeah, I swear I heard something." The second is definitely suspicious.

The footsteps pause, and then turn and begin approaching the stairwell you entered through.

The men pause to rattle a few doorknobs, just as you did a moment ago, but like you, they find them all secure.

“Tight as a drum.” He sounds irritated at his companion’s suspicions. “Let’s go back. We’re not supposed to leave our station.”

That’s it. Go back. You squeeze your eyes tight, straining with every fiber of your being to mentally force the voices to turn around and go back the way they came.

“Yeah, but I heard something. Come on. I’m gonna check the door to the stairs.”

No! That’s right across from you. They’re going to see you! You don’t want to look, but you have to.

Two men, each the size of a football linebacker, step into view. They’re casually dressed in jeans and windbreaker jackets, but everything about their stance screams “armed guard”.

Their backs are turned towards you as they examine the makeshift lock-job you did on the door to the stairwell. Their attention isn’t on you, but you’re stuck. There’s no way for you to slip out of the alcove and down the hall past them, or to signal the elevator without drawing their attention. Between the two

of them, their shoulders pretty much fill the entire hallway. You can't even see the stairwell door past the mountains of muscle.

What isn't blocked from view, however, is the massive pistol one of the men is carrying. You don't know anything about firearms, but if big means bad, the gun he's toting has got to be among the worst.

"You were right, Svava. Someone was here." The gun-wielder is pale and bald, and looks like he could bench-press a small truck. He rattles the door with the hand that isn't toting the pistol, but your slap-dash work holds despite his obvious strength.

Maybe they'll think you left through the stairs. You don't move a muscle.

"Whoever did this has got to be inside," Svava says. "They couldn't do this from the stairs." He turns, looking down the hallway, then back the way they came. Unlike Mikael, he's not carrying a gun. Instead, he's got what appears to be a foot-and-a-half long piece of broom handle. The end has been sharpened to a dagger-point.

You don't know what he plans to do with that, but you can't imagine that it is healthy for whoever's on the receiving end.

You fear that you're about to find out, first-hand.

Slowly, Svava turns to face you. His glance flickers over the entirety of the ten-foot-square alcove you're standing in. His expression doesn't change.

Mikael looks as well, first into the alcove, then back down the hallway in each direction.

Neither raises their weapon.

"The elevator?" Svava offers, frowning.

"We'd have heard it," Mikael responds, holstering his pistol in a side harness hidden beneath his windbreaker. "Come on, let's report this to the Reverend and get back to our station."

The two men turn, and, as one, walk back down the hallway.

They didn't see you.

They looked right at you, both of them, and didn't so much as blink an eye.

Holy crap. They didn't see you!

Elated by your apparent invisibility, you creep out of the alcove and turn down the hallway in the opposite direction the men had taken. You've only gone a few steps when you hear them stop and turn towards you.

"Hey!"

You're not sure what you did differently, but from the men's reaction, your invisibility is long gone. So is their patience. You see Mikael reach for his pistol. Svara's still got that huge stake in his hand.

The hallway extends another 30 feet or more before it takes a 90-degree corner that might provide you some cover. There's no way you can make it to the corner before Mikael can get his gun out.

You've really only got two options. You can give up and try to talk your way out of the situation before things get too bloody.

Or, you could just try to will yourself invisible again and hope to hide as you did before.

To talk your way out of it, turn to section 33.

To try to turn invisible again, turn to section 36.

31.

You access a hidden reserve of practicality. If it's you or her, you want to live. So, this woman who happened to be at exactly the wrong place and wrong time needs to die.

It feels like a burden is suddenly lifted from your shoulders. Not so hard a decision to make after all. You open your eyes and after glancing at two vampires still blocking your escape from the alley, you cross over to the blood-covered woman.

She starts to scramble away from you with slow, weak movements, shaking her head in denial. The panicked woman tries to speak, but the only sounds from her throat are low, gruff squeaks – the damage to her neck has clearly hampered any ability to call for help.

You are startled by a flash of silver that comes over your shoulder. A knife, tossed by the Asian man, is embedded with a dull thud into the right side of your victim's torso. "Saw you didn't have one of your own," he speaks for the first time, with a perfect English accent. "You're welcome to use mine."

You head spins. You had decided to kill, but not how to do it. But the knife solves that problem. That will be much easier than choking or trying to break her neck.

For a second you feel qualms about the fact you are sitting here, thinking how best to take another person's life. Then that is gone and the practical, survival-oriented voice inside your head is urging you to just be done with it. Kill the woman and get out of this place.

You don't look at her face or murmur any soft words of comfort or apology. Grasping the knife, you yank it out of her torso and draw the blade deep into the woman's flesh in a jagged line across her throat.

Blood splashes on your clothes, droplets decorating your face and arms like tiny pieces of glitter. The woman's eyes roll back, her skin pales to a shade of blue and she falls over on her side, unmoving.

It is done. In silence you stare at this first victim of your vampire life. Everything has changed with no hope of being normal again.

Behind you there is the sound of applause, one pair of hands clapping in a slow rhythm. “Bravo.”

All three watchers are smiling, each showing fangs. You look down at the knife in your hand, and pause to wipe it on the dead woman’s top and skirt, so it gleams again in the glow of streetlights before offering it hilt-first, back to its owner.

“New, but definitely not Camarilla material.” Approval colors every word the Asian man says.

“I agree,” states the redhead, standing behind the third vampire and resting her chin on his shoulder. “You belong with us.”

Their leader extends his right hand to you, asking, “Who is your sire?”

You shake your head in confusion and ignore his offer of a handshake. His hand drops to his side.

“The one who changed you, gave you the Embrace,” he explains.

“The man who *killed* me said his name was Nathaniel Le Roi,” you reply, not bothering to hide the anger or hatred in your voice.

He nods, folding his arms across his chest. “If that’s the case, perhaps we can help each other. We’ve been hunting Nathaniel, among others, because he killed some friends of ours.” The man gestures with a nod of his head to the other two vampires, “I’m Randall, this is Lexie and that’s Jody. Our pack’s called Caine’s Mercy.”

“You’re lucky you got away before he could brainwash you,” Randall continues. “In this city, you are either a member of the Camarilla—that’s your sire’s group—or they hunt you down and try to kill you. They won’t stop until you leave the city or are dust. We’re Sabbat. We look after each other and we don’t buy their party line.”

Lexie interjects, “Actually, tonight we were planning a little sabotage action, but finding you is so much better than that. You see, Nathaniel will be frantic to find his lost child. He’ll come looking for you and he’ll be

vulnerable, careless even.” She tilts her head up to whisper in Randall’s ear. “This could be our chance.”

Randall makes a short nod, acknowledging her words, but his attention remains focused on you. “Would you like to get even with Nathaniel for what he’s done to you? If you throw in with us, we can teach you about what you are, help you find a safe place to rest before the sun comes up and help you get revenge. What do you say?”

To join forces with Caine’s Mercy, turn to section 34.

To turn down their offer, turn to section 40.

32.

You stand at the foot of a wrestling ring emblazoned with a sign that reads: *Extreme Wrestling Warfare*. The room is crowded; you spot a collection of odd characters on the bleachers, including a mysterious group wearing long, velvet robes covered in magical sigils. Somewhere in that mess of fangs, claws and bad hairstyles, is your sire.

The announcer is a vertically-challenged figure dressed in green velvet from head-to-toe. “Annnnnnnnd in this corner, fresh from the sewers beneath Prince Morganti’s fair city, we have the fierce tenth generation... *Pomeranian*.”

The crowd boos. Is he talking about you? Shit. Feeling bold, you jump into the ring and grab the microphone out of the announcer’s tiny hands. “That’s right, sports fans. I’m the *Pomeranian* because even though I’m little, I’ve got plenty of *teeth*.”

Several people in the crowd start to laugh, but you take that as a good sign.

“Go over there, kid.” The announcer points to the far corner. “Try not to bleed all over my ring. You’re not the only match scheduled tonight.”

“Sure thing.” You dig deep inside of you and tune into your Beast. You’ve never been much of a fighter, but there’s something about wrestling your Beast adores.

Trotting over to the other side, you come face-to-face with one of the organizers. “Congratulations. Usually he toys with childer until you’re all a little older, but you’ve really riled up the crowd this time.”

“Is that bad?”

“Let’s just put it this way, El Diablo Verde has a reputation to uphold. Keep mouthing off like that and you’ll find out why he’s unbeatable.”

The lights in the makeshift arena snuff out. A spotlight shines on the far side of the room and a song—the theme song for *Zorro*?—begins to play.

