

The book cover features a central illustration of a woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a green, low-cut, patterned dress. She is standing in a dimly lit, ornate room with a large red rose in the foreground. The background is dark blue with intricate silver and red floral patterns. The title 'Daeria' is written in a large, elegant, white script font, and the subtitle 'Kiss of the Succubus' is written in a smaller, similar script font below it.

Daeria
Kiss of the Succubus

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For Jeff Mikoni and Angela Bernhardt

Special Thanks

To Merry Luong, for all the hard work and editing mojo when Damnation City and the clan books were in their darkest hour.

We're much obliged.

Most Honored,

I find it strange to think, now, that I came from Paris. Or, for that matter, from Canterbury or London. Oh, the languages spring easily enough to my tongue. My life, though, seems far away and like a dream. The idea of moving across the world seems almost as fantastic as landing men on the moon. My memories don't seem like memories until I came to New York. Until I died.

Those of my family are creatures of the moment. We indulge our appetites where we can. No, we do better than indulge: we savor. We are also creatures of memory. The hungers we feed are the hungers of the human beings we used to be. Should I will it, my heart beats as hard as that of any other man, and my manhood rises as tall. I have loved and hated, killed and died. I have bled myself on errands of mercy, and glutted my belly in acts of revenge. Look upon my years, mayflies, and despair.

For some hundred years, my sire and I had lived as man and wife. She kept me strong and fit as her ghoul, and I wanted nothing more than to be by her side. With her wealth and kindness, that was the only wish of mine she had no power to grant. Her own health was waning, an infirmity of the blood which even now begins to poison me. I was angry when she told me what she wanted, what she intended to do. Why make me immortal, I asked, when her fate was to wither and slumber? She allowed me to berate her, to call her a bitch and a whore and a fiend. And when I was finished, when I cried, still clear, mortal tears, she allowed me to forgive her, and she gave me her Blood one last time.

Marisa sailed into the fog of ages soon afterwards. Our need for secrecy denied her the ceremony of a proper burial. I told our friends that she had departed unexpectedly, most likely in the company of her rascal brother. I was not allowed my mourning, and that is perhaps what drove me to begin my collection. For over two centuries I have gathered family relics and raised each of my children to do the same. I do not know if I have been a good father. Marisa prepared me well, but by her own example, I knew that time was the one luxury immortality would not afford me. I like to think that, at the very least, I have given them an appetite for the truth and an understanding of what family should mean.

I digress. I only meant to express the importance of this collection to me. This letter will be followed by others, documents and artifacts from my collections. I could entrust them to my Prince, or wait in vain for Marisa to awaken, but I believe that you will put them to the best use.

You will remember me. And when you see what I have not completed, the gaps in my collection, you will mourn.

Your Intimate Friend,

TW



So the old bat bailed on you. Don't know why, and I don't really give a shit. It's not my problem, and it's not yours, anymore. Dust in the wind.

His place was pretty empty. I mean, not empty-empty, there were all sorts of statues and vases and a couple bits that are gonna make me obscenely wealthy. I don't feel like playing CSI and sorting through all of that yet, though, so you get what he was going to send you. I also don't care if his fears were right, although I don't know why you'd need the stuff if he was.

First of all, there's this folder called Kevin (p. 3). Bitter ex-boytoy if ever I've seen one. After that, there's a bunch of shit from someplace called the Mission in San Francisco. Vampires on the sunny coast, apparently. There's a Mixtape, along with transcript (p. 36), then some poor shit getting interrogated about the Cacophony (p. 41). Probably would've made Ayesha sick. Apparently, vampires have been messing with my head and my naughty bits since before I was born, at least if you believe the American Dreamgirl (p. 43). A and I had one of those calendars, I don't think she had any idea.

The asshole seems to have had a real hard-on for the south. A bunch of the stuff he was going to send you was from or about there. There's a Memorial for New Orleans (p. 48), which I gather he wrote himself. Narcissistic bastard. Then, there's a journey through the South and some interviews by Ayesha. I didn't like reading them, but you have that bad trip to thank for All Tomorrow's Bodies (p. 49). Following that, some guy has problems with a girl who won't stay dead, his Inamorata (p. 61). Then there's an article on The Masquerade (p. 64) that you make such a big deal of. Crazy, the way keeping secrets is. Like I asked Ayesha, don't you know we love you?

He seems to have been trying to get it up for the rest of the world, too. Typical New Yorker. First, we've got an article about Carmilla (p. 69), who reminds me of my A., without all the redeeming qualities. Then, there's some stories from The World Before Us... way, way before us (p. 74), as well as some commentary on Alternate Myths (p. 77) and their sources that the Old Bat seems to have ignored. I also threw in his copy of a pitch for this movie, Black Blood (p. 83). If you really like your Masquerade that much, maybe you should do something about it.

I hope this is everything, Willy, because I only want two more thing to do with you. Revenge, don't worry, check. That's coming, yours and mine, and the little idiot's Diary (p. 109). The other? I know you people don't die easy, and I've learned that even regular folks like me don't stay down. How do I get her back?

Please, I miss her.

I need her.

Marisa used to tell me that the only truth that mattered in life was how others saw us. While she was with me, I didn't understand. Surely, all that mattered was seeing her, was greeting her as the night fell and swooning into her Kiss. I didn't understand, even when she told me, that she was putting on a show. She gave me the best years of my life, most of the years of my life, deliberately. As I watched her weaken, I still saw her beauty. Even when she couldn't try any longer, when her blood no longer sang to mine.

What matters is how we are seen, and how we are remembered. No better illustration of this point exists than the following collection, provided to me by two gracious cousins. Here is conquest and defeat, wrapped in one. Remember Fitzgerald:

"The victor belongs to the spoils."

[3]



Kevin

Nobody's going to read this. I'm not writing it for anybody else. I guess if something happens to me and Daryl has to clean out my apartment he might find these boxes, and the Big Picture is going to make him wonder what the hell was wrong with me, but he'll probably just chuck my shit out, paint the place, and lease it to some other hard-luck case for \$50 more than he charged me a month. But then, there might not be anything to clean up, and I'm writing letters to Santa here, because if anything happens to me, I don't think the people who do it are going to leave any of this crap to be found.

Jackie - you'll be proud of me. I'm making a list before I start compiling the story and my observations and conclusions, so I won't forget anything. (I'm sorry I didn't remember to buy milk that time. I wish I had.)

1. Vampires are real. (I hate that word. "Vampire". It sounds fucking lame. I remember the vampire kids from high school, and they were a bunch of fucking losers. I had a letter on my jacket, and nobody said boo when I knocked one down.)

2. Vampires are three things - they are stronger than you, they are faster than you, they are sexier than you. (I know about all three. I'm not going to talk about them right now though.)

3. I am not crazy. (I should have made this #1 but I forgot, and if I cross anything or use whiteout, I have to start a new list or it'll drive me nuts. I haven't got the money to get my meds refilled, and so I just have to type very carefully.)

4. Vampires go where the people are. (For exactly the same reason that the sharks are where the fishies are, but also for the reason that the actor is where the audience is.)

5. Vampires try and keep it secret. (This one is obvious. I'd never heard of real vampires before I dated one. And I know it is going to get me in trouble too.)

6. I do all this so I can find Her. (Again, obvious, but I don't want to lose focus. It's all about deciphering random experience - there's always a pattern if you look close enough and dig deep enough. There was a reason I was chosen for what happened to me. A reason my OC tendencies were there, latent. There is a reason vampires exist. When I have enough observations and evidence the reason will come clear, like the way a sailboat suddenly jumps into 3-D existence amid the seeming chaos of a Magic Eye picture.)

I still keep myself in good shape. I try and focus the creeping anxiety I get now into exercise. Running the perfect mile. Breathing just right. Counting each breath. Each step. There are 1945 of my medium-paced jogging steps in a mile. When it's raining, it takes more steps to make the mile, as I have to shorten my stride. When I run all out, it cuts the steps down a lot. In a week, I do at least seven miles at full stride, running as fast as I can. I know there's going to be a time when I'm going to have to chase or I'm going to be chased, and I'm going to need to move.

Also, there's vanity. Before I started working on the Big Picture, I looked pretty good, and I knew it. I read GQ, and I did the abs exercises. I had all the other status objects to dress my body up, too - sharp Brooks Brothers suits for work, understated Rolex, Lincoln Navigator, and whatever the trends dictated I wear on weekends. When I went out for milk, and everything changed, vintage was in, and my shirt was pale yellow with a pattern of blue concentric circles, and a wide collar. I'd paid forty-five dollars for it, and it was older than I was. It was Sunday, and I had a two-day stubble. In the window of the Speedy-Gas, I looked like a movie star. Inside, while grabbing a fresh gallon of cow juice from the back of the cooler (one with a later expiration date, of course), somebody else thought I looked like a movie star too. When I straightened up with the milk, she dragged her eyes up from my ass to meet mine.

I don't want to describe her here. I've lost the thread of it. I was talking about why I run (other than to keep the crazies down). I run so no matter how bad I have to live, I'll still look good. The male peacock grows his huge tail to basically say, "Hey chicky-chick, I can carry this absurd huge tail around and I'm still alive, so I must have some kickass genes... you want a few of them?" I lost my tail when I couldn't make payments on the

Delicious! Is it wrong how delighted it makes me that poor Kevin's misconceptions make it seem we are the only Kindred in the whole world? I'm so glad he didn't encounter any of the misbegotten bastard brood that pretend to the same state.

Do we know what has become of him?



[5]

Navigator, and when I moved out I just left all my stuff there. I don't know what Jackie did with it all. I treated her bad, and I'm embarrassed about it. I don't want to see her and have to explain anything. So I never tried to get my stuff back. One time, I was in this bar making observations, and she came in with some of her girlfriends from work. I called them The Jennifers because at least three had that name. The rest looked like Jennifers. They were wholly interchangeable. But I had to abandon the place, and ditch out when Jackie went to the can.

So, all I have is my body, and I keep it looking good. I feed it as well as I can with the money I have, and I don't hurt it with smokes or drink or drugs. I know my body isn't a temple. I've seen a body that is a temple, all laid out before me. I know what the Satanist types speak of when they drone about "altars of the flesh." I've worshiped a body like that. My body isn't a temple or an altar. I know precisely what my body is for.

My body is a sacrifice to lay atop that altar.

*So let me be thy choir, and make a moan,
Upon the midnight hours.*

—John Keats

The first night when I called Jackie and said I had car trouble, and that I was waiting for triple-A, I had no idea. I was delirious. What I was feeling then wasn't love, it was the distillation of infatuation. I ached and sweated hormones and she made me flustered, and my words like something ripped from an old black and white movie, but when she smiled about it, I was drowned in warm syrup. Her lips were wide and so her smile was huge. I'm running into it again, and I'm still not ready to describe her. I don't know how to, really. I can list her physical characteristics - tall, slim, freckles, naturally curly hair which had been professionally straightened. Still, what does that tell you?

I'll instead say what it was like to be with her that first night, and how she made me feel about myself.

I'd never cheated on a girlfriend before, and considered myself a superior person because of it, but I was just vain and shallow. I'd never met a girl hotter than the one I was with. Jackie was the full package - gymnastics in college (national finals with UCLA) and sweet genes (her mom was the very definition of MILE and I'd tease Jackie about it). She was all set up with a tight body and pretty face, and she knew all the tricks to make it a gorgeous face. And she loved me too, which was a good bonus. I never thought I'd cheat on her because I figured she was just my type, until I met someone else in the Speedy-Gas that redefined my type.

When she finally dragged her eyes away from my ass, we started talking, me flirting on reflex, she just playing with her food.

"People often get distracted by my ass, and miss that I have great arms and a manly jaw line too."

"Plus, your ass is smart enough to get a GED. Your ass should be proud, because now it can go to technical school."

"My ass looks too good to bother with school. It's going to find a sugar mamma to take care of it."

"Well he can keep looking, because this mamma is down to her last spoonful."

"If you think any self-respecting stockbroker with my classic Cary Grant looks is going to let a damsel in distress go home with a twelve-pack of that piss weak domestic beer, then you're crackers, lady."

"Are you buying me a drink, mister?"

"I'm buying you a dozen. It'll cause me pain to know you went home with that crap."

So I bought the milk I came in for, and a twelve-pack of something imported. Funny, I can remember the exact Bogie VS Bacall shash we said to each other, but I don't remember the brand of beer I bought her even though I eventually ended up drinking most of it.

Somehow, as we chatted, she let slip that her car was broken down - she nodded to the old Volvo in the parking lot. And somehow, I offered to give her a ride home. And somehow, I called Jackie and told her a lie about breaking down, and that I was waiting for the tow truck, and no, that she should go on to sleep, and I'd get a cab home. I thought I'd kept my voice down, but when I got into the Navigator, she was smiling, and said "So you don't want your lady to know you're driving another girl home? You've already got a guilty mind."

She played with my CD's while giving me directions to her place. Feeding *Wreck Your Life* by The Old 97's into the stereo and playing Victoria.

She lived in a condo near North Sheridan in Rogers Park. Not a great area. Sort of rundown, but not so bad that the dealers were selling on the corners. It looked like a place students lived. She got out, and sort of bit her lip in a way that did funny things in my chest and pants.

"You want to make sure I get inside alright?"

I got out, and walked around the Navigator to where she stood, just outside a pool of light cutting down from the buzzing sodium street lamp above. I stood in the light, and squinted to where she stood, chewing my lip now. She smiled at me again, and the stars came down like wasps and circled around in her eyes, and stung me on the face, prickly heat. I took a long ragged breath, and I stepped into the dark too.

HOW TO SPOT A VAMPIRE

It took me awhile to get the trick of it, but here's my method. You don't look for the vampire. Vampires are really good at looking like people because if not, they end up raping people for their blood in alleys. They like it better when people give themselves over, and create a relationship around it, and use love to excuse what the monster does to them. That's what I did. But I guess that's no more fucked up than imagining the stripper really cares about you when she calls you "Baby."

The trick is not to look for vampires, but to watch the crowd. Watch their faces. When there's a vampire hunting the crowd, you'll see people move like schools of fish - with a weird sense of unconscious coordination. Eyes will swivel momentarily to look toward the door. People with breath quicker. They'll unconsciously meander in a certain direction. If you see this, then look to see where it's directed. Once you have it narrowed, watch the people in that area of the room, and see which one is the center of attention. He's your vampire.

His insight is unsettling - are we so easily spied out by those with the eyes to see us? This is exactly why we must be more vigilant. We are by far the most visible of clans, and that very visibility must be made to serve the purpose of concealing our true natures from those we mingle with, rather than revealing it to anyone with the knack for noticing trees where he should only be seeing forest.

It seemed like a student place on the inside too. Dishes piled up and overflowing in the sink. Empty pizza boxes, beer cans. Some wine bottles in the trash. There were baskets of clean clothes that made me twitch, thinking about the wrinkles. She put the beer in the fridge, coming back into the living room where I hovered. She handed me one, and held the other. We stood there.

I glanced at the couch, seeing the pair of boxers with cowboys on them, and said, "Roommate?" She was so good, she even looked embarrassed, "Sorry! Ex-boyfriend. Messy breakup."

"Literally."

"Yeah, I've been so slammed I haven't had the chance to clean up. Ignore anything related to football, NASCAR, or ultimate Frisbee."

"No problem. I might trip over something though... that's a lot to ignore. I won't be able to see half the room."

"There's your ass being witty again. Sit it down here, and tell me about you."

So I sat where she'd made space for me on the couch, and she dropped onto the other end, pulling up her legs. I paused. I thought about what I was doing here. About Jackie at home, waiting for me to get back. I worked the words around in my mouth a little before letting them out, and as I started talking I slipped a hand in my pocket and turned the ringer on my phone off.

I told her about growing up in Charleston, and then coming to Chicago for school, and just sticking around. I talked about my job with Bell and Price, and moved on when her eyes started to glaze when I let slip some trading jargon. I told her my folks had split up after I moved out, and that they'd just been waiting for me to leave so they could make it official, as if I didn't notice the savage cold war that lasted from my 8th birthday to my 18th. I didn't tell her about Jackie until she asked.

"You lied to your girlfriend about driving me home."

"Yeah."

"And then you came inside."

"I did."

"You must care about her, to lie to her like that. You hit just the right note too. I'm sure she believed you."

"I guess. Tell me about you. How come you're so fascinating that I'm risking a two year mostly-happy thing to drink beer while sitting on your ex-boyfriend's shorts?"

"I have a secret, and if you guess it, I'll give you a kiss."

Funny thing is, when I said it, it was totally spontaneous. I didn't even think about it. I didn't believe it, of course. I was just spouting shit, trying to sound clever. I mean, I'd been watching one of the late night skin-flick channels the night before, and beat off to this one movie about a hot vampire chick.

She actually looked surprised when I said it. A first, she just stared at me, eyes a little wide. Then she smiled. One of those smiles you see with your eyes, but you feel down in your crotch.

She came at me across the couch slow, but there was a rigidity and power in her limbs, yet her trespass across the boxer-strewn DMZ between us was smooth, like she was moving on rails, and for a moment, I was repelled. The domino fall of stupid decisions that had brought me here registered for a second. I almost pulled away. Almost.

She said, "You made it too easy!"

And I thought, "I was only kidding."

We need to have a word with the Spaniards about this. Some of our cousins are becoming extremely lax in their precautions. We might need to schedule a visit from our 'communications specialist' to see that a message is delivered and understood.

TEN PLACES THAT I OBSERVED VAMPIRES

1. The Anvil - an industrial gay club. Heineken was expensive here. I got more attention than I'd had for a long time, and it felt sort of good to have other humans check me out. It made me wish I was gay, and that I still could do something with other humans who found me attractive. The vampire here was really obvious. He was hardly making an effort to keep his influence subtle - it was like a series of hammer blows in time with the bassline. I felt it myself, even way over where I hunched over my beer and exchanged shouted "WHAT?!" with the guy on the next stool. The vampire looked good, and everybody knew it. There was an ease about him that made me think he was a regular - little nods to people he knew, and a deference from the staff. I don't know if some vampires were gay before they became vampires, or whether afterwards they just don't care one way or the other anymore. I saw the same vampire a few weeks later playing a straight club exactly the same way. I think it's just a buffet to them, and the sex is like the difference between Mexican or Chinese. One place they fry the chicken and put it in orange sauce, the other it's grilled and stuffed into a corn tortilla.

2. The Steel Mill - a 24-hour health club. Busy people have to work out some time, so why not at midnight on a Sunday? I got in on one of those trial workouts. No way I could afford membership now. I figured it was a good place to look because I used to get girls' numbers at the gym. I thought lifting would be the obvious place for them to flirt - "hey, you need a spot?" - but there were too many mirrors. I found one on the Stairmaster, working hard on an already gorgeous ass. The guy next to her thought it was pretty great too, and let her borrow his iPod. They left together. All those hormones and sweat. It was the first time I'd been in a gym since the breakdown, and the place was a shrine to the physical vanity that vampires love - flesh, engorged with blood, and minds dimmed with endorphins and fatigue.

3. John Manders High School Homecoming Dance - I helped the band set up their equipment, and then hung around pretending to roadie. I had a theory that anybody could become a vampire, and there would be teenage vampires out there, stuck at 16 forever. Since they go where the people are and where sex is bubbling just under the surface, then an after-dark High School activity would be perfect. When I saw the kid with the retro leather jacket, I know he was the one. He just cruised through the crowd of kids, and they parted before him like fog, to flow and swirl in his wake. When he took a girl into the locker rooms, I followed and made a shit-ton of noise by 'accidentally' kicking over a trashcan. He cut out, and left her calling for him. The look he gave me when he passed scared the shit out of me. He was old. Something

about his bones. His eyes had seen nations rise and fall. And he was stuck here, in a fucking high school locker room. I got the hell out of there.

4. Red Five Game Lounge - I went in here to get a coke and sit down for awhile, but it was serendipity. I stuck way out here, even in my generic jeans and tee. The place had dozens of game consoles networked for LAN play, and was packed with kids and twenty-somethings blowing the fuck out of each other. The air was thick with geek aggression and power dynamics - the subordinate males chomped at the alphas constantly, savaging them and each other with railguns and plasma bombs and rocket launchers. They were hooting and preening, and when they'd frag a dude their eyes would involuntarily flit to a booth in the back where a girl was holding court. She wasn't pretty like the girls I dated, or most of the other vampires I'd found. She had emo-kid glasses, and hair dyed this weird auburn color. She was wearing a t-shirt with some kind of logo on it, and geek-punk bracelets and shit. Even I couldn't miss the curves under those jeans, though - and the assembled geeks sure as hell didn't, either. She was gabbling with the boys about console games and computers and music. And she owned them. She owned the whole place. She wouldn't have rated a 4 on my old hot-scale, but here she was an 11. Vampires find their niches.



5. Cook County Senior Center - When I heard the stories about what my Granddad got into when Mom put him in a home, all my illusions about the elderly and sex evaporated. With the blue pill faerie to magic the flesh into willingness, the attendants couldn't keep the codgers in their own beds anymore. This was my next leap, after realizing there might be kid vampires... there might be silver-haired senior vampires too, cruising the widow-set for hot grandmamas. It was January, and the nights had drawn in. I volunteered to help out at the place, and the annual Spaghetti Cook-off attracted a good crowd, and it was like the hormone soup of the high school dance, only in slow motion with more big band music. I spotted the vampire. The bastard was judging spaghetti sauce while shameless octogenarians flirted with him, and tried to sway his judgment. I realized it was a perfect population to prey on, when the ick-factor of wrinkly sex faded. These people die all the time, and nobody says boo. Hell, with their medical conditions, and quality of life, the old vampire might be doing them a favor. His way would at least be fun for them.

6. Merle's - I stopped by because I heard people talking about how good the sweet potato pie was, and how cute this waitress was. I think I'm getting an intuition about it. Or, on some level, I'm starting to recognize the signs when a person has been under the influence of a vampire. So I went to try the pie, and to see about this waitress. It was a kitschy sort of a place, and the pies were in a rotating rack up front. The jukebox was loaded with the hits of yesteryear, and some fan of Johnny Cash had dropped enough coin to keep him singing all night. Sure enough, she was a vampire. I never before saw so many people tip twenty bucks on a five dollar check. She smiled and flirted, and called everyone "Hon" and "Darling" and "Sugah". She played the country girl, but there was something of Europe in her accent. Funny thing - I never saw her get a phone number or anything. She just smiled, and made huge tips. If it kept on all night like that, she'd have made a grand. When I left Merle's, I hunkered down in my car parked across the street and watched. I couldn't figure it out, until I saw her kissing the cook and getting into his truck around 5:00 AM. He was pale and worn thin, but he kissed her like he knew how to do it from long practice.

7. NARCANON - Hello, my name is Kevin, and I'm an addict. It actually felt good to talk about it, even if I didn't get too specific. Some of the guys there looked like they had a low tolerance for bullshit. There's always a meeting somewhere, sometime. Desperate people fighting addiction, hungry for human connection and meaning. They call it Thirteenth-Stepping to scam on chicks at a meeting, and the thought of a vampire hunting here... it made me think of hyenas and wildebeest carcasses. I chewed mints from my little tin, and ate a doughnut and drank coffee to blend in. They don't let you smoke during meetings anymore, so said the little skinny guy sitting next to me. When the vampire came in, I saw the signs, but here it was really weird. Instead of smoothing their hair and checking their breath by huffing against a cupped palm, the addicts got really into the recovery process. When they got up to speak, they seemed inspired - the room was suddenly alive, and people were nodding and murmuring agreement. The confessions rolled free, and there was poetry in the junkies' mouths. I caught a glimpse of the vampire in the back, nodding her head and smiling this huge encouraging smile at the guy speaking. He got choked up, and admitted his Dad did stuff to him when he was a kid, and so nothing has ever been right for him. The hugs when it was over were hard and intense, almost hurting. She was talking to that guy when I left, standing really close, just barely touching his chest with her fingertips. I felt like the interloper, the fake. I belonged here less than the vampire. I skulked out so I wouldn't have to meet anybody's eyes.

8. Jacks County Community College - I was working part time at the community college doing night maintenance, which is what they call janitor work now. It was quiet because there were only a few night classes - mostly continuing ed stuff, GRE for working moms, and some art classes. On a lark I glanced into a figure drawing class, and picked up the vibe right off. They were doing nudes, which I thought might raise some eyebrows if the school administra-

tion knew about it. The guy in the center was tubby and balding, but he was buck-ass naked, and looked like he was loving it. He had huge wood, and it was like a dowsing rod pointing right at the vampire. She was all cardigan and glasses-on-chain, with paint in her hair and on her fingers. Really average looking, and seemingly middle-aged, but she crackled with that aura I'd come to recognize. I felt it moving through me, making me hot inside my clothes, itching to be naked myself. The room was too humid, and it reeked of lust. The students were all worked up, and they were painting furiously. I've got no eye for art, but they looked like they were in the throes of it, possessed by the art. They painted in a frenzy, almost like they were fucking. I nearly dropped my mop and went in to join them, but got a handle on myself and blew the hell out of there. All the shit I'd seen, this circle of middle-age wannabe artists scared me the most.

9. House Depot at 3 AM - I didn't know some home improvement warehouses were open 24 hours. All those times I needed a hammer or a paint sprayer or a new lawnmower in the middle of the night, and I didn't know. I read online that some guys go to home improvement centers and look for women who have that "where the hell are the pliers?" look on their faces, and make a move. It seemed like a stretch, but I gave it a week. I trusted I had a pretty good feel for vampires by then, but I didn't see one until Thursday night, when I'd about decided to ditch. He was slowly cruising the isles, by the washing machines and past new bay windows, a shark gliding through a reef of nail guns. He was the first one I saw that moved like a predator, and the vibe I got off him made me shiver. I got in his way by accident, and he just moved through me, brushing me aside like I meant less than a cardboard cutout of a person. I left fast, and called 911 from the parking lot and told the cops a guy was waving a gun around. I described the vampire, and then left. He had this look when he walked past me, and I knew somebody was going to die when he got them where he wanted them. All there was in his face was hunger, and his aura made me want to throw myself down his throat. I never heard what happened, but I hope he got interrupted and didn't find anyone to kill that night.

10. Evening Services at Trinity Baptist United - This place is huge - one of those immense mega-churches with a stadium-sized sanctuary and massive sound system and Christian jam band backing up the preacher. I grew up a holiday Methodist, and this place defied my brain to understand it. The crowd was really worked up when the preacher started his sermon, and everyone was shouting and answering back, and holding one hand up and swaying. I felt more comfortable at NARCANON. I had the preacher tagged as a vampire from go, but the longer I watched, the more it seemed unlikely. I checked the program from earlier that day, and he did the morning services too, and that alone aced him out. I was leaving when someone recognized me as a visitor, and when the service broke, steered me into a group of newbs and wide-smiling church members talking and being way too familiar. Since the breakdown, I don't like people being too friendly with me - especially when it seems like they have an ulterior motive. I'd been there before in a bad way, lapping up someone else's affection. But before I could find an excuse to ditch out, a new guy joined us and the vibe was unmistakable. He was good looking in a really whitebread sort of way. Taller than me. He shook my hand, and his hand was warm, and his personality leaned out and slapped me over and over in the face while he made eye contact. I'd never been under the influence this directly since the breakdown, right square in the monster's eye... I just lost it, and snatched my hand away, and I ran. I was glad I kept myself in such good shape. I know I made a scene, but I couldn't endure the vampire's presence like that, focused right on me. It made me want it more. It made me want to give myself over to it, and ride the emotions. I ran from it. I ran from me, but I wasn't fast enough, and so I instead ran to my car and drove for two hours in a random direction.



I haven't fucked like that since I was 17, and pumped to the eyeballs with hormones and late adolescence. I didn't hold back, and I wasn't kind. I didn't try any of my Kung-fu at all - all the little secrets and tricks I'd picked up from the girls I'd dated, or the articles in Maxim I'd read. I'd worked her jeans off, but didn't bother with shirt or sweater, just pushing my hand under to paw at her tits while I thrust and kissed her. I'd blow, and then in seconds I'd be ready to rock again, and back between her long thighs.

She was cold at first, cold inside, but then she lit up like a blown ember, glowing hot and she started to gasp and sweat along with me. She squeezed me so hard against her, I thought she was going to crack my shoulder blade, and then she was biting at me, and I felt her teeth rake my shoulder, and then my neck. She bit, and I thrust savagely into her, and her teeth slipped and tore across my skin, until finally she locked them down on me, and wouldn't shake loose, and I knew, I fucking knew what she was doing, and what she was, and that I'd named her right with my smart-ass comment, and fuck me and damn my fucking soul, but I didn't care. I didn't care. I didn't care at all.

Lucky, lucky boy. She must have really been quite taken with him. She's dropped off the radar by the way. None of my friends in Chicago have heard a peep from her, but she's always been the vagabond. Should we run her down? We could get her account of the thing with Kevin, and lay them side-by-side. But could we really withstand such a brutal self-assessment?

THE VAMPIRE'S CONDITION

KNOWN

Here are the things I know for sure about being a vampire.

1. It is sort of like being dead, but not quite. (Mad walked and talked and screwed, but sometimes she was cool and still, like a corpse. Other times, she was hot like she had a fever, but she was always hungry after running hot, and she left me in worse shape. When she was cold, she didn't really breathe except to talk and to keep up appearances. Her heart didn't beat. I was pressing my face into her neck once when she lit up, and I felt the flutter in her carotid as her heart crept back to life.)

2. They drink blood. (I keep repeating this, but it starts and stops here. This is the horror. They're cannibals, and we get off on them eating us. Mad took from me two or three times a

week. Not too much usually. If she'd been pushing herself, she always took more, and I could feel in those moments when she held me that she wouldn't let me go even if I demanded it, but I never did. It isn't just hunger, and I too know hunger since the breakdown. There's something inside them that won't let them go hungry even if they want to, even if their heart is screaming for it. Mad could have killed me a dozen times, but always pulled back. Just barely)

3. Reflections and Photos are screwy around them. (This varies a lot. When I first noticed it, I thought it was something about me and my mental state. But, there's always something obscuring their faces, and their forms. The mirror looks warped, or there's lens flare, or a toss of the head throws hair in the way, or the face is just... smeared, warped. I think they can force it to clear up if they make an effort - Mad did her makeup in the mirror a couple of times. This is the thing that makes me think that they're not natural. It isn't a disease or a virus or DNA or anything. They're magic. It's a curse. I look at what Mad visited upon me, and the shambles of my life, and I don't think the curse was on her really. She was just the... the carrier. The instrument. Vampires are like a curse on humanity, and in their own horrible little way, no more guilty of the atrocities they perpetrate than HIV is guilty of AIDS. It's just what they bring, and what they do. When I realized this, my childhood faith in God returned with a vengeance, and I hated that motherfucker. I think I still do.)

4. They sort-of die during the day, and avoid the sun. (They just shut down while the sun is out. I don't know what the sun would actually do to them, but Mad had all the windows in her bedroom covered in taped-up paper grocery bags and heavy blankets hung like curtains, so it must be bad. When they shut down during the day, it might be some kind of natural defense to keep them from doing something stupid like trying to end it all out on the roof. It means they live one long night. They aren't even aware of the day at all. What would that do to your head? Day and night breaks up time into chunks our bodies and brains had a million years to get used to. Mad never seemed to know what day of the week it was. She had a good sense of yesterday and tomorrow, but it got vague after that. She said once she broke time up into the spaces between showers.)

5. They have superpowers, but they cost. (Like I said - they're stronger, faster, and sexier than you or me. But these powers have a price. When I saw Mad off her leash, really pushing herself, she was terrifying - unstoppable. But afterwards, she was pale and sunken - and really, really fucking hungry. Even so, she didn't ever try and take from me. I don't know what was going on with her then. It was like the monster inside her was exhausted too, and sleeping even though it was thirsty. But looking back on that time, I'm sure someone else paid for her restraint with me. See? She loved me too, and just like my love made me give up my life to her sip by sip, hers for me made her murder other people in my place. In my Observations, the main power I saw and experienced was their influence over people and groups. They play on emotions, and then use words and smiles and all the usual arsenal of human social weaponry, but that vibe they throw off... that strips your defenses, makes the vampire's casual smile seem like the shining benevolence of a loving god. They're strong too - so strong, that if they lay hands on you, then you're done. I felt Mad's strength when we grappled and screwed, and when she clutched me and cried. I knew she was stronger than me, and if she pushed it, way stronger. She was also so fast, that sometimes I hardly saw her move, she just skipped forward half a dozen paces while I blinked, moving like a stop-motion cartoon. When she did this, or used her strength, it was like something else was moving her body around. She didn't exert muscles and tendons. Her flesh *just moved*. It stripped the illusion of humanity more surely than some kind of hideous physical transformation. Scarier than shit, and I hated it when she did that.)

UNKNOWN

Here are the things I don't know about being a vampire, or I'm not sure about. 1. How to kill a vampire (I don't know. I don't really care. I'm resigned to their existence. I saw too many, all comfortable in their niches and hunting grounds for me to even dream of unseating. They're an old curse. They've always been with us. And yet, nobody has figured it, and publicly outed them. Even today, with the Internet and Blogs and YouTube, the crap online is about pervs (like I thought Mad was) or poser vampires or people who think they're energy vampires, or a dozen other kinds of self-delusional bullshit. There's no way I could do anything to stop a

legacy like that. No way in hell. And killing them... how could I possibly even begin to attempt that? I read *Dracula*, but it all seemed too gothic and implausible. Mad had a Midwestern accent, and dressed a little trashy or a little sloppy. Big D's inbred nobility was as alien as the scary, ugly, silent *Nosferatu*. I don't know why they had the vampire looking like a hairless albino rat corpse. Some kind of visual metaphor? He would never last in Chicago looking like that. Nobody would sleep with him, even if he had the vampire charm-vibe jacked out the ass. So I don't know how to kill them, how they die, or anything. I don't care.)

2. What vampire community is like (is ten people in the same city with the same weird condition a "community"? The ones I saw all seemed to have their own territory and hunting grounds. I never saw them congregate, or perhaps I just missed them when I focused on the one laying down the most whammy. Mad made out like there were others, and they acted like a family. She talked about her Dad and brother, and I met her little sister. She mentioned 'cousins' occasionally. Once, she made out like there was some kind of authority - a "THEY" out there, threatening retribution for certain infractions.)

3. How a person becomes a vampire (if it was like in the movies, and just getting bitten was enough, then I'd be one too. They might even breed like people, but the thought of vampire babies sucking blood from their mothers' breasts makes me nauseous, so I'm not going to think about it anymore. It was one mystery among many, and it never entered into the sphere of my relationship with Mad. Perhaps it had something to do with her leaving. Perhaps she spared me her condition. I like to think it is something like that, because it makes it all so romantic, and it makes me a real lover and not a Styrofoam cup filled with her tasty beverage of choice. I know she played me and seduced me, but there were times when she was stripped bare, and I knew she felt something, and I knew that it made everything fucked up for her too. So I hope that is the reason I don't know the answer to this one. I hope it is because she loved me.)

4. What their existence really means (It's something I've thought about, and tried to deal with because now my existence and my meaning owes pretty much everything to them. Everything I do is to further my observations and understanding. I'm defined by it now. But what about them? They're magical. They don't obey the rules. Physics, biology, chemistry... how do you reason some kind of meaning from something that kicks the ass out of reason? I believe in God now, but I think he's evil. The God of the Earth is bloated fat on our misery, and perhaps the vampires are his mouths. His hungry mouths which walk among us, and sup our blood, and through them feed him up fat and terrible. Could there be a better Earthly origin for stories of angels and demons? They're worse than some boogiemani out beyond the firelight. They're in our living rooms, sitting across the coffee table from us. They're in our bedrooms, fucking our brains out. They're dancing with us at our favorite clubs. And we invited them in. We smiled, and gave them a seat. We undressed when they licked their lips. They're right there with us as we do all the things that matter for a human being to do, distracting, seducing, rendering all our dreams and aspirations fruitless and barren, and they do it by subverting our most basic urges to breed and procreate and to possess beautiful people, and hold them close. It is such a human horror they bring, that hunger.. it only wakens in a vampire, but that appetite is with everyone waiting to find something to tempt it. If they prove anything, it is that God is cruel and hungry, and he hates us all.)

For awhile, I just floated, there on top of her, totally spent. She stirred, and it snapped me out of the post-sex fugue long enough for me to realize my head was swimming, and I felt like I was about to puke.

She let me stumble into the bathroom, and lock the door. I wanted to splash cold water on my face, but fumbled it and turned the hot on instead, and I couldn't get the knobs figured out. I slumped down in a pile, and pressed my forehead against her toilet for the coolness, and then my nerves ran in reverse, and I was shaking and freezing. I wrapped her big rough towels around me, and curled up on the bathmat. She left me alone for a few minutes, before knocking hesitantly on the door, a little "hey, is everything OK?" Knock, like I was taking too long crapping and she needed to pee. I tried to say that it wasn't, but my teeth were chattering, and I felt sick before another wash of skin-burning heat came over me, and I pressed my face to the tile floor for relief.

She twisted the door handle, and I heard a ping as the cheap interior lock broke. "Hey," she said, "I don't mean to be an asshole, but I've really got to get some sleep, so could you head out? I'll call you a cab, because you don't look so good."

Understatement. With her help, I stood, and checked myself in the mirror. She'd bitten me all over my shoulder and neck, and from the smeared blood, it looked bad, but when I washed it off, was mostly superficial. No classic Dracula-style twin pinpricks, anyway. It looked like a dog chewed on me though, and it stung like hell. I held the sink until my head stopped swimming, and her image in the mirror smeared and blurred, and so I shook my head to clear it.

I said, "I don't know if I can get home like this."

"Of course not. You're naked. You'd freeze your balls off, and you need those boys."

"I mean, I don't know if I can stay upright long enough."

"The cab's on the way. I'll fix your truck so it won't start and get it towed for you. Do you have a mechanic?"

I told her, and she said, "I made you some scrambled eggs. You need to get your strength back, soldier."

My stomach did one back-flip, and then growled. I dug my clothes out of the wrecked couch. I didn't even want to think about what they smelled like. Worry about that later. I ate the eggs off a paper plate, and she handed me my phone.

"I put my number in under 'mechanic' just in case you have any more car trouble."

The cab honked from the parking lot, and I gave her the Navigator Key. We had an awkward moment then, not knowing how to end it, and finally she knocked the paper plate and scrambled eggs out of my hand onto the floor, and kissed me, and bit my lower lip so hard she broke the skin. I stumbled out, and then turned realizing there was something I hadn't asked.

"Wait, what's your name?"

But the door was already closed.

[15]

*Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees;
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees.*

— John Keats

In the places I was making my observations, I started to notice some weird similarities. The longer I watched, the more I saw. The more patterns emerged. Like how I started to know when a vampire was working the crowd, I could tell when other things that seemed normal were touched by them. I found something weird in the toilets at half a dozen places. The graffiti and scrawl there started to look familiar. Beyond the generic crudity of cartoon dicks peeing into open cartoon lips, and juvenile rhymes and phone numbers, I caught a sense of familiarity. It took me making a trip with my camera to confirm it. These pictures break it down.

The similarities are impossible to dismiss. There's some code here, hidden in the utter mundanity of toilet graffiti. Something like hobo-sign. I have no idea what it says though.

"Call (Phone #) when your itch needs scratching"

"Is Karl still in business? What is he charging these nights to deliver a willing vessel to you, and tidy up afterwards?"

"Three'penny Upright"

"A place with lots of hidden nooks and crannies where one can enjoy a semi-public bite without attracting any undue attention -fantastic if you want to get back to the dance floor rather than make a night of it."

"Butterfly Pork Chop"

"An unusually receptive crowd, or one with a high percentage of perves and freaks who'll get off on it rather than be freaked out - a warning as well as invite, because perves and freaks can become obsessive"

"He likes the backdoor best"

"This place has an excellent secondary exit without alarms, which can't be observed from the main area."

"HORROR SHOW"

"There are usually Nosferatu lurking about after-hours, looking to pick a drunk off from the crowd. If you feel like you're being watched, there's likely one hanging around inside."

"Dusky Spunk And Skunky Skank"

"A place claimed by a member of another clan, and badly managed, making it a poor place to hunt."

"Sugar and Spice And Everything Nice"

"A clean place nobody claims as their territory, but everyone looks after - the rack of last resort kept in reserve for those sad bad mad nights."

I fell asleep in the cab, and the driver had to wake me up when we got to my place. I paid him with a fifty, and didn't wait for change. I wasn't thinking too clear, and my head was trying to float away. I thought about all the sweat and sex all over me. So I jumped in the complex's pool, and the shock made my balls retreat into my abdomen, and it woke me the fuck up. I splashed around a little, and crawled out, soaked and now shaking with cold.

As I was fumbling with my keys, the door opened. Jackie, in a thick robe. I watched her face transform - pissed, shocked, then worried, and she was reaching out and pulling me inside.

"Kevin! Oh God, what happened!"

I mumbled about breaking down... about getting attacked by a dog... about falling into the pool. It was total shit, but I was obviously wrecked. A shower, a cup of tea, and into bed with Jackie where I shivered all night. Her body was too hot to touch, and I jerked awake again and again whenever she'd brush against me. The edge of her arm against my chest felt like someone put an electric iron on me, and pushed the steam button.

In the morning, after she went to work (I called in, but insisted she go. I promised I'd go to the doctor, but I didn't). When she'd been gone for an hour, I got out my phone and scrolled down my contacts to 'Mechanic' and I left this message.

"What happened last night? Call me."

Around seven that evening, I got a text.

HEY. WONDERED IF YOU'D

CALL. STILL GOT 10 BEERS.

BOY, COULD USE HELP

FINISHING THEM. -mad

I boggled a little at the tag. What was she mad about? But I was just slow. It was her sig.

[17]

TEN WAYS TO EXPLAIN THE SYMPTOMS OF BLOOD LOSS AND THE OTHER SIGNS A VAMPIRE IS FUCKING UP YOUR LIFE

When your secret vampire girlfriend regularly leaves you a few pints shy of full, you have to come up with some explanations for the dizziness and fatigue and headaches and listlessness and chills so bad you feel like you can never be warm again. There's also your foul temper, which is in part because you're not sleeping enough (because you're out fucking your vampire lover, who keeps odd hours, and also because the stress of keeping it all secret is making your stomach burn). I had to lie to Jackie, and she heard most of these.

1. Sick (This one is so easy, because chronic anemia has lots of symptoms. I thought about going and getting diagnosed with real anemia, but I didn't want to take that bet. It would mean being examined and tested, and on some level, I was terrified they'd be able to detect Mad on me somehow. Something in my blood. It made me wonder if what she had was contagious, and I didn't want to think about that.)

2. Drunk (Mitchell helped me out whenever he could by seeing that I got properly shitfaced. I could then splash myself with booze, and Jackie would assume my stumbling and bloodshot eyes had the prosaic explanation. She hated it when I came home drunk, but it was a normal comfortable kind of hate. It wasn't break-up hate. She be pissed, then I've be contrite, and then she'd be forgiving, and then I'd do something else.)

3. Hung-Over (This one hardly rates its own entry. See "Drunk". Hung-over gets you less sympathy, because the general consensus is "You had it coming, asshole." But

*Do we really
need to add this
to the collection?
We get it. His
life turned to
shit. Moving on.*

considering what it excused, I would happily deal with Jackie's contempt instead of her horror and shame and disgust.)

YES WE NEED IT.

If we're to truly understand ourselves, then we must first understand what we do to the people we seduce. See how Kevin has absorbed our nature? See how he plays out what has been done to him within his own relationships? This is what we bring, and this is what we must always remain mindful of. Sex, death, romance, and love... for us, these things are inexorably intertwined, and one can not be had without the other three intruding.

4. Over-Medicated (How ironic. Jackie was after me to see someone about my depression when I started to just puppet my way through a day, so I finally relented and went to see my doctor. I told him I was feeling depressed, and he gave me script for three different drugs. He said, "Try each one for a month, and then use the one that works the best." We were friends, and I regularly lost golf to him. I hit on the idea to blame the drugs for anything weird about how I was acting. Since a couple of them killed libido, they gave me an excuse for avoiding sex with Jackie. I would have kept using this one, but Jackie found the unfilled prescriptions in my coat pocket while looking for a tissue. She'd been crying, which come to think, she did fairly often. I had to hem and haw about it after that, and it became a sore subject, so I didn't try and claim it as an excuse anymore.)

5. Bad Day At Work (When I started fucking around at work, and making bad decisions, I had a few of these for real. Tom would come into my office and ream me a new one for fucking up some deal or account. I'd go home, and be a dick all night, and generally mope and be miserable. I liked to play the confident man, but I craved approval. Anybody who says they don't care what other people think is a liar or a psychopath. I used this one occasionally when I had to "work late" or something. Jackie bought it a few times, and then it became one of those excuses that she'd accept but wouldn't believe anymore.)

6. Got Mugged (I only used this once, because it hurt like hell. I'd really started to run out of excuses at work and home, and my boss thought I was a junkie or something based on my absenteeism and haggard appearance. He wouldn't have given a shit if my numbers stayed up, but they'd begun to slip too. That night, Mad and I went a second time, there in the hall in front of the door. I don't know where I found the jizz, but when she kissed me goodbye I was up like a billygoat, and pushing her back against the wall. She got into it a little too much, and left me swaying when we'd blown our wads, her glowing and pink, me pale and distracted by the sparklies in front of my eyes. I asked her what excuse I should give, and she said I looked like someone had hit me in the head, and so I said I could have been mugged, and she said I didn't look beaten up enough for mugged, and I said that she should hit me. She laughed, and then when I insisted, laughed harder. She kept pulling back to punch me, and I kept flinching at the last second, and she'd crack up laughing. Finally, I said it was a bad idea anyhow, and when I was starting to turn to go she belted me in the right eye, and knocked me down. When I got done cursing and she got done apologizing, I kissed her one more time and left. When I made the mugging claim at work, Mitchell said, "I heard of pussy-whipped, but pussy-beat-to-shit?")

7. Cancer (I feel bad about this one. My Dad was in town for a convention, and we had lunch. He's got a nose for bullshit after 30 years on the job. I was trying hard not to out and out lie to him, but he could sense all kinds of wrong, bad shit in my life just by how I was evading his questions, or glossing over obvious problems (like one of my credit cards being bounced when I tried to pick up the tab). When I walked him back to his hotel, he out and out asked me what was wrong, and I was so mad at the way he picked me apart - just like he always did - that I told him I had lymphoma. Mad and I had stayed up all night alternately screwing and watching Jerry Springer reruns, and I was thinking about the segment about husbands who left their cancer-ridden wives for younger (and presumably less cancerous) women. So I told him, and his face went white. I regretted it immediately, but I'd found the perfect way to lie to my father. All I had to do was to admit the worst-case he'd already imagined was true, and he'd believe it with fatalistic fervor. Since the breakdown I haven't talked to him. I wonder sometimes if he thinks I died of the imaginary cancer.)

