

THE CANNITE CONSPIRACIES



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THE CAINITE CONSPIRACIES



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YOUNG, GIFTED, AND VENTRUE

BY MAURICE BROADDUS

I.

The rumors swirled about the rise of hunter attacks on vampires, not that the Ventrue outwardly acknowledged such worry. Octavius Malachi and his progeny, Mararah, had been summoned to Andronikos' great chamber in the wee hours of the morning. Octavius carried himself with the soul weariness of a man who'd long forgotten his youth. A full head of closely cropped silver hair framed his face along with a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. His light blue eyes were like frost on a pond. Octavius favored all black attire which stood in contrast to Mararah's wardrobe of the green-and-orange kente patterns of Ethiopia. Mararah carried himself like the Prince he had been when Octavius Embraced him. Still, the burden of responsibility weighed on him and he knew his sire had much to answer for.

Guards in full regalia stationed at each entrance of Andronikos' great hall. Octavius stiffened with each step, as if acutely aware that something was amiss. Mararah followed behind him, acutely aware that he was the only black face in the room. The high vaulted ceilings caused the clicks of their footfalls against the tiled floors to sound like the solemn staccato beat of a lone drummer.

The gathered vampires fell silent as the duo passed by. The entire Gerousia had been summoned to Rome with an implied threat: to miss this particular assembly risked severe punishment. Ventrue elders sat along a raised platform in careful arrangement flanking Andronikos, who sat in his throne at the head of the chamber.

Andronikos shifted as the pair approached.

The oldest son of a long-dead Roman senator, the Ventrue Prince possessed chiseled patrician features, an Aquiline nose, and a tongue born for the eloquence of a career politician. As courageous as he was licentious, he spent as much time on the battlefields as he did in pleasure houses. Rumors divided as to which of

those adventures cost him his eye. A gray star crossed the black of his pupil, impairing his vision.

“Come forward Octavius. Don’t be shy.” The oily coyness of Andronikos’ tone brought to mind the image of a snake poised to strike.

“My lord.” Octavius swept his black cape to the side and bowed.

“We wish for you to introduce your neonate.” Andronikos gestured to his court, the approximation of a welcoming smile worn on his face like an ill-fitting suit.

“It is not time. I have made no official petition.” The game of politics wearied Octavius.

Mararah thought this was careful posturing on his sire’s part, since one of his childer had been murdered by a group of hunters calling themselves The the Unbroken Circle. It was soon after that Octavius decided to Embrace Mararah.

“We heard you had created another childe,” Andronikos said. “Odd that you would not petition us.”

The neonate had been warned countless times of how Andronikos feared the growing influence Octavius had within the clan and the city of Venice.

“Such is my right as an elder.” Octavius locked eyes with him, not giving an inch.

“The Ventrue have high standards for whom we choose to Embrace. We had no opportunity to...evaluate him.” Andronikos didn’t bother to disguise his condescension. His star-crossed eye fixed on Octavius. “You continue to act as if the rules of our society don’t apply to you, and you place yourself outside of the Traditions I have pledged to uphold. There is no protection for you there.”

With that, the guards snapped at attention and stepped forward. Mararah whirled, ready to defend his sire, but Octavius placed a hand on his arm. Mararah had never seen him appear so tired. Resigned.

“Always remember, the greater the Creator, the greater the creation.” Octavius whispered, though Mararah thought perhaps his sire spoke the words directly into his mind. “They do not realize that *you* are will be my vengeance.”

The guards shoved Mararah aside and stripped Octavius on the spot. A group of neonates stepped between Mararah and his sire in case he decided to go against Andronikos’ wishes. The guards threw a thick hood over Octavius’ head. They shoved him face down against the tile. Octavius didn’t struggle. Then, a figure stepped from behind Andronikos.

Argent the Dreaded.

Nearly seven feet tall, Argent wore sleeveless black robes to display the muscles of his arms. His nightmarish face was a roll of wrinkles as if his face was slowly melting. Mystery surrounded his lineage, and many doubted if he was even

Ventruer or an ally from the Nosferatu clan. A darker theory proposed that Argent, under the tutelage of Andronikos, dabbled in blood magic and his odd appearance was the price for his mistakes.

Argent withdrew an ax from the scabbard carried on his back. He stood over Octavius and waited. Andronikos nodded. Argent hacked at Octavius' back with an expert hand, cutting through skin and bones with a doctor's precision until he tugged back a flap of flesh. Octavius refused to cry out, even as Argent began to carefully work the other side, drawing back a second flap until it looked as if Octavius had sprouted a set of wings. Then, Argent rubbed salt into the gaping wound with the enthusiasm of polishing his favorite sword.

Octavius howled under Argent's ministrations. The sound gave Andronikos such pleasure, he smiled.

Mararah froze at the sight. An inchoate rage, cold and important, threatened to choke him.

Argent drew Octavius' shriveled lungs over the wings, draping the exposed flesh with the blackened tissue. Two neonates carried over sloshing buckets, and doused Octavius' body from the neck down. When the neonates cleared the body, a pair of heavily-cloaked sentries standing at attention near the draped walls slowly raised a curtain revealing a small window. Much to Mararah's chagrin, the sun's rays were beginning to edge over the horizon. The rays caught Octavius' body, but he didn't burst into flames like he expected him to. Instead, the body of his sire smoldered like the reddened embers in a firepit. Octavius's skin blistered and split, but no rays penetrated the bag over his head. He screamed as his flesh blackened, then slowly burnt to ash until only the head remained.

Argent scooped up the bag, its heavy contents shifting, and motioned to the guards to cover up the window. Octavius's head pressed against the cloth, leaving the ghostly impression of his mouth forever locked in a silent scream. Then, he presented the bag to Andronikos.

Mararah stared at the smoldering ashes of his sire.

"I'm sure Octavius saw you as some sort of prodigy and Embraced you with the misplaced notion you would be strong and worthy. All I see is a mongrel lord masquerading as a true Ventruer."

Mararah bristled. "I. Am. Ventruer."

"Octavius has been executed not only for his effrontery, but as an example to other such free thinkers. We could have been spared your peacock fashion sense." Andronikos snorted, basking in the derisive chuckles from the surrounding vampires. "Without Octavius, you are without standing. Look around you. None will follow one of your..."

"...breeding?" Mararah resented being treated like stock to be dismissed or purchased.

“Standing. They don’t see you as fit to rule. There’s no shame. Not everyone can rule. You don’t have the privilege of having been born into a High Clan or a family of note. To society, the Church, or to the Prince’s court, you are invisible and no threat to us. Consider yourself exiled from Rome. You,” Andronikos turned with a sneer, “have nothing other than one night’s reprieve to flee the borders of this city.”

Maintaining face like any true Ventrue, Mararah stared down at the hands of the neonates who restrained him. One thought burned in his mind. He dared not speak it aloud.

“That’s not true. I have my name. And one day Andronikos will remember my name.”

• • •

Mararah paced about the cramped, claustrophobic hovel like an agitated panther learning the boundaries of his cage. With no space to properly vent his anger, he overturned the old, wooden table, sending the heavy plates flying across the room. Then, the neonate punched the wall behind him. The force rattled the timber frames sending bits of the thatched roof flying free. He kicked the still forms of the peasant couple who had just sat down for dinner by torchlight before he interrupted them. Forcing the soon-to-be-widow to watch, he drained the life from the husband. His blood thirst sated, Mararah snapped her neck and discarded the body, building a rubbish pile of flesh. He regretted how very unlike a Ventrue he was behaving, but the Beast within didn’t always allow him clarity of forethought. The Beast fed on his anger, just like he fed on blood to survive.

After being exiled a fortnight ago, all Mararah had was his anger. It stirred within him, a hot, coiled thing unfurling. A pitched rage so tangible, it seized his chest and made it difficult for him to breathe. A low, inarticulate growl began to form in his throat. He balled his hands into fists, in desperate need of someplace, or someone else, to direct his rage at. Not here, not in the countryside miles from Venice.

A knock at the front door.

Mararah moved to the edge of the small, shuttered opening that passed for a window and peered through the slats. After a quick peek, he relaxed and stepped aside to allow his guest to enter.

“Greetings, Pelamana.” Mararah bowed with a flourish.

Pelamana bowed slightly, more out of respect for entering the house, than for him. That was her way. One of the Vazimba people, she possessed an elongated face and full lips; her eyes a deep brown of crystalline focus. Her head wrap and loose robes marked her as alien among the Venetians, though most probably assumed her to be a servant. The Ramanga clan often advised members of the Ventrue clan, however, so only the foolish thought them servants. “I love what you’ve done to the place Interesting way to deal with peasants, don’t you think?”

Mararah shut the door behind her and did not say a word. Most Ventrue fed on princes, queens, ruling families. He fed on whomever he could find shelter with that night. He dared not risk establishing a haven where he could be easily found.

"Truth be told more peasants make better carcasses than servants." Pelamana glided along the periphery of the room as if avoiding the roiling center of a storm. She paused near where the table once rested, a lady in need of a seat. Mararah upturned a chair and offered it to her. She sat down with all due elegance.

Mararah half-smiled despite his mood. "This is why I value you, Pelamana. You are always able to lighten my spirits."

"And here I thought it was my beauty and wisdom which you treasured."

"I could use your wisdom now." Mararah pursed his lips into a rueful grimace.

"Octavius would not have wanted this." Her tone charged with intensity, cutting through his haze of anger with the ease of a blade through a scroll. She kept her head level to avoid his eyes. Then, she continued gently, barely above a whisper. "With your sire gone, Andronikos is your elder."

"Do not speak to me of Octavius," Mararah snarled. "You did not see what they did to him."

"He was your sire. It is reasonable to feel a sense of...loss." Pelamana's voice raised at the end, as if asking a question.

"Feel? That is a luxury for humans. We're better than that."

"You forget. I am Ramanga, and yet I am still Vazimba. Our people and our monsters are part of the same story." Pelamana's eyes lit for a moment. Mararah pulled free of her, not realizing until then that she still held him in place. "Andronikos' spies will be watching you closely. He will need to be distracted if you are to move with any freedom."

"I'll have to see what I can arrange then." Mararah turned to the stacked corpses. "Maybe I will sire a family in my image. And pass down all that I have learned."

II.

The blacksmith extinguished the flames of his hearth. He crouched to inspect the last horseshoe of the day. Satisfied, he grabbed a pair of tongs to set it with the rest. He pressed his hand to the small of his back as he stood and stretched. The bellows deflated, collapsing like a lung drawing its last breath. Then, he loosened the leather apron covering his tunic, but didn't remove it.

Three long scars etched his face. He'd began to grow a beard in order to better conceal them. The beard wasn't especially appealing with his bald head. Sweat glistened along his well-muscled arms. The blacksmith wiped his nose with his forearm. Even as he closed up shop, he still had his night duties to attend to.

The front door squealed open, its hinges in desperate need of oil.

"We're closed," the blacksmith said to his would-be customer.

"I have need of your services," Mararah said.

At the sound of the man's voice, the blacksmith hesitated, if only for an instant. "I said that we're closed. Come see me tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is not promised to anyone. Besides, I have need of the services of your...nightly endeavors."

The blacksmith turned around, the light of dawning recognition filled his eyes. "It *is* you."

Mararah stepped inside and strode the periphery of the blacksmith's workshop, inspecting the wares. He slipped around tables and stools. The huge iron anvil. He ran his fingers along an array of hammers, but stopped to admire the craftsmanship of a shovel head. "The Malkavians maintain that the best weapon is a shovel."

"You're supposed to be dead."

"I'm supposed to be a lot of things," Mararah said.

"But they said..."

"...I know what they told you. A lie easy to believe because they wanted to. That I'd fallen in battle. That we were able to take out the child of an elder, Octavius Malachi's own, and the only casualty was..."

"...you." The blacksmith studied him with disbelief.

"Yes, me."

"But how?"

"You know how. Part of you may not want to believe it. Even now, your belly sours at the thought, and you wonder if your revulsion is worth having to clean your workbench of your sick later." Mararah opened a cabinet. It was empty. He trailed his hand along the back until it found the hidden latch. He slid the back panel to reveal a cache of weapons. Grabbing the first blade, Mararah inspected and then returned it alongside the others. "Just as I remember."

"What do you want?" The blacksmith attempted to maintain his brave front. A wolf startled in his own den was different from one in the comfort of his pack on a hunt. The blacksmith's hand danced along his workbench with idle nonchalance, searching for anything to use as a weapon.

"You know what I want." Mararah curled his lips back. His fangs glistened.

The blacksmith delivered a strong kick, a fine kick. It sent Mararah tumbling over the work bench, arms pinwheeling to maintain his balance. The Beast within snarled. Raged. Wanted to lash out and rip apart anything in its wake. But Mararah leashed it. A thin smile crossed his lips. He relished each moment of combat. Reveled in it. It made him feel... He didn't allow himself to finish the thought.

"I can hear your blood pulsing through your veins. I can smell your fear."

The blacksmith scrambled backward, knocking nails and tools from the shelves frantically searching for a weapon. He grabbed his punch and reversed his grip on it. Mararah charged bowling over tables and stools. He entangled him until they were a knot of limbs. Scooping the blacksmith up, he slammed him into the door. The force of impact rattled the frame and jostled the door from its hinges. The blacksmith scrambled behind the overturned table, but the vampire smashed through it.

Mararah clawed at him. The blacksmith tumbled on his back. Blood soaked his apron. The blacksmith thrust the punch into Mararah's side, expecting him to double over in pain. Instead, Mararah shrugged off the pain as an ache, an echo of memory. Surprised, the blacksmith plunged the punch again, its bladed edge sank into Mararah's thigh, tearing through skin and muscle. Mararah screamed.

His movement left a blood smear, a black smudge in the thin measure of light.

As the vampire rose, a snarl caught in his throat. Drawing himself up, sleek and muscled and invigorated by the fight, Mararah knew he could easily win this battle, but he wanted to do so on his own terms. He laughed, a high pitched and guttural thing which collapsed into an undead howl. This was how it should be.

Testing himself, his limits, Mararah scampered along the walls. He leapt, his weight slamming into the cabinet and table, pinning the blacksmith. The man squirmed, his legs like an insect's protruding from under a heavy stone. Mararah savored the moment. The singular moment *before*. The man's realization that his life had come to an end. The speed of the attack had left no time for any emotion — not fear, not dread — but in that moment, the depths of his emotions washed over him and threatened to drown him. The moment.

"I have need of you again. The circle will remain unbroken," Mararah said.

"I would sooner die." The blacksmith spat on him in defiance.

"I know. But I have need of your hatred and your anger and your skill. In my service, you may yet fulfill your mission." Mararah opened his jaws slowly and lowered them toward the blacksmith's throat. He once called the man friend, but thought of him now as a means to an end. The blacksmith's warm blood flushed through him with such heat Mararah nearly kept drinking if only to sustain the pleasure. But he stopped short and pulled away. With his long fingernail, he cut a slit along his own wrist. His blood dripped into the blacksmith's mouth. The blacksmith's eyes widened as he realized what he would become.

"I do not want to be like you."

"I am sorry, my old friend. Know that I promise you what Octavius, my sire, promised me: struggle, servitude, and a painful end. Eventually. What we carve out between those times is all ours."

"Then I accept this dark gift and will do your bidding," the blacksmith said, wincing as he felt his body beginning to die. "For now."

III.

Mararah's family moved from home to home, never staying in one house or hovel more than a few days or the same town for more than a few weeks. Eventually, Mararah grew to hate the constant uprooting. Living like some beggar without a roof to call his own. They lived in the shadows, among the poor sections of cities, far from the interest of the Ventrue clan and their allies. Invisible. And *growing*.

"Things move along too slowly." Mararah paced in front of the window.

"You're angry," Pelamana said. "It clouds your patience. What are days or months or years to us. Besides, we move into the final act."

"I...I needed to clear my head. I did not want my enemies to see me so..."

"...out of control? Base? Ignoble?"

"Weak." Mararah stopped. He turned to her, his full attention brought to bear. He locked eyes with her as if in solemn promise. "Andronikos needs to die."

Pelamana straightened, but remained entrancingly stoic. "Such talk. The Prince of Rome? Childe of Callat? You risk breaching The First Tradition."

"They gave me no choice."

"It's been years. And Andronikos is still a Prince."

"A title of age and titles be damned. I no longer care. He gains no extra merit with me because he has managed to thrive despite his many shortcomings."

"Survival carries its own wisdom in these dangerous times." Pelamana's hands fidgeted slightly. She pressed her robes with the palms of her hands, ironing out invisible creases. "He has his hands full. The rumors speak of how the Unbroken Circle has stepped up their efforts. And with great success. Almost as if someone were providing them with specific information."

"If Andronikos cannot keep Rome, it was never his to begin with," Mararah said.

"But The Traditions..."

"The Traditions are nothing more than an excuse to keep me in my place." The words rang a bit harsher than he intended. Cool to the touch, like marble against the cheek, the brief brush of contact held him in place. "I ...reject their rule."

"I'm not saying I disagree." Pelamana paused to measure her words. Like any Ramanga, her mind worked a series of interlocking calculations, measuring agendas and probabilities of success. "I believe the Traditions are in place to prevent... exactly what you're attempting to do. Remember that Andronikos places a lot of faith in them, even if others do not. It is why your sire was killed."

"Do not pretend you don't wish to see the Prince's head mounted on a spit."

"I would not be so 'valued' by you if I did not warn you of your charted course," she said.

"You still have not learned what it means to be a Ventrue, because you have been in exile for most of your unlife. A breach of etiquette can bring down their wrath as much as any violation of The Traditions. Your clan thrives, because they hold themselves to a higher standard than all others, and live by that rule."

Mararah hated the way Pelamana danced around whatever point she had to make. "Their staid etiquette is a privilege not all of us have. Besides, I saw how far respectability politics got Octavius."

"So this is about revenge," she asked.

"This goes so much deeper than that. If it were just about revenge, I'd see Andronikos dead and be done with this unlife. This is about humiliation."

"And your ascension. So, you *want* to be a member of the Ventrue clan after all."

"Well," Mararah turned a knowing eye to her, "if that happens as a result, I wouldn't complain."

"Then might I suggest another way. Rather than kill the Prince and bring the full weight and wrath of the Ventrue clan down upon us — *all* of us — hobble him. Remove his legs so he cannot stand."

"I know exactly which legs I need to cut, too."

• • •

The bright marble colonnades and plazas of the imperial city of Rome gave way to the night. The rich remained tucked in their beds, secure in their homes and guards, far removed from the streets where Argent roamed freely. Argent preferred the narrow alleyways, the labyrinth of nested passageways, where he could find the rustic citizens of Rome. On the walls, a painted scene of women and men engaged in an orgy. In the distance, the raucous din of the taverns. The gambling. The barmaids. Tonight, they all bored Argent. His thirst was for something darker.

Argent cocked his head, realizing that he was no longer alone. "You are a long way from Venice, mongrel lord."

"I go where I please," Mararah said.

"That was the delusion your sire passed onto you. As I recall, that did not work out so well for him."

"Your wit clearly has the same shortcomings as your dull fangs." Mararah kept a wary distance. Argent matched his steps every time he moved backwards. "I'm surprised to find you out alone."

"Is there a hint of threat in your words? Perhaps you've found the steel to avenge the sleight of your sire's death."

"No steel need be found. Besides, I simply meant to warn you of the hunter attacks going on in Rome. We heard of them all the way up north in Venice. It is only a matter of time before Andronikos will have trouble maintaining order."

“What business is this of yours, mongrel lord? You have neither the rank nor the status to voice a concern.”

“My *interest* is for my clan. I’d hate to see Rome devolve into chaos. Or allow the dissenting voices to bring about that very destruction.”

“You speak in riddles fit for a Tremere, mongrel lord.”

“Call me mongrel lord one more time.” Mararah narrowed his eyes, grim slits like razors trained at Argent’s throat. The Beast stirred, anxious and impatient. He counted to three and held it at bay.

“What are you going to do, *mongrel lord*?” Argent withdrew his axe. “You dare not attack me. The Traditions forbid one vampire taking the life of another.”

“As your master taught me, there are...work-arounds.”

Mararah retreated into the shadows of a nearby alleyway. Argent darted inside and searched for Mararah, but could not find him. With a dismissive snort, he moved toward the street. The wind shifted. Argent cocked his head again, detecting a new scent and the scraping sound of wood. The executioner pivoted, ready to face an unseen attacker. A bolt slammed into the wall where Argent had stood a moment before. The stake splintered against the stone.

Argent peered closer. The shadows at the alleyway’s entrance shifted, drawing his attention. Brandishing blades, the figures wore masks and knotted leather armor. Argent smiled. He withdrew a second ax from his back scabbard. A blade in each hand, he waved the shadowed figures forward.

“Hunters.” Argent clacked the axes together, the heavy thud of the blades an anticipatory song of a challenge. “Come see how much bite your prey has.”

The hunters pounced at him from all sides. The nearest hunter dashed forward, but stopped short. He held his hand out and blew a dark powdery mixture into Argent’s face. Argent muffled an anguished yelp, attempting to wipe his face with his arms. He flailed about blindly. Through his blurred vision, he buried the ax in the hunter’s neck, more through chance than any real skill. The hunter dropped to the ground, clutching his neck to stem the spurting flow of blood.

Still recovering from the effects of the blinding powder, a second hunter, armed with long daggers, slipped in to take advantage of Argent’s weakened position. The daggers blocked the initial swings of his axes. With his vision clearing, Argent pressed his attack, but the hunter moved in concert with him. Then, the hunter buried his knife in Argent’s shoulder and the vampire screeched. Argent cuffed the hunter’s nose with the hilt of his ax which sent him careening backwards.

Another hunter jumped into the fray. Argent turned to face her, but moved slower, favoring his injured arm. The hunter jabbed the arm with the dagger protruding from it. No longer able to grip the ax, Argent dropped it. The hunter held his arms up in hand-to-hand readiness. Argent didn’t oblige. Though his arm dangled uselessly at his side, Argent thrust at the hunter as if his axe was a short sword. Then, Argent

herded the hunter away from her squad with a series of feints. Light glinted from the metal of a cross sewn into the palm of the hunter's gloves. Argent dodged a kick. His eyes widened. The soles of the hunter's shoes were similarly embossed with a metal crucifix. Was the hunter so arrogant to believe that the trappings of mortals could hurt him?

Argent dropped his other ax and pulled the dagger from his shoulder. Another crucifix had been etched into the blade. Argent tossed it aside with ease and, with a clawed hand, grabbed the hunter's neck and lifted her from the ground. Argent's jaw distended, his fangs extended, prepared to rip out the woman's throat.

A crossbow clattered to the ground, skittering out of the shadows. Distracted, Argent turned. Using the wall for leverage, the hunter stomped at Argent's knee. It wrenched at an unnatural angle. Argent flung the hunter to the ground, and leapt over the crumpled form but was struck mid-air. A stake protruded from his chest. Argent landed on the fallen hunter with a bone-jarring crunch. Paralyzed, Argent did little more than twitch on the ground. Another hunter carried a crossbow and sauntered toward his body. Then, he grabbed one of his axes and chopped Argent's head free.

Argent's killer turned to the other hunters, expecting them to emerge from the shadows.

Mararah and Pelamana appeared instead; the blacksmith dragged another crossbow-wielding hunter behind them.

"You?" The final hunter cried out recognizing Mararah. He began to load his crossbow.

"Nice placement. Two crossbows in hiding positions. Three-on-one frontal assault. Herding the target. All the things I taught you," Mararah said. "We dispatched many a vampire this way, but now? Your hunt is over."

The hunter managed to fire one shot.

Pelamana snatched the stake from mid-air.

"Not me, this is their fight. I'm just here for the entertainment," Pelamana said.

"Brother," the blacksmith said. "Join us."

"First, let me promise you what my sire promised me..." Mararah said.

IV.

Andronikos called an emergency meeting of the Gerousia. With so many prominent Roman citizens missing within Rome itself, the Silence of the Blood — the most important Tradition in his mind — was at risk. The Prince of Rome expected many of his allies to flank to his side, but he had no idea Mararah would be among them. Two other vampires walked beside him. Did Mararah dare to Embrace a child? Were the rumors true?

“Seize him,” Andronikos yelled, perhaps a little too strongly.

Mararah held up his hand. “Hear me out.”

The approaching guards halted and cast questioning glances. Relenting, the Prince nodded and the guards backed away.

“Your actions endanger us all. They require judgment,” Andronikos said.

“You had a problem, we dealt with it.” Mararah smiled, his hand swept toward the assembled ranks of the Gerousia. “In the process, I found my family. May I introduce to you—”

“—you and your ‘family’ are on thin ground. State your business.”

“I admit, my fellow Ventrue, I cleaned up a mess.” Mararah withdrew a bag and handed it to the nearest guard. “You see, unlike Andronikos I protect my family because my clan comes first, not my philosophy. The Prince could not keep you safe, not as I have.”

The guard took the bag to Andronikos. The Prince’s eyes slitted as he let the sides of the bag drop. Argent’s head peered at him.

“So you admit to killing your own?” The other vampires in the hall were silent, waiting, as if they suspected something important was about to happen.

“Nothing of the sort,” Mararah continued. “Argent was the last victim of the Unbroken Circle. The same hunters who destroyed Octavius’ childe before, were the very same hunters who ran unchecked in this city preying on our kind. I have taken out all of the Unbroken Circle.”

“And Embraced one of them without approval from what I hear.” Andronikos searched the Gerousia for agreement. A chorus of grumbling met him. “But surely you cannot have a childe. You would dare to Embrace and risk my wrath?”

“Who is to blame for that? I am in exile, where *you* put me. Cut off from the teaching and protection of my clan, I learned how to live. And thrive, like any true Ventrue.”

“Look at you, mongrel lord. A neonate with no respect for the Traditions. Need I remind anyone here your sire was destroyed for less.”

“I am the voice of the voiceless. I seek out the best. The strongest. That is the way of true Ventrue. Witness our numbers, and the power we have wrought.”

Around the room, former Unbroken Circle hunters removed their cloaks, appearing behind every seat of the Gerousia. Mararah regarded his progeny with an emotion that felt like love.

“You have two choices: you may welcome me back into the Ventrue clan, or you may call me mongrel lord again and attempt to take me down right here. Now tell me, what’s my name?”

That was the final lesson, Mararah thought. Sign your work, for your enemies should always know your name. The Unbroken Circle waited for his order. The

Gerousia fell silent, as if offended by Mararah's breach of etiquette and embarrassed they did not realize the Circle had infiltrated the Prince's court and had probably been there for some time.

The challenge made before all, Mararah forced Andronikos' hand. Not that Mararah wished to remain in Rome, nor pay even a token fealty to Andronikos. But he would be respected as Ventrue. Pelamana slipped her fingers into his.

Andronikos returned his attention to Argent's disembodied, empty stare.

"Welcome, Mararah of Clan Ventrue," Andronikos said. "Of the Gerousia of Rome."



FAMILY IS FAMILY

BY RENEE RITCHIE

“Put it down gently. Gently now...”

The lilting, masculine voice called out from just beyond the dark, cramped chest that had been Zamra’s world since she left home. Everything swayed, then slammed down violently, and her head struck the inside of the lid. She bit her tongue to stem the tide of profanity, tasting her own blood in her mouth.

“God’s wounds, man! I said ‘gently!’” the lilting voice protested angrily. “Give me the key and get out, now.” After a moment, the protest became a shout. “Get out of my sight!”

The floor rattled with hurried footsteps, then, after a long moment of silence, the voice inquired more gently. “My lady? It’s safe to come out now. I wish I could have offered you a gentler welcome to Nice, but—”

“That will do,” Zamra interrupted from inside the box, then pushed at the lid of the chest, which was just heavy enough to deter mortal men from trying to open it alone. Her muscles twitched with the flow of blood to them, powering them with preternatural strength, and the lid flung back on its hinges hard and Zamra scrambled to her feet. Her hand darted for the sword at her hip, but found nothing but her traveling clothes. She bit back even more profanity as she looked around. As her foot shifted back in a defensive stance, she felt the scabbard against her foot.

Torches lined the walls of the room, keeping it lit nearly as bright as day. The room itself contained stacks of chests and rolled carpets that reached to the ceilings. A tall, richly dressed man stood a short distance away from the chest, also poised to defend himself. Bluish veins traced delicate lines just under his pale skin.

A long moment passed as both vampires studied each other, assessing viable threats, environmental hazards, and exit strategies should the other prove hostile. Her skin was dark brown where his was deathly pale, her frame wiry where his was broad, her lips full where his were thin and grim. The gentleman’s brow fur-

rowed in confusion. "...a Saracen?" he murmured, his head slowly turning to one side as he examined her more closely.

Zamra's nostrils flared defiantly. "Is there a problem?" she asked him. He shuffled a step or two back.

"You speak English! Oh, thank God." His posture relaxed, his shoulders slumping forward as he sighed in relief. "Your accent is terrible, though."

Zamra's frown deepened. "Préférez-vous normand?"

The red-haired gentleman pursed his lips and scowled. "English, if you don't mind," he insisted.

Zamra folded her arms with a smirk, shifting her toe under the scabbard of her sword. "Very well, Englishman."

"Irishman, actually," the gentleman countered. "Call me Aidan. Brother Cornelius is my sire."

"And where is your sire?"

Aidan glared warily at Zamra. "He asked me to ride on ahead when it looked like we might not arrive in time." He produced a sealed scroll from within his sleeve, offering it to her.

Zamra snatched the scroll from Aidan, broke the seal, and opened it. The message it bore was clear, succinct, and without embellishment.

Zamra,

I am sorry I cannot be there to meet you. I have your grandsire's letters, and will do whatever it takes to deliver them safely into your hands personally. I have not completed all of the translations yet. For that, I am sorry. I have sent my childe ahead to bring you to me. He is young and dear to me. I will not see him die before he chooses a cause to follow. I will meet you along the road.

Keep sharp. Stay safe.

Brother Cornelius

"I see," she replied curtly, rerolling the scroll, then nodded to Aidan. "I am Zamra, scion and protector of Carthage."

Aidan stood up a bit straighter. "That explains much," he murmured.

Faster than Aidan could pretend to blink, Zamra kicked her sword up into her hand, drew it from the scabbard, and held the blade to Aidan's throat. "What *exactly* does that explain, childe?"

Aidan pursed his lips. "...I misspoke," he replied through gritted teeth.

Zamra shifted her weight forward, pressing forward just enough to split the skin on Aidan's neck. He barely restrained a snarl.

"I have been in that box for ten nights," Zamra snarled. "Ten nights of a small crew drinking and praying to God in many different ways for a decent headwind, and not enough rats to get a mouthful of blood. Do you really wish to be so disrespectful of your elder at such a time?"

Aidan closed his eyes, taking a few deep breaths to steady his own temper. "My apologies, Lady Zamra." The words came from him crisp and clipped.

Zamra lowered her blade with a flick of her wrist and sheathed it before picking up her traveling sack from within the chest and heading for the door. "Do not disturb me as I feed. We ride to Brother Cornelius at the next sunset," she commanded. "I will return here for the day and meet you here. See to it we are prepared." Before she left, she glared at Aidan over her shoulder. "And I am no lady. Do not call me such." She stepped out before he could respond.

Aidan bowed to the door Zamra left through with a flourish. "Rest assured that I will never make that mistake again."



When Zamra awoke, the chest she used as her resting place for the day jostled with rough travel once more.

Her eyes flicked open and she clutched her sword and belongings close to her, her jaw clenched in rage. Her Beast roared in her ears of betrayal and vengeance, but she forced it back, listening closely to the sounds of the road outside.

"Is it dark enough yet?" a hushed male voice, unfamiliar to her, asked tentatively.

"Possibly. The sun is below the horizon. Shall we set them down and see?" another voice asked

"No! What if it is too soon and they are injured? The dark one will kill us for sure, and Sir Aidan will do worse!"

Zamra rolled her eyes and pounded her fist firmly on the inside of the lid in a deliberate rhythm. Two unmanly yelps ensued, and Zamra found herself thumping against the inside of the chest yet again as they dropped it.

She burst out from the chest, taking the lid off its hinges. "Show some care, you imbeciles!" she shouted, lunging for the nearest of the two men. However, arms like iron bands snatched her around the middle, pulling her away.

"That will do," Aidan said in a calm, gentle voice, letting the two men who carried Zamra's chest clear a great deal of distance. He easily lifted her so her feet held no purchase on the dirt road beneath them.

As Aidan spoke, Zamra kicked and struggled to break free of his grip, but he held her firm. "Shut up and put me down!" she demanded.

Aidan sighed, resigned, then dropped her like a sack of grain. Zamra rolled on the ground to a crouch, glaring viciously at him.

"Do forgive me," Aidan said with a placid smile. "I thought you would be happy when you discovered we were already well on our way when you awoke. When you said you would be returning to the box you came in, it gave me the idea of having us both travel safely ensconced by day, and then on the roads proper at night. You might say you were my muse."

"Exactly how much time have you spent with degenerate Roses?" Zamra snapped as she rose to her feet, then looked around to get her bearings. Fields of grass and wildflowers surrounded her, tender stalks swaying from a light breeze. Four stout men, all still breathing, stared mute and dumbfounded at her. She snarled and shifted one foot in their direction, and they staggered backward with fright.

"With Brother Cornelius sequestering himself in his studies immediately after finishing my lessons?" Aidan shrugged. "Hard to say. Still, I needed to socialize with someone who had no desire to test my martial prowess for yet another quarter portion of the night." He then turned to the men cowering on the side of the road. "Take the two chests back to the storehouse in Nice. Take a circuitous route and pretend the chests are laden down as they were before. When you arrive, fill them as heavy as you can carry with what is inside. That is your pay, in return for your silence. Now go."

He smiled, and each man's face lit up with joy. With exhortations of his generosity, they quickly snatched up both boxes and complied. Zamra felt her own lips curl upwards with a smile until she realized her sword and traveling pack were still inside the chest. She scrambled to fetch them, shooting Aidan an annoyed glance. The men gladly handed off her belongings and headed onto the road back to Nice with renewed vigor in their steps.

Zamra and Aidan continued the opposite way, staying silent for several minutes until Aidan looked over his shoulder and murmured to Zamra, "...if they remember to fill the chests or even make it back."

Zamra frowned. "I suppose that is one way to handle it. Please tell me you did not tell every Cainite in the city where you were going. No one must know what we do here."

"And they will not," Aidan replied with a confident grin. "The two I did say anything to think you were the slave I Embraced and left behind in the Holy Land in the Crusades and that I am doing penance by presenting you to my sire."

Zamra's grip tightened on the hilt of her sword.

"And before you draw your blade on me again," Aidan continued sternly, "remember that you won't get to my sire without me, since you don't know exactly where he is."

"And neither do you!" Zamra snapped. "What if we are ambushed or attacked, and you fail? What then?"

Aidan took a slow, deep breath. "Then follow this road north. You will come across my sire at some point along it within the next few nights. If I told you the amount of convincing it took for him to follow this strategy, we would talk of nothing else until we found them."

"And why did you not tell me this sooner?!"

"Because, Lady Zamra," Aidan snarled as he came to a stop in the road. He turned to block Zamra's path, glaring down at her. "In your inflamed state, you never bothered to ask or give me an opportunity to tell you what the damned plan was, and it has the added benefit of ensuring you do not kill the childe of your only ally in this land. And believe me, dear lady, I know I cannot best you in a fight, but if you bring Final Death upon my head, you will lose that only ally you have here."

Zamra glared right back up at him for a long stretch of stony silence. Eventually, Zamra's hand shifted and her sword returned to rest with a soft clink of metal. "You are even more insufferable when you are correct," Zamra muttered, stepping around Aidan to continue down the road with brisk steps

"I hear that a lot." Aidan smiled at Zamra, baring all his teeth.

"Will you ask me to bow my head to you and wait on you when we are not alone as well?"

Aidan shook his head with a frown. "No. My sire respects you too much, and despite his failings, I respect him."

"Yes. Failings," Zamra repeated crisply, her jaw set with clenched teeth.

Aidan's nostrils flared as he took another deep breath, and they traveled the rest of the night in silence. Zamra took the opportunity to look around at the countryside. The supple fields flanking the road added unfamiliar fragrances to the breeze, but one cool, sweet floral note caught her attention. Her gaze traveled to the field of purple flowers and she gasped softly despite herself.

"Lavender," she murmured.

"Hm?" Aidan turned his attention to her, still bound by a few wisps of distraction. "Yes, they grow it in abundance here."

"Brother Cornelius had a pressed lavender flower with him when I met him in Tunis. I had only seen the bottles of oils in the night markets." Zamra smiled at the memory. "I thought it would be centuries before I would see the live flowers firsthand."

She turned to walk backwards a moment so she could take in the sight as long as possible. After just a few steps, a patch of grasses and stalks rustled suddenly, and Zamra tapped Aidan's arm. The rustling stopped.

Aidan turned. "Trouble?" His own hand sought out his sword.

Zamra put a finger to her lips. "Maybe. Turn around, keep walking," she whispered, then turned to face forward. Her glances toward the side of the road were

now more scrutinizing, and Aidan's posture straightened, suddenly alert. A short time passed, but all that greeted their extra vigilance was the night breeze and the occasional hooting of an owl.

"So," Aidan said, finally breaking the silence once more. The flippancy tone he had previously was gone, replaced with cold determination. "If we are being followed, we split up. You stay close to the road and I'll backtrack to distract any pursuers."

"Or I head back the way we came and you go on ahead, since you know the route better," Zamra countered.

"As long as at least one of us goes on ahead," Aidan replied.

"Fair."

After sharing an uncertain glance at one another in their moment of accord, they traveled in silence, watching for any sign of unwelcome followers until the sky grew pale. An abandoned cottage provided easy shelter to rest for the day, and they set to defending their chosen resting place without a word. Zamra secured the windows to block out any errant sunlight. Aidan moved what little straw and thatch was available into two spots on opposite sides of the cottage with easy view of the door. Zamra turned away as Aidan removed his tunic and belt, but when they settled in for rest, each laid on their side, prepared to watch the other should trouble arise from without, or within.



Zamra awoke when the horizon still flared red with the sun. A crimson glow peeked out from under the boards at the windows and under the door. Still sluggish from the false death that overcame all Cainites, she reached for her traveling pack and pulled out her prayer rug.