“And in *this* corner, your host—the Queen of the Gangrel, Luna Santi—is pleased to present... that masked *luchador*, the terror of Tijuana... the scourge of the Southwest... *El Diablo Verde!*”

The crowd goes wild. A huge, manly specimen breaks through the door and emerges into the ring. El Diablo Verde’s arms

are the size of tree trunks. His enormous head is covered with a colorful mask, the tell-tale mark of a Mexican *luchador*.

El Diablo Verde leaps over to his corner and faces the crowd, egging them on. Your jaw drops. He's the size of a small *car*. Santi expects you to fight that guy? The announcer steps aside to make way for a referee. The ref, who looks like something out of a slasher movie, grabs a whistle and calls you both to the center of the ring.

You shift uncomfortably and ask the ref if there are any rules.

“There's only one rule here, puppy: survive.”

Shit. You haven't even seen a wrestling match let alone been in one. And what's this guy all about anyway? He obviously has no problem hitting girls. You drop back, raise your fists and wait for the signal.

Fight.

You're face-to-face with a deadly Mexican luchador. To give El Diablo Verde a left hook, turn to section 35.

To climb up on the ropes, turn to section 38.

33.

You stop and raise your hands, in the universal gesture of “Please, please, don’t shoot me.” You’re not sure, but it’s possible that you may have said those exact words as well. There’s no shame in it; you’re not used to people pointing guns at you.

To your surprise, the men appear to accept your surrender. No bullets fly, but as Svara comes up alongside of you, you can see that he’s wielding the wooden weapon he was carrying earlier.

You only have time to blurt out a single sentence—“The Reverend brought me here”—before he plunges the sharpened stake through your ribcage and into your heart.

You freeze, from the shock of his attack, and from the pain. You can’t move, but it hurts, more than anything you can ever imagine experiencing. Broken bones don’t hurt this much. Childbirth can’t hurt this much. Dying can’t. Nothing could.

You slump to the floor, immobilized by Svara’s attack. Mikael breaks your fall,

cushioning you from the worst of the drop, but it doesn't change the fact that you've still got a foot-and-a-half of wood sticking out from between your ribs.

Your eyes are open, but you can't move a muscle. You only see what's happening directly in front of you, which at the moment consists of a fairly small expanse of office ceiling and the two men arguing in the periphery of your vision.

"Here with the Reverend! The old man's going to kill you for staking a guest!" Mikael seems eager to pin the attack solely on his companion, but Svava's having none of it.

"Hey, I didn't know! Could have been an intruder. A Sabbat spy. An infiltrator. Almost anything. I was just doing my job." Svava begins to pace, nervously, his path taking him in and out of your limited field of vision.

"I'm calling the Reverend," Mikael says, and you hear the muted sound of a cell phone being flicked open and the musical tones of numbers being dialed.

Svava curses under his breath. "Just doing my job, dammit. Don't get paid enough for this."

After a moment, Mikael relays a brief summary of what happened to the person on the other end of the phone. Despite your pain, you note that he's carefully presenting the facts in such a way that he and Svava are the undeniable heroes of the situation. He waits, while the person he called issues a series of gruff commands, and then responds in an obviously cowed tone.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir. I understand, sir." He closes the cell phone, and Svava immediately begins grilling him about the conversation.

"What did he say? Is he pissed? Jeez, he's going to have my ass for this." Svava continues pacing.

Mikael's tone is dour, and there's fear in his voice. You're just not sure who he's fearful for. "He's coming up."

The two men wait in silence, and a few moments later, the elevator chimes and then slides open. Footsteps fall, solemn, succinct footsteps making their way from the elevator alcove down the hallway towards you.

Svara starts to explain, but then grunts and stops rambling. From the sound of flesh on flesh, you suspect it was a judicious application of Mikael's elbow to Svara's ribs that silenced him.

The newcomer's footsteps come closer, until a shadow falls across your field of vision. Reverend Isaac Murik leans over you, moving carefully around your fallen body until your gaze and his are on a comfortable level.

"I wondered where you'd gotten to, my childe," he begins, as if he had found you returning from a trip to the restroom, not lying staked and immobile in an office hallway.

"You slipped away before I was able to speak with you after your embrace. I regret I was called away, but I am a man of extensive responsibilities." He checks his watch, and frowns. "Even now, I fear my time is short. Allow me to present my situation, albeit briefly."

You listen. You don't have much choice.

"God has brought you here for a reason," the Reverend intones, as if beginning a sermon. "Just as I have duties, so do you. Your

choice is simply whether you will take up the tasks at hand, or whether you will turn your back upon them. The choice must be yours.”

He reaches down and grips the stake, frowning at the wound it is protruding from. “I regret to say, this is likely going to hurt quite a bit.”

It does.

But after he’s pulled the stake out, you can move once more. The pain begins to recede, and as you concentrate on how much you want the damage to be healed and the wound to stop hurting, the pain slowly begins to fade.

He reaches down to help you up, handing the bloodied stake back to Svava without looking at the guardsman.

“So, I’m afraid I must ask for your answer, my childe. Will you take up the duties you were created to fulfill?”

To agree to take up your duties, turn to section 12.

To refuse the priest and try to ask more questions about your situation, turn to section 15.

34.

The idea of making Nathaniel pay for what he's done to you overwhelms any concern you might have about the intentions of your new-found friends. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

For the first time since you left that party tonight, you smile in reply, fangs showing as theirs did earlier.

“It sounds like a great idea.” Just thinking about what you want to do to your sire sends a rush of endorphins through your body. Images of torture, burning and cutting flood through your mind as you think about ripping out his fangs, all of his teeth, about gouging out his eyes—making him as vulnerable, even more so than what he did to you.

He'll beg for mercy, ask your forgiveness, grovel at your feet and only *then* will you kill him.

Lexie steps forward, lightly resting her hand on your arm in a gesture of welcome, which serves to pull your attention back from your reverie.

She exhales, “I knew just by watching you that we’d be friends. You’re going to be just fine.”

Randall looks past you towards Jody, the Asian, who nods once.

You are stunned by a heavy blow on the back of your head. Your last thought is “How could I be so stupid?” You fall into darkness as your eyes shut.

Turn to section 37.

35.

You swing your fist with all your might and manage to cuff El Diablo Verde square in the jaw. Surprised, you take a step back and kick him hard in the shin.

El Diablo Verde folds his arms across his broad chest.

A hush falls over the crowd. You advance towards the *luchador*, your fists moving faster and faster in a flurry of punches. In between jabs you notice something weird—he's not even paying attention. He's scanning the crowd: searching for Luna Santi, perhaps?

Without a second's warning, El Diablo Verde focuses all his attention on you. You continue to pommel him, but nothing you do has any effect on his massive frame. He steps toward you, dropping some line about how you're a poor little *chica*.

You tell him to fuck off.

The words hit him harder than your fists ever could. His thick arms wrap around you, squeezing your chest until you feel your ribs

crack. Panicked, you suck air into your lungs until you remember you don't breathe.

"The Calamar Gigante Clutch everybody..." the announcer howls. His statement echoes over the silent crowd. Like you, they're waiting to see what happens next.

El Diablo Verde releases your crumpled body to the mat. He then climbs up onto the ropes and straightens his immense build, forming a weapon—aimed at you.

"Oh God," you whimper. Is there any man, Beast or vampire that can help you now? You want to cover your eyes, but you don't. Your Beast tells you to take it like a Gangrel, and that's exactly what you're going to do.

The crowd chants El Diablo's name. The announcer screams, counting down the seconds. "*Five... four... three...*"

Just when you think you're safe, El Diablo Verde leaps from the ropes, spins in mid-air and slams your body to the ground, crushing your spine. Before you have a chance to move, he lifts your flattened form high above his head and crumples it into a little ball.

As the light in your eyes begins to fade, you imagine your sire standing over you, chastising you for being so weak.

The last figure you detect before you drift off to a deep, restless sleep is the face--the terrifying, masked face--of El Diablo Verde.

May he haunt your dreams forever.

THE END

36.

It worked once, and so you try to replicate your earlier performance. Screwing your eyes tightly shut, you think of rain and accountants, of thin, wafty banks of fog and any other thing that might be likely to ignored or overlooked.

“Stop or I’ll shoot!” There’s not a second between the time that Mikael barks his command and the time the first bullet explodes from his gun. The round whizzes past your ear, close enough for you to hear the pocket of air rush back in its wake.

You drop to the floor, huddling there, still thinking your invisible thoughts.