8. I gave blood today (Yeah, I used this three times in the same week. I said there was a blood drive at work, and we were competing with the tools from Rinegold Associates to see who could give the most in a week. It was great while it remained plausible. Giving blood till I swayed was something I might have done before all this started, when I still cared about competition and winning and dominating others. It's funny, my life has turned into

a shell, but I found some peace in the emptiness. It's peaceful, not really giving a shit about anything.)

9. I'm Fine (If you say this loud enough and angry enough, people leave you the fuck alone even if they can see clearly that it's an obvious lie. If you get righteously pissed when they pry, it makes them feel like they're pushing too hard, and perhaps you have some heavy burden crushing you slowly. It isn't really an excuse, but it buys time to come up with one. You can segue into the excuse by getting a thoughtful, wounded look on your face, and then saying "I had a bad day at work..." or something. When I started playing the indignant broody guy, I felt like a miserable fake, but I'd learned some things from Mad I suppose. I knew that people who loved you wanted desperately to believe you loved them back, and they don't really want to hear an answer like, "You want to know what's wrong? I'm not in love with you and I've been fucking the undead for a month.")

10. Death in the Family (This one was great, and just came to me. I'd "worked late" again, and Jackie was waiting up for me, and she was pissed. She was going to force some kind of confrontation, because she opened with "Where the hell have you been?" and the answer just came to me, like the Devil whispered it in my ear. I said, "Dad called me... my Mom died last night." It shut her down. Hard. She went from furious and righteous to sympathetic and guilty at being furious with me, and I secretly enjoyed seeing her twirl around and around on the hook she'd swallowed. That made me hate myself a little, because it was something Mad would have done. But Jackie left me alone for a week, and when I seemed really used-up and pale, she assumed I'd just been crying privately, because my manly man grief was too raw to share. I took the weekend, and told her I was flying down to Charlotte for the funeral. She drove me to the airport. I kissed her on the curb. She left. Then Mad picked me up in her old Volvo, and we spent the weekend fucking like animals. When I 'came home', Jackie thought I looked so worn down because I had to be strong for my Dad and sister. I think seeing her look at me then was the only time in this whole fucking mess I ever seriously considered killing myself.)

[19]

I started seeing her once or twice a week. As much as I could make an excuse to be working late or having a drink with the guys from work, or friends from out of town. I worked with a guy named Mitchell who picked up on the thing instantly, like he had a radar for cheating. He started talking to me while we were pissing one day. He'd piss without holding his dick, and he was proud of the skill. Sometimes, he'd comb his hair or text people on his phone while pissing just to show he didn't need his hands.

"Getting some strange on the side, Kev?"

"You've got no fucking idea how much strange I'm getting."

"You double-tapped it yet? Hit the sneak pussy, and gone home and tapped your steady's ass? If you could pull that shit, you'd be the poon ninja."

"I thought Andy was the poon ninja because he slept with that temp girl and then hooked up with her mom later."

"If you get the double-tap, you will strip him of his title. Dude, you must do this."

"As if my life weren't complicated enough."

I shook it, zipped up, and hit him with my shoulder as I turned so he pissed down his own leg.

"Fuck, dude!"

Mitchell wouldn't rat me out, but it irritated me how transparent my excuses were to him. Jackie seemed to buy it, but I knew she suspected. I was so spent after "working late" or on a "night out with the guys". I'd swish with some scotch, and rub a little on my neck so she'd think I just had whis-key dick or something, but the sick truth I'd never speak out loud was that Jackie didn't do it for me anymore. I could fake everything but the sex with her, and that just wasn't happening anymore.

I found this in the junk left at her place after the breakdown. It was on the coffee table, with one of her little sister's drawings on the back. I don't know what to make of this. It uses the word "Daeva" instead of "vampire" but I can't figure out what that means. Google doesn't turn up much of anything. Nothing related to vampires anyway. There were reviews for some punk bands, and so it might be like "deva". I found a reference to one of the bands in Chicago in the late Seventies and early Eighties, and this zine looked like a DIY punk magazine that had been photocopied nearly to death.

I don't know what most of this means, but the last paragraph hits me in the balls. Did she read this and decide to leave? Who the fuck gave it to her?

FUCK THE OLD WORLD

We used to fuck for coins in temples, but we walked out ~~one~~ night, and we didn't come back until we got hungry. When the world was still raw and horny, there was no difference in demons and gods except whether you caught your patron divinity on a good day or bad. Gods fucked and ~~we~~ and killed and loved, and when men came before them they trembled because gods didn't live in some fantasy land somewhere. Temples were the houses of the gods, and that's where they lived, and if you knew how to ask and what they liked best to eat, then they might do you a favor. Or shit, they might kill you just because they hated your hair, or liked your hair, or just felt like it. And we were there, and we were the demon gods that men came to ease, and they gave us what we wanted, and we drank them down and ate them up and laid them low.

But all good things must... the one god BIG G was born a couple thousand years before his Son, and the Capitalism of the Soul did the rest, as Big-G gobbled market shares, and put the little guy out of business, our comfortable stomping grounds got smaller, and then even our old lover on the Tiber threw us over for some carpenter, and we were out on our ass, scratching at the doors to monasteries and hoping for handouts.

IF MEN CAN FUCK IT THEY HATE IT

Men fuck weaker men in prison to make them know their place. Men fuck women, and have spent the last ten thousand years **KEEPING THE BITCHES DOWN**. We were gods, and when we lay with men, they worshiped us because it was holy, and we'd leave them husks and make their dead flesh dance if they dared do anything but love us. But the One God and his Son gave us four thousand years of hate, and we became definite demons, the dark-secret priest-breaker and soul-taker.

We don't skulk in shadows, and hide so well. Just the opposite, and so since we left the temples, we've had to be extra careful that nobody who sees us gets any funny ideas - or if they do, are so hooked that they don't care. We play their nerves and it's like celebrity, it makes them stupid, and it makes them crazy for us, and it makes them give themselves and wish they had more to give. But it's dangerous, see, because **WE'RE MORE POWERFUL THAN COKE**. They get a sniff of you, and they want more. They want to be close to you, and they want to drink from you as much as you drink from them - they want to be under your eyes, and they want to be under your hands, and if you don't keep a lid on your shit, then they'll be beating down your doors at noon, calling your name, and weeping as you burn, burn, burn away.

"We've played that game. What's it short for?"

She just smiled.

"Madison? Madeline? Maddie? Maaaaa... I got nothing else."

"Madael."

"Is that... Spanish?"

"Older, sort of. It's sort of a joke from my Dad. Madael North. Pleased to meet you."

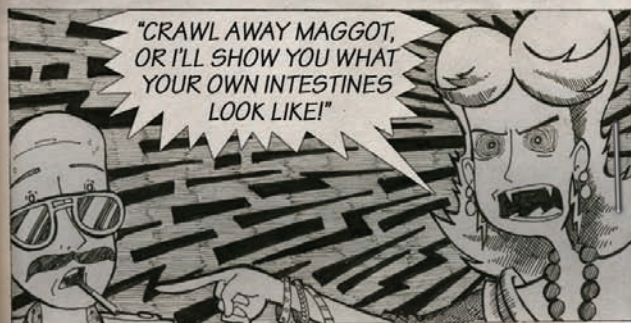
*I had no idea
any of these
were still in
circulation!
Someone out
there must be
going through a
kitsch phase.*

I found this in the toilet at a club. It was left by the sink. I thought it was one of those religious tracts at first and figured it was dropped by a ballsy fundamentalist or by an ironic hipster, but inside it was pretty obvious what it was about. They didn't use the V-Word, but I don't for sure know if they even call themselves that. Funny thing is, at this club I didn't even get a hint of a vampire there the night I found the tract. It made me wonder if vampires used human pawns to plant their messages and drop their literature in likely places, or worse, my insight and intuition about them was not as good as I thought it was.

When I started looking around online, I found a guy in Atlanta who's handle was TRACT-MARKS23 who collected these things. I finally got him to sell me two more of these tracts, but that was all I could afford. He said they were "commons" and not worth that much, but the one I found was pretty hard to come by. He offered me five grand for it, but I had enough just then to get by. A couple of months after I found him though, I was really short after losing my temp job, and tried to get hold of him, but he didn't answer his email, and the letters I sent to his P.O. box finally bounced back.



[21]



"When I first started living like this, I loved it, you know? I got to do what I was doing anyway."

"Sure do. Plus, you're way better at it than you were before, I'll bet."

"That's true. But that's part of the problem..."

"...I just pick out the guy I want to come home with me, and it's pretty much a done deal..."

"...there used to be some thrill to it, but now it's cold and empty."

"That's our big problem. Before we got picked up, we wanted to be this good..."

"...but now, we wish we still fumbled. Yeah, that's it exactly. How do we make it fun again?"

"We make it a challenge again. All these people are ripe and ready. Easy pickings."

"But that's good, right?"

"If you're really hard up, then it's good, but I can tell that you're alright. How come you're here?"

"I don't know. It's what I always did before on a Saturday night."

"Save places like this for when you really need it. When you want fun, try..."

"... THE SUPERMARKET!"

"I think I'm overdressed."

"They say that the produce section is a great place to meet people..."

"Do these carrots look fresh to you?"

"You are surrounded by topics of conversation, and people are at their ease around vegetables."

"Isn't it weird talking food with people when we don't... you know?"
"Is it any weirder than having sex with them?"

"Point."

"If you can get someone to go home with you after meeting them at an all-night photocopy center..."

"... then you'll never be bored with Saturday nights out ever again."

I was going to break it off with her. I'd decided it one night while pretending to sleep with my back to Jackie who was pretending to sleep. Things were rough at work. I'd been off my game, and starting to stick out. Mitchell would crack on me whenever he got the chance, especially when I kicked his ass at pool when I joined the guys from the office for a legit night out.

"You're stretched too thin, Kev. Too many obligations. In Tibet, they know how to fuck without blowing all their masculine energy or some shit. You, my friend, need to retain some Chi."

All the other guys had heard about my failure to double-tap, and Mitchell got the laugh he was looking for, so I took fifty bucks off him on the next three games.

But he was right. It was fucking up my life. So I came by Mad's place after work later that week, intent on breaking it off, but when I got there, she was sitting at the coffee table with a little girl. The Kid was drawing with crayons, and Mad was helping her. She smiled, and introduced me to her little sister. The Kid's name was Aesma ("Another of Dad's jokes"), and looked to be about nine.

I said, "That's a pretty name." Because what the fuck do you say to a kid in this situation?

The Kid said, "Are you my sister's boyfriend?"

I said that I was. And I couldn't break up with her then, could I? With the Kid looking on?

Mad made burgers on her little Foreman grill, but she and Aesma had already eaten, she said. When things started sparking between us, it made me uncomfortable, the Kid sitting there, drawing away, so I was happy to let Mad lead me when she and I started to tumble towards the bedroom, and my head started throbbing with anticipation.

I huffed "What about your sister?"

And she said, "She'll color while we're... in the bedroom."

It was really hot that time, because we were trying to keep quiet. I bit her arm to keep from groaning when she bit into me, and I thought a shadow flickered under the closed bedroom door, like someone was listening there, but I soon forgot about that.

Later, when I started to stumble out, her little sister handed me something. She looked up at me and her eyes were bigger than the whole world.

"I made you a drawer" she said.

This is what Mad's little sister gave me:



When we fucked now, it was less harsh than before, less raw than the first time. I paced myself, and so did she, so I didn't end up a rag doll, and I could drive myself home alright. It all seemed... I don't know. Almost routine. I'd lie, I'd go to her place, we'd screw. I'd wash, rinse, and then repeat.

People can get used to anything. People stay with monsters who hold their hands on the stove or beat their teeth out. My Dad was a cop, and he had a thousand stories like that. Some woman, stomped half to death by her methed-up shitbag boyfriend, would go after the cops hauling the guy off. The one time Dad got hurt on the job, it was because a sixty year old woman hit him in the head with a cast-iron skillet because they were arresting the man who'd broken her nose for the tenth time. Love is a fucked up thing, and that's how I knew things were really done with Jackie, because I would never have let her bite me and claw at my back, and mess with my head like Mad did. I looked at myself in the mirror, and saw the lines forming at the corners of my eyes, and I thought, "This has to be love. Why the fuck else would I endure this?"

I know what she was doing to me. I knew she was drinking my blood. Fuck, that was hard to write. She was DRINKING MY BLOOD. But, it wasn't that fucked up. Or it didn't seem that fucked up then. In college, I dated this psycho girl who still lived at home, and we ended up sleeping over at her house just about every night and screwing like sea otters even though her mom was right next door. We'd have breakfast together. And I knew the situation was fucking weird for everyone involved. I knew it was sort of fucked up. But somehow, it was also normal.

The blood thing was like that. It got normal. It was just something we did, and it wasn't even the kinkiest thing I'd ever done either.

And on some level, I just wasn't putting it all together. I'd named her for what she was, but I didn't have a goddamn clue what that really meant.

I thought she was a girl with a kink, and the best lay I'd ever had, and I didn't know different until I saw her kill Mitchell with her bare hands.



HOW TO ESCAPE A VAMPIRE THAT HAS DECIDED TO KILL YOU

It was inevitable that I would get made by one of the vampires I was observing. I noticed some familiar faces, but I guess one of the vampires noticed mine one too many times. I was observing at The Anvil (in all honesty, because the music was mindless and distracting, and I got checked out there, which was something I needed just then because I was worried I was getting too thin). I turned around after getting another beer, and the vampire was there. The guy I'd observed there before. I tried to play it off, but he could see how I reacted to him.

He said, "I'd offer to get you a drink., but I see you beat me to it."

And I said, "Yeah, drinking alone tonight."

And he said, "That's a shame. I imagine there are lots of people here who'd like to keep you company."

And I said, "I suppose. But I'm just here for the atmosphere."

And he said, "That all?"

The whole time, I have that burning face I used to get when the teacher in 5th grade would ask some leading question intended to make me admit some fault or failure. I could feel his influence over me, making me want to walk to him, and tell him what I was doing, to unburden myself to this beautiful stranger.

But fuck that.

I'd felt that before, and I knew what I had to do to keep my head.

I said, "Yeah, it's getting late anyhow. Have to jet."

He tried to say something else, but I cut past him and headed for the door. I watched for him in the mirrors and reflective smoked glass by the bar, and saw his warped image moving through the crowd towards me, saw the way the people parted before him. He was coming for me.

Here's what I learned about escaping a vampire.

1. Despite their strength and speed and influence, they're not invisible and they won't attack with people around. (Seek crowds, and if you're in one, don't let the vampire lure or herd you away. Make a scene if you need to, attract attention, call the cops. I called the cops several times, just to get official attention pointed at a vampire I needed to distract.)

2. They aren't any smarter than regular people. (Hope the one coming to kill you is stupid or average. This pretty boy turned out to be as dim as his eyes were bright.)

3. Pepper spray still hurts them like a bitch. (I thought that they might have super-keen senses or something, but I was never sure. But they had eyes and a nose and a mouth, and I knew they could see and smell and taste, so this seemed like a good idea.)

I mingled with the crowd, and then hunched below the level of heads to grab the bottle I'd dropped. While down, I stepped back into the hall leading to the toilets and the back door. I excused myself past the couples clenched up along the way, and through into the alley. It was a totally obvious evasion, and he'd pick up on it immediately, but I hoped he was too stupid (he was) and too full of his superiority (he was) to get that I wasn't running from him like a scared kitten.

The thing I learned growing up with a sister who was in Mensa was that people who get praised constantly for something they did nothing to earn tend to get funny ideas about how awesome they are. If you can just *make people* say that you are awesome, then that's got to really mess you up. Fuck your judgment all to hell.

He walked out, looked left, looked right, and caught a huge squirt of my police-grade pepper spray right in his eyes and mouth, and he went apeshit, in a blind slashing frenzy, half clawing at his eyes, half hissing and swinging his arms around. I kept out of reach, and squirted him three more times when I got an opening, and then I ran like hell.

In the car, I called the cops and said a guy meeting his description had just tried to grab a woman and drag her into the alley, and got sprayed, but I was gone before they got there (if they ever came).

She said, "Let's go out."

I was taken aback. I lifted my face from between her legs, and looked up at her.

"Out?"

"Let's go dancing. I want to move tonight."

"We usually move a fair bit when we stay in..."

She pulled me up gently with a handful of my hair.

"First we dance, and then we fuck."

We got dressed up. She'd bought me clothes. Not my usual thing at all, but when I put them on and let her mess up my hair artfully with gel, I had to admit I looked pretty good. She shimmied into a sheath dress that looked like it was made from skinned mermaids. She did a couple of things to her hair, and threw on some FM shoes that gently kicked my libido over and over, keeping it from dozing off.

And so attired, we went to a place called Five Alive.

It was trying for some kind of post-irony glam-fun thing splashed liberally in all the colors found in a pack of Skittles. The waitresses mingling trays of Jell-O shots had Ziggy Stardust eyes. The music was sugary and peppy, like a puppy on meth. The place made Mad laugh and laugh, and she poured two shots of Goldschläger down me, before dragging me out onto the dance floor where we tore the place up. She moved like the music was in her blood, and her blood was moving her so fast that between the strobes she seemed to teleport. She was so good, I looked good dancing with her. I felt charged, and the crowd moved with her, like everyone was dancing backup. They watched us, and I could tell the guys wished they were me. Some of the girls, too. She got me throbbing, like I had a full body hard-on, and slowly the room faded until it was just she and I, and the music, and...

Fucking Mitchell.

Yelling over the music, he leaned in right into my space and I nearly punched him in the balls I was so pissed he got close when I was this charged up.

"Dude, holy shit Dude! Fucking primo, Dude!"

The spell was broken. Mad came over.

"Mad, this is Mitchell. He's one of the assholes I work with."

"Hey Asshole! Are you fucked up yet?"

"Kev, this bitch is awesome! Let's get fucked up!"

It was like she changed frequencies, and was suddenly sending and receiving on 103.9 FM THE MITCH.

We ended up in a corner booth, and Mad kept waving for more drinks. Mitchell pounded shot after shot, and then, "I got to tap a Kidney! Kev, don't let her get ahead of me - I'm two shots down as it fucking is!"

She turned and said to me, "He /S an asshole. I've got to piss too. Back in a tick." And she kissed me on the bridge of my nose, and god damn, was it nice watching her sway away through the crowd, just to see her ass move in that dress.

And I waited. Might have been a line to piss. I waited some more. A long line. I waited some more, and decided to go looking for them.

I tried the handle on the men's toilet and it was locked. From inside, I heard Mitchell's slurred voice, "Bitch, yeah! Here it is! Fucking here it is!" And Mad's voice too, indistinct, and I fucking lost it. I threw my shoulder against the door one, two, three, and the latch gave and...

It was exactly as bad as you could possibly imagine. Her, up on the sink, dress pushed up, him, pants around his ankles, working his shorts down, and fuck no wonder he pissed without holding his dick. It was like a third leg. But hell, that wasn't anything. I could deal with that. I deserved to see that after what I was doing to Jackie three times a week. No, it was what she was doing, her eyes wide and hungry, mouth opened, and about... to... bite....

"Fuck no! You do not fucking do that with him! Not with him!"

I plowed into him, and we went over in front of the urinals in the piss splatter, and I clipped my head on one of them going down. He was crazy with lust, like a rampant bull, and he made the

most of my dazed flopping. He roared at me, I don't think he even recognized me, and then he brought his fist down like a hammer on my face, once, twice. Three... no. Not three. I opened my eyes, and she was behind him, holding his wrist, and his hand wasn't moving. I tried to look at her, but something was unleashed in the room, and it tore at the air, and at my mind. I must have been a little concussed, but still, she was a fury unleashed, inhuman. She scared the fuck out of me, and then she grabbed Mitchell by the face and drove his head into the urinal with a sickening force. It reminded me of crash-test dummy videos. No human hand could exert power like that, and it smashed in Mitchell's skull, and he fell flopping next to me. He convulsed and drummed his heels and said, "Guh! Guh! Guh! Guh!" in jerky bursts, like a bleating animal. Then she reached down, cradling his head in her hands, and she twisted slowly like she was unscrewing a bottle. There was a sharp wet pop, and then Mitchell didn't move anymore.

She stood and stumbled back, pushing the hair out of her face, and the sight of her cut a gouge through me, made me want to rush to her, and protect her. It also hit me in the cock with a wave of warm lust. I wanted to throw her down and have her next to Mitchell's body. I didn't do either. I stood up. I said, "What the fuck? What the fuck?"

And she said, "We have to do something about this! We have to get him out of here! Oh fuck, oh fuck, I'm in so much fucking trouble if they find him."

The way she said it, I knew she didn't mean the cops.

I went to the door, and jammed my foot against it less someone stumble in. Just in time, too. It rattled, and pushed against my foot.

I said, "Clean him up! And... fuck, we'll carry him out between us like he's drunk. We need to fix his head somehow. Just good enough to get back to the car."

And so I watched her cleaning up the blood, and tying a bandana made from a strip off the bottom of my shirt around his head. I watched her pass in front of the mirror over and over, and saw the warped reflection she cast, the smeared face, indistinct. We got him between us, one arm over each of our shoulders, and that's how we left Five Alive with the corpse of Mitchell the asshole.



Here's more of the zine I found in her place. The author is talking about territory and hunting grounds, and I'm sure this isn't metaphor. In my observations, I didn't see much crossover. Each vampire seemed to have their own area or social circle. I have no idea what a "Haunt" is I've got no other references. Some kind of low-class vampire? Something else? Vampires are enough, I don't want to have to start believing in ghosts too.

Is this by a different author? It seems to contradict the other pages I found.

LEAVE THE STREET FOOD FOR THE HAUNTS We don't eat the meat-sticks or the greasy gutter burgers. Pick your stomping grounds where the fodder favors your favorite food, but if you come near La Mere Vipere I will fucking kill you, because all these beautiful punks are mine.

A straight fuck is fun, but anybody who's been in love knows it's better when it means something (but sometimes a good fuck is plenty). It all goes into the veins in the end - everything they eat, read, listen to, every dance move, dream, mixed-tape, love letter, even who they voted for (and Regan tasked like shit).

You have to know it, and know what they've been swimming in, and music is the surest way to find just the right boy or girl to blow your mind or just make your night.

Music pumps, and pounds, and makes the blood move a surging song, and the music that makes them move is the music in their hearts and in their brains, and if the music makes you burn too, then you're going to **TEAR IT UP TOGETHER.**



The posers will nod and shuffle around in their little cliques, but they'll taste as fake as they look, piss-weak and pretending to depth. The one you want is close to the stage dancing, and he's dancing for himself alone, because the music inside him is trying to get out and fuck the music pouring from the amps, and all you have to do is fit yourself into the spaces where his body isn't, and move with him, and your music and his will get together, and it will **CLAW YOUR HEART.**

He'll love you, if your blood is worth anything, and you love him back **FOR FUCKS SAKE**, because what have you got if you're not feeling it? You're nothing but a hungry puppet then, twitching on strings made from monster tendons. Cook the romance down till it's brown and hot, and shoot yourself full of it so you can't think straight for the love ripping through you, and you'd kick God in the balls to stay with the boy who danced with you.

If you're so dead you can't throw yourself into the teeth of love, then **GO STARE AT THE SUN**, and stop wasting space.

She drove the Navigator, Mitchell in the back with the golf clubs I hadn't used in weeks, and I took Mitchell's red Corvette. We screamed at each other on our phones while we drove.

"What the fuck are we going to do with a corpse, Mad? What are we going to do with him?"

"I don't know! I don't know! Stop yelling at me!"

My fury and fear were loose though, and I couldn't see her, and somehow it was easy to let out and I screamed abuse at her until the weeping coming through the phone snapped me out of it.

Over and over, she was wailing "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I fucked it all up. I'm sorry!"

The road was dark, and I pulled over, and saw in the rearview she was pulling over behind me. I got out, and so did she, and in the Navigator's headlights, we slammed together, and I held her and she screamed with her face pressed into my neck, but she didn't bite me. She just howled the way people do at Italian funerals. She shook, and was so scared. In a little bit, she pulled away and was a little better. I kissed her once, softly. She touched my face.

I said, "I have an idea."

We circled back towards town, and when we got to the right spot, put Mitchell in his Vet, and jammed the gas with his shoe, and then popped it into gear, sending him roaring down Western Avenue so he clipped the bridge embankment, and then over-ended into the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. The water was achingly cold. It would screw up the cops figuring a time of death. He'd be smashed up from being bounced around in the car. He was drunk as shit, and still had most of his blood inside him. A tragic fucking accident.

We got back to her place, and it was nearly five in the morning. I had half a dozen messages on my phone from Jackie, and I ignored them. I helped Mad inside, and we took a shower together with the water as hot as it would go, and I cried then, and she held me then.

We stumbled into her bedroom, and she said, "Stay with me? Through the day?"

I said I would.

She said, "I'll fall asleep but it won't really be like sleep. You won't be able to wake me up, or it'll be really hard. It's..."

"I know. I get it now."

"But I'll know you're here, so please stay."

"I will."

I knew when the sun came up because of how she shook, gently. Curled up, forehead to forehead, her wet hair plastered across both our faces, I couldn't miss it. She took a long slow breath, let it out. And stopped breathing. She became utterly still, unmoving, like a corpse on a slab. I watched her lights go out, and felt the rise of panic, because it was like watching someone you love die. Fuck, "like it". That's what it was. Then, I saw the faint motion under her eyelids, like she was dreaming. I squeezed her closer.

I whispered, "I love you."

And she shook again, her legs twitching with the ghost of running, and she gave a faint, high whimper. I thought she was asleep then. She wasn't, though - suddenly, maybe a minute later, all her little movements and noises and things just... stopped. Like she was dead.

I guess she was.

After that it just wasn't right anymore. Something was lost between us. Twist my arm, I'd tell you she'd lost something. She was just a little more distant. Her smile, just a little slower in coming. And when she'd look at me, there was just a touch more of that frightening raw hunger. I couldn't forget the thing that had been unleashed when Mitchell had tried to beat my face in. She knew that too, and that was part of it. Mitchell was fucking things up for me from beyond the grave.

About a month later, after taking a week off and ignoring her texts and messages, I went back to her place. I'd been trying to patch things up with Jackie. We'd become roommates, really. We hardly saw each other, and she had to know I was fucking around on her, but when she looked at me it was with pity rather than anger. She sensed something wrong with me. That whatever I was mixed up in, it was making me miserable. I honestly can't believe she stuck it

out, but her Dad was a shit who used to beat on her and her Mom, so it might have been some kind of cycle of abuse thing, or something worse, like her still loving me, and caring that I was circling the bowl.

But after a week, I went back to Mad.

I should have called first.

I knocked, and nobody answered, and I was going to leave when the door opened and it was her little sister. I started to say something, but she held her finger up to her lips and shushed me.

I followed her in, and she pointed to the bedroom and stabbed at her neck with two fingers, curved like fangs. Then waggled her eyebrows, then stuck out her tongue and made a gross-out face.

I felt nothing. None of the jealous rage I felt when I saw her with Mitchell. I knew she had to be seeing someone else. I knew the blood wasn't just a kink. Still, I should have felt something.

Her little sister pointed at the papers scattered on the table, and pointed to the crayons, and then to the couch. I sat, and started to draw with her. I drew a stick-man and a stick-woman standing by a black river. The little girl looked at it, and nodded. She showed me her drawing, and it was the man from the first drawing she'd made for me, this time he was punching another man in the face and the word balloon above him said, "PUNCH!"

I looked at her and raised my eyebrows, and she held up one finger for "Wait"... one second... two seconds... three seconds... she nodded, and lowered her hand, and from Mad's bedroom someone started to wail and cry, and then I heard a man's voice, deep and rough, "Fucking bitch! What the fuck!"

I was through the door, the kid's papers scattering behind me. Flash of light from the open door. I took it in. The dude was huge. He matched the Harley I saw in the parking lot the way two puzzle pieces mach to make a complete picture. He was bleeding from his neck, and had one hand clutched there, the other shading his eyes from the sudden brightness. She... she was huddled back from him, in the corner, bearded in blood, chest and tits covered like she was hemorrhaging from her mouth. But of course, none of it was hers.

She was crying and yelling, "No! No!"

He was trying to threaten and yell and curse all at the same time, and it came out all smeared, just round noise. Snap, Snap, Snap, I took it in like a paparazzi clicking pictures, and slammed my elbow into the side of his head with my whole body behind it. It fired a spike of pain, numbness and tingling nerves all the way to my fingers, but he went down, and I followed like riding a falling tree.

Big, but he was hurt. I knew the weakness he was feeling, the sick dizziness. When the adrenaline hit him too, he had no coordination. I drove my elbow down over and over into his face, sparing myself a broken hand. I don't think my Dad would believe what his boy was doing with the little bit of self defense he taught me.

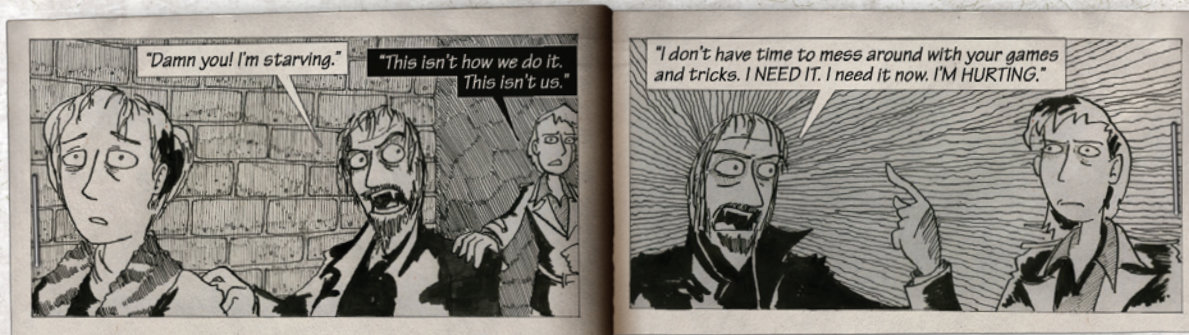
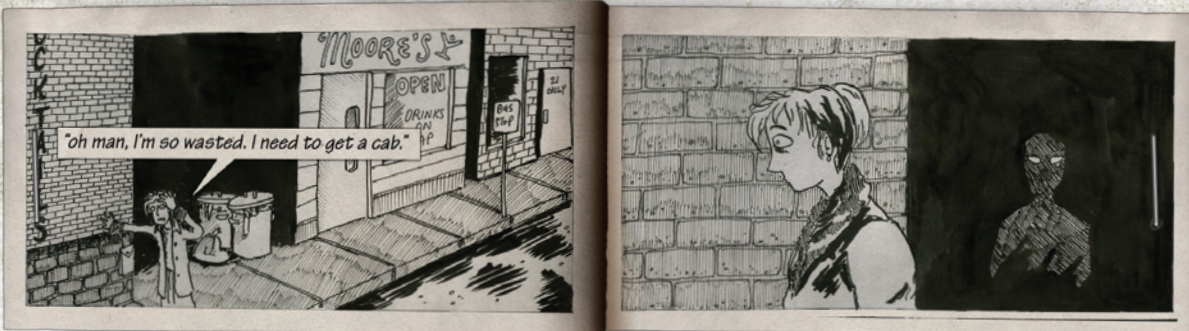
When he quit moving, his face was a mess. Split and bleeding. My arm was fucked up too, and I'd chipped some bone pounding into his skull. I heaved, sucking air hard, and swayed to my feet. From the door, a snort of derision, and the Kid turned her back and went back to the table, and her crayons. I went to Mad, and crouched down before her, and she clutched at me and it hurt. I ended up with the biker's blood all over my shirt.

When she calmed down, she wouldn't tell me what was going on. She just showered, and then found a new shirt for me in the wreckage of the place, and told me she'd take care of the biker. I told her I couldn't let her kill him. She said she wouldn't. She promised.

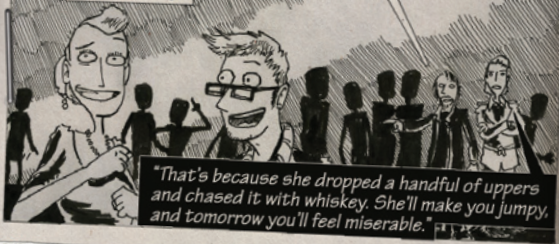
I left.

When I came back the next night, she was gone.

Here's one of TRACTMARKS23's comics. This one really disturbed me. The imagery is raw, and there's no humor. The artist is trying for realism - moreso than in the other tract, at least. The first time I read this, it made me feel physically sick because of the facial expressions on the characters. I saw so much of Mad's unleashed hunger in some faces, and in others, what had to be my own ecstasy in surrendering my body to her. This is definitely the oldest one. The paper is really yellowed and it's got an earnest quality the others lack. The clothes look pretty 70's too. I think this one is an original rather than a reprint.

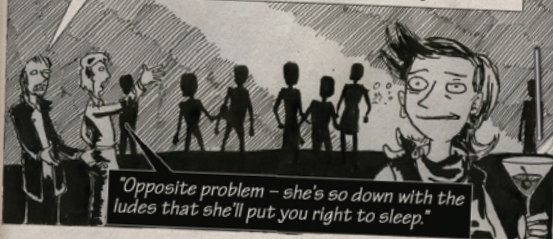


"What about her? She's dancing like a whore with everyone. She'll be easy."



"That's because she dropped a handful of uppers and chased it with whiskey. She'll make you jumpy, and tomorrow you'll feel miserable."

"Her then. She's sitting at the bar, she's not dancing too hard."



"Opposite problem - she's so down with the ludes that she'll put you right to sleep."

"This is why I went down that alley! I can't keep up with all your stupid rules and standards. I never wanted to be upper-crust! I like whores. I hate feeling beneath a woman that's beneath me, if you catch my meaning."



"The problem isn't my standards, it's your self esteem. I picked you because I saw something in you I liked, despite the leather and the attitude. You had real potential."

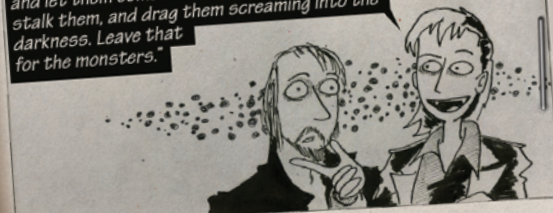


"I didn't grab you and drag you into an alley, did I?"



"I guess not."

"It's our privilege among all our kind to sit at our ease, and let them come to us. We don't hunt them, and stalk them, and drag them screaming into the darkness. Leave that for the monsters."



"They give themselves to us, and when we're through, they thank us and beg us not to leave them. They bare their necks for us, and when we spare their lives, they weep at the rejection."

"That isn't better than the alley! It's worse. You drag them into the darkness, and you savage them. That's clean. It's like wolves and sheep. But this..."



"... is wrong! It's like raping their souls to make them want to be our food."



"Of course it's worse. It's a curse. And the moment you stop hating it at least a little bit is the moment when there's nothing left. Treasure your disgust and self-loathing. When it's gone, so are you."



I called her a hundred times, and got nothing, and then got a message that the number had been disconnected. I kept going to her condo, knocking so loud someone called the cops on me, and I told the cops to go fuck themselves, and then something broke loose inside me and I started screaming at them, and then weeping uncontrollably. I remember them trying to talk me down, and I looked down, and I had a length of decorative wrought iron rail that I'd yanked from beside her door. I screamed something about just wanting to talk to her, and then it felt like every muscle in my body clenched at once.

One cop said to the other, "Is he down?"

And the other one said, "Fucking nutjob. Taze him again."

They bounced me for a twenty-four hour hold, and I ended up in the county psyche ward. I screamed until they narced me into a drooling zombie. It felt fucking great to have consciousness extinguished that way. To just be, without thought.

When the hold expired, I saw the hollow-cheeked psych-nurse, and she asked me questions off a checklist. I gave the right answers. They cut me loose, with a court date for disturbing the peace. The cops were pretty cool about it, because they could have hit me with a felony resisting charge, but let it go. The two tazer burns on my back kept me from feeling too good about it though.

I went home, and got some things together in a bag, and left the rest of it. Let Jackie sort it out, chuck it, keep it, sell it. I was done ruining her life. I just left, and never returned her calls. When my phone service got canceled because I didn't pay the bill, I switched to prepaid and she never got the number.

I went back to Mad's place a week after getting out. I went during the day, in brown shorts and a brown ball cap. I had a package. I talked to the property manager and said I had this package to deliver to Madael North, but he said nobody by that name lived there, and nobody ever did. I showed him the address. Nope, not her. When I did a reverse lookup later on, the name listed for her condo was Dan Winder. I wondered if he wore boxers with cowboys on them.

That night, I jumped the fence into the tiny backyard, and the sliding glass door was unlocked the way I remembered it always being. I let myself in, and pulled around in the dark. All her stuff was gone, and I found the remnants of half a dozen guy's clothes scattered here and there, different sizes, different styles. Some of it was mine, of course. Some of it I couldn't make any sense of. I just didn't know what to look for, so I grabbed some of this and some of that, stuffing it into a gym bag I found in her bedroom. I grabbed a bunch of her sister's drawings from where they were taped to the fridge. I finished the last beer from the twelve pack I'd bought her, ferreting it out from where it had hid behind a curdled gallon of ancient milk.

I felt something itching in me while looking at the place too... the urge to clean it up, and make it tidy. Somehow... order it. Make it make sense. I actually started straightening before I caught myself, and I left fast. That itching would only get worse, and it made me remember my Mom, and her vacuuming and her light switch ritual when she tucked us into bed. She'd touch the light switch three times, and then turn it off. According to the internet, obsessive compulsive spectrum disorders have a genetic link, and can be aggravated by stress. Of all the aberrations I'd picked up from Mad, the gnawing urge to impose order on my environment is perhaps the most benign. The worst has to be the observations I make now.

It's like porn. Looking at porn on the internet is so free and easy. Oh look, vagina! It's like that with looking for vampires. You see one, and then, you start looking for more, and you see more, and you start looking for more, and eventually you end up sort of feeling disgusted with yourself, but... you always go back and look again. That's how the observations are.

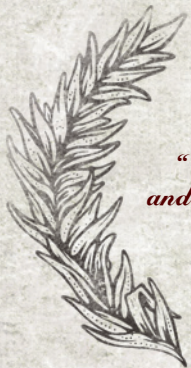
I've reordered my life around making them. I work any job that comes along so I can make rent, feed myself, and track and catalog vampires. I've watched them, watched what they do to people. I've seen their hunger, naked and raw. I've seen it under layers of romance and affection. I think that's scarier, and it made me remember my first night with Mad, and that made me shake, and then I had to wash every piece of clothing I owned, and that meant twenty dollars in quarters for the crappy laundry machines in Daryl's converted house, and that means I didn't have grocery money that week, and that meant I stole people's lunches and weight-loss shakes from the fridge at the office where I was temping as a file clerk. I even drank half the bottle of pumpkin spice holiday coffee creamer. Funny thing too - none of that made me feel desperate

or out of control, but not knowing how many paper-clips I had left in my paper-clip holder drove me crazy, and I had to recount them over and over. When I took them, the meds smoothed things out, but they made my thoughts slippery, and I kept crying for no reason.

And so here I am at the end of my story.

I don't have much else to say about it. I've just been making my observations, and keeping fit, and working, and putting together the Big Picture. I don't know what's going to happen to me. I don't know how long I can keep doing this - something is going to snap, and I'll end up back in County, or in jail, or on the street, or dead. I'm going to get noticed, watching the way I do. I've already had some close calls. But, I know I'm not going to stop. I'm going to keep looking until I find her, or she finds me, or one of her cousins catches on to me, and... poof. I'm gone.

[34]



*"I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your loveliness
and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them
both in the same minute."*

- John Keats



Wind and fog blow in from the bay, tainting even the living with the chill of the dead. Streetlamps struggle in vain to cut through the white blanket, but all they look like are little moons. The Savages drift along the winds unnoticed, sticking to our skin and mocking our every gesture. Or so I imagine. I've never been to the Mission. Indeed, I've barely strayed from Queens in the past few decades. However, some acquaintances have made the difficult cross-country journey, and I've been able to keep in touch.

The Sanctified Mission in San Francisco was founded around the same time as its mortal equivalent. Where the mortal Mission converted the natives, often with a substantial degree of force, the Sanctum Embraced the dead and the dying. The natives of the Mission, whether genuinely Native or not, have generally been grateful and zealous as a result. Many of the reigning elders, in fact, are not white conquerors but Indians who have wholeheartedly assimilated Kindred, if not necessarily Spanish or Anglo culture.

San Francisco, of course, has grown exponentially over the decades. The Mission itself has not entirely followed the city, and rules large sections of the surrounding area while ceding portions of the urban center to other factions among the Damned. The Lancea Sanctum and the Invictus are both strong and numerous, but not necessarily traditional. The Sanctified, for example, integrate a number of unique creeds brought by the Embrace of Christians from outside their original Catholic base. The Invictus are another matter altogether.

Since the Mission rarely rejects members of other covenants from its congregation, many young Sanctified eventually find roles in the Invictus. Combined with the population spike we've observed since the last Great War, this seems to have created a large number of young, energetic Invictus with ties to the other covenants. In practical terms, the younger factions of the covenant wield more influence than those they allegedly owe fealty to. As a result, the Mission was an early center of the Cacophony, a subject I asked my cousins to investigate. The Invictus of the Mission seem to be preparing for an information war between themselves and humanity, a war they intend to win through superior intelligence and preparation.

The Mission is also the center of hybrid Sanctified-Groce cults, an unusual phenomenon of which the current Bishop has been unusually tolerant. Word of the Cult of Lilith, possibly a branch of the more familiar Livian Keresy or Red Madonna sects, reaches me regularly even across the wastes of the Midwest. The Carthian Movement seems to have been stifled by the progressive nature of the younger Invictus, and I'm given to understand that they're little more than an extortion racket, absorbing revenue from labor unions. The Carthians' financial future may rest in the immigrant trade, but I certainly won't be investing.

Perhaps most interesting to me from a family perspective is the growing population of North African Daeva in the area. I've been unable to find out much, but it seems that the Ishtarri sun-cult have carved out their own diocese.

I was entrusted with this tape some years ago, along with a number of other artifacts from the Mission in California. I'm told that copies have been circulating in the Cacaphony there, despite the best efforts of the local Sanctified. As you'll read, the Mission has its own peculiarities, but much of what he says rings true even at my vast remove. I've transcribed the relevant contents, maudlin as they are. You will forgive me changing a few particulars and omitting the pop ballads recorded between the young man's monologues.

Mixtape

— Em's Mix —

A

B

Goodbye, Em. The dead travel fast, and I have to run. I don't know when you'll find this. When you do, I hope you're not angry. I'm not asking you to forgive me, because I've fucked you over so many times, I've killed you and now I'm leaving you to rot. I'm just trying to do what's right. Tell you why you died, and what you need to do now that you're not dead anymore. Call it my Ninth Step. Amends without expectations.

A

B

Mike was right about me, even if he wasn't fair. I was only after one thing. I'm cutting this tape so that you'll know that I... that I didn't do it because I didn't care about you. I want you to understand what I am before you have to become it yourself.

Oh, and I read about Mike's death. Believe me. That wasn't me. I'm sorry, though.

Burn the tape when you're done, unless you want to remember me.

Track 2: *Blood*

Starting tonight, you're only as alive as the people you keep around you. Our condition comes with an urge to excess and then withdraw. You have to fight that. If instinct or accident hasn't taught you already, I will: you need fresh blood, or you'll die. You've died once, I know, and I hope you don't want to go back there.

You can get by on animal blood for a while, but I don't recommend it. I've seen the guys that do that, and they learn all the wrong lessons. They turn into predators, hunting and killing even when they begin to feel the need for the blood of people. You need to learn two things: how to control yourself and how to relate to your food. Neither of them are going to be easy, but both are necessary if you're going to live with yourself.

Oh, and about living... you're going to hear a lot about dead and undead and shit like that. That's self-justifying crap, from people who want to play at being outsiders or martyrs. Those pricks'll tell you not to have friends or sex or anything else fun, too, and all you'll get for listening to them is a quick trip to crazy. The same dickheads will tell you you're not human, that you've got to reconcile yourself to a Beast Within... whatever. All they're doing is inventing crazy religion so they can live with what bastards they are. I have to remember to tell you more about that.

The truth's simpler: you're cursed. I cursed you. I dragged you into a shit deal because I think you're better off alive and immortal than dead. Because I got greedy. Immortal? Yeah, you're immortal. As long as you follow my advice. You could think of it as a disease, or an addiction, but you might as well have claimed you were addicted to food. This isn't like the pills, it isn't an option that your body's turned into a need... it's a do-or-die. No cold turkey.

Track 3: *Lies*

Start lying. You think that's not new to you, but trust me, it is. I knew you were

still seeing Michael. You have to start being convincing, because the world is out to get you, from the sun on down to most of your new family. (Family... remember that for later.) Right now, you probably want to run home to your mom and dad, break down crying, and confess everything from your life of sin to your hunger for blood. Do not fucking do that.

Any time you tell the truth, from now to eternity, you will get someone killed. Maybe you, usually them. The worst, stupidest lie you can tell is better than someone knowing that you're a half-step away from opening them like a milk carton. (Oh, and by the way, you are. I'm sorry.)

Fortunately, you'll find people want to believe you. Play your cards right, and they'll want to hang on your every word. You're better now, more attractive and more alluring, and if you learn how to work that, you can have everything you want without anyone needing to know who you are.

Most lies, you can tell with your head, but there are a few you've got to tell with your heart. Looked in the mirror yet? I'm sure you have. You'll have seen the problem. Your body probably also feels strange, a little numb, or still or something? That's related. You need to learn how to make your heart beat, make your body operate like everybody else's. It's a little weird, learning to flex those muscles on purpose, but you'll get the hang of it, and after you've got it down the reflection thing will come along like second nature. Think of it like Kegel exercises. Little awkward at first, but they'll make everything better.

Warning, though: faking a heartbeat will make you hungry. Just like any lie, you've got to tell it carefully and with perfect timing.

Track 6: *Feeding*

Listen or starve tonight.

If I wasn't so chicken-shit, you wouldn't have to learn this yourself. I hope to God you're listening to this before you have to. You will live the rest of your life on human blood. That does not make you a killer.

Only you can make you a killer. That's your sin, and the jury's out on whether it can be forgiven.

For safety's sake, it's probably safest to start with strangers. The classic pull is to pick up a guy in a bar, so let's go with that. Your ideal hunting ground, at least to start with, is going to be in a slightly risky part of town. The Mission reaches far enough out to get you there, and you can even walk a bit outside the borders. You want to pick someplace where the common people are used to or even looking for a little danger. When you start out, you're going to send off a little bit of a predator vibe, and you'll be better off if you're hunting someplace where your targets want to ignore it.