"Lady Zamra, just what do you think you are doing?"

Aidan's voice carried enough disdain to send threads of heat through Zamra's body. He sat up slowly, his eyes narrowed in grogginess as much as suspicion.

"Praying," she replied curtly as she rose to her feet. "You should try it sometime."

"We do not have time for such pagan luxuries." Aidan reached for the tunic he removed, putting it back on. "The sooner we set out, the sooner we can meet with Brother Cornelius and be done with this."

"Your sire is a man of God," Zamra retorted. "He would understand."

"But not your god, treacherous as he is." Aidan stood and tugged his belt into place. "I have seen his lies firsthand in the Holy Land. We are leaving. Now. You went without yesterday, an—"

Before he could finish, Zamra kicked the door open. She felt her flesh tingle with the last remnants of daylight, but she pressed on, laying out her prayer. Aidan

snarled and lunged forward, snatching the rest of their belongings and following her out. Before the first salutation left her lips, Aidan yanked the back of her tunic and began to drag her toward the road.

Zamra roared in rage, and with a burst of strength, pulled herself free, whirled around, and landed a solid punch in Aidan's side. His stride faltered and he grunted in pain. "I do not insult your faith, Christian," Zamra sneered. "Show some respect for mine."

She then turned toward her prayer rug again, but a sharp blow to the back of her head sent her stumbling. "Do not make me beat you into torpor and carry you over my shoulder," Aidan warned, fist still raised. "We go. Now. No more games."

Zamra could hear the Beast in his voice. "Not until you calm yourself and tell me why you are in such a hurry," Zamra replied firmly.

Aidan gritted his teeth. "Why do you think we do not have a set meeting place, Lady Zamra?"

"I am no lady!"

"I KNOW!" Aidan finally roared, fangs bared. "Now move, or I will move you."

Zamra drew her sword, squaring off against Aidan. "Try."

Aidan charged forward, his sword still at his hip, throwing his weight behind his shoulder as he plowed into her. Zamra raised her blade to cut him down before he could connect, but a burst of speed gave him the upper hand. She hit the ground hard, and his iron grip on her wrists kept her down. His knee pinned her body, and she felt herself sink into the tightly-packed earth beneath her.

"My sire is in danger because of you, vile Saracen whore," Aidan growled down at Zamra. "Whatever he has for you has brought down actual hellfire down on our heads, and I will not see him die because of your misplaced piety. Tell me why I should not just kill you now and spare him."

"What?" Zamra's face paled and she shook her head, confused.

"TELL ME!"

Zamra took a deep breath and summoned her own strength. Aidan's rage gave way to surprise when her legs wrapped around him and she twisted, laying him flat on his back. She rolled off him and onto her feet, snatching her sword and pressing the blade to his throat once more before he could get up.

"Because if what you say is true, you cannot save him without me," Zamra explained coolly. "And you should not have kept silent on this. The Baali are no small threat."

Aidan stayed rigidly still, on his back, fists and jaw clenched in barely-contained fury. After a long moment, however, he gave a shallow nod.

"But," Zamra added, "you are right. Now that I know, we cannot waste any time." Her sword was sheathed in an instant. "Get up. We go. Now."

Zamra did not wait for Aidan to get up. She quickly gathered her prayer rug and pack, heading for the road. A quick glance up to the stars in the night sky ensured her she was heading the right direction. She did not look behind her to see if Aidan followed.

After a short stretch of time, Zamra heard footsteps behind her. Her hand moved to her sword, but she did not look over her shoulder.

“All is well, Lady Zamra.” The voice she heard was low and soft, only bearing a passing resemblance to the smug, lilting timbre he bore before. Aidan’s pace ensured he would catch up with her, but not immediately overtake her. “My apologies for not telling you sooner.”

Zamra closed her eyes and took a long, slow, and deep breath. “Accepted. Please accept my apologies for my short temper with you.”

Aidan’s chuckle sounded hollow as he walked up to her left, matching his pace with hers once more. “It is in our blood to have a short temper. I am not always so level-headed myself, you know.”

Zamra couldn’t help but smile a little, shaking her head. “I never would have guessed.”

“I make do.” Aidan shrugged.

The pair walked in silence for some time, their steps quicker and their vigilance sharper than the previous night. Zamra spared an occasional glance toward Aidan, and his expression added twenty years to what should have been a perpetually youthful face. His eyes were locked in a weary squint, and his mouth, so easily inclined to smile, was a pale, tight, thin line.

“Don’t worry,” Zamra offered. “We will find him.”

“What is in that scroll that they want so badly?” Aidan asked. “And once it’s in your hands, what will happen to you?”

Zamra pursed her lips. “It will not guarantee his safety, but it will likely pull the attention of whoever is looking for it away from him.”

Aidan grunted. “I thought that was why he sent me ahead: to be a distraction.”

Zamra shook her head. “No. He sent you ahead so if true danger arose, you would not be harmed by it. He told me so.”

Aidan stopped in his tracks, his jaw dropping. “What? How do you know that?” he asked.

Zamra did not stop for Aidan. “He told me so in the letter you passed on. If you can read Arabic, you can see for yourself.”

Aidan jogged a few steps to catch up with her as she reached into her traveling pack to dig out the scroll. When she offered it, Aidan held up a hand to stop her and shook his head. “I cannot read Arabic.” He frowned, dropping his gaze. “I cannot read very well at all, actually. It made my studies with my sire a struggle. I suppose God doesn’t want that for me.”

"I can only imagine," Zamra replied softly, putting the scroll back into her pack. "My sire trained me to fight, and it took decades to convince him to that letters and astronomy would be useful as well. But now, I can follow the stars so that I would always know my way. He would always remain silent on our history, though, and I had to find out much on my own. That is how I met Brother Cornelius, actually. We discovered a great deal together, especially with so many of our brothers and sisters lost when Carthage fell. It became my duty to ensure no more lessons were lost."

Aidan smiled, but it did not reach his eyes. "That is a valiant purpose, if perhaps not a wise one. You are noble and loyal to your heritage. I'm merely charming, handsome, and strong." Aidan's shoulders slumped a little, even as he tried to force his smile wider.

"All good qualities," Zamra nodded. "And you are quite smart. I would not have thought of traveling by day the way you did. I did not tell you what to do when we had to rest by day. Some do not even understand these basics after a century."

Aidan shook his head. "That, I will never understand. Self-preservation is the first thing all Cainites learn, is it not?"

"Unhand me!"

A familiar voice to both Zamra and Aidan rang out in the night, snapping their attention back into focus. A cluster of ten people circled a lone robed and tonsured man, two holding him by the arms. The robed man ripped himself free of his assailants' grip, snatching up a discarded staff at his feet.

"Cornelius!" Aidan and Zamra hissed in unison. They drew their swords and bolted forward with the full force of their speed, their Beasts snarling within. They were on Brother Cornelius' assailants in an instant, and their blood spattered the road as they fell.

The monk smiled with fangs bared in savage delight. "You're early! Fantastic!" he bellowed as he swung his staff, sending another assailant's head ringing. "I thought I'd be stuck with a fair fight. Well done, dear boy!"

"You expect no less?" Aidan asked before an errant fist caught him in the jaw. He stumbled back a step or two and caught his attacker's fist before it connected a second time. The sound of cracking bone and howling pain rang out before Aidan let go and backhanded him with the pommel of his sword. The force sent Aidan's victim skidding across the dirt, leaving a red streak in his wake.

"Devils?" Zamra called as she effortlessly dodged a rain of blows and slashed at her opponents' legs. One hit the ground with a thud, while the other stepped on her sword in an attempt to slow her down. She turned and yanked her arm back, slashing the sole of his foot and sending him howling and hopping back.

"Aye," Brother Cornelius replied. "These might be ghouls at best. Find Safirah. Aidan and I will handle the rest." He swung his staff to point Safirah out,

conveniently clotheslining another attacker charging for Zamra. The woman bore loose clothing and covered hair like Zamra, but with lighter skin. Zamra ran in the direction Brother Cornelius pointed to give chase and Safirah bolted.

Cornelius, Aidan, and the others were still within sight when Zamra caught up with Safirah. She turned around and blew Zamra a kiss, then disappeared from Zamra's vision. Zamra blinked, and Safirah could be seen once more.

"Your tricks are useless, heretic," Zamra warned. "Just as you are." She raised her sword, ready to strike.

"Am I, childe of Malchus?" Safirah purred with a wicked grin, which morphed into a grimace of pain. She raised her hands, and a bolt of blackened flame formed in the space between them. "You know what I am here for. Let me have it and I will let you live."

Zamra shook her head. "Unacceptable. You will have no piece of my history!"

She charged forward, throwing her sword ahead of her. Safirah darted to the side to avoid it, but the blade sliced along the side of her neck as it passed. Blood welled from the wound, and Safirah lobbed the black flame toward Zamra. Zamra leapt upward, narrowly avoiding the infernal projectile, and pounced on Safirah. She tackled the Baali to the ground and threw punch after punch into her face, marring the eerie smoothness and symmetry of Safirah's features.

"I would not keep such treasured things from you. Your sire and mine were like brothers, were they not?" Safirah did not fight back, but stared up at Zamra with each blow, unblinking, unmoving.

Zamra raised her fist to strike once more, but held it as she heard Safirah's voice. "No," Zamra said aloud through gritted teeth, keeping Safirah pinned. "You are wrong."

"Am I? You and I have both read the letters." Safirah's lips did not move, but her voice was an intimate whisper in Zamra's mind. "It took so little to sway him."

"You used him!" Zamra shouted in Safirah's face. "You used his love for Carthage to corrupt him!"

"But it never fully took root, did it?" Safirah spoke aloud this time through swollen lips, crushed nose, and broken jaws healing themselves. "He Embraced you before he became an Apostate."

Zamra heard running footsteps approach and slow down, and she clenched her fist anew and let it crash into Safirah's face. She did not stop, and Safirah's voice did not return to her mind. Instead, Aidan snatched her up in his arms once more, pulling her off the Devil. Zamra shrieked and red filled her vision. She flailed and snarled, fully given over to her Beast and her rage.

"Hold her!" Brother Cornelius called, running forward and driving his staff into Safirah's chest with splintering force, impaling her and pinning her to the ground. Aidan grunted and held Zamra as tight as he could, but she broke free,

lunging at the prone Safirah once more. She pulled the staff out of her chest and drove it in again and again. When the staff broke, Zamra used her fists once more. Both Aidan and Brother Cornelius reached to restrain Zamra, but she broke free. Finally, one final punch rendered the Cainite body beneath her to ash.

Zamra remained kneeling in the pile of ash, hunched over, breath heaving, knuckles bloodied. Brother Cornelius made the sign of the Cross and murmured the last rites of the dying.

Aidan slowly approached and knelt in front of Zamra. “Lady Zamra?” he murmured.

Zamra looked up at Aidan, her face screwed into a mask of murderous rage. “What is your cause, boy?” she muttered.

“I thought I told you,” Brother Cornelius replied, his prayers concluded. “He is still young. And learning.”

Aidan shot Brother Cornelius a glare.

“No. Look at me,” Zamra commanded, her voice ragged.

Aidan immediately snapped his attention back to Zamra.

“One night, you will find something you are passionate about, that you will risk Final Death in order to accomplish. It will consume you, and nearly every action you take will be to that end. Every Brujah has a cause. What you have just seen is mine. I am preserving the history of my line and the history of my city because others spit upon it or would see it washed away or twisted to corrupt ends. I will destroy any Baali who dares poison our legacy. Carthage was destroyed, but it must never be forgotten.”

Zamra slowly rose to her feet and trudged away, dragging her feet through the ashes that were once Safirah. “Her sire will come for revenge,” she said, resigned. “The sooner I leave here, the sooner I can protect the rest of you.”

Brother Cornelius, then removed a scroll cased from his robes, pressing it into Zamra’s hands. “Your sire’s last writings, as promised.”

Zamra nodded, taking the case and cradling it close. Her gaze drifted out of focus, her fingers smearing ashes on the leather.

“Are you sure you cannot travel with us?” Brother Cornelius asked. “Tanit-baal-Sahar is not God, no matter how much he may think he is.”

Zamra shook her head. “Let me go,” she ordered in a choked whisper. “Please.”

Brother Cornelius nodded solemnly, but before he could offer a farewell, Zamra took off down the road as fast as her feet allowed. The Beast and the dust of the road burned in her eyes, her throat, and the precious little blood that remained in her. The leather creaked as she clutched the case tightly to her chest.

Only when she was convinced they would not follow did she slow down, ducking into the farmhouse that provided shelter the day before. The sky glowed

softly at the horizon, the barest hint of oncoming dawn. She took a few deep breaths to slow her blood, then gingerly opened the case.

All of the writings in Brother Cornelius' care were there, as well as a few more pages. Puzzled, Zamra carefully examined the new additions with trembling hands. The pages crinkled delicately, crumbling at the edges at even the lightest touch, but the writing matched her sire's perfectly.

By the time Zamra reached the last page, including a final note scrawled in Safirah's spidery hand, her whole body shook with rage. She threw the scroll case across the farmhouse floor, her body wracked with sobbing. It rolled into a pool of sunlight on the floor, the coming sunrise spilling forth through the open door.

When the light touched Zamra's ankle, the flesh began to pop and sizzle, jolting her back to her senses. She roared in rage as her Beast rose to the surface, threatening to unleash itself once more. She threw herself against the door to slam it shut against the encroaching day, then slumped against the wood. The sleep of the day overtook her before she could move any further.



ACTS OF CRUELTY

BY JUSTIN ACHILLI

Blood dropped into the frozen wood of the exposed medgrinda, the wood-paved road that normally hid beneath the surface of the Lithuanian marsh water, steaming with the escaping warmth of life. An open wound spilled this blood, a wound delivered to the head of a self-styled holy man come to bring a rapturous Word to the fiercely territorial tribes far up the river Neris. The tribes had not wanted to hear this Word.

It had ended abruptly, with a vicious clout to the head that the firelight couldn't keep at bay. The small crowd parted to give the holy man's killer some berth, but the crowd accepted him, looking upon him in fear and awe and some amount of gratitude, having kept such perilous ideas at bay.

A monster wearing the skin of a mortal strode with purpose toward the broken holy man and knelt beneath the scant light of the moon. "You are hurt, I see."

The holy man sucked in a shuddering breath. "I only wanted to share the love of the Lord."

"These are lands where love finds little purchase, pašalietis," the monster replied. "You would have fared better further west."

"Please," said the holy man, the entreaty almost inaudible beneath the wind, "help me."

"No, that time is past, I think," said the monster. The creature then distended its inhuman jaw and latched onto the wound, swilling in the blood of the dying holy man, who convulsed thrice, then fell still.

Tipping back its wrist, the monster willed a bone spur to emerge from beneath its flesh, serrations forming along its length. The monster then peeled the flesh from the bloodless holy man — flensing it in one unbroken paring, like a parent peeling an apple for the benefit of an astonished child — and draped itself in the skin-raiment of the dead man.

Unable to see what had transpired, a group of villagers stood inside a flickering aura of firelight. They had heard some of the whispered altercation between the shadowed figure and this outsider-missionary. They had smelled the rich air of blood released from its fleshly vessel. No one had seen the monster creep in and reap the holy man plainly. Most had simply assumed the skulksome form was a thief come to take what few belongings the holy man had.

But a servant of one of the other blood-drinkers had been among them.



Nine dead bodies lay at the foot of the hill beneath the castle walls. They had lain there for days. Cold preserved them, kept them from stinking to the point that the lord would have had to send someone to drag them away. Lord Dausprungas' court didn't have available men to perform such troubling duty at the moment. He wasn't there himself, pursuing a grudge that had required him to lead a hundred armed men to Kreva months ago, and who knew what had come of that?

The Semigallian community dwelling at the foot of the castle didn't want to send anyone to collect the dead, because most of the corpses belonged to Samogitians who should have stayed where they belonged. The fight itself had erupted over who had legitimate claim to a pair of Estonian slaves, who had been the first to die when weapons had left their sheaths. The few Samogitians living nearby were afraid to collect their own dead because they were leery of being ambushed by the wretched Semigallians who had drawn blades in the first place. Two dead Estonians, four dead Samogitians, and three dead Semigallians, face-down in jagged ruts of blood-mud.

The monster — it called itself Gabija, but few knew its name and fewer still believed it to be the goddess of fire with whom it shared a name — emerged from a shunned hovel, sensing the smell of blood carried by the bitter wind. Still wearing the tattered shroud shorn from the holy man's corpse, it collected the bodies left in the wake of the altercation. Laboriously, it dragged them back to its hovel, which stank of bitumen occasionally cut by a waft of earthy bread baking.

There it began the unpleasant work of separating the usable material from the gore. Equal heaps grew, one inside the hovel, intended for the working of strange rituals, one on the outside, fit only for swine's meal. It chanted as it pursued its task, an old poem of uncertain words but unmistakably charnel intent.



Nojus petitioned the eldest Cainite in the domain of nearby Voruta, troubled at the foulness of the acts that had the mortals of the city reaching for their brands. His brood had nominated him for his wisdom and esteem to make the trip to Voruta, distant from their own domain, but along the well-traveled paths worn first by mortal feet then by the undead in their wake. Voruta, where the king-to-be Mindaugas would shield himself within stony walls from the ill-tempered Duke

Vykintas, but where now ruled Eglė, the widowed bride of a dead lord who once dwelt beneath the sea that foamed blood at his passing.

“The monster Gabija has broken none of our ways,” Eglė rebuked. “Evil as the acts may be, they are no crime.” She offered a cup of cold blood, decanted from a beaten-silver carafe. It was how she preferred it, absent the passions of a living vessel, with the humours found in fresh blood separated by the pouring. Nojus found it revolting. He declined.

A ghoul in thrall to one of Nojus’ brood had witnessed the monster take the remains of the murdered priest, having been one of the crowd standing in a rude half-circle at the edge of the village when the killing had happened. When word of the monster’s presence had made it back to the brood, Nojus hired other spies and had them follow Gabija. Even the Nosferatu loathed the monster, and spied on it for lesser boons than they would normally have exacted. Three of them had secreted themselves in the vicinity of the monster’s lair.

The shadow of Voruta’s walls and the smoke from fatty candles hid the dark look on Nojus’ face. “The monster grows bold. It rouses the living to action against us.” Nojus had partaken of the blood of Eglė’s lord husband and would not act against her. Gabija enjoyed no such reverence, however. “This story has played out again and again, from the Neris to the broad Baltic. When one of our kind grows overly bold and incites the living to challenge it, we all suffer.”

“Your lament is as old as the First City,” said Eglė.

Nojus knew this, of course. Esteemed by his brood as preeminent in the histories of the Damned. “And look what it brought them,” he replied through clenched teeth. He had always been quick to anger, despite his bookish calling.

“What would you have me do?” Eglė asked. “Pronounce Gabija’s death? Speak the *lex talionis* like a tyrant?”

Nojus bowed his head. “Žilvinas would have sacrificed one monster for the protection of the Blood.” His marble cheeks burned with shame, the remembrance of a mortal emotion.

“My husband Žilvinas is ash on the wind. And perhaps you forget, Gabija is elder even than he.”

Nojus shook his head and considered his words. These Serpents had their own strange ways, stranger even than the Fiends who tore the flesh from dead men and capered in their tattered skins or crafted ikons from their victims. This would end in dolor, surely.

From the depths of a dusty memory, Nojus recalled Žilvinas. Their relationship was less contentious than the one that existed between he and the widow. Žilvinas had granted him more leeway, had allowed himself to be... advised. Eglė was perhaps more just, but it bordered on righteousness. Then again, he owed her less than he had owed Žilvinas... these damned Serpents knew how to use a Cainite’s hypocrisies against him.

“That may be, but Gabija is no god, for we know it to be one of us. Therefore, it is subject to those traditions that have stood since the nights after those of the Blood had left the Garden. By your own admission, the ways of the First City are the ways that hold true here,” he replied

“You are a scholar, but here I am first among elders, even if time distinguishes others before me,” Eglè said. Nojus’ shame continued, as Eglè’s pronouncement acknowledged both Gabija and Nojus as having more years under the night, but that her own status exceeded theirs. In the west, those of the blood used the honorific of Prince, but the ironies of those decadent courts had few adherents here in the cold north, where the sun had fleeting dominion. Gabija obviously had no regard for even these minimal courtesies that more sophisticated Cainites observed. Eglè shamed Nojus by suggesting that he could similarly ignore the social contract of the vikolakis.

Shame came with a cost. Nojus’ Beast, unwilling to be coddled, roared inside him, bringing a flush of mortal life to him. Only by effort of will did he bring the Beast to heel. And he made sure Eglè saw this triumph as such. Widow of the former lord or otherwise, her position wasn’t unassailable. As she would know if her entreaties to the First City were more than mere blandishment.

Outside, a gale howled, and the too-common *tik tik tik* of freezing rain against walls of stone spoke to the harshness of the Baltic winter clime. Although Nojus had fewer fears than the mortals for what forces acted at night, even he had to admit that evils greater than himself, whether they be forces of nature or the weight of tradition among the Damned, held sway where individual intentions differed. This same regard for tradition meant that Eglè had granted him audience, and was responsible for his protection while visiting her domain.

Still, bitter comfort. His brood would howl for Gabija’s heart from beneath the frozen earth where they hid from the fleeting sun.

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The chilly marshes around Voruta stank, and carrion birds circled the battlefield. A hundred corpses littered the ground. Forlorn, abandoned now by the living who had survived the fight, the swamp held the unshriven bodies of those fighting Dausprungas’ grudge. In a clearing amid a tangled knot of swamp-trees, scores of the dead and dying lay abandoned.

Gabija surveyed the site. From its mouth, the monster expelled a bone with a coughing sound, as if it had been lodged in its throat. The bone ended in a jagged point, with tiny hole at one end. Like a spider, the monster expelled a gossamer fiber of its dead internal flesh in the form of gut, glistening with blood, and passed it through the bone needle.

The monster then moved across the battlefield with purpose. Passing from body to body, it sewed each to the next, first with a loose and limber stitch, then

recircling, pulling the corpses into closer proximity to one another, then sewing again, repeating the process for hours, until the sun rose, then returned to its low haven and hid from the sun.

Worried, the Nosferatu spies lurking beyond the moonlight convened and marveled at the horror the monster was creating. Whispers had traveled from the Land Beyond the Forest even unto these domains far north: The monster was using some unspeakable deathless sorcery to build a servant.

The brief council of Nosferatu disbanded before the sun scalded their cursed flesh.

And the next night, the monster did more of the same, sewing, secreting thread, circling, and stacking the bodies collecting from the battlefield, spending hours aligning them in a neat, alternating row, head to toe, head to toe. Into each dead mouth the monster spat a drop of still water, gathered from long-past rains that had fallen in its *dom*, and then sewed the lips shut. Again the sunrise drove Gabija back to its haven. Again the Nosferatu worried like gossips briefly before taking their own shelter.

Once more on the third night. Insectoid, scuttling, the monster beetled along the length of its creation for hours, sewing and stitching — but the massive, charnel heap had never betrayed the slightest movement. One more time the sun pushed the Cainite into daytime torpor in its lair. One more time the Nosferatu shared what they had spied. The mad old thing didn't realize it was dealing with dead flesh, that it couldn't rouse this gargantuan brute of a ghoul because such a thing required the augmentation of living flesh with undead blood! At least, that's what one of the Nosferatu insisted, having learned such dread secrets from a Usurper who hid among Nojus' brood.

Pity settled in upon the spies. Pity and loathing. These acts of cruelty weren't the violence of a vicious revenant, but the disturbed actions of a vampire lost to a particularly agitated Beast. One of the Nosferatu, a Viking, said that his people called such things draugr, once vampires but that have become capable of little more than the same repetitive actions.

The mortals around Voruta had no such lore informing what they witnessed. While the monster Gabija slept, and while the Nosferatu did likewise, they saw only a ghastly picket, a hundreds-long corpse train disgustingly sewn together from the bodies of the lord's most recent folly. Individually they feared, but collectively they found courage, and took up their torches to the castle on the hill and demanded that Dausprungas' chamberlain protect them.

He agreed. Putting out the call to arms, he called to him what few banner-men would answer, those who weren't exhausted and still themselves nursing wounds earned from the fight at Kernavė that had left so many corpses for the monster to unhallow. It was a strange day, when Kurs, Semigallians, Balts, and Samogitians alike put aside their mistrust for one another — however briefly — and bade the lord's man put down the evil that made its home unwholesomely near them.

That night, though, when the Nosferatu scuttled back to the environs of Gabija's dwelling, the stitched corpses had all vanished. No longer choked with the bodies of the dead, the marsh waters had once again risen over the ground, which emerged here and there in frozen jags of mud. Gabija's hovel hunched at the center of the swamp, without a light signifying someone inside. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. The marsh was almost tranquil. The spars of the medgrinda even laid a path back toward Voruta, as if no great evil had transpired here over the past several nights.

Where had the monster gone, and where — how? — had it taken the corpses?



A moon like a distant eye peered with apathy on the sodden roads of Eglè's domain. Chill miasmas lingered like ghosts over the stagnant marsh.

Eglè the Widow of Voruta and the Nojus the priscus scholari had walked to where the Nosferatu had told them the monster made its lair, near where the lord's clash had left so many dead warriors. This last was too much, this collection of so many of the dead without regard for the superstitious mortals. Eglè was reluctant to pass judgment, but Nojus and the voice of a dozen other eminent Cainites in the domain had forced her hand. She could rebuff them, but it would come at the cost of the domain, and she would not lose what Žilvinas had left for her after his Final Death.

The greeting was upsettingly cordial, with the monster Gabija seemingly unsurprised that they knew the location of its dwelling. It even invited them into to its rude hovel, which they found appalling in its spare condition. Tattered leather curtains, two crude chairs, a shabby table upon which flickered a candle, and an open grave, muddy, with several inches of stale water polluting it. With a sardonic flourish, the monster bade them enter.

"You come to accuse me falsely of breaches of your Traditions," it spoke the first words.

The guests scowled. Yet Eglè knew the truth of it, while Nojus curled his lip in discomfort of the hypocrisy he willingly pursued.

"We thank you for receiving us," Eglè said, though her affected propriety rang hollow.

"You esteem me with your regard," came the monster's verbal riposte in kind.

"Enough of this falsity," Nojus growled, his jaw clenched. The other Cainites noticed his fangs force themselves into prominence. "What do you say in your defense, Gabija? The holy man you murdered in plain sight of the mob? The argument after which you stole the victims? The warriors in service to the nobles, whatever their folly?"

"I do not need to defend myself," the monster crowed, its voice dry and harsh. "The holy man had already been beaten to death and was simply gasping out his

last breaths when I took my right from him. His body was an obsolete instrument, a vessel emptied of its contents by the time I claimed it.”

Nojus gnashed his teeth. “That is not how the mortals see it. They see that one of their own had been claimed by the undead!” He could feel the familiar, jagged voice of the Beast filling his gorge.

“How they see it is not my concern. A mortal killed the holy man. A mortal dumped his body on the medgrinda, hoping it would be frozen over or swept away by the water. A mortal who took issue that the holy man’s vision of God differed from their own and then struck him down as an apostate. The crime is not mine, nor is the cruelty. That lies solely at the feet of the mortals.” The monster tilted its ungainly head, incredulous, as if it expected an apology. The holy man’s skin still hung around its shoulders, a poorly cured shawl offering little warmth but causing much discomfort with its reminder of the fragility of mortal life, even among its Damned guests.

“Mind your passions, Nojus,” Eglè admonished. “We are still guests in our host’s haven.” Her eyes glistened an ophidian gold, drawing Nojus in. Such a strange ilk, she and her fellow dead were! She, the wife of a twice-dead master of earthly and deathly domains, had cultivated a careful mien that she could project upon others, and only her Serpents’ guile and Nojus’ own crumbling determination held the scholar’s Beast at bay.

“You skulked outside the walls of Voruta and defiled the bodies of the slaves and villagers!” roared Nojus.

Eglè spoke softly. “An inhumane act, but not an inhuman one. As eldest of the Blood here, I have no cause for which to punish it.” She said the words with distaste; she agreed with Nojus in spirit, but the letter of tradition had suffered no breach. And yet Gabija smirked a horrid smile at this youngest among them making her duplicitous claim to be eldest. Perhaps she should turn her serpent’s eyes upon it? She doubted it would work, and would likely only give the Fiend the excuse it required to justify a deadly response. She had acknowledged Nojus’ claim of domain in its own haven. To summon powers of the Blood upon the Tzimisce here... She had already strayed perilously close to that line by calming Nojus that way. Had Gabija interpreted such as an attack on another enjoying the protection of the hovel’s status as a haven....

But Gabija had no interest in the petty details of Tradition. It smiled, the feter in its dead lungs roiling behind its nightmare fangs.

Still, Nojus pressed. “Where are the dead? Where are the bodies of the men fallen at the battle?”

“I buried them. And again, this crime is not mine. The lords’ men” — Gabija spat the word *lord* with a sneer that overflowed with despising — “slaughtered each other, and I returned them to the earth.”

Several hours elapsed like this, several hours in which the Cainites enumerated the monster's supposed crimes, only to reveal that each of the transgressions had its origins in mortal failings. Lovers killed in fits of passion, with the victims devoured by Gabija. Religious hostilities turned bloody, sating the monster in their wake. Resentment of tribal neighbors. Desperate poverty. Hauteur, fear, and jealousy. The same sorts of crimes that mortals had visited upon each other since the nights of the First City and likely before. The monster traveled in their aftermath and fed to satiety. Why trouble itself to kill when the prey would deliver itself to its very fangs?

Yet Nojus would not relent, despite the absence of evidence. The crimes, he insisted, were in the superstitious fear to which they drove the mortals, who had two nights hence roused their lord to action.

Eglè considered. Foremost was her duty to the other vampires of the domain. With this monster moving among the living, the undead had cause to worry.

It was troubling, though, that the monster spoke true. It had committed no wrongs, at least directly. Whatever its ghastly intent, it had breached neither Tradition nor elder's decree. And just as troubling was Nojus' insistence. The old scholar knew himself to be building a specious condemnation, yet he persisted.

So be it. Although the matter was an act of expedience, she decided. It felt strange to her. Unwittingly, as if her body rebelled against her own cowardice, she felt her forked touch caress the back of her teeth. Her thoughts briefly turned back to the slain holy man — his kind had some parable about a fork-tongued serpent among their catechism.

Eglè delivered her verdict. Gabija's Blood was forfeit to its elder.

Gabija shrugged. "I will visit Voruta tomorrow night. You may do with me then what you will, and I will see my fate pronounced before my peers," and again the monster spoke this last with derision. "You know, Eglè, that Nojus pleads his case falsely, as does he. My crimes are against nature, not the petty rules of your midden domain."

Nojus stood. "Enough, Fiend. Your hospitality grows as foul as your habits." He gestured to Eglè, and the two stepped toward the door and into the frigid night. "Tomorrow night," he confirmed. "Tomorrow night, you will meet your end. And with whatever theater of indignation you wish to perform."

The two Cainites departed then, their feet splashing in the cold water before meeting the timbers of the path....

And in that moment they realized that Gabija had replaced the wooden spars of the medgrinda with the corpses that had been purloined from the swamp, having sewn them together and hidden them beneath the still waters of the marsh. The lifeless bodies roused at the monster's will, grasping blindly up from the chill water, catching at the limbs, the heavy cloaks of Nojus and Eglè and tearing at

them with the strength of the Damned. Eglè cursed in surprise and Nojus roared in anger, attempting to draw his axe but to no avail as the mighty dead grabbed them, pinned them, rent them asunder with relentless purpose.

Eglè called upon the gifts of the night to vanish, but the dead soldiers had no minds to fool. Nojus invoked preternatural speed, but was never able to gain purchase on the ground by which to flee, so surrounded was he by the clenching forest of pallid arms.

Their screams were swallowed by the trees of the swamp. The dead soldiers tore the limbs from the Cainites, then tore their ruined bodies and lost appendages to gore, then hammered the remains with blighted fists and palms.

From the doorway of its hovel, limned with the feeble light of the candle inside, the monster Gabija smiled, insofar as its hideous face allowed for it. In fact, so far as anyone knew, that made Gabija the eldest Cainite in the domain now that the old dynasty had abruptly ended. Perhaps this cold, Baltic land could become a hearth and dom.



A QUEST FOR BLOOD

BY RUSSELL ZIMMERMAN

Isouda de Blaise loved a great many things. She loved things of beauty and splendor, magnificent creations, magnificent creators, and magnificent creatures. She loved the cold, dark, blood running through her veins, and how it could turn to liquid fire when something truly remarkable gave her a reason to ignite with passion. There were those among her Clan who scoffed at her fondness for cathedrals, thinking it was simply that she was enamored by stained glass. They mistook her genuine admiration for girlish adoration. Few things so required civilization as a cathedral, and as such few things so symbolized it. All that was beautiful about Christendom and society could be found in a cathedral. It was the grandeur of the things she loved, the delicacy and beauty of stained glass, yes, but moreso the way all the pieces, tangible and intangible — the brick and mortar and stone and timber and lead and glass and skill and labor faith and wealth — all fell together flawlessly.

Isouda adored it when things fell into place.

The Queen of Anjou — Toreadors in the French Courts of Love were not mere Princes, no — felt something new falling into place when the young courier bowed and entered her chamber.

She had been vexed, recently, with a quarrelsome Brujah named Alphonse. Insults had been exchanged, and only thinly veiled, at her last ball. Her harpies had offended, and now Sir Alphonse would rather pout and brood — as is his Zealot nature — than attend another of her parties. He felt snubbed, she felt snubbed by his absence, and the wound would fester if it were not lanced soon. He was sending his childer, she had heard, in his stead, and Isouda knew the neonate to be a master of the sword. She needed a way to blunt him. She needed a way to challenge his mastery, to insult his Sire, to bring a satisfying end to the entire unfortunate affair; and then, when she needed it the most, there came this handsome courier, with a handsome blade sheathed in his handsome, finely-tooled, belt.

Serendipitous.

Her handmaidens and girlish courtiers tittered behind their too-pale hands at the sight of him, and Isouda couldn't blame them; the youth had fine, high cheekbones, a jawline made for portraits, gleaming blue eyes she could make out across her great hall, and hair as beautiful as the gold coins glowing in her treasury. Young Emelot, new to the blood, went wide-eyed, then forced herself to look away from his shining countenance; it was the gift of their Clan to appreciate beauty, but their curse to sometimes appreciate it to the exclusion of all else. Isouda knew how it looked — how it felt — when a Toreador forced herself to resist such entrancement. She made a note of Emelot's fondness for pretty young men, then turned her attention and smile to the courier himself.

"I am told you bear a letter," Isouda kept her mildest smile in place, holding out one slender hand for it and nodding him permission to approach.

"Aye, milady, if it please milady," his accent grated at her nerves, but she didn't let it furrow her brow. Yet.

She bade him sit, and began to read. She had been blessed with the blood long ago, and had spent many nights growing accustomed to flickering candlelight. She knew the handwriting at once, and it confirmed her suspicions about who had sent the letter.

Isouda smiled. Sir Fulco de Outremer. Her childe. Simple, loyal, Fulco. A Lusignan by birth and a Toreador by dint of her gift to him, he was supposed to have been useful to her in the courts. Instead, he'd taken too much of his inhuman speed and strength to heart, and given up on cultivating his cunning almost entirely. There was a time his melodrama had been endearing, a time his lovesick angst had made her love him right back. He had grown wearisome, though, with his strutting and posturing and striking pose after pose; so she had sent him away. He was merely a weapon to her, now, an unliving instrument of danger and bloodshed so in love with his chivalric ideals he would do anything — literally anything — for her.

She began to read, leaving the young courier to await her attention.

My Beloved Queen Isouda,

I trust this finds you well, and your court full of peace and grace. The moon shines less brightly while I am away from you, but I take solace in knowing I serve your interests abroad and that I will never truly be parted from you while I do so; in real service to beauty, one is never away from that beauty.

Isouda rolled her eyes despite herself — sliding her gaze down nearly a page of flowery pleasantries, Fulco was heavy-handed at times — and cast a wary glance at the messenger boy. He hadn't noticed her sign of irritation, at least. No, the youth was enamored of her court, she saw. Not any one ghoul or vampire, not the finery alone, nor the size of the keep. All of it. He tried to hide it, did a pass-

able job of the deception, in fact, but she could tell. His aura, when she flicked her attention to it, roiled with passion, curiosity, excitement. He was a ghoul, she also saw, not yet fully of the blood, and likely bound to another.

She hid a smile; she found it endearing when someone so clearly over their head understood, deep down, just how close to drowning they were.

Ireland. I tread, now, where Romans did not. I have found greener pastures here, but ones not much less bloody than in the Holy Land. The violence is less grand, perhaps, but no less frequent. Every man with a fort atop a hill seems to fancy himself a king in this place. The Ventrue, with their Fitzgerald and Strongbow, did not bring enough knights, and not yet for enough years, to disabuse every Irishman of this notion at the same time, and so skirmishes with the Normans remain common. Dublin did little to impress, though I remained there for some weeks giving it every chance to do so. Saint Patrick's Cathedral served only to remind me of you, and to make my heart ache. Rufus attempted to draw me into his schemes against de Warene — I did not oblige — but I remain true to my search. I must go into the wilds, no matter how many warn me of them.

The bond of blood was almost an afterthought, so wholly did she claim Fulco's heart, so completely did she master his loyalty. Keeping him in exile only made him more eager to earn his way back. As her champion and master of the joust, he'd provided her a valuable counterbalance to the more martial Clans here at home...but he was more useful to her afield, questing, so she'd sent him to do so.

But Holy Christ, Ireland, of all place? That would explain the courier's monstrous accent, at least.

She took a breath simply so she could let it out as a sigh.

Thus far I have avoided attention by claiming to suffer the sun-sickness after my time on Crusade. I wonder how many Irishmen in the rougher countryside will even know what I'm speaking of, if the small lie will even work on them. I feel I am at the edge of the world here.