Please work. Please work. Please work.

It doesn’t work.

Mikael grabs you and holds you down with a grip like steel. You struggle, but to no avail, as Svara approaches with his wooden weapon in hand.

You squeeze your eyes shut, frantically trying to disappear again.

But, apparently your trick only works once, or you're just not very good at it yet. You don't know the whys and wherefores, but it's obvious that the Reverend's security force have had no trouble seeing you this time.

With one of the goons on each side of you, they haul you down the hallway so quickly that your feet barely touch the floor.

They bind your wrists and ankles, hogtying them behind you until you're trussed up like a Sunday chicken. Some sort of sweaty rag is stuffed in your mouth, deeply enough that you're thankful you no longer need to breathe.

You're flung into a small room, no bigger than a closet, and left there. From the other side of the locked door, you can hear Mikael and Svava arguing about what to do with you.

"The Reverend is going to be pissed off that we let someone through security," Svava posits. "It could be our heads on the line here, and I don't think we're going to like the boss's retirement package."

"We've got to get rid of the problem before the Reverend finds out." You don't like the

finality in Mikael's voice, and you like it even less when Svava grunts agreement and the two men make their way back to your makeshift prison cell.

They don't bother to untie you. Mikael picks you up by your bindings as if you weighed nothing, carting you through a series of hallways. Svava walks ahead of you, and pauses in front of one of the rooms you'd tried to escape into. He slides an electric key-card through the reader and opens the door.

Both men move through the room within and out onto the metal balcony without pausing.

The ties holding you are cut, allowing you to stand upright, but before you can get your balance, Mikael grabs you by the ankle and turns you upside down. Your world spins, and you buck and arch like a fish on a line, trying to grab hold of him (or anything else). His reach is just too broad, however, and you can do nothing but struggle in vain as he dangles you out over the balcony.

You struggle to beg for your life through the balled up gag of cloth. You want to scream

and cry and plead for them to rethink their plan. To check with the Reverend. To at least find out who you are.

What comes out is unintelligible around your gag. But it doesn't stop you from trying.

Mikael swings you like a human pendulum, and you see the safety of the balcony arc towards you and then away. Like a child pumping a swing, your momentum moves you faster and harder with each repetition. Then, suddenly, he lets go. In an inhumanly cruel twist of irony, your gag flies out of your mouth, leaving you free to scream, now that it's too late.

Turn to section 39.

37.

You hear the sound of distant chanting, one voice echoed by many others in a call-and-response as you start to regain consciousness. You open your eyes to darkness. There is a soft but heavy weight covering your body, and you inhale the smell of freshly overturned earth. Dirt slides into your open mouth.

You have been buried alive!

With strength born of panic, or perhaps the power you have gained from becoming a vampire, you start to claw your way through the dirt. For a moment you feel disoriented. What if you are digging in the wrong direction, going deeper?

No. You pause, listening for the chanting voices, feeling the pull of gravity and you start to struggle toward the surface.

Suddenly, there is light and air as you pull yourself inch by inch out of this improvised grave. You are not alone. There is a large group of people—some fifteen to twenty bodies—in a loose circle around a pit about ten feet in diameter.

Nearer to you, also escaping from the earth are four other vampires. In fact, everyone present is a vampire.

There are lit torches spaced at uneven points and a large bonfire some distance past that, to the east. Its very proximity makes you oddly uncomfortable. You see two bodies, hanging upside down from tree limbs, blood dripping from their limp forms into ornate punchbowls placed directly on the ground below them.

Instead of being appalled, you feel curious and just a little hungry again.

The chanting stops as in one voice, the assembled circle of Kindred watching turn to face the woman you know as Lexie. She calls out, "Praise Caine!"

"Praise Caine!" the vampires answer as one before lifting their voices in a cacophony of joyous sounds.

From his place in the circle, Randall tosses a leather jacket at your feet. "Welcome to the Sabbat."

THE END

38.

You climb up on the ropes, pretending you're going to do one of those flying leap move-thingies you've seen once on television, but all you really want to do is stay out of the *luchador's* way.

This is the one time you and your Beast agree on something.

El Diablo Verde senses your ruse but he, too, pretends to give the crowd a show. Climbing up on the opposite side of the ring, he nods his head slightly, giving you the signal to jump.

You leap high into the air the same time he does, but you both manage to just miss each other. He almost rips your arm out of the socket, which doesn't hurt as much as you think it should. Your body is strangely resilient to the bumps and bruises he's giving you.

The crowd chatters excitedly. You continue to dance with the *luchador* until you hear the final countdown. "Three... two... one..."

"The Pomeranian has survived. Welcome to Clan Gangrel!"

While you're not so sure how you managed to last for thirty seconds in a ring with a vampire the size of Texas, you're happy you did. You walk over to El Diablo Verde and thank him, just to make sure he has no hard feelings. He simply places his thick hands on his hips and gives you a wink. You know damn well if it was a real match your body would be in pieces right now.

Thankful you're still alive, er... undead, you wander over to the corner and exit the ring, hoping you never see the likes of El Diablo Verde—or Karsh for that matter—ever again.

Three vampires are there to greet you. One introduces herself as Luna Santi, the other says his name is Thalus Teratov, and the last declares he's referred to as Sapphire GoldenClaw.

Sapphire *GoldenClaw*?

You're not exactly sure what you're supposed to do in front of the Gangrel primogen, but you try to be as charming as possible. Luna Santi is a study in amber; her caramel-colored skin and brown eyes are lovely. Although she could pass for human in

a dark bar, she'd have a rough time covering up her facial hair. "Ms. Santi? Thank you for bringing me here."

"Yes." Luna glances over her shoulder. If you didn't know any better, you'd say she was acting skittish. "Well, I congratulate you on surviving my little test, anyway. Did Karsh bring you here?"

You nod, trying not to betray your emotions. Luna laughs. "Yeah, I bet you got one hell of a lecture. Luckily for you, I figured out a much easier way to help you transition into our world."

"Oh?" You choose your words carefully. "Another trial?"

"Of a sort. You see, one of these vampires has called in a favor I owe. The other Kindred is your sire."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"You get to choose who you'll leave here with. Your sire will immediately take you to meet Prince Morganti, an honor typically not handed down right after your Embrace."

The other has guaranteed his intentions. For Kindred, that means you won't wind up in torpor or set out in the sun."

Your gut instinct tells you this deal smells rotten, but you're not about to argue with the clan primogen. "Before I choose, I'd like to hear more from these two."

"Of course, of course," Luna reassures you. "But choose wisely, for among our kind, we need to be very picky about the company we keep. Le Roi taught me that."

Talus is the first to step forward. The gaunt man is a study in blurry lines, his black suit looks like it's made out of gauze. "I'm pleased to finally meet you. I'm sorry you had to go through this nasty business, but it was necessary. Luna's orders, of course."

"So, you're claiming to be my sire?" You try to remember all the details, but you've been through a lot tonight, more than you have in months. "Can you tell me how it happened?"

"But of course," he says, oozing confidence. Talus describes everything that had happened to you with perfect clarity--right down to the part about your first test.

“You mean those two pits? Gee, that was something.”

Talus smirks. “Aren’t you the feisty one? I was right to ask the Prince to Embrace you.”

“Permission?” The more you hear about what you’re supposed to do and what you’re not, the less interested you become in joining the Camarilla, the Sabbat or any other group for that matter.

“What happens if I decide to go with you? Where will you take me?” You ask Talus carefully, hoping you don’t sound too antagonistic. If this creepy guy really was your sire, then he’d probably tell you to do whatever was in his best interest. Sounds like something a vampire would do, doesn’t it?

“We will go where you rightfully belong, by my side. Of course, you will join my organization, which is why your choice tonight is so important. If you don’t come with me, I cannot afford you any protections or boons that come with our arrangement.”

“What kind of favors?” Bennies could be good, right?

“The usual. Teaching you how to use your Disciplines, maybe add a couple of special

powers along the way..." Talus's voice trails off into a whisper, as if he's distracted by something only he can see.

You take that as your cue to talk to the other Kindred. "And you? Sapphire?"

Sapphire GoldenClaw is a perfect representation of what you imagine your Beast looks like. The vampire is naked from the waist up and is covered in fur. His broad, brown face seems to have taken on the traits of a bear. His hands look more like round paws than anything else.

"I guess I don't know what to say," Sapphire began. He looked anxious, like he has something to hide, perhaps? "I followed the rules, of course. I asked permission to Embrace you from the Prince and Santi. Remember how I got you to the park? Things didn't go the way I wanted them to, but you're here now. That's what counts."