With that restriction, and remembering that you may have to abort in a hurry and not come back for a few years, try to pick someplace you like. Remember Jack Billiards? I used to pull chicks there all the time. Yes, while I was seeing you. I had to eat. Anyway, find a venue you understand. As you get older, you'll learn how to watch people, how to become part of any scene. Learning begins at home, though.

Feeding is a game, the way pool's a game to a lifelong hustler. There are rules and there are scores and sometimes you will lose. If you lose too often, your bed will swallow you in the morning and you will never wake again. The game starts when you find the crowd. You'll hear the term "herd" a lot, and you'll probably use it to fit in, but don't believe it. The crowds around you, they are humans, men and women, beautiful and exquisite creatures with their own splendors and mysteries. If I overstate, it's because you need to understand. Our art isn't to degrade them, like the Lords, but to inspire and persuade them to give us our sustenance.

Some night, you'll have friends and wingmen. A coterie for a prince or an entourage for a star. For now, you've only got your wits, a few tricks of the blood... and me. Listen close. The key to pulling a takeout is volume. You're more alluring than you were before your transfiguration, yes, but you've got to enhance that. Dress a little different than everyone else – on the cutting edge of fashion, or maybe a little timeless. Try and have at least one piece of

clothing that'll confuse the people checking you out, something they'll focus on more than your features. The first rule of the game is safety, and safety comes from being recognized for what you project, not what you are.

Okay, so you're dolled up... I wish I could see. Really. But you've got the serious drilled into your head now? Good. 'Cause now it's time for the fun. Understand, the human psyche is basically a machine. Hormones, neuroreceptors, a lot of stuff Dracula cultists will go on about. You don't need to understand all that, but you do need to know what it's all for. The crowd's minds are designed to keep them alive by keeping their genes alive. That's why they pursue sex, that's why God made sex fun. You, my dear, are wired to stay alive in an entirely different fashion. You're not attracting licks to keep your species alive, you're keeping yourself alive. In order to do that, you have to exploit the loopholes in their wiring, their programming...whatever metaphor you like.

If you're laughing at all this, remember how well it worked on you.

[38]

You're out on the town. Like I said, a favorite spot will do to start, but eventually you'll want to follow the crowds. Start practicing that. Circulate. Spark up conversations. The best trick for that is idle questions: where's the bathroom, that kind of thing. Don't flatter targets right away, because they'll know you're up to something. Hell, don't begin with your targets at all. Start your socializing around the bottom of the heap, the mortals who are engaged in conversations but clearly have a low attraction value. You'll stand out next to them. The others will wonder why you're slumming.

Death and rebirth has done a good job rewiring your instincts. I can't tell you what it'll feel like, lust or hunger or thirst, but you'll have an attraction to the right targets. Usually several in a given crowd. Don't be impatient – you might have to work them all in a given night – but don't hesitate, either. Once you've been circulating, once you've established yourself as an above-average member of the group, begin immediate approaches.

I didn't say direct. No. You see the guy now, right? Probably one of your skinny,

long-hair types. Yeah, I paid attention. He has a friend that's not pinging your radar. They're just talking, hanging out, having a little fun. You move in on the friend. Acknowledge the one you want, yeah, but this whole game is making him want you. He needs to be fumbling for any chance to have you, not making a reasoned decision whether or not he should. You'll discover very quickly that you can hook targets with a look. I'm teaching you how to keep them from swimming away. He can't get away while you've got his friend.

Your target's best interests are different than yours. He's probably just looking for a little fun, and he's got a hundred reasons not to take it outside of your hunting venue. You, on the other hand, mean him harm. Just a little, you're not all that bad, but it's harm. A transaction where you are taking and he is giving. You might be able to get him out by the back door and put the Kiss on him. What you really want, though, is to establish a lasting connection, a reliable donor, as you were to me.

Gradually, favor the target with your presence and looks. Let him feel that he's winning you over, that he's outmaneuvering his friend. Make him think he's breaking in a stallion rather than getting a gift horse. Again, questions are the key. Targets are intrigued by your mystery, but they're flattered when they think you're after theirs. Learn to listen, to recognize what he wants you to ask next. The more your questions fit his expectations, the less suspicious he'll be. No target uses rational decision making: either he wants sex or he wants to feel like he can eventually get it. Those are emotional needs, and you need to keep them at the forefront of his mental program.

Don't go for the tap the first night. Instead, obtain contact information for several attractive targets. If you're absolutely starving... well, go for the rats. But it's better to keep a rhythm where you don't have to.

Your charms, natural or supernatural, will wear off after the target's no longer interacting with you. He's not likely to meet another of our Kindred, but he'll probably run across somebody he's just as attracted to tomorrow night. Your

strategy has to include investment, attaching the target to you. Buying you drinks is a good investment, as is time spent chasing you. The most reliable form of investment is sex. Contrary to stereotype, that's a good one for either men or women. They'll retroactively imagine all kinds of reasons they succumbed to your charms, and they'll invent reasons to do it again. They're wired that way. If your main lure is that you actually put out, you'll want to offer something they can't get elsewhere. Vanilla was fine with me, but I was the one feeding from you. And Michael? There's nothing that guy wants that he wouldn't grovel for.

Taboos make pretty good lures, although there are precious few worth cultivating anymore. When I was brought over, you could make a comfortable habit feeding off of swingers or nudists or bondage freaks; these days, they can get their jollies on the web or even basic cable. Infidelity, though, that's a great standby. You set yourself up as the greener grass, and the target'll leap fences for you. Even better, once you've got him, you've become the path of least resistance, his way to feel valued outside his proper relationship without having to keep working the bars like he was when he met you.

The goal is to cultivate the target into a regular date, someone you can see on your schedule and tap as often as he can give. When in doubt, just remember how I did it to you.

Track 7: Family and Foes

You know how I told you I was unique? That's one of those lies we've been talking about. Someone brought me into this life like I brought you. I don't really want to talk about him, but he was enough of a bastard to have earned the name "father." That's how our Kindred understand relationships. The person who cursed you is your father or mother, and anybody else they made, or, uh "Embraced," is your brother or sister. Distant relations are cousins. When you're among Kindred, it's usually just best to address them as "cousin," unless you know better.

Different bloodlines and dynasties have different names. Telling Kindred who you are is usually asking for old grudges to come out, but you should know that you're a Daeva and a Callas. Daeva's your clan – we're the most ancient and important dynasty of Kindred. Callas is my grandfather's name, he was one of the founders of the Mission. If worse comes to worse, you can mention his name and mine. Legitimate bloodlines get a little bit of protection in the Mission. Outsiders and genuine orphans get left for the sun.

Other clans... they're kind of like us and kind of not. We go back as far as civilization. The others are either our degenerate offspring or monsters with superficial similarities. Understand, curse or not, the Daeva are still human inside. Your heart is still full of life and love, even if sometimes it's still. You'll feel that pull, you'll indulge yourself across centuries in ways no ordinary person can.

The others are crippled. Be careful of them. Instead of humanity preserved beyond death, they're humanity with parts chopped off. We live with them because of strength in numbers, but they are not and never will be our equals. Lie about that, though, because their jealousy could kill you.

The Ventrue... heh, they call themselves "Lords." Seriously, you go up to one and ask. He'll say that. I don't know where their family tree split from ours, but they don't have any majesty or grandeur, just the ability to force others to follow orders. Dangerous, don't misunderstand, but degenerate. Their dependence on forcing others breaks down their own will and self. Eventually, they all lose their marbles, and they become as pathetic as they are dangerous. You'll find a lot of them strutting around the Mission, wrapped in titles and boasting of victories... but if you listen, you'll hear how short their reigns have been. Their family endures and even prospers, but the individuals break in a matter of decades.

Our condition breeds prophets and cultists. Most of these gather under the name "Mekhet," and whether they're one family or several is something I've never quite figured out. What I do know is that they're secretive, insular, and completely and utterly evil. They slink through every

shadow, they kill who they like and they never get caught. They know stuff, too. Ventrue just break your will, the Shadow-guys know your sins. I think we only put up with them because we're afraid of them. I'm afraid of them.

The Nosferatu are Kindred only by adoption, but they're among the better monsters to associate with. They're the only clan that doesn't try to be us. The first of them were the corpses of sinners, raised by witches or Satan or something, back in the dark ages. Maybe they were made in our image, maybe it's a freaky coincidence. Anyway, the poor guys aren't quite right. Their faculties are fine, but most of them have bodies that are warped and hideous... the few lucky enough to escape that, smell like formaldehyde or rot or just feel wrong. Thing is, that's taught them humility and cooperation. Don't go trusting them or anything, but you could do worse than to hang around their dens some. The Haunts understand the value of remembering their humanity almost as well as we do.

There are wandering tribes, too – you'll usually hear them called Bruja, although their proper house is Gangrel. They hang out in packs, like wolves. They do a lot of growling and posturing, so you might figure them for posers like the Ventrue, but that's the kind of stupid mistake I used to make. You might pull a grift on one Savage, or beat him down in an almost-fair fight. Once you do that, though, you make an enemy of every single one. I'm saying that because I've done it, and I got the shit beat out of me.

There are a lot of blood junkies out there, too. Guys like Mike... I guess I have to tell you. The whole time Mike was telling you I was bad for you, I was dangerous or fucked up or whatever? He was sucking from my wrist. That's why he looked young for forty, too. Filtered through our bodies, blood becomes a drug. A regular person who drinks it gets a feeling like we do when we feed... and sometimes a few of the perks of immortality. The main two things are that their aging slows down, and damn do they want more. I thought about giving that to you, a lot of times, but I held out. I wanted you to want me, not my blood. I guess you did, but look where it got us. Anyway...

I guess I'm making our local crowd out to be pretty bad, but they're not. I've been south, not just out of the Mission, but out of the city, far down as Santa Cruz. I don't recommend trying it, but if you do, don't rely on family ties to protect you. They're barbarians and witches down there, animals who've bought entirely into the line that they're less than human and run far too far with it. They don't just eat regular people, they eat Kindred. I saw a guy braised in the sunlight and then devoured by the witches and the night birds. If you have to go south, be careful. Don't talk to strangers, try to feed as rarely as possible, and don't accept any invitations to "parties" or anything. You do not want to end up as dinner at one of their sabbats.

Track 11: Covenant

Remember I said we're as old as civilization, and the others, they're pretty old, too? Well, we've got some civilization of our own. I don't know how far it goes back, but our family and the others have religions and political movements.

You'll need to go to church. That's mandatory, and if you want, you can blame my dad. If you don't, you'll get hunted down. Any Catholic or Anglican church will do, try for one of the later masses. That's where the new ones like you get recruited. You'll be approached by some of our Kindred there... it'll feel weird, but don't freak. They'll invite you to the real Church. I don't need to tell you the dogma or anything, but just follow their lead, go through the baptism, take communion. Show up for midnight mass each week, wherever it's being held. That's the surest way not to get hassled.

The Church is our covenant with God, lending purpose to our sins, that we might be forgiven for them at the end of days. I'm not sure I believe that anymore, but I hope it's true. Other covenants are subordinate to the Church, but they've all got something to offer. I've tried each... but I guess I'm not the belonging kind.

The Invictus are a covenant between Kindred, making sure our secrets stay buried and the Mission stays safe for

everybody. They talk a lot about knights and barons and that kind of bull, but their real purpose is to protect the Church and those it shelters. I'd recommend getting to know the younger ones... they've got a real no-nonsense approach, and they can teach you a lot about hiding in plain sight, and living it up in the process. The elders are stuffy... honestly, just bow and scrape for them and they'll pass you by.

I used to laugh at the Dracula cult, 'cause they figure they can beat the curse. After a few years on the street, I was pretty well sure I was Damned forever. Their line, though, is that the curse can

be turned against itself, that all we need is the right magic or science and then we'll all be better than human, not just different. Some of them are even further out there – they say that if we take on another curse, we can transcend the one we already suffer. Honestly, that thought scares me, but the Draculas do some pretty good tricks. I've seen them walk on burning coals, and some of the oldest still subsist on animal blood.

Some of our family have formed a... I don't know... counter-Church. Instead of being cursed by God, they think God is within us. They call her Lilith, or the

Mother of Monsters. Their rites look a lot like the real Church, but they invite spirits into their bodies and talk to owls and other weird shit. To me, they seem more pagan than faithful, and they give me the fucking willies, but the Church lets them hang out in the Mission, and it seems like there are more of them every year. Plus, honestly, a lot of our cousins are members. If you want your name to mean something, go to them. Just don't mention mine.

So what if you don't go to any of them? Then when they spot you, they'll take you for an orphan and they'll kill you accordingly. Having no family is a crime.

[40]



The Cacophony

Another audio file, from my family in the Mission. I can't say I'm comfortable with the methods, given my daughter's own involvement in the Cacophony, and the extensive uses to which I've put her. It's too easy to imagine her or my son in the position of this young man... nonetheless, the tape was made at my request.

That... that was...

Shh. It was good. Don't be embarrassed.

You, too? I was a little worried, uh, with the... and the...

[Sound of laughter.]

Hey, we're dead. Can't be expected to remember everything.

Which reminds me.....shit, almost 5.

And here I thought I was just good.

[Pause.]

Don't give me that look. You could snap those anytime you want to.

But... I bet I can do something about your wanting to.

[More laughter.]

No, I'm serious. We're serious, I guess.

Uh, Dev?

It's in my bag, hold on.

Holy shit. That's...

What it looks like. We'll split it.

Shit. You mean it?

You think I don't? After the tongue and the...?

Serious, Dev.

Serious. There are rules. We split the dose. That's about ten hours each, and I promise it will be the best ten hours since your life. I promise that even if you just lie out there in the tub and we don't do it even once.

Alive, again.

Just ten hours. And really alive.

Dev.

Shh. No crying. You'll just get blood everywhere. Save the tears for when they're real again. Just yes, or no.

[Pause]

Yes.

Okay. Take a breath. Make your blood flow.

[Sound of inhalation.]

No. Gentle. Like a cigarette, like you're on the pull.

[Pause]

Yeah. There. Now, the needle's going to go under your tongue. Don't bite my fingers off, 'kay?

[Both giggle.]

[Strangled, pained sound.]

Don't worry, that's just your caps reinflating. Vitae back to blood. Give it a second...

Ooooh...

Shh. Good?

Yeah.

Don't try to stand up yet. Start throwing up now, you're going to waste an hour or two.

Can I see the sun?

No. There are rules. No sun, no blood tricks. You may be running on human but you'll still burn easy.

[Heavy breathing.]

I'm starting to think I owe you big.

Keep thinking that, Andy.

Well, if you'll scoot up here...

[Sound of someone rummaging in a purse.]

[Laughter - from Dev?]

Then I guess I'll have to...

[Sound of someone struggling with handcuffs, then more laughter.]

I told you, no blood tricks.

[A slow, wet rip - razor on flesh?]

[Whispering.]

Just you. Just me. And some very serious questions.

*From the same tape,
after the above interview.*

Yeah, I get the picture. I must be really fucking scared, huh? If you're looking at me like that and I'm not on my knees. Must be pretty fucking angry, too, since -

- Fine. The story. Fucking Daeva and fucking stories. They call you snakes, you know that? From god-damn Genesis. 'S'all you fuckers do, tell stories, tell lies.

I'll be good. Okay, I guess - people talk, right? The Invictus talk. We know that appearance is a matter of life and death. So we fucking talk about it. You know why we have Harpies? Even here, in the Mission? Because somebody's got to watch the clothing and the slang and the little nuances of behavior. You all think they're making you look pretty. They're not, they're making you look human.

Anyway, so we talk. Back in the '60s, I was a Harpy, on a cleaner coterie. The summer of love was still a while off, but we were starting to see the problems already. The mortal baby boom increased the food supply. On cue, we started multiplying. Not just illegal Embraces... there were larvae, too. We were headed for more homeless than we'd had settled herd a decade or so earlier. The Mission's always been kind of loose, encouraging Kindred to pursue their own little projects, scourge out the sin and shit, right? That was no good for keeping the place clean.

Before the sixties, there was just one way the new dead went: they got brought to court, presented, baptized and all that shit. We kept them coming. Anybody who wouldn't clean up, we cleaned up. Simple and sustainable. But only as long as everybody knew everybody else. Pretty soon, even the legit fledglings were too numerous for anybody but a professional cleaner to keep track of. We were actually hauling guys in, seeing if anybody recognized them, and, often as not, letting them go free.

Worse, no matter how tight we kept the Masquerade, the kine were starting to believe in us, anyway. Belief without evidence. Fucking faith. Needless to say, this was a threat to our lifestyle.

So, some of us, Invictus, loyal but just a little more clever, we started to experiment. The herd were pamphleteering all the fucking time, writing survival guides and spiritual manifestos and shit like that. It was working for them. The hippies were starting to build themselves a little cancer culture that could live on the host, and they were doing it with mass communication. We looked back. We saw what the Draculas had done a hundred years ago, and even the Sanctified back when they were just a Jesus cult. I'd heard about guys in fucking Soviet Russia copying novels letter by letter 'cause the state wouldn't let 'em use the mimeograph.

Mass communication. We needed to reach bastards and neonates we were never going to meet. Bring them around to proper thinking, proper behavior, show them how they could live high and stay hidden. We were real subtle, at first. We didn't even say "Kindred," which, you gotta admit, is a pretty fucking innocuous word. We were subtle, practical. We copied the styles the hippies were using... no way you'd know, unless you were a bum who suddenly had a whole new kind of drinking problem.

It got bigger, though. We'd hung Beats and now we were tapping hippies. You know how it is. It gets in your blood. We started putting little cartoons in the guides, and essays that weren't just practical or propaganda. Started trying to talk about the *Kindred Condition*, not just Temptation and Damnation, but what it all *means*. Come on, you're a fucking Crone... okay, you're in the Circle... you're looking for those answers, too. We were wondering and writing about whether all the nice cars and hot rides were really the peak of what we could be.

Are you kidding? Of course we were high. '69 was the best. Like with you. People were starving in the streets, there was blood for everybody and the literature programs were doing a great job keeping everyone clean. We had a lot of illegals, sure, but they were coming in from the cold. They wanted to belong. Invictus *uber alles* and that shit. We were getting calls and letters from as far out as New Orleans - that's right, buy-in from the Old South. Our books were traveling that far... and they weren't the only ones. We started seeing Tijuana Bibles, ciphered guides to the best unclaimed feeding grounds. The city was a mess, but cleaning was so easy we got to focus on the draugr bitches, even taking down some of the mothers that had been producing for years.

San Francisco had gone practically feral, and the Mission was in better shape than ever. Thing is, though, it's never been the Unconquered Us that run the Mission. It's the Church, and the priests like nothing better than to have you on the end of their spears.

Whatever they say, they're a bunch of fucking Catholics and *conquistadores*, and that means they learned how to burn books from the very fucking best.

Our own shitty press building got torched, and the other literati types started going underground. Some of them literally, others moving out to the fringe territories or even down to Hollywood. That was the Sunrise March, which - OW - okay, so you've heard of it. There were executions. I turned witness and got to keep my title. Lost my commission, though, and I can't hold office in the Mission unless I take an oath and a bond. The Abbess made me feed in the Tenderloin - I got Beggar's Penance. Every time I ate one of those fuckers I thought I'd catch the M. Yeah, I knew about it. Like larvae. Cleaners know that shit. Tried to pretend they were hippy chicks, but it ain't the fucking same, you know?

Story doesn't end there, though. If it did, you wouldn't be hanging me like this right now. Just skips a decade or so. I was shooting pool at Jack, one night I didn't need a tap. They'd just invented fucking Pac-Man, which by the way is about the best metaphor I've ever seen. Poor little bastard, always hungry and being chased by his ghosts. Anyway, some college-looking sucker shoved a pile of papers in my hands. Said *Codex Malkavia* on the cover, but I knew damn well what it was. Kindred writing from all around the country. Hundreds of voices, erudite, angry, bugfuck. A Cacophony.

I'd seen shit from outside the Mission before, signs that we were making an impact. But I'd always thought about it as *our* impact. What I learned from that kid - and by the way, he did give a bunch of people the M, little bastard - was that it was never just us. We weren't innovators or geniuses anymore than, let's be real, we were poets. We were just there at the beginning of something that had to happen, from the day the first industrial man got Embraced. Probably from the first time somebody printed *Longinus*.

The kine have an archival culture, now, everything recorded and distributed. It's not a matter of whether we're going to keep up, it's a matter of what kind of idiots would stand in our way. From coast to coast, even back to the Old World, there are coterie working together, networking, getting our culture in shape for tomorrow. You thought the Internet was just for snacking perverts? We're all over it like shit on flies, and the kine can't even see it. Their own tech: PGP, TCP, all those letters that don't mean shit to you Traditionalists. We've got personals in their papers. You know how much you can say for a few cents a word? We've been tampering with the Numbers Stations for years, and you won't believe what we can circulate on a Flash chip. Information's like the curse, like a plague, like the blood. It has to spread, and it'll find any way it can to do it. You should know, Daeva and your fucking ancient songs and all. The twenty-first century's here, and we're all changing to keep up.

Why am I laughing? Because you didn't have to do all this. You didn't have to seduce me, tie me up, dose me human. I would've told you. I would've told you any of this. Even if I hated you. That's what the damn Cacophony's for. Truth will out, just like the Blood.

Fun? Yeah, I guess it was. Still could be, you know. You've got me tied up, and we've both got a couple hours left. Why don't you come here and -

Subj: American Dreamgirl

"You'll know her when you see her." I thought that was bull. I agreed because you said you'd get me out of the Mission for a while. A body like me doesn't travel so much. Certainly not with invitations and an expense account. I didn't believe the long-lost sister story, either. I still don't.

The joy of cynicism is proving yourself right on the terms of the guy in the wrong. Naturally, I followed your instructions to the letter, renting a cottage in Saratoga Creek. I suppose the town's charming, if you're a rich old man who's retired from stepping on the backs of the poor, or maybe one of his ex-wives. Nice houses, friendly people, big beaches for them to lay themselves out on like dead whales. The local Kindred are a handful of fat fucks and pet nightmares, spread out over so many miles they probably go years without seeing each other. Nothing like the Mission, except for all the ugly.

When I was giving you the benefit of my doubts, I figured that was why I'd recognize your clanmate. She'd be the only monster who hadn't circled around and sniffed my asshole after I drove down. I wandered the cute little cafes, then I haunted the supermarkets. I was checking out the boardwalk one night, taking in the mock carnival they put up, and that's when I saw her. She was laughing on the arm of a local kid, the kind you usually see running the attractions rather than enjoying them.

I knew her when I saw her. Of course I did. I've known her since I was old enough to get a hard-on. Who hasn't? I knew why you wanted the pictures, too, why such an unlikely object as a photograph of your Kindred would be worth pursuing. Over the next few hours, I took dozens. I kept at a safe distance. You wanted me to talk to her, but I've known since the sixth grade you don't talk to a woman like that. I just followed, sticking to shadows and keeping downwind.

She hung on the chump until he was the happiest guy in the world, bathing in her aura and willing to follow her anywhere. Anywhere started out as his place, then moved to a stretch of beach a little north of the boardwalk. She stripped and carried him into the sea, disappearing beneath the surf with the scent of his blood. She came up a few hours later. I was still there, taking pictures.

I followed her up the hill, to a house overlooking the water. She paused at the door, haloed in incandescent light. I could only see her silhouette, but I couldn't help thinking her silhouette saw me. I stared at the closed door for the better part of an hour, until it was time to walk back down the beach and find my cottage.

We danced like that for a week, me on her peripheral vision, her the apple of my eye. I watched her through the nights she just kissed and the nights that she drained. Just shy of dawn each morning, she'd pause in that door and I'd be sure we were staring at each other... but not sure enough to walk up. I don't know quite when I gave up on doing your job. Maybe when I stopped snapping photos, not because I knew they'd never come out but because developing them was taking time away from following her.

You wouldn't be hearing from me if she hadn't invited me in. That was last night, her standing in the door, me silently mouthing a good morning. Then she did something she'd never done before. She crooked her finger towards me. No one else would have recognized the invitation, but I'd learned about her. I knew how she moved when she wanted to be approached. I knew her silhouette in that door frame. I knew that last night was different.

I walked towards her, and she smiled. You know the smile, even if my pictures are shit. If you didn't know it, you wouldn't have sent me. I think you wanted to see it again, you old pervert. I think everyone in America does.

She asked me what I wanted, and I couldn't say anything. Then she asked why I'd been following her, and I said I wanted an interview. She laughed, like silver bells coated in years of cigarette smoke. She told me your name, and then I laughed, too.

THE GIRL: "So it's just you and me, now. What did you want?"

CHASE: "I want an audience."

G: "I wanted an audience, too."

C: "I mean an interview."

She laughed.

G: "Sure you do, doll. Why don't you come inside?"

She led me through the house, and I saw why she always left the boys on the beach. The place was a museum, or a shrine... hardly anything except pictures of her. Photos, yes. Not like mine, but photos she'd posed for, allowed. Every one of them, maybe, from some early headshots (1943, by the hair?) all the way up to a Cosmopolitan cover dated 1966. That wasn't the twist, though.

G: "What's on your mind, mister?"

C: "Nothing."

G: "You're staring at me, but not in the flesh. Something about that picture?"

C: "It's the first girly magazine I ever owned. I never knew it was you."

G: "That's the one that gets most guys. That or one of the calendars... the original '53 or the reprints."

She took me to the kitchen, and showed me the original.

C: "I've seen that. In gas stations, I think. Never really noticed."

G: "That's the point, mister. You need a seat?"

Of course I did. I'd recognized her from the first, but that was when I realized who she really was, and just how often I'd seen her.

C: "I'm sorry. I've never met a famous vampire before."

G: "Me? Honey, nobody knows my name."

C: "I don't know your name. But I've seen you before. You were everywhere."

She smiled like she'd just told me a secret. Even though I was the one talking.

G: "They know my face, and my figure. But nobody knows my name."

C: "I've seen you so many times over the years. I guess I assumed everyone but me knew who you were. And meeting you, man..."

G: "I'm not special, honest. I'm just a little bit smart."

C: "I'll say you're smart. How the hell did you manage this?"

G: "You ever hear of Tokyo Rose?"

C: "She was a traitor, right? Worked with the Japanese during World War II? You weren't..."

G: "Of course I wasn't. If you think I've got the voice for radio, then you clearly haven't gotten over my figure. Tokyo Rose wasn't a person, really, she was a job. An American propaganda announcer broadcasting Japanese messages out across the Pacific. These lonely Navy boys would listen to her, wanting to hear a nice girl's voice while they were floating out at sea. They'd listen, even though she told them they were losing, or that they were on the wrong side. Nobody likes to talk about the suicide rate in the war years, but they say 'she' led a lot of boys off the sides of their boats."

C: "What's that got to do with you?"

G: "Well, like I said, I don't have the voice for radio, but I've got real nice legs. Rose is as much a legend as anything else, a siren for her era. But she might as well have been real, and there was a secret to her success."

C: "Broadcasting?"

G: "Close enough. Mass media. The war years were pretty lean, for me. I was never

what you'd call personable, and people weren't too open. Civvies were scared, and the military was watching close for anybody messing with our men. A lot of us hid behind desertions and suicides, but that was difficult."

C: "You were worried about breaking the Masquerade?"

G: "Honey, I was afraid of getting killed. You don't understand how the herd sticks together when they really get scared. You're too young. The more danger they're in, the more danger they're willing to believe in. Foreign wars are bad for us: all of the paranoia and none of the chaos. I used to joke with my sister that we should get on some Department of War posters, so people would think we were proper, all American girls. Well, she did, and I think it worked out for her. Thank God, though, the War ended. People started trusting again, but more than anything they started buying. All of a sudden, there were all these pictures of pretty girls, selling everything from soap to suds."

I found myself looking at a lingerie ad behind her shoulder.

C: "You got into advertising."

G: "I was working perverts, nipping off men who thought they had the upper hand. Well, imagine my delight when I met one who really was a photographer. He was doing advertising shots, the kind they used to work up painted posters from. I wasn't hot stuff, then, but I knew that I could be. I convinced him to start doing some underwear shoots, sell lonely guys like him stuff to dress up their wives. I wasn't so good at seducing in person, but nobody holds a pose like a corpse. I got real good at showing him what he wanted to see."

C: "I'll say."

G: "You're sweet. The photographer and I went together for a while. He shopped me to local firms, then to the big agencies. I started getting myself on cigarette billboards and calendars."

C: "What happened to him?"

G: "He didn't know what he had, but he figured out what I was. He did the same thing lovers always do when they find the truth."

C: "He ran off?"

G: "He tried. He dropped off the face of the earth for a while, then started sending letters to the guys who were smart enough to keep shooting me. Most of them didn't believe him, or were too smart to care. I had gotten organized, too, and I was selling myself in a lot of venues. I'd get the pictures touched up, so I wasn't just one model."

C: "You were a whole style. A whole era."

G: "Catalogs, ads, girly mags... I did a lot of shoots, and I kept them all in the dark about each other."

C: "But why? You didn't get famous, you said that."

G: "Honey, you're thirty years dead and you want to sink it in me. I got myself buried in the head of every man, boy and dyke in the country... maybe the world. While my brothers and sisters are out there using blood and makeup to make the mortals lust after them, I'm already the American Dream. Back in the forties my legs were nice but my breasts were a little big. I took that and I worked it and now nobody questions that tits are a fetish."

C: "You can't really take credit for that."

G: "Maybe not. But it turned out the way I wanted. Half the porn on the Internet is girls trying to look like me."

C: "You stopped posing in the sixties, though."

G: "I stopped posing in the fifties, just took me a while to sell my catalog. I retired, moved out here. I've still got my portfolio, though, and I keep it in circulation. I started out being a taboo girl, the one who you wanted but couldn't have. Then I was the mainstream, the girl next door. Now I'm nostalgia, a comfort fantasy for entire generations of food. Someday they'll be painting Virgin Marys to look like me. And now I can walk down any street, anywhere I want. All I have to do is part my hair the old way, quirk my lips like I did in '53. And I can have anybody I want, anyone at all."

C: "That's... amazing. I don't know why you're telling me, though."

G: "Ain't it obvious, mister? I've been slinking around since the turn of the last century. Girl gets hungry doing that, and the blood of the living is just a little on the thin side."

I shivered, and just for a fucking moment, I wanted to let her. I really, really did.

That's how I knew I needed to get out of there. I crashed out her front door, and I raced the sun back to my cottage. I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. I just lay here staring at the ceiling, trying to get her out of my head and my blood. I couldn't. I was sweating, breathing heavy, even though I don't have to do either any more than you. I looked at the blurred photos I'd taken of her, trying to stare through the haze and see her face, her eyes, her lips.

As soon as the sun dropped, I went down to the manager's office to check out. I'd convinced myself I was going back to San Francisco, to the Mission, that I was never going to leave those streets again. You'll have guessed what I saw. On the wall, the calendar, the pictures of her. I turned it to June like the one in her house, ripped it from the wall while the idiot manager kept asking how he could help me. I went back to my cottage and I developed the last few rolls. There she was on them, crystal clear. I wanted to spend hours gawping, but I've seen the real thing and I know I can see it again.

So I'm putting this in the mail. The interview, the pictures, my story. You can close the account you opened for me. Call it professional honesty, but truth is, I won't be needing it again. I'm going back to her once I drop this. I'll bet you're laughing. I know a secret, though. I'll tell you, even if I don't know whether I'm warning or gloating.

She knows who you are.

And she let me take her picture, just for you.





By accidents of immigration and exile, the great cities of the American South have always been among the wealthiest and most stable of Kindred domains. Among the earliest Kindred settlers in North America were castaways from the English Lords, and many of our own grandfathers followed suit. We allowed the Lords to do what they do best: to create the appearance of power and hierarchy. Only then did we step from the shadows, ready for the admiration and devotion that are ours by nature. There were, of course, native Kindred, though fewer than our ancestors might have anticipated. Daeva who entered the New World through New Spain found Kindred cultures ready-made to adore us, while the colonial domains of the English enriched themselves easily at the expense of the kine.

In those early nights, the herd often stumbled into misfortune, but the Kindred showed an uncanny ability to profit from it. The destruction of human settlements by starvation and war served only to spread the Damned further afield. After a certain period of unrest, the aftermath of the Civil War strengthened the urban centers around which the Kindred already gathered. They became our cultural bastions, cities of marble tradition and iron law.

New Orleans was our crown jewel. No city could better reflect the Kindred or the Daeva. I've heard claims that New Orleans boasted as many traveling Kindred as natives, a rare achievement for a culture that moves so little and keeps so many secrets. The Prince was from an unpopular branch of the Sanctified, and not without his rivals, but he held power for nearly his entire residence in New Orleans. An accomplishment even compared to my own New York. That the length of the Catholic's reign was even known beyond neighboring territories speaks well of his might.

All good things must come to an end, however. The storms of 2005 scattered Kindred from the Mississippi region across the country. Those refugees and castaways have destabilized dozens of kingdoms, and the fall of the Catholic's allegedly invincible city-state has sown fear and chaos among the surviving domains. Every night, ancient thrones are toppled and new dynasties founded. Perhaps this is the end of the South, or perhaps the sun is just beginning to set. This changing world, along with my advancing years, has spurred me to add to my collection. I dispatched my own childer to sample the blood of the New South...



Nightmare Wave

*A memorial for New Orleans, read before the Court
by Prudence Mathers, Founders Day 2006. I wrote
for her Voice, but the pen remains mine.*

One year and one week ago, New Orleans was drowned. One year ago to this day, the nightmare wave began.

New Orleans was one of the richest kingdoms of the South, but this is New York. The blood of the world flows down our streets. Certainly, the finance and immigrant trades reach around the world, but they're distant vessels, at best. We are the heart. National tragedy? Why should we care? Even the bridge-and-tunnel coteries don't feed much further than New Jersey. We've had our own apocalypse this decade and we've come out the better.

We had forgotten about family.

The blood of every Kindred in this room is foreign, tapped from the foolish or the sleeping or the beloved. We become, through the years, creatures of our neighborhoods and homes. We are men of the street or angels of the cemeteries. We call each other Kindred, but we so rarely mean it. We mean dead, undead, vampire, rival... even enemy. We forget that we are joined by blood long since drunk, that we are joined by the Embrace not only to our sires but to our clans and to all Kindred.

One year ago, we were reminded.

I see faces tonight that have not haunted this hall for years. You're here for answers. Let the record show that the wave began with the murder of Taylor Shipman, Daeva of the line Iscariot, by her own illegal childe, Hans Kirmani, found larvae. I promised you I would discover why. I promised only to find more murders the next night, to be roused from my own bed not an hour past noon by a screaming in my skin. Many of you experienced the same brief and certain knowledge of cousins' passing, and no few of you became brutal or ravenous as your families in the Old South perished or starved.

That is the plain truth. The nightmare wave was passed by sympathy of the blood, your own veins throbbing in tune with those of your extinguished relatives. There were no malign ghosts or demons; you may return to your perversions without fear of Malkavia. New York remains clean of that disease. We were afflicted for our kinship to a city of the Damned. She was our sister, and living or dead we have discovered we do share her blood.

In the nights following the evacuation of the herd, and the breach of the levee, many Kindred apparently starved and dozens were exposed to sun and even fire. We do not have enough information to estimate how many Kindred died in the days and nights after the hurricane. From the accounts of refugees, as well as the pangs suffered by the assembled, we know that many of them met violent deaths. No doubt some of those had abandoned their Masquerade. Others may have been killed during rescue attempts by mortals. We can attribute some of those to a task force of the federal Army. I know that fact, in particular, has caused concern and paranoia. However, I have confirmed at considerable expense that there was no directed government effort which identified or extinguished Kindred.

What began as an investigation became a war. Draugr swarmed from their graves to be dispatched by my knights. Honored Kindred became insomniac and feral. Some of them stand among you even now. I fought alongside and against you not one block from this hall. I saw a woman carve the witch-sign VII in her arm even as I transfixed her with my spear. While each of you saw horrors, a brave few faced them. I give my thanks.

I promised that I would disclose the fate of those afflicted who did not recover. Those innocent, I have consigned to soil and torpor. Those who murdered or committed diablerie have been given to the sun.

You have heard that I announced clemency, absolution in the name of my father and of the holy Church. Let me be clear: that is forgiveness for sin, not a finding of innocence. No few of you suffered nightmares or madness, but that suffering was only a symptom of the Damnation we all share, and our sin in perpetuating it. How many of you have sent your bastards and accidents to the South? How many supported the sinecure of your ancestors in New Orleans, after they had committed crimes so black even my father in his mercy exiled them? I ask, but do not think I do not know. I grant forgiveness with full knowledge of your crimes, every one. A week of nightmares and war left me with a domain in tatters and a year to find the truth, and I have found truth.

I remind you again of Hans Kirmani. Damned by the thinnest trace of blood, driven to anguish by the death of relatives whose names he never heard. How much thicker are our own ties, we genuine Kindred? What sins have we inherited or birthed? We all lost someone in the nightmare wave. I grieve for them as much as you; Taylor Shipman herself was a faithful friend and cousin. I mourn, but I do not shirk. I accept Damnation for myself and my family and I will see you do no less. Whether we venerate the Father or the Soldier or the Crone, whether our prayers reach to Lilith or Dracula, we are all Kindred. Let us remember that, and let us remember New Orleans.

Thank you. Enjoy your forgiveness and your remaining nights. A vigil will be held in the chapel until six; please follow Pietus.

All Tomorrow's Bodies

Dear Diary 3-7

I know that Cat is a whore. I can't say it doesn't bother me. Hurts the worst when I'm going through our closet. We used to be the same size. She likes to think we still are, so every couple weeks I end up smelling her johns on my stuff. Just the hint, at first, but I want to be sure. I take it off my hangar, and I lift it to my nose, just so it'll hurt. Yeah, that's man. I could maybe bring it up with her, but I'm afraid she'll point out what my clothes smell like when I wear them. She might cry, too.

Can't say I've had better roommates, either. She pays the rent, she does the laundry. People ask how she affords the place. She shows them the burn on her leg, tells them the story about trying to weld behind a wooden shield. She tells the doctors the same thing, which is why some nights we get to enjoy hydrocodone together. It tastes good in her. Good enough that I try not to think about what she does on our bed when I'm sleeping under it.

She keeps it to daylight, and we don't talk about it. The calls, though... well, I let her answer the phone. It's always for her. I hear it, and I leave the bedroom. I turn on the stereo and just look out the window, at the trees and the strip malls and the vast stretches of suburbia beyond. My brother would call it dull. I call it retirement.

"Ayesha." She's standing behind me. I can see her in the window and I'm glad she can't see me. I can feel myself scowling, I can feel a tooth sinking into my lip trying not to think of the guy on the phone lifting up her dress, running his fingers up her...

"Ayesha, it's your dad." Tooth into lip. I've got the phone from her before she can even inhale. If there's one man I don't ever want talking to Cat, it's my father.

"Hello?" I try to put some scowl into it.

"Good evening, dear." He doesn't hear that I'm angry. Nobody ever does.

"You shouldn't call me."

"Oh? Are the big bad men bugging your phone again?" Remind me of my failures. Talk down to me. That's what Dad's for.

"I'm sure they're too busy bugging Felix. Shouldn't you be doing that, too?"

"Felix is out of town. Are you mad?"

"Not by a long shot."

"Good." Why do they always believe me? "How have you been?"

"I've been doing just fine without hearing from my family. Is there a reason you're interrupting?"

"You are mad." He makes a little tsk sound. "I was calling because I need you."

I chew my lip.

"What for?"

"I need you to go back to work."

Ah, my illustrious career.

"You need a journalist."

"I need a story. And some property."

"No."

"No?"

"I'm out of that business. If you need somebody to..."

"I need you." It's not the first time he's said that.

"Even more no."

He's quiet for a minute. Long enough I dare to think he's hung up.

"Do you know why I called you?"

"You told me."

"Why I called you. I have your number, honey. I got that, didn't I? How difficult will it be for me to find where you live, do you think?"

My eyes flicker involuntarily to Cat. Shit. I think she sees something flicker in my eyes and she looks concerned. I look away from her.

Bastard.

"Tell me what you need."

He does. We finish our conversation politely, because I'm smart enough to lie through my teeth. I hand Cat the phone without looking at her, and I go back to the closet. I pull down my duffel, and I start throwing clothes in. After a few minutes of me doing that as loudly as I can, she's behind me again.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going out."

"You're leaving."

Silence, until the bag is almost full and she's in my way.

"I don't want you to."

"I have to."

"You don't have to go alone."

I look at her eyes. They're wet. I push past her into the bedroom.

"You don't have to..."

"...yes, Cat, I do."

"Why?"

Your leg, Cathy.

"Family business."

Because you're not going to get burned for me again.

She sits on the bed and watches me while I put the recorder and the handheld in my purse, and my purse in the duffel. Watches me while I pull on yesterday's jeans and slap my hair into order. Her eyes don't close until I kiss her cheek. She shivers, I guess my lips are cold. I look through a pile of magazines, throw a few in on top of my stuff.

"Leaving on a jet plane." She speaks it, then sings. "'Don't know when I'll be back again.'"

I swallow hard, and warm my blood. I hug her, and I give her a real kiss. Or the closest thing I can.

"Babe, I hate to go."

"Sure you do," she whispers.

I walk to the door, grab my guitar from next to it.

"Just be here when I come home."

She doesn't say anything. Not until the door is closed, until I'm down the stairs, until she thinks I can't hear her.

"Yeah," she says. And I hear a dial tone.

-Ayesha

Dear Diary 3-8

From: Dad

To: Ayesha

Subject: FWD: RE: Your Assistance

Here's the scholar. She's in London, so you might have a little trouble with time. Despite the distance, I think you'll find her input invaluable. She'll need the payment we discussed.

Love,

Dad

To: Old Bat

From: Frances

Subject: RE: Your Assistance

That's a deal, then. You tell your girl she can get in contact with me at 020-8245-6662. I'll give her whatever background I can, but I want the instrument and I want whatever you collect from her on its background.

Dear Diary 4-12

The poor bastard still doesn't know what hit him. He's next to me in the cab, hauling ten tons of frozen cow while we listen to Adult Contemporary. I'm leaning on the window, watching the stars just above the tree line.

"You mad?" he asks.

"What?"

"You're really still over there."

"Sorry. I forgot to breathe."

He laughs, and winks at me.

"Don't do that too long. Wouldn't want the cops pulling me over and finding a dead..." He stops suddenly with a chuckle. I turn in my seat to regard him.

"A dead what?"

"You know." His voice is all joking, but there's a bit of nervousness there, too. Like he's afraid.

God, they're always afraid, on some level, aren't they? This one's got a good reason to be right now, though. His stupid joke is obvious. I just want him to say it.

"A dead what?"

I'm fixing his eyes with mine. He's not looking at the highway, but his hands have the gentle turns memorized. He tries to smile, hoping to break the ice in my voice. He says it, but not because he wants to. He says it because I want him to.

"A dead hooker."

I have to drive the rest of the way myself.

-Ayesha

Dear Diary 4-13

I hoist the trucker over my shoulder and pull him out into the parking lot. I can see the city lights from here, but they're miles away, and there's nobody to see me dragging the corpse of the fat bearded bastard across the asphalt. I put on his clothes an hour or so back. This isn't how you're supposed to do a vanishing hitchhiker. Not supposed to be the driver who vanishes. I'm surrounded by office buildings, but they don't look nice enough to have cameras. Even if they are, the truck's out of range and I'm a blurry, sexless figure in baggy clothes. I throw him in a dumpster, douse the pile in lighter fluid and a match in after him. I hear it catch. Hopefully he'll burn up before daylight.

The dumpster is giving off plenty of oily smoke by the time I pull out in the truck. I don't like playing with fire, but when you've drained somebody you can't be too careful. I've got more than enough trouble ahead of me, so I'll need to put killing a man far behind.

I drive toward the lights, and I let myself remember. Remember the nights before Cat. Remember Werner and Felix and the whole scene. Back when we were going to change the world and no one was going to notice. I remember going on tour, remember cocky band boys and sweet, shy roadies. I remember back when burying the bodies was still a thrill, when I didn't know they could get back up.

I remember the city. I remember the all-glittering and all-powerful duchess, the woman you couldn't look at without wanting to be. And when I finally park the truck at a closed down grocery store, when I smash in one of the windows and find an old meat freezer to sleep in, I'm smiling. Because this is the city. I've taken blood here and God knows I've given it. I put my earbuds in and wait for dawn. In spite of everything, my blood's glad to be back.

-Ayesha

Dear Diary 5-6

Good stories start with dead girls. So says my misspent youth, anyway. I graduated early from Nancy Drew to Black Mask, and I've had a morbid bent ever since. I'm the dead girl. I'm still walking, yes, and I know who killed me, yes again, but I've had a while to get over it. How long? That's not the kind of thing you ask a lady.

I give myself that talk a hundred times while I look for the recruiting post. It's been there since Vietnam, but my sense of direction isn't quite perfect, and I'm slightly thrown off by the fact that it's now closed and vacant. I'd have thought the Army would be there as long as there was a bar across the street. I figure it's still the lookout, but there's nobody on the corner the first time I check.

I take a wander. The post isn't the only rundown building on this street. Restaurants came and went over time, but it looks like for the last few years they've just been going. After circling the block and not finding anything livelier, I walk down the stairs to the bar. It's called "The Quarry" now, which I can't help snickering at because we used to call it "The Hole."

The place smells like deep-fryer and beer, but not particularly body odor. Guess the whole neighborhood's seen better days. I sit at the end of the bar, where I can scan the old photos along the walls. I idly start rating the patrons when a familiar voice sneaks up on me.

"Ayesha!" he says. I'd stand up, but he'd still tower over me. "Damn, girl, been a while since you've been through here."

"The food didn't agree with me." I can't help but smile. "Speaking of which, Elroy, you're serving food?"

"Working kitchen is part of the licensing requirement. I've tried to keep up to code since I bought the place."

"Bought it? Not bad. I guess decent music isn't required."

"Not a fan of the blues?"

"Not recorded."

He laughs.

"Snob."

"Bitch, thank you."

"I've still got some good musicians on the wall." He points to one of the pictures. I scoot off my stool and take a look. I don't remember the photo, but I must have known he was taking it, because I'm clear as crystal. Face beet red, screaming into the mic, the sweat making my t-shirt stick to my chest.

Behind me is Gary on guitar, Pedro on the drums... and Cat, years slimmer and younger. She's waiting patiently for me.

"You still see any of them?" Elroy asks, as I run my finger down the frame.

I look.

"No."

"Got a new band, though, if you're in town?"

"A gig. Maybe. I'm not really touring anymore." I wrinkle my nose. "Too old."

"You don't look it. Except for the haus frau hair."

"It's a statement. And how many housewives have streaks like this, huh?"

"Alright. I'm teasing."

"I know." I give him a hug.

"So, licensing problems. Doesn't Werner fix those for you?"



[52]

I'm starting to realize why Dad wants this story.