My steed, Myrmidon, still sets the other horses on edge, challenging every stallion he sees; how much more fearful they would be if they knew why! The blood you gifted me, I have passed on to him, and he has served me well since Spain, you may recall, as loyally as I have served you, milady, but the Hunger gnaws at him fiercely. I fear another's squire may get too close if we tarry here. It is best I leave. I will ride Myrmidon when darkness permits, and remain safe — eternally safe, as is my heart with you — in the confines of my carriage by day. Its embrace reminds me of you, who gifted it to me for safe travels. You are with me always, as I am with you despite this terrible distance.

We travel. It rains. To call them 'villages' is an insult to villages. The locals are a surly, prickly lot, but they dare not insult us. A knight with squires and

men-at-arms? They pause. They have learned, many of them, what such tabards and armor and accoutrements mean. The carriage impresses them. It amuses me that some think me a king. They posture and show weapons, but are quickly cowed when we do the same. Brice speaks with them for directions. We trade for what supplies the men need. We ride on.

My God, this rain. The going is slow this time of year, and the clouds darken the sky as your absence darkens my world. We have taken shelter among the Lord Justice's men, Ventrue pawns though they may be, they are, at least, half-civilized. The Lord Justice Fitzgerald plans a castle here, I hear, and the scope of their encampment gives me no reason to doubt it. Sligo, the place is called, and from here, after rest and resupply, we will follow the coast North and find what we may. Some say the river here is the edge of England, that North of it is only barbarity pock-marked with monasteries. I hope to find something unspoiled there. We will press on when the weather permits. Myrmidon's appetites are always a source of friction, though I Feed him often. The watery blood of hind and hart ill suits me, and from it I must pass on strength my steed and my retinue? Such thin fare will not serve forever, and I must Feed what I can here, before heading back into the wilderness.

The pattern commences. We ride. Brice chatters at the locals, they glower back, then sulk away. We ride again.

I was struck by the beauty of a glen, yestereve. The moonlight kissed it just so, turning the waters of its little brook to silver. They laughed and sang to me, and as I looked up from the water I saw the infinite stars gazing at me like the face of God. Bart eventually roused me; I had lost near half the evening there, enamored. Myrmidon was testy at being saddled so late. It was a glorious place. Romans may not have touched this island, but God surely has.

The men grow fretful. We heard wolves howl last night. My retinue carries weapons both a-silvered and at least a crude knife of cold iron. They were outfitted well long before this trip even began, and the supplementary blades helped keep them brave. Myrmidon snorted, heart pounding in his broad chest, as though he would rather howl a response and see the fight over with.

The pack attacked near dawn. They must have known the sunrise would take me away, my retinue's greatest strength removed from the chess-board. They nearly succeeded. Lupines are fearsome, but the silver was a terrific surprise to them. It bit them, and deeply. Brice, Henry, and Rollo died, but once the wolfish, beastly blood began to spill — such rich blood, though! I grappled with the runt of them and savaged the creature with my fangs, and the glory of their blood near drove me mad! — the Lupines grew fearful and wary. The chase continued, the horses were swift enough, mad with panic, so that the carriage barely slowed them. Still and all, dawn would have been the end for us. More silver saved us,

however, an ambush of the Lupines by natives, Hibernians. Irishmen with their ugly Irish spears turned on the monsters when we needed them most. A pair of them, hunters, but outfitted with silver-tipped weapons all the same. I saw the boy — perhaps Willem's age — as I hurried into the carriage, as the sun crested the east, as the glow struck him; I near mistook him for the dawn, so golden was his skin and bright-shining his hair. I mustered up my willpower, even in my haste, and used your gifts to me; the old man bent to my will, I trusted my squires and ghouls to handle the rest for the day. Light peeks in at the edges of the carriage, now, and my eyelids grow as heavy as my heart without you near. I will write more on the morrow.

Lorcan is his name. He looks like an angel. A war-angel, come from on high to aid us in our fight. The older hunter was his father, some chieftain or self-proclaimed king. He was injured in the skirmish, but not gravely. The Lupine curs were driven away by their arrival, for they mistook the pair of them for a full war-band, and there was silver enough on the field to make them run like whipped dogs. Lorcan and 'King' Hahn were on some manner of ceremonial hunt, a cattle raid of sorts, against their neighbors. They know this feuding clan has wolf-men among them, and have long been on the losing end of the rivalry. Our arrival into the mix — they call us 'Normans,' the silly things — was seen as a blessing to them, a sign. They accept that I am different, but bear no stakes, no torches. I will question Lorcan on this further. I look forward to it. The prince is strong and healthy and beautiful, with hair the likes of which I have never seen, and skin nigh as fair as my 'sister' Rosamund's

Isouda de Blaise glanced up from her letter, from the tale to the messenger; it must be him, yes. For just an instant, something like jealousy spiked in her breast. Fulco had not waxed so poetic in decades.

But then, she remembered, he sent him here, to me, bearing the letter. She smiled. Fulco's heart was still hers, as were his treasures.

The youth fidgeted a bit, but said nothing. Let him, she thought. She went back to her reading.

With their 'king' and prince both vouching for us, we are accepted well enough. My will over Hahn's ensures us the guest-right, and the guest-right will bind the others. They feasted us, and we are welcome for as long as I keep him thus dominated. This hill-fort—they call it a castle!—is not much to look at, but the bailey and silver will keep the mongrels at bay. Lorcan tells me it has done so for a dozen generations. He says his people had wolf-men heroes among them, long ago.

Of my squires, slaughtered Brice spoke this tongue the best, but he taught me enough to get by and Lorcan teaches me more, now. His people speak in whispers about me, I know, but respectful ones. They think me a relation to their

'lanan she' or 'bavan she,' as I hear it. I spoke with Lorcan on the matter. 'They are beautiful like you,' he said. His eyes glowed when he said it, then he blushed red as a rose. I understand these spirits to be women, seducers, inspirers, and consumers. I am flattered by the comparison, and wonder how smitten these hill-folk would be with you! I long for you. There is a rough beauty to this place, I think you could appreciate it, as surely they would appreciate you. Lorcan wishes to speak with me on something else, I am told, something to do with the Lupines, I believe, and missing peasants.

I see! There is another here. A monster. Like the wolf-folk, Lorcan says, but also like me. It plagued their people in his grandfather's grandfather's reign, and is why they no longer have wolf-kin of their own. All their clan's heroes went out to slay it. None returned. It has plagued them ever since, haunting nearby, taking people in the night should they wander too close. I have suspicions, of course. The king promised me a shining treasure if we can slay the beast, and wishes he could come along. Though my retinue was weakened, I did not hesitate. I know they mine silver; perhaps they also have gold, or gems, even some relic of the first Christians here? Whatever riches they have secreted away, I will bring them to you, my Queen, my love, my blood-mother and blood-lover. With your favor, I will not falter. I have slain my share of monsters; it helps to be one.

Our expedition has left their rude 'castle.' I asked for a local guide and the prince himself insisted on joining us. Lorcan and I spoke on the ride and I learned more of him and his clan. He is a historian to these people, of a sort, not only champion and hero but story-weaver. The founder of this clan was a bard, he tells me, or a fili. His is a line of war-bards, fierce opponents to their neighbors, who they raid for women and cattle. The prince sees it as his duty to keep the truths about his family, his clan, his blood. They are kin to the Lupines we fought, a branch of the family long since taken root elsewhere. Lorcan has long petitioned his father to let him try to kill the beast we seek, and only our arrival has convinced the king to risk provoking the creature now. We are two nights away, I am told. I am glad Lorcan is with us.

We are near the beast's lair, Lorcan says. He came to my tent, shyly, earlier in the night. The prince had heard of the strength my men gain through me, and the strength I took, gently, from some of his servants at the fort. He shared his blood with me by will — no tricks, no charms — and I returned the favor. His blood tasted of power and youth. I am as eager as Myrmidon!. I feel twenty again, full of fire and eager to war in the Holy Lands. I feel thirty, and eager to bring you glory on the tourney fields. I feel young and alive, ready to fight the whole world.

It was as I suspected. The first night we drew near, he attacked us with wolves. Sickly things, red-eyed and mangy, heady with blood instead of merely meat. A ghou, as surely as my own retinue, and as fierce. When boar spears

and strong arms put an end to them, he flung other servants at us, other ensorcelled creatures. Stags and badgers, bats, foxes, a snorting boar. When those did not do, the creature came at us himself: an Outlaw, a Wolf's-Head.. A Gangrel. Amidst a swarm of every other nearby goat and swine and dog it could summon to aid it, it came at us. We were scattered under the wave of fur, hoof, and yellow fang, but we fought back. The vampire and I sought one another out, of course. My armor is a ruin, and though it wore no armor crafted by mortal hands, it was as hardy as could be expected. Attacking the thing felt like trying to chop down a tree, and did my sword's edge no favors. The Gangrel was great and fierce and shaggy, more bear than wolf. A bloated, burly, thing, near the size and strength of the Lupines. It was ponderous, though, with none of the speed that you gifted me with, and in the end its slowness was its doom. My blade and fangs at long last brought it low. Lorcan is fine, thank God. I am weary. I thank you, my Queen and love, yet again for your gifts to me. I must feed. I must rest.

My retinue is greatly reduced, and my own flesh savaged by the creature's talons. Willem may yet live, though, and Bartholomew — lucky Bart! — will be fine. Prince Lorcan is hale and hearty, and we spoke more on our limping return to his father's keep. He is a marvel, and stronger than he looks. In my red rage and battle-hunger, I did not see him fight, but his blade was bloodied by the time I felled the Outlaw. When the moonlight strikes his hair just so, my heart aches that you are not with me to also see it.

My God. He wrote me a song!

King Hahn feasted us last night — and I ate well, myself, drinking deeply of a petty thief—and during the celebration Prince Lorcan sang of me and my flashing blade. I will not lie, my Sire, my love, I wept. There were whispers, but I made certain the king did not care to hear them. We were presented with some baubles. I scarce even remember them. Their clan's treasures are nothing compared to their clan's heir.

Isouda glanced up again, one eyebrow arching gracefully. There had been a small chest of jewelry with the boy and his letter. Fulco was, as ever, as good as his rambling, lovesick, word.

Between tricks of the Blood and their gratitude for the Gangrel's death the weeks have become months, now. The King is still unwell. Willem is adjusting to the lack of his hand, Bartholomew has gotten three maids fat with his children, and Prince Lorcan and I have been discussing chivalry, righteousness, and the arts. He is a fine dancer — truly splendid — in his rough-shod way, and needs only refinement. He is a gem. Polished, he will shine brighter than the dirt in which I found him. He has the makings of the best of us. To have found him here is a miracle.

I long for you, my Queen. Last night I looked up at the moon and felt so very close to you, while I remained sharply aware just how far away I truly am. I felt

closer to you in Jerusalem than here, closer to you in Pomerania, closer to you in Spain, by far. This place is too rough; it makes me hurt for your absence. I miss you, my queen and mother. I long for you. I weep when I think of how you sent me away.

My prince is becoming a fine dancer. I watched him last night, and lost myself somewhere between the soft glow of embers and the grace of his movements. You know well how we might stumble and become lost by the glories we find. He is a glory, and I have found him. One of Bartholomew's women laughed, breaking me from it, and I nearly dishonored myself by striking her. The whispers grew louder. We have been here so long.

King Hahn is still unwell. His wound yet festers. It makes me feel as though this whole place stinks.

The whispers grow louder. They don't think I can hear them, they don't think Lorcan will tell me, they don't think they're as grating and loud as they are. The guest-right which makes us welcome needs must also keep me humble and gracious. The soul of a knight is propriety. I will not rise to their insults and rumors. Their king's illness is not my doing, no matter their lies; I have kept to drinking only from their stables more often than not, and criminals when the urge has risen too deeply within me. I am careful. I share the blood with Lorcan, and the sources of it. He knows. He approves, so I do nothing wrong here.

We must go soon. They worry, these backwater mud-dwellers, about curses. I could show them a curse, my Queen — you know I could! — but I will not. I must not. I would not hurt my prince so.

We are ready. Willem will leave behind a hand, Bartholomew three sons, and Myrmidon a series of scarred stallions and as many pregnant mares, but we are away. We will take Hahn's baubles and his gratitude, but we will also take his son. I cannot leave him here, to this, to age and die in the mud and the green grass. Lorcan deserves more of the world. The world deserves more of Lorcan. He is my gift to you.

The rain, again. The rain and the fog and the howling of wolves, far away. We make haste for Dublin. Dublin soon, I pray, Dublin and civilization.

God help me. 'Dublin and civilization,' I see I wrote. I! But God help me, it is true. The place is Rome, Paris, Constantinople compared to 'King' Hahn's rude world. Lorcan is in awe. Bartholomew is arranging for further travel. I supped well, drinking deep in the city, and shared some it between the both of them.

I must lose him, I know. I weep to think of it, but what is honor if it is not sacrifice? The treasure his clan promised me is yours by right. The beauty I have found — proof of God's grace, even on this misbegotten island — is yours by right. He will bring you this message, and be yours along with my word.. He will serve you well, I swear it.

I pray, dear Queen, sweet mother, beloved, I pray to God that this one may please you. I pray that this one may satisfy you, as no other gifts yet have. I have sent you tapestries and silks, gold and gems, books and paintings. Let this work of art please you. Let this one fulfill my oath, and end my journey. Let me come home, I pray, and serve you there, where I belong.

I long for you, my Queen.

Yours this night and for every night to come,

Sir Fulcu de Outremer,

Beloved Exile

Isouda de Blaise glanced from the document — smudged in places, hard-travelled — to the one who had carried it to her. He did not look out of place, she granted him that. Sir Fulco had worked on the youth enough for that to happen; his hair was out of style, but not unkempt, his clothing no longer in fashion, but clean and new.

His accent was atrocious, but that could be fixed. She'd done it before. Even Fulco's hadn't suited her, once. He hadn't fit in, the years she'd kept him here. Too accustomed to violence, too in love with it.

Simple Fulco. Noble Fulco. At times she reached out to him with her mind, through the Gifts they shared and gave his leash a little tug. Oh, how he wanted to come home. Oh, how she adored having that over him. She wouldn't let him. Not yet.

Isouda let the young Irishman wait, arching a brow ever so slightly as she read over Fulco's post-scripts. Hrm. Fulco was, perhaps, even more useful than she thought. And, more's the pity for him, perhaps she needed Fulco here even less.

"Lorcan," she let a wrinkle appear, a dainty little furrow of her brow.

The boy nodded, torchlight dancing in his red-gold hair.

"Aye, milady. If it please, milady, Prince Lorcan of—"

"It doesn't, I'm afraid." She waved him off with a negligent gesture. "Laurent. We will call you Laurent, simply. Laurent de Angers. That accent will need work, your prayers and handwriting as well, I suppose, and I'm told your dancing is passable, but only time will tell."

She gave him her prettiest smile, the first time he'd seen it. "Time, of course, is something we have plenty of, dear boy. Your travel here seems to have gone well enough, but I wonder..."

"You must be famished," she looked up at him, offering him a second smile. This one showed a hint of fang, like a maid lifting her skirt to show a peek of leg.

"I was fed breads and cheeses upon my arrival, milady, they were qui— Oh. Oh, ah, yes."

The poor dear. Pretty to look at, but still a bit overwhelmed, too new to the Blood to speak of it, or too flustered to admit his thirst out loud. In fairness, she'd flustered older, stronger, better men than him with that same smile.

"How long has it been since you drank, Laurent?"

"Not since Dublin, milady, when I left Sir Fulco's service."

And entered mine, she thought. Likely two months, then, maybe more. Laurent may be Bound to Sir Fulco, for all she knew, but she did not fear him. She could find no sinister motivation for Fulco's gift.

"Come, then," she reached for a bowl. The tangled webs are best woven early and strengthened often. Besides, she didn't want the babe to be completely helpless. If what Sir Fulco wrote was true, all the more reason to press him into her servitude as a ghoul. All the better to put him to use. A test, then. Yes, a plan formed.

Her porcelain wrist split beneath an ancient, too-sharp nail. Thick, red blood slipped through her fingers — I am a statue, I am a fountain, I am a goddess to you, boy — and into the bowl.

Laurent licked his lips when the coppery, sweet scent hit him. Isouda smiled.

"Drink up, my dear." She gave to him generously, but this time still through the secondary vessel. Greater intimacy would have to be earned. He would need to serve to move his feedings from the bowl to her skin. "Let us regain your strength."

She watched his throat as he swallowed, and fought another smile, another slip of her fangs. He made her feel one hundred again, young and hungry. Up closer, there was an earthiness to his scent. A crispness. A soft sky, just before the rain fell.

"Roese and Emelot will see to your things and show you to your chamber. By day, Brother Marceau will handle your tutoring, and by night I'll assist with it. Oh, and we'll send you, hmm..." she gave him a long look, up and down, considering her many options for a tailor. "Eudo, I think, to handle your new clothing."

He looked at her through heavy-lidded eyes, drunk from her, lips stained with blood, cheeks flushed, breathing just a little heavily from his long, hurried draught. He tried to clear his head.

"My Queen? Tutoring? New clothing? Already?"

"Of course, sweet boy. We've company coming in only just a few weeks, and we need you looking your best. We'll begin immediately. You'll fit in in no time."

"There's a guest coming, a zealot, that I would see you honor with your service. All the way from Paris, he comes, to bring us the joy of his passionate company."

And word from his rabble sire, as well as further insult, no doubt, over last Yule's little barbs.

“You’ll see to my household’s needs, and follow — to protect, of course — what guests I assign you. This visitor will be your first. I’m sure,” she added, just in case Laurent was bound to Laurent, “you want to please Fulco and me.”

“Oh yes, madame. My master—”

“Say no more.”

This Laurent would serve, yes, as any other ghoul but he could not be completely trusted. His knack for perception and memory would be turned inside out, looped about, strung through with new threads like a piece of needlework until he became Bound to her. Isouda would see to it. He would become as useful to her, as civilized, as perfect, as one of her beloved cathedrals. He may, in time, supplant Sir Fulco entirely.

She dismissed him with a smile and a wave. He left, long-legged stride carrying him swiftly past the blushing handmaidens.

She would use him, oh yes, and well. She had seen Sir Fulco’s post script.

I have sparred with him, Queen. He is, put simply, a dancer with a blade, the Ancilla had written. He is a poet and singer; yes, a storyteller; with a pure, shining, heart. But for all those other talents, his true art is surely violence. I have not seen such talent since I fought with the Spaniard, Don Antonio. No mortal has matched me since, I swear. Not until Lorcan.

Alphonse’s visiting childe — barely a decade into his unlife — would be a fine test. It would be the simplest of tasks to barb him into a challenge, and then Alphonse would be doubly insulted by a mere ghoul taking up the gauntlet. Laurent might die in the duel, of course, but even if he did, the insult would stand. And if not...

Isouda smiled as set the letter aside. It would seem dear, simple, Fulco may yet, even from far afield, solve a problem for her, but a Queen’s work was never done. The Brujah may be blunted by a proper challenge, but she had other, greater, concerns. She nodded to her steward, and bade the next messenger in.

What other pieces, what other hints of perfection, might she find next?

SAND AND DUST

BY ANDREW PEREGRINE

Until he slid wearily from his horse, Rodrigo's feet had not touched the ground of his native Valencia for over a hundred years. The journey from Jerusalem had been long, and he had spent it encased in his armor as if it was an iron tomb. The summoning had been powerful to reach him as he travelled, and he wondered what was so important. It was his sword they wanted, no doubt. It was always his sword they wanted, and he was tired of it. But he had made vows, oaths that had separated him from his clan and home because he thought he was doing the right thing. He had pledged his sword against the Saracens so a damned creature like himself might eventually find a place in the kingdom of Heaven. That was what he had said anyway, the truth being far less enlightened. In time, the fire in his heart had burned to ash and now, somehow, led him back to where it all began. Perhaps this would be the last time he would be called to serve. Perhaps the cycle might finally be complete with one more battle. There was certain to be blood, there was always blood.

Valencia was much as he remembered, even though both the Moors and the Christians had made their changes over the years. A new cathedral was being built in the heart of the city, grand enough to have vampires clustering in its shadow, no doubt. As Rodrigo drew closer he noticed that what had first appeared to be a bell tower, had once been a minaret. Under this Church lay an old Mosque, sacrificed so the rulers of Valencia could send a clear message of the new order. Rodrigo passed it with a weary sigh.

Across the square was a villa high enough to look over the city and see the new construction from several angles. There were no guards on the open doorway, despite the apparent wealth of the place. It was a sign that Rodrigo would find the most dangerous predators inside. Leaving his horse outside, but still encased in his travel worn armor, Rodrigo walked through a colonnade and up a short flight of steps. He sensed the other vampires there, their rage and hunger held behind a mask.

"Welcome, Sir Knight," came a low voice from a priest covered in satins and jewels. The entire top floor of the building was built in the open style of the Saracens, an irony that did not escape Rodrigo, even as it made him feel a little more at home. There were several others here, all keeping their own counsel and waiting to see what reaction the priest got before making a move of their own.

The priest extended a hand for Rodrigo to kiss like a suppliant. "I am Prince Javier of the Lasombra," he said, "and this is my domain."

While the Prince's words were cordial, the emphasis on 'Prince' and 'my domain' practically echoed. Rodrigo stepped into the center of the room, brushing dirt and dust off his armor as he walked, and knelt before the Prince.

"I thank you for your courtesy, Sir Knight. You do honor to my domain." Again the emphasis. "We see few of the noble Ventrue here since the great Reconquista moved south."

Rodrigo reached up and removed his helm. Javier took a step backwards, and a low gasp of disgust rustled around the chamber. Rodrigo put down the helm and took off his gauntlets, letting flecks of his dead skin scatter on the floor as he flexed his gnarled fingers.

"I am Rodrigo," he said simply as he met the Prince's gaze full on. "I believe you sent for me, my Lord."

"I summoned no Nosferatu to my court."

"I was called here as a knight," said Rodrigo with a growl, standing before the Prince could motion that he should. He handed his helm and gauntlets to the servant who had been summoned to sweep up after him.

"My apologies, my Lord Prince," came a satin voice from across the room. "I sent for Sir Rodrigo. I thought he might be the answer to that concern you shared with me."

She stood in the moonlight by a row of arched windows, her dark complexion framed with curls of ebony hair. She was dressed in purple robes, which hung on her perfectly, with just the right amount of jewelry to show both her wealth and good taste. Her smile was broad and full of mockery, but not for Rodrigo.

"Ah, then you have served me well, my Lady Aldonza," replied the Prince, clearly not understanding entirely. "Perhaps you should explain the situation to our guest in more detail."

"Of course." She smiled as she and the Prince exchanged the pleasantries of predators. She came over to join them without any urgency and offered her hand to Rodrigo. "I am Aldonza of Clan Toreador," she stated formally. "We met some time ago, in Italy I believe, although I suspect you will not remember me."

Rodrigo noted with intrigue that she didn't flinch as he took her hand and kissed it. He didn't recognize her; these beautiful vampire women all looked much the same to Rodrigo. Passing unremembered was clearly a new experience for her,

but she masked it well. A servant approached with a tray of goblets that he offered to the assembly. Rodrigo took one; the blood was spiced and warm. He drained it and put it aside. Aldonza waved the servant away.

“When this city was reclaimed from the Moors only a few years ago,” said Aldonza, “many Muslim vampires chose to retreat with their Moorish allies, but a few refused to leave. These remainders are mostly from the low clans, who have few resources to move to another city. Many are Nosferatu, I believe. Our Prince has generously allowed them to stay, but we have received troublesome reports.”

The Prince sighed as he apparently understood where Aldonza was leading them. “Yes,” he said, cutting her off. “The reports state that the Children have returned and they are stirring up discontent among the remaining Muslim Cainites. We have heard that they have turned many from the true faith to the heresy of Islam.”

“I am sure,” he added obsequiously, “that the Nosferatu are not to blame. But it vexes me that they may be led astray from the true Christian path. Even those who follow this Allah might be turned back to the way of God.”

“How were you thinking I might proceed?” inquired Rodrigo.

“I assume you know the old haunts of your clan. As a Nosferatu, you should be able to find where they meet and then deal with these Children of Haqim,” said Aldonza.

“While we, of course, do not condone violent action against another clan—” The Prince lowered his voice. “—few tears will be shed over the loss of any heretics left over from Valencia’s previous regime.”

“So you need an assassin.”

“I am looking for a problem solver.” The Prince smiled as he drank deeply from another goblet. “One who knows where his loyalties lie.”

An expendable one as well, Rodrigo suspected, not as glorious as a Ventrue, Brujah or even a Salubri warrior. “I will do what I can, my Lord,” he replied.

The Prince nodded, apparently pleased he seemed to be understood, and swiped another goblet from a passing servant. He drained it greedily, his gaze lingering on the servant for some moments. Then he swept across the room to engage another group in conversation. Aldonza was gazing out at the cathedral being constructed across the square. The old mosque was being squeezed under the new bricks, but some of it could still be seen. Its arches were being turned from Arabian to Gothic, its lettering carved over with Latin.

“I came here for the writing,” said Aldonza. “I assume you know the Muslims cannot depict the saints or the angels, so they cover their buildings in words. The calligraphy is exquisite. I imagine you must have seen much of that in Jerusalem.”

“I saw some, but it was often destroyed when it was discovered.”

“Such a waste. Their work is so beautiful. I had hoped to study it more. Such beauty is how we describe the Divine.”

"Perhaps. But if we keep tearing down each other's works, how can Muslim or Christian find their way to God?"

"That is a question for mortals to answer."

"Not when we keep interfering."

"But it is in our nature to interfere." Aldonza smiled.

"Our nature is to feed; the rest is just to ease the boredom of the ages."

"You have become cynical, Sir Rodrigo."

"I am tired, my lady, and I have much to do before the dawn."

• • •

Eager to get away from the Prince's gathering, Rodrigo set off in search of his own clan, unsure of the reception he might receive. He wrapped himself in the night and walked unnoticed along the streets. So much remained familiar to him and, at the same time, so much had changed. He had been gone for so long, fighting Saracens on what seemed now to be a fool's errand. When he had heard the Christians had been pushing the Moors out of the Iberian Peninsula, he thought the long wars would be over. The Saracens had their holy city back; let the Moors return the rest of Castille, Granada, and Aragon. But the old hatreds remained, and it seemed no one but Rodrigo would ever tire of them.

There was an old church at the edge of the city, ancient and dilapidated. The stones were older than he was. It was so stark and bare that it had been Church, Mosque, and even Temple in its time with little alteration. So it had endured, outside the clamoring of the center, watching from the shadows of the city. It had always been an area the Nosferatu had called home; it was the best place to start.

Rodrigo found a small entrance to the sewers. They were not extensive here, but had been built long ago by the Romans and the Moors. The Nosferatu were beginning to find such places better homes than caves and cellars. They could move around a city unseen, and the smell was not that much worse than the streets above. Rodrigo dropped into the dank tunnels, landing heavily in his armor. In the darkness he could see the Moorish arches stretching out ahead of him, and he set off along the river of effluent that covered his feet.

At first he followed the passages towards the old mosque. But then he heard the song of the Adhan, the call to prayer. "Allah Ackbar" rippled along the corridors and echoed across the walls. He felt the rhythm of the chant, the words tumbling over him as they once had so far away. "Ash-hadu an-lā ilāha illā allāh". There is no God but Allah; a heresy he had fought for decades. Even in this city the Muslim vampires held their own call to prayer, the daylight denied them.

As he followed the call, the tunnels began to merge into a great junction filled with pillars. The floor of the chamber rose higher than the tunnels, making the whole area look much like an open mosque. Several figures were approaching

through the shadows, some cloaked, and others in rags, but none in the riches he had seen among the Prince's elite. Each washed their feet and hands in a long water trough before making their way into the gloom of this makeshift holy place.

Even though he was cloaked in shadow, Rodrigo suddenly felt a gentle hand on his arm. He turned in surprise to see a short and slight old woman standing beside him. Under her tattered cloak, her face was a mass of burns, almost covered with her thick weave of tangled white hair.

"So you've come back to us at last, Rodrigo?" she whispered to him.

"Dulcinea?" replied Rodrigo in shock. "I thought you dead. When the Children of Haqim attacked with the Moors so long ago, I thought most of the clan was gone."

"So that is why you went in a rage to the Holy Land, my child?"

"They had murdered so many."

"Yet all those deaths you imagined were not so important that you looked for any sign we had survived."

Rodrigo hung his head. "I was young. I was angry."

"We are Nosferatu. We endure. You should have remembered that. Instead you forsook us to pledge yourself to the Ventrue and the Lasombra and their holy wars."

"I thought I was the last, I thought I was an outcast. What else could I do?"

"You could have sought us out. You have always been Nosferatu, whatever else you have called yourself. Now you need to decide if you are to do the Prince's bidding or ignore your old promises and remember your family."

"You know what has been asked of me?"

Dulcinea reached up and pulled at Rodrigo's pitted cheek roughly, like an angry grandmother. "Of course we know! We knew before you were even halfway here! Have you forgotten how many secrets we keep? Do you think we have not been paying attention to the 'Nosferatu knight'?"

"I thought I had been forgotten. I didn't know there might be a choice."

Dulcinea pointed towards the gathering crowd in the chamber ahead. "It seems the time has come for you to make one, though."

A dark-skinned vampire had detached himself from the cluster of faithful and began to move towards Rodrigo and Dulcinea. He was tall and thin, moving with dreadful grace, as if he could do nothing else but prowl when he walked. He stopped before the two Nosferatu, and gave Rodrigo a calculated glance.

"So, the assassin has finally arrived," he said with a mocking smile. "I'm a little surprised you would allow this, Dulcinea."

"This is your war, Bilal," replied Dulcinea. "My only concern is my clan. Rodrigo has the right to enter our sanctuaries as one of us. What you both choose to do after that is up to you. I told you long ago I would not play the games of either religion."

Rodrigo and Bilal both exchanged a glance with Dulcinea in surprise. "Oh, spare me your evangelical astonishment," she growled. "This is not a matter of faith or belief; it is a matter of picking a side. Here, the high clans are Christian, so the low clans have taken the opposite path. You Children of Haqim may preach Islam but only to seek out the disconsolate among my people. We know who you really follow. I have allowed this game to continue as it permits the clans to mix and share information. But don't think that places me on either side."

"How dare you show such disrespect," said Bilal, taking a step towards her, his hand on a dagger at his side. In a moment, Rodrigo's sword was between the pair of them.

"I wonder who you are protecting, Christian," snarled Bilal. "Your Nosferatu clanmate, or your Christian friends."

"Take your pick," said Rodrigo. "I am a messenger here; do not make me an assassin. If you leave this city there will be no need for violence."

"We are not going anywhere," replied Bilal, and he motioned to the small crowd of worshippers behind him. From among the faithful, two more Children stood up and began moving towards Rodrigo. Many of the congregation faded away, as did Dulcinea. The rest could only watch in confusion as the trio of assassins surrounded Rodrigo.

"Your dead body will show the Prince what happens when he interferes with us," said Bilal. "Let him send a hundred knights. We will slaughter them all."

Rodrigo let them get close, backing away a little and keeping them all in sight. Then he pushed his blood into his limbs, igniting the speed he had learned from a Toreador companion many years ago. The Children of Haqim hadn't expected that, nor for Rodrigo's powerful strength to allow him to move in full armor as if it was nothing. His blade buried itself in the chest of the first vampire before the others had even seen it move. With a twist, he pulled the sword free and separated the vampire into two unequal pieces.

It had only taken moments to dispatch one, but Rodrigo had shown his hand. The two remaining Children of Haqim lit up their own abilities in an instant, suddenly raining blow after blow on Rodrigo, quicker than he could see. He defended himself as best he could, but the slashes from their knives came at him like a storm. His armor turned most of the attacks, but the assassins pushed him back like twin tornadoes. Against the two of them, Rodrigo stood little chance. So he focused his attention on one and drove himself at him, enveloping him in a bear hug. He only just caught hold of the vampire, but once in his grasp he was powerless against Rodrigo's incredible strength. As he crushed the assassin, he tried to use him as a shield against the other. But it did him little good. The partner drove his blade past Rodrigo's armor and into his side several times.

As the bones of Rodrigo's victim cracked, Rodrigo opened his mouth and buried his teeth into his captive. Thick syrupy blood flooded into him as he tore out the man's throat. He willed the new blood into speed and power, trying to close

his injuries. But the assassins' blades were poisoned and — as Rodrigo released his expiring victim — he, too, fell to his knees.

The remaining Child of Haqim had burned through most of his blood, and he came panting to a stop before Rodrigo, who knelt there helpless in agony. He glared at Rodrigo with a mixture of hate and hunger. This is the way it should end, thought Rodrigo, to die in a mosque at the hands of a people of whom he had killed so many. The blood was screaming through his body, muscles empowered beyond their function, his wounds too deep.

The vampire stepped closer, wary that Rodrigo's apparent weakness might be a trap. "We will drive all of you back," he whispered. "You began this. You came to take our land. We will not rest until we have everything you think is yours."

"Is that truly the way of Islam?" said Rodrigo. "Are you really no better than the Christians?"

"We are past pretenses now, Nosferatu," said the vampire. "Islam is nothing to us. This is about the righteous ascendance of our clan. The Children of Haqim will take this city and more besides. As it has been since the Second City, so it will be forever. Islam and Christianity are just another way to control the foolish."

The Child of Haqim raised his blade, gathering his remaining blood to strike Rodrigo down. But instead, his body spasmed as a great claw blossomed out of his chest from behind. Where most of the congregation had run or been ignored, a Gangrel had remained. She was a small creature, but lean and muscled. Her hands had turned to great talons as she padded carefully up behind Bilal. Then she had fallen on him like an animal, tearing pieces out of the fallen assassin. But Bilal was far from defenseless; he twisted and drove his blade into her like a machine, the blade hammering in and out of her in a blur. They both sank to the floor in a pool of each other's blood, as Rodrigo watched helplessly.

The underground mosque became still but for the drip of blood. Rodrigo pushed himself up and crawled across to where the assassin and the Gangrel lay tangled together. The Child of Haqim was dead, and the remains of life were fading from the Gangrel. As Rodrigo came close, she reached out and took his arm, looking pleadingly into his face.

"I thought he was a messenger of God, and he was nothing but a liar," she said. "Islam gave me peace. The only peace I've known on the long path. If you must fight for something, knight, fight for *that*."

Her desperate grip on Rodrigo's arm faded. Forcing what little blood he had left to heal his wounds, Rodrigo was finally able to stand. He saw Dulcinea, standing there in darkness ahead.

"I am sorry, Rodrigo. The Children of Haqim were taking too much control among the low clans here. I saw an answer in you, and it appears I was right. Al-donza was most helpful in calling you back to us."

Rodrigo nodded gravely. "So, I wasn't the Prince's assassin, I was yours?"

"Not entirely, I wanted to know who you served. Do you still cling to the hasty oaths of loyalty and service you made over a century ago, or are you ready to return to your family?"

"I had hoped my family was somehow different from the Prince, but now I see you are just the same."

"It is complicated; I don't think you quite understand..."

"It is strange how often I have heard that excuse."

"You are young," said Dulcinea, although she could not meet Rodrigo's gaze. "But you could still stay with us. Be our prodigal son and come home, Rodrigo. There is so much we could do together."

"I came home in the hope I could put my sword down. I'll not be anyone's weapon again, even yours."

Rodrigo turned and stalked back into the darkness. Dulcinea faded away without calling after him.

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The streets were silent as Rodrigo made his way back towards the Prince. He had healed his wounds as best as he could with what little blood he had left. But they were deep, and would take time to heal completely. Even for a vampire, some things needed more than blood.

Once more, he entered the grand house by the cathedral without challenge. He shambled up the stairs to find the vampires still gathered as before. Only Aldonza seemed to look at him with any concern for his obvious wounds. The small crowd parted as he entered and approached the Prince.

"It is over. The Children of Haqim will no longer be a problem," Rodrigo said, bowing his head.

"Excellent. It is gratifying to hear the low clans are back in order again. Rest and heal, Sir Rodrigo. We will have more great work for you anon. Once the cathedral is built and the Muslims driven back to the lands they came from, we will make this a new Jerusalem! We shall be the envy of the Christian world."

The assembly began to clap. Each of them grinned, no doubt thinking the riches and spoils they would take. The clapping reached a crescendo as the Prince, smiling broadly, gestured for calm so he might continue.

"But what of the other heretics?" inquired the Prince. "I will take your word the...rabble was dealt with, but what of the other traitors to Christendom? Surely, after the vows of loyalty you took to our Lord God to destroy the Muslim heresy, you did not simply walk away?"

"I dealt with the Children of Haqim, not the Muslims. I care nothing anymore for what you all say you believe. Faith is a lie for every last one of you. I am tired

of it being nothing more than politics. The Nosferatu and the other low clans will not rise against you. I am done.”

The shadows in the room began to grow larger.

“How dare you!” said the Prince. “You pledged fealty to the Holy Mother Church. You will do as you have been commanded.”

All eyes were locked on Rodrigo and the Prince, standing face to face unflinching. Rodrigo’s wounds dripped ichor onto the stone floor and he seemed hardly able to stand. By comparison, the Prince seemed to grow taller as the shadows danced and flickered threateningly around them both.

Rodrigo took a small step forward and stared into the Prince’s eyes.

“I will not,” he said, a deep anger he had kept pushed down inside him beginning to rise.

“You will obey me as your Lord,” shouted the Prince, clearly beginning to lose face among the crowd.

“You are not my Lord,” shouted Rodrigo in reply, feeling his vision turn red as over a hundred years of pain and anger began to push up like a volcano. “I joined a cause for revenge, and it has made me a murderer. I have fought for over a hundred years and gained *nothing*. I swore to follow the true faith, and not one of you has the smallest speck of it. You are all false.”

“How dare you!” bellowed the Lasombra Prince. “How dare *you*, a Nosferatu, speak to me in this way? You have been granted such privilege to walk among the civilized clans. Remember your place lest we throw you back into the sewers you belong in, with the rest of the scum you share blood with!”

Rodrigo felt something snap inside him at the Prince’s words, and let his rage take him. He launched himself at the Prince, frenzy and hunger consuming him like a wave. He was on the Prince in an instant, burying his teeth in his neck. Arms of shadow wrapped around Rodrigo, lifting him off his feet. But his frenzy-charged grip clamped on his neck like a vice. Rodrigo was insensible, lost to the bliss of releasing a rage he had buried for more than a century. As he gulped down the Prince’s rich blood, he grew stronger as the Lasombra grew weaker in his grasp. They both fell to the floor in a crush of blood and shadow.