Unlike Talus, Sapphire doesn't remember what happened to you after you were Embraced, which makes you wonder what else he doesn't know.

"You know, the whole reason I picked you was because you have a special way with animals. I told Santi that's why you'd make

the perfect Gangrel, because you'd be able appreciate them in a way humans can't."

"Time's up," Luna butts in. "Talus, any final words?"

Talus slinks over to you and takes your cool hands in his. "I know this is hard for you, childe, but I am your sire. If you acknowledge this truth, you will become part of a larger family of Kindred. Choose me and I will take you to meet your sister Cassandra and your brother Dmitri."

Luna interrupts him. "Don't forget to tell her she'll have to join the Sabbat, first."

Talus leans over and whispers something in Luna's ear. Her eyes widen with fear. You're not sure what's going on between the two of them, but you're not convinced it has anything to do with you. Frustrated, you look to your Beast for answers, but it's on the defensive. Who will you choose?

To follow Talus Teratov's instructions and join the Sabbat, turn to section 41.

To leave with Sapphire GoldenClaw, turn to section 44.

39.

You're flying out into the open air between one building and the next.

Your speed is amazing. The night wind whips past you, pulling at your clothing, tugging at your hair. You're weightless, and you wonder for a moment if this is what it feels like to fly.

The next building's rooftop looms, and you're sailing towards it. You stretch your arms out, reaching for the relative safety it offers.

Then gravity grabs a hold of you, and you begin to fall.

Time slows. You can see every detail of the windows as you plummet past each floor. Most of the rooms are empty, but from others televisions flicker, holding the inhabitants attentions mercifully away from you.

From one window, a young woman with white hair and an angel's face blows you a kiss as you pass. You wish you had the presence of mind to return the gesture.

The street rushes up at you. It's an empty street, but the parked cars grow larger by the second, as you churn your limbs in a desperate and hopeless effort to slow your fall. One shoe comes off, and seems to defy gravity as it dangles in the air beside you for what seems like a lifetime.

You don't die right away, when you hit the pavement. You feel the impact, one leg shattering as it hits first, then the other knee and both arms. Your head hits last, but no less hard. You can hear the shattering of your skull from the inside as the speed and velocity of your fall flatten it against the cool, rough concrete.

You can't move, can't get up. Your eyes are open, although you can't see more than a miniscule slice of the sidewalk directly in front of your ruined face. It's late. There's no one on the sidewalk. No one driving past. No one to see you. No one to help you.

It hurts. But you're not dead.

Not really dead.

Then footsteps draw near.

“Tsk-tsk.” Even her disapproving noises carry a slight air of the British Isles with them.

You can't look up at her. Can't respond.

A pair of brown alligator shoes step into your field of vision, and Mrs. Kettlesworth kneels down beside you.

You're helpless.

She pulls out the soiled hankie, the one she used before to remove the stain from her suit. She uses it to roll you over, so that your blood and brains and bile—whatever fluids those are that you feel leaking out of you—don't sully her fingertips.

You can see her face now. There's no compassion there, no mercy. Only distain and disapproval.

From an alligator bag that perfectly matches her sensible footwear, she brings out a piece of pine dowel. It's been lacquered and polished, and sharpened to a sharp, gleaming point. The pointed end is shadowy, as if it had been steeped in some dark liquid, soaked for long enough that the color has leached into the wood grain itself.

She sighs. “I hate cleaning up the Reverend’s messes.”

And with an expression of put-upon martyrdom, she stabs the stake deeply into your chest.

The shaft pierces your heart. Mrs. Kettlesworth reaches down and closes your eyelids, denying you even the power of sight.

It hurts. But you’re still not dead.

Not really.

You don’t die there on the street. And you don’t die as she calls for the Reverend’s men to come fetch you.

You don’t die when they take you down to the basement, or when they leave you alone with nothing but the rats scuttling over your coffin for company.

You don’t die at all.

But you want to.

THE END

40.

The idea of making Nathaniel pay appeals to you and for a moment you want to accept Randall's offer.

For the first time since all this insanity started, you smile in reply, fangs showing as theirs did earlier.

"I appreciate the offer, but this isn't me," you gesture to the dead woman's body. "Not the real me. I killed her, yes. But I don't want to do that every night. To *have* to do that every night."

Out of habit, you run both hands through your hair, heedless of the blood still on your fingers. "I think I need to get out of town. You said they hunt you until you leave or die. Can you... Will you help me?"

Lexie steps forward, lightly resting her hand on your arm in a gesture of reassurance. She looks...sad as she exhales, "We can help. Nathaniel will never find you. The Camarilla will never find you."

You are stunned by a heavy blow on the back of your head. Jody drops the plank of wood and grabs your shoulders, while the other two attack you from the front.

Randall hisses in your ear, “One thing your sire would have taught you about, if given the time. Diablerie. In the Sabbat, we strengthen our blood by draining the souls of other vampires. Weak vampires. Those unworthy of the dark gift.”

You feel the sharp bite of three sets of fangs, in your arm, your back, and your neck. That last, Randall’s bite, overlays the marks you endured earlier this evening. The same sensation of being drained is repeated, at a greatly accelerated rate, painfully.

And your last thought is “How could I be so stupid?”

THE END

41.

You enter into a stunted hedge maze that barely reaches your knees. Over the tops of the brush, you see a small ring of candles laid out in the shape of a pentagram. Upon entering the center, you notice the waxy candles are tipped with black flames. You think this is supposed to be some sort of fancy ritual, so you kneel down in the center of the circle and state your intention.

“I am here to join the Sabbat.”

A woman emerges from the far side of the hedge. “I, Cassandra Veil, congratulate you.” She slinks up to you and laces her fingers through yours. “You’re now part of the Sabbat. Right, Dmitri?”

The other vampire, whose misshapen body looks like something Picasso would have painted, grunts his approval. “Party now?”

“That’s it?” You’re beginning to feel you made a mistake. So far, becoming a Kindred was nothing like you thought it was going to be. You’re definitely not impressed—especially with these two. “I say I’m a member of the Sabbat and now you’re my fairy godmother?”

Cassandra opens her mouth to respond, but Dmitri cuts in front of her. “Look out,” he yells. “Owls!”

From out of nowhere, a parliament of owls spins around you. Large wings and sharp claws flood the space in between you and Cassandra. You shield your eyes from their beaks, but to your surprise, they’re not attacking you—they’re targeting *them*. Are you supposed to help or run away?

“Whoooooooo... would... dooooo...” You imagine words forming in the air all around you, coming from the *owls*. “Dooooom. Dooooom the moooooon.”

Is this some sort of vampire special power? You hope so. Well, whatever the words mean, they’re good enough for you. You leave Cassandra and Dmitri behind. After you bolt out of the maze, you head toward a glowing, red light. Your feet fly through the damp grass. Your mind is racing. Screw the Sabbat. You have nothing to gain by joining them. No secrets, no fancy powers. Stick around, and you’re sure they won’t let you live through the night. Nothing is worth that.

You reach a small clearing and do a double-take. About a dozen scarlet-upholstered chairs are arranged around a large ruby throne; the entire arrangement is illuminated by several glowing, red orbs hung to the trees. At first you think they're kind of pretty until you move up a little closer. That's when you realize the decorations are all made out of *flesh*. The chairs? Muscle and sinew, tissue and membrane have been woven together to create furniture. The lamps? Stomachs filled with some sort of gas.

"Oh, God." You say the words and feel embarrassed. Does a vampire even pray anymore? "What the fuck. Who would do this?"

"Good," you hear a sinister voice say. "Our new recruit has arrived."

A stringy, hard rope winds around your ankles, locking them together. The more you move, the harder it squeezes. "Yeah, I'm one of the Sabbat now." Maybe if you keep the strangers talking, you can buy yourself some time.

“Are you now?” A chorus of voices cackle. “Luna Santi has done well. It’s amazing what a little fear will do to our fellow vampires. First, Ariel and now her. Perhaps we’ll begin with your heart. Such an interesting muscle, wouldn’t you say?”

Luna Santi is behind this? The Gangrel Primogen? “Show yourself.” You may be in trouble, but you’re not going down without a fight. You feel another tendril snake up your back and you try to ignore it—even though your Beast can’t. That thing inside you recoils in fear, telling you something terrible is about to happen.

To retain control over your Beast, you close your eyes and center yourself. If you focus, you might be able to escape. “The Hound daresss to speak to ussssssss.” When you open your eyes, you see the chairs are flesh and their mouths are *talking*. To you.