It doesn't take long to jimmy the lock on the post. I slip inside and start looking for a basement door. When you're trying to find the dead, always look for the lowest, darkest point. We find something comforting about that. Sure enough, there's a basement, and when I bust that lock, I'm stepping into somebody's apartment. Bit of a bachelor pad... everything's either Ikea or faux-Asian, and there are piles upon piles of dusty comics.

And a fucking dog that's biting my leg. It's a quick bite and he maintains his grip. For a moment, I just stand there, enjoying the sharp, clear pain after a night of vague, nostalgic aches. And then I pump blood and drop down to pry the little bastard's jaws open. I do that far enough to hurt, and then I shake him and throw him away.

"Stay," I shout, and fortunately he keeps back. Good. I don't want to kill a fucking Jack Russell. I sit on the blanket and duvet cover I'm figuring passes for the bed and wait for the owner.

By the time he arrives, I've healed up the dog's bite and I'm smiling rather sweetly. In fact, I've been doing it so long I think the dust's starting to settle. He looks like a Korean raver kid, and he smells pretty young. I was dangerous when I was his age, though, so I start putting the charm on him before he's halfway down the stairs.

"So who the fuck are you?" Okay, maybe I could use a little more charm.

"Tommy." He answers before he can think not to. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm a friend of the previous tenant."

"Werner hasn't been around in a long time. Not since they started revitalizing Midtown."

"Which was...?"

"A few years ago, after the hurricane. We kind of got the shit end of New Orleans refugees."

"What'd the huddled masses do? Yearn too much?"

"Deal, jack cars, shoot people. This was never the kind of town you'd evacuate the displaced upper middle class to."

"You're not human tonight, Elroy."

"I'm running the last bar on the block and I couldn't do it if I wasn't located conveniently down the street from an AA meeting. Any one of these guys holds out for a chip and I'm broke. Hell, I almost went out when we got the smoking ban."

I should have realized that. The Hole should always smell like smoke. I drop a ten on the bar and give Elroy a hug.

"What's that for?" he asks.

"All the drinks you used to buy me," I tell him and I head back up the stairs. I go for the nearest payphone. Then I mutter a curse and try to find one that works. The entire neighborhood's a husk, a bunch of brick buildings with nobody inside them. Even the graffiti's sparse.

I find the phone, dial the number. Give up after ten rings.

Nobody likes travelers. Especially not the Invictus. Especially not when the traveler's a punk journalist who's going to save them from themselves. But we're a fact, and so there are numbers. Circulated between friends, between cities, guys you can call to get hooked up in a new place. This particular one was supposed to be the duchess's secretary, and she was supposed to owe me a favor, on account of me having strangled the right guy with an E-string last time I was in town.

The Army post's vacant. Werner hasn't been around. Nobody's picking up for the duchess.

"There wasn't one."

"Of the block. Fella name of Werner."

"Werner doesn't have friends anymore."

"Bullshit. His sister ain't duchess?"

He laughs, then, a horrible, adolescent sound.

"The duchess has the wrong kind of friends."

I can't help it. On that one I tackle the little bastard, and I can't decide on charm or throttling. Oh, nostalgia. He tries to scratch my face, but I'm used to that. I catch his wrist and jam his hand down the back of my jeans, hitting Rec on the handheld.

"Tell me a story, Tommy."

Avacha

Tommy considers himself the face of the modern cousin: young, fashionable, political but not bleeding about it. We're relaxing in his "pad," an island of Danish Modern in the concrete gothic wastes of the west side.

Me: "You're pretty young, yeah?"

Tommy: "Yeah. It helps with the job; I don't have much trouble staying under the radar of the older guys."

Tommy's a lookout for the city's big players. He squats on the edge of town, sniffing out newcomers before they can get into trouble.

A: "Do you see a lot of action?"

T: "A lot of traffic, not a lot of action. Back when I worked for the Sheriff, we used to get rough with the newbies. Now, it's mostly keeping the old guys out, and I don't have to get my hands in that. I just make 'em."

A: "So that's how you pay the rent. What's it get you?"

T: "I get the run of the party scene."

A: "Raves, you mean."

T: "If that's what you want to call 'em, sure. If you know what you're talking about, though, they're just parties – nobody seriously talks about raves anymore."

A: "Looking at you, that must be pretty good game."

T: "If you don't mind chasing it on the hoof, yeah. Locations change every week, and contacts only tend to last a few months, so I stay pretty plugged in."

A: "Plugged into what?"

T: "Internet, MySpace, a lot of text messaging. I have to keep my contacts up to date, but that way I don't have to do Clubland."

A: "When I was your age, it was all lurking around shitty record stores and knowing the right parking lots. On the hoof actually meant moving around."

T: "The dark ages."

We have a good laugh over that one.

A: "How often do you actually go out?"

T: "Once a week, unless I'm really hurting. You have to stay familiar, or people start to notice you."

A: "You said contacts only last a few months. You're not chewing through them?"

T: "Nah. The Spaniards wouldn't let me get by with that. It's pretty much burnout; living kids can't be the life of the party all that long."

A: "You can, though."

T: "Every time. I pace myself, you know? One night a week, and I make sure I'm juiced up for the next one."

A: "Does that mean a lot of turnover in your herd?"

T: "Oh, I never dip the same place twice. The whole scene's my herd, not just a couple people."

A: "What about cover?"

T: "I pretty much hang out with the e-tards. Burnout aside, the kids are pretty protective. The straightedge ones look out for the ones that get high, and they're used to the groping and the freakouts. Even the snotty ones keep an eye out for cops."

A: "So they protect you."

T: "Yeah, and I get the scene mothers. Chicks who give really out of it guys rides and shit."

A: "Self-selecting prey."

T: "Oh, they're predators. Looking for a score like anybody. Sex, crash space, shoulders to cry on."

A: "Stuff you can offer."



T: "Shit I can fake."

A: "Last question, Tommy. Short answer. What's family mean to you?"

T: "I guess my living folks, and my... you'd call her my mother. The Spaniards talk up the Kindred deal a lot, and I guess they play fair, but I look out for myself, yeah?"

A: "Yeah."

Dear Diary 5-7

Tommy told me the lay of the land, and in exchange I'm feeding his dog. Assuming I'm not running like hell, I might wake him up on my way out of here. Meantime, his geek side is serving me well. Nobody's used to hearing from this guy except in text, and his private key was on his PC. A little tech support from Frances, and my handheld's Tommy. I clean up in Tommy's bathroom. It's cold, filthy, and clumsily attached to the water system, but with towels jammed under the door and the cold water turned all the way off, it does the job. Maybe I do a little more than clean up. I turn the shower on and plug the drain, and I ball up under the stream of water. The hot water tries its best to boil me, to get under my skin. I barely feel it. Two bodies in two nights and only one of them's ever going to walk again.

When I drove out of the city for the last time, that was supposed to be the last time. Leave forever for quiet neighbors and warm, damp nights, become a local bad dream instead of a traveling plague. Play house with Cat until the end of her days. I've been stumbling through that for a long while now, and it's never come as easy as killing a man.

Dear Diary 5-21

Music is something you're supposed to practice and refine. An act, a scrim that separates you from your audience as much as it connects. Spending weeks of downtime in the State of the Living Dead, though, playing refugee and gathering scraps for Dad... well, I've been getting bored. So I've put together some guys and we're working on rocking. They're a little stoned and some nights I've forgotten how to sing, but I'm as good at opening doors as opening legs. Elroy's put in a few good words, too, and we've been playing about once a week.

There I am on the stage, coming on slow and mournful with an old torch song. Lovers, lies and the promise that all can be forgiven. That's me, on the stage, my leather draped over my shoulders and my arms hidden inside, hugging myself. I look cold, that's what I do, but I'm warming the audience up. I stand there, trying to keep my tears clear and easing into the only song I sing for me.

All the poor saps out there, though, they think I'm singing for them. They feel it in their blood. They think they know the kind of longing I'm singing about. Just a little pull, occasionally catching the eyes of one of the crowd. Mostly hipsters, a few devoted enough to know what a secret show really is. Then the predators, my entirely outclassed competition, the creatures just here to score and unable to understand the longing I'm inflicting. None of them are kin. None of them are a problem.

There's one I'm really singing for, though. Boy by the bar, tousled brown hair and a tall, solid build. I've seen him here before. He probably thinks we're his favorite band. Sweet, stupid boy. Tonight's his night.

I finish the number, hope Ella Fitzgerald doesn't have a hungry ghost, and then we get down to what we're really for. The show stops being mine and starts being ours, I pick up the bass and I pretend the drum is the beat of my heart.

Except for the smell and the sound and the rush. Exactly twenty-three feet four inches from me a man has burst multiple blood vessels in his nasal cavity by running right into the bouncer's fist. And fuck if it isn't a fist that is dead and handsome and all my fault. I should have known. Our history's antedeluvian, the man with the fist and me.

He calls himself London. Or at least he did when I killed him. I don't know his name now. I miss a chord and my fingers start to go dry. I checked the venue. How did I miss him? Why do I miss him?

Mind in the moment. Fingers on the strings, blood to the fingertips, do not let Guitarist Dave start thinking this is his song. One beat to the next one. Finish the song. Finish the set. I get through it, I say my thank-yous and I'm figuring I'll book.

It's my night to be equipment bitch. But I'm queen bitch, here, the band does not have a show without the girl with the blood tricks and I need very badly to avoid someone. I leave Dave to pack up. I'll slip away from London and I'll find my dear new groupie and I will not murder him like I need to right now. Just get something to take the edge off. But it's a small bar and the shortest distance between Point A and Point B will always pass through Point ex-boy-friend. So of course I turn a corner right into London's chest.

Embarrassing. Would be worse if I'd turned the corner into the chick he's got with him. Another one of us. Shit. I take the initiative.

"Uh, hi."

"Hi."

My eyes stick to his chest. Nothing there to eat, but whatever I liked about him is worse since I killed him.

"You're looking good."

"You shouldn't be here."

"Are you about to start territory shit with me? You used to sleep in my trailer."

"You used to sleep with me."

Yeah, I changed him. More ways than one. His blood's calling to mine right now. Fuck it. I let mine call back. The new girl senses it.

"You didn't tell me she was an older woman."

Bitch. At least we both scowl at her.

"I'm going to be at the bar. Let me know when you're done with her."

And she leaves. Something wrong about her. I have to ask.

"She yours?"

"No. Yes. We're not related."

He still has shame. It's cute.

"Good, you don't need the drag."

"Is that what I was?"

"You still smoke?"

Knew he would. I remember too well what he was like. Big, blue eyes. Roadie for Harry and Lance, back before they broke up and I had to reinvent myself as an opening act again. Thing is, any time I had to haul my own gear, he was right there. I didn't need help. My girly arms can punch through your face. He was always there, anyway.

"Thanks."

He takes the cigarette. No flinch at the smoldering. He must have trained that reflex out. Maybe even before he realized it wasn't nicotine he was craving. London was always sweet. Funny, too. He'd realized he'd never be a bad boy, that he'd always be stuck in the friend zone... and he made it work. As a friend.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

And then I had a weak night. I promised myself I was just going to spread for him. Bloodless, victimless sex.

"I'm on tour." Bad lie.

Do I need to tell you it turned into murder?

"With a band that can't play? This is fake, Ayesha, even for you."

I let that go but I'm biting my lip.

"You nesting here?"

"Close enough."

"I'm hearing tell this is a Spaniard town."

"Cubans, actually."

"I've never heard them called that north of Miami."

"Yeah, well, I actually speak some Spanish. You've dealt with them?"

"Not here."

"You'll have to, if you want to eat." Showing concern. Jerk.

"I've had a friend make introductions. Thought I told you to stay clear of the cities."

"You told me to follow your example."

I jerk my thumb towards the bar, where the girl's pouring urine-colored beer for my lingering audience.

"That what the bitch is for?"

He pulls his hand up to slap me, all pretense of human muscle having fled. Too fast for a living thing to see. And just as fast he puts it down.

"Jordan. Her name's Jordan."

"And she's not yours." Maybe I stress that a little much.

"Don't worry. You're not a grandma."

He's sneering. Something he never did before I left him to rot a day in my bunk. But it clicks for me, there.

"She's a Lord."

"It was kind of a Moses thing."

I blink, then I get it.

"She was in Bullrush?"

Town was wiped off the map. The herd's scattered in pockets from Houston to Atlanta. I haven't heard of a single Kindred survivor.

"I found her in the mud. She got made right before the storm. Doesn't even really know who sired her."

I am an unimaginable fuckup. I didn't make a monster. I made a hero.

"You rescued a baby Lord?"

I crack up. So does he. It's just fucking insane, that we're both here, that I turned him into a bloodsucking killer and he didn't quit being a knight in shining armor.

"I guess I did."

He's smiling. He smiles better dead.

I put my hand on his shirt, over his heart. Perfect. Still. I think "safe," and then "Cat," and then "why the hell not?"

So of course Jordan comes back.

"Bones needs help out front."

He turns, I roll my eyes. She pauses, and adds one word.

"Now."

Moses? Maybe. Cuckoo, that's for sure.

I smile at her as she takes my child away. I wonder if the teeth make me any prettier.

Dear Diary 6-1

Truth is, a rotted out friendship is still better than being alone. Pulling strings on the living is easy; the dead, well, you've got to build shit up, and even shit is something. Which is my way of saying that in chatting up London, I've finally got a good idea where to find Dad's instrument. Kindred scurried out of New Orleans with a lot of our cultural treasures. I guess Dad's making an effort to buy them up. London tells me the Spaniards haven't so much been buying so much as requisitioning them, making them property of the community at large. My dear old sire seems to think they won't want this one too much.

I end up in a music store. I don't know whether that's God messing with me or just that all my exes only make friends in music stores. The store doesn't have a sign; either they're relying on word of mouth or people peeping in the windows. On the side I enter, it's a second floor walk-up on top of a girly bar. The whole place is jammed floor to ceiling with sheet music, vinyl records, textbooks and all the rest of the shit you expect to find in these places. I navigate carefully between a display loaded down with dusty blister packs of guitar strings and longboxes stacked like sandbags. I wince at the fire hazard even as I imagine Dad salivating over the chance to organize it all.

The air's musty, heavy with the smell of newsprint and cheap binding. I wander a bit. The store can't be more than two hundred feet square, but the shelves and the boxes turn it into a maze. The ones against the wall vibrate to the music downstairs, but I can't peg the song over whatever concerto's playing on the speaker system up here. I find the counter and the Mole somewhere in the middle.

"May I help you?" he asks, and he sounds like he's the last man behind a cash register that means it. He's small but not light, almost entirely hairless and wearing a benign but blank little smile beneath his glasses. I get a whiff of both communion wine and dead blood off him. Have to wonder if he drank them at the same time. Also, man, is it Sunday already?

"I'm Norah." I tell him Tommy should have dropped him a line. I know damn well Tommy did, because these days, hey, Tommy's me.

Mole nods.

"You're here for a special collection?" He makes it sound all fancy and mysterious. Like I'm not just buying up real expensive driftwood.

"Yeah. A glass armonium. Would have been bought in Baton Rouge about six months ago." I hate the part of a job where I've got to tell the truth. Letting the living know what I need doesn't come easy, even when they're clearly junked up on the blood of the damned.

Mole pulls out a catalog, pages through reams of dot matrix printouts. Just how big is the library here getting?

"Yes, we have an item like that. Can you tell me the provenance?"

"Stolen," I snort. "Half a dozen times. My understanding is that the childer of Dame Chantal took it to America and hocked it around 1800. Library of New Orleans since 1879, removed for safekeeping during the floods. I'm a little fuzzy after that, but I was told it wound up here."

"A refugee purchased it from a dealer," Mole snickers. "He had some notion of auctioning it once he got here." Junkies like to think they're players, but they know they're not. Guys like Mole just love it when one of us legitimately Damned screws up.

"Who was the dealer?"

He scans down the page.

"Daeva, claimed to be a Moretti." I don't like where that's going, but I keep my face still. "Gave his name as 'Felix.'" Fuck you, Dad.

"How much do you want for it?"

"I'm afraid a sale is out of the question." Yeah, he loves the chance to shaft a Kindred. "The library maintains these collections for the people –"

"– and you're not one of them." He tenses. Doesn't like being reminded of that. "You're just an addict and a flunkie."

I grin, put my hand to his arm, run my fingers along to stir the blood. "You want to help me. And if you do, you might get a very good fix."

Thank God I'm not telling the truth anymore.

-Ayesha

Dear Diary 6-2

"I'm on the list."

I'm good with people, really I am. Wouldn't be the first time I've flirted my way through a door, either. But eight years back the boys and I packed Vault, and I personally rocked it. Five years before that it was Elektrik. And when I was a very little girl who still happened to breathe, I got somebody's head between my thighs for the first time ever at The Station. Every one of them was in this wretched little building and I don't care whose territory it is now, I should not have to be nice to get in.

"You're not," says the doorman. I can't even call him a bouncer. Bouncers are my people; this dude's just a fucker with a piece of looseleaf who doesn't think my corset's nice enough.

"The other list. The red one." Boy smartens up fast, and flips to the back of his clipboard. He squints, trying to make out neatly printed black on deep red paper.

"Sorry," he says, trying to cover up smooth. Now I give him the shark smile, now I let him look at me and wonder if I'm a mob princess or a producer or someone else mysteriously fabulous. I glide past and touch his arm, let him shiver.

"Next time, check that one first." Poor boy doesn't know where that list really comes from, but it was placed in his hand by the owner and I know that they were firm about it. The red paper's so it doesn't copy easy. His red cheeks are just a gift. I leave him to shift in his jeans and deal with the line.

The inside of the club's just as it was last week, and I think the name is the same. The look is all frosted glass and LED lights, very new, very pastel. The light comes from practically everywhere, but it isn't very bright. The colors change in soft waves, or ripple in time to the beat. The booth soars over the dance floor, making a guy in worn out Docs look like a god behind his turntables. A long way from the strobes and disco balls of my youth. And no stage anymore. Live music is dead.

Some things are the same. The walls. The crowd. Thick on the floor. Young, hungry, money to burn if pants will drop. The air conditioning's still awful, but that's good for me. I can smell the bodies on the dance floor, the bodies at the bar, the sweat condensing on the frosted glass. That's the moment I get it. The place is a cathedral of ice and lights, a church to worship the Look, the Self.

Yes, of course I'm dancing. I could almost hit the danger zone, I could almost let go...

...but that would be stupid. They get a red list here once a week. Every bouncer at every bar in Clubland knows you take that seriously, but most of them don't see one more than once a month. Once a week means this must be a pretty reliable place to pull, and nowhere gets that way by accident, not tonight. So even as I'm playing up to the blonde with the butterfly tattoo and even while my fingers are raising goosebumps on the back of his fine long neck I am keeping my eyes open and I am sniffing for something that isn't blood or peroxide.

Because this looks like a party, but truth is it's a supermarket. And out front along the velvet rope? That was a breadline. I can play princess or starlet or anything I want but the truth is that I'm being given my ration. I'm being watched, by cousins of varying distances, by well-fed monsters, by that chick with the shaved head and the words "DAS KAPITAL" stretched across her boobs. The emo she's practically wearing is family, too, and impressive legs don't stop me from guessing that he probably did dislocate something to get into those pants. I extract myself from the bottle blonde and his girlfriend and wander over.

She acknowledges me. We greet like old friends, but our body language is all double entendres. My arms are at my sides, I'm not bringing a fight. Hers are outstretched, she's allowing me on her patch. We kiss cheeks, but we're both running cold, because neither of us is going to go hungry to turn on the other. She whispers in my ear, and I'm sure it looks girl on girl, but all she says is "Citizen."

-Avesha

Colonel Celia Alvarez has a rough kind of glamor, but it's glamor all the same. Glamor she engineers, like she's slowly engineering the city. We meet at her favorite club, the shiniest cog in the Spaniards' machine. She gets bottle service even though neither of us is going to drink. I lift my empty glass to her.

Me: "Appearances are everything?"

Colonel: "No. Cleanliness is everything. Appearances are a means."

A: "Important means, though. Tell me about them?"

C: "Have you ever been to a theme park?"

A: "Sorry?"

C: "Disney World, Six Flags, someplace like that."

A: "Not since I was a kid."

C: "You'd miss the intricacy, then. A theme park is designed to look like a festival, or an enchanted kingdom, or an adorable European village. That's what the children see. You're bombarded with color, sound, kept in joyful crowds that part only for an hourly parade. There's the appearance that you can go anywhere, try anything. With surprisingly little variation, though, you follow well-marked paths, you're channeled into one ride and then herded onto another. As a kid, you wanted to live there year round, didn't you?"

A: "Yeah, I guess I did."

C: "If you did, you'd begin to notice something very different, something your parents could see the hints of. You'd see that the streets always take you where the owners want you to go, that the souvenir stores break up the longer walks, that the food is crowded by the exits to rides, not the entrances. They don't want you to get sick, after all. If you watched very carefully, you'd see something else. That the employees don't follow the same paths. At most, you'll see them cutting across the streets, but usually, you won't see them at all."

A: "Funnel cake salesmen are diabolic and subtle."

C: "If you watched, if you followed them, you'd slip through a door and find yourself backstage, in a maze of alleys and underground tunnels. Tunnels designed to allow them the freedom to move, while you're led along by the costumed characters and the other children, by entire herds of Judas goats."

A: "You make it sound pretty grandiose. A theme park's a business, just a way to make a buck."

C: "A way to extract a commodity from a herd that's easily led. The same way an abattoir extracts meat from cattle. The kine have been doing it to each other for years. We've adapted it, increased the scale, put it in the service of the Kindred. The city calls this the Midtown Growth Project. You call it something else, though, don't you?"



A: "Clubland. Ah."

C: "Exactly. We've designed the entire experience. The kine crowd the streets, primp and pay and even bribe their way in, all for the promise of sex, status and style. Meanwhile, the Kindred enter at their leisure. If you're on the red list, you're treated like royalty."

A: "And get in free. So what's your angle?"

C: "The Movement doesn't have an angle. We're working for everyone. If you're hungry, you might get caught. If you get caught, you put us all in danger. We've institutionalized feeding. We make it easy and secure. Ensure neutral ground, make sure that no one dies in Clubland and that if they do, that the death is reported as occurring elsewhere. The food comes to you, and everyone stays safe."

A: "And who owns it?"

C: "You do. The Kindred control the means of production, and we produce for the public benefit."

A: "Marx?"

C: "Only vaguely. Human capitalism and competition works for us, keeps them grinding against each other and moving the machine. Kindred are the ones who have to work for mutual benefit. We're a smaller community, so we can afford to act like one."

A: "Somebody's got to be getting filthy rich off this, though. Am I right?"

C: "Most of the money is tied up in human resources. We're not operating on large profit margins, but enriching living assets will enable us to develop larger projects over time, perhaps even expand into other cities over the next ten to twenty years."

A: "You've been able to do quite a bit with just one city. Last time I was through here, culture

was dead, Midtown was a dump, and about the only nightclub worth noting was, uh, in this building right here."

C: "The storm helped us out, there."

A: "Katrina? That's got to be an unpopular view."

C: "No one's happy about the disaster. For better or worse, it dispersed Kindred, especially young ones, across the south. The loss of New Orleans to ghosts and madmen debunked the myth that personal authority could hold back change. You might as well try and stop the rain. We have sizable populations of nearly every clan here from Louisiana, and we've been teaching them not to fear the future. We've deposed the old regime, which was as corrupt and vulnerable as the one in New Orleans. And in a few years, we've harnessed kine science and labor to build a genuine community of tomorrow."

We watch the dance floor for a while. There, the light comes from everywhere, surrounding the living and the dead in an unnatural glow. The booths that orbit the floor, though, are recessed and dim. Anything could be happening. I think about pulling one of the herd... two, even, I think the engineer would let me indulge. That's the clinch, though.

A: "We're not backstage, are we?"

C: "Pardon?"

A: "I came in the front door. I was expected, my name was checked off. You had an expensive bottle delivered, but it's just a prop."

C: "We don't want to frighten the animals."

A: "Or the proles. The illusion – the designed experience – it isn't just for the food, is it?"

C: "The community gets a clean, pleasant experience. That's the duty of public servants."

A: "Service with a smile."

Dear Diary 6-23

"Why am I doing this?" London asks, as he puts the blinkers on and turns right again.

"Cause you like me so much." I try not to sound sarcastic, because I kinda hope it's true. We share blood, though, so it's not always easy for me to tell whether he wants me or I just want him to.

We're circling the block in his pickup. When I went to see Mole, I figured I'd get the address of some dusty old warehouse on the south side. Instead, we're cruising nice townhomes on the fringes of uptown. Colonel Alvarez and her brood don't keep their "library" central. We'll have to be quiet, not wake the slumbering herd.

"Drop me off here," I tell him as we come around the back of the house in question.

"You sure?" he looks at me, and I think the concern's a little deeper than what I'm forcing from him. "I could watch your back."

"None of us in there. I can handle a few cattle if I need to."

He doesn't acknowledge that, but he doesn't undo his seatbelt, either. I hop out the passenger door, then scale the fence. There's an electronic alarm, so I have to spend a couple of minutes dismantling the door lock. I've never been particularly good at straight lockpicking, but I'm pretty strong and nimble when I need to be. This isn't the first time I've had to use that touch to clean up my brother's mess.

As soon as I'm in, I know the house is a sham. The furniture's an assembly of antiques and hand-me-downs, yeah, definite young-yuppie-couple stuff and yeah, there's a high chair at the table, but the whole place is coated in thick, sticky dust. There's a study or something on the first floor, and that's where I find all the boxes stacked. Mostly, they're small. Jewels? Cash? I'm not dumb enough to care. Only one of them's big enough to be what I'm looking for. It's a little smaller than a commercial coffin but not nearly as stylish. I take the crowbar out of my bag and pop the top.

Inside is a weird set of glass cylinders wrapped with plastic balloons, styrofoam peanuts, and a year's supply of packing tape. If it's not an Armonium... well, I don't really know what is. I reach to touch the glass, where the wrapping's torn... and feel a tingle when my finger gets close, like the touch of an old lover, or a spider crawling under my skin. Takes me a second to realize it's a memory, and another to remember who.

I slam the top down, slide the crate down the hall. I smash the French doors, not really giving a shit anymore whether the human cops show up. I need to get this done and I need to get it done now. I throw the thing in the back of the truck. The crate splinters a little. Hopefully the instrument's padded.

I shout to London. "I was set up." He rolls down the driver's window.

"You said that."

"More than I thought."

I run around to the passenger side, yank it... and it's locked, the handle snaps off in my hand.

He gives me a sad, sorry smile, and hits the gas.

Fuck.

Someone steps up behind me. I can hear Docs and stilettos.

"Need a ride, Citizen?"

Dear Diary 6-24

The blade's still tickling my face, but I get the impression that Celia's finished redesigning it. Being the optimistic sort, I let my skin start to knit.

"Fuck," I say, trying to get the conversation going again.

Emo's still holding my arms behind my back. Both wrists are still crushed from arguing the point. Celia's watching me, perfectly still.

"Fuck you," I add, just in case she doesn't get it.

"I don't like you," she says. I probe my cheek with my tongue. I taste air.

"You mean this isn't just your kink?"

She raises a piece of paper.

"You're red listed as Norah Carpenter."

"That's me."

"Not what your friends call you, Ayesha."

"Are we friends now? Because I could really use some."

"Norah Carpenter beat up my lookout and staked him in his own closet."

"Good thing I'm not her."

"She used his identity to contact my office, and put herself on the ration."

"She sounds like a real bitch."

"But it's not her I don't like, Ayesha, it's you. It's this."

And god help me if she doesn't have a 1978 Red Spot, original photocopier edition.

"Unbelievable." Actually.

She flips through it. Shows me a picture where my face is out of focus but my breasts and my Strat are entirely recognizable.

"You didn't just model for this, though. You wrote it."

Celia holds the page too close for me to read, but I know the damn story. "BYE BYE BOYFRIEND: GETTING RID OF A BODY YOU'VE LOVED TO DEATH." One of my best. Until they could check DNA. You never want to keep ashes anymore.

"I'm so glad you read it for the articles." And now I actually am calm, not just joking back panic.

"This is trash," she says.

"You're misjudging the medium." Familiar territory.

"You're misunderstanding me. This is trash. Waste. What you throw away. That's how scientists figure out what animals eat. Go through their shit."

"You would be the expert, Colonel."

She jabs me between the ribs. I'd forgotten the knife.

"We don't want anyone knowing what we eat. We don't want them knowing we exist."

"I wrote 'BURN THIS BOOK' on the cover for a reason."

"You wrote the truth. You compromised the Masquerade."

"Bullshit."

"Excuse me?" she spits. Apparently, that's Emo-speak for "break the nice lady's other wrist."

I take a few minutes to get coherent again. My tears taste rusty.

"I'm sorry," I say, but I'm not going to let her think I'm begging. "I'm sorry I ruffled your iron curtain. I'm sorry that I reached out to the poor idiot masses and told them how not to leave a trail."

She kicks me in the stomach, but I'm on a roll.

"You know what I'm the fucking sorriest about, Colonel? I'm sorry I wasn't the fucking first."

Another kick. My roll is maybe not so strong.

"You expose us. The moment the herd knows that there's such a thing as vampires..."

"The herd believes all kinds of crazy shit, lady. They believe in ghosts and the power of prayer and the democratic system. Most of my nights they've believed that other humans who think like you were going to bomb them flat."

Fuck, that was my favorite rib.

"The danger isn't what they believe, Colonel. They believed in vampires for a long time and some of them haven't stopped." I get a flinch on the v-word. It's kinda cute. "The danger is us getting made. Individually. You have to watch your own mask, and that's why I'm here. The herd's as smart as us and they're better connected. And that's why every damn fledgling needs to know how to burn a body."

That's when I tell my heart to beat. Dead flesh gets red life but it's still full of holes, so all of a sudden I'm drenched in blood. Including my wrists. I slip out of Emo's arms lubed up by my own Vitae, and I pull all the bones of my left arm back into place. My right? I just flail it into his head, hard. I shatter the beanpole's neck and I shove him at Celia.

Of course, she's faster than me, and we're catfighting on the floor before I can blink. First she's on top, then me. We bite at each other's faces, my cheek gets torn open again. Our eyes lock, and hers really are beautiful as she tries to pull on my blood. All of a sudden I'm tingling where she's touching me and I want her to do it more. But that trick hasn't worked on me right since my Dad used to do it, and instead of kissing her I crash my head into hers. Her grip gets loose and I get my hands on the knife.

I don't want to talk about the rest. Doesn't seem like the kind of thing I'd do, anyway.

On my way out, I pick up the Red Spot and tuck it into my jacket. Glad she didn't ask about my obit for Keith Moon.

Dear Diary 7-6

"Everybody wants a piece of you," says London, and he doesn't mean to flatter. "Nobody liked Alvarez, but they know they can't replace her."

"She and I have something in common?"

"You don't want to hear."

The 'zine is sitting on the table between us. Like all of the furniture, the table's homemade. It's been cut from a spool of telephone wire, and painted a very sixties orange. The scent of sawdust hangs; London's lair is a work in progress.

"Colonel didn't know me by my tits."

Boy's smile is sad, and as gentle as ever. I don't want to know he sold me.

"Maybe she's got a good memory. I do."

Jordan made a point of leaving when I turned up.

"Did they find the box?"

"No. Still in the back."

Maybe he didn't.

"I'm taking it with me. Brought a truck."

"So I don't have to tell you to go."

I stand up, and step around the table. I put my hand on his shoulder, and he doesn't pull away.

"She's not here."

"She's not."

Jordan? Cat? Doesn't matter.

"I brought my guitar."

His smile isn't so sad.

"Yeah?"

We play for a while.

I haul the crate out myself. The loading dock is crowded against a side street, and I don't really care if somebody sees me being strong. I'm so busy not caring that I startle when I realize Jordan's sitting on the dock.

"Your hero's carrying some guilt."

"Anything I should know about?"

"You already do. He sold me over to the Colonel. Almost got me left for day."

"Bit of a leap."

"He was pushed. Betrayal isn't London's nature. You, though, you're a baby Lord. You push people like buttons."

"You're a dangerous lunatic. Changing his mind was the least I could do."

"I'm sure it was. Do me a favor, Jordan?"

"Doubtful."

"Tell me not to come back."

Felix tells me that Ayesha found his corpse packed with the instrument and revived him. She departed soon afterwards, though he implied they had intimate relations.

I have no choice but to accept his version of events, and he has become my agent for the remainder of the Armonium's journey.

He also shipped Ayesha's handheld computer to me, from which Frances helped me to extract these materials, as well as a wealth of others. I believe the insights I've gained were worth dispatching her, but, try as I might, I cannot feel any true sorrow for her loss.

Age, I believe, has gotten the better of me. Perhaps I will see to her "roommate," Catherine, before I rest.

You have reached 181-888-1000. No one is available to take your call. To leave a message, please press 1 or wait for the tone. To leave a callback number, press 2.

I got your check. Maybe I didn't make myself clear last time. I'm not looking for money. I can get by on my own. Except that I can't. I want to know where Ayesha is, not your goddamn charity. And I want that freaky little muppet of yours to quit following me around.

If I were you, I'd be thinking real hard right now about getting in touch. You've proven you know where to find me. So here I am returning the favor. Third message I've left you. Third number. And I've got two addresses, paid for with that very nice check you sent me.

So call me the fuck back, and tell me what you did with -

If you would like to record your message again, please press *. If you are satisfied with your message, please press 1.

[61]

Inamorata

This curious letter reached me through my aunt. A diagnosis of madness, or accusations of perversion and Malkavia are obvious, but the Moretti blood is thicker than that. The business might be too close to the family heart even for this collection. However, this is a firsthand account of a popular legend; not proof, but perhaps a pointer in the right direction. If there is truth behind the ravings, it's truth the entire family should learn.

Dearest mother,

I have come to wish that I was haunted. I have likewise come to yearn for you again. Our blood bond no longer holds me, and I can easily recall your imperfections. Yet, I recognize that you have it within your power to call me to you, and that you have not done so. Despite my distaste for your excesses, I have come to respect and admire that restraint. If, as a living man, I could have shown as much, perhaps I would not be tormented as I am now. As a measure of my respect and, yes, love, I now call you mother. My revulsion towards our relationship is small compared to the endless ache I must endure.

"Angelo," I can hear you now, "don't be so dramatic." I imagine us in your living room, one of those long, miserable summers. You remember, don't you? No such thing as air conditioning, so our haven had those big, open windows? Even so, I felt like my flesh was starting to rot. The tenements were a foul home, and a fouler feeding ground. Not even nostalgia can settle my stomach when I imagine the sweaty, mosquito-bitten bodies we used to feed on. Science proved me right, you know. Those vile insects do leave something in the blood. Disgusting.

Yet I had reasons to love that haven, even after your attentions had begun to pall. By our twentieth year, I owned the superintendent and we'd moved to a basement. Still, summer nights I climbed the thirteen stories to your old apartment, and stood in the windows, enjoying what little breeze I could, watching rags flap on the clotheslines like skewered birds. You called me your fledgling, and I imagined my soul was out there, struggling against the ropes you'd sewn through me.

Those nights blur together, now, don't they? I hardly remember the winters, but those summers by the window are vivid and continuous, as if I spent years on end watching parents tuck children into beds, children growing up and leaving, and now-grandparents aging and dying in their sleep. I suppose I hastened many of those deaths. Aged blood has always helped me sleep.

I watched families grow, and yet I never did. I knew why, of course. I accepted your blood and your love for that very reason. No, I didn't love you, not then. I lusted for you, certainly, I enjoyed the envious looks we received from our cousins. Yet, for all your charms, you were old, and I wasn't, not yet.

So it was that I went back.

I climbed the stairs, slipped into our old apartment... and found it furnished. Was it the first day hot enough that I wanted to? I don't remember anymore, such is the distance of time and country. The curtains, the yellowing white ones that we had left hanging for decades, were replaced with heavy velvet. The pale cinderblock was painted a warm grey and lit by electric sconces. And the windows... the windows were closed. They had air conditioners in them, now, a luxury still rare in the homes of my prey.

Everywhere I looked were signs of life and habitation. When I managed to quiet my surprise, I heard a heartbeat. I went to the bedroom, and I found Claudia. I didn't know her name, not then. I could only admire the curve of her hip, her full breasts pushed against her mattress, even as her sleeping arms held a pillow over her head. She did not sleep easily, Claudia, but I was delicate in my feeding and my caress. I left her none the wiser, and joined you in our tomb by dawn.

Oh, the nights that followed! I introduced myself to her, insinuated myself into the routine at the grocery store where she worked. I remember how you scolded me for bringing home useless sundries; eventually, I began to throw them away on my walk back. When I was ready, my blood called to her and she consented to join me for a drink. I told her my name, my real name, and we laughed as we sipped the alcohol. Where I remember our old meals as nausea, I recall (repetitive) heaving up the wine in the bathroom with joy. I was in love, after all.

I walked her back to the tenement. There was the tremor of fear in her step; I suppose she was wondering whether or not I would push her. I was prepared to, of course, wanting to sample waking what I had only tasted in her slumber. Yet, when we reached the foot of the stair, it was she who invited me in. What man could refuse? We kissed upon the first step, and by the time we were as far as her couch, her clothes were tatters. I drank deep that night, and she lay cold come morning. You never taught me the secrets of Embrace. Those, I purchased later at awful cost.

No, I found myself alone with the corpse of my love. I fled to our tomb. I tried to confess to you, but you wouldn't listen. That is why I struck you, why I took you by force and then took my leave.

Took my leave? I fled, didn't I? I fled.

I crossed thirteen miles from your haven, and I paid tithe to the Gravediggers and Ratchers. I have lived a spare existence, shunned my family name for fear that you would find me. For nineteen years, I have fantasized that it was not me, but you who finished Claudia. That you had conceived jealousy and murder, or that it was your fault anyway for not teaching me how to make her immortal. How I hated you for my sin.

I have heard of ancients rewriting their own memories in torpor dreams. Perhaps I would have, as well, and the truth would have been lost forever. How I wish it had.

Not one week past, I caught a familiar scent upon the wind. I was not far from my haven; indeed, the cafe from which it came is a favorite spot of mine. I often sit there and watch the herd, suckling a piece of ice against the summer wind. A girl was tending tables. She was young, certainly, but her face was unmistakable. My Claudia! I introduced myself, of course, thinking that perhaps the resemblance was a coincidence. Yet she knew my name immediately, the one I have not used in years. She seemed uncertain how, but she was drawn to me, even without the benefit of my mesmerism. She called herself "Charlotte," but in the months that came, I wrapped her around my will. I had found love again.

I found joy simply in coupling with her, merely the physical act of love, without its proper consummation. Charlotte was more forward than Claudia in her dress and in her manner. I had to remove other suitors. Finally, however, the night was right, proper for us to become one. I had learned the way of the Embrace from the Gravediggers, and I had performed that service for them no small number of times to pay my lease.

Yet, when I tasted Charlotte's blood, it burned. It burned as yours did, when you Embraced me. I experienced the Becoming again, and swooned. When I awoke, my heart was beating. My blood was pumping. My chest heaved with the glories of breath. I had never until this moment considered myself Damned, but as Charlotte lay sleeping, I found myself saved! Love, I thought, Love has redeemed me!

I went to the priest of the Gravediggers. He did not recognize me, at first, so ruddy were my cheeks and so gay my manner. I tried to explain to him, but, like you, he would not listen. He broke my arms and he locked me in his haven. The sun was nearly up, and I felt sure that I could face it, awake and unharmed. I was ready to begin my new life, but I could not find any way out.

I fell asleep again, and I woke at nightfall, my heart still but my brow sweating blood. The priest was there to comfort me, to wipe my sweat and tears, to tell me that I was safe. He told me that I had been deceived by a fiend, that my blood had been poisoned and made mortal. He would not listen to my protests, to my explanations. He told me of the Inamorata, the honey-blooded angel, who lures the Damned to feed and so blunts the instruments of God. He called her Temptress and Namath and Solace, and it was three nights before he allowed me to leave his cell. There was no trace of her. Not at her apartment, nor at the cafe. The priest counseled me to forget, perhaps even to slumber some years, but I refused.

Know, mother, that I do not believe him. I know that there is redemption for me, and all our kind. I know that our loves are reborn, and that in their blood lies the key to human feeling once more. If Claudia came to me once, as Charlotte, than surely she will return to me again. I have done you disservices these many years, by denying my name and cursing yours. I shall return for you, and we will find her again. We will drink from her, and love forever.

In Adoration,

Angelo, called Daeva and Moretti

The childe never did come home. I could find no trace of these "Gravediggers."



The Masquerade

You want your YouTube. But do you want to be on it?



New Year's Midnight, every year, my friend Aubrey calls me and tells me the world's going to end.

"They're going to find out this year," she says. "They're going to find everything."

Aubrey wasn't always like this. She was a millennialist, back when we still had a millennium coming up. CCTV and the World Wide Web made her nervous, yeah. Before 2000, though, she was all about the Y2K bug. Heard about it from a friend at Social Security years before it was on the public's radar. She was convinced it was going to plunge humanity back to a primitive state, and anyone prepared was going to get to rule over the herd with an iron fist. For *that* New Years, she went up on the mountain with a cult she'd built for just that purpose. A month later, we were all still doing the night-to-night and she showed back up. She didn't have to eat for a while, but we made fun of her pretty bad. Every year since then, she calls me up and tells me the Masquerade's going to end. Every year, she's been wrong.

"I'd love to tell you we've always been smart enough to keep distance between ourselves and our food, but I can't,"

Still, I always take the call.

Why? Aubrey's always got something to say after she's made her prediction. She may have been wrong about Y2K, but she knew about it years before I did. Before the World Wide Web and the Internet became synonymous, she was antsy about GOPHER. For 2007, it was YouTube. I did my best to keep my tongue in the pretty young thing I was kissing while I listened. (Bluetooth headset? Present from Aubrey.) She told me that Internet video was going to let the mortals crack the secret of immortality. She told me that before the year was out, cell phones would be able to browse video sharing web sites and upload directly.

"You already have no idea who's watching you," she said. "But from now on, you can be sure there'll be more of them."

I had that shiver. The one you get when your crazy friend says something right. My pet misunderstood, and accidentally clicked the set off as her hands snaked around my head.

What is the Masquerade?

We call Masquerade the First Tradition. Everyone remotely

associated with our society has heard of it. We're taught that it goes back to the most successful Kindred group in history: the Roman Camarilla. Just scratch the surface, though, and you'll find some very different ideas about the Masquerade, and some surprising facts about its history.

Science and History

First things first: "Masquerade" may sound grand and ancient, but in English, it only goes back to sometime in the 18th Century, a hundred years or so after mortals started using the word. Still, with the emphasis it gets, you'd expect that the concept was already with us. Being certain is hard, but historian Vincent Temple challenges that view.

"I'd love to tell you we've always been smart enough to keep distance between ourselves and our food, but I can't," Temple says, stroking a professorly gray streak in his hair. I'm interviewing him by web camera, and feeling the safety of one of our built-in defenses: Temple's permanently out of focus, his features smeared and distorted as if by a combination of lens and data compression. His hair and

fingers are a clearer, but only a little. "References to beings like our Kindred go back to the dawn of human writing. Right from the start, human beings are very aware of monsters, and they develop rituals to try and protect themselves. They're also very aware of the dead. Early humans depict dead people dwelling in houses or caves, and only very rarely are they shown in populations of any size. Tonight, we often imagine entire after-lives or cities of the dead around those depictions, but there's barely any mention of such places. In those first nights, living humans meet their ancestors or gods face-to-face, talk with them, bargain with them and they aren't surprised at all."

Skeptical, I ask him if he can say that those living dead were Kindred.

"I can't say for sure. Certainly, I've never met any Kindred with a credible claim to being so old. However, I have to look for the simplest explanation, and that simplest explanation is that Kindred have existed, in some form, about as long as the kine." As he makes his point, his image becomes crystal clear, and I give a start. He chuck-

les. Our lost visages are too easily reclaimed.

"The idea of the Masquerade is actually very Victorian," he says, and the blur of his hand across his face suggests that he's pushing glasses back onto his nose. "It comes out of the view that we can sort creatures neatly into different spheres and that consumption implies predation. It's been embraced, if you'll pardon the word, because it tells us that we're above the mortals, that we control their perception of us. The same thinking that finds a huge jaw and calls an animal the 'king of the dinosaurs.' In fact, mortals have been discovering us and we've been killing each other back and forth as long as anyone can remember."

"What about the Camarilla?" I ask. "Certainly, the Romans didn't know that there was an entire nation ruling the night." Temple smiles.

"Rome's one of my very favorite periods," he says, and the pride makes his face seem almost living. "I've been present at the raising of four confirmed Roman vampires." Temple is a resurrection man, one of only a few who I've met in my Requiem. Most Kindred happily leave

our ancestors buried, letting them rise by themselves or waiting to wake them until moments of dire need. When one of our family rises, disoriented and hungry, we don't usually find out about it for several days.

Temple comes from a different school entirely. Along with a group of his fellow Dragons, he's developed detailed theories on the processes of torpor and waking. He puts these to the test by raising Kindred of various eras under controlled conditions.

"The human mind, as we have learned from their own physicians, as well as experience, is almost infinitely malleable, but also sharply limited. While the process of the Embrace removes the physical behavior of the brain, it does not change its essential nature: to change according to the requirements of a given circumstance."

"We see phenomenal learning among the newly risen. Their language abilities are astonishing even compared with mortal children. I can't teach a man who's been walking for two hundred years how to turn on the ignition, but I can get

a man who's been sleeping four hundred driving stick shift." As a scientist, Temple believes that the first few nights after torpor are critical in adapting the Kindred to his new life. As a historian, he feels that a mind risen from torpor loses old knowledge as quickly as it gains new skills. He's dedicated himself to recovering history from the minds of elders from the moment the body wakes. He claims to have thousands of hours of recorded conversations (from paper, through reel-to-reel and now digital media), going back to the start of his experiments in the early part of the century.

"The first thing I always ask them," he says, "just as soon as we can have a conversation, is how they feel about the food. Feeding them is a tricky subject, of course, since we've established that one of the ways that we update ourselves for new eras is through the consumption of blood. I use a consistent set of donors, mental incompetents who we're reasonably sure don't have any ideas of their own. The Romans have been very consistent, so far. They don't think of mortals as food, they think of them as *descendants*. They tell me

that they hid their existence not as a matter of strategy or even theology. They always start off talking about *shame*."

The Good News

Father Parker Hodge doesn't find that at all surprising. The winter cold hasn't lifted yet, and we're sitting on a bench near Kennedy High School. A couple of athletic, warm-looking kids are playing basketball. We're both smoking, trying to warm the air in our lungs.

"Of course they lived in shame," he tells me, rolling dry eyes. "Even before God sent us His Soldier, our grandfathers must have *felt* their damnation. Just as the kine had their virtuous pagans, so too we had a few Beasts ahead of their time. That in no way diminishes the truth or the importance of the Church, and it doesn't change when we received the First Tradition."