Not a single member of the court moved to separate them, until Aldonza stepped forward. Her presence flared out into the room, becoming almost suffocating. The assembled vampires stepped back against the force of her power, and even Rodrigo fell still under its weight. His body tangled together with the Prince’s, whose sightless eyes were turning grey. Dark, thick blood began to run along the elegant mosaic tiles, staining the rich fabrics of the Prince’s robes.

Rodrigo forced himself to stand up. He was dizzy from both the frenzy and the heady power of the Prince’s blood. The stones were slick with blood, something that had not passed unnoticed among the assembly. They all clustered around in

their gold and silk, their fangs locked into place. But none of them were fools. After seeing Rodrigo tear their Prince apart, none of them wanted to be the first one to make a move against him.

Only Aldonza, salivating at the power that was hers for the taking, stepped towards Rodrigo as he slowly gathered himself together.

“Sir Rodrigo of the Nosferatu, you have committed a crime against this court and your kind. You will kneel and be judged.”

Rodrigo did not move. He could feel the power of the fresh blood running through his veins, even with the wounds he had taken. Surrounded by so many vampires, he wondered if he faced his Final Death.

“Kneel!” shouted Aldonza, in such a voice that it seemed as if the very stones of the place were listening. The pressure of her voice forced Rodrigo to his knees as swiftly as if she had hammered him to the floor. Their eyes locked together, and he saw fear blossom deep within her. Sir Rodrigo understood she had nothing left; Aldonza had expended everything she had on this one gambit of control, one last chance to avert scrutiny for bringing Rodrigo to the court. Much to Rodrigo’s surprise, her challenge had the desired effect on the assembly. After a momentary pause, each one seemed to come to a decision and gently bowed towards Aldonza, a sign of their fealty.

“Hear me now, for on this night I claim this court and all its domains as my own,” she muttered, with barely a hint of a tremor in her voice. “As the new Prince, I will decide the fate of this...murderer.”

Her praxis was grudgingly accepted, for now at least. No one wanted to deal with Rodrigo. The other Cainites restored their masks and began to slip away. They would each need to make plans if this was to be the new order.

Unchallenged, Aldonza allowed herself to relax. Then, she gave Sir Rodrigo a small smile. The vampires sat eager, waiting.

“You are henceforth exiled from this city.”

A collective gasp could be heard from around the room. For killing the Prince of the city, the knight was not to be harmed. Though the Prince was unpopular, Aldonza’s first order was to pardon the vampire responsible for slaughtering him before the eyes of the court. No one, however, was as shocked as Rodrigo. He turned his gaze to the other vampires, saw their disappointment and an expectant longing in their eyes, and knew his task was not yet done.

“Furthermore—”

Rodrigo gave her no chance to speak. Taking her by the throat, he flung her across the room toward a stained glass window. Her eyes went wide with miscalculated terror as she spluttered out entreaties, pleading to the other members of the court, but they stood perfectly still. When they reached the window, Rodrigo twisted her head to look out at the cathedral. Her gaze focused on a part of the old

mosque under the construction. Among the grey stone, the colorful and elegant writing stood out clearly in the moonlight.

“Find some beauty in all this,” Rodrigo whispered in her ear as he held her there. “Now you rule here, find the sense you said you seek. You are the only one that sees this as anything other than a means to power. I warn you, Aldonza, if you do not bring peace to this city I will return and I will end you.”

With that he released her. She fell heavily against the wall but gathered herself quickly. She said no parting words, and the other vampires simply watched him leave. Rodrigo never turned back to see their reaction to his loaded threat.

Sir Rodrigo found his horse outside, and mounted it painfully as his wounds twisted inside him. He put on his helm and turned his horse towards the city gates, shuttering the eye holes against the growing dawn.

“Let us be gone from here,” he willed to his mount in disgust. “We’ll have to seek our place elsewhere, if such a place exists.”

Together they rode quickly out of the city’s limits to find shelter as the night began to fade away around them.



INCARNADINE SEAS

BY CATHERINE LUNDOFF

Something slammed against her, jolting Agnes Monfort awake, every sense alert. Sleep in her current form did not mimic that of her human prey, the kine whose blood nourished her, but her transition to the wakeful alertness of the darkness from the frozen little death of daylight was near to it. Upon that waking, she knew that she was not in any of the earthen nests where she usually sheltered from the day.

She reached out, feeling her way through the loose earth around her to find that she was surrounded by wood. She should have gone to ground in the dense earth of a forest outside London. So where was she now? And how long had she been here?

She was ravenous, as if she had not fed for days. As if she had not drained a drunken farmhand under the hedgerows last night. Her sense of wrongness was overwhelming. The very dirt around her reeked of enchantments.

She flexed her hands, curling them into claws and reached upward to touch a wooden ceiling of oak, bound in iron. She caught the light scent of rusting metal an instant later. Then the ground shifted strangely beneath her, suggesting that her prison was in motion. Was she in a cart?

As she strained to listen to the world outside, the image of the Tremere sorcerer Stephen Blackwood, Baron of Claremont, rose behind her closed lids and would not be dismissed. If Blackwood held the keys to her prison... a second, final death by any means other than his hands would be merciful. He would devise torments for her until the horrors of Amaranth would be a blessing of sorts.

Her terror was enough to send the tendrils of frenzy shooting through her and give her strength beyond what she normally possessed. The iron bands on the box shrieked as they were driven apart by her blows and kicks, but they still held. She

wasn't free, not yet, but now she could see beyond her cage.

She saw wooden walls lit by candlelight and heard a human shout an alarm. Agnes kicked and punched upward again and this time the wood shattered as she struggled her way free. A sharp twist and she landed on top of the crumbling pile of wood, metal and dirt that had entrapped her, crouched and ready to spring.

The room tilted again and now she could smell seawater on every side. She was trapped on a human sailing vessel then, far away from her familiar woods. Perhaps she was far enough from the earth she would need at sunrise to mean her doom. And there was a cluster of kine huddled in the doorway staring at her, their fear so palpable that she could hear the blood pulse beneath their skins.

With no more awareness than that, she launched herself across the room with a spring, claws out and extended as she embraced her Beast. She could swim as a wolf. All she needed to do was to slaughter and drain the creatures who stood before her and she would have the strength to escape and swim for land.

Then she struck air turned rock hard and fell to the floor mid-leap, screaming in pain as if caught by an arrow. Blackwood. It must be one of his enchantments. But what had he done, what could he do to make air like stone to imprison her? Agnes spun on the floor and pulled herself upward onto her hands and knees. Where was he? Why couldn't she smell or hear him?

A human female stepped forward, the glowing object in her hands burning Agnes' eyes. She turned her face away and buried her muzzle under her paw to block its light.

"She-wolf, by this I command you." The woman's voice was guttural and her accent strange, not the French-accented English Agnes had grown accustomed to hearing since she had come to this cold country. By squinting upward, she could see that the woman's dress bore the double tablet badge of the Jews of Hertfordshire.

Not that it mattered to her. These kine would let down their guard, like any others and leave their throats open to her teeth. No one commanded her, not even the possessor of a light that rivaled the noon sun. But for now, she must practice what patience she possessed. Agnes thrust her Beast away for the nonce and shifted to stand on two legs to face this sorceress or mage, whatever she might be.

The woman's eyes blazed black in her olive-skinned face. Her long black hair was coiled around her head, a dark wimple barely containing it, and her expression was feral and arresting. Agnes roiled with desires, bloodlust overlaying them all, reminding her that she yet hungered like one newly embraced. She eyed the woman sidelong, pondering on how she might destroy the light so that she could feast.

One of the other humans threw several bundles on the floor near her and muttered, "Sister, you cannot control this creature. See how her eyes shine with bloodlust. She will kill us in our sleep or worse."

The scent of blood caught Agnes' attention, drawing her away from the humans to the objects that he had thrown. A wine sack oozed red and sweet around its wax plug and she fell upon it, pouring the contents into her mouth, every muscle yearning for the salt tang of human blood that she craved. Then her tongue recognized what she tasted and she spat out all she could on the floor. "Do you seek to poison me with goat piss?" She glared at them, baring her fangs.

"It is the blood of a goat. You will drink no human blood this night, she-wolf." The woman lowered the light but still held it like a shield in front of them. "You will obey my commands or I will use this to burn you with eternal flames."

Agnes gave a growling laugh. Blackwood, she feared. He was a Cainite like her and he knew no mercy or weakness. He had slaughtered her sire and enthralled her coterie and he would do the same to her if he captured her. But these could be no creatures of his, whoever they were. "How will you do that? I am stronger than you will ever be and every light goes out eventually." She grinned a wolf's grin when she saw the men draw back.

But the woman stepped forward, frowning, and Agnes felt a shift in the air. "I am Rebecca, daughter of Ezra ben Isaac, and I do not fear you. But I know whom you do fear. Dress yourself and we will parley." She gestured toward the floor, her movement exposing a silver chain with a six-pointed star on it hanging from her neck before she tucked it quickly away.

Agnes cocked her head to one side and studied her. The woman's expression did not waver and after a long moment, Agnes gave another growling laugh and looked down at the pile of human garments at her feet. Her lip curled at the sight of a woman's confining skirts and layered garments. She would have to shred her way free if she needed to change or fight. She crossed her arms over her naked breasts and looked at the woman. "No. Get me clothes like his," she gestured with her chin toward the man who had thrown the wine sack.

"Without the badge," she added, watching him pull his short cloak closed to cover the patch on his cloak. She favored them all with a wolfish grin when the young man glared at her. "I have no use for one God or many gods. I care not which one you serve, but I do not want to be noticed unless I choose it."

The older man raised his hand to silence the younger's outraged response and nodded before waving him out the door. The woman glanced back before she followed, "We will return, she-wolf." She paused, "How are you called among creatures like yourself?"

Agnes eyed her, letting the silence stretch between them until the other humans got restless and tugged at her sleeve. "Agnes Monfort," she said at last. The woman nodded and turned away. The door slammed shut and was bolted behind them and Agnes listened to their footsteps fade away before darting over and pressing her ear against the solid wood. But there was nothing to be heard except the waves outside and rats scurrying in the wooden walls.

She followed the noises of their passage until she found a rotten beam, then punched her hand through it to seize a struggling rat. Its tiny life alone was not enough to slack her thirst so she caught and drained several more, tossing the bodies behind her into a corner. She wiped her hand over her bloody mouth as she lurched around the room testing and prying at the walls and floor, trying to find her balance on two legs as the ship rocked around her. Perhaps the rats could give her more than their lives if she could follow them to an escape route.

The door swung open again as she completed her circle of the room. This time, it was only the old man and the woman, Rebecca, still carrying the small sun. There was something different about her now, something that reeked of Tremere sorcery, and Agnes stepped backward with a snarl.

The man tossed a pile of garments on the floor in front of her. "Cover yourself." He turned away, as if the sight of her naked form was repugnant to him. It almost amused her, but not enough to deny his offering. In moments, she was attired as a young man, her brown hair bound up under a loose hat.

"Why am I here?" She shot the question at the woman, looking at her sideling. Her wolf raised invisible hackles as she caught a whiff of wrongness in the air. Sorcery, blood, power: little of Rebecca's previously tantalizing human scent crossed the room now. Blackwood's face rose unbidden in Agnes' mind and she edged backward. Was the woman one of his creatures, his ghoul, perhaps? A Tremere who had somehow disguised her scent?

Rebecca spoke at last, "We have need of you and your...powers." Her voice had a deeper, darker timbre to it now, as if she spoke from inside a cave. "Do you remember how we caught you?"

Agnes looked up startled, as scraps of her missing memory returned. London. She had fled there to escape Blackwood when she realized that she was not powerful enough to defeat him. Burned by that knowledge, she had traded the woods she knew for strange cobbled streets and small forests that stank of humans and their beasts.

It had been just after nightfall and she had been hunting on the edge of the city. Her prey had fled down a noisome dark alley with her in pursuit. Then there had been a blinding light and a great noise, then pain and darkness. "What did you do to me?" Her voice was a growl.

Her fear vanished. She would drain this woman, this ghoul or sorceress, this tool of Tremere scum, then compel her to accept the Embrace. Her vengeance would be bloody and swift, worthy of a Gangrel. Agnes closed her eyes against the light and sprang, changing as she leapt. The man shouted and the light blazed, but there was no unseen wall to stop her now. She struck the woman and they both fell to the floor. Agnes bit down on her shoulder and Rebecca shrieked.

A flood of Tremere-tainted blood flooded Agnes' mouth and she nearly recoiled as Blackwood's scent smothered her in a wave. Captured! Blackwood's

creatures would sacrifice her to feed his dark powers or worse! Frenzy, rage and terror all warred within her.

At that moment, Rebecca whispered in her ear, "Drink my blood, she-wolf. Savor my vitae and you will be mine." She laughed harder and harder as Agnes bit deep, desperate to kill this creature who might be her doom.

The old man struck Agnes with the light, burning her until she dropped her hold. Then he knocked her off Rebecca's body with a jolt that must have damaged the light because it went dark before flickering dimly again.

Agnes scrambled backward and shook her head to clear it, before darting forward to attack the man. She slammed against the same wall of air that had stopped her earlier. She cursed and pulled back, nursing her singed nose before shifting back to her human form on far side of the small room.

Rebecca was sitting up, the blood pouring from Agnes' bite already beginning to slow. As Agnes watched longingly, the torn flesh under Rebecca's hand knit itself together and she met Agnes' gaze with an unreadable expression. Then she gestured and muttered a phrase. Agnes shuddered as a wave of weakness washed over her and the room went dark.

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When Agnes woke again, there was a leather collar encircling her neck and a chain ran from the collar to the wall. Instinctively, she reached up to rip it off with both hands. The resulting sharp pain took her by surprise, dragging a small scream from her throat before she swallowed it.

"You cannot take it off. Only I can." Rebecca sat on a wooden stool near the door and watched her, the burning light on the floor at her feet, the men nowhere in sight or scent.

Agnes stared at her, eyes slitted and calculating. "What do you want of me?" She could still taste Rebecca's blood on her teeth, the vitae sweet, powerful and intoxicating for all of Blackwood's reek. She wanted more. If she lured the woman closer, broke the chain, she might be able to....

Rebecca stood, gesturing with her hand and the collar tightened on Agnes' throat. Agnes sat still and silent, waiting for her next movement, next words. It went against everything she was, this quiet stillness and waiting. She wanted to attack, to rip this woman to shreds, fight her way out of the ship while tearing the throat out of every human who got in her way. To be free and wild again.

"Do what we need and I will release you. Fail me and I will leave you for the Baron. What do you choose, she-wolf who was called Agnes?"

She looked away as if the answer made no difference to her, but Agnes could sense her body thrumming with something, just under the power. It smelled like an intoxicating brew of fear and rage. "Why would I help you, you who belong to him? You fear the Baron, even though you are his creature. Are you trying to

flee him?" she gestured at the hold around them, "There is no escape for one of Blackwood's ghouls. What more does he want of you?"

There was silence for a long moment before the woman spoke again, her voice softer this time, "My family is compelled to live off the King's sufferance since we had to leave our home and come to London. King Henry wants my father's wealth and to compel us to convert. The Baron wants to...control me. My powers, his to command, my life, his to own. He would use me for his own ends, to conquer and control your kind and mine to build his infernal power, first via the Embrace then through my sacrifice."

Agnes stared at her, imagining that she could read the very blood that flowed through the other's veins. There might be falsehood here, as well as truth, but she had neither the patience nor the interest to read one from the other. "What does a powerful Jewish sorceress require of a she-wolf, born to roam the wilds? This is no place for one such as I. Set me free and capture a better tool."

"It is too late. We are bound by my blood until I release you."

Agnes glared at her. "The Baron controls you as his creature. I can smell him on you, taste him in your blood, so why has he not Embraced you already? Or have you found a weapon or magic to forestall him?"

A shudder ran through Rebecca and she closed her eyes. Her face paled in the dim light before she opened them again to meet Agnes' gaze. "There are powers and magics of which you know nothing. With my father's help, I have found a way to hold the Baron at bay for a little time. It will not be enough to maintain my freedom, not without defeating or destroying him."

"But I fled from him too, so what service do you think I can offer you against him?"

The other woman's full mouth quirked in something like a smile. "My father, my brothers, they tell me I am a fool for seeking to control you. But if controlling you stretches the limits of my powers, it must do the same to the Baron. You were able to fight him and escape when your coterie and sire did not; you were stronger. Your ferocity, my magic, together we might defeat him. The alternatives are... less hopeful." She walked toward Agnes, and crouched nearby. "Do we have an alliance? It need only stand until my father and brothers are in Flanders and on their way to Hamburg."

Agnes briefly wondered how Rebecca knew what Blackwood had done to her sire, but quickly dismissed the thought. Perhaps she had helped the Baron destroy him, perhaps he had boasted of it to his own people. It no longer mattered. "Do you not ask for their safe delivery, witch? Or yours?"

"What safety is there for Jews in any of these lands, she-wolf?" Rebecca's voice took on a bitter edge that shifted to a surprised exclamation an instant later. A loud crash on the deck over their heads was followed by a shudder that shook the boat from stem to stern.

"Free me! I will fight!" Agnes yanked at the chain and glared at her captor. "Where are we?"

"Off the coast of northern France or Flanders, I know not which. This attack comes too soon. I am ill-prepared." Rebecca laid her hand on the chain and closed her eyes. She murmured words in a language that Agnes did not recognize before reaching into the bodice of her plain wool gown and pulling out a vial. She opened her eyes for a moment and gave Agnes a feral glare. "You are bound to me until I release you. I forbid you to harm my father, my brothers or me until this is done. You fight for me and no other."

"Release me from this. I will pledge myself to you." Another shudder shook the boat. Agnes could hear faint screams from the deck above.

Rebecca bit her finger hard and the smell of her blood filled the room. Agnes fought for control as the witch let a few small drops trickle into the vial. Then she sprinkled its contents on the collar and it snapped free as the door burst open and a group of armed knights entered.

Agnes shifted and threw herself at them. This time, there was no unseen wall to impede her and she tossed two men back into the dark corridor. With a roar, she surged after them, knocking their swords aside as if they were but toys. One gave a single choked scream before she tore his throat out, savoring the warm rush of his blood into her starved mouth.

That pause was long enough for the other to recover what remained of his courage, and charge her. His blood coated the walls as she tore him limb from limb and she drank hungrily from him until an enraged howl from Rebecca drew her up from the intoxicating meal. A sharp tug from an unseen hand on her neck pulled her forward as she scrambled to get a purchase on the blood-slick wood beneath her. She snapped and twisted in an effort to free herself from the strange grip that she could neither see nor smell.

There was a scent now that she did recognize, one that grew stronger by the moment. She tore into the fool who was trying to fight a witch with his sword and dagger despite the otherworldly glow that now surrounded her. Agnes made short work of him and when he moved no more, she snarled and tore down the corridor and up a dark set of stairs at the end, cursing ships, Tremere sorcery and Jewish witchery in a series of growls and snarls.

The scene waiting for them on the deck did not improve her mood. Storm clouds loomed overhead and the clumsy cog wallowed on heavy waves. She could smell the coast but the cloud of salt and enchantment filled her snout until she was not sure if she could swim to land if she jumped free from the ship. The deck swam with the blood and bodies of dead sailors while Rebecca's father and brother stood back to back facing a creature of wind and mist and water that spun and whirled above them.

"Blackwood!" Rebecca yelled from behind her, her voice rising above the howling of the wind. Her face looked drawn and pale as she took a breath and raised her arms, strange phrases pouring from her lips.

Agnes felt a swirl of mystical energies and her hackles rose as she growled at the scene on the deck. Whatever the creature was, it was like nothing she had ever seen of Tremere sorcery, let alone any power of Blackwood's, and she didn't know how to fight it. The very air smelled of fire and brimstone and her instincts screamed Demon!

But how had he summoned it? The answer came to her an instant later. This must be what Blackwood had slain her coterie to achieve. There was no escape now for any of them unless Rebecca's plan succeeded. Agnes darted forward, making a wide circle around the men and the cloud attacking them, looking for a way to strike at it.

The cloud monster lashed out at her and she felt a sharp pain across her flank. The frenzy took her then and she jumped upward, striking and snapping at it with all her strength. The Beast within her demanded revenge and pain and blood for every attack that Blackwood had made on her, on the other Gangrel that he had consumed as he wanted to do to her.

She could smell his touch on this beast that was no beast, hear his voice howl spells into the wind that sustained its shape. She struck again and again as she snapped at the air and mist. But there was nothing solid to connect to and the thing swept her toward the side of the ship and the wildly tossing waves.

A second whirling cloud of seawater spun upward from the tossing waves, then shot toward Agnes and her foe. The force of its attack created a maelstrom around Agnes and she fell heavily, landing on the side of the vessel with her hind legs hovering just above the roiling waves. A storm boiled across the deck, covering the ship in a torrential rain that rendered the humans still on the ship invisible even to Agnes' keen vision.

But through it all she could hear Rebecca's voice chanting. She scrambled, trying to get a purchase on the slick wood with her front paws. The ship heaved in the waves and wood cracked and splintered from the pressure. Agnes could hear screaming and howling and the crash of wood as the ship was forced ashore.

Then, just as suddenly, there was silence. The creatures of water and wind vanished, dissipating over the waves that calmed just as swiftly as they rose. In their wake, Rebecca dropped to the deck and was utterly still.

Agnes pulled herself back on to the ship and walked warily toward the witch's body. If the woman was dead, perhaps she was free again. But the witch's father was there before her, his voice frantic as he spoke her name. And Rebecca's brother now stood before Agnes, unsteady on his feet but with a cudgel in his hands that looked stout enough to crush bones.

With a shivering effort, Agnes shifted back to her human form and glanced toward the eastern sky. Dawn would be coming soon. If the witch thought that together they could defeat Blackwood, she had sorely misjudged the situation.

Agnes stretched all her senses for any trace of Tremere sorcery, for Blackwood himself or one of his creatures. Above her, the wind caught the sail and the clumsy ship ground its way further ashore and the wind was drenched with blood and salt and swamp.

Rebecca's brother made a threatening swipe at her head with his cudgel as she walked toward them but she ducked it easily and struck at him back-handed. A searing pain shot through her as she knocked him aside, dropping her to her knees next to the witch's body. The old man studied her with repulsion. "You cannot hurt us without hurting yourself. My daughter is wise."

Rebecca's brother scrambled to his feet and retrieved his cudgel, only to pause at his father's uplifted hand. The old man stared at her, "Can you save her? You are bound to her, she-wolf. If she dies, you will perish again."

Or she might be free once more. Agnes looked landward, where she had seen woods and fields. Her keen otherworldly senses caught the scent of a human settlement in the darkness and mist ahead of them. Prey to hunt and earth to rest in when the hated sun arose, these were all the things that she should want.

Why was there so much mist? Agnes looked down at the witch's pale, unconscious face and the world around them went dark gray and moist. The old man vanished, along with his son, and only Agnes and the witch remained. Instinctively, Agnes bent down to tear at the witch's neck, only to find herself seized and gripped by a hold far stronger than any human woman's.

"I knew that you could not resist such a morsel." Blackwood's voice emerged from the cloud of mist around them. His face loomed out of the mist, lips twisted into an inhuman smile. "Come closer, little Gangrel. Let me taste you."

Agnes shuddered and tried to pull away, but Rebecca's need held her close and Blackwood's sorcery even closer. There would be no escape from this new and final death. The Baron would consume her and she could do nothing to stop him. He must have been close by for the whole journey and Rebecca's talk of defeating him had been no more than idle words.

Blackwood sank his teeth into Agnes' exposed neck and she howled her despair and her fury into the mist around them. The pain was agonizing, far worse than the initial Embrace by her sire, and she hated Blackwood and Rebecca alike for bringing it upon her. Rage and frenzy warred against sorcery and twisted her body and spirit as her blood flowed into Blackwood.

But Agnes could feel Rebecca's spirit still lingering. Could feel it as she was suddenly released from the geas that held her. Blackwood pulled her closer and she obeyed his summons, sprawling across the witch's body as he fed from her.

She let her fangs rest on the witch's exposed skin, gathering the remains of her strength. Then, she sank them in. Rebecca screamed, Blackwood howled, and the

iron grip holding Agnes in place loosened. She bit down harder and was rewarded with a hot stream of rich blood that burst sweetly in her mouth.

Blackwood struggled and she felt waves of pain shoot through her, yet she held on. She could feel the witch's life force shifting under layers of enchantment that no longer smelled like Blackwood's alone. She wondered if she would survive this, if she would hunt in her woods again.

The witch's blood flowed through her, slacking her thirst like no other human's ever had and Agnes lost herself in it. Soon she was drunk enough to nearly forget Blackwood's presence. She hardly noticed as his presence faded, as if he had never been more than mist and shadow.

After a time, there was less and less blood to savor and Agnes drifted back to herself. The mist lifted and the sky began to lighten with the dawn. The woods near the shore were thick and dark, and without a second thought, Agnes scrambled to her feet, dropped over the side of the ship and melted into their sheltering shade. A few minutes later, she had found a sheltered patch of earth that would suffice as shelter for the day and she sank into it. She was safe when the sun finished rising.

She did not see Rebecca stirring behind her, didn't see the witch seemingly come back to life, crawl to the stairs and fall into the dark hold.

• • •

Agnes broke free of her new shelter as the sky went dark. She crouched for a moment above the pile of earth before changing into her wolf form and taking a deep breath. Blackwood's touch no longer lingered on the air. There were humans nearby and she could hear Rebecca's father's voice raised in a lament.

She paused; the witch's geas should hold her no longer. Her family were prey, could be prey tonight. But, after a moment's hesitation, she found herself turning away and moving toward the village she had smelled on the boat. There were humans, many of them, their scent rising over the scent of swamp and salt. They would be vulnerable and unwary, easier prey.

She loped easily through the woods until a familiar figure made her halt. Rebecca stood hidden amongst the trees, her gaze turned toward the ship and her father's voice. She seemed unaware of Agnes until she turned and met the Gangrel's eyes. Agnes' hackles rose as she realized that she faced a creature that was both Cainite and something more.

Whatever the witch was now, she was no longer prey, but if Agnes were not cautious, she herself would be. No sooner had that thought come to Agnes than Rebecca pulled her cloak tightly around her and turned away from both Agnes and the sound of her father's voice. She began walking toward the village and Agnes hesitated before following her.

They would both require blood and shelter before the night's end, and this new Rebecca was like her childe now. The thought overwhelmed Agnes for a moment: she was a sire for the first time. Sire of a childe who was like no other and who had a weapon that could be used against Tremere sorcery, even Simon Blackwood himself, if he still walked.

Agnes turned that all over in her mind, vowing to herself that it was temporary. When Rebecca was no longer a new fledgling, she would take the weapon, whatever it was, and leave to move north and east. She would find forests in plenty and the hunt would once more be hers alone. She would be free again.



THE LAST SPARK

BY EDDY WEBB

The last bell of midnight faded as the woman spoke. “Forgive me, Most Reverend Father, but I have been tempted by one of the walking dead.”

Archbishop Ambrosio Luis Monçada looked away from the confessional partition and wiped his hands on the edge of his fine robes — an old habit from his mortal days a century ago. The candlelight glittered off his rings as he hid a smile. This was the moment he had been working toward for months. Every step now needed to be carefully measured.

“That is a very serious statement, my child...”

“Elisabet,” the confessor interrupted. “Please, Most Reverend Father, call me Elisabet. I have been meeting you at midnight for months now. I trust you with my soul.”

Again, Monçada’s smile lurked in the shadows of the confessional. “Elisabet, then. Why do you believe you have been tempted by one of these...walking dead?”

“The man you sent me to speak to. Leandro Fuentes.”

“I remember,” Monçada said quietly. “Did he accept your donation?”

Elisabet remained silent, and Monçada could hear the creak of the wood from her shifting weight. Finally, she spoke in a hushed whisper. “I did not give him the money, Most Reverend Father.”

“My child... Elisabet... we spoke of this. The sin you committed was a grave one, and only through penance can you absolve your—”

“I know!” Monçada could hear the edge of hysteria in her voice. “But that man Fuentes was wicked and vile! He violates the children in his care, treating them as nothing more than...than animals!”

Excellent. This is better than I could have hoped, he thought. The archbishop kept his voice calm as he mentally moved his next piece into place. “But he gives

those children a home, does he not? What lives would those orphans had led if it were not for the generosity of those such as he?"

The creak of the wood again. "That is why I have come, Most Reverend Father. It is for their souls that I speak to you, because I believe this man Fuentes is wicked and vile."

"Tell me, then. Tell me what you saw."

Slowly, piece by piece, Elisabet told the story. It was one that Monçada had heard a dozen times before — the half-naked throngs of children, the magnetic pull of Fuentes' eyes, the bite of a girl's neck or a boy's thigh to draw some blood. Monçada had known of Fuentes' particular debauchery for some months now, ever since his spies uncovered the merchant's vile feeding habits. Ever since Fuentes, member of the Amici Noctis, petitioned the Courts of Blood to reclaim the blood of Monçada's childe, Lucita de Aragon.

Lucita. The things I do for you, Monçada mused silently. And the things I do for myself.

He continued to listen to Elisabet, anticipating the shame and regret of falling for Fuentes' charms and joining him in such vile depravity. He could hear the tears in her voice, and was surprised as her words turned to iron.

"He reached out to me," she said, "attempting to draw me into his...depravity. Thank the Lord that I still carried my crucifix — I had planned to add it into my donation — and I held it out, screaming at him to get back."

"Indeed?" Monçada was impressed. Here was a woman with as much will as Lucita. "And what did he do?"

"He... God forgive me, Most Reverend Father, but he *hissed* at me like the snake of Eden. In the dim light of his chamber I saw his teeth turn into a snake's as well. He told me that he was already dead, and it would only be a matter of time before I was as well."

Monçada leaned back, overcome by the woman's belief. He had felt the dying embers of the woman's faith from the time she spoke to him in their first midnight confession — as a woman of a minor noble family, her husband had purchased the right for her to confess to the archbishop himself, even if Monçada could only meet at night — and he did what he could to fan that ember. At first he had tried to take direct control of her mind, but she proved to be surprisingly resistant to his mental influence. So he needed a subtler, more intricate path, carefully stoking her faith and leading her to the door of his rival.

As she related the end of her story, he could feel her faith like the heat of a roaring fire. A faith forged in the crucible of evil.

Perfect.

"This is a strange story you tell, Elisabet."

"It is no story, I assure you, Most Reverend Father. I swear on the blood of Mary that every word is true."

"Am I the first one you've told this to?"

"Yes, Most Reverend Father. I want to tell my husband next, after I absolve my sin."

"I don't think that would be a good idea, my child."

Her voice became uncertain. "No?"

"Imagine you are him. Your wife comes to you and tells you that she didn't perform her penance because she believes the man she needs to pay is wicked and vile. Odds are he would have you cast out of his house and send the guards after you, believing your words to be merely excuses and an affront to his faith."

"I...I hadn't thought of that." Monçada expected to hear tears in her voice, but instead it simply became firm as she asked, "What shall I do, then, if no one believes me?"

"I believe you."

He let the sentence hang in the air, as he heard the relief in Elisabet's voice. "You do? Oh thank you, Most—"

"I believe that you have encountered a servant of Satan. I believe that you sincerely want to help the souls of those poor children. And I *believe* you are God's instrument for the task ahead."

Elisabet grew quiet again, and the burning sensation of her faith ebbed as well. The archbishop let her think for a moment, and then continued. "The creature you encountered fears only four things: fire, sunlight, God's will, and a wooden stake through the heart."

He heard her shift again. "Sun...sunlight?"

"Indeed, my child. I cannot provide you with sunlight, and you already have the glory of God's will within you. But the other things, I can help you with. Once you leave here, go speak with the groundskeeper of the church, and tell him that I want you to have a stake, a hammer, and a torch. Use the phrase 'cum Deo' in your request."

"Go with God," she murmured, remembering her Latin.

"Once he gives you these tools," Monçada continued, "you must seek the vile creature in its lair and destroy it. Your faith in God will protect you."

He waited, but Elisabet said nothing. "Did you hear me?" he asked. A shadow flickered across the screen separating them, and then he heard her speak as her faith flared up again. Her voice was only a whisper. "I hear you, Most Reverend Father. And I will do God's will." He heard the door open and close carefully, quietly.

All he had to do now was wait a few nights, and see if his latest move would bring him victory. He said a small prayer to God, thanking Him, and left the cubicle.

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A few nights later, a nondescript messenger sent Monçada a simple missive with only three words on it: “It is done. -E” He waited another day for his own spies to confirm that Leandro Fuentes’ villa had burned to the ground a few nights past, with the owner inside. He carefully touched the spy’s report to the candle’s flame and dropped it to the desk, instinctively leaning back. He watched until it was nothing but ashes before he wrote an invitation for Elisabet to join him for a private confession in his home on the church grounds.

She arrived early, dressed in a heavy cloak to keep out the winter chill. From the candles scattered around the room — the only light in the windowless room — he saw that her face was drawn and pale. Her hands trembled as she closed the door, before sliding them back inside the large, heavy sleeves of her wool dress. The lavender oil on her skin didn’t quite mask her nervous perspiration.

He stood up and motioned to a comfortable chair next to his. “It is good to see you face to face, Elisabet. Please, take off your cloak and sit next to me.”

She shook her head. “Could you start the fire? It’s very cold in here, and I am shivering.”

“Perhaps I can get you a blanket, or something else to keep you—”

“No. A fire will suit me. I see you have wood ready.”

Monçada stepped back involuntarily from the steel in her comment. Although there was no fire in the room, the heat from her faith started to radiate out from her.

“Unfortunately, my child, I don’t have the means to start a fire. I often I don’t feel the cold, so I forget such details.”

Her mouth twitched — Monçada couldn’t tell if it was a smile or not — and she pulled a small tinderbox from her cloak. “Whereas *I* do not forget such details,” she said. Her hands still trembled as she held it out to him. “Start the fire. Please.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Monçada pushed his will onto hers, his magnetic eyes drawing hers to him. He quietly murmured, “You don’t feel the cold, and you don’t need to light the fire.”

Her eyes held his for a long moment, but her hand stopped shaking. “But I do. It’s such a small favor to perform, Archbishop Monçada.”

He finally looked away. Once again, the woman’s will was too strong. She silently acknowledged the victory and put the tinderbox back within her cloak.

“I prayed I was wrong,” she said, looking at the cold wood piled in the fireplace. “When the creature Fuentes burned, he cursed your name, screaming it as

often as he could until the flames claimed him. I wondered why he would assume that you were behind the..." She shivered again. "Behind the *release* I had offered him. But then I remembered the four things you said such demons feared: fire, sunlight, God's will, and a stake. We have never met during the daylight..."

"My duties to God keep me very busy," he said, the decades-old denial coming easily to his lips.

She continued, as if he hadn't said a word. "... and even in the coldest nights, I recalled that your fires were always small, or you sat far away from them." She shook her head. "And I believed your words — your blood is thin, you're a busy man, years of study without outdoor work have made you pale — but I needed to know."

"What of God's will? As an archbishop, I certainly cannot avoid the wrath of the Almighty inside the walls of his church."

For a moment, he felt the power of her faith abate. "I admit, that was something I haven't been able to understand." For the first time, she tore her eyes away from his.

Slowly, as if approaching a startled horse, he took a step toward Elisabet. Perhaps this situation can still be salvaged. "It's clear that this demon has tempted you, whispered lies in your ear and tried to turn you against God's true plan."

As he stepped closer, she pulled her hands back out of the cloak. The heat from her faith rose suddenly, like a dry log suddenly catching with a towering flame. She held out the tinderbox again, along with a silver crucifix. "But fire purifies, does it not? If these are nothing but the lies of Satan, then you can sit with me by the fire, kiss the cross, and pray over my deluded soul. If you will do that with me, then I will gladly put my life and my soul in your hands."

The heat of her faith prickled at his skin, and he felt like he was standing near a bonfire. Monçada closed his eyes and clasped his hands, as if in prayer, but he was marshaling all of his willpower. He had murdered men and women, destroyed other Cainites, and crossed many palms with thirty pieces of silver. God had damned his Dark Father, which meant that all Caine's childer were part of God's plan. He had been blessed with direct, unequivocal proof that the Almighty exists, and had the tools and means to assure that His plan was carried out.

This was just a mortal, one who has had barely thirty years to begin anything of God's plan. Yes, her faith was strong, but so was his.

Opening his eyes again, he reached out and grabbed the tinderbox. He could feel the dark impulses in the back of his mind scrabbling, screaming to step back, to leave, to *run*. As Monçada's hand closed on the tinderbox, he imagined a cage of thick iron bars, and shoved the instinct into it. I am Lasombra, he reminded himself. I do not run.

He felt the heat abate as he stepped to the fireplace, carefully avoiding the touch of the crucifix. His hands fumbled with the unfamiliar box, but soon he had

the flint and steel out. He placed the lightly oiled fabric on the cold wood, as his caged instincts snarled and screamed.

He forced himself to watch as the first spark fell onto the fabric, turning into flames. After a few moments, he finally succumbed to his screaming instincts, and turned to face Elisabet. She had lowered the crucifix, and as the heat increased at Monçada's back, he felt the flames of her faith die. "But... I was sure that..."

Monçada slapped the crucifix away with one hand and grabbed her throat with the other. Lifting her off the ground with his incredible strength, he stepped across the room to shove her against the stone wall, away from the building flames of the fire. She stared at him in horror, trying to break his iron grip around her throat. In the distance, he could hear the first bell of midnight.

"You *cow*," he spat, and the second bell rang as he searched her cloak for more weapons. "Did you think you could come into my domain and so casually dispose of me? I *made* you."

Her struggles grew weaker as he pinned her against the wall. The third and fourth bell rang as he tossed away the wooden stake and held a small dagger he discovered against her cheek. She barely managed to croak out a single word: "Midnight."

The fifth bell. The Cainite eased his grip slightly. "Tell me. Tell me your last words."