“Oh, shit.” Panicked, you try to wrench yourself free, but wind up face first on the ground. You inch further and further away from the chair-mouth-things, but are held back by the weird snake circling your forehead.

“Laika will be pleasssssed,” one of the chairs tells you. “You’re so fresssssh.”

“At least I don’t look like I’m from a fucking rummage sale.”

Cassandra slinks over and helps you to your feet. “That’s no way to treat your new Master, little Hound. I know my place. Now you must learn yours.”

“You lied to me. I’m not a member of the Sabbat, am I?”

Laughing, she slakes her fingers up and down your body, then slits her wrist and raises it to your mouth. You refuse to drink, but your Beast has already surrendered to her blood. Once you’ve had a fair sample, she dematerializes into shadow and speaks to you from the blackness.

“What do you think of me now, little Hound?”

Your head feels foggy, drugged. You want to run and fight, but something has taken hold of you. It’s too strong to resist. “I guess you’re all right.”

Cassandra morphs back into her vampiric shape and nods. “All yours.”

“Time to rejoin your Master.”

You open your mouth to reply, but as soon as you do, the pink vine wraps itself around your mouth. At one end of it is a large, bloodshot eyeball. “I, Talus, declare your flesh to be the property of the Sabbat.”

His eye forces its way all the way down to your stomach, winding through your intestines. You gag. Each involuntary swallow you take forces the eye-stalk deeper into your bowels. Your Beast howls in terror and rails against it, but it’s no match for Talus. You sense your Beast whimper and fade into the background, taking what little is left of your sanity along with it.

“Nope, nothing here.” The eye-stalk contracts and spins its way out of your system a lot faster than it went in. As soon as you are released, you sink to your knees.

“Please, just... please kill me. I want to die. *Please.*”

Cassandra, Dmitri, the chairs and several other vampires surround you with shadow. “I’m sorry, my Love, but your nightmare is just beginning.”

Faced with the inevitable, you howl at the moon in anger. Not for what you have already lost, but for the terrors you can no longer wreak on the Gangrel who betrayed you: Luna Santi.

THE END

42.

You refuse to be daunted by the challenges you've faced before, or your earlier failure to discover the truth contained here in the Repository. Somewhere, here amongst the clutter, lies the secret to Golconda. Somewhere, hidden in the disorder, the pieces lie fallow, just waiting for you to put them together in the right combination.

As you move between the aisles, you find traces of those who have come before you, remnants of previous presences here in the Repository. They make no sense whatsoever to you.

Notes scribbled on the back of envelopes document one person's studies, while those scrawled on a series of used cocktail napkins directly contradict the work of the first. You discover instructions written in the margins of newspapers and between the lines on pages of sheet music, clawed into stone tablets and painted in colored ink on the back of woven tapestries.

There is truth here. You're certain of it. Each piece is like a personal message from another member of your clan, a secret left for you to decode.

But no matter how intently you study these pieces, no matter how many nights you spend dedicated to your work, the meaning of the archived bits eludes you.

Some nights you sit without moving from dusk 'til dawn, studying a single artifact. Others, you prowl through the aisles of the Repository like some caged beast, unable to focus, until the morning sun rises outside and sends you back to your restless sleep.

Time passes, weeks becoming months, months becoming years.

And still the Truth eludes you.

To continue your studies, turn to section 18.

To set out on your own, turning your back on your duties, turn to section 21.

43.

This is your breaking point. It's all too much. Vampires are real. You're a vampire. Everything you know has changed in the space of a few hours.

Out of habit, you run the fingers of both hands through your hair, digging along your scalp, trying to think. This has to be a bad dream. Please let it be a bad dream.

Their leader interrupts your musings, "Who is your sire?"

You glance in his direction, confused by the question. "Uhh, what?"

"The one who changed you, gave you the Embrace," he elaborates. "Made you one of us."

"He said his name was Nathaniel Le Roi," you reply, not bothering to hide the bitterness in your voice.

The redhead steps up behind the speaker, keeping her eyes on you as she murmurs to him. "Randall, if that's true..."

He cuts her off with a sharp glance, before returning his focus to you.

“Describe him to me.”

You get the sense he is accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed without question. On edge, the descriptive details of Nathaniel’s appearance spill from your lips to the growing approval of your audience.

Randall nods when you are finished. “It seems you *are* the childe then of the Toreador Primogen. How lucky.” he smirks, folding his arms across his chest.

Something in his stance or expression sets you off like a spark to tinder. “Lucky! I don’t feel the least bit lucky!”

You point to the still-breathing woman who has pushed herself to an upright, sitting position against the building wall, one blood-stained hand pressed against her neck, eyelids half-closed as she fights to retain consciousness. “*She* doesn’t feel lucky!”

Behind you, the Asian man glides over to the woman’s side and casually snaps her neck, before you can react. “Now she doesn’t feel anything. Better?”

“Jody, you could have waited.” The woman *tsks*, with a pout on her face. “I was hungry.”

Your mouth hangs open you take a few steps away from the dead body and her killer. This unfortunately brings you closer to the other two vampires. Taking advantage of your distracted state, they act.

First here is a sharp pain in your chest, starting at your back. When you look down, the point of a blood-covered wooden stake is jutting out from the space your heart should be. Your muscles lock up and you become paralyzed.

You can feel hands supporting you from behind. The world tilts and spins, until you are staring straight up at the night sky, stars mostly obscured by the glow of electric lights. The tall buildings telescope on either side of your peripheral vision.

Then, bending over so her ratty hair drapes like a frame around her face, the woman speaks, while lightly caressing your cheek. “You’ll be given a chance to prove your worthiness to the Sword of Caine after we kill your sire. All you have to do is lie there.” She laughs, and for the first time you see the depths of madness in her eyes. “We’re doing you a favor. Really.”

Turn to section 45.

44.

“Wonderful! Let’s get going.” The whiskers on your sire’s nose twitch with anticipation. “Thank you, Luna. Theratov, always a pleasure.”

He hastily excuses himself from Santi’s presence and rushes you out of the ring. Even though your sire looks like a big ole grizzly bear, you’re pretty sure he’s not someone you want to cuddle with.

“Hey, where are we—”

Sapphire scolds you. “Keep your voice down. You don’t want to get us killed, do you?”

Killed? What did you get yourself into, anyway? You’re not sure if you’re happy he Embraced you or if you should be pissed at him. And what’s with that stupid name, anyway? “So, I have to ask. Your name isn’t really Sapphire GoldenClaw... is it?”

“Not here, okay?” Sapphire growls menacingly. “We have an important meeting to attend to. The kind I can’t afford to refuse.”

For the moment, you keep your mouth shut and follow him back through the butcher shop and into the sewers. After a few twists and turns, you come to an intricately carved door supported by two columns. Standing on either side of the elegant doorway are two hooded figures cloaked in velvet.

Sapphire leans forward and whispers to one of them. The figure raises his hand and the door dissolves, revealing a dimly-lit passageway. You tread carefully, hoping you're not getting suckered into a trap.

"Okay, we have a few minutes." Sapphire's shoulders droop. "Sorry to involve you in this mess, but I am bound by the Prince's orders. Luna Santi has been a very bad girl."

"I'm guessing it's not a good idea to piss off the Prince."

"Ah, to be young and naïve again." Your sire stops about halfway down the hall on a tiled landing. Wandering over to the wall, he starts pressing various bricks and statues sticking out of it. "You were right. My name isn't Sapphire GoldenClaw, by the way. It's Urso."

“Let me guess, the whole GoldenClaw bit was a disguise?”

One of the statues slides back into the wall, allowing a broad door to swing open. Karsh is standing there, waiting for you.

“I see you’ve brought your childe,” he says, eyeing you suspiciously. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

Urso holds his ground. “I know you don’t like me much, warlord. You think I don’t play by the rules, but you’re wrong. I brought my childe here because she has a right to know what’s going on.”

Karsh sticks his face into Urso’s. It is full of threats. “You disobey *two* Princes by bringing her here.”

You feel your Beast stirring. Either you do something now, or both you and your sire are going to wind up slaughtered. “Mister Karsh, I asked him to tell me what was going on. Urso felt it wasn’t safe to have our discussion out in the open.” You do the best imitation of doe eyes you can possibly muster. “I can leave if you want me to.”

Your sire doesn't seem affected by your words, probably because he's too busy struggling with his Beast, but Karsh definitely is. "Urso, you may tell her only what pertains to her."

You pull the back of Urso's pants away from Karsh. "Thank you, Karsh. We'll be going now."