"When was that?" I ask.

"What is this, Catechism?" he gives a rough laugh. "Late in the first century. We didn't have a Diet of Worms or a Geneva Convention or anything. Longinus preached His message from the very beginning, but the Testament was written and accepted

over time. You can't mistake perfect for instant."

"Did the humans know, though?" I press him.

"What do you want me to say? I wasn't around then. They were making *Dracula movies* by the time I was baptized."

We sit quietly for a moment, puffing on our cigarettes. The kids are still playing basketball, and my tongue's working in my cheek, reminding me how long it's been. None of them has looked our way.

"Tell you something, though," he says. "They don't look that smart to me."

Hitting the Books

Turns out that, as an attempt to bolster mortal atheism, the Masquerade's entirely a twentieth-century thing. Before that, back as far as the Renaissance, it was the series of secret symbols that the spread-out Kindred population used to mark their land. There are about a hundred words for it, most of them used by books in languages I wouldn't be able to read, anyway.

"I may have a very nice Civil War soldier to talk to, soon. The War was very good to our family, you know.

"What do you want me to say? I wasn't around then. They were making Dracula movies by the time I was baptized."

Kindred culture stood strong while mortal culture was swept aside. When the Northerners came for us, we were waiting and we sent them right home. Most of what you and I think of as the Old South was defined during that very period. I'm more curious, though, about the war itself. Traditionally, we've followed armies and conquerors, but I see very little of that having happened *during* the war. I think Colonel Spade might..."

I'm back on the line with Temple, who's going on a happy tangent. I've turned off the picture on my end. I keep expecting him to complain, but he doesn't. I try to bring him back on topic.

"The Masquerade," he tells me, "is an idea. It can't literally be breached or broken or whatever it is you city types kill each other for."

I point out that he's not exactly operating out in the open.

"No," he chuckles, "I'm not. But you don't really know where I'm operating, do you?"

I want to ask him if the call is coming from inside my house, but he'd probably say yes. Instead, I let him go on.

"The humans know they have monsters. They always have, and they always will. They'll talk about it, they'll laugh it off, but it will always be nervous laughter."

As Crazy Does

"How long *have* they been making Dracula movies?" I ask. I'm on the phone with Aubrey again. This time there's no one to distract me, and I keep getting bored while I wait for her to answer. My phone beeps. Not only am I waiting, I'm ignoring a picture message.

"They've never made a proper one," she replies. She's talking to me like I'm

one of the slow kids. I hate to admit that I find it reassuring, and slightly arousing. "But the first mortal adaptation of Stoker's novel was *Nosferatu* in 1924."

"Why didn't anybody do anything about it?" I ask. Maybe I am one of the slow kids.

"Stoker's wife tried. I know, yeah, you're wondering why none of us did anything... well, what the hell would we have done? I was still practically nursing at my mother's neck, but what can we do about some German guy prancing around on camera?"

"How did Stoker even get published in the first place?"

"You could ask that about Le Fanu, too," she chides.

"Who?"

Beep.

"The guy who did a bio on the Princess of Dublin. They made that one into a movie, too. You'd like it, it has lesbians."

I let her get by with the fact that I *would* like that, and think about it.

"When you put it that way, it doesn't seem so bad." You'd think that revelation would make me happy, but I'm actually thinking *shit, article down the toilet*.

"Movies, books, they're all just noise. Stoker got a few of our words out into the open, and I'm *sure* that Carmilla planned her own biography. She's reigned for three hundred years at this point, she's no dummy."

I chew on that, and then I get to the point I do with every New Year.

Beep.

I ask her why this year, why in 2007 the mortals are going to wise up and discover the Kindred.

"They're not," she says, and I wish I could turn to look at her like she's got three

heads. Which would also be cool for other reasons.

I bring up her warning and point out that I've been prepping this article all week, that there are Kindred who need to know about the danger she's foreseeing, unless she's just a crazy bitch who can't be happy with just one thing to be paranoid about.

"I wasn't warning everybody," she says, and the stern schoolmarm voice isn't getting me hot anymore. "I'll have gone off to sunrise long before the herd figures us all out. I was warning *you*."

Bitch hangs up on me. Apparently, I have "flix" waiting on my phone. Me, kissing a redhead on New Years. Me, buying a webcam. Me, sitting on a park bench.

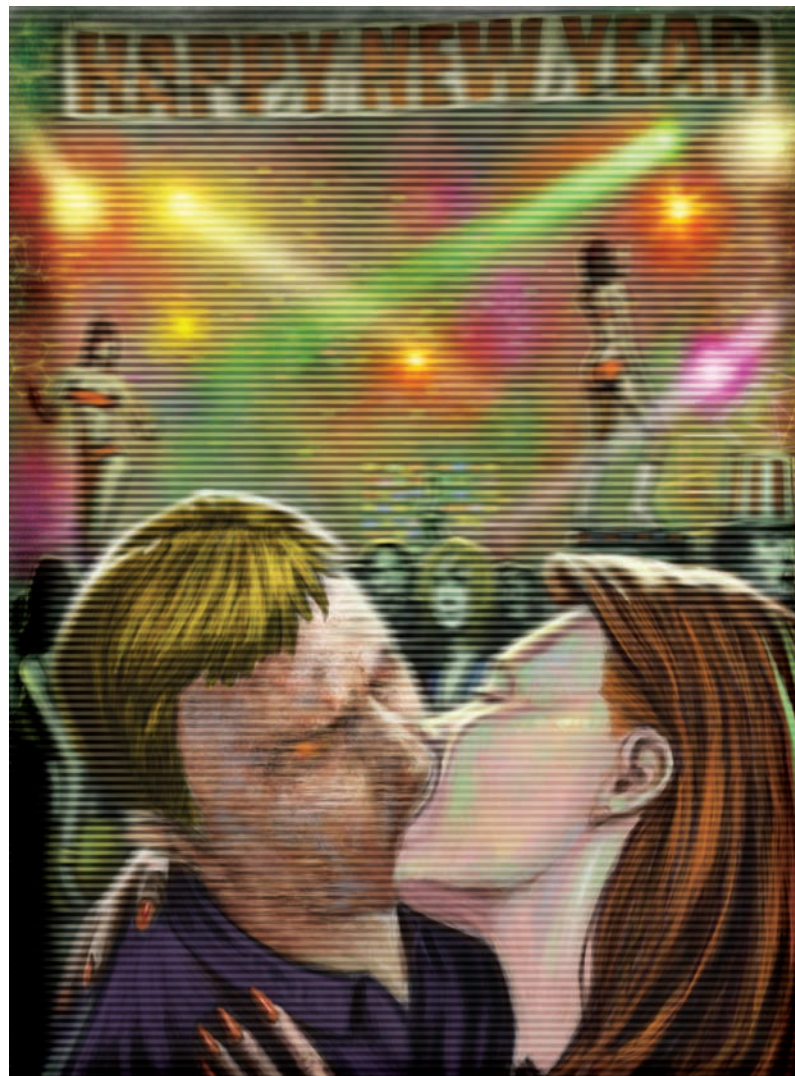
And me.

On the phone.

Right now.

Vice Is like a fury to the vicious mind, and turns delight itself to punishment.

—Ben Jonson



I often feel that I have always been in New York. Like so many of our feelings, however that is a lie. I began my life in the Old World, and, though I was Embraced in the New, not only my mortal blood crossed the sea. Sweet Marisa carried the blood of the Dacva with us, as did so many others. Our beginnings as a clan must stretch back across the oceans.

From the stories and songs Marisa taught me, I would like to imagine great empires of the night, true nations of the dead. Indeed, I must confess to a touch of anglophilia where poetry is concerned. I would like to believe that in this age of instant, private communication, we could renew our acquaintances with our Kindred abroad.

I have been disappointed. The domains of Europe, Asia and Africa are as fractious and scattered as our own. If they have any ancient knowledge, they have not been willing or able to share, and their ties with each other seem as tenuous as their ties with us. In past decades, I could say nothing to my cousins abroad. Tonight, I find myself able to say nothing faster.

Nonetheless, I have made some useful acquaintances. Frances, a Shadow, has been invaluable in providing context to my collection, so much so that I helped her loot treasure from the Library of New Orleans. Electronic communications have also provided the opportunities to study or be informed of the artifacts of the Old World without undertaking the journey myself. Perhaps when I have slumbered and my health has improved, Marisa and I will return to the Continent together.

If we remember.

I have taken the liberty of translating this from the French. It is, I fear, rather a fluff piece, but given the importance of Carmilla in the media of the herd and the folklore of the Kindred, I would be remiss in not collecting it.

Following Carmilla

Just as the carriage had passed the summit of the steep bridge, one of the leaders, taking fright, communicated his panic to the rest, and after a plunge or two, the whole team broke into a wild gallop together, and dashing between the horsemen who rode in front, came thundering along the road towards us with the speed of a hurricane.

The excitement of the scene was made more painful by the clear, long-drawn screams of a female voice from the carriage window. We advanced in curiosity and horror...

You just have to be in the right place. A quiet rest stop, a Styrian *schloss*, a Dublin sidewalk. You won't know where, but you will know who. You'll recognize her, from dreams or visions or outright fantasy. You'll know why she's there. She needs you.

Through the carriage door was now lifted a young lady, who appeared to be lifeless. My father was already beside the elder lady, with his hat in his hand, evidently tendering his aid and resources. The lady did not appear to hear him, or to have eyes for anything but the slender girl who was being placed against the slope of the bank.

I approached; the young lady was apparently stunned, but she was certainly not dead.

That's the myth, anyway. Carmilla is one of our very few famous Kindred, a folk hero among her family and a defining character in the literature of the kine. In both our worlds, she represents taboo. To mortals, she associates "vampires" with petty sins like homosexuality and loving the dead. Among the Daeva, she is admired for seduction and tricks, but is disturbing for her promiscuous Embraces and blood-bonding. She has become immortal in a way most of us avoid like the sun. Among humans, embalming women as icons is relatively common. Perhaps because our society is so small, Kindred do so more rarely. Mortals can love from the distance of space or days, but the undead know only our relatives and neighbors. Knowing realities prevents us from canonizing our fictions. Carmilla, however, remains tantalizing. We imagine she could appear at any moment, force us to lover and render to tatters our Requiems, leaving behind only longing and unwanted childer.

Years ago, I became infatuated with one of Carmilla's childer. I doubt that says enough to identify either of us. Entrancement with that pleasant young man has led me through two mortal lifetimes tracing Carmilla Incarnadine, ruler of Dublin and far-traveler. Following her back through time, I've uncovered three Carmillas: the Carmilla of our myth, the Carmilla who has defined us to the kine and the Carmilla of genuine history.

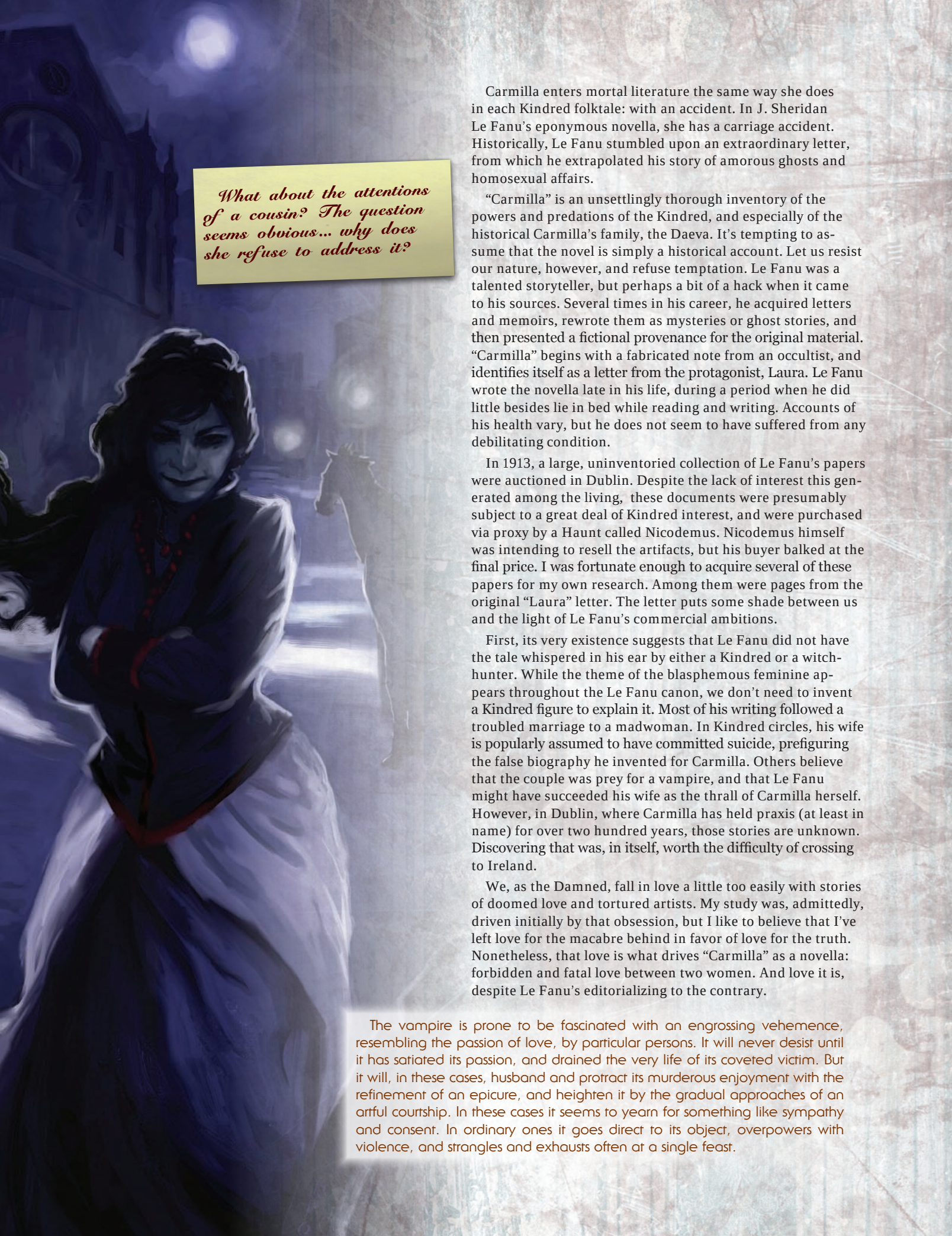
She conveniently neglects any of the cults of Lilith or the Grone, not to mention the churches built on slumbering elders.

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Novel Debut

I remember my father coming up and standing at the bedside, and talking cheerfully, and asking the nurse a number of questions, and laughing very heartily at one of the answers; and patting me on the shoulder, and kissing me, and telling me not to be frightened, that it was nothing but a dream and could not hurt me.

But I was not comforted, for I knew the visit of the strange woman was not a dream; and I was awfully frightened.

An illustration of Carmilla, a vampire, in a dark, gothic setting. She is wearing a dark, high-collared dress with a red sash and a red necklace. Her hair is dark and wavy. She is looking towards the viewer with a slight, enigmatic smile. In the background, there is a large, dark, gothic building with a clock tower. A pale, ghostly figure of a woman in a white dress is visible in the background, and a white horse is also present. The overall atmosphere is dark and mysterious.

What about the attentions of a cousin? The question seems obvious... why does she refuse to address it?

Carmilla enters mortal literature the same way she does in each Kindred folktale: with an accident. In J. Sheridan Le Fanu's eponymous novella, she has a carriage accident. Historically, Le Fanu stumbled upon an extraordinary letter, from which he extrapolated his story of amorous ghosts and homosexual affairs.

"Carmilla" is an unsettlingly thorough inventory of the powers and predations of the Kindred, and especially of the historical Carmilla's family, the Daeva. It's tempting to assume that the novel is simply a historical account. Let us resist our nature, however, and refuse temptation. Le Fanu was a talented storyteller, but perhaps a bit of a hack when it came to his sources. Several times in his career, he acquired letters and memoirs, rewrote them as mysteries or ghost stories, and then presented a fictional provenance for the original material. "Carmilla" begins with a fabricated note from an occultist, and identifies itself as a letter from the protagonist, Laura. Le Fanu wrote the novella late in his life, during a period when he did little besides lie in bed while reading and writing. Accounts of his health vary, but he does not seem to have suffered from any debilitating condition.

In 1913, a large, uninventoried collection of Le Fanu's papers were auctioned in Dublin. Despite the lack of interest this generated among the living, these documents were presumably subject to a great deal of Kindred interest, and were purchased via proxy by a Haunt called Nicodemus. Nicodemus himself was intending to resell the artifacts, but his buyer balked at the final price. I was fortunate enough to acquire several of these papers for my own research. Among them were pages from the original "Laura" letter. The letter puts some shade between us and the light of Le Fanu's commercial ambitions.

First, its very existence suggests that Le Fanu did not have the tale whispered in his ear by either a Kindred or a witch-hunter. While the theme of the blasphemous feminine appears throughout the Le Fanu canon, we don't need to invent a Kindred figure to explain it. Most of his writing followed a troubled marriage to a madwoman. In Kindred circles, his wife is popularly assumed to have committed suicide, prefiguring the false biography he invented for Carmilla. Others believe that the couple was prey for a vampire, and that Le Fanu might have succeeded his wife as the thrall of Carmilla herself. However, in Dublin, where Carmilla has held praxis (at least in name) for over two hundred years, those stories are unknown. Discovering that was, in itself, worth the difficulty of crossing to Ireland.

We, as the Damned, fall in love a little too easily with stories of doomed love and tortured artists. My study was, admittedly, driven initially by that obsession, but I like to believe that I've left love for the macabre behind in favor of love for the truth. Nonetheless, that love is what drives "Carmilla" as a novella: forbidden and fatal love between two women. And love it is, despite Le Fanu's editorializing to the contrary.

The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. It will never desist until it has sariated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim. But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent. In ordinary ones it goes direct to its object, overpowers with violence, and strangles and exhausts often at a single feast.

Passages like this one, and, notably, much of the prey's antipathy towards Carmilla, are introduced by Le Fanu. If the novelist knew any truth, he cruelly misrepresented the Kindred condition, transforming our passion and allure into obsessions and lies.

Analyzing the Laura fragment and Le Fanu's drafts makes it clear that the author was not acting as historian. Most striking is the setting of the story: the historical Laura was an English girl living south of Belfast. Her father and his friend go unnamed (presumably to maintain her anonymity), but they are both English soldiers who served, as had their fathers, in the removal of Ireland's Catholic nobility. Le Fanu depoliticized Laura's social position by relocating her to Styria, and at the same time capitalized on the romantic fashion for the Continent. He also invented an ending for the story, in which Carmilla is conveniently exorcised, and male domination over female sexuality is confidently reasserted. The actual letter, and his own earlier drafts, run rather differently.

I have no single theory that accounts for the behavior and disappearance of our beautiful guest. That she was one and the same as the General's "Millarca" is a truth that will brook no argument. My father was for a time engrossed with the explanations offered by an indecorous Catholic monk; I have not been as impressed. As once a queer specter haunted my nights, the memory of the lovely Carmilla haunts my days. I fancy sometimes that I can see her features in clouds illuminated by the moon, or in the skull-faced portrait my father refuses to remove from our walls, but such thoughts are, as I say, fancy, and properly dismissed.

Although Laura applies the label "vampire," she does not do so with the certainty or apparent sense of relief that Le Fanu later gives her. Her own words suggest that she wishes for the return of her Kindred lover. Hardly a surprise, but the standards of Le Fanu's time compelled him to put a stake through the heart of the homosexual relationship much as his sense of drama required him to put a stake through the heart of his monster.

Dublin Underground

Our visitor lay in one of the handsomest rooms in the house. It was, perhaps, a little stately. There was a somber piece of tapestry opposite the foot of the bed, representing Cleopatra with the asp to her bosom; and other solemn classic scenes were displayed, a little faded, upon the walls. But there was gold carving, and rich and varied color enough in the other decorations of the room, to more than redeem the gloom of the old tapestry.

There were candles at the bedside. She was sitting up; her slender pretty figure enveloped in the soft silk dressing gown, embroidered with flowers, and lined with thick quilted silk, which her mother had thrown over her feet as she lay upon the ground.

What was it that, as I reached the bedside and had just begun my little greeting, struck me dumb in a moment, and made me recoil a step or two from before her? I will tell you.

I saw the very face which had visited me in my childhood at night, which remained so fixed in my memory, and on which I had for so many years so often ruminated with curiosity, when no-one suspected of what I was thinking. It was pretty, even beautiful; and when I first beheld it, wore the same melancholy expression. But this almost instantly lighted into a strange fixed smile of recognition.

There was a silence of fully a minute, and then at length she spoke; I could not.

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Twelve years ago, I saw your face in a dream, and it has haunted me ever since."



???

*Write Frances re: New
Camarilla.*

*Without Le Fanu, I
doubt we'd use a common
name for her at all. The
professor is unwilling to
admit that the kine book
created Kindred legends,
much as Dracula eventually
would.*

*Dress which suggests
the modern Tshtarri, but
that parallel could be
meaningless.*

When "Carmilla" appeared in *The Deep Blue*, it caused an immediate sensation among the Kindred of Ireland. Like Laura, they were shocked to find a familiar face where none should have been. The Princess of Dublin was already well-known in 1872. She had, against all expectations, supported the foundation of the so-called New Camarilla. The few Kindred I have found who recall those nights said that they were uncertain whether the novella was meant as flattery or some sort of attack. The Burrower of Laois Abbey had not yet been exiled from Dublin. He told me that it was a tribute, and that the Princess was well-known to enjoy romances of courtly love and adored the unconsummated adoration of mortals. As evidence, he points out that even in the 19th century, Kindred had enough influence to stop or alter the course of a single serial novel. Le Fanu, he reasons, had a powerful protector.

The Burrower also explained why no one asked Carmilla. When the novella began to appear, she had not been seen in Dublin in a quarter-century. Indeed, her infamous "Call to Unity" was delivered in Belfast. Though Carmilla held power in Dublin, her court and residence were mobile. Exactly how long she was the city's dominant elder is difficult to determine.

In other cases, supposed traveling elders are often hoaxes, elaborate fictions developed to protect a torpid corpse. In our own local history, we have seen them maintained by secret childer, as in the infamous case of Chantal. Carmilla, however, appears as a wandering figure in too many folktales of Ireland and the continent to easily dismiss the possibility that she herself moved away. In the few domains I have found which keep written records, there are references to visitors of apparent status, often named as "of the Camarilla" and traveling with an entourage. In this way we begin to solve another of the puzzles left us by Laura and Le Fanu. Both mention Carmilla by different, anagrammatic names. Orally-related stories of her appearances in Kindred domains across the Continent use a cluster of similar aliases.

Le Fanu substantially extends this motif, suggesting that it represents a unique, magical weakness. With the maturity of a Kindred mind, it's hard not to look for a more fitting explanation, and here we have it: "Carmilla" is a corruption of "Camarilla." Yet, those tales go back many centuries further, suggesting at least sporadic activity. Both the Laura letter and Le Fanu's adaptation mention Carmilla's "mother," who assists in the cuckoo's egg trick. If this woman is actually her sire, they both must go back very far indeed. The Burrower told me that Carmilla came to Ireland from Gaul in the nights of the Invictus Emperor; such an ancient traveling with her sire strains credulity. Laura also mentions a "hideous black woman, with a sort of coloured turban on her head."

Most of the records I found give her an entourage of between three and four; she is always the last to depart, presumably at the moment that her departure will be most keenly felt.

Saint Carmilla

Sometimes after an hour of apathy, my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet over-powering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, "You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one for ever."

Then she would throw herself back in her chair, with her small hands over her eyes, leaving me trembling.

We all know, however, that Carmilla isn't famous for changing her name, or for having a nomadic court. What can history tell us about her notorious pursuit of the taboo? As I said, I've traveled more widely than most, but I didn't have to stray far to encounter my own blue-eyed childe of Carmilla. She has so many verifiable Embraces to her name that some Kindred associate the act itself with her. In my home domain, orphans and larvae are called "childer of Carmilla." The phrase seems to be popular as far as Paris.

Carmilla folktales, however, center less on her progeny than on her affairs with other vampires. Carmilla appears as a sweet-natured elder who has suffered a tragic accident. Her host-to-be is compelled, by stir-

ring in the Blood, to assist her while her entourage travels on. She always avoids the suspicion which ordinarily dogs elders. Some of the longer tales tell complex and comic stories of her outwitting local princes. Others simply speak of her beauty and alluring nature. Carmilla and her host become mutually obsessed, often to the distress of other Kindred. Carmilla feeds from her host, sometimes appealing to charity, while in others simply dazzling them with her overwhelming presence. Sexual relations are implied but rarely detailed. Often unknown to the host, their feeding is mutual; Carmilla wakes by day and feeds her Vitae to her host. It is said that her Blood is sweet and infuses the loins with fire.

She used to place her pretty arms about my neck, draw me to her, and laying her cheek to mine, murmur with her lips near my ear, "Dearest, your little heart is wounded; think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours. In the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die – die, sweetly die – into mine. I cannot help it; as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love; so, for a while, seek to know no more of me and mine, but trust me with all your loving spirit."

And when she had spoken such a rhapsody, she would press me more closely in her trembling embrace, and her lips in soft kisses gently glow upon my cheek.

Then, compelled by some strange urge, Carmilla leaves. Afterwards, large numbers of poorly-concealed lover corpses are discovered, implying that she sates herself not only on Kindred but kine as well. In the few cases we can verify historically, she almost always seems to be granted a full pardon, sometimes following a letter dispatched in her capacity as ruler of Dublin. Her host usually argues on her behalf, still obsessed as much as wounded.

Carmilla appeals to our suppressed wants: to consume each other's blood in acts of passion, to lust and feast without restraint. We don't just secretly wish to meet her, but to be her, to enjoy the freedom in death that reason demands we deny ourselves. Yet, through Laura's writing, Carmilla offers a stern warning against her own example.

You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish; the more ardent the more selfish. How jealous I am you cannot know. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me and still come with me. And hating me through death and after. There is no such word as indifference in my apathetic nature."

[73]



You see? This is what playing host to the Incarnadine gets us. I told you this would happen – now you're going to clean this up. Or else.

The World Before Us

Our family's culture is passed mostly by oral tradition, and a rich tradition it is. Our so-called scholars never fail to dismiss memory or poetry as a source of history, and they care even less for song. I have spent decades learning the songs of our sires, recreating the music of the past... but no one will listen. I have on occasion been invited to perform for a Grone-cult, or been asked about a word of unusual origin. Where my genealogies are prized possessions, held so tightly that even I must be content consulting my drafts, the songs are considered novelties or entertainments. Tonight, I put my pen in the service of those truths. If the written word is all that will be believed, then here is the truth, written down. The music will be lost with me; perhaps it will be recomposed in a wiser age.

In assembling this, I have been aided by Frances, of the Mekhet cult. My personal collection, as well as contacts across the island and even New York, provide the bulk of the necessary resources. By grace I am the greatest scholar of our clan's antiquity, and perhaps that of our Kindred in general. Frances is remarkably wise for a Shadow, aware that information has value only when it is put to use. I have, therefore, permitted her to argue her own case. Perhaps her facts will illuminate my truths.

Frances was, of course, adequately compensated. Neither she nor her cult may lay claim to any truth or artifact within this package.

Why Seek the Past?

[74]

I'm old enough not to believe the words of wicked old men, whether scientists or wizards. I was too old for that before my Embrace, and no blush of life can make me younger, after these long centuries. Yet, the mysteries of the ages beckon to me, a thousand closed doors beyond which lie some moment of my past or my ancestors'. My mortal line has long since been extinguished, and my immortal Kindred lurch forward towards futures I will not and do not wish to see.

Death and requiem refuse to still my own need to change. If I cannot grow, if the cracks multiplying in my skin refuse to grant wisdom, I may still climb my family tree for knowledge, even as I draw nearer the sun. One day, I hope that the entire story of my family can be told to each new lover-child as it used to be. I imagine them standing proud again at the pulpits, shunning as always the sun but fearing it never more.

Conceived in Sin

Only the most debased of the witch-broods could deny that we Kindred flow from human blood. The story of the Kindred begins with the kine, and the story of the kine begins in Sumeria.

Kine scholars have, of course, piled mountains of corpses showing their descent from brightest Africa or furthest China. Even if these bodies are human, if they truly possessed the vitality which separates human blood from that of mean animals, they could not have had the wit or the grace that we so value in our herds.

Oh, Dad. Racist to the end,
weren't you? To every end.

The kine know this, too, in their blood. They never fail to try and reclaim their motherlands, to return to the heart of their civilization. Nor have we. With every mortal Crusade, from dawn of the last millennium until tonight, our Kindred have followed, my family at their head. While the chatter of the herd suggests kingdoms of grandeur and gardens of paradise as far as they can push themselves to imagine, the true beginning, for them and for us, was the city of Ur.

Ur was ruled by the God I will name Sin. Every figure in our history has many names, as we do tonight; I choose those which mean the most to me. Sin is our earliest ancestor, the lord of the moon and of wisdom. From him, man

The old bat is needlessly mythologizing. It's easy to pinpoint a historical Ur, and tempting to call it the starting point of civilization.

Starting points, however, are inevitably arbitrary, like the mythical "transitional fossil." Kine culture, though pockmarked with births and deaths, is as much a continuum as our own. Human excavation, both with and without our guidance, has suggested that early cities were in fact places of trade or secure living, from which the inhabitants commuted to surrounding agricultural bases. It seems reasonable that Kindred or ancestors claiming those domains were likewise entombed within the cities, venturing by night to feed on a settled population. Simply put, they too were farmers.

learned Humanity, became more than an ape and a hunter, gathered in the city and spread out to the farms. Who was this moon-God? As we acknowledge that we were preceded by man, we must acknowledge that something preceded him. Tonight, there are mortal wizards in every hedge and gutter, praying to

their own tiny and filthy idols. I have seen them draw petty favors from beings called "Wotan" and "Moloch" and even "Teddy." These cannot be the Gods that elevated them.

I said that Sin had many names. Among these must later have been Yahweh of the Jews and the Jealous Father of Longinus. Yet, Sin ruled in his palace in Ur long before any one group of men became his Chosen. We know from mortal fragments that Sin descended regularly into the underworld. Earlier scholars, my beloved Chantal among them, infer that the underworld was a place that could be physically visited, perhaps even by mortals. More likely, the herd misunderstood Sin's need to torpor as we, his childer, do.

There were no Kindred in these early nights. True, mortals tell of demons in the desert, part animal and part man. They refer only to their own ancestors, changing breeds who had not yet evolved or extinguished. Our history begins when Sin begets Inanna. As our childer succeed us, the Goddess of War and Lust succeeded her father. She seduced from him the secrets of his wisdom, and his mastery of the moon. She drove him from a city and buried him within a mountain. Yet, Inanna ruled over the sun, as well. Where her father raised up and ruled over man, Inanna ruled from Ur over all things.

Ruled By Lust

The Goddess shared our thirst for blood, at least in her soul. She fought wars for their own sake, naked and fiery as the sunset, rending her enemies limb from limb in wassails we can only yearn for. She crowned herself queen of every nation, and taught the herd music that they could sing her praises. She exiled the unruly and the ugly, so that they could form nations and be conquered by her again. She entered the private places of men and women, gorged herself and dragged them to her palace for her pleasure.

Inanna was the first and foremost mistress of the city, warrior and lover and ruler. She originated our virtues, and also our loneliness. That is how she fell in love with Tammuz, a man of vitality and stability, and made him God-consort. That is why she welcomed Lilith, the Stranger from beyond

Inanna's endless lands, and made her highest priestess. Of Lilith, we know one true thing: she was scorned. Perhaps she was another child of Sin, begotten or raised. Lilith has been called the Serpent of Eden, perhaps that is why our blood is cold. I believe Sin sent her to Inanna.

Lilith was faithful to Inanna. She loved and mimicked her in all things. When Inanna failed to rouse from torpor, Lilith prayed and gave blood until the Goddess was reborn. When Inanna gave judgment to the people of Ur, Lilith visited her lady's wrath upon them. When Inanna took a lover, Lilith took her own. When Inanna warred with the screech-owls and the half-men of the desert, Lilith fought at her side with tooth and spear.

These are reasonable interpretations of fragments of Laments recovered from Erciyes in the 19th century, as well as verifiable Sumerian Laments assembled by mortal scholars. However, their assembly into this monomyth is dubious at best. The professor has assured me that oral tradition among the Daeva supports the integration, but has not made any recordings or elders available to me.

The Way of All Love

Child of Sin or no, Inanna embraced Lilith as her little sister. We know, however, what happens between sisters. For though Lilith had coupled with Tammuz as they sung the Goddess's praises, she soon conceived hunger for him all her own. One night, when Inanna slumbered in the earth, she was roused as usual by blood. But that blood did not drip from Lilith's blessed veins, but the filthy beaks of the owls. They fed Inanna as they fed their young, and they sung to her their own songs.

"Goddess," they screeched. "The sun has fallen, yet your handmaiden does not wake you. The moon has risen, yet your husband does not wait for you."

Inanna woke, the blood of the owls tasting of ash and rage in her mouth. She stormed from the hut where she died and strode through the markets of Ur. Where her people did business, she butchered them. Where they ate and they drank, she swallowed them whole.

When she reached her own palace, she found Lilith and Tammuz together... not coupling, not kissing, but speaking prayers to one other instead of to her. Tammuz she rent limb from limb as an enemy on the battlefield. She threw his parts from her highest tower, and while Lilith cowered and wept, the Goddess choked the life from her. She dragged the body to the desert and bid the owls take the blood they had given her back from her servant.

I have told you of the things the Goddess and her father were that we are not. She shared our wits, though, and the bitter depths of our feeling. If her rage was even greater than ours, then so was her mourning. She commanded her slaves to recite laments until they dropped dead of thirst, but none could soothe her for Lilith's loss, any more than they could equal the priestess's eloquence. She ruttet with her subjects until their bodies broke from the strain, but none could leave her with the gentle smiles of Tammuz. Inanna was once more queen of all, and once more had no one to share it with.

Inanna commanded the sun to tell her where Tammuz's remains had fallen. The sun obeyed, and Inanna's finest seamstresses sewed new flesh to coat his bones. When his body was complete once more, she took a piece of the sun, and placed it in his heart. He awoke, his eyes glowing with her reflected glory as never before.

Inanna went to the desert, with a troop of soldiers and maidens to offer to the owls. She sang to them their own screeching songs, and saddened them so that they cried back Lilith's blood. She took the lifeblood in her mouth, and returned it to her sister in a kiss. The desert-birds had taken Lilith's eyes, so Inanna carved her new ones from the moon, eyes that showed Inanna or anyone else just what they wanted to see. She named her true-sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of Night and Perpetual Maiden, and so they were reconciled.

The Goddess's household was complete again, and for years more she ruled. Yet she had worked a subtle trick, that she could never be betrayed again. Tammuz had the heart of the sun, which Lilith could not look upon with the eyes of the moon. They could love each other only through adoring their Goddess. The Prince of Day left exquisite tokens of his

love, which Lilith wore when Inanna discarded them. The Queen of Night bit her tongue when she kissed her sister, leaving her blood for her lover to taste. And so it was, until the land became bitter.

The First Requiem

Inanna had brought the sun to Earth, first to smite her enemies, then to find her husband, and finally to fuel his heart. The green land of Ur burned

and became desert, and the goddess gathered her husband upon a golden boat, and took him far away. She left Lilith Queen and Goddess in her stead, to watch over the city as it waned.

At first, Lilith gloried in the city all her own. She gave her blood to lovers, as she had Tammuz, and so gave them love beyond death. These are our true ancestors, the childer of the Stranger and the Scorned, the scions of the Queen of Night. She brought them

up as Inanna did, to sing the praises of Queen and City. As Inanna had cast out malcontents, Lilith cast off those childer with whom she quarreled. They founded their own cities, and in their glories saw Lilith's decline. When Ur became empty and the breezes haunted its sheepfolds, they composed Laments, and had their mortal flocks do likewise. They learned our purpose: to celebrate Humanity, to embrace its virtues and its excesses and to mourn it forever when it passes.



6-3. Painting, artist unknown, c. 1700s; thought to depict Inanna or cognate goddess in an unknown myth cycle.

Alternate Mythology

As I've noted, finding our origins requires crossing borders ordinarily impassible to us. While traveling to the Old World is beyond even my considerable means, the kine make it easier and easier for us to visit in spirit. Some young Kindred develop friendships across the oceans; the young academic who writes me below is one such. His versatile mind has not helped him find a place in his own city, but it endears him to me, and speeds my work considerably.

From: Nic Echo
Sent: Friday, February 15, 3:10 am
To: The Old Bat
Subject: RE: The Old World
Attachments: BldBllds.jpg

If they keep this up, they are going to put a hole in the wall.

I'm sorry about your friends' triangle. Don't feel like you're missing too much, though.

Lishan and Mat have at least admitted they're lovers, and Katy disappears into Lishan's room with them all the damn time. She doesn't say, but I think they circle-lick each other, and I think she thinks I know. "I think she thinks"... how fucked is that, anyway? I wonder a lot about how we got here. It was supposed to just be a living arrangement, something so that I didn't have to live under my sire's twiddly little thumbs and Lishan didn't get so much pressure from Fifth Street. Now everybody's calling us a damn coterie and I think all of "Elysium" suspects that we're drinking all over the place. Paradise for the dead? Not really.

My main concern is about you. Is your haven safe? Are you feeding?

I know I'm lucky to have had a choice, but nobody told me being Kindred was going to be so damned expensive. I figured I'd be able to scam a lot more off the herd, but even though I *can*, it's as hard as ever to motivate myself to go out there. Especially the places Lishan or Katy hang out... I mean, I get enough noise and sexual tension in my own damn grave, here. Why would I go out to a nightclub? I guess there are some of the other scenes to consider. My sire used to do Renfair back in the day, and it seems like a lot of the older guys at Elysium have ties to various little communities. Like the Waffle House guy, for instance. Most nights, I keep sane by watching TV and using the Internet. My old trivia buddies still meet at Fado, and I can usually tap one of them. I think they basically know, but no one makes a big deal out of it. They don't have any idea there's anyone else like me.

If we actually got West Side Story with Fifth Street, I guess I'd be a little dry, but I'm sure Katy would hook me up. I know I'm bitching about her a lot, but she's really been good to me. Much better than, say, Mat.

Despite the whispers of "perversion" on the lips of your Harpies and Elders, consuming one another's blood is fairly common at your age, particularly these nights. They'll learn soon enough that being closer isn't all it's made out to be. My own relationship with my daughter is proof enough of that.

I don't know if they even want to be closer. Frankly, I think they just get high off the Blood and maybe all the screwing. They're not monophagous either, or at least Katy isn't. I'd never presume to tell her to keep a

stable herd, but I think she's sucking off a lot of our other Kindred, too. I keep telling myself it's not my business, but she's going to end up with a red leash and the M pretty soon.

You don't need to be worried about me; I'm not part of the big circle-lick. I'm just worried about them. "Monster I am lest a monster I become" and all that shit, yeah, but these are my friends we're talking about. I don't like living with them, and I don't like being treated like we're a fucking political party or something just because we're shacking up, but they're mostly decent, especially Katy. Full disclosure: I do stuff with her, but all we do is screw. It's safe, and neither one of us has gotten close to getting carried away.

You asked about the bond in general. I don't know if I can really help. It's similar to the attachments mortals develop to us, either to the Blood-influence or to our blood itself. However, it does not purely bond a master to a servant, and sometimes I doubt that the domination and submission Kindred say is inherent to the bond is anything more than two Beasts wrestling for influence. Among bond-groups like your friends, the connections usually don't result in clear masters and slaves. Whether the bond is dangerous, I don't know. Certainly, it inflames passion, and I have grown weary and skeptical of passion in these nights. But I am, as you often remind me, very old. Perhaps my passions have simply rusted over, so that they no longer bring me joy.

Well, all I can tell you is that the bunch of them are going at it like cats, in every possible sense. I'm not afraid somebody's going to get hurt. I mean, somebody already is hurt, right? Me. I don't want to be in on all the biting and sucking, but we used to all be real tight. Now they're in their weird little knot and Mat looks at me like I'm the inquisition every time I ask something – like where we're keeping the emergency money.

Which we're kind of in the middle of, right now. I ran into trouble with your last check. I know it's legit on your end, but we've got to get you on PayPal or Redwire or something, because the banks ask a lot of questions from me. I've got some authentication jobs coming up that'll bring me back up to snuff, and Lishan's taking on some work for the Asimaiyat, but we've been hurting for money besides the mortgage. I've been letting Katy slide, since everybody knows she's the muscle and has the mortgage, but... no fun, ma'am. No fun at all.

Is there anything I can do to help?

Thanks for tagging me back the other day. That and all your mothering helped more than anything else. Like I said, it's been totally insane here. The work helps, too, but I'm not sure that you're going to like all of my conclusions. I've been looking at the parallels and the written sources, and there are some serious issues with treating your oral traditions as facts or even legitimate folklore. I ran most of these by Frances already, but she didn't reply.

You're quite enamored of our "rich cultural tradition," which is great. You've asked me to look for historical records to back that up. The problem is that most of the relevant sources don't go back very far.

I'm confident enough in my own work, and in Frances's consultations, that I did not ask Nic to prepare a comparison with other sources. I compensated him for this anyhow out of goodwill, and I pass it on in the hopes that it will help you appreciate my collection. He places too much pride in his own methods, but that speaks for itself. I won't bother to correct him.

From: Nic Echo
Sent: Friday, February 15, 3:10 am
To: The Old Bat
Subject: **Blood Ballads**
Attachments: BldBllds.jpg



Also known as the *Ballads of Blod and Cynn*, *Ballads of Blood and Sin*, *Ballads of Blood and Fear*, and many other titles. There's also one extensive critical edition from 1919 called the *Childe Ballads*.

The earliest generations of this collection were originally recorded in England and Wales in the early 1800s. They're written transcriptions of traditional Daeva family ballads and songs. They notably, very notably, omit both the melodies that must have been used to sing them and the genealogies that precede some traditional ballads. Many of them tell stories that you'll find familiar from your own research (Frances has scans of some early versions, BTW). They're full of Liliith, a creator God who rules jealously and is obsessed with sin, and all sorts of other spooky, epic stuff that blends pre-Crone paganism with Sanctified theology. There are Biblical figures, lost clans, and tales of ordinary Kindred seducing and eluding mortals. There's also an unusual level of internal consistency and relationship between different versions.

Most striking, for your purpose, is the appearance of a wandering "Mother" or "Black Abbess" who admonishes priests not only to tempt mortals but to remember their own sins. She is addressed repeatedly as "daughter of God," which could arguably refer to your version of Liliith. This wandering stranger also resembles Longinus's mother (as depicted by the Livian Heresy) and the so-called "Sheddima."

The Blood Ballads are extremely popular, and, up here, we've got some recreationists doing Red Madonna hymns based on them. They mostly match your version of our origins, even if you only talk about them obliquely. They're known enough that "blood ballads" is used as a generic term for any Kindred folk literature.

Unfortunately, they're a horrible source. I'm not going to say "forgery" outright, but, to me, they're extremely suspicious. Why?

First, they're written in English and Welsh. I can't really work with the Welsh material (maybe Frances could), but the English is kind of weird. The texts are from various eras of Modern English, with rhythms and devices we can associate with kine sources in Old English. No obvious Middle English traces, nor shades of any kind of French. They read as if the writing had been done in Old English and then translated directly. That's *possible*, but all of the notes suggest these were collected from petty British domains in the years shortly before their publication. (Irritatingly, they're all anonymous, though I'm working with a cousin in Cardiff on mapping them by geographical references.) Any source in spoken language would have passed through intermediate phases of English and French, and there's no evidence for that. I've been doing some work with a possible intermediate *Beowulf* manuscript for another client (don't worry, he doesn't know), and the comparisons are striking.

Second, ageism. The original compiler seems to have talked only to the eldest Kindred in a given domain. I know that was the custom in those days, but that means that even if we take "him" at his word, there are gross gaps in the information provided. We don't know how old the elders are, how many generations a given ballad passed through, or how much content drift may have occurred during this time.

Last, you can't trust a prankster. Most of the names for editions of the *Ballads* specifically involve plays on words. For example, "blod" is "blood," but "cynn" isn't "sin," it's "kin" or "kind," as in Kindred. There is a word for sin that resembles a word in some of the titles. "Fear" would have sounded like "fyren." "Childe Ballads" is even more obvious. It's an homage to mortal folklorist Francis J. Child. We can safely assume that someone recorded the ballads from their inception through the early twentieth century, and these individuals were actively embedding their own humor in the material.

IMPO, there are two likely possibilities. One, that the *Blood Ballads* is a forgery. It matches traditional songs and storytelling from many areas of the world because it was written in an era when that material was available to the forger. He was probably a pretty good scholar, but he wasn't ready for the kind of analysis you hired me for. A century or so too early, you know? It may even be intended, like the *Malkavian Testament*, as a satire. That'd put it out of my area; I was embraced for a flexible tongue, not a sharp one.

What's more likely, though, is that it's actually a reconstruction. We know that in the early middle ages, the Spear used cousins with sharp memories as "books" themselves. These Kindred were living copies of the Testament of Longinus (see below), and it's very likely that they absorbed other texts as well. We also know that continued population expansion in the industrial era contributed as much to the sustainable rising of elders as it did to the expansion of the neonate population. The *Blood Ballads* appear at exactly the right moment in history to have been reconstructed from a Speaking Testament.

From: Nic Echo

Sent: Friday, April 22, 3:18 am

To: The Old Bat

Subject: The Testament of Longinus

Attachments: TestLong.jpg



Half the city may think I'm living in sin, but you won't catch me denying that the Testament of Longinus is the most important work of literature that Kindred have ever created. It doesn't matter whether you're Circle or Chapel, whether you think it's the Bible or *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*: the Testament has impacted every civilized Kindred since the founding of the Church. Even the hardest-line Invictus are afraid to ban it. It's the only written record that's been consistently preserved and venerated by our Kindred, rather than burned or buried.

Except that for much of Chapel history, most of the Damned couldn't read. Mortals relied on their priests to tell them the will of God. There were many fewer Kindred in those nights, though. Most population centers wouldn't even have supported a single one of us, much less a congregation. Yet, the Testament endured, largely thanks to Speaking Testaments, wandering Kindred who memorized the Testament of Longinus word for word and carried it across the trackless wastes between domains. This seems to have been true across Europe and the Near East, and many of these witnesses no doubt followed the Crusaders into the Holy Land.

Monasteries on the continent kept records of witnesses who came and went, and we can tell from those that the Daeva represented around half of all witnesses. That tells us that as far back as the 800s, our ancestors were devoting Requiems not just to mourning themselves, but to memorializing the Slain Christ. Indeed, while Christ Himself occupies a relatively small portion of the Testament of Longinus, even in editions that include mortal Scripture, the motif of Christ's death and his friends' mourning is often represented in illustration. The Risen Christ is often depicted much like or even alongside Longinus Himself.