"I ignored your advice," she gasped. "I told my husband."

Monçada smiled on the sixth bell. "Oh? And did his guards chase you here?"

"No," she whispered, her voice barely heard over the seventh bell. "Because he believed me. If I don't leave here at the last bell of midnight..."

Furious, Monçada flung her onto the floor. He grabbed her hair to hold her head still while he held the dagger to her throat. The eighth bell rang. "What have you done?"

Her faith rose, and the Cainite leapt off her as if she had burst into flames. "They will set fire to this place," she said, standing up on the ninth bell.

"You're mad. Attacking the church in this fashion is suicide. Your husband's family will be destroyed."

The tenth bell. Elisabet smiled. "We will be given a larger estate in heaven."

The cage in Monçada's mind broke open. Let the woman burn for her belief, he thought, as he ran to the door and slammed it behind him. With the last tatters of his willpower he pulled the heavy iron key from his robes and locked the door.

I will outlive her. I will outlive all my enemies.

The smell of smoke was the last thing he remembered.

• • •

The next evening, Monçada awoke in darkness. His fingers brushed against a substance like cold ivory when he shifted, and he could feel something sticky clinging to his face as he pushed himself to his feet. He stumbled in the dark for an eternity before he found the edge of a rusty metal ring that tore at his flesh as he pulled it. A sliver of moonlight revealed that he had fled to the crypt behind the church grounds. His hands and robes were covered in blood. Even in the throes of the Beast, God had delivered him to safety and sustenance. Stepping out of the crypt, he saw the scorched shell of his house.

The other priests were relieved to see him after he washed himself in a well. They feared that his was the burned skeleton they discovered after the fire had died down. They wove a wild story of armed men breaking into the church grounds at midnight and setting fire to the Archbishop's home before being torn apart. Monçada calmly explained that the men were the servants of Satan, attempting to destroy him for learning the truth about Leandro Fuentes' wicked ways. It was only through the grace of God that he was able to pick up a sword and fight his way out of his burning home.

The priests never asked him why the throats of all the armed men were ripped out, or why none of them had any wounds from blades. They simply threw the bodies into pauper's graves at the Archbishop's command.



Two months later, Monçada received a scroll of black parchment. When he unrolled it, silver ink glittered for several minutes before it faded away, leaving nothing but a blank inky expanse. But he smiled as he turned the words over and over in his mind.

"First, the petition by Fuentes against Lucita de Aragon has been dismissed. Secondly, the void left by Fuentes must be filled. After deliberation, it has been decided that you shall fill that void. May you serve the Amici Noctis until someone stronger claims your blood."

Monçada rolled up the blank scroll and touched the candle to it. He set it carefully on the desk and leaned back as he watched it burn to ashes. The things I do for you, Lucita, he mused. And the things I do for myself.

THE HIDDEN STARS

BY JACOB KLUNDER

The wharf at the city of Tunis was bustling even at night. It was not as busy as the Ḥalq el-Wād, the fortified port on the coastline that lay on the other side of Lake Tunis, but with goods making their way to and from the warehouses along the lakefront at all hours, arrivals at night were nothing unusual.

Nasir al-Khallal had arrived at the Ḥalq el-Wād at sundown, a passenger on a trading ship his clan controlled, and made his way, with a guide, up the canal to the city's harbor. Beyond lay the city, mostly shrouded in darkness as one would expect. Nasir could feel himself growing excited at the sight. Had he still been alive, his heart would have beaten faster, his breath quickened. Now, he simply smiled and looked up at the stars that shone bright over the North African city. The city that might mean the end of his century-long search. The city that might be the resting place of *The Book of Hidden Stars*.

Yet also a city that might mean the end of his undead existence, if he did not tread carefully.

The harbor was a riot of movement, sounds and smells. Nasir pulled the lower part of his keffiyeh headdress across his nose and mouth to ward off the worst odors of tar, fish and human waste, while the words of half a dozen languages reached his ears. His guide, a huge European man who nonetheless dressed in the djellaba robes of a berber, led Nasir to a large house at the edge of the city's suq, a huge marketplace befitting a city that was not just an important port, but also the capitol of the Kingdom of Tunis. For a moment, Nasir stopped to breathe in the scent of spices, incense and perfume, a smell that reminded him of the markets of his native Baghdad, a city he had not set foot in for over a hundred years. As they walked, he noticed that his guide kept one hand firmly on the arming sword at his side.

"Are there many bandits in the suq at night?" Nasir asked in a light tone, looking around at the marketplace, which, at this time, was almost empty of anything

except desperate shopkeepers, drunks and whores — the last two flying in the face of the supposed Muslim morality of the city.

“I am not worried about bandits,” the man answered, his Arabic accented but understandable. “The Followers of Set are not well-loved around here and the mistress told me to guard you until you could be properly introduced to the Prince.”

Nasir nodded. His clan was mistrusted in much of the Muslim world and given his mission, he was in even more danger than normal.

Then he arrived at his destination, the door of the house was open and light spilled around a figure standing in the doorway. She was short, her lack of height accentuated not only by her tall servant but also by Nasir’s own 6 feet. He felt as if he was towering over her. She was pretty without being beautiful and her dress, although somewhat in keeping with Muslim sensibilities, still managed to show off a shapely figure. She had the mixed features of the Berbers of North Africa and Nasir knew that had he still been alive, he would have compared her somewhat unfavorably to his own pure Arab stock. However, death had a way of making such concerns seem trivial. His smile firmly in place, Nasir stepped forward and bowed. To his surprise, the woman spoke first.

“Greetings,” she said, speaking Arab rather than the Holy Tongue. “My name is Layla. Welcome to my home.”

“I am Nasir al-Khallal and I give you my humble thanks.”

Inside, Layla directed her servant to bring Nasir’s chest to the guest room and then led him down a stone staircase to a small chamber under the house. The only light came from coals that burned in four large iron pans in the corners, but Nasir could still make out an altar dedicated to Set which stood against the far wall, and smell the pleasant aroma of incense. She turned and bowed slightly, then spoke to him in perfect Egyptian.

“Welcome to my home. I apologize for not greeting you in the Holy Tongue, but this is Tunis and our clan is less than welcome here. I am Nehemes-Sutekh, Chantress of Set and member of the Witches of Echidna.”

Nasir replied with a deeper bow of his own.

“I was beginning to wonder if you had no True Name.” His gave her his most polite smile and was acutely aware that his own Egyptian was far from flawless. “I am afraid I cannot match your impressive titles. I am merely Sutekhuser.”

“Strength of Set’,” Layla mused with an impish smile that made her look even prettier. Nasir could easily imagine that smile causing most people to underestimate the woman. “You don’t look like a warrior.”

Nasir shrugged. “I am not. Merely a nobleman’s son, dabbling scholar and failed poet. I think my sire chose my True Name based on the strength of my conviction.”

Layla nodded and indicated a long, padded bench set against one wall.

"Please, have a seat and tell me more about why you are here."

"I would have thought the elders of the Great Temple had informed you about that, along with the information that I would be coming," Nasir replied as he settled himself.

"Alas, my supply of sacred papyrus is limited and messages must be kept brief."

Nasir nodded in understanding. The ritual which Layla spoke of was relatively simple and easy, requiring only the slightest insight into the Deeper Mysteries of Set. It allowed a person to write a message in one place, only for it to appear somewhere else. However, the message had to be written on sacred papyrus made from reeds from the banks of the Nile and ritually prepared. And the message would only appear on similar papyrus. Nasir himself used this ritual to communicate with the elders at the temple and he knew all too well how difficult it could be to have sufficient quantities of the sacred papyrus outside of Egypt.

"Well, in that case, let me explain." He settled himself more comfortably on the bench. "Have you heard of *The Book of Hidden Stars*?"

Layla cocked her head to one side, eyebrows furrowing.

"I think I have heard the name mentioned. It is a book filled with astrological secrets, is it not?"

"More than that," Nasir replied. "I think it's best if I start at the beginning. As you are no doubt aware, the Babylonians were the great masters of astrology."

"Indeed," Layla replied. "Many of the astrological techniques my sisters and I use in our rituals come from Babylon."

"Good. Well, at the height of Babylon's power, a cabal of sorcerer-astrologers discovered a way to see hidden stars and, by doing so, vastly increase their power and lifespan. However, the members of the cabal did not trust each other and so divided the secrets into seven parts and wrote them on seven clay tablets, one for each astrologer. That way, they could only enact their powerful magic when they were together. Unsurprisingly, the astrologers fell to infighting amongst each other, determined to seize the tablets for themselves. During that infighting, an enterprising apprentice stole the tablets and tried to flee Babylon. Unfortunately, said apprentice lacked his master's skill in predicting the future and fled right into the army of King Cyrus the Great of Persia, who was invading Babylon. The tablets were taken as spoils of war and, for a while, completely disappeared."

"How do you know all of this?" Layla asked, an inquisitive smile on her lips.

"Painstaking research amongst letters and writings from elder Setites and, occasionally, other vampires that were in Babylon at the time," Nasir answered.

"Now, eventually the tablets were discovered in Ctesiphon by a Persian scholar and poet whose name has been lost to the ages. This was about a hundred years

before the rise of Muhammed. The poet became obsessed with the tablets, for he had some knowledge of the Babylonian language. He set about translating the writing, but grew frustrated with his imperfect understanding. However, a local Lasombra learned of the poet's work and became his patron. This Lasombra undoubtedly sought to gain the secret astrological methods for himself, but once the poet had finished his transcription of the tablets into a book, he had apparently also learned enough astrology to use those methods. He destroyed the tablets and fled, using magic to cover his trail. And so, for over a century, I have been chasing this book, ever since I uncovered the various writings describing the tablets and the work of that unnamed Persian poet. With the full sponsorship of the elders of the Great Temple, of course."

"And you believe this book to be in Tunis?" Layla asked, her tone of voice betraying more than a little uncertainty.

"I do. I have searched every city and town that is or was once part of Persia, delved into ruins and ancient buildings and I have had no luck. But then, some decades ago, the chaos of the Fourth Crusade in Constantinople meant that the private letters and writings of the ancient Treador Michael the Patriarch became available. There, I found a letter from one of Michael's servants, dated some 300 years ago. It seems Michael had sent this servant to consult with a mighty astrologer living in Tunis. Michael had warned this servant that the astrologer did not like vampires, but the warning proved unnecessary, as the servant reports that the city had been sacked and the astrologer was most likely dead."

"Ah, yes," Layla nodded. "About 300 years ago, Kharijite insurgents, religious fanatics, occupied the city and pillaged some of it."

There was a brief pause, then Layla continued, "You are treading on dangerous ground. If the elders of this city realize the prize you are after, they will not hesitate to kill you in order to claim it for themselves. Were it up to me, I would forbid this search, but the elders of the Grand Temple have given me a command. Tomorrow night, you must present yourself before Lady Sophoniba, the Prince of the city. She is expecting you, as I have already informed her of your arrival. At this meeting, it is likely you will have the chance to meet the most powerful and influential, not to mention knowledgeable, vampires of the city. They should be able to help you. Though it's not likely that they are willing."

"We shall see," Nasir said, smiling. "I can be rather persuasive."

• • •

The next night, Nasir arose, readied himself and exited the small guest room to find Layla waiting for him.

"You will meet the Prince and her court at the Baths of Antonius," she informed him without preamble. "My ghoul, Jurian, will show you the way there."

"Any advice?" Nasir decided to be equally blunt.

“Remember that most of the vampires you will meet are very old — some of them, the Lady Sophoniba included, hail from the time the Phoenicians ruled these lands. Which reminds me, you don’t speak Phoenician, do you?”

Nasir chuckled. “Sadly, no. I hope Arabic will be appropriate.”

“It will. Also, do not speak of Carthage. The elders do not take it well, as Tunis was destroyed alongside that more famous city. Remember to call them Cainites rather than vampires — they all trace their lineage from that wretched murderer rather than the glorious lord Set. And be careful. Anything you do reflects on me — I know the Grand Temple supports your mission, but many of the more powerful vampires of this city do not like or trust me. Helping you is a risk for me.”

Nasir sketched a short bow to his hostess and let Jurian lead him out of the house and through the city, to a massive building complex much larger than any other Roman baths he had ever seen. Like the docks, the baths seemed to be in use even at night and were lit by torches, lamps and huge braziers, warding off the cold of the night. A servant received him, led him through several corridors and finally stopped before a set of double doors and offered to bring him a goblet of blood, but Nasir declined. He had been fortunate enough that the ship he had travelled on had taken shelter from a storm in a small town just two days from Tunis. Nasir had drunk his fill and he preferred, whenever possible, not to accept blood from others.

Before entering, Nasir took a moment to compose himself. The leading vampires of this city were ancient and powerful. If they realized the power of *The Book of Hidden Stars*, if they realized that he was lying to them about his mission, his existence would be forfeit.

The meeting took place in a steam room, with wisps of vapor sometimes obscuring the dozen or so people there. A woman, who was obviously Lady Sophoniba, sat on a bench opposite the entrance. She was a voluptuous woman of almost impossible beauty, with flawless skin that reminded him of marble. Next to the Prince stood a tall, handsome and stern-looking man dressed in simple clothes. His arms were crossed and his dark eyes stared unwaveringly at Nasir.

With a diplomatic smile, Nasir crossed the room and bowed deeply before the Prince. The die was cast.

• • •

When he returned to Layla’s house later that evening, he found her in the central garden. A man was kneeling at the petite woman’s feet and she had her mouth to his wrist. The man’s face was rapt with pleasure. As Nasir entered, his hostess turned and smiled, her teeth and lips stained with blood.

“I trust the meeting went well.”

Nasir nodded and settled himself on the stone bench next to Layla. The smell of fresh blood stirred his appetite in a way that the tapped blood he had been offered at the Baths had not and he found his darker appetites rising.

"I think I acquitted myself well," he replied, forcing himself to look at Layla and not the vessel at her feet. "I met a few vampires of interest — most importantly, Abirami ben Sophoniba, seneschal and childe of the Prince. He seemed not to like me."

Layla let out a slight chuckle in response and lowered her head to sip more blood.

"He wouldn't. He dislikes anyone who is not of Clan Toreador and he has a particular hate for our clan."

"He might be a problem. However, for now, I need to know where I can find a Lasombra by the name of Marduniya abd-Allah. He was pointed out at the meeting as a scholar with a lot of knowledge about the city. I believe he might help me on my way."

"The leader of the city's Ashirra?" Layla said, turning to Nasir. "The one vampire in the city who might hate our kind more than Abirami? You are walking a fine line, Sutekhuser. Be careful you do not stumble."

• • •

The next night, Nasir found himself at the newly-built Kasbah Mosque in the center of Tunis' medina district. Layla had informed him that Marduniya made his haven there, as the mosque was too young for the holy aura to keep out vampires. As he had hoped, Nasir found the Lasombra inside. The man did not look happy to see his visitor.

"What do you want, serpent?" he asked venomously.

"I have come," Nasir replied as he settled himself on a bench, "to seek your knowledge."

"I do not help infidels," Marduniya sneered.

"Listen, we are both disliked by the Cainites of this city due to our faith. Now, I will be leaving soon enough, faster if you help me, but you seem to be staying here. So, I propose we assist each other. You offer your knowledge to me and I help you become more respected by your peers."

"And how do you propose to do that?" the Lasombra asked, suspiciously.

"I seek out rare writings for my clan. We have quite a few works thought lost to time. Archimedes' *On Sphere-Making and On Polyhedra*, for example. Several of Euclid's works, most of Aristotle's writings, all of Democritus' writings on ethics and, my personal favorites, all of Cicero's books on philosophy. I have copies of some of these with me and I can requisition other copies from the Setite library."

Nasir saw Marduniya's eyes light up and recognized the desire of a fellow scholar. He drove on.

"With such works in your possession, your peers cannot help but admire your knowledge."

“And what will the price be?”

“As I said, I seek a book of astrology. This book belonged to an astrologer who lived in Tunis, but was killed by Kharijite insurgents some 300 years ago.”

Marduniya nodded. “I know of him. The local Muslim rulers tolerated his presence, but the Kharijite fanatics were determined to kill what they saw as a sorcerer.”

“If you can tell me where he lived,” Nasir said, keeping a level tone despite his excitement, “I will be more than willing to pay you.”

Marduniya nodded. “It is a deal. Wait here.”

A few minutes later, the Lasombra returned with a map of the city.

“The astrologer of whom you speak made his home here, in what was once the south-westernmost part of the city. His house was said to be covered in strange symbols painted on the walls. Today, that area is ruins and ramshackle housing for beggars, thieves and bandits. It is territory belonging to Jugurtha of Clan Nosferatu and I strongly suggest you talk to him before venturing out there.”

“I thank you,” Nasir rose and bowed. “I shall send a servant here with the copies I have in my possession as soon as possible. Should you consider this inadequate, simply let me know and I will send for more.”

“See that you do,” the Lasombra replied. “If you cross me, serpent, the Faithful will hunt you wherever you go.”

• • •

After his meeting with Marduniya, Nasir had returned to Layla’s and sent Jurian off with a selection of copies. He had then asked his hostess about Jugurtha. Layla had explained that the Nosferatu was known as the ‘Lord of the Ruins’ and his domain encompassed all the ruins of Tunis. She had also furnished Nasir with the information that Jugurtha was opposed to Tunis’ current expansion — not surprising, since it resulted in the ruins slowly being converted into new buildings. Apparently, his hatred was directed at Abirami, as the seneschal was one of the vampires most invested in Tunis’ growth.

“Jugurtha has even gone so far as to use some of his bandit contacts to sabotage shipping and wreck warehouses,” Layla had explained. “Nothing major, but enough to cause a bit of trouble — his people even tried burning down the warehouse I own, which was how I learned of this plan. It’s something you could use again him.”

Nasir had feared that finding a Nosferatu in a city the size of Tunis would take days, but as it turned out, it was surprisingly easy. According to Layla, asking any street urchin or beggar to get word to ‘The Night Father’ would get Jugurtha’s attention and within an hour, Nasir had his audience.

“I will cut straight to the point,” he said, seated on a broken pillar on the outskirts of the dock area. “I am looking for a book that belonged to a learned astrol-

oger who lived in Tunis and I have recently learned that his house stood in what is now the south-western ruins.”

Jugurtha laughed, a sound like bubbling oil.

“Direct and to the point. I like that. So unusual for one of your clan. And you need my permission to enter the ruins, as well as a guide to lead you there, yes?” The Nosferatu leaned forward. “And what is in it for me?”

“As I understand it, you have been doing your best to prevent Tunis from growing much bigger.” Nasir held up a hand, forestalling the protest he saw coming.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell on you. Especially not to that bastard Abirami. However, I think I can help. Or rather, my clan can. We are experts at causing chaos if need be. If you help me here, I can make sure that Layla directs her influence towards disrupting trade in Tunis.”

Jugurtha cocked his head, his eyes fixed on Nasir, who had put on his usual, diplomatic smile.

“Helping you will anger Abirami,” the Nosferatu finally said. “Add that to your help disrupting trade and we have a deal. Now, the area you want is far from here. I suggest you leave as soon as you can after sundown. I will have a local boy waiting for you outside Layla’s house. He’ll guide you and make sure there’s no trouble.”

Nasir rose and bowed. “You have my thanks, Lord of the Ruins.”

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“I need a couple of servants,” Nasir said, before leaving Layla’s haven the following night.

“I only have a single ghoul,” she protested, but Nasir interrupted.

“No need for a ghoul, just a pair of strong, loyal cultists who don’t ask too many questions. I will be heading to a rough area and I have learned not to put too much trust in a Nosferatu.”

Layla gave a nod of ascent and shortly afterwards, Nasir left the house accompanied by two burly men. The guide provided by Jugurtha waited as promised, but Nasir did not make his way towards the distant ruins. Instead, he walked to the baths where he had first met with the elders of the city.

Unsurprisingly, he found Abirami standing outside, arms folded, his face stern.

“The Prince is not receiving,” he snarled.

“I’m not here for the Prince, I’m here for you,” Nasir retorted, his usual urbane manner completely gone. “I have come to this city for the sole purpose of acquiring a rare book. I offer you the chance to come with me and see that I am not breaking any of the city’s laws in doing so and thus prove to you that you are wrong about my clan.”

For a second, just a fleeting instance, Abirami's façade cracked, showing surprise. Then the cold, sneering face returned.

"Fine. Let me fetch my sword and we can be on our way. But your servants stay here."

"Of course," Nasir replied. Then he turned to the cultists. "Go and wait near your mistress' house. Find a tavern and amuse yourself." A few small coins changed hands.

The walk to the ruins took over an hour. The night before, Nasir had described the astrologer's house to Jugurtha and the guide seemed to know where he was going. However, the ruins themselves were a tight-packed maze and it took them quite a while to find the place. To Nasir's eyes, it was simply another stretch of tumbled-down Roman buildings, but as the guide brought his oil lamp closer to one intact stretch of wall, Nasir saw the inscriptions upon it.

"Thank you," he said to the young man and took the lamp from him. "You've done well and can leave us. We can manage from here." Then he turned to Abirami. "Shall we?"

"You first."

Nasir smiled and ducked into the ruins. There was only a small chamber, but the light from the lantern illuminated a collapsed staircase.

"There is no way through there," Abirami grumbled. "We will need several laborers to clear that out."

"No need," Nasir smiled, broadly. He shrugged off his robe and walked towards the staircase and as he did, his body changed. Scales burst forth, his shoulders narrowed and his chest lengthened. Behind him, he heard a gasp of revulsion.

It took Nasir only scant moments to find an opening in the fallen masonry big enough for him to slip through in his altered state. From there, he wriggled his way until, finally, he stood in a small cellar. No light penetrated from above, but with a moment's concentration, Nasir's eyes began to glow and soon, he could see the chamber perfectly. It was a neat trick, something he had learned from a Gangrel after performing some rather specific favors.

The room was in shambles, but Nasir immediately spotted a half-collapsed book-case. With trembling hands, he reached out. There were several scrolls, but also a single, large book, its clasp still holding it closed. Gently, Nasir undid the clasp and opened the book. He was immediately greeted by astrological charts and Persian writing.

Elated, Nasir clasped the book to his chest and slithered his way back up the ruined stairs, his return made somewhat more problematic by the large book. He found Abirami still standing there, holding the lantern.

"Did you find your book?" the man asked, gruffly.

"I did."

“Give it to me.”

“Certainly,” Nasir said, holding the book up to his face. Abirami’s eyes followed and too late he realized his folly. Nasir’s eyes no longer glowed — instead, they had turned golden and snake-like and Abirami found himself frozen, unable to move. It was only for an instant, but that was enough. Nasir’s left hand flashed forward, the stake he had concealed there piercing Abirami’s heart, paralyzing him.

• • •

It was getting close to sunrise as Nasir finally returned to Layla’s house. He found the woman standing outside, Jurian at her side. The ghoul had his hand on the hilt of his sword and Layla’s expression was one of smug superiority.

“Did you find the book?” she asked, icily.

Nasir met her haughty demeanor with his usual smile. “I did indeed.”

“Then hand it over.” Layla held out a scroll of sacred papyrus. The writings on it were clear to Nasir — instructions from the elders of the Great Temple. “The elders of the clan apparently don’t quite trust you with this knowledge. I will have the honor of taking the book to the Great Temple.”

“They never mentioned any of this to me in their messages.”

“Well,” Layla sneered, condescendingly, “perhaps if you had bothered to study the Deeper Mysteries, you might have been able to communicate more fully with them and they would have trusted you. But enough stalling, Sutekhuser. Hand over the book and then prepare to return to the Grand Temple for judgement.”

Slowly, Nasir reached into his robe. But before he could hand over his prize, a shout cut across the street.

“Layla! In the name of Lady Sophoniba, you are under arrest!”

Striding toward them came Agathon, the city’s Master of Law, dressed in mail and carrying both sword and shield. He was flanked by two servants, most likely ghouls, who were also armed and armored.

“What nonsense is this?” replied Layla, looking in confusion at Agathon.

“The Prince’s childe was found in your warehouse, a stake through his heart,” the Malkavian accused. “Guarded by two of your servants, who hurled oil lamps at us when we entered. The body of her childe may have burned, but we have one of your fanatics. I am sure the truth will come out.”

For a second, Layla’s expression was one of complete incomprehension. Then she spun towards Nasir, anger rushing across her face.

“You!” she roared. And then her eyes grew confused as Nasir began to fade, not only from her sight, but also from her memory.

“That’s right, you bitch,” Nasir thought as he felt the veil descend over him, hiding him from the eyes and thoughts of those present. “I may not be

skilled in the Deeper Mysteries, but I am proficient enough in the blood-gifts of Set to impersonate you.”

With the sounds of battle erupting behind him, Nasir calmly entered Layla’s house, holding *The Book of Hidden Stars*. The last he saw was Jurian cutting down one of the Master of Law’s ghouls in a spray of blood.

• • •

“Prince Sophoniba thanks you for your service,” Agathon said. His face still bore the scars where Layla’s lashing tongue had struck him. “She realizes it could not have been easy for you to betray your own kind.”

“It was no betrayal,” Nasir replied as he looked out towards the ship getting ready to leave. “Layla was the one who betrayed the clan when she attacked the Prince’s child. I understand we are not well trusted in these parts and I consider warning the Prince to be doing my clan a service. Even though it cost Layla her unlife.”

“Indeed,” the Malkavian nodded. “However, given the circumstances, the Prince hopes you understand why she is asking you to leave so abruptly.”

“Certainly,” Nasir answered, his smile firmly back on his face. “However, perhaps the Prince will allow a few of my clan to come to Tunis once the furor has died down. We do have mercantile interests in the city.”

“From what I know of Lady Sophoniba, that is most likely. Have your elders send her a letter of introduction and I see no reason why she would not accept a small contingent of Setites to rest in her domain.”

Later, as the ship had left the harbor and turned east towards Alexandria, Nasir sat on deck, a small oil lamp beside him. *The Book of Hidden Stars* lay open across his lap.

The journey to the Great Temple of Set would take months. Time enough to read the book. Time enough to copy it, with slight alterations, into another book, an old Persian book whose parchment pages Nasir had carefully scraped clean of any writing. Time enough for him, and him alone, to learn the secrets of the Hidden Stars and the power they offered.

Above the ship, the night was cloudless. Stars shone down. Nasir fancied some of them looked new.

OMEN'S END

BY REE SOESBEE

Vomit spewed from his mouth, coating the floor before the great stone fireplace in rich, red blood. He fell to his knees, a tremor spasming through his body. With supernatural effort, he dug his nails into the thin rug that covered the stone floor. His stomach twisted and his body shook as the curse woke him for another agonizing day.

When it was done, Simon Aylard sat back on his knees, gasping for breath he no longer needed.

"You will eat only ashes..."

The witch. She'd placed this curse on him nearly a year ago. Ashes were his fare now, rather than the rich blood demanded by his vampiric nature, and with each day, he ate less and less. Simon knew enough about curses to realize that when he could eat no more, his body would begin devouring itself — and he would die. Using the degradation of blood in his system, Simon had mathematically determined how long the curse would take to kill him. He'd started with nearly a year, but nights flew by in the war with the Fiends, and that time was drawing near; with every day and every hour, he could feel his body withering. No more than a few days, now, and he would be gone.

Seven...eight...nine. Nine handfuls of ashes from the fireplace, where once he had feasted on rich, thick blood. Curse that Tzimisce witch. Damn the beast to hell.

The enemy was a Tzimisce flesh-shaper, a witch, a heretic, and the bane of his clan. Other clans called the conflict between Tremere and Tzimisce the 'Omen War,' and it was a good enough title. Certainly, both sides had enough magic to herald a thousand dark omens. This one — *this* witch — had settled herself upon the fate of the Chantry of Versailles, eager to see it fall.

His curse was just the beginning of her deviance. Already, the witch had laid waste to many of the other Tremere, pillaged the nearby herds of cattle and villag-

es, and taunted the remaining warlocks with wastrel shows of vulgarity — torn-apart children; sculptures of flesh; standards of bone and sinew. The Tzimisce had sworn to destroy them, and she was waiting for her opportunity, taunting them with the deaths of his fellow warlocks and toying with the mortals under their guard. She was insane, and viciously fanatic, letting no opportunity pass without milking it for the suffering of the Tremere.

Every night for the past year, Simon had tried to find her and kill her. Every night, she'd eluded him, and the countryside suffered the brunt of his failure. Now, the last of his clan hid in their chantry, trusting in sorcerous wards and hideous grotesques to keep them safe from the witch's wrath. All, save Simon, who braved the countryside in search of the only restorative that could save his unlife: her death. He suspected that she hid from him, more pleased by his slow, lingering death than any quick kill. Perhaps she wanted to use him to destroy the chantry. Perhaps she intended for him to beg for his existence.

Simon wiped his mouth with a rag from the counter, tossing it into the still-glowing embers of the night's fire. Rage filled him, but he forced it down like bile, quelling his beast with thoughts of revenge and plans of the future. He was determined. He would outlive the beast. Clan Tremere would be victorious.

As he entered the main library of the Versailles chantry, he could feel the eyes of the other warlocks lingering on him. Pity, that most wretched of emotions. It lived close to the instinct for power. Did they see him as a liability? A burden? A weakness to be fed upon, to strengthen themselves? Simon glared at the three apprentices in his care, and their eyes rapidly dropped back to their books.

"Lord Simon." The Regent's voice, speaking in fluent French. Simon quickly regained his composure, turned, and executed a slightly awkward courtier's bow.

"Regent Divino," Simon smiled nervously. "My apprentices and I welcome you. Thank you for answering my request for a moment of your time."

Greying, old, but polished, Regent Divino stomped forward on his cane, the swirl of monk's robes hiding a horror that had once been a foot. Now, it was little more than a stump, smooth and barely skin-like, with suckers reminiscent of an octopus's covering a thick, leathery tentacle. The Tzimisce flesh-shapers had taken only a moment, a bare touch of flesh to flesh, but the Regent would forever bear the pains of their wrath.

The Omen War had taken something from them all.

"I wish to speak with you again about my curse," Simon began. "As you know, I've very little time left to find a solution."

"A year... It can pass in an instant, can't it? Such a trouble. No luck finding the Tzimisce witch? No? Hm. Well, any progress on magical reversal?" asked the Regent calmly.

Eagerly, Simon reached for a small but precious book in his pocket, drawing it out to reveal sketches, notes, papers interlocking between the pages in a disor-

ganized jumble. A year's worth of work. "My research points to only three resolutions," he said rapidly. "One, I find and kill the Koldunic witch that cast the curse on me. I've been trying on that front, but she hides in her depravity. Two, I die. Or three..." Simon flipped to a page in his research, "I attempt to create a potion called Abel's Draught."

"Abel's Draught?"

"A rumor, sir, and one likely started by the Tzimisce heretics themselves. We have the recipe, but it's not exactly simple to make. Beyond the usual mystic items, it requires..." he forced himself to finish, "...the most powerful blood available. Preferably, the blood of an Antediluvian." Simon watched as the Regent's face purpled. "Sir," he said quickly, before Divino could respond. "I think there is a solution. His Mighty Lordship, Tremere. Such potent blood would suit the spell." He handed the recipe to the Regent.

"*Tremere's* blood? Are you quite mad?"

"It only requires a drop. Less than. Sir, we have a vial from the council, containing the mixed blood of the seven Council Regents. If it has even a pittance of Tremere's blood within it, it could save my life. If I could just requisition—"

"You are mad." The Regent shook his head. "I can't just give you the founder's blood, Lord Aylard, even if I had such a thing. Based on such incomplete findings, I'd no sooner give you mine. This recipe is no more than a bunch of scribbings, haphazard and incomplete." Divino smoothed the thick linen paper, looking it over carefully. "You've no guarantee it will work, nor any knowledge where the alchemical formulae originated. Really, Simon, I taught you better than this."

"But, sir, it may be my only chance."

"I have all three of our Grotesques scouring the countryside for this witch, rather than guarding our chantry doors. She's killed the fourth, decorating the road to the chantry with its intestines while it struggled for breath enough to scream. She's too close; she's too powerful. This is as much as I can do for you, and you should be grateful for it. She's out there, taunting us. Only the wall of this chantry keeps us safe." The old man shook his head, white hair of his beard brushing the collar of his Franciscan robe. He handed back the papers, his stern look returning. "Forget this draught – it's a myth. Spend your time instead in prayer and in the hunt, and hope that we find her."

"But, sir...!"

The old man raised his hands, cutting Simon off before he could say any more. "Enough. Continue with the research alone, if you please, but don't distract me with this again unless you have something credible. I must maintain the chantry's defenses. We are all in jeopardy from this Tzimisce. She's trying to find a way to eradicate this chantry. We must remain inside and wait her out."

“But sir, there’s no assurance that the Grotesques will be able to find her in time, if at all. Is it really such a waste to try? If you could just go over my research, I’m sure you’ll find...”

“Simon, Simon. You are safe within the chantry. We have the Gargoyles, plus yourself, myself and our three apprentices. The remaining Tremere of Versailles are powerful in our magic, and we have plenty of sorcerous wards protecting the inner chantry. Despite her ravages on the countryside, this witch cannot reach you here. She cannot do anything to you.”

“With all due respect, sir, she doesn’t have to do anything more.”

Divino frowned, his brows knitting together. “Enough. I understand you are in a quandary. But what you don’t seem to reason, Lord Aylard, is that this witch and her clan seek to kill all Tremere — not just you. She has already destroyed five of your compatriots, rendering this chantry weaker than it has been in centuries. I can’t focus solely on your issue, no matter how much you would like me to do so. The Omen War goes on, Simon. We must protect the chantry!”

Regent Divino’s footsteps echoed in the library with the last of Simon’s crushed hopes. Behind him, somewhere in the stacks, he could hear a smug snort from one of the three apprentices. Simon’s face burned as he turned to face them. Surely, they’d already made the connection: if he died, one of them would be promoted to Lord. “Back to work,” he ordered harshly.

As he stalked through the stone archway of the library, the smell of musty paper and the lingering chill of the cellar surrounding him, Simon drew his small book from his pocket. Once more, he read the formula for Abel’s Draught. Written in a pinched hand on tightly pressed paper, it spelled out an incredibly difficult process, but fairly commonplace ingredients — all save one. He scowled. If he could not have the blood of an antediluvian, then he would have to get the most potent blood available and hope for the best. That meant taking it from the Regent; Divino, who was Etrius’s childe, and Etrius was Tremere’s childe. Two steps removed from the blood that the potion required. It would have to be good enough — either to sufficiently complete the draught, or at least, to show enough progress that the Regent would give him the vial from the founders and allow him to make the potion again. The Fiend Tzimisce no doubt expected him to give up.

Never.

A noise roused him from his notes. Simon narrowly avoided slamming into a youth as the young man blazed around the corner of the stacks, carrying too many books to see what lay beyond. Barking a reprimand, Simon snapped his journal shut with an angry click as the young man staggered to a halt.

“I’m sorry, sir!” the young man said, brown eyes wide and face pale. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Apprentice Suárez.” Simon took in the other man with a raking gaze. Tall, lanky, with dark hair and olive skin, the apprentice had been sent from the Spanish chantry in Catalan a few years ago. With only five vampires left in the chantry, Simon knew him, but the two had never been particularly invested in one another. “Watch where you’re going, Apprentice,” he snapped.

“Sir...” the younger vampire began, stammering slightly. He set his books down on a nearby shelf and managed a half-bow. “Forgive me, sir, but I overheard you speaking to the Regent. I know that I’m but an Apprentice, but is there anything I can do to assist you?”

Simon opened his mouth for a scathing reply, then paused. If he was genuinely going to do this, he could use assistance — and a scapegoat to blame, if things went awry. “Actually, yes, Apprentice Suárez. All of you, actually.” He turned to the other two apprentices, cutting through their ‘not watching’ fakery. “Meet me in the laboratory in an hour.” Perhaps he could make use of them for his best interests.

The alchemy room smelled of sulphur coupled with acrid preservatives, rotting plant matter, and singed vellum. Simon lit the few guttering candles carefully, his vampiric nature rising at the sight and feel of flame. Lined up tidily near the wide window of the room, the three apprentices watched him with interest. “Hm. There’s no fireplace in here. Too dangerous to have one near the alchemical mixtures and preservatives,” murmured Simon.

Turning, he raised his voice to address them. “Apprentices of Clan Tremere, you will obey my dictates. I will be here for several days, tending to a very difficult potion. Apprentice Gavrond, I’ll need you to bring me a steady supply of hazel, witch-wort, pine sap and mandrake from the gardens.”

The first apprentice nodded. “But, sir, in order to gather what you need, I will have to go outside. Without the Grotesqueries guarding the gate, isn’t that a bit dangerous? I...I mean... she’s still out there.”

“Are you afraid, apprentice?” Simon sneered, rounding on Gavrond. “The gardens are barely a fly’s wink outside the chantry. Do so quickly and return.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Apprentice Alleteau, I’ll need you to search the library and the restricted files. Bring me anything unusual relating to curses, particularly the revoking of such.” The second apprentice nodded eagerly, a glint of greed in her eye.

Simon frowned as he set out his work tools. The difficult part lay not in getting the draught’s magic correct, but in acquiring some of the Regent’s blood. The best way to do that would be to force the Regent to give it to him willingly — but to do that, Simon would need to be much more powerful. The thaumaturgical spell that thickened his blood would temporarily give him an Elder’s power. Not permanently enough to provide the blood potency for Abel’s Draught — that would re-

quire someone whose blood was legitimately thick. Temporarily. Just long enough to dominate the Regent's mind. Becoming an Elder through Thaumaturgy would give him the power he needed for a single swift vampiric contest with the Regent...but only if his veins were filled with blood. Or, in his case, ash.

Simon turned to the third young man. "Apprentice Suárez, I will need you to bring me ashes as the need arises. Morning and night."

"Ashes?"

"Yes. The work I'm doing is very difficult, and will require a great deal of magic. As I no longer feed on blood due to this curse, I'll need other sustenance."

The apprentice blanched at the idea of eating ashes, but was wise enough to say nothing. "Yes, Lord Aylard."

"Start a fire in my chambers, and in the library. Clean them regularly, and bring me the residue."

"Yes, Lord Aylard."

"The rest of you may go. Suárez, help me assemble this beaker array."