Karsh wanders deeper into the new passageway, closing the door behind him.

"If he had his way, I'd be dead by now." Urso moans, kicking the stone wall. "He doesn't even care how rare I am. Just sticks to his damn orders."

"Yeah," you say, fingering your forehead. "I kind of got that impression. So what's the deal?"

"Luna Santi has been working with a clan known as the Tzmisc. She's been feeding them opportunities to grab new Gangrel. You just happened to be one of them."

Although Urso is telling you what's going on, you're not sure you understand the seriousness of the situation. "I don't get it."

“Santi is trying to overthrow the Prince. That particular plot happens a lot among our kind. There’s always one vampire who wants power over another but in this case, new vampires and kine are getting caught in the crossfire. Her war with Morganti is a huge threat to the Masquerade.”

“And the Tzmiscé? I’m guessing Talus was one of them.”

“That clan is not part of the Camarilla. They’re mostly Sabbat, which by our standards is about the meanest, sickest, most terrifying group of vampires known to man.”

“Why would Santi side with them? For support?”

Urso’s shoulders droop. “Yes and no. Talus is powerful, but until tonight I had no idea how brave he was. He knew I was your sire and yet he asked you to join the Sabbat right in front of me. Santi must have promised him part of the city in exchange for his help.”

“How bad can the Sabbat be, Urso?”

“Rumor has it they have power over bones and flesh.” Urso shook his head, his face a contorted mess of emotions. “They blend and twist them in their hands like clay—while you’re still alive, of course. With the Tzmiscé, mortals and Kindred alike are tools for their nefarious ends.”

The thought of being turned into pottery causes your Beast to howl. “So what now? Karsh didn’t seem too keen on me being here. From what you’re telling me, you need to figure out how to end this threat.”

Urso takes a step back and gives you the once-over. “I was right to choose you, little one. There’s not much I can do for you now, not with Karsh and the other Gangrel in town, but I can give you a choice.”

“Lay it on me.”

“To prove your worth, jump back into the ring with El Diablo Verde. If you win—for real this time—it would be a tribute to me and to Clan Gangrel. The only other option would be to join the Sabbat and wait for me to rescue you.”

You may be new to the Kindred, but you weren't born yesterday. "You want to use me as bait."

Urso places his fat paws on your shoulders. "I can't guarantee that I'd get to you in time, but I'll definitely try. 'Course, it depends upon how long this meeting takes. A lot of other Gangrel and angry Kindred have appeared to deal with this matter. Litrac, Inyanga, Beckett, Karsh and Theo Bell just to name a few."

"I guess it's up to me, then. Either earn my chops in the ring or show my support for the clan."

"That about covers it, yeah." Urso hands you a crudely drawn piece of paper. "If you want to track Talus down, you'll have to play his game and join the Sabbat. If they let you in, you can report from the inside."

"Has anyone else signed up for this? I mean, there's got to be other spies—"

"Sure, kid. Ariel tried earlier tonight, but she's Malkavian. Whatever the Sabbat did to her, she's more messed up than before. Obsessed with mirrors, poor thing. You remember that suit who watched you wrestle?"

Your mind was so focused on El Diablo Verde, you can't remember who was sitting in the audience. "I was a little busy..."

"Well, that was Nathaniel Le Roi. He's this Toreador guy. Kind of a stiff, really. Anyway, I told him his childe was in danger and he didn't believe me. Nathaniel thinks the Prince is going to give him protection just 'cause he's got some dirt on him."

"Great, so I guess it's all up to me."

Your mind is reeling. So far you've managed to survive long enough to accomplish your goal. Now that you've met your Sire, you're faced with a terrible decision that will impact your immediate future. Truth be told, you're not sure who's worse—El Diablo Verde or the Sabbat. You start to laugh. Just yesterday you were complaining about the weather. Now? You might be the only one in the entire city who can thwart a coup. Your gut tells you this is not what you have to do, but what you should do. You're no longer a weak and powerless mortal, you're a vampire now, and you better start acting like one.

“All right, Urso. I think I’ve made up my mind. Tell Karsh I’ll see him later.”

Making a quick exit, you dash out of the crypt and wind your way through the tunnels. The twisting paths seem a little more familiar to you now, so when you come to a fork you know exactly where you want to go.

To veer right and face El Diablo Verde in a deadly re-match, turn to section 32.

To join the Sabbat to see what Talus is up to, turn to section 41.

45.

It seems like an hour, maybe two hours have passed. Rats crawl over your still body. Your sense of smell was never so keen as now, when blood and urine, garbage and decay, gasoline and alcohol mix to form a cocktail of aromas you can't ignore.

Then, you sense him coming. No better way to describe it. You hear steps, a purposeful, confident stride.

“Morgan!”

His form appears looming over your unblinking eyes. “Who has done this to you?” Nathaniel radiates concern and anger. “I promise you, my childe, my poor childe, they will pay.”

He starts to kneel down, hand going toward the stake, when Jody, the Asian vampire, appears literally out of nowhere, fangs bared, claws for hands, attacking him. The other two vampires join in.

You can only hear and see snippets of the fight. It is brutal and brief. Bodies fly in the air above you, blood trails make arcs in the air like solid red rainbows, before splashing across your face and the ground.

The three move as one. Nathaniel howls in pain. Then you hear only slurping and silence.

“Jody, grab our little Toreador.” You hear Randall order his companion. You are lifted from the ground, like a sack of flour, tossed over one shoulder.

Your head is lifted up by your hair and find yourself staring at the disembodied head of your sire. “The trophy of our hunt. Tonight we have dealt a major blow to the Camarilla and that is due to you.”

Randall’s eyes are fever-red and his face flushed with color. “Nathaniel’s soul was exquisite. One day, if you are very careful and smart, you too will know what it is to enrich your blood. The taste of another vampire—of your enemy’s life—is like nothing else.”

He releases your hair, so your head flops back down, face pressed against Jody’s jacket. “We will teach you everything you need to know, Morgan.” You feel his hand trace along your spine as the group heads back out into the street, brazen and unafraid of the night. “Welcome to the Sabbat.”

THE END

46.

Nathaniel would not have brought you here, left you with this woman if he didn't trust her. But the thought of food is becoming all consuming. You look toward the exit Nathaniel used, then back at Victoria, trying to think of the most polite way to proceed.

"I'd like to thank you for your hospitality as well, Miss Victoria. Perhaps you would... hrm... favor me with more conversation after dinner?"

She laughs softly, leaning back in her chair. "Excellent manners, even when under duress. Do you know what Hospitality is, young vampire?"

"Hold that thought," she continues abruptly before you can reply. Then Victoria looks beyond you and asks the bouncer, "Steven, will you invite Violet to join us please?"

She gestures to the empty chair across the table. "Please sit. You will be provided for. And while we wait, I will explain."

“Thank you,” you murmur before taking the indicated seat. “This has been a very difficult evening for me.”

“Of course it has,” Victoria replies in a soothing voice. “And if I am correct, you come into our world as a true neonate. You have not been a ghoul. You did not know we exist. This is as it should be. It means in our city the Masquerade has been preserved.”

She taps the mouthpiece of her cigarette holder delicately against her perfectly white teeth. “This is the first and most important rule. We do not let mortals know we exist.” She inhales then continues, “Never forget that. You place everyone at risk should any hint of our existence reach the wrong places. We will kill our own to protect our safety. You will be expected to do that as well if told.”

You inhale reflexively, fascinated by Victoria’s words, by her smallest gestures. Each move is almost a dance, so graceful. Although she is not a type you have ever been attracted to before, you find yourself wondering if this might be what people mean by love at first sight.

Pleased by your attention, Victoria smiles and leans forward again, resting her glove-covered elbows on the surface of the table. You mirror her motions, content to stare into her grey-green eyes for as long as she will let you.

A third party joins your table, sitting at your right hand. A wine glass is placed on a golden charger in between you and the new arrival. You are vaguely aware of this, but everything else seems unimportant, so long as you can view Victoria. Even the gnawing hunger in your stomach abates while your eyes are captured by such beauty.

The spell of fascination breaks only because she laughs again, clearly delighted, before shifting her attention to welcome the new arrival. “Oh there is no doubt you are Toreador, definitely subject to our clan weakness. I am going to enjoy having you around to shake up the status quo, Morgan.”

You straighten up, with a slight shake of your head. It feels like you were under sedation and are waking up again.

Dressed all in shades of purple with a Bettie Page-styled haircut, a girl who must be Violet

murmurs a soft hello. She looks at Victoria, arching her right eyebrow in question. Your hostess smiles and lowers her eyelids once in confirmation.