Tonight, most European versions of the Testament are influenced by Speaking Testaments. Many of these were written by witnesses who flayed their own skin and tanned it as parchment. They recorded and illuminated the Soldier's words on their own flesh. Few of the volumes have aged well, but I've heard that they're still quite beautiful. Supposedly, the Princess of Dublin possesses one, and reads from it on holy days. I wish I could touch, or see, or even just smell one of those volumes. An eternity of bearing the Message? That's real immortality.

The numbers in which witnesses are recovered and raised are surely greater than the proportion of Kindred they represented in the Middle Ages. We can probably attribute this to their popularity, and the number of their resting places that are pilgrimage sites in the Old World. Many of these former wanderers have risen but no longer travel, instead dispensing the Word of God from their own tombs, while pilgrims bring them meals of blood.

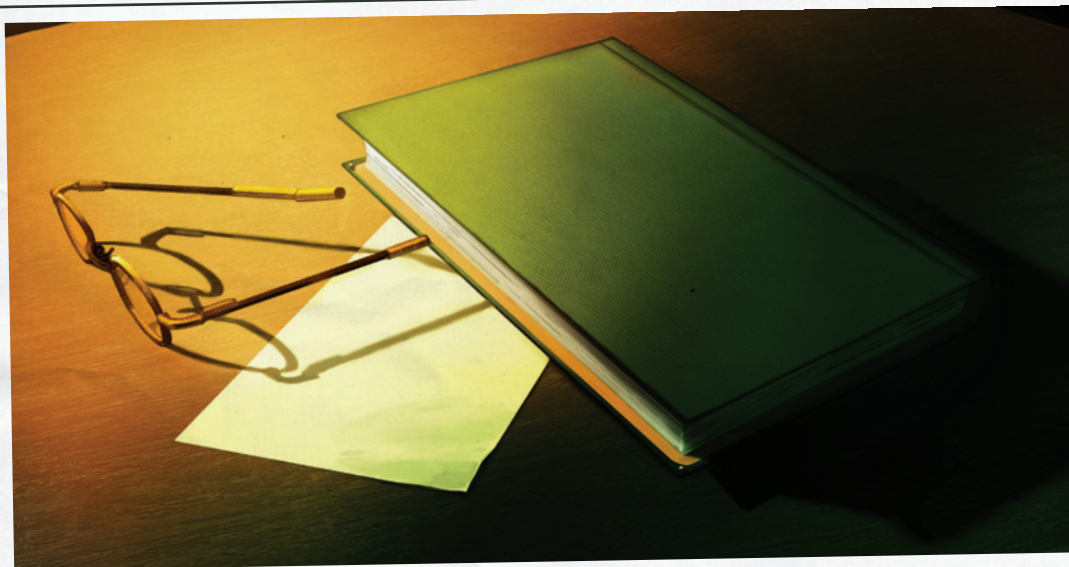
Most versions of the Testament itself don't have anything to say about the origins of the Kindred. Those that do clearly adapt some other source. That's probably why so many of the simpler Sanctified believe we all originate from Longinus. Those that do clearly adapt some other source. However, many versions incorporate portions of the Hebrew Bible and/or the Jewish Apocrypha, which do reference figures from your narrative. Along with *Job*, *Exodus* is one of the most common inclusions. These vary from mortal translations, and every one I've seen is more geographically specific, including that used for the extremely popular Roberts translation of the Testament. What you'll want to know is that mountain on which God speaks to Moses is positively identified as Mount Sinai, and that there are copies of the Testament *Exodus* which come to this conclusion centuries earlier than any mortal record. Sinai, of course, is named for our clan's supposed grandsire: Sin. If you want Sanctified evidence that the God of the Israelites began our bloodline, that's your best bet.

Sent: Friday, April 22, 3:18 am

To: The Old Bat

Subject: Marcellarius | Piso Minor

Attachments: MarcPMinor.jpg



As much as we worship the ashes of the Camarilla, the few pieces of literature that survive don't say much about our own blood. S. Macellarius Corbulo is one of the earliest confirmed Kindred chroniclers, and a prolific author of histories. Whether or not he was one writer or a few is difficult to determine, as is his clan. He proudly proclaims his family as "Julian;" probably the "Dead Julii" referred to in some of the Greek epistles. Who they were, however, is anybody's guess. Tonight, there's a Ventrue family that claims the Macellarius name, but they're a dynasty of liars from the very top: their main ritual is pretending to eat, of all things.

Dude was known for indulging himself, too, a family trait I'm being reminded of through the wall at this very moment. I'd like to tell you that Macellarius is clearly one of your Daeva mourners, proof that we were great and glorious in Rome. Unfortunately, there's no evidence at all that the Julii were Daeva, except that they were proud and decadent.

Macellarius's histories incorporate a complicated creation myth, but it's all clearly invented to tie Kindred to the Roman city-state. Given some of his other surviving work, this may be another text we're not meant to read as literal truth.

One of the other Romans gives us a bit more, however. Julius Piso Minor records foreign clans from Greece and Persia. He's dismissive and insulting, but identifies these "perverts" (see, he must be a relative **8-|**) closely with prostitution and seduction... much of it associated with religious ritual. Alongside the Asura text and our own present name, this reasonably links the Daeva with Persia. Piso Minor also uses Latin pidgins which might be renderings of "Daeva." Owls figure heavily in his symbolism, as they do in our oral tradition. Of course, we already know that other clans have adopted similar imagery.

We can't identify the clans of either of these authors in a modern context, but we do know that they refer to families of our own clan, coming from the same part of the world and doing the same sorts of things that the oral traditions suggest.

From: Nic Echo

Sent: Friday, April 22, 3:18 am

To: The Old Bat

Subject: **Mary's Childer**

I'm betraying a professional confidence here, but your support has meant a lot to me lately. I think you'll like this, even though it doesn't work with your thesis. While I was authenticating 9th century copies of the Monachal Apocrypha, I discovered that one of them was written over a copy of another text. Tentatively, I'm saying that this is the "Gospel of James" argued against so fervently by some of the Hostilinus Brood in the Dark Ages. I had to return the docs, but I was able to take some scans and do a dirty translation. Check it out:

"In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent to the Galilee, to the home of a virgin named Mary, who was betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. The angel flung open the door, and said "Greetings, favored one, for the Lord is with you."

Mary shivered, to which Gabriel said "For though you are a virgin, your womb is to become fertile. And you shall bear the son of the Lord, and when he comes he shall be called Jesus."

Mary bowed her head and said "Let it be done, for I am the handmaiden of the Lord."

The virgin married her betrothed, and because she told him of the angel's message, he shared her bed without touching her. At that time, Joseph the carpenter was a young man.

Soon enough, as the angel had foretold, Mary's womb became bloody and swollen. But when time came to deliver, the midwife proclaimed the child dead. Though the child was a boy, Mary knew that the son of God could not be born dead. So she kissed the child and hid him in a wood, as Moses's nurse had hid him in the reeds. She kissed him on the forehead, and called him James.

Though dead, the child grew. And by the third year, when the virgin had borne two other cold, still children, James was able to speak as an adult, and often watched living children from windows, where they would play by the light of the fire. His two younger, cold siblings — a boy and a girl — were given over to his care in the woods where he dwelt.

In the fourth year, with Mary still a virgin and pregnant again, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, declaring that a census should be taken. Each man had to go to his home city to register. Joseph also went up from Galilee, to the city of David which was called Bethlehem, for he was of the house and line of David. And James and his siblings followed, for there were bandits on the roads and they were hungry.

While they were there, Mary gave birth to her firstborn, born alive, and she named him Jesus. And while she slept, each of his brothers and sisters gave him gifts, and then vanished into the night, each to go their own way.

Only thrice did the deathly siblings of Jesus gather again. First, when his mother was sick with worry, they called him home, and were denied. Second, when he was murdered upon the cross, God blotted out the sun so that they might watch and comfort their brother. And last, when they found the betrayer of Jesus, and hung him from a rope.

And from the day of their brother's death, they aged no further. The angel Gabriel appeared to them, and told each to make their way into the world, and to be fruitful in the manner of the dead. And he warned them of a soldier, who would bring them the last words of their brother, but also His curse."

From the Old World, we turn our gaze to the new media. Cinema, television and the Internet have changed the way we must relate to our prey, and have changed the way they relate to us. As in the age of "Carmilla" and Dracula, the herd is once again enthralled with the vampire, an image which reflects my extended family more than any other.

For decades, their obsessions have grown stronger. It was, perhaps, inevitable that some of our literature would once again cross into their media. The attached package is a presentation intended for major Hollywood studios. Based on the infamous novel Black Blood, which circulated widely in paperback and photocopy a few years ago, this represents another intersection of Kindred vanity and mortal wish-fulfillment. Some of my fellows will no doubt feel threatened by the information "revealed" herein. My dry and ancient eyes strain to see anything but pathetic comedy.

BLACK BLOOD: Ill-met in Qatar

Screenplay by:
D. A. Evans

Based on the
Novel "Black Blood"
By: D. A. Evans



D.A. EVANS

"D. A. EVANS"? You're fucking kidding me. This reads like some neonate's masturbation power fantasy. 'Adrian Childe' is a melodramatic cartoon, and I'd dismiss her as utterly ridiculous, were some of her affections not such common vices for us. And then there's Felix of course... I wonder how he reacted to his portrayal in this pulp?

My people in California tell me the film rights to BLACK BLOOD had been tied up in court since it was published, but they've recently been cleared, and were just optioned by Michael Bay. Someone was pushing to keep the thing suppressed, but he or she was just slapped down hard. Nobody who would talk to me about it had any idea who pushed it past the blocks. I might send some people in person to take a look at the situation.

Someone's sense of humor verges on the absurdist. How did this ever see publication? The Spaniards are in quite a state. They have Felix under close watch after this kind of exposure. I think they might also suspect him of being "D.A. EVANS". His love of irony has always been somewhat troubling. The Cacophony want to find the author and induct him or her immediately. This is an astonishing coup for the post-modern Masquerade over the classical.

CHAPTER 1 – FI AMANULLAH

There is a specter that haunts all beaches at night, when the sea, aching for her lover the Sun, sighs her dark breath across the land. The sand is warm, but in the darkness, seems to shift deliberately under you, treacherous. Like someone else's wife sharing your bed. The specter follows those who walk nighttime beaches, and he whispers to them, touches the hairs on the nape of their necks, and never leaves them to just walk and think in peace. How many of those nighttime wanderers follow the specter's suggestion, and walk right into the surf and through the breakers, and out into swells where every stroke churns luminescence, until finally vanishing beneath Her hungry water?

My god, does this set the tone for the rest of it, doesn't it?

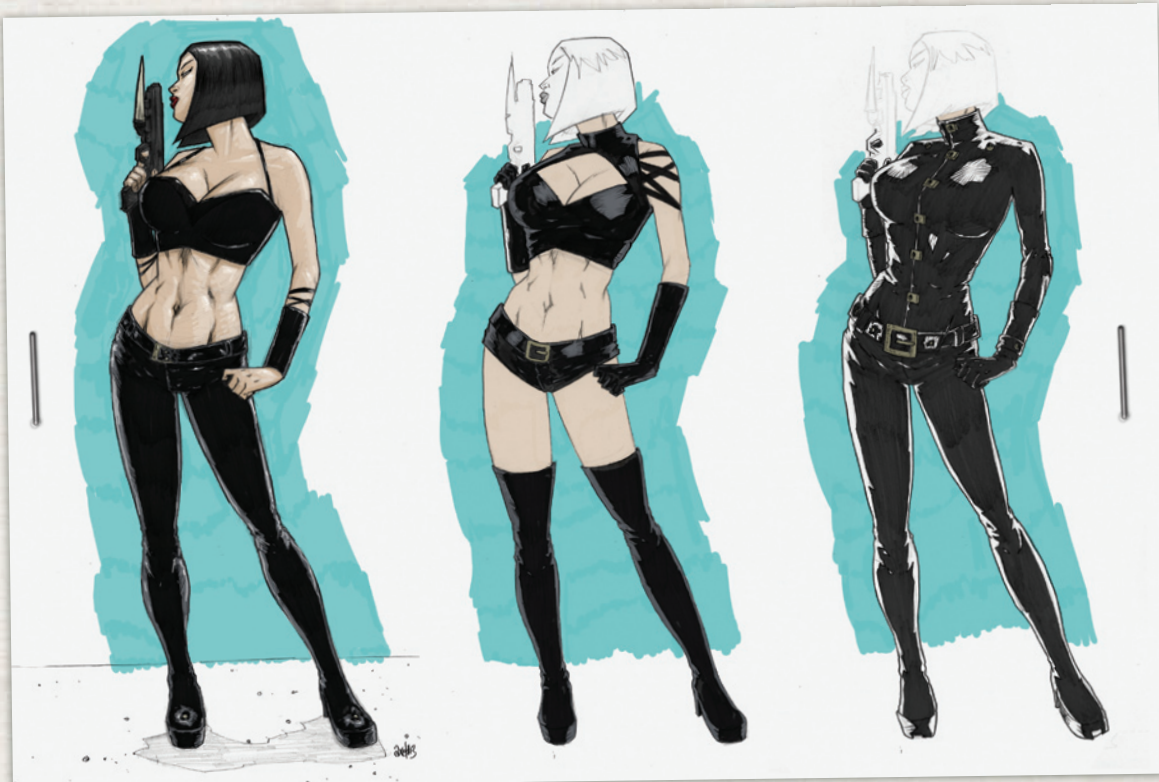
During the day, the beaches between the Doah Club and the Oasis Hotel were a testament to modern Islam's ability to adapt and change. During the Call to Prayer, the faithful knelt before God in their swim suits and surfing shorts, bronzed and dark. When Adrian Childe thought of the beautiful things that grew in this desert, she lingered there, recalling when she'd plucked such flowers, but her mind turned as it always did down the dark paths suggested by the sea-herald specter – she thought of the horrors that also sprouted freely here.

'Adrian'? Is the author being sly with us? "D.A. Evans" has to be male. The way Adrian is written... she's a ninja stripper one moment, a mewling romance-starved girl the next.

Now, it was dark on these beaches. Behind Childe, the lights of the Doah Club lit the sand's highs, leaving its lows in impenetrable black. Her trip into Qatar was unconventional and convoluted – the sort of arrangement most of her cousins could never manage, but she had backing and her handlers had sway. The incursion wasn't how she would have managed it herself if she'd been pressed, but she had to admit it had been neatly done, even if it left her so hungry her teeth ached.

The son of Qatar's deputy minister of tourism was attending MIT when he suffered a tragic accident. The driver escaped serious injury, but Ata Diamo was not so fortunate. His father insisted he be flown home immediately for burial, and pulled every political and diplomatic string he could grab to see his boy's body found its way home quickly. In Boston, Ata Diamo's mortal remains were placed in a sealed travel casket, cooled with dry ice, and surrounded with an aura of diplomatic imperatives. But, it was not Ata who was loaded aboard the jet at Boston International.

Childe was contacted through the usual channels, and made her way to Boston with the key to a P.O. box. Inside, she found a baggage handler's uniform and identification. The type-written instructions told her where to go and



"Mattie Howard" is the first recognizable name Evans uses in *BLACK BLOOD*. Mattie was a Chicago Daeva who dropped out of sight after the troubles there in 1998. We've not been able to uncover any connection to her and the *BLACK BLOOD* novel – is she mentioned here as a memorial? A misdirection? Or just a sly bit of humor to let wise readers know the author is the genuine article?

when. According to the badge with its generic blurry photo of a generic blurry brunette, her name would be "Mattie Howard" for the night. The instructions were brief. Her handlers knew she could play the game, and assumed she could see to the details herself.

At the airport, she met her contact in the break room by smelling out his coffee – a noxious brew alleged to taste like hazelnut. It was the agreed upon recognition sign. She said, "That smells terrible."

"It tastes worse, he replied testily. "Come on, let's get started. We're working Concourse D."

He wasn't one of her cousins. Despite this, there was no friction between them. He kept it locked down with pure will, and she was too much the professional to start a pissing contest about territory when neither of them was supposed to be here. When he stood close to her, it was like a muted vagueness had descended around them. It felt the way insomnia dims the senses, but she was alert and keen.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "We'll be able to get you into the box without being noticed. I'll see to it."

As they walked, occulted by his influence, Childe studied him, memorizing his face, his movements. She judged his potencies by how he moved, and knew she could take him if there was ever the need, but from how keenly he observed her right back, she thought he would see it coming if the first move was hers. And in this life of hers, there was always the possibility of finding oneself so needy. Friends today, enemies tomorrow.

He gave her an encouraging smile, to let her know she'd been made, and that he took no offense. "You have the disease too, I see. We watch because we've been trained to, and then, because we're terrified of missing something. It is when we start seeing enemies that aren't there that we become a liability to our cause."

"As you say. Is this it then?"

The coffin was a reinforced plastic affair, much-battered from years of air travel. Childe walked around it slowly.

"It'll be tight inside with my field kit."

"Too tight, in fact. You'll be picking up your kit in Doah when you arrive. I have these for you," and he handed her a gym bag containing jeans, blouse, shoes, cash, and passport and tourist visa paperwork in the name of Gabriel Winslet from London, England. All the clothing was well-worn. There was also a small sealed envelope containing three bulky items. Written in a generic hand upon it was "Open in-route".

She didn't like operating without her field kit, nor was she especially comfortable with the number of links in the chain she was climbing to reach the field. Every link was a person, and every person was a source of screw-ups and potential subornation or betrayal. She hadn't even been fully briefed yet – just activated with the proper recognition phrases scattered in the classifieds of a free Atlanta paper. So following the code-sign breadcrumbs, she'd come, placing her trust in strangers whose motives and motivations were unknown to her, and then flying across the Atlantic into one of the most unstable regions in the world inside the coffin of a Qatari official's dead son.

When she considered it like that, it wasn't so far outside her ordinary mission profiles.

She changed without looking to see if her contact would avert his eyes, and then said in her best West End, "So, do I look the part?"

He said, "You'll do better with your hair tied up. I recommend acquiring a hijab or burka when you arrive. With your eyes and skin, you could pass for Arab if you needed to blend in, and Qatar is liberal enough that a woman out on her own at night isn't a shock."

"I have worked the region before. I know what it will take to blend in, and I also know when I'm best served standing out."

"Of course, I didn't mean to imply..."

"But I am touched by your concern. We'll share a drink sometime, and talk about the time you told me how to dress up like a real Arab girl."

He smiled, "And I will laugh an embarrassed laugh, and people will think us to be old friends. Allow me."

He opened the casket, and offered his hand. Feeling forgiving, she took it and then let him have it back when she'd stretched out in the box. The interior padding had mostly been removed – in flight, the corpse would have been wrapped in plastic, surrounded by dry ice, and cushioned with foam. All this removed, it gave her slightly less room than an iron maiden, but she could raise her hands to her face.

"Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be. When does the flight leave?"

"In a few hours yet, but this is the best opportunity we had to make the switch."

"Where is Ata now?"

"He's tucked away safe so we can produce the body when the Minster starts making noise, and then the airline can claim a terrible tragic mistake was made."

"Then everything's been seen to."

"You are in God's hands, sister."

"I don't think..." she started to say, but her sharp retort was cut off by the thumping darkness of the closing lid. The ghost of panic and mortal claustrophobia stirred in her, but she stomped it down ruthlessly. This was far better than being buried in the ground, as she'd been forced to do on several occasions, to hide or to sleep. Sounds outside the box barely penetrated. Under her hand, she found the hastily installed internal lock, and toggled it. Now, while she couldn't get out without someone opening the casket from the outside, they'd be hard pressed to themselves get in.

Childe then tore open the envelope, and identified the objects inside by touch: a tiny tape recorder, a glow stick and a NATO push-button spring knife. She smiled in the darkness at the knife, and the inside joke it represented, then she cracked the glow stick and shook it, filling the coffin with a weird green glow. She raised the recorder to her ear and listened to her briefing.

All went according to plan, though it was four days before she arrived with the vagaries of flight delays, and by the time she felt the box being unloaded, she was getting very hungry. But after extracting herself from under the awed gaze of a mortuary worker come to prepare Minister Dima's son for a proper burial, rather than seek nourishment she followed her briefing and came to the beach. She smelled the air for the scent of jasmine, and the man who would be wearing it.

She heard him walking through the loose sand before she smelled him, and she smelled him before she saw him. She didn't turn towards the lights, knowing they'd momentarily blind her, rather, she waited until he was abreast of her, staring out to sea before cutting her eyes over to scan him. She felt a rise, looking at him, the urge to lock his wrist, and sweep his legs, and clench him in a submission hold until he acknowledged her as his master. He was controlling similar impulses, she could see, and he very deliberately drew a pack of Turkish cigarettes and a gold Dunhill lighter, silently offering one, which she refused with a slight shake of her head.

He was as tall as her, but heavier. His skin was as dark as a well-oiled gun holster, and his features a blend of South Asia, Europe, and North Africa. She made him immediately, by his casual acceptance of physical deference from her – the way he moved, she could see he expected her to accommodate those small movements. To read his mood, and move about him like pilot fish about a shark. She knew the type: used to command, and used to being obeyed. She wasn't about to fall into his orbit; her personality had enough gravity of its own to resist any pull his might exert.

"Assalamu Alakum."

She responded in a tourist's Arabic, "You are my contact?"

He chuckled a few puffs of smoke, and responded in Dutch Accented English, "No, but I bring you the papers your contact had prepared for you. He became indisposed, and I found it my duty to see such a distinguished visitor to our city properly introduced."

When he noticed her stiffen beside him, he said "Please, don't be alarmed. My master, the Caliph of Qatar, wished me to convey to you his pleasure at your visit, and to wish you an enjoyable stay. He extends to you his hospitality."

She frowned. The tape had said nothing of this. Things had already gone pear-shaped, and she'd only been in-country for a couple of hours. Her contact at Boston International... "You are in God's hands now" he'd said. She understood.

"You've been on to me since Boston," she said, dropping the false accent and sliding into the voluptuous fluidity of the language. She loved speaking Arabic, and it always seemed like a language to whisper into the ear of a lover, or paint in honey and wine on his body with a long sable brush.

Well, I'm betting this D.A. Evans would be an interesting fellow to get to know, if that last line is any indication.

He responded in Arabic himself, "Well, not you personally, but your mission and the desires of those you represent. While we are not directly concerned with the thing which brings you here, we have certain... interests in how you achieve your goals."

"I won't burn down your city, if that's your concern. Discretion is my middle name."

"Is it? Well, the Prince of Montenegro might wish to be informed of this change, for I believe he is operating under the misapprehension that your middle name is Catastrophe."

"I certainly have no idea why he might think such a thing."

"Of course not. Still, you have a certain reputation in some circles, and the Caliph thought it best that one of his Viziers was here to meet with you, and welcome you."

"And offer his hospitality?"

"Of course. I knew that you would understand."

She did. And she didn't like it at all. Her mission was already compromised, and the Caliph had obligated her to behave in a... civil and respectful manor while in his domain with the grant of hospitality. Though, when she considered it, it did give her some privileges as well. So long as she remained faithful to the guest's obligations, she was considered part of the Caliph's household, and would have a certain influence locally. She looked at the smoking man beside her, and considered it further. They'd clearly intended this as well, hoping perhaps she'd be able to achieve her goals without the... exciting complications which had become something of a hallmark for her.

But, the fact that her handlers had chosen her for this operation suggested otherwise.

"My contact was to deliver a package..."

"Unfortunately, this package was misplaced. But to compensate you for the loss, you have a *beit* with its own courtyard at the Ritz Carlton, compliments of the Caliph. You should find all you require laid out for you." He handed her a slim mobile phone. "Please call if you require anything at all. I understand your journey may have left you in need of refreshment. If you speak of your requirements, they can be met discretely and without the need for you to inconvenience yourself seeking them yourself."

All very tidy, very neat. Her hosts clearly had some experience managing foreign operators. She took the tiny phone.

So, no field kit at all, she thought. All the wonderful toys she'd come to enjoy deploying so much... well, this was the Old World, the Cradle of Civilization, so perhaps it was fitting she was forced to make do with only the most primitive instruments of tradecraft. For example, the NATO knife she was surreptitiously slipping back into her pocket along with the phone after holding it, finger on the release, for the hour she had been waiting.

"Please convey to your master the Caliph that I gratefully accept his hospitality."

"With pleasure."

"Fi Amanullah, cousin."

She saw how the tension drained from his posture - clearly, she'd made the large man nervous, and he was pleased to have avoided any unpleasantness.

She smiled to the sea, while the full moon crept around the horizon, staring like an owl's eye.

He lunges, and she leaps back, but not in time, getting a slash across her bared belly for her trouble. Her arms are back, and we see her wide, flowing sleeves.



We show a close-up, of her NATO knife, being pulled from those sleeves we noticed earlier!



Dude gets stabbed in the back of the head. Oh, yeah.



Concept art from the fight in the Qatar National Museum.
Take a look at the detail on that scimitar. Recognize it? Yes; so do I.

CHAPTER 5 – THE BODY REMEMBERS WHAT THE MOUTH WON'T SPEAK

The whole peninsula cooked all day, and how a place could be both so hot and so humid and yet so utterly devoid of rain confounded Childe to understand it. She'd read that in the ancient days, when Rome was nothing but a rude village on the Tiber, this region was home to a powerful empire fattened on the trade between Indus and Mesopotamia, before becoming a veritable backwater when Islam moved its seat of power from Mecca to Damascus. In those dusty centuries, the pearl divers brought up the jewels of the sea so to eke a meager living on this desiccated hand of jutting land. While dressing for the night's activity, she recalled that she'd once had a string of Qatari pearls, given her by an admirer. The memory came unwelcome, from another time and another life, and she shook briefly with its passage, feeling the cool pearls trickle through her fingers once again.

She left the beautiful dusky-skinned boy asleep where he'd collapsed after she'd slaked her needs on him. Her third since arriving. She trusted the Caliph could afford to keep her satisfied, and had used the little phone with shameless pleasure, ordering company and clothes. She'd never use it to make an operational call, of course, as it would certainly both be bugged and chipped to allow her hosts to track her movements within a few meters. If their reach extended deep enough into the right dark corners, there could even be satellite imagery of her activities.

She'd dressed in a loose flowing dress and jacket, both overtly modest, yet sullenly sensual like so much in this dry corner of the world. She thought of the salty taste of dark skin... the scent of oiled hair. Yes, they might profess modesty and seem repressed to the jaded Western voyeur, but they respected the power of the sensual in a way many in the West had forgotten. She was finding the place seeping into her, was finding its secret music in the ways she'd been trained to listen, and the dance was coming to her. How to move with the crowd, project the body-impression of the familiar. So much the better when shedding it like a cocoon, and spreading magnificent wings. That her clothing offered unrestricted motion, and the easy concealment of certain small items, could go unsaid.

The NATO knife had become her talisman after her encounter with the emaciated creature at the Qatar National Museum the previous night. The ribs along her left side still ached slightly where his saber had notched them and laid open her smooth flesh. The sleeping boy's blood coursed through her, easing the pain still more, but that ache was a much-needed reminder that she was a stranger in this strange land, and there were players yet unrevealed in this dark game. The knife she concealed inside her voluminous sleeve, after practicing the drop into her hand half a dozen times, was satisfied. The little blade was blooded, its four inches of steel had last-night been driven to the hilt into the creature's right eye.

But while it confounded her, the heat of Qatar meant its clubs and hotels stayed open late, and the cooler night was lit and well-peopled. She checked the note again – the Rydges Plaza hotel. The rooftop bar was a popular place with western expats, according to the concierge at the Ritz Carlton, and when she walked into the place, that was the crowd – western travelers, oil execs, some well to do tourists. The music weaved and throbbed, an electronica take on traditional Arab balladry, weaving love for Allah with love for woman until she couldn't tell which the singer crooned about in remixed loops of ecstasy. She was moving with the music without even thinking about it, slipping through the crowd towards the bar. And then, there he was at the edges of her awareness, sparking a fierce surge in her belly like an animal trying to get free. Not angry... playful. The beast wanted to run with someone... who?

There.

He was as gorgeous as ever, wreathed in his own blend of charm and influence. He licked salt off the back of his hand and she felt it along her neck, and he tossed back the liquid gold in his glass, then bit into the wedge of lime in his other hand. She knew he could upend the bottle and empty it, but he loved the ritual of the salt and the lime. He loved to do things properly, to take his time. He was a big man, but betrayed none of the oafishness big men are often afflicted with. His blonde hair was cropped shorter than she remembered, but his mouth was just as wide, expressive and sensual. He was dressed expat himself, kaki pants, linen shirt open wide at the throat. He was surrounded by a small group of other men, laughing and sharing the bottle of ruinously expensive imported Tequila. She knew he'd purchased it, because he always bought the drinks.

His lazy blue eyes slowly sought her out, and finding her he put on a charming show of surprise, his smile lighting up his whole face. Even his eyes... his dead, frozen eyes... even they thawed. He excused himself, and came towards her while his cronies laughed and exchanged jokes. Their leader and his women!

Felix! I will never let him live this down.

They met halfway, and she spoke in Spanish.

"Felix. You're the last person I expected to find here, though it is a pleasure to see you."

He answered in Spanish, confirming his continued allegiances, "Adrian, my night is brighter. I was forced to

make friends with some men from United Petroleum, and to talk of American football with them for over an hour. It was hardly a challenge. I haven't truly had one since I abandoned my therapist."

"Darling Boy, you are so beyond the help of any therapist that I wonder why you bothered."

"Not to find a cure, I assure you! No, but a psychoanalyst is supposed to have great insight and powers of observation, and yet... well, she saw nothing I did not wish her to see, though it was tricky at times."

"I promise not to even try to penetrate your lovely mask, as I find it far too endearing."

"Shall we find a table? Are you eating?"

"Not tonight, I think."

They sat, and for a moment simply looked across the table at one another. Felix was a thorny rose she'd been scratched by more than once, but he smelled so, so sweet... and they were family, so there was also the delicious spice of incest to their flirtation. Still, in Toronto he had shot her in the spine, crippling her while he completed some business he wished her clear of, and then later in Port-Au-Prince she'd returned the favor and left him so badly burned he could hardly drag himself into the swamp to sleep out the day beneath the black waters. Yet, they had spent that night together in Madrid, and when the body-memory came she had to quickly shove it aside less it excite and distract her.

"You aren't an operator. We can't be here on the same business."

"I think you might be surprised what my people consider their business. There's some concern after Montenegro..."

"Why does everyone throw that back in my face? The situation was already fucked up before I even inserted. Five factions, two sets of enemies, and me all rushing for the same prize. It was unstable as hell, and I certainly am not responsible for the fire, or those bloody Draculi cultists throwing themselves upon the Spears like that."

"And that is nothing like this situation, hmmm?"

"Well..."

"How are your ribs?"

She clenched her teeth for a moment. He just sat there, not even having the decency to look smug. Just smiling slightly, like a well-fed tiger.

"Who are they?"

"I'm sad to say they're cousins. The Holy Order of the Red Madonna. You've not heard of them?"

She shook her head gently.

"They're crusaders. Descended from crusaders, in any case. They began as quite pious and orthodox Spears, come to the Holy Land to walk the same sands as Longinus himself. They stayed on, and gradually absorbed the local color. They never settled well with the reconciliation of Islam with their faith, and considered the Iblic creed something of a heresy.

"And yet they stayed in the region?"

"Yes, and remained stubbornly Christian in orientation. They came to fixate in fact on Mary, and then on Lilith..."

Childe betrayed her interest, stiffening slightly.

"... ah, yes. Their interest in your objective becomes clear, eh? Well, they found parallels between Lilith's role as mother to monsters such as us, and concluded that through spiritual parallelism, if Mary is the Mother of Christ, then Lilith is the Mother of Longinus."

"That seems somewhat spurious."

"Please! If we're going to discuss everything that's unlikely, spurious or wrong-headed about religion, we'll be here until the sun sees us off to whatever comes next for our kind."

"I am chastened. Tell me the rest."

"They believe that Longinus was Daeva like them, and so the true bloodline of the faith is ours. Any who profess to carry Longinus's word of other bloodlines is heretical, and they consider it their duty to purge those heretics by consuming them."

"Cannibalism?"

"In some languages, 'crusader' and 'cannibal' are interchangeable. And the region is alive with cannibal mythology too. The lowest of the jinn is the corpse-eating *ghul*. Perhaps even stranger, they seek to become spiritually closer to the Red Madonna by hovering in a state of perpetual near-starvation which would make them the envy of the Milan runways."

"I noticed how emaciated the ones I encountered here were,, but they were still..."

"They have certain secrets too, such as the power to draw strength from their hunger. They have mastered their instincts to a remarkable degree. A cadre of bulimic self-starved Daeva supremacist religious fanatics may seem too adjective-rich to be anything but comedy, but they can be exceptionally dangerous. Living amongst enemies, as they do, has sharpened them. As I think you discovered."

Evans's characterization of the Knights is wrong in some significant ways, though their reactions and actions are consistent with their motivations. It would seem that the author had both personal experience with the Knights (an obscure order), and some reason to deliberately obscure the truth about them.

"So you're here to watch that I don't make too much noise?"

"I am. There's also a certain... interest among my people. The Origin..."

"Shhhh... no more secrets here in the open. You'll make me do something mad and kiss you to keep you from talking anymore."

"Are those words intended to dissuade me from continuing, or to guarantee it?" He smiled again, and there was hunger in his eyes this time.

She was for a moment terrified of that hunger, but she'd tasted his blood as much as he'd had hers... they had to flee to opposite ends of the world to keep it from becoming what it inevitably must. Not love, but something as powerful. More powerful, perhaps. Something they were both old enough to know better than to allow. But she ached regardless - the body remembers what the mouth can't speak.

"I have another meeting tonight."

"Really?"

"I haven't been idle since I arrived, nor am I so dependent on contacts and handlers that I've forgotten how to follow the signs on the ground."

"I wouldn't be so gauche as to ask who..."

"But of course I'll tell you, Felix! You would have such a time following me otherwise, and if I were trying to lose you, I might miss the others who follow. But not here, I think. Come with me, and let's walk. The moon is still full, and they are hunting with owls over the beach tonight."

"I had forgotten how much they go in for falconry here."

And together, they left the Rydges Plaza and watched owls kill desert hares while they talked of Rabin Al Shahari.

CHAPTER 8 --- A WIND THAT BRINGS THE SMELL OF BLOOD

Childe shoved Rabin down behind the Land Rover, and sprayed fire from the Israeli-made Uzi across the hood. She wasn't trying to hit any of the ambushers, just make them keep their heads down. The bullets lodged in her back were like little knots of muscle, that perversely made her think of Felix's hands kneading her back, expertly working out the tension... return fire snapped her back to the present, and she dropped down with Rabin.

"What is this! You promised me safety! Your people..."

"My people fucked this up, proper! I'm off the reservation now, and making this up as I go."

"We have to... Quess ummak! Your back!"

"It's fine, stay behind the goddamn tire! You think these assholes are so stupid they won't shoot under the truck?"

On cue, a round dug a furrow in the packed sand beside Rabin, who scurried crabwise behind the wheel, putting axel and engine between him and the shooters.

"They're going to circle around and flank us. There are at least four shooters out there, and if they're smart, about four more who held fire and are already moving. Hang on... She popped up, and fired through the driver side window, shattering it.

"I shot out the overhead light. When I move, get inside the truck, and lay down in the floorboard. I'll keep them focused on me.

"Should... should I try and drive off?"

"Fuck no. I had enough trouble finding you. You're not going anywhere. I'll come get you when I've taken care of this."

She closed her eyes and counted to ten, letting them adjust to the darker darkness, and then opened them and scanned the night for motion, and... there. Creeping low, combat-crouched, and wearing night-camo and IR goggles. She smiled, and expertly shrugged off her clothes.

Now, she's literally a stripper ninja. I retract my previous statements about masturbatory wish-fulfillment. This is savage satire. Especially considering that one's clothing generally remains the temperature of one's body. There's literally no reason for her to get naked here. The idiosyncrasy is boggling.

Naked, her body was the temperature of the air. The Uzi was hot, it would flash in the IR, so she handed it to Rabin, drawing instead the little push-button knife. Rabin stared at her like she was mad, but he wouldn't... couldn't take his eyes off her.

One wonders why assassins sent to deal with one of us would wear IR goggles rather than low-light image enhancement goggles. This kind of sloppy detailing suggests the author lacks any real insight into the intelligence service or tactical operations.

She squatted where he hunched, kissing him hard on his lips, feeling them involuntarily open under hers. "As soon as I move, you fire the Uzi into the air until it runs empty, and then get into the truck and think invisible thoughts."

He shook visibly, seeing her, and said as if quoting, "and the jinniyah of the hungry desert called to the men, and a third left the caravan, and went into their arms, and through the night cried in pleasure, but in the morning they were nothing but bones..."

We need to source this quote.

She crouched, feeling the texture of the packed sand under her bare feet, the wind, hot as feverish breath, and dug her toes in for traction and then called upon the thrumming blood, and gave herself to it, let it move her and she went is a swirl of wind that blew Rabin's hair into his eyes. Shocked, it was a full ten seconds before he remembered to start firing...

She moved, unbreathing, her heart still, a piece of the night, and she gave herself to the blood like she'd not done in years - let it find the ideal path for her limbs, the speed they were capable of conjuring. And the strength. She reached the first ambusher within three of his heartbeats, hardly a smudge on his infrared-enhanced vision, and then she was beside him, and snapping the blade out on the little knife even as she swept it up under his chin, and slit his throat, then past him, a killing wind.

She'd reached his partner before her first victim's brain had even realized he was dead, and he was still trying to scream through slashed vocal cords while holding the spurting blood with gloved hands. His partner was fractionally faster, bringing his short brutal carbine around on her as she swept upon him.

She grabbed the barrel and forced it down, flattening her body like a diver so when his convulsing finger clenched, the bullets knifed through the air parallel with her, and she drove into his chest, and bore him over, coming to rest atop him, with the gun pinned between them. She ripped the goggles off his face, and slashed his throat like she had his partner, and his blood sprayed across her face, and she clamped her mouth over the wound. His heart pumped and throbbed, ejaculating the blood down her throat, while the hot gun between them ground against her and made her writhe harder against him, gorging orgasmically on his life. In moments he shuddered, and she was off him and moving again with a resurgence of terrible speed.

She circled in a crouched sprint, around the low baratsi from where her ambushers had staged their attack, and burst around into a knot of four gunmen, the second wave waiting to deploy.

Shock and awe.

She tore back the cloak of discipline and will that kept her terrible influence concealed, that let her blend in when she was on mission time, and she smashed them with the unveiled majesty. She burned with unholy attraction, and for a second she was the most ravishing thing any of these hard killers had ever seen or experienced. Her presence grabbed them by the balls, and ran a thousand tongues over their cocks and the skin at the bases of their spines, along their faces, and left trails of hot pleasure behind, and in that moment they would have killed for her, died for her, sold their souls to Shaitan for the chance to touch her, and in that moment of quivering paralysis...

She killed them.

The blood that drove her limbs to unnatural speed gave them ungodly force as well, and she was amongst them, as close as a lover. The first, she simply drove the little knife through his temple and two inches into his brain, then twisting it out, she stabbed the neck of the next, leaving the blade lodged between his cervical vertebra. The punching sound of blade stabbing meat doused the survivors with ice water, and they unfroze, but too slow. She snatched the falling carbine – an American-made M-4, cut short, with compensator and big night sight. She didn't aim, just cut loose with a sustained burst of fire at waste height, and without the throbbing strength of the blood in her limbs, she'd never have kept the jumpy gun level, but she slashed the two men nearly in half with the surge of fire which didn't stop until the weapon locked open and smoking, empty, and dropped.

Before the gun had hit the sand, she was twenty paces away, and accelerating. When she circled around the other side of the baratsi, the remaining two gunmen were expecting something, and filled the air between them with fire, but she was a wind that carried the scent of blood, and blew around the bullets, into the first killer. She'd lost the knife, and so bore him down much like she had the second man she killed, and wrenched his head aside and bit down into his neck, furiously raking her teeth through his flesh, biting hard until she felt the meat give, and then wrenching her head back, tearing a chunk of flesh out, and bathing again in arterial spray.

The last killer's fire was wild, but he focused on his fallen comrade and scored three hits – shoulder, arm, belly – as she scrambled and clawed the ground. She moved almost like an animal on all fours, but even with the wounds she found him, and swatted the gun aside, spitting the hunk of his fellow's flesh into his face. He flinched back involuntarily, and she clamped her arms around him, wrapping him in legs as well, and he fell backwards, caught in her spider grasp.

She squeezed him until she felt one of his ribs pop against her left thigh, and he cried out.

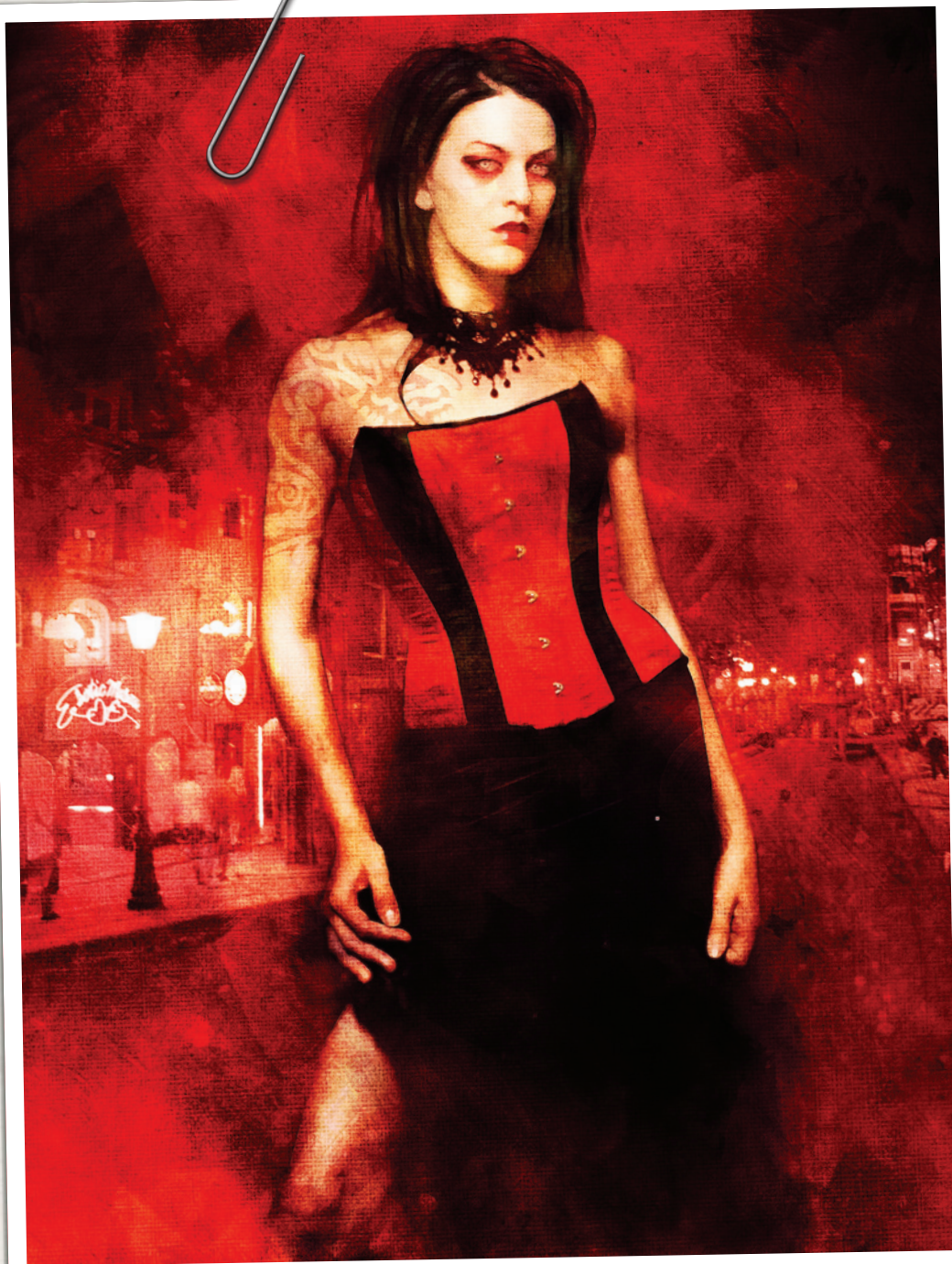
Then, there was a crystallized moment. One they would both remember for the rest of their lives. She could feel him go limp in her grasp, feel the total surrender in him. His mind rebelled at the situation. Impossible. Whoever had put these mercenaries on her had not told them what they were dealing with. For a moment she pitied the poor little man, even as she leaned close and bit through the strap holding his goggles on, so they fell away. In the darkness, he was a shadow against shadows, but she had him between her legs, and she could feel him. Seeing was irrelevant. She licked his ear gently, then bit through his earlobe. She felt his manhood stir, and it made her smile. All this horror and death, and this ready lad could still manage a fuck!

"Oh lover, I couldn't possibly go again. Why don't we just talk for awhile instead?"

CHAPTER 14 --- THE MOTHER OF MONSTERS LOVES ALL HER CHILDREN

They drove as fast as they dared along the wide arterial highway laid across the sands, like God's plumb vein pumped up and ready for the needle. It ran long and straight from Doha to the bordertown of Salwa, but they weren't breaking country and running into Saudi Arabia. Not yet. Morning caught up with them in Mukeinis, a baked dry desert town owing its existence to the ancient wells that made this place the only source of water for fifty miles in any direction. Now the wells were dry, and water was trucked in from the coast, but the town remained, a way-over full of gas stations and 4WD rental places catering to adventure tourists looking to tear up the dunes.

But this was their destination, and here they'd find the package Rabin sent from Iraq six months ago before his country was shattered before the American's flag, and his tenure at Baghdad University cut dramatically short by his appearance on an enemy's list.



Childe leaned against the glass of the window, half curled around the still-raw wounds in her belly. She was so far away that when Rabin spoke, she hardly heard him. Round and round in her mind, she replayed the fight that had left her in tatters... the creature out of the desert, lithe like an Ethiopian red wolf. She fired the throaty SPAS-12 shotgun she'd taken from the emaciated Knight earlier, and the beast had evaded, wise somehow, and before she could realize her error, the creature was upon her, and then it wasn't a wolf any longer, but a man with skin so black it drank the light...

"Adrian! We need to find a place for the day, right? We need to find a hotel here."

"Yeah."

"Do you have money? I don't want to use my plastic."

"No... in the bag. American dollars. About a thousand. British pounds. There are some riyal too, but not so many. Had to pay to find you."

"Fine. Yes, this should be enough. We'll stay here. I'll get a room, and then we can sneak you in, alright? I'll use my false passport..."



“Yeah.”