As the other two apprentices filed out of the lab, Suárez perked up and came forward to assist. The young Spaniard was eager, asking questions and listening respectfully as Simon set the laboratory to his specifications. Simon kept the journal safely in his pocket until the young man left, not wanting to reveal more about his purposes than was absolutely necessary. After Suárez was gone, Simon pulled it out and reread his notes on the elixir once more.

Abel's Draught. The original recipe had come from one of the oldest books in the chantry's library, a cunningly hand-crafted tome with a wingspan like a small eagle. Handwritten on expensive vellum and delicately bound, edged in gold with brass corners, the book made his small linen journal seem impoverished. With the Regent's blood, Simon determined that the elixir would have a fair chance of working properly and lifting the curse, but not a good one. Hopefully it would be enough to cure him, or to staunch the curse and provide "credible" proof that the serum worked as a counteragent. Perhaps even give him some extra time...

For six nights, Simon worked on the potion, sleeping each day on a small cot in the alchemical lab. The work was slow, agonizingly detailed, and based on scientific hypothesis that made Simon's head churn. Each day, he was awakened by Suárez bringing a new supply of ash. Gavronde arrived around the twelfth bell, with the herbs and materials Simon requested. Just before dawn, Alleteau came to report about the library, bringing specific research that Simon needed to help with his task. The three of them were well-trained in the methods of the Tremere, asking few questions but devouring everything with their eyes. Like eager little spies, they studied Simon and his research, trying their best to figure out his plan. That, of course, was the way of things in any chantry. If they determined the outcome of his attempt — to attack the Regent — they'd have no compunction about turning

him in for their own benefit. Thus, Simon made sure to scatter his requests among the three of them, making sure none had enough information to put together his plan until it was too late. Suárez, ash and a steady hand with the science; Gavron, current information and herbs; Alleteau, research on the most difficult or complicated parts of the thaumaturgy involved. Unless the apprentices worked together against him, and shared information among themselves — something not in the nature of most Tremere — his true purpose should remain hidden.

Simon prided himself on the plan, working with a feverish intensity toward his goal. Yet each dusk when he awoke, more blood vomited forth from his mouth, and more ash was required simply to keep him alive. Dutifully, he ingested the residue that Suárez brought him. Slippery and dry, it lingered on his tongue and dried his mouth. He ate it anyway, desperately trying not to think about his impending death from starvation. Meanwhile, all around him, unlife in the chantry went on. The three mighty Gargoyles guarded the area, and the movement of the apprentices on their petty tasks was like the bustling of bees. Damn them all. The sands in his hourglass were running dry, while they looked forward to eternity.

From the dripping chemicals and slowly saturated heat, the boiling beakers and bubbling ointments, at last he distilled the mixture. It was strange, thick like pine sap but not sticky. Orangish and gelatinous. Simon stared at his concoction with pride. All he had left to do was to add the blood of the strongest Elder he knew...and then ingest the serum.

Which meant it was time for the most difficult part of his plan: overcoming the Regent.

“Suárez,” Simon said at last. He restrained the urge to fiddle once again with the heat supply and the central water aerator. The lord of the chantry straightened, tugging at the faintly stained sleeves of his robe. “Please tell Regent Divino that I wish to see him here in the laboratory. At his earliest convenience,” he added quickly. It would not do to appear demanding or insistent.

“Of course, my Lord.”

Hours passed. Simon paced the small laboratory, his thoughts flickering between anxiety and resentment. A pox on that Tzimisce. His entire career — his entire unlife — hung in the balance. “I’m certain he’ll arrive soon,” Suárez said gingerly, handing him a handful of ash. “You should eat, sir.”

Simon choked down the ash, the gritty silt cloying his lungs. The sludge of it was vile, like the feeling of crushing a serpent between one’s fingers. The taste was worse. “When will he be here?” He fumed, returning to the beakers and coils. He twiddled some of the vials, replacing a heat source and moving a half-full beaker to replace it with an empty one. Through gritted teeth, he added, “Divino tests my patience.”

“As well he may, my Lord. He is Regent, after all.” The apprentice’s words were reasonable, and Simon nodded.

“Go and ask him again.”

Suárez left obediently, allowing Simon a moment alone with his thoughts. When the Regent arrived, he would have to move quickly. The power granted by the blood would last only a short while. He’d have to phrase his command carefully — *put some of your blood into this vial* — and then erase the entire scene from the Regent’s mind.

“Sir?” Simon wheeled, ready to launch into a diatribe — or possibly *creo ignis* — and saw Suárez standing in the doorway. Biting back his temper, he managed, “Yes?”

“More ash for you, sir.” Suárez stepped forward and placed a second bag in Simon’s hands. “You should eat more, my Lord. You seem...discontent.”

A polite way to put it. The regent was taking forever to arrive, and Simon’s patience was frayed. Perhaps the apprentice was right. He’d lost a lot of strength over the last few days, and it wouldn’t do to be on the verge of a hunger frenzy when such delicate operations were in order. “Yes, of course.” Simon took the bag. “Thank you, apprentice.”

Slime would have tasted better. The ash was grimy and chalky, bitter on Simon’s tongue, but he choked it down.

As the Regent’s footsteps echoed in the hallway leading to the laboratory, Simon closed his eyes and performed his spell. He felt his body growing numb, the veins opening wide, nearly ripping themselves apart as the spell took hold. A mighty hunger overtook him, and the world seemed red when he opened his eyes. Bloodshot. A side effect of the spell.

“Quickly, sir,” Suárez handed him a final bag of ash. Simon put it to his lips as he completed the incantation, drawing in the thick, powdery ash as quickly as he could. It tasted dark, like earth and soil mixed with soured blood. As it slid down his throat in a chunky *mélange*, he heard the Regent open the laboratory door.

Regent Divino stepped into the room, a quizzical frown on his aged features. “Apprentice Suárez told me there was an emergency, Lord Ayulard? I should hope...”

In that instant, Simon caught the Regent’s gaze. There was a palpable snapping feeling as their eyes locked. Simon thrust his will toward the other vampire, locking them both in an invisible battle for dominance.

“Put your blood into this vial.” Simon commanded, powering the last of his blood and the ash within his veins into the effort and holding out a small glass receptacle. He’d have the strength for just one more domination, hopefully one that would erase the entire scene from the Regent’s mind. To his delight and amazement, Regent Divino stopped in his tracks and reached for the vial. As he slit open a vein with one sharp fang, the Regent raised the vial to his wrist — and a vicious-looking, spiked wooden stake thrust itself brutally through the Regent’s back

and into his heart. It burst out between the sternum, piercing bone, flesh, and robe, and blood poured down the Regent's chest in a sudden red gout. Simon shrieked, his Beast lunging toward the surface in shock and fear, the sight of blood — even blood on which he could not feast — causing it to rage inside his breast.

The Regent fumbled for the stake, falling heavily to his knees on the stone with a scream of agony. A knife blade slashed from behind with tremendous strength, beheading him where he knelt. Slowly, inexorably, Divino's hands crumbled, then his arms, head, shoulders, and all the rest fell into ash on the laboratory floor. Simon gripped the edge of the counter with white-knuckled fingers.

"I must thank you," Suárez said. Simon tore his gaze from the Regent's residue. The apprentice stood over the ashen corpse, a look of utter madness etched on his features. "His Sight was too great. I never could have done it, had you not distracted him."

As Simon watched, the apprentice's face began to flow and shift like water. Skin rippled, bone cracked and snapped into different patterns, different features. He saw the shadow of Gavron, Alleteu, Suárez — his three apprentices flowing over the canvas of a single face.

"You...were all of them."

"Yes. I killed them, one by one, while you were locked in this room. Tsk tsk. Didn't you know that a Lord's first duty is to his apprentices? To his clan?" A sadistic smile lit the creature's shifting face. "While you were locked in here, ignoring your responsibility to your lessers, I destroyed them all."

"How did you get inside the chantry?"

"How fortunate I am that your three gargoyles are searching the countryside for me," the Tzimisce's androgynous features came sharply into focus. Long nose, pale skin, wicked-looking bestial eyes and fangs. "They aren't giving the chantry nearly as much protection as they once did. It was easy enough to find Gavron in the forest when he was looking for your herbs, and once I became him — the chantry was all but open to my whim. I never even had to enter the inner chantry, or contact the wards there. All of your apprentices came to me, one by one, in the course of performing the duties you gave them." The witch's claws extended, sharp as broken shards of glass. "Everyone but the Regent. He was too careful, locked away in his inner sanctum. He watched everyone, and he stayed behind his wards. I couldn't find a single weakness, not a moment when he was off-guard. If it hadn't been for your mutinous intent, and his trust in you, I would never have been able to destroy him."

Simon snarled, every portion of him wanting to fight — but he'd used all of his blood on the plan, all of his strength. All that was left was ash in his veins...

"The ash." He said suddenly, horror creeping over him.

"Oh, yes. That. If I'd left the ash of your apprentices lying around, I'd surely have been caught by the Gargoyles snooping about. Fortunately, I had another receptacle...a very willing one."

Simon felt his bile rise. That was the ash he'd been eating? The remains of the apprentices — Suárez ... Gavronde... Alleteu. Fed to him like clockwork, and he'd feasted on it. The Fiend had made a monster of him — a cannibal, gorging on the dead corpses of other Tremere. Knowing that its victory was complete, the Tzimisce witch moved toward the high window of the room, perching lightly on the ledge and preening in victory. Simon clenched his hands in impotent rage.

"When I finish this draught — when I'm whole again — I will come for you. You'll die a heretic's death, consumed by fire!"

"Oh, you poor thing. No... even if you had the resources, you don't have the time. There's no blood in your veins. You barely even have ash left in your body. No, Simon, you'll do nothing at all... and then you'll die. Good night, and good riddance." The Tzimisce's laugh echoed in the empty hallways of the chantry.

Slowly, the Tzimisce began to change again. Massive wings tore their way out from its back, connecting to the joints of its hands, wrists, and elbows. Great sweeping ripples of flesh pulled the very skin away from bone, shaping it into ragged, pale wings.

Simon had only a moment to devise what revenge he could.

As the creature changed into a monstrous, bat-like thing, Simon fell to the floor beside the Regent, scooping great handfuls of ash from the floor. Repulsed, he poured them into his mouth, choking down the flesh and bone of the man he'd known as mentor, even father. As the Tzimisce launched itself into the air, Simon crawled to the window, letting out a shout.

It looked back.

Simon caught the creature's eyes, using the Regent's ash in his veins — the last traces of blood and the substance of his fellows — and attempted to twist its mind.

"Fall," he commanded.

The Tzimisce wavered in the air, teetering off balance. With a shriek, it toppled downward, tumbling like an autumn leaf toward the stones below.

There was a satisfying crunch when it struck the ground.

Simon sank back to his knees beside the empty window, his hands shaking. There was no Abel's Draught — no antediluvian blood — no apprentices or Regent to help him. He was alone in the chantry of Versailles, and his death would be upon him soon. He raised his head to stare out at the faint edge of sunlight creeping over the Carpathian Mountains. The Tzimisce had claimed three apprentices, a regent, and a lord this day.

But his enemy was dead.

Clan Tremere had been victorious in the end.

EIGHTY AND NINE

BY DAVID A. HILL, JR.

Agnes descended into the pit. One step, two steps, three steps, four. Her long, flowing beige wool dress scraped at the ancient steps, picking up mud and dirt along the way, pulling the fabric down deeper into the catacomb. The muddy end of the fabric rolled down each step like a cloud of murky wet blackness. Like the night tide, crashing down one stone at a time. The dress, like her disposition, grew heavier with each step.

“Sire, you told me this was the place. Why so deep? What does it mean? You do know I despise these cryptic messages. You could simply explain it to me. I can listen.”

She spoke to nobody in particular. She looked around and sighed as she realized she was not simply alone, but deeply, fundamentally alone. So far beneath the surface, she could scream until her chest collapsed and none would ever hear her.

“Eighty and six.” She passed a fork, peering down the hall briefly. She furrowed her brow in frustration. “Or did I forget forty and five? I do not remember forty and five. Who carved these halls without markings? Perhaps I should have marked them as I passed. You told me not, sire. You told me where to go, but not how to get there. You told me where to go, but not what I’d find there. Will I find you? I know we’ve had our disagreements. But you’re my sire, and absence made my dead heart long for goodness, for devotion. I promise you, sire, if you are here, I will treat you with respect like never before. I cannot promise eternal, undying devotion — I don’t aim to lie to you — but I will endeavor to do right by you. To honor your wants. To honor your needs. To honor your name.”

Not a trace of light made way this deep into the earth. But Agnes saw. The blood of Malkav guaranteed she saw everything. Indeed, everything and more. She narrowed her eyes, focused, and pressed on. She descended after each fork, another steep ten steps after another steep ten steps.

“Eighty and seven.”

She put a hand to the cold, moist stone walls, carefully running her fingers along the sandy mortar. Concentrating, she stopped. She felt only the faintest echo of emotion, of life coming from the stone. “Hints of sorrow. Jealousy. This is a crypt of the well-to-do, the nobility. This was a person with impact, with power. But not much. This was the kind of person that inspired envy. The kind of person that inspired...not very much of substance. The same pettiness. Not even with great strength. Envy, but the kind you can overlook and ignore.”

She sighed.

“Eighty and eight.”

Five steps down, and she stumbled. She fell, she rolled to the ground.

“I’ve found it!”

She stood and touched the wall again. Her senses bled together. She stood in the tomb, but everything of her but her body went elsewhere. Her sire told her that Malkavians could learn to project their spirits, their minds, their everything ephemeral into the great beyond, to travel the world, to touch the moon. But she’d never experienced it. Not until tonight. Not until her senses woke to another place.

• • •

Agnes descended into herself. She stood as a soldier amidst an army. The soldiers looked like none she’d seen before. Their armor more beautiful, better made. She stood outside a military lodge with other soldiers, guarding a man within, a man with a modest crown and narrow moustache. He paced impatiently. Then she snapped to attention once she realized she stood in the sun. She looked in every direction, basking in the warm light. She heard a hundred conversations amongst the military men around her, but she paid little heed. The sun was all-consuming for some time. She could not gauge the time — it may have been a minute or an hour — but she missed it so.

“Sire.” She thought to herself. “Why do you show me this sun? This thing of which I’m denied? You took the sun from me. Now you give it back. Am I mortal? Or am I simply experiencing another’s life? The sun is hot, but like a lover, not like a funeral pyre.”

A friar carrying a stack of papers pushed through the line. She looked to him, since he appeared so different than the soldiers. Agnes could not hear the exchange, but the friar gestured with urgency. With little hesitation and deliberation, the other soldiers parted to allow him through.

The friar approached, offering the lord the papers. As the king took the stack, the friar produced a knife from beneath it, and thrust it into the king’s abdomen. Within seconds, the soldiers marched in and put the friar down. The king held tight his wound.

Agnes tossed herself forward, trying to stop the man, trying to help the king, trying anything to engage this new world. To grasp it and prove it was the real thing.

Everything went black.



The young child of Malkav came back to her senses, and descended into the eighty-ninth hall of the tomb.

“The fashions... I don’t understand. Who were they? What did that mean? Did he die? Sire, guide me?” She looked upward, to the black stone ceiling. To the moss. To the dripping water.

“You told me I’d never walk alone. Well, I’m alone right now. And I need your help. Why am I here? You promised me I’d never walk alone, but I’ve never felt loneliness like I feel tonight. Like I’ve felt since your blood grabbed me from the edge of death. You showed me loneliness unlike any I’d ever felt, but you promised me I’d never be alone.”

“You promised!” She shouted. *“You promised!”* The second shout cracked her voice. *“You promised!”* The third shout sounded like scratching along marble, less words.

She ran her hands along the walls. A piece of chipped stone cut across her palm. Her senses bled together once more. She fell to her knees, overwhelmed.



Agnes stood as one of six women. Powerful. Tall. They led a charge of men and women against armed men with strange spears and red tunics. The spears boomed and bellowed with smoke, killing some of her compatriots. These were not the spears of men. These were the stuff of gods. With each boom, a flare vomited forth and frightened her. As they fought the armed men, one attacked her; his weapon tore a fist-sized hole through her. But the wound knit shut quickly, and she felt anger grow inside her. It was unlike any anger she ever felt before. It was worse than the Beast, because it was not only anger, but anger mixed with righteousness. She felt holy in that moment, purposeful.

Her instincts grew beyond purpose. She felt truly necessary. Welcomed. Needed. She felt that she was the only thing standing strong before a sea of evil. She felt corruption closing in. She felt taint. She smelled it. Like she stood in a pond with a rotting corpse — she couldn’t ignore the terrible amidst the natural. She knew, above all, that these men were killing her world. That they were murderers of not just other men, but of the very idea of life itself. Not that they deserved death, but that they needed to be stopped at all costs.

She grew. Her muscles expanded and contracted rapidly, and she took a new form with a majestic coat of black fur. She felt talons grow from her fingers like knives thrust out of the bone, as long as her fingers again. She growled a guttural

noise through gigantic teeth. She briefly wondered if this was what it felt to be Gangrel, not Malkavian as she knew so well. Envy grew within her, to replace the blood slowly but assuredly evaporating from her veins. Her senses shifted and sharpened, differently than she'd ever experienced. She didn't have the sensual senses she grew accustomed to — she didn't feel emotions and ideas. She felt reality. She felt truth. She felt millennia of history and destiny. And when she looked upon the men, she saw something else. Something within them, like ghosts possessing their shells. But not ghosts. Not the spirits of men. These were amalgams of blood and iron, skeletons of steel wrapped with viscera and with teeth like a broken clay pot.

She moved faster than she could think, and tore asunder soldier after soldier after soldier. She was a colossus, marble made flesh. They fired their spears, they thrust them into her, they struggled to no avail. She was utterly unstoppable. The weapons no longer tore fist-sized holes within her — they simply bounced off and stung like little bees.

With a single snap of her massive jaw, she beheaded a soldier. She tore upward, lifting the head from the body, but the spine resisted. Many men stared her down, leveling their weapons, weeping and threatening in kind. She lifted the victim by his head, and swung him like a Scottish throwing hammer. The spine snapped, and everything from the neck and down flew into the crowd of soldiers. The few remaining gave up the ghost and fled, screaming for mercy. Her senses faded.

• • •

Agnes descended into vulnerability. She held tight to herself, weak, frail. She closed her eyes hard. "Please. Return me there. Bring me back. Sire. I wish not to return. I'll spread these words. Just do not keep me in this form. Let me change. Let me grow." She fell to her side, against the wet stone wall.

"Was I Gangrel? But I believe I breathed? Was I Lupine? I know not, sire. Why would you show me those things? Why would you make me envy the living? The animals? I want that life. I tire of this weakness, of this uncertainty. I knew what I was to do. I want that purpose, sire. I want any purpose. Don't make me wander in the darkness."

Ten minutes passed. An hour passed. Her face was stained with rusty brown tears.

Agnes pulled herself to her feet, and continued down the hall. Less than a minute passed before her senses faded into blackness once again.

• • •

Again, Agnes found herself in the morning sunlight. She heard voices, marching, and mayhem in the distance. She couldn't pick out a single sound, a single voice. She tried honing in her senses, but the noise was just too much, her ears too weak.

"Qu'est-ce que le tiers-etat?" read the paper in her hands, dimly illuminated by a glassy lamp sconce. She scanned the pamphlet. "This is not Latin. What is

this?” She attempted to read on, but knew not the language. She thought she understood a word here or there, but she couldn’t suss out the context. She growled in frustration, and looked around. Brick and plaster walls.

In the distance stood a castle, and hundreds of people surrounded it in what appeared a peasants’ siege. Soldiers pushed cannons on wheels, threatening the people. She couldn’t understand the words, but the sentiments were obvious. These men were afraid, and ready to kill. They were lording power over this population, who refused to respect them. A small number of peasants scaled the fortress walls. She rushed toward the castle.

Her senses dulled. She felt herself fading from the place again. She saw the black walls of the tomb. She smelled the moss and mildew of the eighty-ninth corridor.

“No, no, no, no!” She ran faster toward the fortress. As her vision clouded over, she raised her arm to her mouth and bit down as hard as she could. Her senses exploded back to life, and focused again on the moment. She grinned with the revelation, and forced her way toward the walls.

She pushed through the crowd. “What is this? What are we doing?” She said to some of the peasants. They shook their heads in confusion, then pointed to the castle. Just then, the drawbridge slammed down, crushing some of the crowd. Men with spears — no, handheld cannons — attacked the people, slaughtering many. The crowd burst into riot, screaming and throwing things at the walls, and at the officers on the ground. While Agnes couldn’t understand the chanting, she chanted right along with the others. She found herself swept up in the moment. She knew not the words, but she said them. She said them with conviction. She said them with power. She knew that right now, things were changing. That she was part of a force that would tip the scales of the world. That so long as she stood with this crowd, she might die, but the change, the revolution would live on eternal.

As she rioted with the crowd, two dismembered heads rose aloft on spears. The people cheered. She cheered along, and then felt pressure in her stomach. She looked down to see a spear along the edge of a handheld cannon penetrating her abdomen. She grabbed the weapon and looked up to the man, the soldier impaling her. She pulled on the weapon to no avail; this body did not flow with Caine’s blood, it leaked a woman’s blood, a mortal’s blood. She looked to the man’s eyes, pleading with weakness and defeat. He ripped the weapon from her, and moved on to attack another peasant. She grabbed the wound and fell to the ground. She grasped at the blood, as if to hold it into her abdomen. Her senses faded.

• • •

Agnes descended into self-pity, into defeat. She howled out, and smashed her fist into the cold brick wall. She forced the equally cold blood in her heart to her hands. Her next punch cracked wall and bone alike.

"Eighty and nine. Eighty and nine." She looked around the tomb, letting her vision set fully back into its Cainite perfection. With bloody hand, she stood and scrawled on the wall.

"Eighty and nine. A king pacing in time of war. A monk and his papers. Shoves the blade deep. Shoves the blade true." Her syrupy, dark blood clung to the walls, and dried fast. It was like unto ink. Something of the wall, perhaps the moss, perhaps the stone, grabbed onto her blood and pulled it in, sealing the message like the finest paper.

She took a deep, sharp breath in. She moved down the hall, and scrawled more.

"Eighty and nine. Red soldiers stood against the people. The people took on majestic furs. Black furs. Awe-inspiring furs. The people fought with rage. The people fought with teeth. The red blades would not overcome the people. The earth protected the people. It was their turn to protect the earth."

She frantically scrambled across the floor, furiously scrawling on another wall. She smiled for the first time that night. Truly smiled. She felt purpose more acutely than when wearing the black fur. She knew that what she scrawled, what she made of her blood was truly important.

"Eighty and nine. The people took the castle. Qu'est-ce que le tiers-etat? Two heads aloft on pikes. Their cannons were not enough to hold us back."

She smiled to herself, and walked further down the hall, her mind open, her mind ready. Slowly but surely, her senses faded into blackness, into otherness. "Yes!" She stood and outstretched her arms, welcoming the next revelation like a long-awaited lover's return.

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Briefly, very briefly, she saw the sun. She saw the sun overwhelmed by the moon, overtaken by darkness. Then her eyes opened, and she was elsewhere. Where she stood, it was cold. Not cold like the tomb, but cold like the dead of winter. A fire burned in the distance, but the air stung her skin like a rap with a nun's stick. She wore a heavy wool tunic, which scratched at her skin, but provided much-needed warmth. Her heart beat with vitality, but only provided enough heat to hold off the worst of the cold.

The place had tan, painted walls, with red tapestries hanging perfectly along the ceiling. Everything looked pristine, cleaner than Agnes had ever seen. She stood in the far corner of a room, holding a halberd. Each remaining corner housed a soldier with ornate red tunics and black trousers, with black hats and immense, beautiful white feathers atop them. In the middle of the room, five people debated; three on one side, two on the other. The two clearly had the stature of power. One, a full-figured woman, wore a crown encrusted with clean, shimmering jewels. Jewels of a like Agnes had never seen. She stood quietly. Not passive, but in control of the situation while the three across the table promised her the world.

One of the three men, the one in the center, took a step forward and placed a leather sack on the desk. He opened it and out fell a handful of jewels just like those on the woman's crown. The man standing with the woman looked to her quizzically. He wore all black, with a gold chain between his broach and his hip. She nodded once to him, and he looked back to the others.

She felt purpose again, but not destiny. She had a job to do, but not such a job that would shape eternity. She was not protecting the world — she was protecting her interests.

"We believe we can make this arrangement. You'll receive approval for a twenty-five year approval period. We presume this is acceptable?" The man took a rolled paper from a desk drawer, and unraveled it before them all. The woman took up a pen, and dipped it in ink. Agnes scanned the document. The words made only slight sense. The characters were different. The order was different. But she gathered that this was a land agreement, a business agreement.

Agnes listened carefully. Their English was familiar but strange. They spoke with stronger emphasis and care than she was used to. It didn't all make sense, but the context helped her piece together the intention and ideas.

The middle man on the opposing side looked to his compatriots. Both nodded in kind. He looked back to the two opposing. "This is acceptable. Thank you, your highness." He lifted a pen and dipped it in ink as well. He signed the paper, and reversed it. The woman's assistant handed her the pen, and she signed as well.

"We are placing a great deal of faith in your operation, sirs." The woman said slowly, carefully. The men nodded. She continued. "You're not representing your company in this; you're representing the Empire. Your failures will be our failures. And I'm certain you know how interested I am in failing in that region?"

The middle man looked to his compatriots, swallowed hard, and looked back to her. "I understand. We will not disappoint you." Agnes looked to each face in kind. Every face told the same story; failure meant execution, shame, and disgrace for generations. Every person here knew this gamble could make or break families.

Agnes's senses faded. But she reached up with her free hand, and stroked the blade of her halberd. She repressed a pained yelp. Everyone in the room looked briefly to her in shock, but returned to their meeting.

She remained in the moment, but her ears rung; she couldn't hear their conversation. The three men produced a map unlike any Agnes ever saw. She focused on it, studied it. She watched as they drew lines from place to place. With time, she understood the center as Europe, with Asia to one direction, Africa to another, and another three great landmasses across the ocean. "South America, North America, Greenland" she made out. She saw another massive island, but couldn't manage to read the name. She took one step forward, and again, all attention was on her. The other three guards lowered their halberds. She stepped back and waited until everyone returned to their business.

Moments passed, and she found herself lost in the moment, lost in time.

• • •

Agnes descended into curiosity. The moment she saw the tomb walls once more, she climbed to her feet and began transcribing the map from memory. She prided herself in her memory, but the map felt like it came from another place, another time, like a dream she dreamt a decade ago.

She drew quickly, trying first to block the rough shapes. She forced blood to her hands to act as an inkwell, and then spread the rough blocks outward into every detail she could muster. She scribbled “America” in one of the western land-masses, but the blood pulled together like mercury to fill in the writing. She moved to the side, and wrote. The memories faded, but she grabbed a sharp rock, evoking the pain from the halberd blade. The memory sharpened in response.

“Eighty and nine. The empress signed an accord for twenty and five years. Their business would represent her empire in another land. They swore over jewels, clean and shimmering.”

Resolute, she walked further down the corridor. In the distance, she saw an end. But well before she could reach it, her senses faded once more.

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She saw a ship on the ocean, from overhead as if she were a bird. It shook and swung, spilling black oil into the water around it. The blackness overcame her vision completely, and she was lost again.

She found herself again in a crowd. The people looked different to her, like a Gangrel called “Anda” she met once years ago. Angular features. They were mostly young and angry. She stood with them in a large, stone courtyard, larger than any courtyard she’d ever seen before.

The people formed a wall, standing at the ready. She leaped up to see over the crowd. She saw massive green carts advancing. Larger than any carriage she’d seen before. Each with a cannon atop.

Her senses snapped back to the tomb.

• • •

Agnes descended into frustration. She came to, biting her arm again, trying to distract her senses, to keep her in the vision. She failed. She shut her eyes, and chanted what she could remember of the people on the stone courtyard.

“No! I wasn’t finished! What did I see? I need to return! I need to see more!” She growled out, and kicked the wall. “Show me more! Sire!” She looked left, then looked right. She looked back at her writings. She looked back over each. “Eighty and nine. Eighty and nine. Eighty and nine. Eighty and nine.” She looked

to the ceiling and paced. "What does it mean? This is not a Rite of Enigmas! This is just visions. They mean nothing together. What are you showing me? Sire! Tell me!"

She sat, crossed her legs, and concentrated.

"An army. A king is assassinated. Killed by a friar."

She paused.

"The people fighting against an army. Perhaps a Lupine? If this is why they kill us, I understand. That feeling. Nothing like it in the world."

She nodded to herself.

"The people fought an army. In their own city, they overwhelmed the army."

She nodded again, firmer.

"A queen approves a business moving into a faraway land."

She winced and shook her head.

"Then the people stood against an army again. What is the link?" She stood and paced, descending into obsession. "I see the people fighting power each time, except when the queen makes her agreement with the businessmen. Are the businessmen trying to topple the queen? Are they trying to embarrass and scandalize her by failing? That would be delightfully subversive, but they appeared wealthy and interested in success. Of course, wouldn't they want to appear as such? I could not see their souls in that mortal shell. I forgot what it's like to not intuit the truth. Mortality must be so very frightening. How does one live without seeing through deception?" She grunted and paced harder now, putting a bloody hand to her chin.

"It was another time. The future, not the past. I've seen enough of the past, worn on the breasts of my elders. I saw the world to come. So much war. So much struggle. Where were the Cainites? Mostly, I saw the sun. They must have been in slumber. But why am I seeing mortal stories? Do they matter to me? To us? Human blood lives on, so should we."

She looked to the end of the hall, to the final stretch of her journey. To the wall. To the culmination. She walked onward, and her vision blurred and blackened.

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Agnes saw blackness. She knew no soil, no stone, no grass beneath her feet. She felt as if she were falling, but falling nowhere. As her vision focused, she saw the starry sky above her head and below her feet. She felt warmth from behind her, so she twisted and contorted her body in the air to see. Behind her she saw a sun, greater than any she could imagine. Enormous, as tall and wide as her vision could handle. It was everywhere. It was red and yellow and white and hotter than a thousand fires. This was not the welcoming sun of her earlier visions. This was the sun which would take her existence, that should grant her Final Death. But it didn't. Not truly.

The heat was such that she did not burn; the heat pulled her asunder. She screamed but heard nothing; her words disintegrated with her flesh. This wasn't a burn. This was a slaughter. This was divine punishment, the way it was always described. It was pain and agony beyond compare.

• • •

"Nooooooo!" She screamed, now back in the tomb. She patted herself all over, verifying that her body was in fact there. "No, no. This can't be it. Show me the people. Show me more stories. The people fight the army. The people fight the queen. More fighting. No suns!" She stormed down the hall, and placed both hands on the far wall. Her vision went black.

• • •

When she came to, she felt terrible pain down her arms, and down her back. She looked to both sides, and as her vision reformed, she saw her wrists pinned to boards. She looked down to see herself hanging aloft. And as the focus returned, she saw others in a grid, crucified. She pulled at her bonds. She felt her vampiric strength, but it simply wasn't enough. Her fellows, a great many, were all Cainite as well. Their faces taut and dry, fangs extended. Flies swarmed all around. Those around her groaned and screamed, fighting their bonds with futility.

She tried healing her wrists, forcing the nails out. But her wounds burned like the sun. She lost herself to frenzy as she felt the searing light against her blood. Minutes later, she stopped. She looked around again. She counted. The grid consisted of fifteen rows, with one then three then thirteen then six in each following row for twelve rows. She could not see the one at the front. Her row was the eleventh.

She looked to her neighbors.

"Where are we? From whence do we come? Why are we here?"

The man to her left peered over, but had no eyes. Maggots fell from the sockets. His jaw opened, and crumbled to dust, spewing forth a tide of larvae. She looked to her right. The woman to that side was nude, with a grid of lacerations covering every inch of her body. She chanted, wailed in some unknown language.

She fought her bonds to no avail and an hour passed. Then another.

"Sire! Release me! Bring me back to the tomb! Show me another story! I've learned all I can learn now, and I want to return!" She screamed for hours. Hours became days. The sun rose, and burned her flesh like paper, but her body refused to pass into the Final Death.

Another night passed. And another day. Another night. Another day.

On the fourth night, she gave in. She stopped fighting. She stopped screaming. She resigned herself to an end on this hill, on this cross.

She closed her eyes, and begged for torpor. For an end. And at that, she found herself back in the tomb.

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Agnes descended into hunger. When she came to, her body was covered in scratches and blood. She fought the hunger for moments, and haphazardly scribbled a map on the wall. Of one cross, then three, then thirteen, then six and six ten times more. Then she wrote a final note.

“Eighty and nine. We were eighty and nine on a hill, held high for night and day and night and day and night and day and night. We could not die. We could not end. We were eighty and nine, and we could not fight the kings and queens and armies like the people. We could only hang.”

She looked to the beginning of the hall, to the stairs. To the eighty-eight flights above her.

“I am weak, broken, tired, and hungry. I have no faith in myself, sire, or in my body. I could not leave. Was it day? Was it night? When I come to surface to surface, will I see the sun or will I see the moon?”

She stood and hobbled to the first flight of stairs. “Sire? You asked me to come down here. Am I meant for torpor? So soon? I’m but a young student. I need to learn. Not the lessons of sleep.”

She looked up the stairs.

“I cannot make it on my own.”

She heard a voice inside, her sire’s. “You’re not alone, Agnes.”

She blinked twice, then nodded. Agnes ascended into her Beast, into faith. Her rage, her hunger, her innermost demon carried her out. Up eighty-eight flights, and away from this place. And with each flight, she heard the tomb collapse behind her, sealing her lessons, her messages away for another student.

GHOSTS OF CHORAZIN

BY ALAN ALEXANDER

1242 C.E. (NOW)

“Chorazin.”

Enkara whispered the name of Hell’s most-favored citadel to herself as she surveyed the blasted hilltop beneath which so much evil resided. In six centuries, it seemed the hill’s appearance had not changed at all. Or perhaps it had, and Enkara’s own memories had simply faded, worn down by the procession of the ages. The hill’s benign appearance was deceptive in any case. The truth of Chorazin lay buried far beneath in the warrens and tunnels dug deep into the living earth by the Baali and their pitiful mortal cultists for the benefit of what lay buried beneath the fortress-temple. And now, Enkara had returned here to the place where she had lost the only being she had ever loved after betraying him in the worst possible way.

By not killing him when he’d begged her.

The journey from Alamut to Chorazin had taken three months. At first, it had been just Enkara and her three ghoulish servants, but when they arrived in Tyre, they were challenged by a group of drunken fools, eight French knights in the service of Phillip of Montfort who were out on the town and who thought that beneath Enkara’s veils lay a prize worth claiming for the night. She slew five of them for their effrontery, pausing only long enough to commend one of them for the quality of steel in his sword before decapitating him with it. After slaking her thirst on the fallen knights, Enkara offered the three blubbing survivors a choice: serve her and be gifted the blessings of her blood or die then and there. As a further condition, if they choose service, the three knights would immediately have to renounce their God and accept damnation.

In truth, Enkara cared nothing for the superstitions of the Christian knights, no more than she cared for the fables of the Prophet of Islam which had captured the

imagination of so many of the younger Children of Haqim. When Enkara lived, she worshiped the gods of Sumer, but she had set those myths aside long ago. In these nights, Haqim alone was worthy of her veneration. Still, she wished to test the faith of these would-be crusaders, to judge them as she would any Cainite who crossed her path. All three were craven cowards who begged for their lives even in the face of one who they thought was a servant of the Devil himself. She fed them from her veins and bound them to her service...for the moment. While she had judged them and found them lacking, she would likely need to replenish herself on the trip back, and a source of blood that could carry things and generally make itself useful was more practical than trying to hunt in an area as desolate as Chorazin.

646 C.E.

*(From The Commentaries of Enkara on
the Battle of Chorazin, transl. from Imperial Aramaic)*

We arrived at the battle site in full force — fifty judges plus two hundred mortal soldiers. We soon received word that the Amr and his sorcerers would be delayed but that they would meet up with the Salubri contingent and join us within two night's time. Unwilling to delay for so long while our own forces were exposed in the field, Izhim Thrice-Blessed, my sire, commander, and lover, ordered us to take up defensive positions while he led a reconnaissance group into Chorazin to assess the situation. As the sun rose that day, Izhim and I rested together inside his warded sarcophagus. It was the last time we would do so.

The reconnaissance group penetrated the defenses of Chorazin three hours after sunset on the next night. They did not return. The next day and for the first time in my unlife, I slept alone in Izhim's sarcophagus. The following night, the Salubri and the Children's sorcerers arrived. The Amr was most vexed when he learned that Izhim's group had not returned. He told me that he had seen portents and ill omens suggesting that the Baali were on the cusp of some terrible working. I asked him if we could defeat them. Al-Ashrad's troubling response was that he did not fear defeat as much as the price we might pay even in victory.

1242 A.D. (NOW)

As she surveyed the scene, Enkara contemplated the course of her unlife since she was last here. After nearly six centuries, she had long since put the Chorazin campaign behind her. The slave girl from Seleucia had become a respected elder among the Children of Haqim. She could probably have been powerful as well as respected if she'd chosen, but Enkara truly believed in the wisdom of Haqim as she understood it — that she was meant to be a Judge of the Children of Caine rather than a slave to the Jihad. Unfortunately, her traditionalist beliefs put her at odds with many factions among the Children. In recent centuries, the number of

Children devoted to the teachings of the Prophet had grown, and Enkara balked at the idea of any Child of Haqim placing devotion to a mortal religion over their loyalty to their clan and founder.

Not that those beliefs meant that she would have any truck with that other emerging movement within the clan — the Web of Knives. A strange little cult as far as Enkara was concerned, it consisted of a number of Children both young and old who believed a bizarrely heretical reimagining of Haqim's origins and agenda. Enkara knew Haqim personally — her Embrace had preceded his departure by several centuries. The Founder seldom spoke to her of the First and Second Cities, but what Enkara recalled of him after all this time was decidedly inconsistent with the Assassins' bloody tyrant to whom "judging the other Cainites" was a euphemism for exterminating them to the last.