Violet holds up her left arm over the wine glass and cuts a line across her wrist with her other hand, using a delicate knife with a short, two-inch blade.

Nothing else is as important to you in the whole world at that instant than watching the slow stream of her blood into the glass. You note the scar marks on Violet's wrist, old and new—indicating she has done this before. You can barely restrain yourself from grabbing the glass. Your fingernails dig painfully into the palms of your hands, while you force yourself to wait, to be polite and civilized while in the presence of Victoria.

When the contents of the glass equal a standard pour of red wine, Victoria whispers, "Violet dear..."

The silent woman pulls her wrist away and twists in her chair, presenting her extended arm to the blond goddess. Victoria's tongue laps gently at the wound, while she closes her

eyes for an instant. Then your hostess gestures to the glass. “Be my guest.”

You remember to salute Victoria with a toast of the glass before proceeding to drain it dry. Manners can carry you only so far, but at last the desperate urges are contained and you feel less like a caged animal and more like rational person again.

Just as quietly as she arrived, Violet leaves the table and disappears through the same beaded doorway your sire used. You glance about and realize that the bouncer has not returned. The place is empty, except for the two of you. Nathaniel should have been back by now. That realization makes you vaguely uncomfortable.

“I was going to explain some more to you, if memory serves?” Victoria tilts her head to one side, the smile back on her face though it does not reach her eyes.

To ask Victoria to continue talking, turn to section 49.

To go find Nathaniel, turn to section 50.

47.

Your eyes slip from Victoria's face to rest on the glass she just drained. You can smell the last drops of drying blood that cling to the side.

She exhales a soft understanding sigh. "Hold that thought." Victoria looks beyond you and asks the bouncer, "Steven, will you invite Violet to join us please?"

She gestures to the empty chair across the table. "Please sit. You will be provided for. And while we wait, I will educate you. Some Kindred say it is one of the duties of a Harpy." Victoria's voice gives a subtle emphasis to the word before she continues in a more casual tone, "But I like to think of it as a side-benefit."

"Thank you," you murmur.

Victoria smiles and leans forward, "You must answer one question for me so I can better help you, Morgan. You come into our world as a true neonate, yes? You have not been a ghoul. You did not know we exist?"

You nod, because talking requires too much energy, and all you want to do is reach across the table, to steal the glass from her hand and lick the minute trace of blood that remains.

Victoria continues to speak, filling the passage of time. “The First Tradition is our most important rule. We do not let mortals know we exist.” She puffs on the cigarette, and then continues, “Never forget that. You place everyone at risk should any hint of our existence reach the wrong places. We will kill our own to protect our safety. You will be expected to do that as well, if ordered to.”

You are drawn in, distracted from your hunger by Victoria’s words, by her smallest gestures. Each move is almost a dance, so graceful. You have never seen anything like her. Although she is not a type you have ever been attracted to before, you find yourself wondering if this might be what people mean by love at first sight.

Pleased by your obvious fascination, Victoria smiles and leans forward again, resting her glove-covered elbows on the surface of the table. You mirror her motions, content to stare into her grey-green eyes for as long as she will let you.

A third party joins your table, sitting at your right hand. A wine glass is placed on a golden charger in between you and the new arrival. You are vaguely aware of this, but everything else seems unimportant, so long as you can view Victoria. Even the gnawing hunger in your stomach abates while your eyes are captured by such beauty.

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You straighten up, with a slight shake of your head. It feels like you were under sedation and are waking up.

Dressed all in shades of purple with a Bettie Page-styled haircut, a girl who must be Violet murmurs a soft hello. She looks at Victoria, arching her right eyebrow in question. Your hostess smiles and lowers her eyelids once in confirmation.

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other hand, using a delicate knife with a short, two-inch blade.

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"I was going to explain some more to you, if memory serves?" Victoria tilts her head to one side, the smile back on her face though it does not reach her eyes.

To ask Victoria to continue talking, turn to section 49.

To go find Nathaniel, turn to section 50.

48.

“Nathaniel mentioned debts and favors when he changed me and you have mentioned it now. This is important, isn’t it?”

Victoria smiles in approval. “Yes. You have good instincts. Boons are the currency of our society. While money is nice, given that you live for decades and assuming you are smart enough to do so, you will have basic needs covered, but power comes from whom you know, who you owe and who owes you.”

“Then, if I understand correctly, he’s placing himself in debt to you on my behalf.”

“Yes.” She looks at you thoughtfully, then continues, “This falls under the Fourth Tradition, also called the Accounting. You are a childe. Nathaniel is responsible for everything you do. If you break our laws, he can be made to pay.”

Tilting your head back and running your tongue over your fangs, you take a moment to think, before asking. “So how many of these traditions are there?”

“Six. They are the basis of our law. Being here, in my club, you are in my Domain. That is the second. We must have the area and mortals to sustain us so we do not reveal our existence. Tonight you feed from my herd. In time you will cultivate your own.”

At the mention of feeding, your body stiffens in reaction. Victoria laughs sympathetically. “Violet, dear...” she calls towards the back of the club.

The beaded curtain over the doorway jingles and a petite woman dressed only in shades of purple, with a Bettie Page-styled haircut, appears. She walks to your side and looks at Victoria, arching her right eyebrow in question. Your hostess smiles and lowers her eyelids once in confirmation.

Violet holds out her left arm. You notice the inside wrist is covered with scar-tissue. Using a knife with her right hand, she opens a cut, a new line and offers it up to you.

You glance at your hostess. Victoria murmurs, “Please, be my guest.”

Her permission given, you drink directly from the black-haired girl, enough to take the edge off before you stop of your own accord.

Violet sways slightly on her feet, eyes heavily-lidded and complexion several shades paler. You murmur a thank you as she slowly makes her way towards the back of the club.

“Won’t you sit down?” Victoria points to the empty chair across the table from where she sits.

“May I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

“You said something about being a Toreador and having the clan’s weakness?”

“Ah.” Victoria absent-mindedly twirls a lock of hair hanging over her heart. “You will not learn everything in one night, but you should start somewhere.

“Toreador is a bloodline of vampires dating back through eras of time. We are the lovers of beauty, creators of art and muses that inspire art. We are the most perfect, most lovely of Kindred. We are the arbiters of taste. We influence mortal fashion through our servants and tools. We maintain the structure of society.”

Victoria inhales and continues, “There are other bloodlines in the night. Their representatives are in this city as well—from brutal, vicious Kindred who prefer nothing more than to fight, to the sewer dwellers who would make the Hunchback of Notre Dame look like an Adonis. There are...”

The bouncer, Steven, interrupts as he appears at Victoria’s side, holding out a cell phone. “It’s Prince Morganti.”

Victoria looks surprised, but immediately takes the call. She stands up, and walks away while saying, “Good evening, my Prince.” Once she reaches the far end of the club, Victoria paces back and forth. The conversation is one-sided as she answers only with one word replies.

When she is done, Victoria walks up to your side. She smiles down at you, brushing the tips of her fingers along the line of your jaw. “Nathaniel sends his love.”

“What does that mean?”

“He won’t be coming back tonight and I have agreed to keep you with me.” She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Remember when I mentioned it’s all about debts and favors? Other Kindred have called in their debts and their negotiated payment requires Nathaniel to be out of commission for some time. As his unreleased child, you have no protection. But, I have a haven—a safe place—nearby. You will stay there until he comes for you.”

As Victoria explains, you start to relax. When Steven stakes you, pinning your torso to the seatback, it comes as a complete surprise.

“Nathaniel will be unstaked in about ten years, assuming the Prince doesn’t change his mind. And I promise Morgan that the day he is walking among us again, the first thing I will do is release you to your sire’s care. Until then, you will be perfectly safe.” You can feel Victoria press her lips in a kiss on your forehead. “I promise.”

THE END

49.

“Nathaniel mentioned debts and favors when he changed me and you have mentioned it now. This is important isn’t it?”

“Yes. You have good instincts.” She leans back, taking refuge in the shadows. “Boons are the currency of our society. You will come to see that power among the Kindred derives from whom you know, who you owe and who owes you.”

“If I understand correctly, my sire is placing himself in debt to you on my behalf.”

“Yes.” Victoria exhales a lazy ring of smoke, “Nathaniel will be held responsible for everything you do. If you break our laws, the Prince can penalize him—and likely will. He is unyielding when it comes to the Traditions of the Camarilla.”

“And if I wanted to start acquiring boons myself?”