He looked at her, the demon of the desert, somehow broken, and then quickly got a ground floor room at the American-style motor court, and was able to park close to it. He watched, and when there was nobody obviously watching, opened the passenger door, and pulled her out.

“Come on!”

Inside, the room was stifling, and Rabin turned the AC as high as it would go. She stumbled into the bathroom, and closed the door. And he stood, key in hand, trying to decipher what he was to do when a crash sent him rushing to the door.

She'd grabbed the towel bar, and it had given way. She lay curled around her wounds mewling. When she realized he was there, she forced herself to sit, and to smile.

“God, that must hurt.”

“Only when I laugh, Sergeant.”

He sat on the low toilet. “What happened back there?”

“The situation got too complicated. The Caliph of Doha...”

She caught his blank look.

“My kind is... territorial, and the old systems of government appeal to us. In the West princes rule their cities, but in the East...”

“Caliphs. I understand.”

Such oversimplification. If only things were quite so simple and straightforward in reality as they are in fiction.

“When I arrived he granted me his hospitality to keep me on a short leash, but things quickly spiraled when Knights started gunning for us, and the local Spears stepped in to deal with their old enemies. We just ended up in the middle of it, and...”

“And by the time they were done, the airport was a war zone. I remember. Vividly.”

“Qatar has been stable for a long time. And rich since the oil came. My people were as complacent as anyone, and they reacted to this by blaming the only party who tried to be responsible and explain the situation. The Caliph exiled me officially from his household and his territory, but I couldn't go until we'd found where your associate had taken the package.”

“So the Caliph becomes our enemy too.”

“Yeah. And he sent that... assassin after me. One of our more savage bloodlines, a creature of the wilderness. If he's been living in this desert, he must be half-mad regardless. He...”

He watched her tense, and start to shake.

“... put his hands inside me. He tore me open, and he grabbed my intestines, and twisted. He wasn't trying to fight or win, he just wanted to see me in pain.”

“You beat him though.”

“Ha! No. I just shot him in the face. I put him down long enough for us to get out of there. No, he'll be coming for us again, and I've got to somehow find my feet. Ah...”

“What?”

“The sun. Help me into the bathtub. Wrap the curtain tight around me. When the sun comes, I'll be still like a corpse. Rabin, I...”

“It's alright. If I can guard your rest, then I repay perhaps one of the dozens of times you've already saved my life.”

She started to say something else, and he quickly leaned in and kissed her on the lips, and she felt hers open un-

der his involuntarily. It took the flash of pain as he helped her into the tub to cut her amusement at the reversal.

Her blood, thick and red as grenadine syrup dripped into the tub as she stepped over the edge, bursting into a star-speckle of smaller drops on the white, and Rabin's heart hammered as they crawled upwards against gravity, tracing spidery spirals, overlapping expanding circles, creeping curvature, like the footprints of drunken centipedes. But, he thought, is this the strangest thing I've seen tonight?

"Can you... talk to me while I sleep? I will hear you."

"I will."

And he did.

He watched her become as still as a stone, and then he told her who her Mother was, and where she was born, and whose blood flows in her veins, and in the delirious cascade of daytime sleep, she heard him, and she saw it unfold.

As the sun crept up outside the hotel, Childe watched another sun rise, a sun from days long past which lit the faces of men and women who's bones were not even dust any longer.

She stood in the streets, dusty for the season was dry, and it would be two months yet before the rains came again. Around her the crowds of Uruk thronged, the men with their oiled beards, the women with hair beneath embroidered mantels, and all with skin glowed bright with sweat, and the lightest among them a luminous brown. Then the sounds came to her, invading the shocked wonder which the sun bathed her in.

Voices were loud and heightened with the wide gestures common to Urak, so every conversation had two threads of meaning, the words, and the gestures. She held her own hands before her, long and slim, but filthy. She straightened, and stood from where she crouched, and found herself half a head taller than most of the men around her, and a full head taller than the women. Her tunic was of rough stuff, and worn thin. She had no mantel to cover her hair and it hung long, and unbraided. She felt something then, the revenant of shame, and knew there had been better times, and knew her immodesty would have appalled her in some long ago day.

What was she doing here, back to a chalk-marked wall? Watching... watching what? Watching for whom?

And she had her answer then, as the heavy iron-bound doors in the great house across the way were thrown back, and slaves emerged to hang awnings and unfurl the pennants of Inanna, and the milling crowds took notice, and began to form a loose queue.

One slave, in tunic and sandals finer than any in the crowd, raised his voice above the din, and said, "Let those who bring offering and petitions for the Inanna, She Whose Sandals Trail Blood From Which Flowers Spring come forward now and be recognized, and present their petitions for considering, so only those with pressing matters and grand gifts be shown the Holy of Holies."

This was what she'd come for, hoping to catch a glimpse of the goddess, for on petition days she would sometimes be roused to leave her temple, and walk among her worshipers in the street. They said she might take a young man who pleased her into her bed, always calling him Tammuz regardless of his name, and sometimes when she was deep into her cups, she would curse the terrified lad for leaving her, and sometimes strangle him too.

Oh, my. Surely, he wouldn't use this tale in his prurience, would he?

Do I detect a touch of offended propriety? I never took you for someone faithful to the orthodoxy, my dear

The slaves sorted the petitioners, turning some away, admitting others. She waited, and the sun crawled across the sky, and the crowd grew thinner, and then just as hunger and thirst were about to drive her away a sound, a chilling roar, no... two roars, and from the temple the goddess emerged with her constant companions, the twin lionesses she'd reared by hand from cubs after killing their mother on a hunt. How to describe a goddess? She was no bigger than an ordinary woman, but her presence was enormous, it pushed the mortals back from her, and they dropped their eyes, and made the signs of her cult.

She watched Inanna and the arrogant power in the goddess excited her – she realized she did not want to beg Inanna's favor, but to be like her – a woman of power and consequence, who dealt life and death in equal measure. Before she realized it, she was moving forward, towards the goddess, with not the faintest idea what she would say to her.

She stepped right into her path, and when the lionesses snarled at her, she told them to hush in the language of beasts, and they did.

Inanna noticed her then.

"I don't know you."

"I wish you to know me."

"Why would I wish to?"

"I know secrets and spells. I know where monsters sleep, and the names they answer to. I heard the screech owls cursing a man, and then he died the next day, and so can kill a man who offends me with words alone."

"Aye, these are good tricks. But can you bring life to his member? Can you make his wife fat with child? If you can only court with monsters and owls, and steal breath and slay, then what are you?"

"I don't know. I was once respectable, but my intended husband was arrogant, and was a fumbling lover with no thought for my pleasure. I rejected him, and so was cast out of my city, and I wandered and came to your city. I live by telling fortunes and begging, and sometimes men will pay me to lay with me, but if they fail to please me I speak the owl's curse to them, and they die."

"I think I have heard of you, after all. Some of the petitions brought to me today are for protection against a witch."

"That could indeed be me. Will you kill me now, to protect your followers?"

The goddess smiled, and her teeth were filed to points.

"No. You'll drink with me I think, and if you continue to amuse me you'll join my household. What sort of handmaid would you make? Could you brush your mistresses hair and listen to her gossip? Could you tie her war sandals to her feet when Urak was threatened?"

"I could."

She drank with the goddess, and through the night, and the next day, and then when her mind was swimming, and the whole world shimmering they stripped her of her rags, and bathed her, and oiled her skin and hair, and braided them in the secret ways that bring storms and rain, and she was presented to her goddess who said, "Now, my handmaid and priestess, by what name shall you be known in our service?"

"Lilith."

Her service to the goddess passed in a delirium of happiness – she was welcomed, and for the first time since her exile, she was home. The fellowship of Inanna's household was free, and informal. It was a rowdy place. Not the solemnity of the holy places Lilith recalled from her childhood, but vital and filled with life and laughter, and rude jokes, and a raw carnality Lilith found intimidating before realizing the naked power of her sex, and the freedom in owning that power rather than letting others dictate how it be used.

When the old King of Urak died, his son claimed the throne, and to cement his claim he came to the temple of Inanna, and offered himself to the goddess for one night. He was a sculpture of brass, this man, hard and polished – his body a work of art. Yet, he was also a remarkable wit and Inanna took to him immediately. But the death of the old king, and the ascension of his son was inauspiciously timed, for the household of Inanna was bleeding, the rivers of their wombs showing their fertility, but while so opened, unable to accept the sacrifice of the new King's seed.

Yet, while Lilith was welcomed into the household, her own cycle had not yet come into syncopation with her goddess or her sister priestesses, and with a lascivious smile Inanna brought her to the young king, and said that with her approval, Lilith would lay with him and so his kingship should be blessed.

Inanna called, and her husband, a brooding young man she named Tammuz like all the others, joined her to watch the king's performance. First intimidated, Lilith found the display excited her, and when she caught the eyes of Tammuz upon her, hungry, she writhed with unmatched passion upon the king. When the king emerged the next day, visibly unsteady on his feet, a great cry went up in the city – the blessing was a powerful one, and so his rule would be marked by great fecundity but also great strife.

Empowered, Lilith's status in the household rose. Yet, her own blood never came with the other women of the house – she always remained alone in this, and it became a subject for comment.

When Inanna monthly banished Tammuz from her bed, the young man moped around the temple, making trouble for the slaves, and brooding. Lilith remembered his dark eyes upon her, and when she saw him in the gardens picking figs, or staring into the sky, her heart quickened. He was a big man, but graceful, with strange hair the color of gold. One day, he spoke to her.

"Am I such an ogre, that you won't look directly at me?"

"No...nothing like that."

"Is it because I was a shepherd before Inanna took me as her lover? A man with no status or family?"

"Of course not. I was driven out and shamed by my people. I judge none."

"Then why?"

"I..."

He stood, suddenly fierce, and came before her.

"Then why?"

"Because I remember your eyes on me when I lay with the King, and I want them on me again!"

He started, then spoke, "But the goddess... Inanna would..."

She kissed him, hard and fierce, and said, "Quiet!"

For three months, when Tammuz was sent from the goddess's bed, he came to Lilith's, and perhaps they became reckless, comfortable in their scheduled liaisons, or perhaps Inanna knew all along, and let her fury build and build until...

Lilith was astride Tammuz, galloping towards climax when her bedchamber door burst open, and the terrible Inanna strode in. She grabbed Lilith by the back of her neck, and flung her against the wall, leaving her stunned. She clamped her hands around Tammuz's manhood, and squeezed, and then tore it free.

Tammuz screamed like the damned, and Lilith came to her feet, screeching in the voice of the Owl, calling Death upon her goddess. Inanna laughed and kicked her in the stomach, and then ripped Tammuz limb from limb, painting the room in his blood, and spraying Lilith in it until she looked like a sacrifice bled on the altar.

Then Inanna grabbed a handful of her hair, and dragged her from the temple, out into the street, and scream and thrash as she might, she could not free herself. When she tried to raise a cry, Inanna would kick her. When she begged for mercy, Inanna would laugh. To the edge of the city, and then beyond it, through a day and a night, the goddess dragged Lilith until they came to the place where the screech owls roost, and Inanna addressed them.

"What would you give me for this whore of a girl."

They screeched back, "We know this one already! She has stolen secrets from us! We would have her corpse to peck and tear! We would put her spirit into an egg, and bury it in the sand so it pickles!"

Inanna laughed, and said, "Her pain will be eternal?"

"Yes!"

She took Lilith's throat in her hands, and began to squeeze. "Then have her."

When the girl was dead, the owls ate her eyes and fingers.

Inanna returned to her blood-soaked house, and was a terror upon her priestesses and slaves. For a year, she was foul tempered, and cruel, and capricious. She would return to Lilith's room to weep and tear her hair - her grief as unstoppable as her fury. She refused to allow anyone to clean the room, and yet Tammuz's blood did not corrupt or spoil, his rent flesh did not rot. No other men turned her head, and her bed was empty. The storms came, but they dropped little rain, instead flattening crops with wind, and lighting the savannah with lightning strikes.

Finally, she relented to her own heart, her misery eclipsing her pride, and she gathered the shredded flesh of her dead husband, and she sewed it up whole again, but was unable to find his heart, having flung it beyond the garden wall, never to be found.

How could a man live without a heart? She might return life to his flesh, but how to keep it living? She pounded this question for another year, slaying and resurrecting dozens of dogs, donkeys, and bulls to test her arts, yet without a heart, none of them lived longer than a few agonized moments. Then she hit upon a solution.

She reached up into the sky and captured a piece of the Sun, holding its subtle fire in her hand, she placed it within Tammuz's breast and said the words that quickened life, and he gasped and lurched to his feet, and screamed "Who am I?"

And she said, "You are the shepherd Tammuz, and my husband." And he believed her, though this was not his true name before he died.

Seeing her husband restored, and robbed of his memories, she thought of Lilith. And she considered that perhaps she'd been too harsh with the girl, and so she walked out for a day and a night to where the screech owls roost, and she asked after the girl.

"We have eaten most of her, and use the rest to lure mice! They come to nibble her bones, remembering how she took such a high tone with them once when she ordered them from the kitchens!"

"I would have her restored to life."

"We made a bargain! She was to suffer forever!"

"It is a goddess's prerogative to forgive! Return her to me, creature!"

"We must be paid! There must be recompense!"

"What is a fair price then?"

"We will have half her life! If you call her out of her torment, and give her breath again, then half will be ours!"

"Your price is too high!"

"It is the price! You will never find her eggshell sarcophagus and recover her soul without us! Either half a life or no life at all!"

The goddess grimaced, and then spat her agreement. The screech owls fled in all directions, seeking the egg containing Lilith's soul. While she awaited their return, Inanna laid out Lilith's mouse-nibbled bones, and marked them with blood from her own divine veins, finally biting her lip and kissing the forehead of Lilith's dried skull and leaving the blooded mark there.

The blood spread, reddening skull, shoulder bones, ribs, arm bones, legs... then blossomed, then swelled, until Lilith's flesh was restored. When the owls returned, she placed the egg in Lilith's mouth, and forced her to crush it.

With a gagging surge, Lilith lurched back to life, or... half a life.

When Inanna realized the trick the Owls had played, she raged against them, but they had flown. Lilith, her beautiful handmaiden, and the only of her priestesses to ever bless an Urak king, was not the vital living girl she had been, but instead a creature caught on the threshold of world and underworld.

When they returned home, she flinched from the sun, and buried herself in the sand. When they arrived, she ran to Tammuz, but he did not know her. When in her passion, she bit into his neck, the fires pumped from his burning heart scorched her mouth, and sent her screaming back to her room, and she licked the blood from walls and floor until one of the slaves thought to bring her a goat to devour.

Things were never right for Inanna and her city again. The rains came erratically. The new king grew sickly, and prematurely aged. They said he had a frequent female visitor in the dead of night, and they moaned in their passions, but in the morning the King was further wasted. Crops failed. Urak suffered defeats, losing territory. Inanna grew reserved, rarely leaving her temple or hearing the petitions of her worshipers. Finally, she was simply gone one day, taking nothing but her spear, her sandals, and a jar of wine.

The temple came into Lilith's care, and the city turned to her for guidance and blessings, but she never learned the tricks of bringing life. Instead, she watched the slow inevitable decay of grand Urak, and she wept for it, and memorialized it, and sang hymns to its lost grandeur, and its sad fate. Her womb was barren, and she found that supping of blood brought her more pleasure and strength than rutting or food. But she found that her blood could return the dead to a half-life like she suffered under. Her children were like her – beautiful, powerful and graceful, and all touched with the quavering nostalgia for all things lost – the romance of ages, and...

With a gasp, Childe awoke, wrapped in blood-smeared plastic, with Rabin leaning on the tub edge and snoring faintly.

This one dares too much. I find as much humor in the mockery of the sacred as any other, but to use this tale thusly? Abhorrent.

CHAPTER 17 --- INTERLUDE

"How did you become an Ethno-Folklorist?"

"I was trying to avoid real life. I combined two obscure academic disciplines, and then spent ten years getting doctorates in both, and then another five in research. My fields were too obscure to teach, but catchy enough to see me funded."

"There had to be easier ways to avoid growing up."

"In Saddam's Iraq? Precious few. But my research flattered Saddam and the nation. Through folklore and oral history, and the archeological evidence I'd sorted through and coordinated, I was proving that Iraq was the true cradle of civilization. Saddam ate that shit up."

"I can't believe that's the only reason."

"Well, it's a pretty sexy discipline. Some of the old stories are positively racy. I never expected to be living one."

He cupped her breast, toying with her nipple with this thumb.

"Here I am, sharing the bed of a night demon, on a mad quest to prove the origin of a mythical creature's lineage and keep it from falling into unworthy hands. My only payment the delights of the flesh."

"And great piles of dirty money."

"Oh yes, piles of dirty money, but give me a few more minutes, and I'll demonstrate again why I'm really here."

They were in a holding pattern, locked from landing, and waiting for the signal. Childe had done this many times – most operations reached a point where you'd done everything you could possible do, and so all that was left to do was wait for your actions to bring reactions. It was always the hardest part of an op too, she thought. The racing, and the lying, and the killing... that kept the mind focused. But waiting gave the mind time to wander down the wrong paths, to meet fear and anxiety down dark alleys. She'd found that there were some things that really helped pass the time, but few compared to sharing the bed in a luxury hotel with a well-built young man, and riding him until he was utterly spent.

Adrian judged that Rabin wasn't quite expended yet.

She rolled atop him, and said, "Shall I call you Tammuz? Will your wife drag me to my death?"

He grimaced, and said, "I left her in Baghdad, and good riddance. I married to strengthen my father's business. Were she anywhere within a hundred miles I'd be properly terrified though. She might skin me with words alone."

"Do you feel guilty? Even a little bit for abandoning her? When you get your filthy, filthy money, you're not going back to live in Iraq. Will you bring your wife with you?"

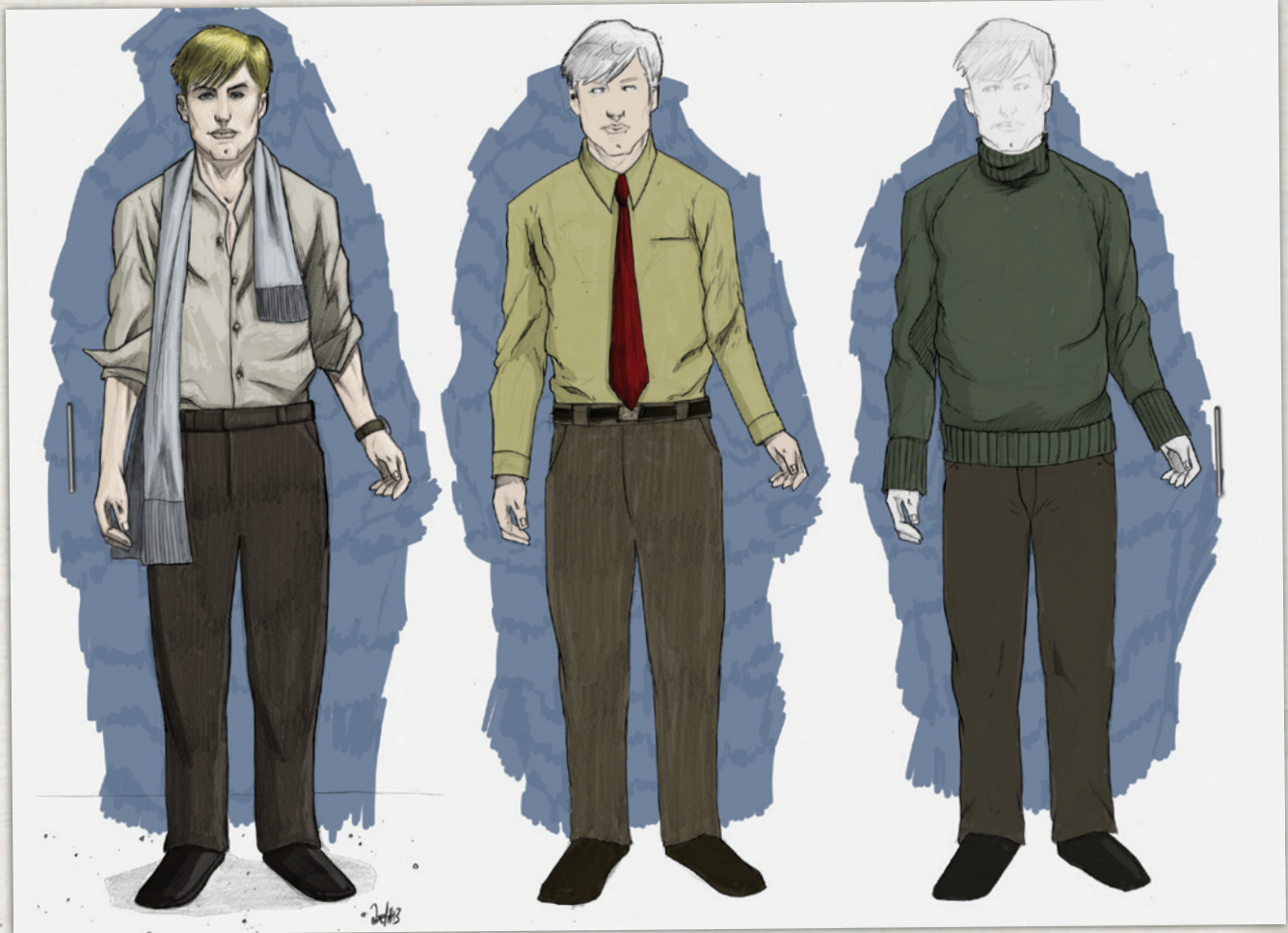
"No, she can stay there. Guilty? Not really. What she doesn't know can't hurt her."

That's true, thought Adrian, as she worked Rabin's member to renewed hardness, and mounting him ever so gently bit into his neck, just sipping, to bring them both more pleasure.

But in her mind's eye, it wasn't Rabin's darkly handsome face beneath hers, but Felix's.

What he doesn't know...

Whoever Evans is, he certainly has a thing for Felix. It reminds me of slash fiction (Google it, old man) where the author inserts himself into the story so he can have imaginary sex with Kirk and Spock at the same time. Think about it... "Adrian" is the masculine of the name, and the author is almost certainly male. I don't know if this means Evans is a pathetic crawling masturbator or one of the most brilliant literary manipulators I've ever read.



Have you seen this? Tell me this isn't the spitting image of Felix? Glorious.

CHAPTER 23 – HER HIPS WERE WINDCUT STONE, SUPINE SHE RECLINED

They left the Land Rover a quarter mile out, and crept in on foot, guided by the luminescent LCD of the GPS handheld. They carried only what they judged essential. Childe had one of Felix's big Kukri knives, the twin of the one he carried. When he'd handed it to her, she'd almost been afraid to take it. She knew what the set of blades meant to him, and how long he'd carried them. But he'd held it out until she'd lifted it out of his hand, thanking him with only a slight nod. He understood that she knew. They each carried an AK-47 of some vintage, cut down Bedouin style and lovingly decorated by hand. Rabin also carried such a weapon, confident from his stint with the Iraqi army in its function. Ammunition for the thirty-year old rifles was tucked into pockets, with several magnesium flares each. Rabin carried a canteen of water, stubbornly refusing to leave it behind. It was a declaration of his humanity between his inhuman companions, and a small defiance against Felix.

Adrian was concerned – Rabin's jealousy was obvious, and she knew Felix simply didn't care. Couldn't care, unless the smaller man took some action.

The desert was unnaturally quiet, arid even for this dry land. Almost nothing lived here, and what did, sensed the death that walked like man, and stayed still.

When they'd come nearly upon the location the GPS indicated, they caught strains of something... an engine. They dropped, and crawled to the lip of the dune they were climbing, careful not to dislodge sand to slide down the windward side and reveal their presence.

Just as she'd feared, the Caliph's people had already completed the excavation, and the Sleeping Goddess was there on her side, her hips were windcut stone, supine she reclined in the sand. She was carved from an upthrust of black basalt, the form of a sleeping woman on her side, the sands wrapped around her legs like a blanket. How long had she slept under the sand? Yet, that burial had protected her from the relentless grinding of wind and grit – she appeared as she did to the vanished people who'd carved her in the days when Qatar was savannah and grassland, its sands bound with turf greened by season rains. But as Childe remembered, when the Mother went to sleep, her lover Enki was bereft, and could not look upon her resting place, and so forgot to bring fertility to that land.

There were dozens of people at work below, and the perimeter was patrolled by gunmen in traditional desert dress. The noise they'd heard was generators driving the banks of big lights spotting the Goddess, and illuminating the excavation around her.

"I make it twenty seven workers and bookworms, fifteen shooters, and likely another half dozen mixed in those tents by the trucks."

She considered, "Agreed. We should have brought grenades."

"That's how you get your reputation. I think we can do this with a bit more flare and less mindless violence."

"I've never known you to shy from violence."

"Mindless violence. I'm entirely enamored of mindful violence."

"There's something else too... He's here."



"Are you sure?"

"My guts ache. I know he's here. I feel it in my bones. Out in the desert somewhere. I felt him close to me, and I know he would terrify the mortals, so he keeps his distance. But he's out there, because he knew I'd be coming here eventually. The Caliph has to see me dead by his instrument because he's declared I violated his hospitality, and defied his exile. He'll lose support if anyone finds out he deliberately violated his own grant of hospitality. No, the savage is out here walking on wolf's feet. I'm glad the wind is in our face."

"Unless he's already behind us."

Felix leaned close to Rabin, "You're the expert. What are we looking at?"

Rabin stared for a few moments more, and then said, "As the tablet said... the old caravan route from East to West Qatar passed through here, and this is where the Mother came and where they built her first and only temple. The Sleeping Goddess. The fragments unearthed..."

"I don't need a lecture. Just tell me what I'm seeing."

"The tomb of your goddess, your mother. The Mother of Monsters, whose Womb Is The Tomb. Where she came to sleep her sleep of ages, until her children come to her to whisper the wonders of the new world that she'd foreseen in her drug-dreams."

Felix recoiled from the little man, and Childe felt the shock herself. Felix's mask slipped for a moment, revealing the thing within, the inhuman creature, and he grabbed Rabin by his shoulder and twisted him around, and pushed his face close to the man's face.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

Rabin smiled at him.

"Lilith's last refuge. The Sleeping Goddess is where she came to sleep. You think all this chaos and death was only for the true origin of your clan? Are you so stupid?"

Felix snarled, and locked his big hand around the smaller man's throat. Childe put her hand on Felix's arm, hissing "What the hell are you doing?"

But Rabin wasn't to be denied, he kept grinning and speaking. "My researches showed me so much, but the truth always remained... vague. The evidence so fragmented. And then I heard the whisper. The call. In my dreams, the story was revealed, and I found the pattern in the fragments. I found the truth of your clan, and your founder. It laid bare the naked lie of Abraham's God. One God? One? She showed me a world overflowing with divinities! And so many of them just sleeping, waiting."

"Felix, lock it down! Nothing is changed. We retrieve the Origin as I was briefed, and..."

Rabin interrupted, "It isn't the Origin you were sent to retrieve, don't you realize that yet? It was Her!"

"My briefing..."

"You said you never had a proper briefing. You were just told to find me and my Origin evidence."

Felix let Rabin go, and slid back down the dune face. They followed, and there was a flash from Felix's wrist, "We have twenty minutes, and then none of this will matter."

"Why?"

"At oh-three-hundred the U.S.S. Tripoli will, with the full good faith of the Qatari government, launch five Tomahawk cruise missiles at this location in order to eradicate the terrorists they believe are here staging attacks on their good friend Saudi Arabia."

Rabin stared at him.

Called in a favor for satellite imagery of Qatar and through my thralls made a freedom of information request on Gulf War missile strikes. There are signs in Qatar's deep desert of possible weapons strikes, and from the documents released by the Navy, there were indeed half a dozen cruise missiles fired into the heart of Qatar during the liberation of Kuwait. What to make of these thin strains of truth?

Childe started to speak, but Rabin cut her off with a shriek, "What?"

"If mother-mine is sleeping over this dune, then she's going to keep sleeping forever. Those missiles are going to blow the Sleeping Goddess to gravel."

The sound Rabin made was hardly human – he just howled and threw himself at Felix, who slapped aside his clumsy attack and locked him in ude-garami, twisting his arm into a control hold, and clamping his hand around Rabin's mouth. Rabin bit into his hand hard enough to draw blood, but Felix held without changing expression. He looked at Childe.

"You had no idea?"

"No," she answered. Seeing Rabin twisted and helpless, it did something to her, something complicated. She wanted to throw herself on Felix, and free Rabin. She remembered his body, tangled up with hers, and the blood he gave her willingly when she was so hurting for it, and for the contact. Yet, the power in Felix, the ferocious terrible beauty of his body and the throbbing urge to kill he was visibly resisting... that hit her on another level, and it made her hot to join him, and to rip Rabin open and share him like a ripe fruit.

"Your people... they are still obsessed with trivia like this. Irrelevances."

"How could this be trivial? The true source of our Blood..."

"Doesn't mean shit. Adrian, you'll make me weep for you. I knew you were sentimental, but really, this is a mile too far. What does it change if we know our progenitor's face? It would be a disappointment regardless. Poor nutrition and dental health back in those halcyon days. She'd hardly rate ugly by our modern standards."

Rabin bucked in his grasp.

"None of this history matters. Nothing matters but tonight. Keeping our nature hidden tonight. Keeping those we laugh with and dance with and fuck with ignorant of what we are. Tonight. All this effort and death to find out what? Nothing that keeps us mindful of this essential truth. We only exist while the man who sells us a cup of coffee has no idea what we really are. All this? A distraction at best, and a massive over-exposure at worst."

She shook her head.

"This is the message that the Spaniards have me deliver when someone forgets. And this cursed mess demands I speak. Since this is you I'm talking to, Adrian, I tell you with words. Anyone else, I'd already be cutting."

"This is beyond just keeping secrets. This is about the truth of our existence! I've seen it, Felix. I've lived it. I'm going over this dune. I'm going to see the truth of it."

"You're talking like you've found religion. Listen to yourself! The you of Port-ah-Prince would have mocked the you of tonight. This is worse than your infatuation with this..." he shook Rabin like a sack of meat, "... you've been infected with the romance of discovery, of revelation! There's no revelation! No meaning we don't carve from the world painstakingly over and over, night after night. Everything else is a lie you tell yourself to make that truth go down easier."

"You're dead inside, Felix! Why do you continue on, without feeling anything?"

"Pride. And the work. Also, my art and my urges. I try and outdo myself. I have a new technique I learned in the Ukraine for removing the skin from limbs in a spiral, like the peel from an apple. They say if you peel an apple all in one piece with a silver knife by the light of a candle, then in the mirror before you the face of your true love will appear."

"What?"

"I want to see what appears if I peel a man this way."

"Why do I always think there's more to you than this? Again and again, you show me what you are, and I can't stop feeling for you."

"I'm an exceptional liar. And unlike you, I've never really been human. Becoming what we are... it was like waking up for me. But for you..."

"... like falling asleep."

He smiled at her.

"In my way, I have a great deal of affection for you. Let's go away together for a month or two. Anywhere you want."

"No Felix. I have to know."

"I wish you'd given me some other choice, then."

Before she could move, he released Rabin and while the man stumbled, drew and drove his Kukri into his back in a short upward stabbing motion that tossed Rabin on his face into the sand. He writhed, and tried to reach the worn wooden hilt protruding from his back.

"I've punctured his right lung. Cut an artery too. The blade is blocking most of the blood flow, but the lung is starting to fill up. See the froth around the wound? That's his breath, hissing through a hole in his back."

She was on her knees, cradling the gasping man, reaching for the knife.

"Don't! Draw it, and he'll be dead in under a minute. Leave it in the wound, and he might easily live for several hours. Perhaps long enough to get him back to Mukeinis and to a surgeon."

She made hushing sounds to Rabin, who'd begun to weep freely.

"He might end up with nothing so bad as a scar that aches when it rains, and a fearsome story to tell. Adrian, ask yourself, which romance is stronger? For the man, or for the truth?"

She imagined orders screeching from a secure telefax machine. A crisp-uniformed naval officer snatching the sheets, and carrying them to the XO, and then the XO passing them to the Old Man. He'd read them twice. He'd raise his eyebrows to see if the XO had anything to say about them. Orders would be issued, the ship brought about. Weapons freed... the phallic imagery of those missiles, rushing to impale the Goddess.

There was nothing she could do to stop it.

In less than twenty minutes, the missiles would come, and the Goddess would be rubble. Would twenty minutes really make a difference for Rabin? He might die, but there was no stopping the American barrage. That was a certainty. She whispered some soothing nonsense in Rabin's ear, and stood.

Felix raised his eyebrows, as if to say "Really? This is what you choose?" He looked sad for a moment, and then he came at her so fast his canvas jacket snapped with a whipcrack.

She only had time to drop into a defensive stance, and he filled the air between them with strikes and kicks, just as Childe knew he would. She remembered how much Felix fetishized the Japanese. She remembered the care with which he tied the scratchy hemp rope, placing the knots just so, the precision and care of the tea ritual, the clean linier power of the Okinawan open hand styles. He was stronger than her, she knew. But... yes.

She was still faster.

She evaded, turning his fast brutal strikes aside with the wings of the crane, and then she moved inside his circle of death, and showed him the wing chung she'd mastered in the year since their last encounter. She strung the iron wire, her hands were killing knives. She stayed close, and worked him like the wooden man, and he couldn't extend fully to punch or kick. The abbess never intended her fighting art to be used this way, but it was a woman's art, using a woman's speed, and for Childe it was so like sex that she felt herself getting hot this close to Felix. She caught his scent. She tightened her circle, now driving her elbows into his hard midsection, and knees up under his ribs.

He rode her blows with nothing more than a grunt, and switched to jujitsu, trying to lay hands on her, and lock her limbs, but she was again the wind, and proved she was still his superior in speed.

Her blows did Felix little real harm, but each of his attacks she defeated, each of her own she drove home, they chipped away at his will. Each nudged his mask of self control just a little further from his true face. She slipped through an opening, and slapped him open-handed in the face, and the mask fell further still.

He growled, "Adrian... stop... fucking around with me!"

She gave him a smile, and kicked him in the balls so hard it lifted him six inches off the sand.

The mask fell, and Felix's true face shone through – he was rage and fire and hate and lust, and more than anything else, he was wrath.

And it was exactly what Childe wanted.

Felix surged forward, plowing into her like a linebacker, and smashed her down into the dune, and drove his fist into her face, bursting her lips open so they reddened like a whore's, and again into her cheek, rouging it with livid bruises. His mouth snarled open, fangs erect and he hissed low in his throat. She twisted under him, writhing like a victim, like she knew a victim would move. She played his instincts, and then showed him her throat, and he bit her, clamping his mouth around the wound and sucking at it. She felt the thrill of being emptied this way, the waves of surrender as Felix drank from her.

And it was also exactly what Childe wanted.

The blood they'd shared, the bond they'd fled – it was such a close thing, so narrow was their margin of escaping that uniquely undead marriage, that it remained in them for years, unrequited, until...

Felix jerked his head back from her throat, and scrambled off of her, falling and dragging himself back. The wrath was gone, but his mask of control had not returned. Instead something else was blossoming in his face – horror, and coming close on its heels, something softer and by a wide margin more disturbing. A convulsive parody of longing.

She chuckled, though her throat was ragged, and sat up, bringing up her knees to lean on them.

"What are you feeling now, Felix? Hmmm? Something unfamiliar, I'll wager. A new feeling, so like love... yet, you don't have anything to compare it to do you? Well, call it love then, my thrall. We'd taken it as far as we could in Port-ah-Prince, and this is what we fled. Was it so terrible?"

His face writhed, hate and anger succumbing to the relentless devotion he was feeling for her, his blood now bound to her blood, singing the song in her veins. Like the blood moved her limbs, now it moved his heart.

"Carry Rabin back to the Land Rover. See he gets medical attention. If he dies..."

He sat and shook.

"...I'll know the reason why."

She stood, swaying a little, and turned, taking a step up the dune face.

"Is that it? Is that how this ends? With you walking away? I'm not going anywhere."

She didn't even turn. She just said, "Yes, you are. Because if he dies, you'll never see me again."

She retrieved her AK-47 from where it had fallen, and went up the dune to meet her Mother.

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.
—George Gordon, Lord Byron*

BLACK BLOOD:
Ill-met in Qatar

Property of:

D. A. Evans
2075 West Park Place Blvd.
Suite G
Stone Mountain, GA 30087



The master asked me to meet him at a party. I was surprised. He's never asked me to meet him anywhere, before, anywhere except his apartment. I've wondered occasionally if he ever leaves. I wouldn't mind spending my life in the master's apartment. For all his little complaints about his "condition," about the way the dust gathers on the statues, about how difficult it is to keep the plants... it's really quite nice. He leases half of the building, and keeps the rest to himself. The view's not what you might imagine, not if you watch a lot of television, but it's pretty enough. You can see across the rooftops of Queens. Sometimes, there's even a human figure silhouetted against the backdrop of the night sky. I'm not sure if that makes it feel more or less lonely, though..

I always meet him there, usually as one of his music students is leaving. They tend to be a little dazed, woozy. Sometimes, he asks me to walk them to the door. Other times, I drive them home. His car is cared for, but never seems to have been used. So I was very surprised when he asked me to meet him at a party. Surprised, and flattered.

The drive out to the East Egg was relatively pleasant. The party began well after sunset... or at least, that was when I was to meet him. The address, of course, was auspicious; even so, the enormity of the house holding the party was still impressive. I was even more startled to have someone take my car. Or, rather, to take the master's car, which he had lent me for the occasion. A friend was picking him up, he said. I thought that was peculiar, too. I hadn't imagined he had friends.

There were people of various ages talking on the lawn, some on picnic blankets. Relatively few drinks were in hand; obviously I was right, and the party only started recently. A few were girls my own age. One smiled at me, but I flushed and looked away. I entered the house, and finally found the master on one of the balconies, looking out over the Sound. Even in the dark, I could sense a light fog passing over the water. He was talking to a woman. I say a woman; it was difficult to be sure. Her curves were generous and her gown revealing, but there was a sense of youth and... boyishness about her that I couldn't reconcile. The master caught sight of me as I stepped onto the balcony. He leaned in, whispered something to the woman. She looked me over with lidded and shadowed eyes, then sighed dramatically. She hunched her shoulders and swept past me. Her scafoam gown brushed my shoulder and I shivered. I can still remember exactly where she touched me.

I turned and stared after her as she walked back into the light and past the other, chattering, guests. I suppose she was popular: others turned, too, but my eyes stayed fixed only on her. She went back out onto the lawn – to leave? – but my eyes continued to follow her. I must have done so a while, because the master interrupted me.

"Boy," he said, as he always did when he wanted my attention. I crossed the balcony to him, my feet clattering on the stones. The lady hadn't made a sound. I wondered if I were that clumsy, if my shoes were so poorly chosen...

"Jealous," the master said. I stammered an apology. He snorted. "Not you. Her. She's jealous of everyone."

"Why?" I'd never seen so striking a creature in my life.

"She used to be someone important," he answered, "a duchess."

The master always spoke of people with important titles. I was never sure whether they were living or dead, since his tense so often became confused. He had a scotch in hand, half-full, which he drank in a gulp. As he threw back his head, the light from indoors illuminated his features. They were elegant, thin, cruel. And they were old, older than I'd seen before.

"She's... very beautiful," I stumbled.

"Are you afraid I'll be offended?" he asked. He set his glass down. His fingers, cold from the night and wet from condensation, lifted my chin. "That I will be jealous?"

"No, sir," I lied. The feeling of his fingers on me was different from the brush of the duchess's dress, and different too from the same fingers on the back of my neck when I drank from him. Yet they have been just as difficult to forget.

"I've been betrayed," he told me.

"Not by me," I asserted, and made the effort it took to look him in the face. His eyes were blue and still, but they were staring into mine. He kissed me, then, for the first and the last time. A rude brush of his lips on my cheek, like stones scraping.

"Not by you," he said, as I stood, breathless and confused. "By... a like mind."

That, to me, was a strange expression. I had spent hours with him, learning the songs, helping him sort the letters in languages I could only begin to read. We had worked together, laughed together, and I had drunk from his veins. I felt certain there was no other mind like his.

"I had plans to pass on my collection." I knew that. I had always hoped that he would change his mind, leave me with something beyond the mad songs and the remembered words. "To a member of another family, someone who would preserve them."

I nodded. I heard a horn across the sound.

"I was lied to. The cousin I trusted was no more than a shadow, no more than a w—" he stopped, here, to lean over the balcony. He knocked his glass onto the rocky beach below, and I held him while he retched his scotch upon the beach as well. I was faintly aware of someone in the doorway behind us, perhaps giggling. I didn't care. I took the handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his mouth clean. A little redness had gathered at his eyes – his condition, he had said before. I dabbed that away, as well.

He gave a single sob, then shook himself from my arms. I pretended not to care.

"What I've already given... has been destroyed." He hissed this last. "But you have been faithful. I will keep my promise to you, even if I must change its conditions."

I couldn't help but look for reassurance.

"You'll make me... your son."

He turned his face back to the light, and smiled at me for the first time all evening.

"Yes, and more besides. You have no idea what waits for you. Anything you desire, anything under the stars." He looked out over the water again, this time at the green light of a passing ship. "All you have to do is keep my collection safe. My collection... and my body." He paused, probably waiting for me to question him. "I am not an old man."

"Of course," I started to lie, but he waved me silent.

"There is poison in my blood, and it makes me appear old. In my heart, I am every bit as vital as you will be. Tonight, I will make you my son, and you will lay me by my Marisa. You will keep us safe, while we dream ceaselessly of the past. And above all," he gripped my arm with surprising vigor, "you will protect my collection!"

"Of course," I said, and he didn't interrupt me this time.

I loosened his fingers carefully, and took his arm. I led us back inside, and down the stairs. I asked the valet for the car. He asked me if anything was wrong.

"My father has had too much to drink," I said. He gave me a queer look, but simply adjusted his jacket and walked away. I noticed his sleeve as he did that. The cufflinks were made from teeth. Dogs' teeth, perhaps.

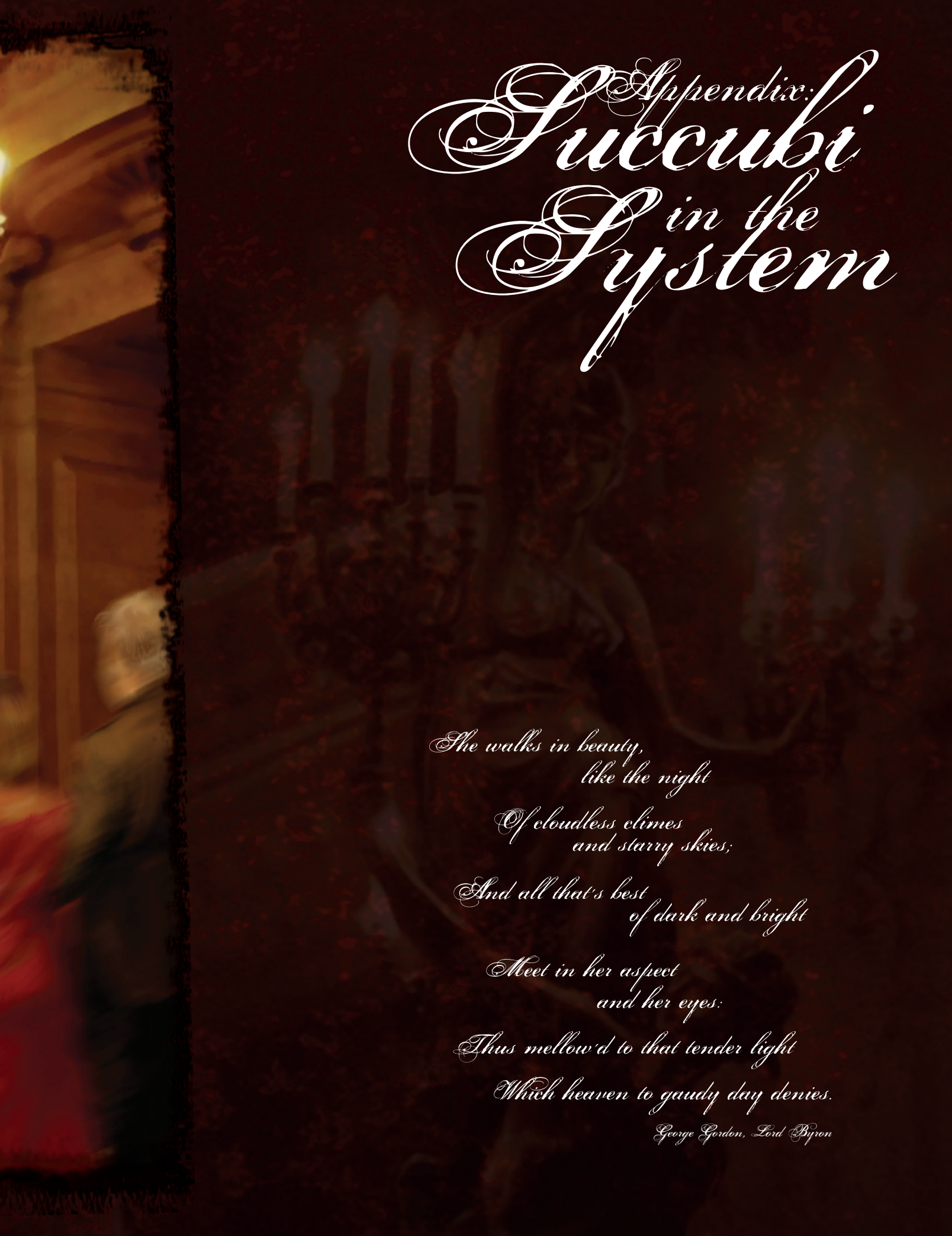
The drive back to the master's apartment was long and dark. He leaned close against me as I guided him up the stairs, between his statues and his carefully tended plants. I took him to the master suite and closed the shutter over the window, stopping only a moment to look out over the roofs. With a twinge of shame, I thought about how I would feel when that view became mine. I set the linnen over him, and he whispered the last secrets in my ear. The last words to the last songs. He drank from me for the first time, and I drank from him for the last time. The master became my father, and his body became mine to keep.

I took him downstairs as he had asked, wrapped him in linnen and placed him in a plain wood box. I set it next to a similar one, labeled "Marisa," and kissed it. After a moment, I kissed Marisa, too, then left them with the others. I turned out the light and climbed the stairs, returning to the master suite to rest, wrapped in my father's sheets and his fading scent. The entire world seemed more alive, and even as the hunger gathered in my belly, so did joy.

I will live a hundred lives and do a hundred deeds. I will experience every passion. And I will keep my promise. His collection — this collection — will remain safe in my arms.

Nope, Sorry, asshole.
— CAT





Appendix: Succubi in the System

*She walks in beauty,
like the night*

*Of cloudless climes
and starry skies;*

*And all that's best
of dark and bright*

*Meet in her aspect
and her eyes:*

Thus mellow'd to that tender light

Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

George Gordon, Lord Byron

Erzsébet (Bloodline)

"The light that burns brightest still burns."