Ironically, it was only after the loss of Izhim Thrice-Blessed at Chorazin that Enkara truly blossomed. He had rechristened her "Enkara" after her Embrace at Seleucia. The word meant "weapon" in Izhim's nearly-forgotten Sumerian tongue, and he had spent nearly eight centuries forging her into one. By the time of the Chorazin campaign, "Izhim's Weapon" was known and respected (and sometimes feared) both inside and outside Alamut. After Izhim's loss, she was on her own... and swiftly proved herself worthy of his patronage. She was as wise as she was powerful, as skilled with words as she was with a blade, and within century after Chorazin, there were none who could deny Enkara's worthiness as one of the Judges. Izhim's Weapon had become her own person.

But now, after all that time in which she had put Izhim out of her mind, she unexpectedly found her dreams dominated by him. Images of him pulled screaming into...that thing. Images of him calling her name, begging her to come and save him from his fate. Eventually, she spoke to the Amr Al-Ashrad who thought that there might well be some meaning to her dreams. In particular, while the wily old sorcerer was cagey about his suspicions, he hinted that Chorazin might have some connection to the Blood Curse, a magical condition which had been spreading throughout the clan over the centuries since the fall of the demon-fortress. Mainly an issue for the warriors, the Blood Curse caused those afflicted with it to crave the blood of fellow Cainites, often to the point of frenzying at the mere scent of it. Opinion was divided over how to treat those afflicted, with the Web of Knives certain that it was a sign from Haqim proving his sanction of diablerie against Cainites of other clans. Enkara concurred with the Amr's thoughts and reminded him that she had witnessed what might well have been the first Children claimed by the curse: warriors who went mad in the tunnels of Chorazin and attacked one another for their blood before being put down. Finding Enkara's dreams to be auspicious, the Amr bade her travel to the ruins of Chorazin to see if any clues about the Blood Curse could be found there. Three months later, she had finally arrived.

By Enkara's command, her loyal ghouls and her newly-acquired larder remained at the campsite almost a mile from the hill. She made her way alone, and

at the edge of the wards that the Amr had set some six centuries before, she pulled a scroll from her bag and read the inscription as Al-Ashrad had taught her. She noticed a faint shimmer ahead, and the magical compulsion that demanded she flee this dreadful place faded. The normal non-magical instinct to flee remained, but Enkara resisted it. She had survived Chorazin once before when it was fully populated by the vilest of creatures and emerged with no injury worse than a shattered heart. Now that the fortress was empty, she had nothing to fear and nothing else Chorazin could take.

646 C.E.

**(From *The Commentaries of Enkara*
on the *Battle of Chorazin*, transl. from Imperial Aramaic)**

There were three primary entryways into Chorazin. At Al-Ashrad's command, I led a detachment of fifteen of warriors and thirty ghouls into the southern entrance. In those tunnels, most of our natural advantages were neutralized. We were too many to move with our characteristic stealth, and to make free use of our wondrous speed would mean leaving our mortal soldiers behind while simultaneously exhausting our reserves of blood recklessly. Almost immediately, we were set upon by Chorazin's first line of defense, pitiful mortals who had been transfigured by daemonic magic into monstrosities. One man was disemboweled by Rashid only to collapse into a swarm of man-eating scarabs that fell upon my comrade and devoured him screaming. A group of cultists shouted obscenities at us as they charged...despite the fact that their mouths had been sewn shut and their eyes removed. Abominations that had once been children dropped down from the ceiling upon us, their forearms and lower legs replaced by jagged bone hooks that allowed them to scuttle about like spiders.

And that was just the mortal slaves. The number of Baali to be found in Chorazin seemed mercifully small — Baali seldom congregated in large numbers as they were prone to infighting — but those we found in the tunnels had fearsome powers at their disposal. Black flames that they could spit out at will. Awful wailing sounds that caused those who heard to be so overcome with despair and shame that they became helpless. Curses invoked in the infernal language of Hell itself that could strike down even the pure of heart with ill-fortune.

But the power of the enemy was no match for the gifts of Haqim, and our swords burned through the Baali and their servants with a righteous flame. Eventually, we made our way to the central chamber at the lowest level of the fortress. Then, we paused, transfixed in horror. The Children are accustomed both to Death and to her handmaiden Blood, but few among us had seen either in such abundancy. The central chamber of Chorazin was a domed area almost two hundred feet across and a hundred feet high at its apex. The sloping walls

of the dome were of black stonework, but they were riven with glowing crimson veins that illuminated the scene in an unnatural hellish light that pulsed like a dreadful heartbeat. In the center of the chamber was a massive totem representing the infernal deity of the Baali. Or so I thought at first. It was a great hand seemingly carved out of a single titanic piece of volcanic rock and stretching nearly to the ceiling of the dome. The hand was painstakingly carved so as to seem covered in scales, and the palm was marked with the burning-red sigil of the demon Namtaru that pulsed in time with the veins in the walls.

And sprawled around the monstrous hand was a sea of flesh and blood. I now realized to my amazement that the cultists and Cainites we had struggled against to reach this pit were no more than a fifth of the fortress's total population. Those we fought had been a diversion. Here, at the heart of Chorazin, at least a dozen Baali and several hundred mortals made the ultimate sacrifice to their dark god — ritual suicide. Hundreds of cultists, apparently freely and of their own will, were merrily slicing upon themselves with knives and swords to spill their hearts' blood onto the chamber floor. The smell of vitae was almost overpowering. And for some of our number, it was overpowering. My distraction was broken by a fierce growl followed by the sounds of nearby struggle. My second-in-command, Zubayr, who had fought by my side for almost two centuries, had entered a powerful frenzy unlike any we'd ever seen. Consumed by a maddening thirst for blood, he flung himself on his nearest companion and sought to drain her dry. We were forced to end him, but he would not be the last to suffer such a fate.

I turned back to the chamber and watched in horror as the sea of blood moved of its own accord towards the terrible hand in the center of the room. In a circle around the hand were the Baali themselves, thirteen in all, their arms stretched towards the Hand in supplication. The blood washed up around them and then over them, trapping each Devil in a pillar of swirling blood. Then, the blood itself ignited, enveloping each of them in hellfire. The Baali did not even scream as the flames consumed them, and it was by the light of those thirteen funeral pyres that I could see Izhim and the other twelve captives. They were somehow embedded inside the Hand of Namtaru, their heads and limbs struggling to escape from the jet-black surface of the statue, a surface that now seemed more like shimmering oil than basalt as it sought to drown them within the Hand's lifeless interior.

"Lifeless" I thought, until I saw Namtaru's giant fingers slowly start to move.

1242 A.D. (NOW)

Enkara moved through the tunnels of Chorazin in utter silence. Ironically, for once, she found the quiet unnerving, for in the absence of her own footsteps, there were no sounds to be heard at all in the abandoned fortress. After just a few moments, she was also in complete darkness. Reaching down inside her robes, she

produced a brass amulet, another gift from the Amr. Enkara was not a sorcerer, but she was quite familiar with their ways. Biting the side of her cheek, she kissed the amulet and allowed her blood to feed it. Then, she uttered a quick prayer to Shamash, the Babylonian sun deity. Instantly, Enkara could see clearly as if a bright light had illuminated the tunnel. To her surprise, she realized that the walls, floor, and ceiling were all tinged red. Cautiously, she stepped over to the nearest wall and gently ran her fingers across it. She touched her fingertips to her lips and was even more surprised to detect the taste of blood. Old blood to be sure, but certainly not six hundred years old.

“A few weeks at most,” she thought to herself. “Could someone have been here recently to make sacrifices to the demon? And if so, how could they have spilled enough blood to coat every surface without leaving any other signs of their passage?”

Shaken, but still determined, Enkara forged onwards. Soon, she was in an open area full of stalagmites and other rock formations, and still everything was tinted the color of blood, though the light from her amulet caused the formations to cast black shadows that flickered as she moved. As she made her way to the center of the chamber, something in the pattern of the shadows’ movement troubled her, and she froze. The shadows still flickered even when she did not move. Then, as if aware that they had been detected, they suddenly moved with purpose, coalescing into ebon creatures that looked like dark echoes of the nightmares she had fought here so many centuries before. Enkara pulled out her sword with her right hand, raking the blade across the palm of her left as she did to coat it with her deadly vitae.

Izhim’s Weapon was outnumbered but still both powerful and determined. And she had not returned to Chorazin to fall prey to its ghosts.

646 C.E.

**(From *The Commentaries of Enkara*
on the Battle of Chorazin, transl. from Imperial Aramaic)**

By the time we had arrived, Izhim and his fellows had nearly been subsumed into the Hand of Namtaru which had begun to move of its own accord. What we had naively believed to be the Baali’s idol now seemed to literally be the demon they worshiped, buried since time immemorial beneath this cursed hilltop. Despite that terrible realization, my own attention was fixed upon Izhim Thrice-Blessed, my sire and lover. Overcome, I ran into the chamber, heedless of the danger in my haste to rescue him. The warriors who had accompanied me called out begging me to come back. When I ignored them, the most loyal among them followed me. That they should have been doomed because of their loyalty to me shames me to this very night.

Even then, I was already an elder, and I was strong in both blood and will. I smelled the heady aroma of the blood that filled the chamber floor up past my ankles, but so focused was I upon freeing Izhim that the blood's temptation had no purchase on me. My comrades were not so fortunate. Behind me, I heard terrible growls followed by screams of surprise. I spared a glance back to see that four of the warriors had been overcome by the scent of the tainted vitae and driven to frenzy, turning on the others in an effort to consume them. Undaunted, I called upon the gifts of Haqim and headed towards Izhim so swiftly that I practically ran across the surface of the blood without sinking. By the time I reached my lover, his head, shoulders, and right arm were all that protruded from the Hand's surface.

I cried out to Izhim. "Hold on, my love! We shall soon have you free!" I kissed him desperately and then grasped his shoulder and arm and pulled with all my might. He did not move from inside the monstrosity, not even when I felt his shoulder and forearm break from the force of my exertion. He screamed in agony, whether from my ineffectual efforts to free him or the pain of his imprisonment. Then, he looked me in the eyes and said the words that would haunt my dreams for decades to come.

"Enkara... kill me! Before it is too late!"

I recoiled at his instructions unable to countenance such an act. Then, he slid further into the demon's stony flesh. High above, Namtaru's fingertips began to flex with greater range, as if the demon was working out the kinks after a long, deep sleep. I tried again to pull Izhim free before strong arms grasped at me and pulled me away. I struggled, even as fellow warriors who bravely followed me shouted that we must withdraw, that the Amr and the sorcerers were preparing to scourge this entire chamber with their magic to ensure that the demon returned to his slumber. I begged them to try to rescue Izhim before that could happen, but even as I spoke, Izhim screamed my name once more. I turned to face him just in time to see his agonized face disappear within the corpus of the buried Namtaru. Weeping at my loss, I rushed forward one last time to grasp his still free hand and kiss it. Then, it was ripped away to sink into the Hand which instantly solidified back into impervious basalt.

I nearly frenzied myself from rage. Before I could harm one of my allies, one of the Salubri elders stepped forward and struck me across the jaw with such a mighty blow that it would have killed a mortal instantly. I swooned and came to my senses moments later in the safety of the cavern that we had followed to enter the chamber. From all around, I heard incantations in the dead languages of Sumer, Akkad, and Ur. Then, a cold white flame rose up to fill the chamber, incinerating the dead bodies and the vitae they had shed. In the center of the inferno, I could see the terrible Hand of Namtaru writhe in pain and then still. The flames died down, and when they were gone, nothing remained save the hand itself, now

smoking but immobile. The Baali and their servants were exterminated, and that which they worshiped was bound once more. But our losses were terrible. Over half the elders of Haqim's warrior caste were gone. The Salubri warriors had suffered even greater losses, including the death of Samiel, the general of their line. And even that fate was kinder than the one to befall my beloved Izhim, a fate most assuredly worse than death. Chorazin had been cleansed, but for me, the cost was far too high.

1242 A.D. (NOW)

Scarred, weakened, and dangerously low on blood, Enkara finally made it to the central chamber. Strangely, once she made it to the tunnel's opening, the shadow-things which had harried her for the last few hours withdrew as if afraid to approach the chamber. There were no signs of activity inside, so Enkara cautiously made her way across the open area towards the Hand. The blackened ground beneath her crunched softly. Where the tunnels leading to the central chamber had been colored blood-red, the chamber itself was utterly black, and even after all these centuries, the floor was still coated with several inches of ash.

As she drew near, Enkara felt rather than heard the soft whisper of Izhim calling out to her from within the Hand. In her mind, she sensed her lover's pain and despair and, above all, a terrible all-consuming thirst.

"Haqim have mercy," she thought. "Izhim has been imprisoned for almost six centuries! How much of that time has he spent conscious and in agony from lack of blood?"

A part of Enkara intuited that to interact with the Hand of Namtaru in any way might be unwise, if not disastrous. But that part was drowned out by emotions that she'd thought burned away centuries before. Blood called to blood, and to Enkara, Izhim's vitae seemed almost deafening. Without hesitation, she sliced open her hand and held it to the stone in the exact spot from whence Izhim's face disappeared. Instantly, the surface of the stone rippled like water, and after a few seconds, the pallid face of Izhim Thrice-Blessed emerged from the liquefied stone. Enkara gasped. Unlike other Cainites who grew paler with age, the skin of Children darkened, and when Enkara had last seen her sire, his skin had turned midnight black after over fifty centuries of unlife. Yet now, he was as pale as bleached bone and his once blackened hair was the color of straw.

"En... kara... B-b-b-blood," he croaked softly as if using his own voice for the first time in untold ages. She rushed forward and placed her still bleeding hand over his mouth. He sucked greedily, and as he did, more of the ancient vampire's body emerged from the Hand until he finally slid free and dropped to the floor without letting go of Enkara's hand. Other than his paleness, he looked as he did nearly six centuries before. With some difficulty, Enkara pulled her hand free from her lover's mouth, concerned that he might frenzy from hunger and wondering whether she was even capable of restraining him if he did.

“Izhim, be at peace. Let me take you from this terrible place. I have servants outside. Their blood awaits you.”

Slowly, Izhim stood up and gently pulled Enkara into an embrace.

“Oh, Enkara. My Beautiful Weapon.” She hesitated for a moment and then relaxed, relieved and overjoyed to have her sire and lover back once more. He nuzzled her hair softly and inhaled her fragrance before leaning in to whisper in her ear.

“Their blood could never taste as sweet as yours.”

Enkara had barely an instant to register the danger before Izhim seized her in a grip of iron and flung her violently against the Hand of Namtaru. She hissed in pain...and then screamed, as ebon blades sprang from the stony hand and impaled her. Snaking their way through her body, the blades exited through her chest, legs, and arms before wrapping around upon themselves to immobilize her. Enkara called out to Izhim, but he merely put his finger up to his lips.

“Shhh,” he said softly. In response, a spiky tendril slithered out of the Hand and wrapped itself around her neck so tightly she could hardly speak.

He regarded her with a cool expression. “You have questions, I suppose.” Then, he nodded, as if listening to the words of some hidden advisor. “What you must understand, Enkara, is that the Baali’s ritual was...inadequate. The true leaders of the Baali fled this place long before we had arrived, leaving behind devoted cultists and enthralled childer who would perform the ritual upon our arrival. The Battle of Chorazin was a trap for the Children of Haqim, one in which mortals and Baali and...prisoners were sacrificed to the Fallen One.”

“Namtaru,” Enkara said through gritted teeth as the barbed tendril around her throat tightened.

“Namtaru is a name, Enkara,” he said indulgently, as if talking to a child. “Nothing more. Just a word used in a futile effort to contain the infinite.” He laughed gratingly and shook his head. “I was so arrogant when I came here, Enkara. I had walked the night for five thousand years and thought that I knew every secret worth learning. Then, the Fallen One took me inside of him and conveyed me to...that other place. He...he showed me things, Enkara. He told me things. I...I had no idea.”

Izhim paused abruptly before blinking rapidly for several seconds, and his mouth began to twist and crumple as if he were on the verge of weeping. Despite her own pain at Izhim’s betrayal, Enkara felt heartsick at how her sire and lover must have been tormented by the demon for centuries. Then, he shuddered and regained his composure.

“I digress. Despite the Baali’s best efforts, their curse was incomplete. The sacrifice of so many lives aroused the Fallen One but not enough for him to grant the boon they requested. The Fallen One wanted more. And what he wanted was

something only I could give him. You see, of all the Children offered up that night, I was the only one who truly, truly loved someone else. You.”

“Yes, Izhim,” she gasped through the pain. “Remember how you once loved me.”

“I still love you, Enkara!” he said urgently as if it were vital that she believe him. “I do! I would die for you, die a thousand times if I could.” Then, he stopped and the strange intensity faded to be replaced by resignation. “I just... I cannot suffer for you anymore. Not. One. Second, More.”

Izhim stepped back and raised his arms as if in supplication to the Hand of Namtaru.

“I, Izhim, called Thrice-Blessed, childe of Anath, grand-childe of Haqim the Hunter, offer freely my name, my allegiance, and my one true love in accordance with our agreement. Let the contract be fulfilled.” He lowered his hands and looked at Enkara almost sadly. “Take my love away.”

The Hand of Namtaru shook violently and then began to flex its fingers once more, even as the crimson veins in the walls flared brighter than they had when last Enkara was here.

“It is done,” he said solemnly. “The sacrifice is accepted. The Blood-Curse which was but a trickle through the warrior caste will become a flood. It will taint them all and pass thence to the other castes. The Children will become cannibal-monsters who hunt not for justice but merely to satiate their lust for diablerie. The other clans will despise the Children and, in time, seek their destruction. Thus is the vengeance of the Baali fulfilled.”

With that, Enkara felt her body slowly sink into the stone of the Hand as if it were icy cold mud. At once, she felt the tendrils of Namtaru — the Fallen One! — reach inside her mind and soul to promise her torments both agonizing and exquisite, agonies of the most terrible and succulent kind. Weeping in terror, she cried out to her lover one last time.

“IZHIM!!!”

He stepped up to the love of his unlife, wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumb, and then raised that thumb to his mouth to lick it clean.

“Izhim Thrice-Blessed is gone, my Beautiful Weapon. My name is Izhim ur-Baal. And at last, I am free.” With that, he turned and walked away. Enkara screamed once more before she was lost within the Hand of Namtaru. Izhim ur-Baal departed and passed into history. Behind him, the hell-fortress of the Baali waited, quiet and empty.

Empty save for the ghosts of Chorazin.

ORFEO'S PLAGUE

BY RICHARD DANSKY

It was the autumn of plague when Orfeo was summoned to the House of the Silent Grey. Never before had his presence been demanded there, in that most august institution of research for the sons and daughters of Cappadocius, and never before had his most humble inquiries been deemed perhaps worthy of attention.

But these were no ordinary nights, not in Venice when the canals stank with sickness, and the boatmen poled their craft carefully for fear of colliding with one of the floated corpses carelessly tossed into the canals. It was a new sickness, unlike any seen before, and both the Doge and the real powers of the city had declared that every effort be bent to finding a cure for this most terrible of maladies. Great men of science worked tirelessly to solve the puzzle, and both the living and the dead labored tirelessly to wrestle answers from those corpses that could be preserved.

The Cappadocian Orfeo was one of those among the unliving tasked with studying the plague, and he took his labors seriously. Even so, he knew that the space allotted for his researches was small, tucked into the deepest sub-cellar of a palazzo owned by a servant of the clan, and that others commanded far greater resources and respect. Surely they, he reasoned, had made greater strides than his own small contributions. Surely the others, the ones with endless subjects to study and endless servants to record their observations and support their efforts, they could be the ones who had found the key to the sickness and who would be thus rewarded. Surely he was least among those Cainites who styled themselves scholars of death.

And so it was a surprise to Orfeo when the door to his chamber echoed with the urgent rapping of a visitor. Carefully, he replaced his instruments in their proper slots, and paused to wash the ruddy, clotted gore from his hands before responding. "Enter," he called out, and the door swung open.

“Orfeo DiScalfani?” The question was not a question, it was an accusation, and the man who offered it was dressed in the rich livery of the Giovani family. He was living, Orfeo saw, a heavysset fellow with a round face and unkempt black locks, and whose chest was heaving silently with the effort of stumbling all the way down to Orfeo’s tiny chamber. His face was red and his eyes were piggy, their wet squint hiding the dull glaze that indicated a bond of blood. Sloppy and vulgar, those were the hallmarks of the Giovani, and the messenger wore his resentment for having had to render service to one not of his bonded house on his gravy-spotted sleeve.

“I am he,” said Orfeo, and crossed the room effortlessly in three strides. “To whom do I owe the...pleasure of your visit?”

The messenger ignored him, instead reaching into a pouch at his waist and pulling forth a small but ornately decorated scroll. “Your presence is requested,” the man said, forcing the scroll into Orfeo’s cold fingers. “My duty is now discharged, and I will leave you to this gloomy place. May you rot in it.” Saying that, the man turned on his heel and walked away as rapidly as he could without giving too much offense, not that offending one so lowly in the ranks of the clan as Orfeo would be considered a great sin.

For his part, Orfeo watched the man go, observing him recede into the distance until the first huffing, puffing sounds of his lugging himself up the staircase to the palazzo proper could be heard. Then and only then did he take a moment to examine the document he had been given.

The seal on it was one he recognized, a stylized F superimposed on what he had once been told was a knucklebone — “because fate rolls dice with us all”. Those were the words of his sire and instructor, Master Fasih, late of Asia Minor, and that he had summoned Orfeo in this manner was a matter of some significance indeed.

The message inside the scroll was terse, as was Master Fasih’s way. “Your skills and presence are required at the House of the Silent Grey. Please attend.”

Which of course meant, “Come immediately”. Hastily, Orfeo finished tidying his notes and washed his hands, then scurried for the door. Briefly, he considered changing into more formal garb, but the note requested his skills as well as his presence. There would be work to be done, and fancy robes would not impress Master Fasih. “Quite the opposite, really,” Orfeo said to himself, and then shut the door behind him.

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The House of Silent Grey was not one of the better known strongholds of the Cappadocians. Old, secluded, and ever so slightly ramshackle, it was too utilitarian for the likes of the high-living necromancers who’d recently joined the clan’s ranks, and too complicated to reach for many of the others. And yet, for those who

were neither picky nor fastidious, and who were of sufficient status that the other notables of the Clan preferred them somewhat out of the limelight, it was a perfect dwelling. Heavy stone walls, endless corridors, a maze of chambers easily secured against both intruders and the sun — it was a place, as they said, where work was done, and screams went to die.

To reach it required an awkward journey - through tunnels that burrowed beneath the city unknown to the living, then up to the surface for a last, exposed journey by boat. The candle of the hours he'd kept on his worktable had indicated that it was four hours until dawn; Orfeo would have to hurry in order to reach his destination before the sun rose; it would certainly be too late for him to return home after whatever consultation Master Fasih required. And of course, the courier did not wait to escort him, but had instead hurried away. Something odd was afoot, and Orfeo felt a mingled shudder of anticipation and disquiet.

It was not like Master Fasih to plot surprises or tricks. Then again, there was always the knucklebone.

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It was near dawn before Orfeo found himself hammering on the cyclopean doors of the House of Silent Grey. Many times, his path had been blocked by some diversion or another, and the boatman whom he'd hired to pole him down the final leg of the journey had proved curiously insistent on making detours along the way. Ultimately, Orfeo had been forced to simply shove the man out of the boat and resume his journey; there was no time to waste if Master Fasih was waiting, and besides, a boatman should know how to swim.

Several moments passed before the massive doors swung open. The servant who had unbarred them did not speak; dressed in simple brown robes, the better to hide bloodstains, she merely gestured toward the far side of the antechamber where a massive arch opened onto a long hallway lined with doors. Orfeo stepped inside and the doors swung shut behind him, plunging the room into near darkness as the servant scurried softly away.

After taking an imagined heartbeat's duration to steel himself, and to let his eyes adjust, he walked through the archway and into the corridor. Above him, a vaulted ceiling arched so high it was lost in the shadows. A row of doors, some open and some shut, lined the corridor. In the rooms beyond the open ones, he could see other Cainites like himself working diligently or studying. Most of the rooms emitted only silence; a few gave forth screams. The floor of the hallway was covered in rich carpet that muffled his footfalls. Money had been spent here, but spent only to ensure the building was suitable for its true purpose.

And at the end of the long hall was an open door, and framed in it, back turned, was the figure of Master Fasih. Orfeo hurried forward, fearful of being seen as tardy, and stumbled to a halt in the doorway of the laboratory, which blazed with light.

Sensing his student's arrival, the older Cainite turned. "Ah, Orfeo. Join me," he said, and extended one gaunt hand in a gesture of greeting. Orfeo dutifully bowed, as was proper, and then entered the chamber. In it were a number of stone tables, each girded with straps and buckles and a seemingly endless series of restraints. Candelabras suspended from the ceiling provided some illumination; torches carefully placed around the room provided more. Fasih himself stood, tall and lanky, by the side of one of the slabs, the only one in the chamber to have a subject bound to it. The man was of middle age and clearly far gone in his illness; his pallor matched that of the Cainites, and thick, sludgy rivers of sweat poured off his body onto the cold grey stone. The man was clad only in a loincloth, and Orfeo could see where a number of incisions had been made: on his arms, his thighs, his neck, and one above his heart.

As Orfeo approached, Fasih stripped off his bloodstained smock, revealing simple black garments underneath. "Recitation," he said. "The symptoms of the new plague."

Orfeo stopped, clasped his hands behind his back, and cleared his throat. "Master Fasih. The symptoms of the plague are, in order, first, a fever. Second, a great lassitude and a desire to find rest in even the most perilous or inappropriate of places. Third, a loss of interest in sustenance or water of any kind, even as the victim sweats voluminously. Fourth, a grey pallor to the skin, particularly on the face. Fifth, descent into unconsciousness from which they do not wake, followed in a matter of days by sixth, death." He bowed from the neck, not daring to look at his instructor.

"And the means of transmission?"

"Not known at this time, Master, though it appears to strike at random. Other illnesses can be traced — the first outbreaks are near the docks, for example, or in the brothels frequented by travelers or soldiers returning home. But this new plague made its appearance in all sectors of the city at once. It seems most curious."

"Indeed." Fasih cracked a half-smile, then hid it before his student looked up and spotted it. "And how would you treat this disease, were the Doge to ask you for your advice?"

Orfeo coughed once, nervously and out of old habit. "In such a case, I would recommend a course of cold baths, as well as poultices on the chest to draw out the bad humours. Beyond that, forced feedings of broth on a regular basis and a regular change of dressings so that the ill humours not be re-introduced to the body." He bit down on his tongue before he could answer further; to say too much in front of Master Fasih was to risk exposing one's self as a fool. He taught caution before all, that one should only speak when sure, and how one's uninformed guesses could be turned against the speaker.

This time, however, Fasih merely drummed his fingers against each other and stared until Orfeo had to look away. "Master. Did I miss something?"

Fasih shook his head. "Yes and no. No, in that you have clearly studied this illness, and the suggestions you make are sensible and cautious. Yes, in that, well, let me ask you this." He took a series of swift strides to stand in front of his student. "What is unusual about this malady? Why should it trouble us so, when we truck as readily with the dead as with the living?"

Orfeo blinked. "That...that it came in fall, when summer is the season of plagues?"

That brought a smile. "Yes, it came at the time when the year begins to die, instead of the sweltering months, when the miasma of the canals breeds foulness in the very air. But this is only a start. What else is there?"

Orfeo thought. "That we have word of no other city suffering from this, despite the fact that our merchants and trading vessels are not yet being turned away?"

"Excellent, excellent. The plague is unseasonal, the plague is only here. But what else? What is the missing piece?"

"Master?" Orfeo blinked. "I do not know. Some new expression, perhaps? A symptom I missed?"

"No, no." His shoulders slumped, ever so slightly. "Perhaps I was asking too much. Examine the patient and tell me what you find — or do not find."

Carefully, Orfeo rolled up his sleeves and attended the sweating man. Leaning over the patient, he lifted the man's eyelids and pressed a cold hand upon the fevered brow. Carefully each dressing was checked, each limb examined, each incision probed. During that time, the man made no sound, nor did he respond, or toss or turn. Instead, he merely lay in his dolor, the faint scent of stale sweat surrounding him in a faint cloud. Eventually, Orfeo looked up.

"Yes?" Fasih scratched the bridge of his nose, once. "What is your diagnosis?"

"His eyes, master. They are what give me pause. The light in here is dim, yet the pupils are shrunken, as if he were outside on a sunny day. I have studied many sicknesses, but this is like none I have seen before."

"The eyes are the windows of the soul," Fasih observed sagaciously. "And yet these windows are fogged. If I were to make this man your patient, what would you do?"

"I would tend to him, of course."

"And you would fail, for he is not there."

The younger vampire turned in confusion. The sick man lay on his cot, mouth open in a silent "o". "Master, he is right here."

Fasih raised an eyebrow. "Is he? Why don't you ask him?"

"I cannot, for he is insensate. The questions fall on deaf ears."

"Empty ones, Orfeo. The soul has already fled his body. You could heal the flesh and it would remain unanimated, for the spirit that would drive it has already been plucked away."

Orfeo gaped. “How can a disease of the body claim the spirit? Such a thing is—”

A distant hammering interrupted him. Fasih held up a hand as Orfeo looked around wildly, and then beckoned the same servant who had led Orfeo inside into the chamber. “Yes, Analisa?”

The servant, who had entered the room silently, bowed from the neck. “His most august self Augustus of the family Giovanni requests an audience and the privilege of discussion with you your research, Master. What shall I tell him?”

Fasih grinned without humor, his face a tired rictus. “A moment.” He turned to Orfeo. “And now it is time for you to leave. The discussions of the ancient and terrible — or the young and overly ambitious — are not for the likes of your ears, my student. Get thee hence.” He thought for a moment. “Get thee far hence. I bid thee to leave the city and seek out the knowledge of what is happening here elsewhere, as such work has been sadly lacking.”

Orfeo cast his eyes downward. His voice was thick with disappointment. “As you wish, Master. Merely allow me to return to my chambers and retrieve—”

“You will retrieve nothing. You will go, and you will go forthwith, and you will leave by the servant’s way.”

“Master, I—”

The hammering on the door came again. The servant Analisa glanced back over her shoulder, fearfully. “Master, what shall I do?”

“Let me stay with you, Master! I can assist with—”

“Signore Giovanni, he is most violently insistent—”

“Enough!” The single word brought cold silence to the room, broken only by a single, low moan from the dying man. “My servant, you will go to the front door and apologize to Signore Giovanni, explaining that I am in my researches and will require some moments to make myself presentable for such august company. My student, you will obey, and you will leave, and you will leave Venice this very night.”

“But there are but a few hours before dawn?”

“Then you should travel quickly. Begone!”

And with that, Fasih turned his back on his student and strode determinedly toward the great doors that guarded the house, the servant Analisa hurrying to stay ahead of him. A door at the back of Fasih’s lab beckoned; surely this was the servants’ entrance of which Orfeo’s master had spoken. He had never disobeyed his master before, and now seemed to him to be, for whatever reason, a spectacularly foolish time for him to start.

And yet...

He turned, and walked back over to the makeshift bed of the plague victim. The key to Fasih's odd behavior was here, Orfeo was sure of it, if only he could decipher what it was. A body stripped of its soul like a stalk of wheat roughly harvested and left to burn in the fields, a plague that woke unseasonably and refused to spread even when offered ample opportunity - the answer was right in front of him.

And then the man's eyes opened.

The pupils were still dilated, the gaze unfocused. But the man on the bed saw him, of that Orfeo was sure, and that was enough to stumbling back in shock.

"Dead man, listen to me." The man's voice was a feeble rasp, barely escaping a parched throat and cracked lips. "Heed your master. Flee wherever you are able."

Orfeo shook his head. "No, no! If you have recovered, this is a miracle! I must tell him!"

"It is not a recovery, it is cheat. This is not my body, it was merely empty so I might make use of it for a moment or two longer."

"But the plague—"

"There is no plague! Can you not understand? Listen, childe of Fasih, your sire has always dealt honorably with the dead. It is for his sake that I warn you, and it is in his name that we will meet again, but only if you leave, now. *Alea jacta est*. The long game has begun. Do not let yourself be removed from the board at the first throw of the dice. Do not let your enemy know your face."

And then with a booming crash, the great doors at the front of the house were flung open, and the smaller doors all along the hall Orfeo had traversed slammed shut.

"Go!" said the figure on the cot, and then slumped back into insensibility, the faintest wisp of something curling upwards from his mouth. There were voices in the foyer now, angry ones rising over Fasih's calm and soothing tones. Every instinct in Orfeo's body told him to go there, to help his master and sire, to try to prevent something terrible from happening.

But still the chamber echoed with the hissed final word of the possessing spirit. Still he remembered Fasih's seemingly inexplicable order. And so he turned and ran, pausing only to steal Fasih's seal from where it sat conspicuously atop a workbench. He plunged through the humble door Fasih had indicated and down the steps beyond, and by sunup he was safely buried in the hold of a merchant galley transporting fine fabrics to ports in the south of al-Andalus.

It was not until much later that he heard of the tragic fire that had enveloped the House of the Silent Grey, and how, after innumerable scorched bones were found amidst its ruins, the Doge had declared that it never be rebuilt. Or so the dead men told him.

VEIL OF POWER

BY DANIELLE LAUZON

I sat amongst a pile of satin cushions and rugs in my private audience chamber, waiting for the ghoul to arrive. My guards stood just outside the door, ready to act if anything untoward should happen. While I was confident in my own power to overtake a ghoul, I had no illusions that my rival, Elaheh, would leave me be if she learned of the meeting. Brightly colored mosaics depicting concentric geometric shapes covered the walls of the room, drawing the eye and making the large room seem full. In one corner stood a stone carved image of an angel with a cat-like form and large wings sprouting from its shoulders. I particularly liked this piece, rumored to have been in the palace since before the current Caliphate had control.

Being the Prince of Baghdad had its perks, private rooms, power, and an endless supply of followers bowing and scraping trying to earn favor. It also had its drawbacks, like Elaheh. She wanted my power, and was willing to kill for it. I just had to be faster than her.

A young girl peaked her head into the room, breaking my train of thought and bringing me back to the room. When she spotted the cushions, she entered and walked over to where I was sitting. She was Elaheh's ghoul, and by rumor, slated to undergo the Embrace soon. I could see the appeal in her dark brown hair, caramel-colored skin, and golden brown eyes. She held herself stately and dignified as a king would, evidence of Elaheh's grooming.

"Alienor, how nice of you to come to me," I said, projecting my truth out to her, wrapping her in the fullness of an illusion.

She nodded curtly, not looking at me, but instead fixing on a point nearby. Of course, she could not see my true self through the illusion, only what she expected to see — her regnant.

“Tell me child, would you do anything for me?” I asked her, the words coming to her in a perfect imitation of Elaheh’s condescending tone.

“Anything you ask of me, mistress,” she said, her head down in a submissive gesture.

Anything. I contemplated this. Was she as bound up as all that, willing to live and die by her regnant’s word? I guessed she would have to be if Elaheh was contemplating the Embrace for the girl. But that meant the Ventrue would be keeping a close eye on her, watching her for any mistakes that might mean she isn’t yet ready. The Ventrue clan tended to spend more time training and grooming their ghouls than others, almost as much time as my clan, the Ravnos. Anything was the answer I wanted, it also came with the added problem of fanatic loyalty. I only hoped I had made this meeting late enough that she wouldn’t have time to go back to her real regnant before the sun came up.

I needed to get information from the ghoul to solidify my plans. I had no idea who was working with Elaheh against me, but this ghoul should know who speaks to her regnant most often. I couldn’t very well set her to spying without breaking my carefully crafted illusion.

“Tell me what you know about Mritunjay,” I asked her, starting with my biggest question — what was Elaheh planning against me?

She hesitated slightly. I worried that maybe this was something they had spoken of before, and would this question give me away. She finally offered a hesitant answer, “Not much mistress, I don’t spend a great deal of time at court, as you know.”

I could see that she was worried she would upset her mistress by not knowing. Well, at least the girl wasn’t already part of Elaheh’s plots against me. That worked out well, since it meant she wouldn’t suspect the ghoul’s part in my plan for her.

“I do know Afrah, mistress,” she offered helpfully.

I hesitated. She was the Seneschal, another Ventrue, and likely to be close to Elaheh, if only through their shared clan. This could be information I could use, but how would Elaheh respond to this? The girl spoke out of turn, but I couldn’t betray my eagerness to hear what she had to say. I had to speak as Elaheh would, maintaining the truth Alienor saw before her. My hesitation grew into an uncomfortable silence and the girl blushed, turning her head away.

I spoke quickly, giving Elaheh’s words force, assuming displeasure was the likeliest answer, “Did I ask you about Afrah?”

“No, my lady,” her voice was soft and contrite, she didn’t return her gaze to the illusion. I wasn’t surprised to see how the harsh words scared the girl. Elaheh was well-known for her temper, and she likely expected a beating for speaking out of turn.

I softened the voice, but not too much and said, “What did you want to tell me about Afrah?”

She gave a furtive glance and spoke quickly, “She won’t support destroying the Caliphate of the city. She believes it will destabilize the city, and that the Abbadid rule is necessary for vampiric survival.”

I nearly let out a gasp. The bloodthirsty woman would go so far to secure rule in the city as to destroy the mortals in charge, destabilizing everything and likely throwing the city into a civil war. Of course she would, she killed indiscriminately to gain power, that is why I was here, wasn’t it? My mind raced with this new information. Where had this girl picked up this information? Surely, she would have detailed knowledge about Elaheh’s plans, but Afrah’s?

My hesitation did not go unnoticed by Alienor. “Mistress?” she asked tentatively.

“Go on,” I said to her, interested in what more the ghoul knew about this.

“She plans to speak with the elders about it, ask them to seek a moratorium on your action.” She said this part carefully, as though she wasn’t exactly sure what it meant. “Can they do that?”