Victoria’s mouth curls up in a slow smile. “By rights, they would default to your sire until you are released—acknowledged by the

Prince as an independent vampire. That is..." she taps her cigarette holder, allowing the ash to drift to the floor, "if he knows about them."

You ponder her reply while carefully crafting your next question. "What about committing to owe someone in the future? A debt that takes effect when I am 'released'?"

"Did you have something specific in mind, Morgan?"

"I want to learn. I don't want to be reliant entirely on Nathaniel. I want to know the things he won't tell me. I want to live, and knowledge is power." You stare intently into Victoria's eyes. "If you will agree to help me, then I would owe a future boon to you."

One finger glides back and forth over her lower lip as Victoria stares back at you, considering. After a moment she says, "I will require more than that. I like to anticipate when there are shifts in power. I offer this—I will educate you in how to survive and in turn you will keep me apprised of any threats to my position as Harpy from your sire or any others you encounter in our city. Agreed?"

“I don’t know what a Harpy is or does.” you counter. “I would not know what would be a threat to you.”

Her hand comes to rest on the tabletop as the woman frames her reply. “The Harpy is the final authority on who owes whom and what standing an individual has in our society. The best-connected Harpies can ruin their enemies with a well-placed word. Reputations are made and destroyed when a Harpy exercises their influence. To be a harpy is to have power in the Camarilla and I like power.” Victoria tilts her head to one side, her smoky eyes making a study of your face.

“So, if I hear someone plotting against you or slandering you, then I would contact you and simply tell you what I heard?”

She pauses, as if considering your words before nodding in confirmation.

With a slight shrug of your shoulders, you say, “Agreed.”

Victoria calls out, “Stephen, bring me the book.”

The bouncer hands over an aged brown leather journal, several inches thick, with two buckled bands wrapped around its width, holding the book closed. Victoria flips it open and finds a blank page well towards the back. At the top she writes “Morgan, Toreador, Childe of Nathaniel Le Roi.”

When she has included the full details of your verbal agreement, Victoria signs and dates it before turning the book around and offering you her pin.

You read the wording carefully and copy her actions. When, out of curiosity, you finger the edges of the book and flip back several pages, Victoria quickly slams the cover shut on your hand, leaning far across the table, so her face is inches from your own.

You pull back, startled.

“No one will ever see your debts and boons, so long as I am Harpy. Nor will you view that of others trusted to my care.”

It is at this moment you see the killer behind her elegant façade. She is as much a monster as you are. A far older and better-practiced monster.

“Don’t be disturbed, Morgan. I do look after my allies and informers. It’s to my benefit. I value long-term relationships.”

Worried, you think back on what you have agreed to. You have missed something, made a mistake.

You slump in your chair, head in your hands.

You forgot to specify a time limit or end to this agreement. From the look in her eyes, Victoria is not the type to renegotiate.

“Consider this your first lesson in Kindred politics, Morgan.” she coos with cigarette holder posed in her upturned hand.

THE END

50.

“Victoria, are you receiving?”

A new voice heralds a new arrival coming through the main entrance. He passes by the bouncer with a cordial bob of his head, already confident of his reception. The man wears a priest’s collar, a carved wooden crucifix hanging from a chain about his neck and carries a bible in his left hand. He bears a striking resemblance to Richard Chamberlain in *The Thorn Birds* mini-series. More, than that, you feel as if you have seen him recently; his face is so familiar.

You flinch, but feel no different in the presence of the religious symbols.

“Fewer of us find garlic, crosses and the like to be an issue than you might think.” Victoria whispers before extending a welcome to the man. “Reverend Murik, why am I not surprised?”

“Dear lady,” he murmurs while kissing the back of her offered hand. “I heard just now about the newest member of our flock and wanted to introduce myself.”

The priest turns to you, with a pleasant expression on his face, “So, Nathaniel has selected Cymbeline for you? I think he must have decided to go in reverse order.” He thumps the flat of his hand on the bible, before running one finger along the inside of his collar as if it was too tight to be comfortable. “Never mind. Never mind.” He mutters to himself as you try not to stare in confusion.

“So, Morgan. Are you adjusting to um, well, everything? I hope he... um...that is to say, Nathaniel did handle it properly yes? You look quite as I imagined, hoped you would. Victoria, don’t you think Morgan looks just as a Kindred should? I mean pallor...?” His questions spill forth in a lower register of voice, with a different accent and tempo of speech. The priest tilts his head to one side and says as he leans forward, “I would have let you find your own name, you know.”

His questions rattle about in your head and you inhale before selectively answering him. “I suppose I am adjusting, but I will admit to being overwhelmed.” You decide to play it cautiously, and tack on a polite “thank you” while the Reverend looks at you expectantly.

“Just so. Just so.” He looks at Victoria. “I am going to invite young Morgan to join me on my rounds. Hrm....You will let Nathaniel know when he comes back, won’t you. I suspect he will want to speak with me. He may be looking for me even now.”

She exhales a puff of smoke. “I could never say no to you, Reverend.” Laying her hand against the table’s edge, Victoria asks him, “I assume you’ve seen the Prince?”

“I made a point of speaking to him as soon as I heard the news. You can update your book accordingly. I think he was quite glad to remove that sword of Damocles.”

You are unable to follow their train of thought and lean back in your chair, as they converse for a few moments in the same vein. Then, Victoria rises and moves around the table. “I have work to do upstairs. Record-keeping. Morgan, I have enjoyed your visit. Go with the Reverend here and I will make sure to tell Nathaniel you are with him when he returns.”

Even walking away, she moves with such elegance you can't help but feel a momentary envy and wonder if you can acquire similar grace and polish in the nights to come.

The Reverend sighs softly. "I hear music when I watch her." Then he taps your shoulder with his book. "Come. Time is precious and there is little of it left tonight to accomplish all I must do."

Bemused, you shrug and follow him out the door and into the night.

The next hour is spent in apparently aimless wandering. You find yourself answering questions instead of asking them for a change. The Reverend coaxes you to speak about your family, your interests, and what you knew of vampires before being Embraced. He shares cautionary tales with you about some of the older, more powerful and "quite insane" vampires in the city.

You feel so comfortable that you even volunteer the story of the first time you tried mood-altering drugs. He laughs and mutters something about blood being the only drug he needs. Yet, other than talking with you and

wandering the streets, the two of you visit with no other vampires. Do nothing of purpose that you can perceive.

“Well, we’ve come to the end of our time together.” He stops abruptly. You look about and realize you are standing before the same brownstone where Nathaniel changed you to Kindred.

“I want you to know I wish...” The Reverend sighs. “Nathaniel shouldn’t have done this to you.”

You angle your body away, turning your head, to hide the expression on your face. Sympathy is more than you can bear right now. You are trying so hard to just come to terms with your new condition.

“I will remember everything you have shared with me tonight and I will keep an eye on your family.”

You start to look up and ask what he means by that last bit, and you see him drive the crucifix into your chest, up to the crossbar. You fall on your back, lying flat and immobile on the ground.

The Reverend kneels down beside you. He crosses himself before grabbing one of your limp hands, holding it between both of his. His eyes are not sane.

“I lost one of my childer at Nathaniel’s hands and the Prince owed me a great debt from years before you were born, Morgan. The bible says “an eye for an eye.” Your sire did not know I knew he murdered my youngest. Now he will know that and he will know my pain.”

A blood-tear rolls down the Reverend’s cheek. “I will mourn you. He didn’t cry for my loss, but I am a better person. I will remember you and I will honor you. You should have been mine. I will choose my next childe from your family and you will be part of the night always, through them.”

These words terrify you, but all you can do is scream inside where no one can hear.

Reverend Murik releases your hand, reaches up to gently shut your eyes. Left in darkness, you imagine you feel his hand trace the mark of the cross on your brow.

Then you feel nothing at all.

THE END

51.

The angel leans over and kisses you gently on the lips. Your body erupts in pain, pain beyond your understanding. Through tightly-clenched lids you can still see a powerful white light enveloping you. Blood runs from your eyes, your ears, your nose. You scream and scream and scream.

After an eternity, the light fades, and the pain returns to whatever realm it was summoned from. You open your eyes, and the angel is gone. You see blood all over your hands, and you reach inside your jacket for a cloth to wipe them clean.

That's when you notice your heart beating.

Amazed, you press your hands to your chest. Thump. Thump. Thump.

You turn to the window, and see the first rays of dawn. The sun slowly rises, and there is no fear, no pain, no burn. You are human again.

You weep tears of joy. Your life is yours once again.

THE END