The Erzsébet long to walk in the light. Not to commit suicide. Not to be mortal again. The Erzsébet exalt in their undeath, singing Requiems that might be hymns of praise. They long to walk in the sun because it's the only thing they haven't done yet. Members of the Erzsébet know that, while eternity is within their reach, it cannot go uninterrupted. As age creeps in and poisons their blood, they are reminded that nothing can stave off torpor forever. They enjoy their unives to the fullest, so that they may sail into the ages without regret.

Bloodline Disciplines: Celerity, Majesty, Auspex, Vigor

Nickname: Cavaliers (contemporary), the Withered (derogatory). They also go by many family names, including Moretti, Syska and Rózsa.

Weakness: Most vampires do not fear age. The Erzsébet know better. As the decades pass them by, they find that their bodies begin to age as if still human. For every decade since his last torpor of one decade or more, the Withered visibly ages 2 years.

This weakness also penalizes Physical feats and Disciplines. If it has been more than 50 years since the Erzsébet's last such torpor, his player may not benefit from the 10 Again rule on any roll involving a Physical Attribute. If it has been more than 100 years, the Erzsébet suffers a -1 penalty for each decade past 50, up to -5. Additionally, he cannot benefit from dots in Celerity above this penalty.

History and Culture: The Erzsébet have very little history as a bloodline, but quite a bit as immediate families and individuals. They owe this to the peculiar circumstances of their line's recorded appearances in Europe. In the late 17th century, a woman calling herself Syska appeared at several courts in northern Italy.

Travel in the Mediterranean region was unusually easy in that period, thanks to many active trade routes and Kindred financing thereof. The Mediterranean Kindred were undergoing something of a Renaissance of their own, reveling in widespread cooperation between independent Ventrue rulers; at the time, the Ventrue were popularly aligning themselves as the founders of the Invictus and the truest heirs to Rome. At the same time, the Lancea Sanctum was enjoying a spiritual resurgence led by glorious churches and the revival of pilgrimages. These traditions were bolstered by the availability of skilled mortal labor-for-hire and the awakening of large numbers of crusader Kindred.

Cooperation between Princes was common, if always from a distance, and Syska made herself useful as a messenger. Due to her varying age and long disappearances, she was widely believed to be a brood of several different Daeva, perhaps Embraced from the same mortal stock. In fact, Syska was a single vampire, afflicted with the aging common to her bloodline. Syska is the earliest known Erzsébet, and was believed to be Polish by the Kindred she dealt with in Italy. Later claims that either her mortal or vampiric line were Hungarian are difficult to verify. In 1657, Syska appeared before the Court of Milan for the last time. She became embroiled in an argument over whether she had been using her nomadic existence to Embrace promiscuously, and murdered her accuser. She was sentenced to torpor, but escaped.

In 1751, a young-looking elder named Rózsa appeared in Vienna. Recently-published histories had made a folk-heroine out of Elizabeth Bathory, the so-called Blood Countess. While mortal culture wouldn't identify Bathory with vampirism for several centuries, the Kindred of



Vienna celebrated the murderess almost as one of their own. The myth of a mortal who understood why life must be stolen gripped the Kindred imagination in Vienna. Parties were held reenacting and exaggerating Lady Bathory's crimes. The sins of the mortal became heroism to the damned. The Kindred have often indulged excess, and the growing Bathory legends provided a theme for this predilection, connecting it to the humanity that the stuffy Lancea Sanctum urged secular vampires to abandon.

Rózsa emerged into this social scene claiming not only to be Hungarian... but to be the childe of Elizabeth Bathory herself! Her stories were met both with applause (for their daring) and skepticism (for their general implausibility). Rózsa built a cult of personality around her mother and herself. She claimed that, like Dracula, Elizabeth Bathory had been cursed by God, and that her alleged death was only torpor, the result of being deprived of the blood she required. Bathory, said Rózsa, had been buried in unmarked and unhallowed ground, her monument inscribed with a false name.

Rózsa threw herself into the parties and asked for nothing but invitations... yet, sometimes she lamented that her fortunes had declined, that she could not return to her mother's tomb and raise the Blood Countess from the dead. She began to age, gradually, lending more credence to her claim that her unique line suffered a unique curse. Bathing in blood, she said, was her mother's means of comfort, not a true ward against the curse's power. Other Kindred gave her small sums of money, fortunes that might enable her to locate her mother's resting place and wake the heroine, and Rózsa cached them throughout the region. When it became clear that she had no intent to mount the search or even return to Hungary, Rózsa and her childe fled Vienna for the shores of England, where she reinvented herself as one Mariza Moretti.

Auctors and other nomadic mercenaries were dispatched to follow her. Over time, small donations had become large fortunes, and the Kindred of Vienna wanted them back. They offered substantial rewards for the capture of any "Erzsébet," rewards worth risking the roads and sun for. Mariza became Marisa, and spawned several broods, at least one of which came with her when she relocated to the Americas.

Tonight, the American Erzsébet are largely known as the Moretti. They generally present themselves as a line of Daeva with a unique and unexplained curse. The Erzsébet understand their aging as a growing poison in the Blood, and often believe it as a consequence of growing in potency rather than age. Some modern cousins of the bloodline refer to it as if it were a virus somehow unique to vampires within their family. Nonetheless, most know that it cannot be transmitted. Some have tried to cure it by making pacts with spirits. Others join the Order of the Dragon and perform obscene experiments upon themselves. A few even approach mortal doctors, wondering if the problem is a conflict between humanity and undeath rather than a true weakness in their Vitae.

Erzsébet often feel more kinship with their ghouls than Kindred outside their bloodline, and certainly more than those outside their clan. Ghouls, too, are afforded an altered mortality instead of true agelessness. Where they can suppress passion and impatience, they often groom ghouls over decades to prime them as new members of the family. When Marisa herself traveled to the New World, as many of her brood were ghouls as were childer. Even before the modern day, Erzsébet tended to keep in touch with her progeny. A few hunters still chase them on behalf of European Kindred.

Most Erzsébet qualify for the Close Family Merit, and several have independently invented the Night Life Devotion. Their Auspex enables them to avoid the bounty hunters who still occasionally pursue them, and to enjoy every pleasure of unlife just a little more.

The one true family creed of the Erzsébet is this: enjoy youth and vigor while they last, because soon they will give way to sleep under the sun.

Daeva Merits

The Merits of individual Daeva reflect the line their peculiar existences dance between the Masquerade and their Requiems. The hedonism which runs in the Daeva Blood must usually be indulged among mortals. If a particular cousin is slave to her Greed, she must gather the wealth from mortals. If another wants to sate his Lust promiscuously... well, it doesn't take long to sleep his way through all of the city's interested Kindred, while more humans are born every day. Even a Succubus who ruthlessly suppresses her Vice is likely to find focusing on crafts or martial arts as much a distraction as perfecting Celerity. In this sense, mortal Merits are usually more useful to the Daeva than those specific to vampires.

Some of the exceptions are below. Daeva often have closer relationships with their clanmates than other vampires, and may keep in touch despite having moved between territories or even cities. A few have found ways to dull their razor-edged passions.

Social Chameleon (• to ••••)

Prerequisites: May not possess the Fame Merit ••+.

Effect: Your character is one of those people who just belongs. He can walk into a party not caring that he doesn't know the guests and doesn't know the host. All he truly needs is awareness of exactly the kind of people he's surrounded by: how they dress, how they act, and most especially what they want. This Merit is based on long periods of interaction with and observation of the herd. In fact, understanding how to belong is based on knowing the differences that make mortals many herds instead of just one. He knows how to stand out, and he knows how to blend in.

Your character gains a bonus, equal to his rating in this Merit, for Socialize rolls in dealing with the members of a group who adhere to a specific sort of identity: hanging out at the cop bar,



among the society mavens at the most exclusive club in town, or just chilling with the local underworld scum at an illegal gambling den. Additionally, you receive this same modifier for any Persuasion or Subterfuge rolls made to convince the members of that group that you're one of them.

At the Storyteller's option, not having any dots in a Skill appropriate to the group (Computer when trying to blend in with programmers, or Streetwise among criminals) inflicts a -3 dice penalty to Socialize rolls associated with this Merit.

This Merit can also be used as social camouflage, blending into groups of others to remain unseen by those searching for the character. In such an instance, the character with this Merit may make a Manipulation + Socialize roll, opposed by the Wits + Composure or other appropriate roll used to look for him.

Cacophony Listener (•••• to ••••••••)

Effect: People talk, and so do monsters. The tradition and taboo surrounding the Masquerade may obscure communication between Kindred, but they don't block it completely. A child of the information age, your character hears everything. Where other people see outbreaks of Masquerade breaches or scatterings of pamphlets, your character sees what's really going on. He has the ability to reconstruct current events in the Kindred world from the mess of tiny messages vampires send,

deliberately or otherwise. He recognizes useful information, and knows where to get more.

Cacophony information sources are divided into the following levels of accessibility. Each level includes the lower ones.

••• **Word on the Street:** Your character can read the signals used by neighboring vampires. He might recognize the graffiti of the surrounding coteries, for example, or know their hand signals. Your character can access the knowledge of Kindred who keep domains near his, or who have access to the same herds.

•••• **Talk About Town:** Your character knows where underground magazines and pamphlets get dropped, as well as how to decode them. He can gain access to specific gossip and other messages being spread around the city, and subjects of general Kindred interest, such as debates on how the Embrace works, around the region.

••••• **Friends Abroad:** Your character is one of the rare Kindred with reliable, personal contacts outside his nearby domains. For older vampires, these are likely to be mailboxes or phone numbers. For younger generations, they might be Internet acquaintances or communities. Your character not only has access to the general "noise" coming out of the world's Kindred population, but can ask specific questions of other information junkies. You should agree with the Storyteller in advance who your character's sources are, as with the Contacts Merit.



Once per topic, you may make a Wits + Investigation or Socialize roll. For each success, your character learns one fact or finds one document about the subject in the Kindred community at the level he has access to. If the Storyteller feels that less information exists than the number of successes rolled, she should inform you, although your character may assume he simply hasn't found anything yet.

Close Family (• to ••••)

Prerequisite: Must be a vampire.

Effect: To the Daeva, family means Blood. Family doesn't always mean getting along or not screwing each other, but at the end of the night, it'll be family that comes for your body. Your character's family line is particularly widespread or in close contact in your local area. Doesn't matter if they're a mechanically distinct bloodline or a group of cousins who just keep in touch: when your back's against the wall, you've got somebody to turn to — or at least somebody to be the wall.

Once per session, you may add a +3 bonus on a Manipulation + Persuasion or Manipulation + Empathy roll involving a member of your character's family. The family member isn't anymore likely to put his life on the line, but he is willing to take a few risks to help your character out. Especially if he sees something in it for him.

The number of dots a character possesses in Close Family determines the distance at which this bonus applies:

- Immediate Family: Sire or broodmate.
- Middle Distance: Grandsire or first cousin.
- Distant Kin: Second cousin, member of same bloodline.

At her discretion, the Storyteller may apply penalties to a Close Family roll. Some example conditions:

- 1: Your character has recently asked for a lot of favors, or otherwise slightly annoyed members of his family.
- 2: Your character's family may be close, but they have reason to completely ostracize him, such as suspicion that he murdered a member of the family, or having been publicly convicted of a serious crime.

Drawback: Familial connections go both ways, particularly if one has called on them in the recent past. A character with this Merit may expect to be asked to assist members of his Blood as well, or risk reducing the rating of this Merit by one dot.

Voyeur (•••• or ••••••••)

Prerequisite: Must be a Daeva.

Effect: Passion shackles more than the Damned. Many mortals behave just as the Daeva do, without any supernatural calling in their blood.

Once per game session, the Daeva may watch someone else act out the vampire's Vice, and regain 1 Willpower. The rules which govern the mortal regaining Willpower from their own indulgence apply to the vampire as well: the Vice must be indulged fully, and at some risk to the character. Simply watching two mortals have sex won't give a vampire any Willpower back. On the other hand, watching a man have sex with his sister-in-law while his brother is downstairs cleaning the guns certainly qualifies.

The Vice of the mortal does not matter. The Daeva must watch the act more or less to completion. She doesn't have to

watch an accountant fudge every row of a ledger, but she needs to be there when he perpetrates his initial fraud, or when he finally comes to claim his ill-gotten gains. She can be a participant in the act; in fact, at •••, the Daeva must actively corrupt or tempt the mortal in order to receive Willpower. At •••••, the vampire need merely observe the act from beginning to end. However, it must be the mortal himself who is moved to temptation, and the mortal himself who is at risk. The vampire regains no Willpower if she has received Willpower from another source during the same scene.

Daeva Devotions

The Daeva are nothing if not innovators. Careful to hide their creations until the time is right to place them in the public eye and be lauded for them, Daeva are constantly creating new uses of their supernatural potency. Below are several examples of this creativity at work.

Devotions

Picture Perfect

(Obfuscate •••••, Majesty •)

Majesty is one of the Daeva's great gifts: the ability to make mortals *want* to come to them. Even its most basic power, Awe, is such an effective social tool that some young Daeva don't even realize they're using it. They'll lock eyes with someone across a crowded room and just feel a *click* as they become the mortal's whole world. Obfuscate, meanwhile, is a Discipline that the Daeva can learn only through difficult practice. The benefits usually run counter to those of Majesty, offering concealment instead of adoration. Yet, when a vampire learns the Familiar Stranger, she becomes able to pose as anyone her victims know and expect.

A certain Daeva south of the California Mission was always better at hiding out than turning minds. Over time, she fused her mastery of Obfuscate with her rudimentary (and, she believed, innate) capacity to Awe mortals. After many hungry and difficult years, she learned to be recognized as anyone... and then she learned to be recognized as herself, with the benefits of Majesty. From there, she was able to pass the effect on to photographs taken of her. Photographs that could spread her image and her Awe throughout mortal society, without her having to interact directly with her future victims.

She created the Picture Perfect Devotion, which allows a vampire to extend her Awe effect through photographs, and triggers it once again when the subject meets the vampire face to face.

Cost: 2 Vitae per scene (in addition to the cost of negating the Lost Visage and any other costs necessary to become fully visible)

Dice Pool: Presence + Socialize + Majesty

Action: Instant

While being photographed, the vampire must successfully Awe the photographer. If the vampire succeeds, any pictures of the vampire made from the negatives or digital images taken by the affected photographer carry the Picture Perfect effect. (The photograph must be taken by a character who is a valid subject for Awe: not the vampire herself, nor an automated system.)

Picture Perfect activates once in each scene a character (a "target") views an image created with the Devotion. At Storyteller discretion, it may also activate when a target views an image painted, sculpted or drawn by an artist under the effects of the Picture Perfect Devotion. The first time a target encounters a Picture Perfect image, they are affected as if the vampire had used Awe upon them. Subsequent viewings of the same image do not create the same effect *supernaturally*, but the target is unlikely to change his overall opinion of the picture. Viewings of further Picture Perfect images in the same scene are affected by the initial Awe, but do not have a supernatural effect of their own. They may, however, have that effect when viewed in subsequent scenes.

Later, when a target encounters the vampire or someone closely resembling her, he is overwhelmed by familiarity and affected by Awe again. The effect feels like meeting someone you've always wanted to, or seeing a deeply held fantasy come to life. As with the initial exposure to the photograph, the effect automatically succeeds. This occurs once per scene, up to the maximum number of Picture Perfect images that have affected the target.

No vampire may be affected by an image in which she appears, since it is not possible for a character to invoke Awe on themselves. Characters present when the picture was taken, but who were not targets of the initial Awe effect, are unaffected by the image. The image may be altered and retain its effect, so long as it remains recognizably the vampire or someone who closely resembles her. Sufficient alterations may create an effectively new image and allow the Picture Perfect effect to occur again, at the Storyteller's discretion.

This power costs 33 experience points to learn.

Night Life

(Vigor •, Majesty •)

In young vampires, or those who have stayed close to their Humanity, a trickle of Vitae suffuses the surface of the skin, allowing

them to look healthy and passably alive. Moreover, any Kindred can counterfeit life for a short time, enough to keep down a meal or engage in carnal intercourse. This Blush of Life, however, is all too fleeting and all too tantalizing to the Beast's hungers. Even the pleasures it allows are only temporary, as the vampire must shortly rush to a restroom to vomit back the mortal food it has consumed. A quick flush of the Blood may allow a vampire to escape scrutiny from mortals, but he still faces difficulties if he wishes to spend the entire night in one's company. The cost of a little Vitae is repeated over and over as the night goes on, and the Beast begins to bellow for more blood.

Other powers, however, can be adapted to the purpose, and somewhat more efficiently. Vigor gives a Kindred the ability to go beyond mere animation of the flesh and infuse his muscles with unholy might. Majesty allows the Damned to make his presence magnetic and charming. By combining the small deceptions of Majesty with the physical control of Vigor, a Kindred can counterfeit life for an entire night.

Cost: 1 Vitae + 1 Willpower

Dice Pool: None. Paying the cost results in automatic success.

Action: Instant

Duration: From activation until dawn

When active, Night Life enables a vampire to counterfeit life through the active circulation of Vitae, controlled motion of the

lungs, and so on. These are physical movements mortals perform unconsciously but notice just as unconsciously when others fail to perform them. A vampire using Night Life intuitively keeps his organs operating much as they would in an ordinary human being. The sensation is not entirely comfortable: Vitae, even warmed and liquefied, is no longer mortal blood, and the organs tend to grind in stops and starts. The vampire often finds himself experiencing alien sensations in and beneath his skin: pores opening one by one, intestines squeezing in fits and so on. However, a vampire who has mastered this Devotion also has the ability to avoid giving evidence of his discomfort and, indeed, gained some capacity to ignore it. Thanks to his air of Majesty, his mortal companions will usually forgive any tiny aberrations in his behavior, or unusual symptoms – such as clotted Vitae clogging an obvious vein or a light sheen of the Blood trickling forth with sweat.

A detailed medical examination or encounter with a particularly observant mortal may detect that something's *wrong*, but won't provide any evidence that the vampire is a walking corpse. In addition, the constant, low-level effects of Vigor give the vampire positive sensations as well. Night Life isn't as pleasant as the Blush of Life, and it's a long way from the blessings of true mortality, but it's an efficient and reasonably comfortable way to stay out all night under close observation without arousing suspicion.

This power costs 10 experience points to learn.

Living in Sin: Storytelling the Succubus

Vice

The Damned are slaves to passion and vice, and the Daeva are shackled worse than any. Struggling against their Vice bites into their souls and weakens them, eventually leaving them easy prey for other creatures of the night. A Daeva driven by his Vice is like a captain tied to the wheel of his ship during a storm: ostensibly in control, but only because there is no other choice. Of course, some Daeva don't even try to keep shackle their urges. They rationalize pursuit of their Vice as a necessary concession to the Beast, or even as a mark of Humanity. After all, what could be more human than indulgence?

The Daeva clan weakness can sometimes slip between the cracks in Storytelling. Some moments are obvious: when Misha finally corners the Hound who's been making her life hell the entire chronicle, it's time to let slip the dogs of Wrath. On the other hand, a coterie that spends most of its time in dive bars and nightclubs may have trouble recognizing the appropriate moment to indulge Lust. The Storyteller may feel that taking away two points of Willpower each time she describes a beautiful stranger is inappropriately punishing, or will at the very least annoy her players. Since antagonism between players and

Storytellers is rarely a good thing, she may cease reminding them of the weakness at all... and inadvertently cheat them out of half the fun of being a Daeva.

After all, that's what it's all about. Most players don't pick the Daeva clan so that they can keep a lid on their character's wants-turned-needs. They want to tell stories about things they could never do (or at least never do with a clean conscience). They want to break hearts and take names. The role of the Daeva clan weakness is to remind them of that, to spur players to action where instead they might be overly cautious. It's *not* meant as a stick to whack characters with whenever their players miss a detail that describes an opportunity to indulge.

As a Storyteller, work with your player to determine just what sets off his character's urge to sin. A Greedy vampire might be a kleptomaniac, taking the possessions of others just for the thrill. In that case, the Storyteller could make an effort to point out objects of particular interest. On the other hand, the character might hunger to fulfill childhood wishes, resenting the tiny luxuries she was denied when she grew up mortal. The Storyteller could bring that Vice into play by making those luxuries conspicuous.

Another approach is to set up opportunities to gain or lose Willpower just like framing any other scene in the game. After all, when a Storyteller brings a character's Vice into play (Daeva or not), the struggle is almost always worth being the stakes of an entire scene. The best technique depends on the group's level of comfort with talking out of character and pre-planning scenes. The Storyteller might ask "So, who feels like risking some Willpower?" and let the group contribute ideas for setting a scene around the moral dilemma of a particular character. Alternatively, the Storyteller might meet privately with each player (such as after the Prelude, or between game sessions) to discuss what scenes or kinds of scenes they could add to future sessions, in order to bring the opportunity to gain Willpower or sacrifice it in order to do the right thing. If the players aren't comfortable bringing input and would prefer to just get on the ride, the Storyteller might consider preparing such scenes herself.

Sex and Romance

Romance is the force that beats **Vampire's** bloody heart. The gothic genre the game descends from was influenced by, and influenced in turn, the Romantic Movement. Romance exalts horror, embraces anxiety and glorifies heroes who are larger than life but still not all they should be. Romance exalts the nature of humanity and the feelings that drive it. At *White Wolf*, we've spent seventeen years finding the romance in our monsters and their cities.

Each of the clans has their romance: the romance of power, of fear, of the wild, of secrets and truths. The romance of the Daeva is that of the modern romance novel: our love-hate relationship with sex and sensuality. The biggest shelf in most book stores and one of the most profitable genres in fiction, but one we don't talk about. Women pass the novels to each other with cursory comments. Men use their existence to defend porn. It's the old Madonna/Whore complex: the thing we want is the thing we shun. The Daeva are about love and the things we mistake for it, the things we love that aren't people and the way we use people to get them. The Daeva are about sex.

So, past the literature-babble: what does all this mean for your chronicle? The Daeva are sexy. Not because they've got powers to win friends and influence people. Depending on how you see them, those are symbols of what they are, or tools to make them what they should be. Sex, though, whether as desire or consummation, is a tricky subject for a storytelling game. Sex can enrich your game, but frankly? It's easy to squick people out. So let's talk about how not to do that.

Drawing Lines

If sex is going to play a major role in your game, the first thing you need to establish is what kind of content is alright with the group. Most troupes feel this out as they go along, and they're pretty successful at it. Still, sitting down in advance can't hurt, especially with subjects near and dear to our hearts. Sit down with the group and make a list of sex-related subjects that just



won't come up in the game. Discuss each subject if you want, but ultimately, a single "no" should ensure that the Storyteller and players never bring it into the game. And remember: just because something's turned up in a White Wolf game book doesn't mean it has to be available in your game. We've dealt with some of the worst sides of human sexuality: rape, domestic abuse, even necrophilia. Your No List can have any of those on it. Just because we went there doesn't mean you have to.

Milder topics can be banned, too. Some players simply may not be comfortable with teenage sex. It doesn't matter that it's a subject that goes back past "Romeo and Juliet." If it upsets someone, cut it off.

Dimming Lights

Alright. Once you've got the No List, you're ready to talk about things that are *allowed* to come up in the game, but that should be restricted to implication or mention, rather than being roleplayed out. For most groups, sexual intercourse is going to be on this list. A lot of players just don't want to see the grunting and the thrusting, and that's completely fine. When such an event takes place, simply fade to the next scene.

This approach is kind of Greek theater: the items on the Fade List happen, but off-stage. The Storyteller or one of the players might be responsible for describing the lead-up or the outcome, but they stay away from the details of the act. Again, the boundaries of your game aren't those of our books.

Diving Games

You've had your talks about what *not* to do, and what you might do but not get into too much detail about. Now it's time to consider how sex can drive your game forward, how all this defining comfort zones can help get your troupe into the session and having the fun. Let's consider some triggers and uses for sex in storytelling games.

Closer: Sex brings people closer together, even when folk don't want it to. Two characters who have shared sexual attraction or encounters are closer than two characters who haven't. They comfort each other more easily, but they're almost inevitably also more prone to jealousy. They're more likely to put their necks on the block for each other... or to be asked to.

Green-eyed monsters: Vampires get jealous of human relationships, no question. A Daeva might conceive a mad passion for a particular mortal. The obvious form is stalking or rape, but what about courtly love? What if a vampire decides that it's his duty to be jealous, to feed his Vice of Envy or Wrath by inflicting pain on himself? What kind of monster or hero might that create?

Tenderness: In naive terms, sex breeds good feelings, even compassion. In a lot of cases, that means that the stakes in the characters' relationships get higher. A character who channels sex into tenderness might find his ability to feed curbed, or

feel increasing responsibilities as he develops protective feelings towards the subject of his desire. Two characters might also flirt or make love to distance themselves from recent traumas.

Manipulation: Dead or alive, people use fucking to fuck with each other. The undead often play games of "want me/can't have me," or barter out the promise of sexual fulfillment in exchange for even the most menial favors. The living, witting or not, often play the same games, implicitly promising redemption or forgiveness in exchange for sex.

Human as human does: The most obvious reason to engage in fleshly pleasures is to feel like a person. Vampires find the pleasure cold in comparison to the Kiss, but that doesn't prevent them from liking and wanting it all the same. The ritual aspects of human sexuality are sometimes comforting to the undead: being able to walk into a room and walk out with the man you want is a powerful ego boost for a living deadwoman... even if all she does is walk the fellow home to sleep off wine and blood loss. The rituals of relationships, too, can form a basis for reconnecting with ever-dwindling Humanity. A Tuesday date at the park, just after sunset, with kisses on bridges and choked-down wine can do wonders to soothe the soulless.

Symbolism: A cigar isn't always a cigar. In the truest romantic tradition, sensuality of all kinds can represent sexuality... and vice versa. A mortal friend warming a vampire's hands with her own breath might say more than any extended bedroom romp, while a marathon in a no-tell hotel might represent a desperate attempt for normalcy amid the intrigues and insanities of Damnation.

A NOTE ON VIRTUE AND VICE

While the Vice of Lust is an obvious focus for sexually-driven scenes, it's by no means the only choice. As we've mentioned in passing, most Virtues and Vices can play into sexual relationships. Protecting a lover can be Just, while always pursuing the hot young thing on the scene might be driven by Envy.

Though the Romantics had their own love/hate relationship with Judeo-Christian standards, they had a *relationship*, one you might find inspiration to exploit in the works of Lord Byron (particularly "Don Juan") or Henry James (*The Turn of the Screw*). While sometimes described as "unhappy romantics," American anti-transcendentalists like Nathaniel Hawthorne also dwelt extensively on traditional virtue and vice, and the problems they had relating them to their modern world of obsession and darkness. Sound familiar?

Sample Characters

What follows are two sample Daeva characters (both with full stats as potential combatants). Both are neonates, meant to serve as examples for players and Storytellers, though they can also be used as characters by either.

The first is a neonate who falls more “in line” with Daeva ideals and stereotypes. The latter character breaks the mold in a number of ways, but still can be identified as a vampire of the clan.

Annalise Delacroix



Quotes: “No, I’m not alone. But the seat’s empty, if you want to talk.”

“Why not play, brother? Do you have to drive yourself crazy to make the night worthwhile?”

“Honest opinion? Does this one make me look dead?”

“Of course they come to me. The trick is to keep them coming.”

Embrace: 2008

Apparent Age: 25

Background: Coveting your brother’s blessings is a sin as old as Cain and Abel. Being willing to sell your soul for it goes back nearly as far. Not many people actually get offered the choice. Annalise Delacroix did, and she hasn’t looked back. But even looking forward, she isn’t always smiling.

Annalise comes from money. Not just from moneyed *people*, no, from money itself. For two hundred years, her mortal family has had the best of everything: homes, clothes, schools and protectors. Those guardian angels are a cult of the Damned, breeding the Delacroix for Embrace for as long as either can remember. Without the dead and their money, Annalise wouldn’t be here. Her parents, James and Eleanor, wouldn’t have been able to afford the doctors. They wouldn’t have been able to afford the fertility treatments. They wouldn’t have been able to afford the drugs. And if Eleanor hadn’t had all that blood money and expensive treatment, Annalise wouldn’t have her twin brother, Corbin.

Corbin was the success. The vampires watched the family closely. They saw potential in Annalise, but in Corbin they saw achievement. Where Annalise allocated her allowance for all tomorrow’s parties, Corbin spent lavishly on his choice of law schools. Where Annalise cultivated the dearest of friends and toys, Corbin efficiently selected the best tools to claw his way to the top of his class. Where Annalise gave herself to passion for boys and girls and rock and roll, Corbin prepared to make manifest his destiny. And so when one twin was chosen to leave the family and join the dead, it was Corbin, as the vampires had known for years.

Yet, Annalise’s brother didn’t leave her behind. Like Orpheus, he had to look back. He started taking her to the parties of the beautiful and the Damned. First as his sister, then as his date. And their mutual envy grew, because Corbin was immortal... but Annalise was *popular*. Both twins were beautiful – no need to waste time on that – but Corbin had judgment and chased trends. Annalise had style and set them. Her family’s patrons, her brother’s sire, those were Ventrue, Lords concerned with whom they stand on top of.



Annalise's new friends were Daeva, and they were impressed with who was lying beneath her. For Annalise, the early months of her brother's transformation were agonizing: no one to rely on during the day, the chance that she might die forever on any given night. And so she offered her friends a choice: consume her, end her agony and remember her forever as she was, or bring her into their glittering world of darkness.

Maybe she was just smoking a joint after playing a coffeehouse and letting Sebastian and Danielle take nips off her cannabis-enhanced blood. Maybe she delivered her ultimatum moment of glory, with the razor to her wrist and the vampires watching in hunger and horror. Maybe it was a little of both. Either way, Danielle did the deed, and Embraced Annalise Delacroix into the Daeva.

In the months since, Annalise has been all things to all the night. To Danielle, she's the perfect daughter and lover. To the city at large, she's the youngest and best of the Harpies, donating her time and expertise to reinvent the Masquerades of the undead one by one. She's changing their names, reinventing their wardrobes, updating them for the new century and the coming decade. To her clan, she's the model of a devoted cousin and a well-adjusted Embrace. Annalise's new extended family just adores reminding the Lords that they could have had her, if only they'd had vision.

Everyone's happy but Annalise. Where once she yearned for her brother's immortality, now she yearns for his company. She's moved past him, grown up faster by the grace of being three minutes ahead in the womb or eight months behind in the Embrace. He sulks and belittles her accomplishments. Yet, when they can see past their differences, when they can accept that they're family both more or less than ever before, their bond is stronger than ever. They're getting bad at being siblings, but they might become the very best of... friends.

Description: Annalise's looks favor her mother's dusky complexion and the cut of her clothes favors her rather excellent figure. She may not look like she's dressing to impress, but she always makes an impression. Her assortment of heavy belts, worn jeans, and gas station jackets never fail to catch eyes. At the same time, she can be taken for granted when she wants to be, sitting with her guitar in a corner and a world of her own. She keeps on the cutting edge of technology with her smartphone and her laptop, but they're only on when she *wants* to be found.

Storytelling Hints: *You're the life of the party, Annalise.* Annalise isn't dumb. She knows that she's adored because she's useful... and she spends hours a night making sure she stays that way. Her collection of fashion magazines, cataloged music and hipster pornography would be the envy of any marketing company looking to influence young consumers aged 18 to 32. She works on her collections and designing new Masquerades based on them. She's developing Kindred as products, one by one, selling undead appeal to the information generation. The longer she can keep a grip on life and how to fake it, the more influential she'll become. A few years down the road, when she starts to slip, when this month's look starts seeming a little too much like last month's, then it'll be time to raise some childer of her own.

Her weak spot, of course, is her brother Corbin. Her Daeva mother, Danielle, doesn't like the boy at all, but Annalise wants to keep him out of trouble. She wants him, period. You don't spend twenty-six years with someone and then just walk away. When Danielle and Annalise finally fall out, when it's time for the fledgling to leave the nest and assert not only her ability but a domain of her own, Corbin is most likely to be the cause. Arrogant prick that he is, he probably won't even notice.

Playing Annalise: Everything about Annalise has been taken from someone else. Her jacket's from an old boyfriend. The guitars and the art studio are from her mortal parents. Her amp is a rental she never returned. Every conversation she has is focused on how she can make sure the other party is unable to live without her, or how she can apply what she likes about them to herself.

ANNALISE AS AUTHOR

Annalise could easily find employment in the service of the Collector of this book. She's bright, good at getting secrets out of people, and her keen observational skills make her more than usually able to travel. Annalise also has her own money to spend. It's not always easy to get to, and she'll be skeptical of funding someone else's cause, but she'll trade just about anything to increase her personal status and ingratiate herself with her relatives.

The danger for Annalise is that she might get just a little *too* wrapped up in getting the story. What might happen to her if she became more involved with one of her investigation subjects than with the shadowy old bat who set her on that track?

Dean Rayner



Quotes: "You're quick, I'm quicker. I'm dead. You're deader."

"She was a long time ago, and there've been a lot of bodies since. You saying there need to be more?"

"I'm not a bad guy. Except when I'm the worst."

Embrace: 1984

Apparent Age: 30

Background: Too tough to live, too pretty to die. Dean Rayner never planned on being Dracula's legbreaker. He planned on breaking a few legs, yeah, but those guys deserved it. They were messing with his girl. Whatever her name was that week. Unlucky for Dean, he wasn't so much a tough guy when the punks had knives. Or maybe one knife. Bleeding out's a bitch.



Lucky for Dean, one of his friends wasn't one of the living. That friend was what they call a Shadow, and he did what anybody would do for a dying buddy. Took him to qualified help. A doctor, in a manner of speaking, who gave Dean an operation, in a manner of speaking. New Blood for old. His girl made a donation, and he got up faster, stronger, crueler than he was before. The doctor needed to be paid, and Dean found himself shuffling around doing odd jobs for the undead.

At first, it was errand-boy stuff. Take the cooler to the Spaniard. Then it got tougher. Get the heart, put it in the cooler. Dean didn't like it when the work got violent. Until he realized who he was really dealing with. What he really was. After that, work got a whole lot easier. Real easy to put a hole in a man's chest when you know that he's been killing since he *was* a man. Dean's buddy helped him out a lot. Taught him how to be not just a tough guy but a pretty smart one, too. How to look for the little signs that somebody's on your tail, or figure out where they're running to by what they bother to pack. They're a buddy act, sometimes, a double bill, and you don't want to mess with either one unless you've taken out the other. Which nobody ever has.

Dean worked for the Draculas for a long time, and he's still got friends on the team, so to speak. He'd rather be with them than with the politics fetishists or any of the god-botherers. But word's gotten around that Dean Rayner is a man who can put things right and take a beating in the process. Word is he doesn't even mind the beatings. They make him feel like he's suffering, like he's supposed to be. So lately, he's been taking a lot of contract work. Putting down things that are less than human and lower than him. Protecting the Masquerade, humming his Requiem while he crushes some skulls. Call it therapy.

As for religion? Dean goes to church. Regular church, like regular people go to. The kind where they don't give you shit because you bought a homeless guy a pint without getting two in return. He does what he's supposed to, says his words to a priest, just like his mom taught him. Dean's heard guys call the doctor his father, but that's a misunderstanding. Some people get family when they switch sides. Dean just got responsibility. He doesn't know where the doc is these days, anyway. He'd like to. He'd like to catch up on old times. Find out why he remembers tubes and drips and injections. Why he doesn't remember teeth. Why he doesn't know what happened to his girl. That'll take a while. Old dude split town a while back, around the time Dean started getting curious, started to understand what it was like for everybody else.

Dean doesn't remember the name of his girl, most nights. When he does, though, he has to drink. Drink until he forgets. Drink until he's got bigger problems.

Description: Dean's a good-looking guy, even if he'd shrug off the comment. He's got strong cheekbones, dirty blonde hair, and a chin where it's always five o'clock and just about time to party. His smiles are charming, but not magic; if there's magic anywhere, it's that all the knife scars and needle marks on his chest and arm are more appealing than worrying. His wardrobe is casual, but it's well-picked and always ironed. It's possible he cares more about his looks than he admits, or that he's being taken care of by a Masquerade consultant like Annalise. She wouldn't be the first woman to see more of him than he does. Also, about the hair? Dean's hair always looks good. If Dean's hair does not look good, then someone has been working on his temper. And if somebody's been working on Dean's temper? You don't want to ask Dean about it.

Storytelling Hints: *Everybody gets a fair deal.* Dean Rayner'll tell you he's ten kinds of bastard, but he got royally fucked a long while back and he'll need to be a lot more than Damned before he does it to anybody else. If you've got a problem, and no one else can help, Dean might. He's not so bad at listening, especially when he doesn't feel like talking. But be careful about sharing your problem. Because if you're the problem, Dean'll be more than happy to solve you.

When he's dealing with other Kindred, Dean often lets a cigarette dangle from his mouth, unlit. It's a threat, just a little. Shows he's relaxed. Shows that he'll bring fire if he feels like it. Even just to light a smoke.

Playing Dean: Dean knows his past is just a little unusual, even for one of the undead. He asks questions – he may shun his family, but he knows how they work. He knows the players in the city, and he knows when they're playing him. He doesn't want to be a player, but he'll win at the games. Accordingly, his Traits skew towards being the man to see trouble coming and the man to finish it, as Physically as need be. If Dean's walking away from a fight, it probably means the fight's over. He has also seen some difficult things – and done more than his fair share of them; his starting Humanity has been reduced to 5, and the resultant 10 XP used to purchase a second dot of Vigor.

DEAN AS AUTHOR

Question is, how does Dean Rayner pass the time between beatings? He's the right man to go asking questions of people who don't want to be asked, and he's patient enough to work for somebody he hasn't figured out yet. He'd work for the compiler of this book or any other... but if he doesn't like what's being done, he's perfectly capable of changing his mind and still cashing the check.

Dean's weakness is that his wounds aren't physical. There are the old scars, sure, but the things that hurt him the most are the questions he hasn't been able to ask him. Somebody with some answers, or just some comfort, might be able to put him in a hole he couldn't dig out of.



Daeva

Kiss of the Succubus



Name: Annalise Delacroix

Player:

Chronicle:

Concept: Masquerade Consultant

Value: Charity

Vice: Envy

Clan: Daeva

Covenant: Invictus

Coterie:

Attributes

power

intelligence

●●●●●

strength

●●●●●

presence

●●●●●

finesse

wits

●●●●●

dexterity

●●●●●

manipulation

●●●●●

resistance

resolve

●●●●●

stamina

●●●●●

composure

●●●●●

Skills

mental

(-3 unskilled)

Academics ●●●●●

Computer ●●●●●

Crafts *Fashion Design* ●●●●●

Investigation ○○○○○

Medicine ○○○○○

Occult ○○○○○

Politics ●○○○○

Science ○○○○○

physical

(-1 unskilled)

Athletics ●○○○○

Brawl ●○○○○

Drive ●○○○○

Firearms ○○○○○

Larceny ●○○○○

Stealth ○○○○○

Survival ○○○○○

Weaponry ○○○○○

social

(-1 unskilled)

Animal Ken ○○○○○

Empathy ●○○○○

Expression *MUSIC* ●●●●●

Intimidation ○○○○○

Persuasion ●●○○○

Socialize ●●○○○

Streetwise ●○○○○

Subterfuge *MIMICRY* ○○○○○

Other Traits

merits

Barfly ●○○○○

Mentor ●○○○○

Status (Daeva) ●●○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

flaws

disciplines

Celerity ●○○○○

Majesty ●●○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

○○○○○

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Size 5 [5 for adult human-sized kindred]

Defense 2 [lowest of dexterity or wits]

Initiative Mod 4 [dexterity+composure]

Speed 9 [strength+dexterity+5]

Experience

Armor

health

●●●●●●●●○○○○○

□□□□□□□□□□

willpower

●●●●○○○○○○○

□□□□□□□□□

vitae

□□□□□□□□□

□■●●●●●●●●

Vitae/per turn 11/1

blood potency

●●○○○○○○○○○

humanity

10 ○

9 ○

8 ○

7 ●

6 ●

5 ●

4 ●

3 ●

2 ●

1 ●

equipment

• Cutting edge wardrobe

• Smartphone and super-light laptop

• Sweet guitar and amp

• 1963 E-Type Roadster Jaguar

• Snazzy apartment and art studio

Attributes 5/4/3 • Skills 11/7/4 (+3 Specialties) • Clan (+1 bonus Attribute; see p. 92) • Covenant • Blood Potency 1 (May be increased with Merit points) • Disciplines 3 (Two dots must be in-clan) • Merits 7 • (Buying the fifth dot in Attributes, Skills or Merits costs two points) • Health = Stamina + Size • Willpower = Resolve + Composure • Size = 5 for adult human-sized Kindred • Defense = Lowest of Dexterity or Wits • Initiative Mod = Dexterity + Composure • Speed = Strength + Dexterity + 5 • Starting Humanity = 7 • Vitae = d10 roll



Daeva

Kiss of the Succubus



Name: Dean Rayner

Player:

Chronicle:

Concept: Dracula's Legbreaker

Virtue: Justice

Vice: Gluttony

Clan: Daeva

Covenant: Unaligned (formerly Ordo Dracul)

Coterie:

Attributes

power

intelligence

●●●○○○

strength

●●●●○○

presence

●●●○○○

finesse

wits

●●●●○○

dexterity

●●●●○○

manipulation

●●●○○○

resistance

resolve

●●●○○○

stamina

●●●○○○

composure

●●●○○○

Skills

mental

(-3 unskilled)

Academics ○○○○○○

Computer ○○○○○○

Crafts ○○○○○○

Investigation ^{Criminology} ●●●○○○

Medicine ○○○○○○

Occult ○○○○○○

Politics ^{Who Benefits?} ●○○○○○

Science ○○○○○○

physical

(-1 unskilled)

Athletics ○○○○○○

Brawl ●●●○○○

Drive ○○○○○○

Firearms ●●●○○○

Larceny ●○○○○○

Stealth ●○○○○○

Survival ○○○○○○

Weaponry ^{Improvised Weapons} ●●●○○○

social

(-1 unskilled)

Animal Ken ○○○○○○

Empathy ●○○○○○

Expression ○○○○○○

Intimidation ●●○○○○

Persuasion ●○○○○○

Socialize ○○○○○○

Streetwise ●○○○○○

Subterfuge ●●○○○○

Other Traits

merits

Danger Sense ●●●○○○

Striking Looks ●●○○○○

○○○○○○

○○○○○○

○○○○○○

○○○○○○

○○○○○○

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flaws

disciplines

Celerity ●○○○○○

Obfuscate ●○○○○○

Vigor ●●○○○○

○○○○○○

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Size 5 [5 for adult human-sized kindred]

Defense 3 [lowest of dexterity or wits]

Initiative Mod 5 [dexterity+composure]

Speed 12 [strength+dexterity+5]

Experience

Armor 1/0

health

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willpower

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vitae

□□□□□□□□□□

□■□■□■□■□■□■

Vitae/per turn 11/1

blood potency

●●○○○○○○○○○○

humanity

10 ○

9 ○

8 ○

7 ○

6 ○

5 ●

4 ●

3 ●

2 ●

1 ●

equipment

• Soundtrack to Animal House

• Leather Jacket

• Pack of cigarettes and zippo

• Souped up street bike

• Motorcycle helmet and riding goggles

Attributes 5/4/3 • Skills 11/7/4 (+3 Specialties) • Clan (+1 bonus Attribute; see p. 92) • Covenant • Blood Potency 1 (May be increased with Merit points) • Disciplines 3 (Two dots must be in-clan) • Merits 7 • (Buying the fifth dot in Attributes, Skills or Merits costs two points) • Health = Stamina + Size • Willpower = Resolve + Composure • Size = 5 for adult human-sized Kindred • Defense = Lowest of Dexterity or Wits • Initiative Mod = Dexterity + Composure • Speed = Strength + Dexterity + 5 • Starting Humanity = 7 • Vitae = d10 roll



Daeva

Kiss of the Succubus



Name:

Concept:

Clan:

Player:

Virtue:

Covenant:

Chronicle:

Vice:

Coterie:

Attributes

power

intelligence

●○○○○

strength

●○○○○

presence

●○○○○

finesse

wits

●○○○○

dexterity

●○○○○

manipulation

●○○○○

resistance

resolve

●○○○○

stamina

●○○○○

composure

●○○○○

Skills

mental

(-3 unskilled)

Academics ○○○○○

Computer ○○○○○

Crafts ○○○○○

Investigation ○○○○○

Medicine ○○○○○

Occult ○○○○○

Politics ○○○○○

Science ○○○○○

physical

(-1 unskilled)

Athletics ○○○○○

Brawl ○○○○○

Drive ○○○○○

Firearms ○○○○○

Larceny ○○○○○

Stealth ○○○○○

Survival ○○○○○

Weaponry ○○○○○

social

(-1 unskilled)

Animal Ken ○○○○○

Empathy ○○○○○

Expression ○○○○○

Intimidation ○○○○○

Persuasion ○○○○○

Socialize ○○○○○

Streetwise ○○○○○

Subterfuge ○○○○○

Other Traits

merits

○○○○○

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flaws

disciplines

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health

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willpower

○○○○○○○○○○○○

□□□□□□□□□□

vitae

□□□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□□□

Vitae/per turn _____

blood potency

○○○○○○○○○○○○

humanity

10 _____ O

9 _____ O

8 _____ O

7 _____ O

6 _____ O

5 _____ O

4 _____ O

3 _____ O

2 _____ O

1 _____ O

equipment

Size [5 for adult human-sized kindred]

Defense [lowest of dexterity or wits]

Initiative Mod [dexterity+composure]

Speed [strength+dexterity+5]

Experience _____

Armor _____

Attributes 5/4/3 • Skills 11/7/4 (+3 Specialties) • Clan (+1 bonus Attribute; see p. 92) • Covenant • Blood Potency 1 (May be increased with Merit points) • Disciplines 3 (Two dots must be in-clan) • Merits 7 • (Buying the fifth dot in Attributes, Skills or Merits costs two points) • Health = Stamina + Size • Willpower = Resolve + Composure • Size = 5 for adult human-sized Kindred • Defense = Lowest of Dexterity or Wits • Initiative Mod = Dexterity + Composure • Speed = Strength + Dexterity + 5 • Starting Humanity = 7 • Vitae = d10 roll

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PRINTED IN CHINA.

We've always been here, you know. In that sticky, musky place where sex and worship intermingle. We were the hierodules in the ancient world — I am the Whore of Babylon, mother-fucker. Now be quiet, smile for me and get down on all fours.

If you crawl for me, I'll show you some things you can do with that wagging tongue of yours that are far more interesting than spouting philosophy at me.

— Sinnhaja, Queen of the Harpies
to a visiting Carthian

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