I thought for a moment. Elaheh would certainly have a quick answer to that, but I wasn’t so sure. Of course, the elders could seek to suck, but in the end, the Prince has final say, his word the rule of law. But, the elders could force the issue. Certainly, I would support such a motion against her plot, but I wanted more than a moratorium on Elaheh, I wanted her neutralized. Really, I wanted her to pay for what she had done to my clan, and what she was surely planning to do to me. How would Elaheh respond?

“They can ask, but it is meaningless,” I said, condescension dripping from the illusion of Elaheh’s voice. “Alienor, where did you hear this information?” I asked in a gentler voice.

“I heard her talking to someone,” she hesitated and went on, “I don’t remember who, mistress. I’m sorry.”

Well, it didn’t matter, if she was speaking so openly, she was bound to get around to the elders soon. I realized this could work out in my favor. If Afrah made herself an enemy of Elaheh, then I could use them against each other. This was the break I was looking for.

“Alienor, do you know why I asked you to come here tonight?” I asked the girl, having the illusory Elaheh stand, prompting the ghoul to stand as well.

She looked into Elaheh’s eyes, searching. “I would not presume, mistress.”

“I have a task for you. A final task,” I said, giving the words meaning.

She suppressed a grin, a spark of anticipation lighting her face. Such a lovely face, too bad. “Yes, mistress?”

"This is your final test, if you pass, you are ready for the Embrace," I said, again attempting to instill gravity into the situation. "Are you ready?"

"Yes mistress," she said. The calm she mustered surprised me. She was indeed Elaheh's creature, so completely confident in herself and her mistress. I marveled at both their naiveté. Did Elaheh really think she could just leave a ghoul around and have it go unmolested? She was far too trusting.

"The task is simple, but it will be trying. You must kill Afrah," I said with a solemnity that surprised me.

She started. This was not what she was expecting to hear. "Afrah?" She asked in a quiet, shocked voice. "But... she's the Seneschal." I could see the struggle between accepting the task and doing what she felt was best. I would have to order her, and then hope it overrode any self-preservation she held onto.

"Not anymore. She plots against me, and she will suffer the fate of those who cross me. You must kill her." My voice rose as I spoke as I pushed emotions into my carefully woven façade.

"I see," she answered, somewhat fearful of her regnant's ire.

"Good. Now leave me. The sun rises soon, prepare yourself, for you must kill her today, while she sleeps and her protections are at their weakest. Be careful, those who guard us during the day may try to stop you." I told her, then waved my hand for her to leave.

She bowed deeply and hurried from the room. As she did, the scent of her flushed skin rushed past me on a puff of air. I inhaled deeply before letting it out in a satisfied sigh.

The girl was untested and certainly not a killer. The guards would catch her for certain, though hopefully not before she did her deed.

• • •

After Alienor left, I sat contemplating the plan. Elaheh wanted my power, wanted me dead, and planned to destabilize the city to gain that power. I could have just killed her, but her favor among the court stayed my hand against a public attack. She had too many powerful allies for such a bold move. Instead, I needed subtlety. Elaheh was a typical Ventrue who thought she knew everything. She would be looking for typical Ravnos deceptions, expecting me to poison the court against her. I needed to be more direct, but if I didn't play my cards right, not only would I lose the city we struggled over, but she would certainly have me killed. Alienor was the key. Elaheh cared more about the ghoul than she should, and would never suspect her.

Now all I needed was to ensure the elder's support against her. I stood and walked from the room, determined to find Tolik to speak with him. The Malkavian elder was the most powerful vampire in the city besides myself. He understood what it was to hold true power, and I wanted to gauge his reaction to Afrah's news.

I also wanted to gauge the elders support, for I would be Prince of this city, regardless of Elaheh's downfall.

• • •

I found the Malkavian in the library, surrounded by musty old books, the scent of sage and rosemary filling the room along with the sour smell of fresh ink and the crisp tang of freshly pressed parchment.

He looked up briefly from his work, and spoke without looking at me, "Mritunjay, welcome. What brings you here, and so close to sunrise?"

I stopped momentarily. I should have known there was no way to surprise the old seer. He made no pleasantries, nor did he mince words.

"I wanted to talk to you about..." I started, but he cut me off.

"Elaheh, yes. My old friend, your obsession with her is starting to disturb me. You know she will kill you if she finds you lurking here," he said, his voice impassive.

I disregarded his dry attempt at humor. "Has Afrah come to talk to you?" I asked as I walked further into the room, entering the warm embrace of the candle light at Tolik's reading desk, the faint scent of the fire rousing my Beast deep inside me.

"Yes, first thing as the sun set. I'm surprised you didn't come sooner. Did she come to you as well?" He sounded genuinely curious.

"No, rumors fly fast around this palace," I said. I waited a brief moment, then went on, "she's gone too far."

"Yes, but what would you have me do?" He finally looked up at me, a glint in his eye.

The man knew the struggle I had. I could not ask him to speak out openly against Elaheh any more than I could do so myself, her loyal sycophants would find any excuse to call for our blood. He also knew my own thirst for vengeance.

"How do the rest of the elders feel? Do they support her action?" I glanced at the book Tolik was reading, but could barely make out the cramped text.

"Why do you care so much? No reign here will last beyond the Mongols." Tolik looked up at me, his face an emotionless mask.

I laughed, "You live too much in prior nights, my friend. We beat the Mongols at Irbil."

"They'll be back," Tolik said, eyes shining.

I could never tell when the Malkavian was trying to be funny, or seriously believed the things he said. "The elders, Tolik?"

"Of course, they can't support this course of action. Does that mean they'll support you against her? I can't know all their minds fully." He made a sound like a sigh,

a deliberate exhalation of breath. “The Nosferatu here will always stand behind you, as will the Brujah if only to see her fall. Afrah may convince the Ventrue to turn their backs to Elaheh, but they are too proud to succumb to a Ravnos. You know this.”

“And you? If you put your support behind me, the undecided will be sure to follow,” I pressed.

He looked at me, the look that pierces your soul and lays all your secrets to bear. I flinched under that scrutiny, but my will is strong and I held out against him. He shook his head slowly, “What are you planning, old friend?”

“Nothing to concern yourself with. Just...your support?” I prompted.

“We’ll see,” he said, sounding somewhat resigned.

I was about to speak further, but I could see the first vestiges of pink and orange highlighting the sky outside, foretelling the rising sun. I needed to get back to my personal chambers to ensure my safety while I slept.

Tolik noticed my gaze and nodded, “We can talk more tomorrow, Mritunjay. For now, I would like to find a nice place to rest my old bones.”

I gave a quick bow as I rose, and hurried from the library, too preoccupied with my own plans to notice the empty halls around me. I only barely made it to my darkened chamber before the first rays of sunlight streamed through the palace windows.

• • •

The next night, as the sun sank into the horizon, I awoke to a palace in turmoil. Alarms rang and people rushed through the halls. I slipped unnoticed through the halls to the Prince’s receiving chamber. The room was long and wide with pillar columns dividing the room down the center in two rows leading up to a stone dais. Tapestries hung down the walls, giving the enormous room a closed in feeling. A single rug ran the length of the stone floor between the columns flanked on either side by huge mosaics that depicted a scene from what I could only assume was Enoch. I wasn’t sure, and had never asked.

Vampires stood at the edge of the dais, the Prince’s seat at the top empty. Elaheh was already there, along with a few others. Afrah was nowhere in sight. As I watched, two guards entered carrying Alienor’s limp body between them. I bit my lip in anticipation, had the girl succeeded? My presence went unnoticed by the court, their attention fixed on the scene in front of them.

Elaheh gave a sharp gasp as she saw who the guards had brought in. She rushed to the girl and helped her stand.

“What did you do?” It was more of a demand than a question, the words shouted at the girl.

The room grew quiet as the women stood facing one another. Alienor stared guileless into the face of her regnant. “I did what you asked of me.” Her voice took on a pleading tone.

"I never asked this of you. Why would I?" Elaheh said in a harsh whisper, low enough to where only the girl could hear her, though I could easily guess what she said.

Alienor faltered and stammered. She seemed to have no words for the woman. I watched them from my vantage point, a sense of joy filling me at Elaheh's obvious distress. She was clearly unprepared for this source of attack; she likely didn't yet realize there was an attack.

In the large room, the other vampires stood in anxious groups murmuring amongst themselves. They wanted justice, and speculated if Elaheh would deliver. Everyone knew this was her favorite ghoul, the prodigal child who could do no wrong.

"Silence." Elaheh's stern voice cut through the room and with it, a cold quiet descended. She looked resigned, broken, perfect.

"Alienor has murdered a member of this court, your majesty. Justice must be served," Tolik said from his place at the side of the room. He strode towards the dais and the two women. Relief flooded through me at the sight of Tolik, and the news that Afrah was indeed dead.

The silence held for a moment longer, everyone looking at Elaheh and Alienor. Finally, Elaheh stepped forward and spoke, "Alienor is a ghoul, and therefore cannot be held responsible for her actions. She must have acted at someone's behest. Someone must have coerced the girl."

"Alienor is the property of the Prince of Baghdad. Who would dare to do such a thing?" Tolik was incredulous. As well he should be, I thought with some satisfaction.

Elaheh shot him a glare. "Who indeed. How inept must someone be to attempt this kind of deception? Surely, knowing we can retrieve this information from her. We shall put this to rest, Tolik, question the girl." She sounded confident. She was right, no one would touch the Prince's ghoul. Especially not such a favored possession. My only concern was that Tolik would reveal me. The seer's loyalty was to Baghdad over any Prince. He had to know I was behind this, but his mind was harder to know than any other's. I clenched my hand into a fist, the first vestiges of fear creeping in.

Tolik took the girl by the shoulders and stared into her eyes, peering beyond them, deep into her soul. His voice took on an eerie timbre as he spoke to her, "Alienor. Do as I say. Tell me who told you to kill Afrah. Why did you do it?"

Alienor's eyes were glassy, and when she spoke, her voice sounded stilted and mechanical, "The Prince."

Gasps broke out around the room. I could barely feel the thick traces of blood oozing from where my nails cut into my palms. I took a hesitant step forward, but shook my head. No, Tolik would handle the questions. She needed to say Elaheh's

name, Tolik knew that as well as I did. I was just another Ravnos, part of the crowd, I was not Prince here, despite all my play acting over the past few days. Not yet at least.

The Seer spoke to the girl again, "A name girl, who? Tell me."

"Elaheh," she said, her voice sounding distant, as though she were remembering something, "she told me it was the final task she had for me before she would gift me with eternal life."

Murmurs arose from the crowd. I tried to prepare myself, still unsure of how Tolik would respond.

"I never!" Elaheh shouted above the din of the court. "How dare you! Why would I charge the death of my own Seneschal? This is preposterous."

Tolik looked at her and frowned, "You are the Prince, Elaheh. You have right of destruction over all of us. But this, this sneaking in the shadows and assassinations. You have power, what more do you want?"

Relief flooded me. Tolik had decided to support me after all. This would go much easier.

"I want the truth Tolik, and this is not it." She shouted.

"Do you doubt my abilities, my lady?" Tolik had adopted a formal tone and a rigid posture.

"I do, Tolik, because I did not order Afrah's death." Elaheh's voice had a dangerous edge to it.

This was my cue. I stepped forward, separating myself from the crowd. I nodded to Tolik, his part was not quite yet finished, but he had played his role admirably so far.

"Elaheh, stop. You make yourself sound like a fledgling, flailing about after getting caught in your lies." I made eye contact with her, daring her to use her power against me in the middle of the court.

Her eyes narrowed and her face hardened. "Mritunjay, what are you doing here?"

"I know it isn't obvious, but all will be clear in a moment. You once said that Baghdad was the heart of vampiric society, that all should be welcome here to marvel at what it meant to hold true power. Yet, you kill peaceful guests without cause, and you assassinate your rivals without thought." My words rang out through a now silent chamber. I could feel Elaheh's Beast rising inside her, urging her into action against me.

"Your child?" She scoffed, barely holding her calm, "she disrespected me."

My own Beast responded to her words, but my control over it was absolute.

"Afrah," I turned to the watching vampires. "Elaheh planned to overthrow the Caliphate of Baghdad. She would bring this city to civil war in a desperate bid for

power. Afrah was going to move against Elaheh in the coming nights. Clearly, Elaheh learned of Afrah's plans and has eliminated her rival." I turned to her, and gave her a slight nod, "I commend you for your foresight, but it was too little too late."

Elaheh made as if to speak, but Tolik cut her off with a gesture. Despite her position as Prince, Tolik's personal power was greater. Even Elaheh knew better than to cross him. The watching court members grew almost eager, hoping to see blood. I smiled, my confidence rising and surrounding me as though armor. And, now for the finale.

I spoke, the full aura of the Luminary surrounding me, wrapping the court in the chain of my command. "Elaheh of Clan Ventrué. I name you traitor to this city. Your power is forfeit, and is now mine. If you wish to fight me, know that you fight all present in this room. I will give you one hour to vacate *my* city."

Her eyes widened in horror.

"Yes, child. Lessons come hard. I hope you have learned that crossing the Deceivers is not worth your time. What did you say to me? You are more powerful than the rising sun? I hope for your sake that's true, because you will likely face it soon."

I had made a gamble, I had no idea if the others present would actually support me, but Tolik's support lent me confidence in my words. The silence remained unbroken, I could see a bit of hesitation on a few faces in the room. Elaheh's supporters were still on the fence.

She growled in rage, her Beast rising uncontrolled to the surface. She lunged at me, her canines extended and her skin clearly turned to stone. I took a quick step back, dodging her attack, and created the illusion of a barred cage around her, which only she could see. She railed against it for only a second before breaking out, lunging at me again. Her sudden escape surprised me, I had not suspected she had that kind of power. I was barely able to pull my sword in time, putting it between myself and the frenzied vampire. The watching vampires drew closer, the stench of greed and desire rising around them. We exchanged a few blows, but I could not stand against her for long, my sword sliding off her skin, her claws barely grazing me.

Tolik stepped forward, put his hand to the raging woman, and locked eyes with her, stopping her movement and putting her into a deep, nightmarish sleep. As if on his cue, the other elders spaced about the room moved forward, making warding gestures at the few vampires who looked to try to come to her aid.

Tolik spoke, "It is done. Mritunjay is our Prince. Someone take Elaheh away. She will awaken in a day or two, and she can leave then." He then took a knee before me, signaling his allegiance, and so too did every other vampire in the room. I smiled, ruefully. I knew this kind of position could not last, but I would certainly show them a thing or two while I held the highest seat of power in all of Baghdad.

GOAT'S NAILS

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They were mortal, the figures stumbling down the icy slope. Mahtiel knew it three miles off. Their stumbling, moonlit gait gave them away — no Cainite moved so clumsily in the evening — but even if it hadn't, they breathed, life swirling warm and misty across the frigid Hungarian hillside. She stood, still and dead as a corpse within the shade of the trees, with no breath to betray her.

"They don't have horses," said her lover, also dead.

"We had horses," she said. Even without taking her eyes off the men coming ever-closer, she knew Rothriel was rolling his eyes in embarrassment.

"They never liked us," he said finally, careful not to let exasperation creep into his tone. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction; after a lifetime of nights together, they had settled into a rhythm that was largely bemused when it wasn't romantic to sicken the both of them. "And besides," he said, "It raised suspicion to travel at night on horseback."

"That's no excuse for letting them be stolen."

"An event I have oft apologized for." Rothriel rattled his sword in his scabbard, cracking the frost that stuck to the blade. It echoed, unseemly, across the silent snowfall. "Shall we go meet them?"

Mahtiel rubbed the scar on her forehead, ran her tongue along the top of her teeth. Her canines were already distended, and her Beast cried out, whisper-soft within her.

"Yes," she said.

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There would be no negotiations with these men, these scouts on patrol. Their orders would be to slay any who walked these lands without having been born to them. Rothriel was Harrappan, his features dark and fine, and Mahtiel was a mon-

grel of Palmyra and a Rome hundreds of years dead. Neither of them could pass as a Hungarian. They were the first kine the lovers had seen in nearly a week; the Golden Horde were as much locusts as they were men. Entire villages had been depopulated in the Khan's passing, but small pockets of resistance remained. Fortified redoubts like Tihany Abbey.

Mahtiel gave them away, though whether it was deliberate or not she could not say. She was lost in her hunger when her boot crunched into ice rotten and black, hidden in the silver of the moonlight. It was enough to raise the alarm, though not enough to save the prey.

Her blade shivered in the chill, scything through the first man's neck. With a practiced flick of her neck, she caught a few drops of blood on her tongue, a trick that once drove the Palmyran crowds wild and served to sooth her savage Beast.

The rest was mere butchery: artless work, bloody and quick. When it was over, Mahtiel's foes lay died, and Rothriel's last man had long since thrown down his blade. He lay on the hard, frozen ground, curled and whimpering. Mahtiel and Rothriel approached him together.

"Mercy, please, mercy, I have a family," he cried.

The scar upon Rothriel's forehead cracked open, weeping a single bloody tear. An eye, silver and shining, cracked open. An argent iris sighted the man and focused. The light it shed was softer than that of the Hungarian moon. Rothriel cocked his head to the side. "A daughter, yes?"

The soldier whimpered. He was young, but Mahtiel was younger when she killed her first man, the Egyptian sand hot under her worn leather sandals. She thought of that sun, and fought down the panic of her Beast.

She'd been dead far longer than she had been alive.

"Go," her lover whispered to the soldier. The boy wheeled on the ground and took off, still whimpering.

"You didn't kill him," she said. "You didn't kill any of them."

"You killed two men. Is that not enough?"

Mahtiel turned to regard Rothriel, who stared coolly back as they trudged along old, crusty snow. His third eye was now lazily half-lidded. She regarded him with all three of her own, the shared mark of their fallen clan.

"This one'll need to learn to fight with his other arm, 'tis true," Rothriel said, gesturing to the soldier whose arm now bent in four places. "His fighting days are done, as they are in this man," he said again, gesturing to a soldier they both knew was playing dead. "His spirit is broken, and will mend into a more pleasing shape. They could not harm us, in any case. What is to be gained from killing?"

"Blood," Mahtiel snapped, but even in her anger she knew that was a weak argument, so she shifted to a more philosophical tack. "Golconda will not be found in maiming, nor anywhere else."

Golconda. The philosophical ward of their Clan. The state of grace vampires could attain to earn God's forgiveness...or at least defy their Damned state. Despite the faded Templar's Cross she wore and the angel's name she carried, Mahtiel had never truly believed.

"Again, 'tis true," her lover answered, taking a more paternal tone. It was difficult for him not to, at times; her Embrace had been during Rome's first grand stumble, when a queen rose up to defy an empire, but his had been long centuries before Troy fell. "Golconda cannot be found without, nor within."

Golconda. Salvation. Mahtiel shook her head. "More of Mokur's meaningless riddles. This is why I left you."

"Yet you returned! I fully expect that were anyone to ask, you would swear you'd stayed separate from me this entire time." He grinned. "Golconda is elusive. But the Christians have it true: no salvation is possible without works, so work we must."

"And faith."

"And faith," he agreed, and his face darkened. "I did a grievous wrong to a clanmate, my love. A wrong darker than death. Decades before Saulot met his end, a Healer needed me, and I left him."

"Is that what brings us to this forsaken peninsula in the middle of two armies, between Béla and Batu?" Mahtiel asked, sharper than her sword. Her boots slammed into the snow, churning it beneath her stride. "You have renounced violence! Swore never to take a life with fang or steel! I sought you out to defend you on this path of madness, and you venture into the path of the Horde? Of the Trembling Ones?"

"I never asked for you to follow me," he said, softly.

"How could I not?" she said, whipping to face him fully. They had surmounted the hill. "Not? Not? Not?" her voice came back to her, echoed by the world. The fury in her voice took her aback. Rothriel merely pointed past her.

"Tihany Abbey," he said quietly, his eyes alight with reflected fire. "Mind the echo."

Mahtiel turned. The lake, dark and deep before them, gave way to the vast, curved promontory encircling it. Perched atop that height was a squat, tough-looking little fortress, surrounded by a sea of tents and horses. A few forts had been thrown up by the invaders settling in for the siege. There weren't many, all told — a few hundred, perhaps a thousand — but they were too many to fight through.

"If they do not kill Dokiel," Rothriel said of their clanmate trapped within the monastery, "The Tremere will. They hunt us ceaselessly, Mahtiel, those who stole our clan. The Usurpers will bring storm and sleep down upon there, and move their forces into the castle with magics that cannot be matched. When that happens, they will consume Dokiel, and our Blood will again fuel our progenitor's murderers."

He placed a hand on the pommel of his sword, a reflexive movement from a dozen lifetimes of fighting. He withdrew it, suddenly, as if burned. "I swore that

violence against them would be against Saulot's wishes. I agreed with the Healers, even if you did not. But I must save Dokiel. I owe it to him."

Silence stood between them in the chill night. A cloud slid over the moon, casting them into shadow and revealing the stars. Around the fortified abbey, a hundred fires burned sentinel against the cold and the dark.

"You left me," Rothriel said. "You came back, and I never truly asked you why."

"Love," Mahtiel said, as if that should have been enough. Yet Rothriel shook his head.

"I don't doubt you love me," he said. "We twisted Saulot's words to bow to our hearts, broke his commandment to never Embrace out of love. No, we dared much for each other, and that kind of fire forges steel that cannot be broken." He sighed, an affection he had resumed after she had returned. "I think you came back out of guilt."

Rothriel gestured to the Abbey, a black pebble on the mountain, shining in the moonlight. "I spent a harsh winter here, nearly a hundred and fifty years ago. The Salubri there was near as old as I, but I was a fledgling at his feet. In the words of the Christians, he found Golconda. 'Be a lamb before the lion of your Beast,' he said."

Rothriel sounded full of awe, but Mahtiel quirked a smile at that. "They used to feed the lions of the fighting pits lamb meat," she said, thinking of her lost homeland. "They were well-sated, and less fierce for the lesser fighters. I preferred my lions starving."

They were silent once again.

"Come," Mahtiel said at last. There would be no purchase in arguing. "The Horde won't lessen any time soon. Tihany can hold out for years. Dokiel cannot. We shall resume this on the morrow's moonrise."

• • •

They woke on broken shells, having slept on the sandy crust of the lakeshore. Mahtiel planted her hand and shoved the old Mongol boat off them as she stood, sending their shield against the sun clattering across the beach. It cracked against another boat abandoned during the long siege, then bounced and slid into the icy water. Rothriel stood as well, looking immaculate and perfect, a fact that made Mahtiel's heart beat again for the moment before her annoyance swelled. Her own tabard, already marked from her service in the Crusader Kingdoms, was sandy and scarred by dozens of the tiny, flat shells.

"No tracks," Rothriel said, scanning the beach. No tracks meant they weren't patrolling this area, which meant a bit of time to themselves. He reached an ungloved hand out to her, to lay a hand on her through mail rusting in the damp air. Their lips met, and then the small sharp pain of his bite, the familiar soft feel of

his flesh giving way to her fangs. Their blood intermingled, rich and warm and coppery in the cool air. His blood made her veins ache.

Something wasn't right. Her head snapped away, tearing a tiny bit of Rothriel's lip. She licked the blood from her lips, staring at the beach. She was hungry, and the hunger sharpened as her senses did.

The night arrow caught Rothriel in the shoulder, spinning him about and dropping him to the ground. Mahtiel's blade came free of her sheath, singing a song she had loved for hundreds of years. The Hungarians swarmed over the beach, visible now, surprisingly fast, and there — above their heads — floated a black-clad Cainite, his features fine and Viennese, a son of the neighboring land. Usurper, she knew. Part of the vanguard.

The Tremere hunted in groups, sending their youngest childer ahead. Their elders followed behind, cowards at the rear of columns, waiting for the Salubri to fell themselves against shock troops. Weakened so the mantle of clan could be ripped from exhausted shoulders and the Blood ripped from a tired throat.

Her blade sparked on a steel gorget, traced a white line down a mail sleeve covered by the livery of Béla IV, and returned again to ring the helm of her attacker. He was older, her opponent, and seasoned, but no seasoning could match the power of the Blood. Stepping back and parrying the broadsword aimed for her blonde locks, she dropped her shoulder and the point of her own heavy blade, and ran her attacker through, mail and all. She stared into his eyes, dark and blue in the moonlight, and saw the fear there. Mahtiel lifted her arm, seized his forehead with an unkind grip, and took his soul.

Her third eye, golden in the early night, cracked open from her forehead scar. The man's soul slid out easily and flowed into the eye, a warm light coiling in the withered void where her own soul once lay. She felt the ecstasy of the pain her blade had dealt, the love he'd had for a woman somewhere in a Romanian peasant village, the small secrets he'd kept from his father, who had pushed him into Béla's army. And he knew the movements of the Tremere army from whence he'd come. She truly cared only about the last, but Mahtiel let the other thoughts slide across her heart, one by one, before she let them drift elsewhere. The man's soul came with the last beat of his heart, and she tossed the body aside.

Rothriel had sprouted three more arrows. He still refused to slay any of his opponents; broken blades and bruised soldiers littered the ground around him, though one still locked blades with the love of Mahtiel's unlife. The soldier stepped back and whipped his blade with the speed only a ghoul could manage. A small coin of Rothriel's flesh popped off his neck, revealing dark red flesh beneath; a single drop of vitae, rich and heady in the air of the evening, wept from the wound. It stopped crawling down his neck, and began to slowly pull itself back. The Tremere wizard beckoned with his hand, and Rothriel's skin tore around the wound, a streamer of shining blood flowing forth in a torrent past the wizard's outstretched arm and into his waiting jaw.

Light suffused Mahtiel, fire tracing in the ancient veins under her skin, the pure remnants of the man she'd just killed. Lions, not lambs!

His strength carried through her veins, and she charged forward, intending to launch herself off another boat at the Usurper. But her eye caught movement across the clouded, moonlit sky: a grappling hook whipped through the star-dappled sky, embedding itself within the shocked wizard's chest, and yanking him out of the sky.

Mahtiel turned. The warrior was clad in leather and horsehair, his face foreign. Not Mongol, but closer to them than she. His curved sword lay at his feet, with both hands committed to grounding the Tremere wizard. The Mongol stranger — a scout? — grinned as he saw her shock. Mahtiel studied his face and saw the fangs in his smile; he wasn't Mongol, but he was perhaps some distant cousin to them, and certainly closer than Rothriel's Harappa was to her Palmyra. He wore a cloth across his forehead, keeping an unruly mop of hair from his face.

The scout hopped forward, tossing a loop of rope around the leg of the Tremere and twisting the vampire about. The Usurper screamed something in French, then said nothing as Mahtiel's heavy blade separated his head from his body. A series of loud, pained smacks came from behind her; she turned to see Rothriel using the flat of his blade to pummel the soldier, breaking bones and churning humours with the blows. Her lover dropped his sword as the soldier threw back his head to scream, lifted in the air with an undead hand grasping his livery. The ancient vampire tore away a steel gorget, and he buried his face in the man's neck.

Mahtiel turned back to her savior, but he was gone. In a moment, she was at Rothriel's side; she watched the muscles in his throat work, and then as he dropped the now-pale soldier into the icy, shelled sands. The rents in the side of his armor showed unbroken flesh beneath.

"The Tremere are with Béla's forces, like bloated ticks on a dog," she said, the dead man's memories flashing before her three eyes. "They give his fighting men speed and strength of arms. The plan is to force the Mongols into quitting their siege."

"They won't quit," Rothriel shook his head. "A long siege is the surest death of spirit and discipline, and it's made the Horde testy. Otherwise it's a sound strategy, and in keeping with the Horde's tactics, but Tihany itself offers the most defensible area for miles. They would assault the monastery instead, taking shelter within the walls and flanking Béla's forces with their remainder outside."

The younger vampire looked at the icy lake. Not deadly like it would be to a mortal, but certainly unpleasant. "Then we must swim and ascend to the abbey tonight."

Rothriel grimaced at the thought. "The cold...! Not to mention surmounting the rocks. Climbing will be supremely difficult, and almost impossible before dawn."

“Nay,” said Mahtiel, hefting the grappling hook the scout left behind. “We have our ways.”

• • •

“I won’t leave,” said the ancient Salubri, sadly.

“Won’t leave!” Rothriel said, exasperated.

Dokiel folded his arms within the long sleeves of his Benedictine habit. He looked born to it, despite having been born a thousand years before Christ. “There is no more to say.”

Rothriel had wanted to infiltrate the monastery in secret, but Mahtiel insisted on being direct, trusting that the Templar cross would carry her through. It did, though not without shocked comment by the peasants about the two foreigners who dropped off the walls, dripping and covered in ice. They saw no priests, but the peasants told them Dokiel had been at vespers before dawn.

Mahtiel stepped forward, repositioning herself within the small chapel. Besides the altar and ornate monstrance, the rest was made of the same strong stone as the walls. The windows were open to the skies of Tihany, and she could see the stars whenever the clouds slid across the moon. The sky beyond was slowly turning an unhealthy shade of pink. “There’s a great deal more to say, my brother,” she said gently. “We have risked much to come here. The Trembling Ones shiver, and where they shudder, we die. Already their wickedness has infected the Telayavs. There are so few of us left.” The steel had drained out of her voice, melted by her anger. Now there was nothing left but smoke and sorrow. “So few.”

Dokiel looked at her, sadness in his eyes and a smile on his lips. He reached out to her, slowly, and plucked a small piece of shell from Mahtiel’s mail. “You’ve picked up a goat’s nail, sister.”

“What?”

“There was once a maid who lived here, at Lake Balaton, before there was a monastery,” the Healer began, but Rothriel cut him off.

“I left you once before, brother,” Rothriel said. A bloody tear rolled down his eye, to Mahtiel’s shock. She had never seen him this distressed, not even in the heat of battle. “The Precept of Samiel, our wanderlust, compelled me to leave you before your wisdom could be transmitted. Now I beg you to leave this place with us, instead. The Golden Horde...”

“Don’t give yourself the excuse of a fanciful name,” Dokiel said softly, but no blade had ever cut Rothriel as deeply as those words. “The Warrior Caste claims the Blood of Samiel runs so strongly within them they cannot resist moving along with it. Precept? You give a name to a mortal tendency inflamed by our Curse, wanderlust and an unwillingness to claim a demense as your own. You simply Embrace those who have always felt as he did.”

Dokiel walked to the window, put a slim hand on the smoky glass. The sky brightened beyond, and Mahtiel felt the fear rise within her. “You search for a place to call your own, and when you find it, you claim it was never yours all along. So you leave.” His voice was still kindly, though with a razor still sheathed within. “Are you seeking my forgiveness, Rothriel? You have it. You desire God’s forgiveness, though, and that you can only find by yourself and by Him. You have forgotten what it means to be Salubri. The steel in your heart has dulled, and you cannot see yourself within.”

Rothriel’s third eye flicked open, and his other two eyes narrowed. Dokiel turned to stare back at him, unmoved.

“Those are not shells, if you ask the common folk of the lake,” Dokiel said, his voice once again impassive. “They are the hooves of goats. There once lived a woman on these shores, with hair like, well, yours,” he said, gesturing to Mahtie. “The color of darkened honey. She was mute, but kept a herd of magical goats. One day, the King of the Waves asked for a jug of goat’s milk in exchange for restoring her voice, and the woman accepted. Yet she became so enamored with her beautiful new voice that she believed none deserved to hear it. The king punished her for never speaking. He drove her beautiful goats into his domain, and as they die under the waves, their hooves wash up. She was turned into stone by the king’s magic, forced to repeat whatever was said to her. You’ve heard her voice — the echo over the lake.”

The three were silent for a few minutes. It was Rothriel who broke the quietude, and Mahtiel instantly knew he’d failed some metaphysical test.

“We need a place to stay for the day,” her lover said. Dokiel smiled slightly. “But of course. The monkeys here will show you to the crypts.”

• • •

“This is my first time here,” Mahtiel said, “And I hate it.” She stepped up a small wooden staircase to look over the fortified walls. Rothriel had decided to scout their path out after declaring his intention not to honor Dokiel’s wishes, and was walking the walls of the opposite side. The battlements would have done justice to a small castle in England, and they commanded a spectacular view of the lake and the hills. During the day, she knew, archers would be up here loosing arrows lazily at the other side. By night, however, the castle stood a silent sentinel. She could see the swaths of forest cleared out for siege works and camp fires, like vast wooden lanterns containing dozens of tiny orange flames.

“So tell me,” Dokiel started again. He’d asked the monks to stay away, he said, and like all the herds of mortals Healers kept around they knew of his nature.

“Small things,” she said. “Friendly traders knew of the monastery here, those who sought to resupply Tihany and Béla in his exile. They suddenly stopped mentioning the monastery here, yet we’d had no word that it fell.” She sighed, some-

thing she hadn't done in years. She must've picked the habit back up from Rothriel. "They sold this place to the Tremere."

Dokiel looked thoughtful. "How did you know?"

"Because the Usurpers' ghouls pounded down the door of our haven that very day," she said, smiling at the memory. She had been groggy, yet Rothriel had taken to the habit of staying awake during parts of the day. He had moved like the wind, cracking armor and bones with his bare hands, deftly sidestepping and whirling through the shafts of sunlight streaming through the shattered door frame. One bright ray had caressed his arm, she recalled, her own eyes searing even at the memory — but he did not falter, or stay, or even flinch, even as the room was hazy with the sweet smoke from his flesh. She sighed again, this time out of pleasure. "We had been betrayed."

"Ah," he said. "As our progenitor was, dear sainted Saulot."

Mahtiel frowned. "No traitor could be blamed for that, I thought." Not even Ahab, the bane of the clan who had left Samiel to die at the hands of Baali.

"No one childe of Caine holds that honor," Dokiel said sadly. "No, the Salubri were betrayed by all the other Clans. We Healers kept the mortal herds healthy and free of disease. You Warriors, well...you ensured the herds weren't preyed upon unduly. Some spoke of a third Caste, of the Watchers, who kept the other midnight beasts from partaking of the Childer of Seth, for that was Caine's brood's purview and theirs alone. But if they existed..." Dokiel shook his head, still smiling. "I never met one."

"You believe the other clans...left Saulot to die," Mahtiel realized. She turned to look Dokiel full in the eyes, a habit she had adopted around Cainites of a more powerful generation. She saw the certitude, the calmness...and the madness burning behind his smile.

"We kept them from unleashing their predations since the days of Enoch, and ours was the only clan uncursed by Caine. Avarice is the most dependable of impulses, with jealousy only slightly less so. We are especial, do you not see?" Dokiel waved down at the torches, his voice taking on the tone of authority. "Know you are to be unmade; you are the white lamb, the gentle sacrifice; you are the greatest part of the bounty of Caine."

"The Book of Nod?"

"The word of our clan chief," Dokiel confirmed. "In our Final Death, the Tremere damn themselves twice over, and Caine's brood is damned eternal." He smiled serenely. "Caine gave God the best works of his field, golden wheat and rich roots. But Abel gave the blood of the lamb, and that is what He valued most of all. Our Blood will ensure our salvation."

An arrow whistled by their heads, cracking in two against the stone wall beyond them. More whistles broke the night.

Mahtiel ran. She ran past groggy defenders stumbling out of their barracks to face the night assault, past monks at midnight vespers and the few peasants baking and making butter in the darkness. She ran until she met Rothriel, who was himself running towards her.

“The attack is...”

“Happening,” Mahtiel responded. He nodded. “We can still subdue Dokiel, if you...”

“No need,” her lover said. “I did not spend the time scouting, as I told him. I spoke to the monks.” The moon broke out of the clouds above, and Mahtiel saw bloody tears smeared on Rothriel’s cheeks and forehead. He shook his head. “Every tale of Golconda says that feeding comes rarely, that blood is a taste to be enjoyed rather than a need to be sated, that the Beast no longer rules.”

“What are you saying?”

“I found the bodies,” Rothriel said grimly. “Drained of all blood, stacked like cordwood in a shallow pit. All of the monks of the abbey.”

Mahtiel covered her open mouth with a mailed hand. She looked back at the walled gates of the monastery, now illuminated by dozens of fire arrows arcing above it. Dokiel stood on the battlements, arms outstretched, mouthing prayers to the black sky.

The line they’d left was still there, affixed to the hook in the wall. It took a few brief moments to scale and leap to the ground. The lovers flitted through trees and over rocky soil until they burst out before the cliffs overlooking the lake.

A group of scouts stood there, overlooking the lake themselves. From their armor, they were clearly Mongols. If they turned, they’d see the two...

And one did. He was familiar to Mahtiel, and his grin erupted once more. He winked at her. “There!” he said, pointing away from the lovers and into a darkling copse. “I see movement!”

It was a scant minute before they left. The lovers leapt as far as they could, slamming into the water with bone-cracking force that no mortal could survive.

Even crawling across the bottom of the icy lake underwater, they could hear the shock and sound of battle from Tihany.

• • •

“What now?” Mahtiel asked, her voice echoing softly over the lake. Water oozed out of her chain and pooled around leather boots, flowing over the goat’s nails littering the shore.

“We walk,” Rothriel said, though his voice did not echo as strongly. “We go together, until our wanderlust grows too strong to ignore. Then we go alone, until the night we meet again, or not.”

“What Dokiell said...if we are meant to be sacrificed...if we are the last of the Salubri...”

“Then that is our fate, and our curse,” Rothriel said, oddly cheerful. “Yet he wasn’t wrong when he said he had forgotten what it meant to be Salubri. We are Damned from the moment Caine’s blood replaces our own, Mahtiel, but to be Salubri is to know there is a way to escape our damnation.” He smiled, and her heart gladdened. “Saulot is gone, and we must adapt. We are not lambs, but lions. I will seek Golconda. I know now that it does not lay in the sins of my past, and that is more than I knew the night before.”

Mahtiel nodded. She took his hand, and their boots crunched together in step through the ice and goat’s nails.

• • •

The Mongol scout who’d saved them twice leaned against a chill pine above the shoreline, watching them leave. His blood was shadows and darkness, sliding forth to cloak him from the eyes of Salubri. His own third eye gently opened on his forehead, as if bidden by the presence of clan and kin. If they could have seen it, they would have watched it catching the remaining light as a cat’s would.

“Not the last of the Salubri,” he said to himself. He picked up a goat’s nail and slipped it into a pouch at this side as a keepsake. “The embers of a flame can kindle the fire anew. Good luck, cousins,” the Watcher said, though he did not believe in luck.

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